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## Beyond the solid South: southern members of Congress and the Vietnam War

Mark David Carson

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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**BEYOND THE SOLID SOUTH:  
SOUTHERN MEMBERS OF CONGRESS AND THE VIETNAM WAR**

**A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**The Department of History**

**By  
Mark David Carson  
B.B.A., Loyola University, 1985  
M.A., University of New Orleans, 1993  
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## **ABSTRACT**

From the beginning of America's involvement in Vietnam in 1943 to its disastrous end in 1975, southern members of Congress exerted a significant influence on and expressed divergent opinions about Cold War foreign policy. In part because of an enormous increase in military spending in the South fueled by prominent membership on military committees, congressional hawks were more inclined to support military aid for countries fighting communism and accept military over civilian advice in prosecuting the Cold War. Hawkish southerners embraced containment wholeheartedly, exhibited an intense patriotism, and concerned themselves with upholding personal and national honor. Therefore, with some prominent exceptions initially, hawks were more inclined to accept military solutions to contain communist aggression. When America became involved in Vietnam, southern congressional hawks advocated fighting a war without limits for a total victory.

On the other hand, the southern doves were much smaller in number but still extremely influential. They did not abandon internationalism until very late, and preferred economic aid and multilateral solutions to Cold War problems. The leading doves, Senators William Fulbright of Arkansas, Albert Gore of Tennessee, and John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, after enabling the United States to deepen its commitment in Vietnam, mounted a spirited dissent that legitimized protest and eventually helped end the war. They rejected American interference in smaller and weaker countries and also upheld a version of Southern honor that demanded that America admit its mistake in Vietnam. Therefore, the South, though "solid" on Civil Rights and other domestic issues, did not speak with one voice on Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

It had been a long three weeks. On July 25, 1969, Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, chairman of the powerful Armed Services Committee, led a difficult and increasingly contentious floor fight to win congressional authorization for funds for an antiballistic missile system favored by President Richard Nixon. In previous years, the Senate had passed as a matter of course every administration's requests for military hardware. Vietnam changed the landscape of debate on all things military. Stennis, who had since 1964 had been one of the war's most hawkish supporters, urged his colleagues to pass the bill. While the Mississippi senator tried to get agreement on procedures that would bring the funding for the ABM to a vote, Arkansas Senator and Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright interrupted. Fulbright had turned against the Vietnam War in 1965 and was considered one of the chief leaders of the congressional antiwar movement. He had clashed with Stennis several times over Vietnam policy, and the three-week debate had heightened the resentment between the two senators. Fulbright wanted to hear more information and debate on the ABM. He marveled that in the twenty-five years he had been in the Senate that this was the first time that there had ever been "serious debate" on a Pentagon request. The ABM, to the senator, served as a "symbol" of the dependence of the Senate and the country on the "great manufacturers...the great industrial enterprises," and, particularly, "the military bureaucracy." He praised some incoming senators for joining him in opposition to the ABM. "It is remarkable how interested they are in being senators," he remarked, "and not stooges of the military."

Stennis leapt to his feet. He angrily shouted, “Will the senator yield? Will the senator yield right there?” Stennis demanded and got an apology, but Fulbright continued. He provided several examples of military contractors and the money they provided for several states. “The military-industrial complex is a tremendous influence in this country,” Fulbright asked Stennis, “You won’t challenge that?” “I’ll challenge your whole remarks,” Stennis retorted. The Mississippi senator let Fulbright finish, then got to his feet once more and banged his hand down on his desk. “I fully made up my mind that no one who comes here and imputes bad motives and sinister influences by the military services would go unchallenged.”<sup>1</sup>

The clash between two powerful and proud senators in part illustrates the diversity of opinion on military matters among southerners in Congress. By 1969, after five years of American involvement in Vietnam, the lines had been fully drawn between the majority of legislators from the South, firm believers in the domino theory and champions of a unilateralist American anticommunist policy, and the smaller yet still influential southern doves, previously upholders of an internationalist and multilateral approach. They had soured on both internationalism and unilateralism, however, and wanted the United States to withdraw from the “immoral” war in Vietnam as quickly as possible. Both sides exerted significant influence on foreign policy decisions that led to America’s involvement in Vietnam. And key leaders of both hawks and doves came from a region that has always been associated with militarism.

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<sup>1</sup>*Congressional Record* (hereafter cited as CR), 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 25 July, 1969, 20825-20829.

Stennis's championing and protecting of the military was neither surprising nor new. From the 1940s to the 1970s, the region wholeheartedly supported the armed forces, some preferring the judgment of generals and admirals to that of civilian leaders on foreign policy. And there were several reasons why. One was, as Fulbright suspected, economic. Southern "hawks" represented states that benefited greatly from military spending. World War II began a relationship between the Defense Department and the South, of which President Franklin Roosevelt played matchmaker. Though in the 1930s the President had championed the cause of uplifting the impoverished southern economy, which he called "the nation's number one economic problem," it was the war that brought significant relief to the region.<sup>2</sup> In return for Roosevelt's increased attention to southern economic concerns, Senators Tom Connally of Texas, Walter George of Georgia, and others supported FDR's desire for an internationalist foreign policy against the likes of Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, and other northern and western isolationists. For the most part, the rest of the South in Congress fell in line with Roosevelt on foreign policy. In part for this support, and in part because of the cheap land and pleasant climate, the South received forty percent of the War Department budget for building military installations in the U.S. during 1940-45. The preference for locating new military bases in the South continued until well into the 1970s. In addition, the region captured its share of war plants, receiving twenty-two percent of the public money for

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<sup>2</sup>Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 146-147.



this endeavor during the war. The federal government had spent on new southern war plants nearly as much as private businesses had spent for existing plants from 1940 to 1945. While many other regions, in particular the West, also gained from increased Defense contracts, none of these regions had been as economically depressed as the South had been. Consequently, since World War II the South has depended on the largesse of the Defense Department. As military spending in the South increased even more with the onset of the Cold War, Southern members of Congress drew closer to the leaders of the armed forces. They supported and protected military leaders in part because of the great financial benefit their states enjoyed from military spending. As one scholar described it, “[the South] paid homage to and reaped benefits from the defense establishment.” In addition to Defense spending, one out of every three soldiers in Vietnam came from the South, a region that represented only twenty-five percent of the population of the United States. Furthermore, the South had a large share of military retirees as well.<sup>3</sup>

Southern hawks also supported military actions because of the growing ideological threat to the American system. With the onset of the Cold War, American Presidents increasingly made foreign policy decisions based almost solely on the real and perceived machinations of the Soviet Union. As new commitments to foreign nations in Asia and elsewhere increased, support of southern internationalism in Congress began to wane. Many southern legislators did not accept the necessity of some American involvement in foreign nations, particularly in the form of economic

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<sup>3</sup>“Southern Militarism,” *Southern Exposure* 1(Spring, 1973): 60-62. See also Schulman, *From Cotton Belt To Sunbelt*, 136.

aid, yet were more than ready to promote military aid. Therefore, even though they backed off from a type of internationalism made popular by southerner Woodrow Wilson, which stressed collective security, southerners continued to support and accept the containment strategy and its companion of rearmament—in other words, a predominantly American military solution to the threat of Communism.<sup>4</sup> With the “loss” of China and the beginning of the Korean War, southern conservatives soon grew tired of Harry Truman’s “limited war” and agreed with General Douglas MacArthur that there could be “no substitute for victory.” Yet, a few years later, when the French neared defeat in Indochina, prominent military supporters Richard Russell, John Stennis, and Lyndon Johnson approached American military involvement in Indochina in 1954 with hesitation, followed by downright opposition. Within the realm of southern hawks, those more “educated” on foreign policy had the most objections to “showing the flag” and sending the troops to Vietnam. Once America committed troops, however, all southern hawks wanted to, as Richard Russell said in 1965, “go all the way” militarily to win. They therefore rejected Lyndon Johnson’s limited war in Vietnam just as many of them had rejected Truman’s similar military strategy in the Korean war. In the end, southerners in and out of Congress rallied around Richard Nixon’s increased bombing and gradual withdrawal of troops from Vietnam.

But not all southern congressmen were hawks. Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Fulbright, his predecessor, Tom Connally of Texas, Senator and later

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<sup>4</sup>George C. Herring and Gary R. Hess, “Regionalism and Foreign Policy: The Dying Myth of Southern Internationalism,” *Southern Studies* 20 ( Fall, 1981): 260.

Representative Claude Pepper of Florida, Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee, and a few other prominent southerners supported multilateralism and internationalism and continued to vote for foreign aid. Connally was instrumental in aiding the passage of the United Nations Charter. He had to deal increasingly with a powerful “China lobby” that demanded more dollars and attention to fighting Asian communism just before and after Mao Tse Tung came to power in China in 1949. Although by the end of his Senate career in 1953, Connally had grown concerned with the high cost and increasingly unmanageable nature of American commitments abroad, he appeased the powerful China lobby by including a small amount of funds in a 1949 foreign aid bill for “the general area of China.” That “trickle” of aid became a tidal wave of American money and military advisors in the 1950s, and combat troops in the 1960s. Though Connally stressed collective security, he ended up enabling those who wanted a more unilateral approach. Pepper, a liberal internationalist who in the late 1940s criticized the implementation of the containment policy as militaristic and “anti-Russian,” had been cast aside by his constituents and branded a communist sympathizer by the man who defeated him in 1950. He was elected to the House in 1962, and as the Vietnam war escalated, he turned against it and eventually aided those trying to legislate an end to it. Albert Gore espoused opinions similar to Pepper’s and was the first of the “old line” southern doves to be defeated in 1970. Additionally, John Sherman Cooper, the Republican Senator from Kentucky, turned against the war in 1967 and helped draft one of the few antiwar amendments that passed Congress in 1970.

Southern doves were led by Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, the “Rhodes scholar from the Ozarks.” Fulbright, the man who held the chairmanship of

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee longer than anyone else in American history, had sponsored the first resolution approving the creation of the United Nations in 1943. As chairman he oversaw the increases in foreign aid which deepened America's involvement in Vietnam and acted as floor leader for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which provided congressional approval for Vietnam. After 1965, however, he led the fight to disengage the United States from the war that he increasingly viewed as a "mistake." His 1966 hearings on Vietnam policy propelled the Arkansas senator to the forefront of the antiwar movement and made Vietnam dissent respectable. Though their numbers were small, the efforts of Fulbright, Gore, and Cooper influenced the policy of Presidents Johnson and Nixon, and eventually helped bring about an end to the war sooner than Nixon wanted. As long as these and other prominent southern legislators dissented and, as a result, influenced American foreign policy attitudes and decisions, the South could not be described as completely "solid" in their opinions.

Although southern legislators expressed two divergent opinions on Vietnam, both hawks and doves represented southern ideologies and traditions in forming their opinions on Vietnam. First, both sides espoused some aspect of Wilsonianism. Fulbright followed his own brand of Wilsonian internationalism in which he emphasized the self-determination of countries like South Vietnam without American interference. Therefore, he opposed the Americanization of the war. Lyndon Johnson, the southern hawk who led the United States into full-scale war in Vietnam, also expressed a belief in Wilsonian ideals, but he thought more in terms of the creation of a new anticommunist "order" with the United States as paternalistic leader.

His proposal to create a “TVA on the Mekong River” attests to his belief in the virtues of American interference in the internal affairs of Vietnam.

Second, because most members of Congress knew little about the Vietnamese, they compared their plight, with some accuracy, to the plight of their own region. Fulbright drew parallels between the South Vietnamese mistrust of foreigners and the South’s resentment of Yankees during Reconstruction. Russell also compared the South’s rural inhabitants to the rice farmers of South Vietnam, an analysis that proved more accurate than that proposed by most of Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam advisors. Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam policy suffered because he knew little of the culture or history of Southeast Asia. “Foreigners are not the folks I’m used to,” he had remarked. Instead he tended to mold their image to fit the anticommunist crusade his administration led against the communists in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

Third, southerners in and out of Congress emphasized upholding personal and national honor. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown defines honor as “the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus. Family integrity, clearly understood hierarchies of leaders and subordinates, and ascriptive features of individuals and groups are guides for those evaluations.”<sup>6</sup> Sociologists Richard E. Nesbitt and Dov Cohen have characterized the modern South as a “culture of honor.” They assert that the South is more prone to violence than the North because southern males are taught

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<sup>5</sup>Joseph Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 265.

<sup>6</sup>Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, xv).

the necessity of defending themselves against any perceived threats to their strength or toughness. Honor is based on “a man’s strength and power to enforce his will on others.”<sup>7</sup>

Nesbitt’s and Cohen’s conception of honor best fits southern hawks.

Southerners’ sometimes extreme patriotism and willingness to use excessive force to fight the threat of communist aggression separate them from other regions. Richard Russell served as the quintessential leader of a culture based on honor. Through the entire course of the war, Russell agonized over Vietnam policy and wanted to find a way for the United States to disengage. However, he never settled on a proposal that would allow Americans to leave honorably without abandoning the commitment to South Vietnam and “losing face.” His closeness to Lyndon Johnson, however, did not prevent him from publicly expressing his doubts and, by the end of 1965, trying to push the President to increase American military pressure on North Vietnam in order to bring about an end to the war. He expressed his main concern on the Senate floor six months earlier as Johnson contemplated further escalation: “Whether or not the initial decision [to intervene in Vietnam] was a mistake is now moot. The flag is there. U.S. honor and prestige are there. And most important of all, U.S. soldiers are there.” Despite his doubts whether Vietnam was the right place to fight communism, the maintenance of the honor of America and its armed forces stood as paramount to Richard Russell.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 4-5.

Lyndon Johnson was also a southern politician overly concerned with honor. Johnson followed the assumptions of the containment policy, yet felt completely insecure and uncertain that he could carry out its dictates in Vietnam. Johnson convinced himself that as a southerner from a Texas teachers' college, he could not get any credit "for anything I do in foreign policy because I didn't go to Harvard." He feared that he would be called a coward or a traitor if he failed in Vietnam, or, even worse to his sensitivities, "an unmanly man."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, he listened to Harvard-educated Robert McNamara and other members of the "Harvards" left over from the Kennedy administration, who persuaded him to increase America's military commitment in Vietnam.

Southern preoccupation with honor also explains the martial tradition that in part defined southern society. Historian George Tindall has asserted, "Southern history has bred a psychology of danger and defense, and a military-patriotic tradition." George C. Herring and Gary R. Hess pointed out the fact that Southerners "have been more inclined than any other Americans to view war as a natural consequence of human strife and acceptable means of demonstrating their patriotism." They contend that the South, being the only region to experience military invasion since 1814, may have been more sensitive to external threats. Paul Seabury concurs, saying that, as the U.S. of the 1930s reflected European-oriented, conservative values and institutions, the South saw the Nazi threat as "a dagger thrust at the heart of this

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<sup>8</sup>Caroline F. Ziemke, "Senator Richard B. Russell and the 'Lost Cause' in Vietnam, 1954-1968." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 72 (Spring 1988): 55.

<sup>9</sup>Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, Harper and Rowe, 1976), 252-253.

system.”<sup>10</sup> Or, to use a phrase many southern whites would champion on the 1950s and 1960s, the Nazis in the 1940s, posed a threat to “our way of life.” The Soviets and their growing number of satellites from the 1950s onward would be the new enemy. However, the dynamic had changed. America could not attack everywhere or go for “total victory.” Southerners, feeling that the American system was increasingly under attack from an aggressive Soviet communism, were willing to use violence and war more than any other region to protect American honor. Therefore, southern members of Congress grew increasingly impatient with limited conflict and often compared both Korea and Vietnam negatively to the World War II experience—a time when America defended its honor to the fullest militarily and succeeded.

On the other side of the Vietnam issue, doves also imbued their cause with the luster of “honor.” While hawks wanted to uphold American honor by acting militarily to defeat the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, doves thought that American honor could only be upheld if it admitted that it had made a mistake, and decided to press harder for a negotiated settlement with, if necessary, concessions to the communists. Kentucky Republican Senator John Sherman Cooper, a former ambassador to India whom the *New York Times* described as an “intriguing blend of the homespun Kentucky mountaineer and the polished easterner who went to Yale and Harvard Law,” invoked the traditional southern call to “honor” in proposing a negotiated settlement from 1965 onward.<sup>11</sup> After 1967, he increasingly favored disengagement

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<sup>10</sup>All historians quoted in Herring and Hess, “Regionalism and Foreign Policy,” 260.

<sup>11</sup>“Leader of the ABM Fight,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1969, John Sherman Cooper Collection, The Wendell H. Ford Research Center and Public Policy Archives, University of



from Vietnam. Fulbright concurred and suggested that America's prosecution of a war against a small and desperately poor nation went against the "ethical code" under which Wyatt-Brown suggests southerners had been raised.

Honor also demands "clearly understood hierarchies of leaders and subordinates."<sup>12</sup> Southern deference to the traditional hierarchies manifested itself in three specific behaviors among legislators from the region. First, although Russell, Stennis, and Gore expressed doubts about Southeast Asian policy during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and early Johnson administrations, they usually communicated them in private. According to a tradition backed by southerners, the President had the responsibility to make foreign policy. Therefore, the senators generally refrained from public criticism until 1965 and 1966, when the increased escalation yet still limited American involvement in Vietnam caused them to break with tradition. The hawks demanded an all-out effort while the doves demanded a negotiated settlement and withdrawal. Second, southern doves, with one major exception in Representative Robert Eckhardt of Texas, did not take part in Vietnam protests or approve of the more radical solutions of the antiwar movement. Fulbright himself pleaded with the young people involved to "stay within the system." Thirdly, a number of southerners cherished the Constitution, the document that created the system under which they served. Though southern legislators themselves enabled the executive branch to usurp the constitutional role of Congress to "advise and consent" on foreign policy and to declare war, they increasingly resented the dominance of the executive branch

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Kentucky, Lexington, KY, Senatorial Series II, William Miller Files, Box 608.

in foreign affairs. The resentment culminated in the efforts to pass the War Powers Act in 1973, which reasserted the war-making powers of the legislative branch. With its passage, southerners, for one of the few times during the Vietnam era, spoke as one voice in upholding what they saw to be as the “original intent” of the authors of the Constitution. The structure of the constitutional separation of powers had been salvaged and honor preserved.

Though the historiography of twentieth-century American foreign policy can be described as voluminous, this adjective does not apply to studies of southern attitudes toward foreign affairs. A few such studies do exist. Alfred E. Hero's *The Southerner and World Affairs* provides an overview of southern opinions on foreign policy for the period between the end of World War I and the mid-1960s. Charles O. Lerche Jr.'s *The Uncertain South*, analyzes the changes in roll call voting on foreign policy issues among southern Congressmen in the 1950s and 1960s. Edward W. Chester's *Sectionalism, Politics, and American Diplomacy* explores foreign policy attitudes of all regions from the American Revolution to the Vietnam War; and Tennant McWilliam's *The New South Faces the World* examines the beliefs of a handful of leaders interested in foreign affairs in the century after the Civil War. Despite the superior quality of these works, they do not provide extensive analysis of southern Congressional attitudes on foreign policy during one of the most contentious periods in the history of the American South: the Vietnam War era.

Although in his last chapter McWilliams refers to a decline in Southern internationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, his book covers an earlier period, 1877-1950.

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<sup>12</sup>Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, xv.

Hero and Lerche concern themselves chiefly with the changes in Southern attitudes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, emphasizing the movement of southerners away from Wilsonian internationalism, particularly in regard to foreign nonmilitary aid to Third World countries and support for the United Nations. Prior to this period, according to all three scholars, southern senators and representatives and, to a somewhat lesser extent their constituents, were more supportive of active U. S. involvement in international affairs than were those of any other region of the country. Lerche contends that the sense of crisis southerners felt because of successful Civil Rights court cases and legislation, along with the shift in the focus of foreign aid from European to African and Asian countries, set many southerners against foreign aid programs. Nevertheless, southerners still supported unilateral American military aid and intervention in response to the Soviet threat, which in some sense explains their initial support of the Vietnam War. Because Hero's and Lerche's books were published in 1965 and 1964, respectively, they could not fully analyze the South's response to American involvement in the Vietnam war. Writing in 1975, Chester does have that opportunity. His book largely echoes the conclusions of Hero and Lerche, but also uses economic arguments to explain southerners' retreat from internationalism. In the last few pages of his book, he does include some polling information concerning southern and other regional attitudes towards American military involvement in Vietnam as well as some analysis of important Vietnam roll call votes in Congress. Chester concludes generally that the South overwhelmingly supported American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> His analysis, however, is by no means

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<sup>13</sup> Alfred Hero, *The Southerner and World Affairs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

extensive. Most recently, John Fry's *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* devotes one significant chapter to Vietnam. In it he correctly observes that southerners took "center stage" on foreign policy matters during the Vietnam war. His analysis, however, deals mainly with southern hawks, and though he assigns some importance to Fulbright and other doves, Fry interprets southern congressional opinion as solid and dominant.<sup>14</sup> Existing literature, in short, offers no lengthy or systematic study of southern congressional attitudes and actions on Vietnam, and their importance for American Cold War foreign policy.

My study is designed to fill in this gap by defining and attempting to explain why southerners reacted to events in Indochina as they did, and to suggest that though the majority of southerners allied themselves with the hawks, theirs were not the only strong southern voices on foreign policy. The dissent of William Fulbright, John Sherman Cooper, Albert Gore, Sr. and several other southerners influenced and inspired many others outside the South to turn against the war. Though their numbers were small, and though the southern doves were not the first to publicly turn against the war, the prominent position of Fulbright in particular as chairman of the Armed Services Committee made dissent "respectable." That a majority of southerners did not accept some of the conclusions of the doves, or concur with the worldview of the Arkansas senator and the other doves, did not make Fulbright, Gore, Cooper, and a few others any less southern in attitudes and ideas. When all three were no longer in

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Press, 1965). See also Charles Lerche, *The Uncertain South: Its Changing Patterns of Politics in Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), and Edward W. Chester, *Sectionalism, Politics, and American Diplomacy* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975), 230-273.

<sup>14</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 261-297.

the Senate by the mid-1970s, southern hawks completed their domination of the region, and the South became more solidly conservative and hawkish than ever before.

A few notes on methodology and style are in order. I have defined the South as the eleven Confederate states—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, and Florida—and Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Oklahoma and Kentucky have long been considered southern states by the Democratic Party.<sup>15</sup> Nisbett and Cohen have included Oklahoma and West Virginia as sharing the “culture of honor” with the other states. The conservatism of one of the major congressional figures in West Virginia, Senator Robert Byrd, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan and member of the Armed Services committee, attests to the kinship of the state’s major legislators to the rest of the South. West Virginia also received a significant amount of Defense Department funds for coal, supplying the military with one third of its non-petroleum fuel.<sup>16</sup>

It is also important to understand the language being used when referring to southerners in Congress. Throughout the dissertation I have used the words “members of Congress” and “congressmen,” and “chair” and “chairman” interchangeably throughout the text to vary the word usage and provide for better narrative flow. This by no means reflects an oversight or refusal to include female members of Congress. Women simply were not elected during the period. From the

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<sup>15</sup>Undated Memorandum: George Smathers to Democratic National Committee, CA, 1960, George Smathers Papers (hereafter cited as Smathers Papers), University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, Box 27.

time that Senator Hattie Carraway of Arkansas left the Senate in 1945 to the election in 1973 of Representative Lindy Boggs of Louisiana to her husband's seat as result of his disappearance, there were no female southern senators or representatives.

Similarly, I use the term "southerners" throughout the work, and have, whenever possible, backed up assertions of southern opinion by polling data. Most of the time when I refer to southerners, however, I mean "white southerners," because, prior to 1965, those were the only southerners allowed to vote. African Americans from the South did not become a significant electoral force until the mid-1970s, at which time the Vietnam War had ended. This is not to suggest southern African Americans played a small part of the fighting or the protest movements. Between 1965 and 1970, African Americans, both nationally and in the South, were more likely to be drafted than whites. Black soldiers comprised between thirteen and sixteen percent of the soldiers drafted during the five year period, while only making up eleven percent of the nation's men eligible for the draft. African American southerners also actively participated in the anti-war movement, and were more likely to favor withdrawal from and oppose military escalation of the Vietnam War.<sup>17</sup> In one of the many ironies pervading the history of Vietnam, the attitudes of southern blacks on the war more closely paralleled those of William Fulbright, the segregationist, than Lyndon Johnson, the integrationist. Nevertheless, since most southern members of Congress had an adversarial relationship with southern blacks during the concurrent Vietnam and Civil Rights periods, their opinions and attitudes were not seriously

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<sup>16</sup>"Southern Militarism," 93.

<sup>17</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 279-280.

considered. Their lack of political power made it possible for most southern legislators to ignore African American pleas for freedom while at the same time trumpeting the defense of “liberty” and democracy in South Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 1

### SETTING THE STAGE

In October, 1949, as Mao Tse Tung made his final attacks against Nationalist Chinese forces, Congressman Charles Deane of North Carolina sent President Truman a report on his recent fact-finding mission to the Far East. In it he discussed the possible dangers and difficulties involved in any potential United States involvement in Indochina, observing that “Southern and Southeast Asia are aflame with militant nationalism.” Having discussed France’s difficulties in accepting the end of its colonial empire, as well as the social and economic upheavals experienced in the region, he continued ominously: “the shadow of Communism overhangs the entire political situation in the Far East.” Communism, he continued, “waxed fat on human misery and economic despair and on the aspirations of colonial peoples for political independence.” Therefore, any U.S. policy would have to address the problems of poverty and to identify and embrace Asia’s burgeoning nationalism, Deane concluded. The solution to the problem was not solely military. “A negative policy which ignores these factors and is designed merely to ‘check Communism’ by military means is not likely to accomplish its purpose.” Deane’s October 19 memo was particularly surprising from a member of Congress with no known foreign policy experience or special knowledge and who had visited Asia for only a short period of time. He ended his insightful memo with a fervent hope: “if we remain true to our heritage of freedom...and with missionary zeal dedicate our policies in the Far East to the principles of advancement of human freedom and the uplift of the level of material



well-being and human dignity, we shall not only check Communism but place it precisely on the defensive.”<sup>1</sup>

Deane’s memo was one of the first, if not the first, warnings from Congress about the possible pitfalls and challenges involved in any military involvement in Indochina. Given the hysteria over the imminent “loss” of China and the resulting often reckless and uninformed statements made by his colleagues during this period, Deane’s memo emphasizing the nationalist over communist nature of the Indochina independence movement stands out as unusual and particularly prescient. There is no evidence that either the President or his advisors seriously considered its findings and suggestions.

Deane’s memo arrived at the end of a nearly six year period in which the Congress and the Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman administrations struggled to find a wise and coherent policy in Asia. Members of Congress from the South played a significant role in these debates. During and immediately following World War II, southern legislators embraced Roosevelt’s internationalism, culminating in the creation of the United Nations in 1945, in order to secure collectively a more peaceful world. According to political scientist V.O. Key, southern senators demonstrated much more cohesion on foreign policy roll call votes in the 1940s than non-southern Democrats and Republicans. They voted over ninety percent of the time to support the presidents’ preparations for war, wartime measures, and plans for the United

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America’s Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 63-64.

Nations.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of the birth of the U.N., an internationalist organization that prominent southerners in Congress in part helped create, disputes ensued over the nature of political power in China, Indochina, and several other Asian nations or territories ravaged by war and political instability. The long torturous road to Vietnam started here for the United States. As the threat of communism began to overshadow any considerations of addressing the poverty and embracing the nationalism of Asia, as Deane proposed in 1949, southerners in Congress gradually moved towards a more unilateral military position. Though several influential southern senators and representatives urged caution, in the end America increased its military aid and presence in Asia. Prominent southerners in Congress may have worried over U.S. involvement in Asia, but in the end they played a significant role in securing American aid in the region.

The majority of southerners in Congress, including Deane, would have normally concerned themselves with domestic problems. Nevertheless, a small group of them exerted enormous power and greatly influenced the Roosevelt and subsequent administrations by chairing or acting as ranking members on the four major foreign policy and military committees: the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Senate and House Armed Services Committees. During and in the years immediately following World War II, Senator Tom Connally of Texas chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Representative Carl Vinson of Georgia headed the Naval Affairs Committee, and Representative Andrew Jackson

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<sup>2</sup>V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 556-580.

May of Kentucky ran the Military Affairs Committee, (both forerunners of the Armed Services committee). In addition, FDR's secretary of State, Cordell Hull, and his successor under Harry Truman, James Byrnes, hailed from Tennessee and South Carolina, respectively. In all, southerners exerted significant influence on the making of foreign policy, as they would throughout the Vietnam era.<sup>3</sup>

Four years before Deane visited Indochina in 1949, few members of Congress from any region had visited Vietnam or knew much about the area. Indochina was an unknown entity, distant and seemingly insignificant, important only as it related to China in particular and Asia in general. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had some peripheral concerns in Indochina. Early in World War II, Japan completed negotiations with the wartime Vichy French government to control Indochina while keeping the French administration in office. The deal angered Roosevelt, who had earlier expressed an interest in promoting self-determination for the former French colony, but for two years he publicly stood by the stated policy and supported the re-establishment of "French sovereignty...as soon as possible throughout all the territory, metropolitan or colonial, over which flew the French flag in 1939." In part, the President supported the recovery of French colonies in order to secure the Free French cooperation with Allied landings in North Africa. Once the invasion succeeded, FDR revised the policy towards French colonialism in Indochina.

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<sup>3</sup>Marion D. Irish, "Foreign Policy and the South," *Journal of Politics* 10 (May 1948): 306.

The President quickly came to recognize that the French were doomed in that region.<sup>4</sup> In 1942, as the U.S. government began considering the creation of the United Nations, Roosevelt could sense a “palpable surge towards independence” in colonial areas in both Europe and Asia. In discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Vladimir Molotov, the President expressed his desire to see these nations move towards self-determination. Of course, many of these new nations, having suffered for years under the yoke of European imperialism, would not be ready to govern themselves. In the meantime, Roosevelt asserted, the areas should be administered under an international trusteeship system.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout 1942 and 1943, Roosevelt promoted self-determination and trusteeship proposals with his wartime allies, Great Britain, Russia, and the Free French. In March 1943, he presented British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden with a formula in which the former colonies would be granted independence by stages. In this proposal, Roosevelt specifically discussed Indochina. The Foreign Secretary, along with his Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, rejected the suggestion, concerned with the future of their far-flung holdings in Asia and other parts of the world. They worried lest the U.S. and China, the only major allied power in the region, would insist on “policing Asia.” Churchill also could foresee the fracturing of the post-war Franco-British alliance with the adoption of the trusteeship formula. Sensing the unease of the wartime allies, Secretary of State Cordell Hull directed the State

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<sup>4</sup>George C. Herring, “The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina,” *Diplomatic History* 1 (Spring 1977): 98.

<sup>5</sup>William Conrad Gibbons, *The US Government and The Vietnam War: Executive Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I, 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 7.

Department staff to rewrite the trusteeship proposal to include only former German, Italian, and Japanese colonies.<sup>6</sup>

Although Hull did not consult Congress on the trusteeship issue, the deepening discussions over colonies did involve some members of Congress, the most influential of whom was the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the plain-speaking Tom Connally of Texas. He, along with Vermont Republican Warren R. Austin, was the first to join State Department executives, at the request of Hull, to discuss the shape of the postwar world. Though the role of these senators in shaping policy is not totally clear, Hull and the President listened to them at least until the passage by both houses of Congress of resolutions supporting the creation of the UN in the fall of 1943. In fact, Connally, Lister Hill of Alabama, and J. William Fulbright, the “Rhodes scholar from Arkansas,” sponsored these resolutions before the President publicly lent his support to the organization.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, between that time and the spring of 1945, consultations with the Congress after decisions were made replaced direct participation in formulating them.

The consultations usually did not include the President. Roosevelt preferred to let the State Department meet regularly with only a small bipartisan group called the “Committee of Eight,” which included three southerners: Connally, Senator Walter George of Georgia, and Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky. The group discussed U.S. positions and were provided with confidential drafts of the UN Charter. It is

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 8. See also Walter LeFeber, “Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina: 1942-1945,” *American Historical Review* 80 (December, 1975): 1280.

<sup>7</sup>Herring and Hess, “Regionalism and Foreign Policy,” 261.

unclear whether any member of Congress involved had a definitive influence on the formulation of policy.

Congress did debate one issue, the postwar fate of the Mariana, Caroline, and Marshall Islands in the Pacific. Many in the military establishment wanted to maintain the American military bases on the islands, going so far as to suggest annexation by the U.S. so they did not fall to the Russians or revert back to their former owners, the Japanese. Southerners, particularly on the Naval Affairs Committees of both houses, supported the military's position. In the Senate, Harry Byrd, Sr. of Virginia, chairman of the committee, went to the UN Conference in San Francisco that convened the following year to get assurances from the American delegation that naval base rights in the Pacific would be protected. In the case of these islands, U.S. officials removed the trusteeship provisions from the draft charter of the UN that the Americans presented at the UN organizational meetings at Dumberton Oaks in August 1944. Therefore, the initial framework for the UN left the trusteeship issue unsettled. Hull fought to reinstate the trusteeship provisions, asserting that the governments involved should make "definite commitments" to grant independence to their colonies after a period of international trusteeship. The Navy and War Departments and the State department differed over the trusteeship issue. Roosevelt initially sided with his diplomats, reiterating his support for international trusteeships, but the debate continued both in these departments and on the international stage.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 5, 10.

The issue reappeared at the Yalta Conference in 1944, but Churchill vehemently opposed the inclusion of the proposal in the UN Charter. “I will not have one scrap of British territory flung into that arena....As long as every bit of land over which the British flag flies is to be brought into the dock, I shall object as long as I live.” Though the Prime Minister appeared reassured after it was suggested that the proposals did not include British possessions, Britain’s position on colonial territory remained unambiguous: They would not accept the trusteeship system. The only definitive trusteeship proposal included in the final report at Yalta applied only to territories seized by the Axis Powers and existing mandates of the League of Nations. The rest were to be settled later.<sup>9</sup>

As the trusteeship debates raged on, Roosevelt in early 1945 appointed representatives to the UN organizational conference in San Francisco. Connally was included along with former isolationist Senator Arthur Vandenberg and the top two ranking members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Connally and Vandenberg had clashed over the war. The Texan consistently supported FDR in his attempts to help the Allied Nations at war—Vandenberg vigorously opposed him. In fact, the Michigan Senator ranked as one of the chief Senate isolationists before and, for a time, after the war started. As Connally asserts in his memoirs, “Vandenberg had an early dislike for me. Almost invariably when I spoke on the floor he made an obvious show of stamping out into the cloakroom until I finished.” Connally particularly disliked Vandenberg’s consistent isolationist stand, especially after the shooting war began. In early 1945 Vandenberg made, in Connally’s words, “a so-called flop to

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid. 12.

internationalism.” Still, Connally questioned Vandenberg’s motives. “He labored hard in his Senate speech to justify his change of heart. But still he didn’t’ recant his earlier aggressive, snorting isolationism. His reversal was sort of ‘Here is where I get on the bandwagon before it turns the corner and leaves me behind.’”<sup>10</sup> Francis O. Wilcox, Chief of Staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that Connally chaired and on which Vandenberg was the ranking Republican until the roles reversed for two years in 1947, suggested that Connally harbored some jealousy toward Vandenberg, in part because the Texan “did not have the intellectual apparatus” that Vandenberg did in foreign affairs.<sup>11</sup> Judging from Connally’s firm control of the Committee over the course of the war, Wilcox may only have stated his preference for the Michigan senator. Despite their previous enmity, both powerful senators realized the importance of cooperation in carrying out the formation of the new international agency.

The two senators and the rest of the delegation met initially on March 13. After being briefed on Yalta, and having accepted the decision to postpone the settlement of the trusteeship question until later, both Connally and Vandenberg found it important that the delegation stress to the public that these meetings were to organize the UN, not to negotiate the peace treaty. As the momentum slowed in San Francisco for implementing trusteeships in Asia, events in Indochina brought it to a

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<sup>10</sup>Senator Tom Connally, as told to Alfred Steinberg, *My Name is Tom Connally* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1954), 212, 269.

<sup>11</sup>Interview with Francis O. Wilcox, *U. S. Senate Oral History Program* (U.S. Senate website), 75, available from [http://www.senate.gov/learning/learn\\_history\\_oralhist\\_wilcox2.html](http://www.senate.gov/learning/learn_history_oralhist_wilcox2.html) , Internet.



halt. Just a few days before on March 9, the Japanese overthrew the French puppet regime in Indochina. General Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French forces, requested that the United States aid the Vietnamese and French resistance groups fighting Japan in Indochina. Roosevelt agreed and sent air support. In addition, on March 15 Roosevelt backed off considerably from his stand against European colonialism in Asia, suggesting that if the U.S. could secure from France its assumption of the “obligations of a trustee, [in Indochina]” then he would agree to the French retaining it with the understanding that “independence was the ultimate goal.” Thus, the President, despite his distaste for colonialism, actually paved the way for the French to return in this, his last recorded statement on the troubled region.<sup>12</sup>

A few days before he died, the president did weigh in on the State Department’s feud with the military over trusteeships. He agreed with the State Department on reinstating the trusteeship provisions in the UN charter and said that he would take the matter up when he returned. He died three days later. On April 17, the Secretaries of State, War and Navy met with the American delegation in San Francisco to begin drafting a paper on trusteeships for the new president, Harry S. Truman. Over that and the following day, the delegates discussed the issue. Vandenberg stated that the Congress would go along with the position of the Secretaries of War and Navy against presenting a trusteeship proposal at San Francisco so that the U.S. could retain the Pacific Islands. Connally concurred. The final report included trusteeships only by “subsequent agreement” based on action initiated by the country holding such territory. The wording protected American

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<sup>12</sup>Herring, “The Truman Administration,” 100.

holdings on the Pacific islands by having the trusteeship of these islands maintained by the U.N. Security Council, in which the United States could veto any attempts by others to control them. In addition, by not addressing the question of trusteeships for British, French, or Dutch colonial areas, it insured that Europe maintained its colonial possessions. Senators Connally and Vandenberg supported the proposal, and made sure U.S. officials maintained the “subsequent agreement” provision in all trusteeship deliberations with other U.N. countries.<sup>13</sup>

The American delegation approved the trusteeship proposal in the shadows of an ever-increasing animus between the U.S. and Soviet Union. The Soviet’s continuing imposition of pro-Soviet governments in areas they liberated in Eastern Europe forced a reappraisal of American foreign policy. Fearing for the future of Western Europe in the wake of Soviet expansionism, the State Department stressed continuing cooperation with France and Great Britain in particular. De Gaulle himself played on American fears when discussing Indochina, saying that the French public believed the U.S. opposed their plans to return to their Asian colony. “We do not want to be Communist; we do not want to fall into the Russian orbit; but I hope that you do not push us into it.”<sup>14</sup> In San Francisco, French Foreign Minister M. Georges Bidault asserted that France had no intention of placing Indochina under the trusteeship system. For the next nine years, the French continued to play to American

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<sup>13</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 13-14.

<sup>14</sup>Herring, “The Truman Administration,” 101.

fears of communism in Western Europe in order to secure their military and monetary support, while insisting that they alone controlled the fate of Indochina.

As the U.N. Conference in San Francisco continued, the major nations argued over the language of the trusteeship proposal. The Soviets and China wanted to add the word “independence” as an objective of the trusteeship system. The U.S. and other allied nations did not, favoring instead the wording “progressive development toward self-government.” Once again, the U.S. followed the colonial nations in not wanting to encourage the new organization to butt into colonial affairs. Senator Connally expressed his fear that if the word independence were used, “there would be a good deal of stirring up of a desire for independence and the orderly procedure in the direction of self-government would be interrupted.” The final wording included both phrases, so in the end the trusteeship chapter accepted either outcome “as may be appropriate to the particular territory and its peoples and the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned.”<sup>15</sup> In effect, the final language constituted a compromise that effectively decided nothing. The American delegation got the trusteeship proposal passed by the majority of delegates in San Francisco, and it became Chapter XII of the United Nations Charter.

All in all, the San Francisco organizing conference of the UN marked the death knell of any consideration of granting self-determination to former French or British colonies. Roosevelt had talked tough, assuring his son in 1942 that he would work “with all my might and main” against any plan to “further France’s imperial ambitions.” Because of the necessities of maintaining the wartime alliance and the

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<sup>15</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 15.

desire to maintain control of U.S.-held possessions in the Pacific against possible threats in the region from the Soviets, Roosevelt's policies on Indochina did not match his rhetoric. In effect, they did the opposite, allowing France to come back into a land which it had, in the president's words "milked for 100 years," leaving its people "worse off than they were in the beginning."<sup>16</sup> Further, the fear of Soviet expansionism led the U.S. delegation in San Francisco to further facilitate the French return by both moderating the language of the trusteeship proposal and by ensuring that it did not include European colonies.

American efforts on trusteeships also allowed the U.S. to keep control of the Pacific islands. If America kept these islands, it would not be in a position to insist that the French give up its Asian colony or any other of its holdings. The members of the Senate and House, including those from the South, staunchly supported the military position of maintaining security in Asia by holding what it had. Southern congressional support of military over civilian positions on Indochina would reappear even more strongly in the period between 1950 and 1975, with devastating results.

President Truman shared neither Roosevelt's concern about colonialism nor his interest in Indochina. But he did share the concerns of the "Europeanists," as they were called, in the State Department over the Soviet threat. He also had a war to finish and wanted to keep all parties together. Thus, he gave the French a free hand in Indochina. Meeting with French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault in mid-May, 1945, the President supported French military participation in the war against Japan,

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<sup>16</sup>Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 147.

although it was agreed that France could not exploit its position to promote re-colonization of Indochina. Two weeks later, Secretary of State Edward Stettinius assured the French Foreign minister that the U.S. did not officially now and had not ever questioned French sovereignty over Indochina.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, both Asian and European experts within the State Department struck a compromise that favored Truman and the Europeanists. The resulting policy paper, entitled “An Estimate of the Conditions in Asia and the Pacific” suggested that since the colonial peoples were not ready for independence, it would be best for American interests in Europe and Asia to support the colonial powers. The paper did warn of the existence of a strong nationalist movement within Indochina and called on France to promote “an increased measure of self-government “ so that that the people would be “reconciled to continue French control.” However, it stated unequivocally that the U.S. “recognized French sovereignty over Indochina.” The final paragraph, a sop to the Asian experts in the State Department, emphasized that it was the “general policy of the United States to favor a policy which would allow colonial peoples to prepare themselves for increased participation in their own government with eventual self government as the goal.”<sup>18</sup>

With the exception of the UN charter discussions, the executive branch of the government did not let members of Congress in on any of these decisions. Wartime exigencies tended to bring the congressional leaders of both parties into what one

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<sup>17</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 21.

<sup>18</sup>Department of State, “An Estimate of the Conditions in Asia and the Pacific,” 22 June, 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, hereafter cited as *FRUS*, VI: 556-580.

scholar called an “extraordinary consensus” regarding foreign policy. The public and congressional preoccupation with the UN left the remaining decisions on the postwar world to be made, as H. Bradford Westerfield suggested in 1955, “largely in private by the military, the President, and a few advisors who, for the most part, were leaders of neither political party.”<sup>19</sup> That consensus would end soon. But, though not completely irreversible, the decisions made in 1945 to allow France to reoccupy Indochina would have repercussions for American foreign policy for the next thirty years.

As political and military officials tangled over Indochina, the region itself boiled over as the struggle for control continued. The leader of the Vietnamese nationalists or Vietminh, Ho Chi Minh, forced Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai, who had been a puppet of the Japanese, to abdicate. On September 2, Ho declared the independence of Vietnam. With U.S. officials present, he began his declaration with words from the Declaration of Independence. At about the same time the Chinese invaded from the North, and the British from the South, officially to accept the surrender of the Japanese and to maintain order. The British commander in Saigon released French troops who had been imprisoned by the Japanese, and these troops went on a rampage, killing indiscriminately, occupying public buildings, and eventually driving the Vietminh from Saigon. The starving Chinese troops moved through the northern province of Tonkin, and they confiscated from the peasants all the food they could possibly eat. For a time they removed the Vietminh from power.

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<sup>19</sup>H. Bradford Westerfield, *Foreign Policy and Party Politics: Pearl Harbor to Korea* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1955), 144.

With China, Great Britain, and several thousand French troops occupying his country, Ho Chi Minh tried to enlist the help of the United States. He sent several messages to President Truman and the State Department and one addressed to the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. There is no evidence, however that Connally ever received it. In any event, Truman, caught between European colonialism and Asian nationalism, decided to adopt a “hands-off” policy, refusing to respond to Ho because the U.S. did not officially recognize his government. Though a number of Americans in the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, had met and worked successfully with Ho during the war, the leader’s long-standing communist background served as a deciding factor in the decision. By February, 1946, the Chinese made an agreement with the French to leave. One month later, after contentious deliberations between Vietminh and French officials, the two parties came to an agreement in which France recognized Ho’s regime as a “free state” within the French Union—the new name for the old French empire—and promised to hold elections to determine whether Ho would control Cochinchina, the southern province. The final negotiations would take place in Paris later that year to define more clearly the time of the election and the nature of Vietnamese independence within the French Union

The protracted talks in Paris settled nothing. In the meantime the French created the Republic of Cochinchina, a direct refutation of Ho’s plans for unification. In the end, the two sides agreed to sign a document in which France agreed to elections in Cochinchina in 1947, but Ho knew the French would not relinquish hold on its major colonial possession in Asia. In the last meeting between Ho and French

Foreign Minister Bidault, the Vietnamese leader issued a stern warning: “If we must fight we will fight. You will kill ten of our men, and we will kill one of yours. Yet, in the end, it is you who will tire.” The French Indochina War began just two months later.<sup>20</sup>

As the shooting war started in Asia, the Truman administration faced a potential crisis in Europe. The British informed the U.S. in early 1947 that it could no longer support Greece and Turkey as it had been. During this time, Greece in particular struggled against communist insurgents. Fearing the “loss” of these European nations, President Truman proposed replacing the British commitment with an American one in order to stem the tide of Soviet aggression. He met with congressional leaders on February 27, 1947, to explain the situation and discuss chances for congressional approval of a Greek-Turkish aid program. With several members of Congress present, including Senator Connally and Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, also of Texas, Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson impressed upon the congressmen the grave threat of Soviet expansionism to the whole region, and inevitably, to the United States. After a stunned silence, Senator Vandenberg, who was also in attendance, stated the he would support the proposal only if the President made a dramatic explanation similar to the one Acheson just had. The Michigan senator said that Truman had to “scare the hell out of the American people” in order for the people and the Congress to support aid to Greece and Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1990* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 23-26. See also Karnow, 163-173.

<sup>21</sup>Joseph S. Jones *The Fifteen Weeks: February 21-June 5, 1947* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 139-145.



Truman did just that. In a speech to a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, the president depicted the world situation as a choice between two worlds: democracy and communism. The U.S., Truman said, should commit itself to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.” He concluded dramatically: “If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world—and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our nation.” Truman’s speech outlined what was to be known as the Truman or Containment Doctrine, and it would define American foreign policy for the next forty years. George Kennan, a foreign services officer and Russian expert, first formulated the policy of containment. Kennan said that the United States should embark upon a patient, but firm plan to contain Soviet expansionist impulses by applying “counter-force at a series of shifting geopolitical and political points.”<sup>22</sup> Though he did not intend containment to be used as a general policy against all instances of communist aggression, the Truman Doctrine made it U.S. foreign policy, suggesting open-ended commitments to fight Communism wherever it threatened “free peoples.”

The majority of Southern congressmen backed the President’s aid program to Greece and Turkey and supported containment in general, for a variety of reasons. Religious and political conservatism made southerners, more than inhabitants of other regions, suspicious of the “godless” Soviets, even during the wartime alliance. Senator and former governor Harry Byrd of Virginia expressed his long held mistrust in 1953, saying, “There is no assurance that we can ever trust Russia, no matter what

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<sup>22</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 27.

agreement she makes.”<sup>23</sup> The martial tradition in the South may have contributed to congressional support of containment and the necessary rearmament needed to meet the Soviet threat. In addition, party loyalty played a large role. However, it should be stated that the consensus that existed during the war still carried over to this period, in that both Democrats and Republicans joined with the president in aiding Greece and Turkey.

However, the aid bill did not sail through Congress without extended and sometimes contentious debate. The South produced some of the harshest critics of the aid program, from both the right and left. From the right, Senator Byrd, the leader of a political machine in Virginia, and an archconservative in both military and fiscal matters, responded in a cautious and somewhat critical manner to Truman’s speech. Byrd believed that “the greatest single obligation we owe to ourselves and to the world is to keep America strong at home—to preserve fiscal solvency, our productive capacity and safeguard our ability to finance our obligations without crushing taxation.”<sup>24</sup> He suggested that Truman’s far-reaching doctrine represented a “commitment, which in its logical and ultimate consequence will place vast financial and military burdens on us.... Where will our next intervention be?”<sup>25</sup> In a prophetic statement, Byrd warned of the risk the U.S. took by intervening to combat

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<sup>23</sup>Undated Senate Statement, 1953, Box 377, Harry Byrd Sr. Collection, University of Virginia, hereafter cited as Byrd, Sr. Collection.

<sup>24</sup>Speech by Senator Harry Byrd, Sr., April 30, 1947, to the Southern Industrial Council, Byrd, Sr. Collection, Box 367.

<sup>25</sup>Statement: March 12, 1947 on the President’s message on Greece, Byrd, Sr. Collection, Box 403.

communism. “It is certain that once we begin giving aid to a country we will not dare to withdraw, for then we will admit failure and encourage our enemies.”<sup>26</sup> Senator Byrd also charged that the president over exaggerated the crisis, therefore misleading the American people and the Congress.

Byrd opposed Truman’s decision to go it alone in Greece and Turkey, when the real dispute centered on Russia. He objected that the U.S. did not want the UN to administer and pay for the program because of fear of a Russian veto in the Security Council. The answer, the Senator concluded, would be to make the UN share the financial and military load in Greece and Turkey, and at the same time directly confront the Soviet Union’s veto power in the international body. This potential “showdown” as he described it would give the American delegation ammunition with which to challenge the veto privilege. If the debate over the veto resulted in the Russians withdrawing from the United Nations, Byrd concluded, “it is far better to do that now, because, as long as she continues her selfish and obstructive tactics, there is no hope of the UN being a real instrument for the preservation of world peace.” The showdown with Russia would be better now because America was the sole possessor of atomic weapons. The U.S. should force the issue now instead of “wait[ing] until we have been weakened by excessive drains on our economic system which may result in bankrupting ourselves in the effort to help bankrupt nations.”<sup>27</sup> In a sense, Byrd suggested that Truman use “atomic diplomacy,” a tactic very similar to the

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<sup>26</sup>CR, 80<sup>th</sup> Congress., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 22 April, 1947, 3773-3775.

<sup>27</sup>Speech by Harry F. Byrd, Sr. in the Senate, April 1, 1947, Byrd, Sr. collection, Box 367.

“brinksmanship” mentality that would define the next administration’s dealings with the Soviet Union. .

On the other end of the political spectrum, liberal Democratic Senator Claude Pepper of Florida agreed with Byrd. He charged that the Truman Doctrine would effectively emasculate the United Nations and warned that “if we rob the United Nations of the stalwart support of the strongest nation in the world and then condemn it as being incapable of acting, the fault is on us, not the United Nations.”<sup>28</sup> Pepper went even further in his criticism. He charged that “reactionary forces,” “cartelists and imperialists” had seized control of the United States and were attempting to drive the nation to Fascism and war.”<sup>29</sup> Pepper’s view stood far outside the mainstream for any region in 1947, but his passionate resistance to the Truman Doctrine illustrated the variety of opinion on foreign policy that existed in the “Solid South.” Pepper paid for his dissent, losing his reelection bid two years later after being branded “Red Pepper” by his opponent, George Smathers, who suggested his desire for friendship with Russia made him a communist dupe or worse.

Other southerners, such as Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky and Senator George of Georgia, wanted something from the Europeans in return for American aid, such as the return of strategic materials. George also proposed some remuneration for products such as cotton, which would have benefited the cotton growers of his

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<sup>28</sup>Irish, “Foreign Policy and the South,” 323.

<sup>29</sup>“Red Pepper,” *Newseek*, April 7, 1947, 25, Series 431, Box 19, Claude Pepper Collection Claude Pepper Library, Florida State University, hereafter cited as Pepper Collection.

state.<sup>30</sup> Despite all the debate and requests, the bill passed by an overwhelming margin, 67-23 in the Senate and 287-107 in the House, the majority of dissent coming from Republicans and a handful of conservative and liberal Democrats such as Byrd and Pepper.

In addition to aid, the President also requested the use of a “limited” number of military advisors in Greece and Turkey. The House Foreign Affairs Committee debated the number of advisors that should be authorized and their status, whether they would serve only as advisors or in combat. The potential danger that many members of Congress could foresee was expressed well by Congressman Tony Morris of Oklahoma, who worried about the implicit expansion of executive power. “If we send them over there, with unlimited power, and do not reserve the constitutional right to declare war...they could send an army over there and we would be helpless, and we may be catapulted into a war.” In a sense, the same debate would take place in 1964 over the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. In the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Pepper again brought up objections, saying that the public did not favor advisors. Despite these concerns, the Senate overwhelmingly approved without amendment the provision for advisors.<sup>31</sup>

As it turned out Congressman Morris’s concerns were well founded. By granting the executive the power to send advisors, but not limiting the scope or number that could be sent, Congress effectively gave Truman a free hand in Greece and Turkey. More important, it set a precedent whereby the President could intervene

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<sup>30</sup>Irish, “Foreign Policy and the South,” 324.

<sup>31</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 35-37.

without much interference from the Congress and without an official Declaration of War. The issue would be revisited in Korea, the Formosa Resolution in 1955, and a few more times in the years leading up to the Vietnam War. In every instance, the legislative branch allowed the executive the power to intervene, with the decision on whether to consult Congress being left to the President.

While the Truman Administration continued its emphasis on containing communism in Europe, some members of Congress wanted more money and attention to be paid to Asia, particularly China. When the administration began work on the European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan, a number of Republicans and some conservative Democrats in Congress insisted that the administration add China as one of the countries to receive Marshall Plan aid. Republican Representatives Walter Judd of Minnesota and John M. Vorys of Ohio led the effort to convince the Truman Administration to provide massive assistance to the faltering Chinese nationalist government under Chiang Kai-Chek in his continuing struggle in the Civil War against the Chinese Communists under Mao Tse Tung. In a situation that in some ways foreshadowed America's involvement in Vietnam, Chiang oversaw an inept and terribly corrupt administration that had mismanaged or stolen almost all American aid sent both during and after the war. Chiang, a devout Christian along with his wife, Madame Chiang, had support from many American Christians as well as a small but very powerful and vocal group of conservatives in both Congress the business world, and the military.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 25-27.

America had already aided China tremendously, both before and during World War II. After the war, the temporary rapprochement between the Nationalists and the Communists in China dissolved, and civil war broke out once more. Between 1946 and 1947, General George Marshall led an unsuccessful mission in China to bring about a solution to the civil war. He suggested the replacement of Chiang and the formulation of a coalition government between liberals from the Nationalists and Communist parties. He also suggested holding off on military aid “to let the opposing Chinese military forces reach some degree of equilibrium or stalemate without outside interference.”<sup>33</sup> However, both civilian and military officials kept pushing for aid, and the Republicans in Congress took up the cause. In the spring of 1947, Marshall, now Secretary of State, agreed to lift the embargo on military supplies and eventually came to the conclusion that supporting the corrupt Chiang government was necessary in order to strengthen congressional support for aid for European Recovery. Though the administration request for China aid excluded military assistance, Congress eventually provided for it. At this point Chiang looked weaker than ever as the Communists gained more and more control of the country, and many Democrats and a few Republicans in the Senate realized giving money to Chiang was the same as throwing it away.

Marshall sided with the senators. In a statement before an executive session of the House Foreign Relations Committee, the Secretary of State described a situation that would develop in China if the U.S. intervened. It sounded eerily like what would happen later in Vietnam.

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<sup>33</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 40.

Any large-scale United States effort would most probably degenerate into a direct U.S. undertaking and responsibility, involving the commitment of sizable forces and resources over an indefinite period....The costs of an all-out effort to see Communist forces resisted and destroyed in China would be impossible to estimate, but the magnitude of the task and the probable costs thereof would clearly be out of all proportion to the results obtained....It would involve this Government in a continuing commitment from which it would practically be impossible to withdraw.... The United States would have to be prepared to take over Chinese Government, practically, and administer its economic, military, and government affairs... Strong Chinese sensibilities regarding infringement of China's sovereignty, the intense feelings of nationalism among all Chinese, and the unavailability of strong qualified personnel in large numbers required argue strongly against attempting any such solution.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Marshall's strongly held views, the Truman administration felt it necessary to continue to aid China so they would not lose a traditional ally to the Communists. Truman therefore pressed forward with the aid package. However, Truman and Marshall saw China in the context of all other American commitments abroad and considered it of less importance than fighting communism in Europe. They hoped that economic aid would serve to delay as long as possible the negative consequences internationally that would follow a Communist victory in China. They saw the aid as an extension of the European Recovery Program and hoped it would

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<sup>34</sup>Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Economic Assistance to China: *U.S. Policy in the Far East: Part I*, Selected Executive Session Hearing of the Committee, 1943-50, House Foreign Affairs Committee Historical Series (hereafter cited as HFAC), Volume VII 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 20 February, 1948. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 166-68.



contain for a while Soviet expansionism in the region as well as inspire the Europeans to keep up the struggle against Russia.<sup>35</sup>

The House Foreign Affairs Committee expressed a far different opinion on the matter. Many of its members believed that the State Department had neglected China in the race to defend Europe, either by oversight or because of intrigue by Communist sympathizers in the department. It considered the China aid provision first and kept European Recovery and Marshall plan legislation together in the same bill. In addition, Judd and the other Republicans who controlled the Foreign Affairs Committee added \$150 million in military aid, which would be administered under the same terms as the Greece and Turkey program. The hearings themselves could only be described as a love fest between the committee and U.S. military experts on China such as General Clare Chennault, a Louisiana native. Judd, Vorys, and other Republicans attacked the State Department for supposedly slowing or opposing American aid to China and also provided an opportunity for the military to make their case for a deeper commitment. Of the few Democratic members of the committee to bring up objections during the hearings, one, Representative Mike Mansfield of Montana, would later play a large role in the debate over Vietnam. He warned his colleagues, "In order to embark on a policy like this, once we do it, we might as well stay realistic and face up to it, it is going to cost billions of dollars and it will likely takes years in the process.... Do we have the resources, due to the tremendous losses incurred carrying on the late war, to extend our lines clear around the world and at the

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<sup>35</sup>John H. Feaver, "The China Aid Bill of 1948: Limited Assistance as a Cold War Strategy," *Diplomatic History* 5 (Spring, 1981): 112-114.

same time have a reasonable...expectation that our policy will achieve the results we desire? Or would a policy of that kind mean that by stretching our resources so thin that instead of being able to gain in one area, we would face the possibility of losing in all areas?"<sup>36</sup> For the most part, the southerners on the committee, although not as rabid in their support of China as the Republican majority on the committee, joined with them to support both economic and military aid.

The only full House debate on the bill came on a proposal to strike the China provision from the Marshall Plan. Some House members such as Representative James P. Richards of South Carolina reasoned that the two should be considered separately and offered an amendment to accomplish this. It was soundly defeated, as the fear of communist advances increased following the fall of Czechoslovakia in 1948.<sup>37</sup>

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee agreed with Richards and did everything within its power to separate the two proposals. In fact, most Senators begrudged having to aid China at all. Particularly frank in their assessment of the bleak situation there were Senators George and Connally. George said, "I think that anything we give to China is probably just a complete waste; just a venture into the outer darkness. We don't know what we are doing, and we can't do any good by it. There is one way to save China from Russian communism, and that is to send [an] army up on the Manchurian border big enough to stop it. Otherwise you are never going to stop communism in Asia." George said he had sympathy for China because

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<sup>36</sup>HFAC, Volume VII, p. 232.

<sup>37</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 43.

“we just about gutted the [Chinese] empire [by giving the Russians parts of Manchuria] at the Yalta agreement ” which he called, “the crime of the century.”<sup>38</sup> That last comment of George’s evoked what became known as the “sellout at Yalta,” a charge that would be used frequently and ruthlessly in the next few years as a weapon by the Republicans and some conservative Southern Democrats to besmirch and attack the FDR and Truman record in their dealings with Russia and the Communists in China.

Connally, with characteristic color, expressed his concerns on a number of issues involving aid to China. He stated unequivocally that Chiang had “a good many years to win out, and he hasn’t won yet Had China, the senator asked, “shown any improvement with the money we gave her? Hasn’t Chiang been going down gradually ever since he got this money? “ Chiang, Connally explained, surrounded himself with “crooks” who had squandered every bit of American aid thus far. And Chiang could not, “shake [them] because they carried Ward No. 3 ‘way back yonder when he started out.” He continued a few minutes more, adding that he did not think “\$100 million or \$200 million or \$300 million or \$500 million or \$600 million is going to save China.”<sup>39</sup>

Connally did not seem concerned about the approaching communist takeover, somewhat naively believing that not all Chinese people opposing Chiang were

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<sup>38</sup>Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Assistance to China: *Foreign Relief Assistance Act of 1948*, Hearing Held in Executive Session Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Historical Series, (hereafter cited as SFRC), (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973) 80<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 22 March, 1948, 468.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 20 March, 1948, 443, 445, 449.

communists. Some “are fighting the government that is in. They are opposed to his long regime and they don’t think they are getting their reforms, and not getting their land.” He also railed against the House Republicans who forced the issue on military aid, expressing a fear that “the more we monkey with this Chinese thing, the more danger there is that Russia will come in. She isn’t going to stand for our approaching a military situation...and we can’t send an army over there because that means we are in a war.” Finally, he also took issue with the “China lobby,” members of which “buttonholed” senators incessantly to support even more military aid, but were not being clear on the total implications of such aid. “I asked [former American Ambassador to France and the Soviet Union, and a present member of the China Lobby, William] Bullitt this morning, ‘Do you want to send and troops. Oh no, no, no, no!’”

Senator H. Alexander Smith of New Jersey interrupted, finishing Connally’s thought by observing, “Bullitt of course is a great proponent of it.” Smith further expounded upon the fight between the House and the Senate over military aid, asserting that “we are taking Marshall’s side of the controversy, and the House is taking Bullitt’s side.” Bullitt, Smith continued, had suggested sending General Douglas MacArthur there “to help run the show for Chiang Kai-shek.” Connally made clear his stand, and the general view of the committee, when he urged caution, particularly against the enthusiasm among the China lobby and their military advisors for intervention. “That crowd is for bullets and we are not,” he explained. <sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 22 March, 1948, 466-467.

Despite opposition from the southerners and the doubts of most others on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Chairman Vandenberg reiterated the necessity of aid, concluding, “I don’t think this country would stand for our turning our backs on China, and that is what we have done if we don’t do something about China.” Then Vandenberg asked a question that would reverberate through the halls of Congress and the White House over many administrations in the efforts to carve out a coherent policy on Vietnam and all of Asia. “So you can’t turn your back. You have to do something? And your problem is, What can we do?”<sup>41</sup>

For lack of a better answer to Vandenberg’s question, the committee unanimously approved the request for economic aid and cut the military aid from the House’s request for \$150 million to \$100 million. The ensuing conference committee to iron out differences in the bill favored the Senate version, and the congressmen split the difference between the House and Senate versions, setting the number at \$125 million. Further, military aid did not follow the Greek-Turkish model in that advisors could not participate in combat activities. Aid to China became part of an omnibus bill that included the Marshall Plan proposal, and it passed both houses, the portion dealing with China becoming the China Aid Act of 1948.<sup>42</sup>

Though Congress had already discussed the fate of China in 1946, and would with more contentiousness search for scapegoats after China fell to the Communists, the China Aid Act debates set the tone for all further congressional discussions on intervention in Asia. Chiang at this point was down but not out, and the hope

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 20 March, 1948, 456.

<sup>42</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 46.

continued among Judd, Vorys, Carl Mundt and others in the China bloc that the U.S. would save him. Connally, George, Byrd and others expressed skepticism, emphasizing the corrupt nature of the Nationalist Chinese government.

As a group, southern congressman backed the President. But, within this consensus, opinions varied greatly. Claude Pepper would feel the sting from the electorate for his stand against American foreign policy, which he perceived as militaristic and imperialistic. The “radical” nature of his criticism placed him far from the ideological mainstream of southern politics. George and Byrd held the other end of the ideological spectrum, and both held sway for the moment. However, for the most part, ideology did not fully explain southern attitudes. The South gained greatly from Defense Department contracts that had started during the World War II and had increased with the onset of the Cold War. Southerners in Congress whose states benefited by their associations with the Armed Services committee supported the military leaders with whom they consulted with regularly. The economic boon to their states from Defense spending helped secure the re-elections of those legislators. However, in the China Aid debate, those southern lawmakers who held the middle between the two extremes of Byrd and Pepper urged caution and restraint, and it was the Midwesterners and the generals who talked war.

In the end, however, leaders in Congress from the South supported both economic and military aid to Nationalist China. Its inclusion in an omnibus bill along with the European Recovery Program made it almost impossible for them to oppose. They may have worried over the consequences of such aid, but became more concerned over the Communist threat, and, in the end, agreed to help Chiang

militarily. As much as the threat of a full-scale intervention in China concerned leaders such as Connally and George, in the final version both senators supported the military advisors over the administration on military aid. The debate on China Aid coincided with a contentious presidential election in which many southerners walked out of the Democratic Convention to protest Truman's stand on Civil Rights, some supporting Dixiecrat candidate Strom Thurmond for President. Truman looked increasingly vulnerable, and Republican attacks on China increased in volume and belligerency. What did not seem to be waning was the communist threat. The fear of communism, for both southerners and non-southerners, began to outweigh most other foreign policy considerations.

Nevertheless, the southerners in Congress remained committed to the Democratic Party and Truman's foreign policy, and to at least limiting the amount of aid to China. As Connally asserted, China was not a new problem: "I have been struggling for China ever since I have been here, for thirty years....She has been a sore spot for years and years and she is always going to be a sore spot. I don't care what you do now. China is going to be on our necks as long as any of us are around here."<sup>43</sup> Connally once again spoke prophetically, for the fear of losing China and the subsequent hysteria in the search for scapegoats when China fell to the Communists would greatly influence the decisions on Asian policy of presidents and members of Congress over the next two decades. Southerners, ever mindful of the threat of communism itself and of Republican and conservative Democratic charges of being

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<sup>43</sup>SFRC, "Foreign Relief Assistance Act," 20 March, 1948, 458.

soft on communism, would increasingly begin to change the focus of their opinions regarding foreign aid. Southern congressmen, along with most Americans, believed that all communist aggression originated in the Soviet Union, and they arrived at the conclusion that Soviet expansionism could most effectively be curbed militarily. Thus, where southerners in the Senate had in the first years after World War II backed economic aid while begrudgingly supporting military assistance, the precipitate cost of helping others in economic and technical aid quickly turned many southern fiscal conservatives against it. At the same time fear of the next “domino” falling made them enthusiastically support most efforts to increase military spending in Asia. They therefore backed containment wholeheartedly, but considered it mainly in terms of military aid and, if need be, American intervention. With the shift in southern congressional attitudes, along with an increasing contempt for the ineffectiveness of the UN organization they helped to create, many southern legislators abandoned the internationalism and multi-lateralism which defined them during the war and immediate postwar periods. At the same time, they embraced the military component of containment, which made future interventions possible. This shift evolved gradually however, as evidenced by the reticence of many southerners in Congress to sponsor the involvement of American troops in Indochina in 1954. However, since most southerner legislators never abandoned their Cold War assumptions they rejected the contention forwarded by North Carolina Representative Charles Deane that nationalism, not communism, inspired revolutions in developing nations.

The debates over the China Aid Act of 1948 would be replayed in a similar fashion over intervention in Vietnam in 1954 and 1964. Southern congressional



apprehension beforehand over intervention remained consistent, as demonstrated in the attitudes of Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, Senator John Stennis of Mississippi and others. However, once the discussion ended, these men fell in line, supporting the consensus, usually allowing the executive the leeway to act in any manner he would choose. In 1954, largely due to Eisenhower's reluctance, the U.S. did not intervene militarily. However, Southerners along with most Americans never abandoned the policy of containment or the view of the Vietnam conflict as anything other than Moscow-inspired. Ten years later, therefore, southern congressmen joined the overwhelming majority in supporting intervention. Though they certainly did not act alone, the extremely powerful southern leadership in Congress in part paved the way for the American tragedy in Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 2

### “THE GENERAL AREA OF CHINA”

On July 18, 1949, Representative F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana conducted a radio interview of American World War II hero and Lake Charles, Louisiana, native General Claire Chennault, the man who trained and commanded the “Fighting Tigers” in their successful defense of Asia against the powerful Japanese Air Force. Chennault had remained in Asia, married a Chinese woman, and started a commercial airline venture in China. For the previous several years Chennault had been one of the most vocal members of the China Lobby and had called for increased military and economic aid to help the Nationalist Chinese fight the communists. A few months earlier he had published his war memoirs, *Way of a Fighter*, which even conservative Republican Wisconsin Senator Alexander Wiley of the Foreign Relations Committee characterized as “disinformation” on the present situation in China. “Chennault,” Wiley sarcastically added, “practically says that, given an air force, he can beat back the commies.” Now as the Chinese situation looked increasingly hopeless for the Nationalists, Hebert introduced his “friend of many years” and the “best informed man in this country on what is happening [in China] today” to a Louisiana radio audience. Hebert played devil’s advocate, stating all the arguments against deeper American intervention in China, thereby allowing Chennault to make his case for the Nationalists. The General suggested that if China fell to the communists it would be “the greatest disaster in our National history and the greatest threat to our security that we Americans, and our allies, have ever faced.” He warned that if the United States did nothing “but wait for the dust to settle,” then the communists would not stop until they took most of South

Asia, India, the islands of the East Indies, the Philippines, Formosa, and Japan. He refuted the claim that Chinese Communists were more nationalists and agrarian reformers than hard-line communists and also charged that the U.S.S.R. controlled their revolution.

Chennault would have preferred intervention earlier, but “the important thing is not the past but the future.... We can’t hope to get back for a long time what the Communists have already seized in China and Manchuria—but we can at least see that they are stopped and held from taking the remainder of Asia.” He proposed creating a “sanitary area” along the western and southern borders of China, which would “cut off the rest of China from Burma, Thailand, French Indo-China and the other rich lands of South Asia.” He also advocated a long-range plan of military and economic aid to promote “rehabilitation and development of the backward areas of free Asia” in order that the Asian people “can be shown the Democratic way to security and the good life.”<sup>1</sup> Though Hebert and Chennault gave lip service to the forming of a Pacific Pact and to economic aid to Asian countries, they talked almost exclusively of American military aid. Hebert, in presenting Chennault’s views to the people of Louisiana, presented the implicit message that future containment of communism in Asia depended almost solely on American military aid and personnel.

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<sup>1</sup>Radio Interview of General Claire Chennault by Congressman F. Edward Hebert, Transcript of Radio Broadcast from Washington D.C., to Louisiana over KNOE (Monroe, LA.) and WNOE (New Orleans), July 18, 1949. John Sparkman Collection, (hereafter cited as Sparkman Collection), Box 112, W.S. Hoole Special Collections, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Wiley quote is from SFRC, *Economic Assistance to China and Korea*, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 15 March, 1949, 9.

Though it would be a few years before Hebert would enjoy a position of power over military matters on the House Armed Services Committee, his support of Chennault and the military, though not a new stand for the Louisiana congressman, reflected the beginnings of a shift of opinion among many southern congressmen. The movement away from internationalism began with the inability to successfully aid the Nationalist Chinese, along with the failure to achieve “victory” in Korea in the UN “police action.” The potential “loss” of China, however, would dominate discussion in the Armed Services, Foreign Relations, and Foreign Affairs committees for the remainder of 1948 and all of 1949, with the China bloc in Congress leading the charge to keep the Nationalists fighting, all the while savagely berating the Truman administration for, in their view, facilitating their failures because of neglect. Senators Tom Connally, Claude Pepper, and a few other southerners in Congress fended off increasingly vicious attacks against the Truman administration by Republicans and a few conservative Democrats. Yet, illustrating the variety of southern congressional opinion on the China issue, conservative southern Democrats, including James Eastland of Mississippi and John Sparkman of Alabama, publicly supported the China lobby. Privately, Georgia’s Richard Russell and Harry Byrd also brought up objections. Southerners were far from united. Out of the attitudes on Truman’s “failure” in China came the Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949, which, at the insistence of the China bloc, allocated a small amount, \$75 million, to provide military aid for the “general area of China.” Less than a year later, in May of 1950, the President, beleaguered by scathing criticism over the fall of China, followed the advice of the State Department and invoked the provision of the Mutual Defense Act to send

direct military aid to Indochina. A month later, the increasingly heated political climate along with the real threat of the communists overrunning Korea brought about a large increase in direct aid to the French Asian colony.

During this period from 1948-1951, however, most congressmen focused not on Indochina but on the events in China and Korea. Southern leaders in Congress hesitated at first to support aid to China, fearing a larger more destructive intervention. Once South Korea felt the threat from the North, southerners as a whole largely supported the Democratic President but grew increasingly impatient with both the minimal support among other nations involved and the unwillingness to fight all out in Korea. A number of southerners lamented that the U.S. military supplied about ninety percent of the troops and most of the money for Korea, and, as a result, began to abandon internationalism. Southerners' impatience with the concept of limited warfare also persisted and heavily influenced their decisions and opinions on Vietnam. In Korea, many conservatives both inside and out of the South insisted that America not fight with "one hand tied behind its back." Southerners would be the loudest proponents of this sentiment during American military intervention in Vietnam. Nevertheless, when the time came in the 1954 to decide whether America should intervene to save the French in Indochina, southern leaders, along with the President and many others, stepped back from the brink. But though hesitant to send troops to Indochina in 1954, Southerners in Congress never abandoned the policy of containment, which would serve as the basis of American military intervention ten years later. Their influential positions on congressional committees that oversaw foreign policy and the military, moreover, influenced many other members of

Congress, which in part give them a share of the blame for the tragedies and misadventures that followed.

In early 1949 the Foreign Affairs Committee held hearings on the extension of the European Recovery Program, of which the China Aid Act was a part. On February 15, 1949, Secretary of State Dean Acheson touted the wisdom of the European recovery program by explaining its significance in the context of the overall American foreign policy goals. Acheson discussed Indochina as one of the places that America and Western Europe could promote trade, thereby exporting Western values and “way of life.” In discussing the social and physical conditions in Indochina, the Secretary espoused the paternalism that would characterize much of the history of American involvement in Vietnam. The people of Indochina, he maintained, desired independence and had talked a great deal about both throwing off white domination and communism. Acheson posited, however, that the Indochinese people lacked some basic tools needed for self-government. “They are about ninety-five percent illiterate...They do not know about starting schools....[or] how to organize and build roads.” Government was “something of a mystery” and complex business practices equally out of reach. America, Acheson asserted, faced “a race with time” in the region. Its advisors had to gain the trust of the people; only then could they show these apparently “backward” people “simple things about what a school district is and what falls within [it], how you go about collecting taxes,” and how you choose

teachers to teach the children. If American advisors failed to do this, Acheson concluded, “you will have chaos of the most terrible sort.” <sup>2</sup>

Acheson was far less sanguine about developments in China. Early that year the communists had taken Peking, and the administration began to close its assistance program to China. Acheson observed that the Nationalists and the Chinese people had lost the will to fight. In describing the situation, the Secretary used language that would come back to haunt him and the Democratic Party for the remainder of the Truman years and well into the 1950s. “People say to me, ‘What is our policy toward China?’ You might say, ‘What is the policy toward a house that is half fallen down and the rest of the walls are about to collapse.’ The first basis of the policy is to wait until what is falling down falls, and [smoke] clears away and you see what is left.” <sup>3</sup>

Many in the China bloc in Congress, most of them Republican, did not want to wait until the smoke cleared, or as Acheson stated in another widely publicized comment, “until the dust settles.” After the Democrats on both the Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations Committee initially voted to exclude China Aid from the European Recovery Act extension, the Republicans prepared themselves for battle. As Chiang officially resigned and retreated to Formosa, leaving many Nationalists troops still on the mainland, the China bloc pushed for greater efforts to save China. In February, 1949, fifty-one House Republicans sent the president a round-robin letter charging that Roosevelt’s wartime support of Chiang had been abandoned in 1945 when the Truman administration tried to “force” a coalition with the communists.

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<sup>2</sup>HFAC, VI, *Extension of the European Recovery Program*, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 18 February, 1949, 38-39, 41-42.

They demanded the creation of a commission of several top-level military, economic, and political advisors to reexamine the situation and to report to Congress and the President. A subsequent meeting with the signatories to the letter and Acheson went badly. Congressman Walter Judd of Minnesota ignored the Secretary's careful presentation of the facts, practically branded Acheson as a defeatist, and demanded action that would suit the China lobby. The meeting ended abruptly. The next day, February 24, one of the few Democratic China lobby supporters, Senator Pat McCarran introduced a bill that would have created a massive aid program for Nationalist China. The bill was referred to the Foreign Relations Committee, and Connally referred it to the State Department. As the diplomats mulled over how to respond, Connally received another letter, this time from fifty Republican and Democratic senators urging that hearings be held on it as soon as possible so that the bill could be properly amended to the satisfaction of the committee. The signatories included twelve southerners, three of whom would play a large role in helping shape Vietnam policy and debate: William Fulbright, Richard Russell, and John Sparkman of Alabama.<sup>4</sup>

Because the Foreign Relations Committee had already had held extensive China hearings and because the chairman knew that a number of signatories would not necessarily have voted for McCarran's bill, Connally expressed bewilderment at the number of Senators who demanded more hearings on China. Throughout March,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>4</sup>Robert M. Blum, *Drawing the Line: The Origin of American Containment Policy in East Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 38-44. See also SFRC, *Economic Assistance to China and Korea*, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 11 March, 1949, 2.



Foreign Relations heard testimony from Acheson, General Barr and several others in an effort to determine what should be done about China aid. After several hearings the committee ended up doing nothing on McCarran's bill, but still had to deal with the extension of the China Aid Act. Connally realized the overwhelming pressure being brought to bear to assist the remaining Nationalists, so on the floor of the Senate he added an amendment to the European Recovery Act extension. The amendment, an interim measure, would authorize the funds left over from the previous year, approximately \$58 million, to be spent at the President's discretion in areas of China not under Communist domination. The Senate version with Connally's amendment won out in conference and the bill passed both houses in April 4.<sup>5</sup>

Connally's final amendment to the bill came out of a compromise with newcomer California Republican Senator William Knowland, who authored a similar amendment. Knowland had already gained the reputation as one of the most effective leaders of the China bloc in the Senate and more than once annoyed and baited an increasingly frustrated Connally. On April 21, Knowland proposed a Senate concurrent resolution establishing a joint committee to investigate American policy in China. He claimed it was not too late to save the Nationalists, whose situation he compared to the British at Dunkirk. If America did nothing, Knowland predicted, Burma, French Indochina, and ultimately India would fall. Though the Foreign Relations Committee and the Senate in general largely ignored his plea, he kept up the attacks. A week later the California senator outlined on the floor of the senate the

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<sup>5</sup>Blum, *Drawing the Line*, 48-49.

legislative history the 1948 China Aid Act, accurately observing that it if it had not been for Congress military aid would not have been extended to China. In a direct jab at Acheson, Knowland said, “The question which we must ask and answer is whether it is in the best interests of maintaining this world as one of free men and in the best interests of future security of this Nation to permit 450,000,000 Chinese to be taken behind the iron curtain while we wait for the smoke to clear.”<sup>6</sup> He vowed to continue fighting for more aid, promising to offer an amendment providing assistance to China to the upcoming Mutual Defense Assistance Act. The legislation originally had nothing to do with Asia. It would have provided the military aid necessary to carry out the recently ratified NATO treaty. Knowland was insistent that aid to China and the Far East also be included.

Because the Mutual Defense Act involved both foreign policy and military assistance, in the Senate a joint committee of both the Foreign Relations and Armed Services held hearings in the summer of 1949. Knowland sat on Armed Services, and, to the chagrin of Connally, took every opportunity to question witnesses on China, whether they were discussing it or not. As the hearings continued, the atmosphere between the two senators grew increasingly heated. They were exacerbated even more because of a number of important developments occurred as the two committees began hearings.

Early in the previous hearings over the McCarran bill, Connally advised Acheson to clear up the confusion regarding the administration’s China policy. He told a hesitant Acheson, “It seems to me that we will just have to grit our teeth and tell

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<sup>6</sup>Senate, *CR*, Vol. 95, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 28 April, 1949, 5238-40.

them the truth.”<sup>7</sup> Acheson agreed with Connally and ordered the State Department to develop a White Paper on China. The Department began its work. As it formulated the document, State Department officials, the military establishment, and even Senator McCarran of the China bloc itself advised against the publication of the paper which would definitely criticize a Nationalist government that teetered on the brink of collapse. Nevertheless, Acheson approved the paper, entitled “United States Relations with China with Special Reference to the Period 1944-49,” and released it on August 5, less than a week after hearings began on the Mutual Defense Act. The document characterized the Chiang government and its successor as corrupt and mismanaged, suggesting that both ignored the prudent and sensible American proposals to reform and improve themselves. At the same time the White Paper damned Communist China’s leaders and expressed confidence that the Chinese citizenry would throw off the yoke of the oppressive government. The United States pledged to do all it could to “encourage all developments in China [which would] work toward this end.”<sup>8</sup>

Acheson and the State Department collectively “gritted their teeth” and told their version of the truth. The Republicans and many others did not accept it. The State Department expected the Republicans to howl with protest; they did not disappoint. House Minority Leader Joseph Martin called the White Paper an “Oriental Munich.” Congressman John Davis Lodge, younger brother of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, quipped, “Apparently the Administration would rather lose a continent than

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<sup>7</sup>SFRC, *Economic Assistance to China and Korea*, 18 March, 1949, 40.

<sup>8</sup>Blum, *Drawing the Line*, 89-95.

lose a little face.” Vandenberg lamented the “tragic mistakes” of the State Department’s insistence on a coalition government with the Communists in China.<sup>9</sup>

As the State Department made the White Paper public, in the House as in the Senate the debate continued over the Mutual Defense Assistance Act. But criticism of the bill did not come from only the Republicans. On August 18, Congressman Lodge offered an amendment that would provide \$75 million of military aid for China and \$25 million for Southeast Asia. Congressman Mansfield, a Democrat and supporter of the administration, charged that the amendment amounted to a “virtual declaration of war” and predicted that American troops would follow shortly after American aid. Democratic Congressman George Smathers of Florida refuted Mansfield’s logic. “How in heaven’s name could it be a declaration of war to say we are going to assist the Chinese fight communism in China and have it not constitute a declaration of war to say that we are going to assist the Greeks and Turks...and do the same thing in Iran and various other places throughout the world where we embarked upon a program of containment?”<sup>10</sup> All in all, the release of the White Paper led to consternation on both sides of the aisle and satisfied very few in Congress.

Despite the China bloc’s insistence on blaming the Truman administration and the State Department for the deteriorating situation of the Nationalists in China, not all in the Congress or the military agreed with them. In April, Major General David G. Barr, Director of the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group to the Republic of China, sided with Acheson. The general told the House Foreign Affairs committee that the

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<sup>9</sup>*Time*, August 15, 1949, 12.

<sup>10</sup>*CR*, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 18 August, 1949, 11782-11791.

Nationalist soldier had lost his will to fight. Congressman James Richards pushed the general to go further. The South Carolina congressman asked Barr whether he felt the Chinese had lost their will because the Nationalist government was either corrupt or inept. Barr said that the Nationalists exhibited both incompetence and corruption. Richards pressed even further and addressed the charges that the United States did not adequately arm the Nationalist soldiers as they had been required to do under the congressionally approved military aid program. The General followed Richard's lead. "There was no battle lost while I was there, due to lack of ammunition or weapons, either." Richards concluded his inquiry by asking "Will it take U.S. forces to save China?" Barr said that American intervention was "the only thing in my opinion that would save China now." The congressman designed his inquiries in order to get General Barr to deflect and refute the suggestion by the China bloc, led ostensibly by Walter Judd on the Foreign Affairs Committee, that Truman's neglect of China was leading to its fall.<sup>11</sup>

Senator Knowland, predictably, disagreed. He criticized the White Paper and the Truman administration for its lack of emphasis on China, but also requested the administration bring home General Douglas MacArthur from Japan and Vice Admiral O.C. Badger from China to testify before the Joint committees on the China situation. MacArthur had declined to leave Japan very recently in response to similar requests, but this did not deter Knowland's efforts. The motion brought about the most contentious debate between the California and Texas senators. After issuing a letter signed by ten

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<sup>11</sup>HFAC, VII, *Briefing On the Fall of China to the Communists*, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 6 April, 1949, 508-09.

members of the Senate Armed Services committee of which the California senator was a member, Knowland went further. In the midst of questioning General Omar Bradley on the MDAA in the joint Armed Services/Foreign Relations hearings, Knowland unexpectedly entered a motion to bring McArthur and Badger to appear before the Joint Committee. The motion angered Connally, who said it was not fair to vote to demand that the President bring the military leaders home. "We are [not] in a position to try to dictate to the Executive whom of his subordinates he will bring back here from important posts in the Far East." In response to another senator who suggested that it would be extremely important to get the opinions of the American commanders in the region, Connally retorted, "Everyone knows that is not the purpose of the motion." The chairman realized, as did everyone else in the room, that Knowland only wanted MacArthur and Badger in Washington to provide a public forum in which they could even more forcefully assail the Truman China policy. Yet Connally, ever mindful of the political implications of his actions, did not want the charge of partisanship or unfairness to be hurled at his chairmanship of the joint proceedings. So the chairman allowed a vote on the matter. The motion passed 13-12, with two conservative southern Democrats from Armed Services, Senators Byrd of Virginia and Richard Russell of Georgia, voting for it (Byrd actually held Russell's proxy, and voted "yes" for him). Connally's frustration boiled over, and he called the resolution and those voting for it shameful. Byrd, angered, defended himself: "I think we're about to take one of the momentous steps in the history of the country. I think we, the Senators of the United States, have the right to get all the information from those in whom we have the most confidence." Implicit in that statement was that Byrd, and,

by association, Russell, had less confidence in the State Department and the administration on China than they had in the military leaders. Connally had already withdrawn his statement, but he apologized again to Byrd. However he added, "I do feel very deeply that we are doing a very wrong thing."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the desires of the China bloc and the conservative southern Democrats on the Armed Services Committee, MacArthur felt he could not leave his post and declined once more. Truman did not order him home. However, Admiral Badger, another military commander sympathetic to the China lobby, testified on September 8. In what became the highlight of the hearings, Badger outlined his plan to keep China afloat for at least the next year by providing military aid to a number of Chinese warlords still conducting guerilla operations on the mainland, a number of whom controlled the area near the border with French Indochina. Though he admitted that the Communists would overrun most of China, Badger still believed that Mao Tse Tung's forces had already lost popularity. The Communists, therefore, could not hold China for long. When pressed for how much aid military aid would be needed, Badger said that \$75 million would be sufficient.

Of all the members of each committee who questioned Admiral Badger, two southerners, Connally and Senator Pepper of Florida, were the most critical. The Chairman wanted to know how much, if any of the money would go to exiled former Chinese President Chiang Kai-Shek. Under Connally's questioning, Badger admitted that Chiang, though he had resigned and now resided on the island of Formosa, still

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<sup>12</sup>Congress, Senate, Joint Foreign Relations, Armed Services Committee, *Military Assistance Program: 1949*, 81<sup>st</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 10 August, 1949, 11, and 12, 118-119, 184-192.

controlled the military forces and had taken \$300 million in gold bullion, the balance of the Nationalist Chinese treasury, with him. Badger also responded to Connally by saying that he would advise Congress to give the money not directly to Chiang, but to those warlords that would cooperate with military plans to keep the communists from the areas they controlled. Connally challenged this assumption and suggested that no plans or money would go to China without Chiang's control:

Connally: He [Chiang] would have the veto on it [the military plans], wouldn't he?

Badger: I don't believe that he would veto a plan that was approved by proper American authorities.

Connally: Maybe not, but he would have the power to do it, if he wanted to, wouldn't he?

Badger: Probably, yes sir. <sup>13</sup>

Pepper also questioned the resolve of the warlords and the remaining Nationalists to keep the resistance, particularly because Chiang still held control over their actions: "Don't (sic) the very lucid, honest presentation of this matter disclose the political problem we have got....It is not just a question of sending arms to a particular place. It looks like to me what you are talking about is what General Marshall and General Stillwell and all of them tried to do, but....Chiang Kai-shek wouldn't go along with them." He also cast a shadow on the admiral's claim that American aid would not include an American military mission in China. Pepper saw no difference between this operation and the one in Greece, "except" in Greece "they

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 8 September, 1949 515-550.



have a government, and you are asking us directly...to take over this job.” Badger agreed. Pepper continued pressing the admiral to tell him the extent of American involvement, and Badger admitted that U.S ships would have to deliver these goods to mainland Chinese ports, some of which would be surrounded by Communist Chinese territory. Neither Pepper nor Connally pursued the matter further, but the implication was clear. The admiral advocated that America deeply involve itself in a civil war by aiding guerilla fighters in an extremely tenuous situation. After the United States had already spent in excess of two billion dollars since the end of World War II, the hopes of a favorable outcome seemed dim at best.<sup>14</sup>

As Knowland doggedly continued his fight for his amendment that would set aside money for China and the Far East and would include a U.S. military mission to administer and supervise the aid, Connally tried to reign him in. In the debate over the amendment the two senators clashed once again. The chairman, who reconciled himself to the fact that some money would be authorized for China, continued to try to keep presidential control of its disbursement. He did express his frustration that Knowland held the hearings, which should have focused primarily on giving military aid to carry out the North Atlantic treaty, hostage over China. He further warned the committees of the possible implications of their actions: “If we go to giving them military aid, we may get in trouble with some other countries that we haven’t considered.” Connally added an amendment to Knowland’s amendment that would include the seventy five million as an “emergency fund,” to carry out the purposes of the act in the area. The President would have sole control over the fund. Knowland

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 8 September, 1949, 540-45.

objected to the exclusion of a military mission to accompany such aid, to the lack of assurances that the funds would be used in China, and to the fact that the President did not have to report to Congress or anyone where or whether he spent the money.

This led to another argument, as Connally forcefully repeated the charge that Chiang “absconded” with the three hundred million dollars in gold from the Chinese treasury. The money, Connally claimed, had originally been given to the former Chinese President to help them fight the communists. Knowland objected to the term “absconded,” which would imply that Chiang stole the money. Connally asked Knowland that if the money belonged to the government of China then why did a former president and private citizen still have it. The Chairman then, to the delight of the committees, called for a dictionary so that the record could show what “abscond” meant: “Abscond means ‘to hide.’ Well if he didn’t hide, who did? Here is what it says: ‘To Depart clandestinely to steal off and secret oneself.’ There is no implication that he has to steal.” He repeated again as the room erupted in laughter, “I say there is no implication in the dictionary that he stole any money.” After Knowland insisted that there was no mystery of where Chiang was headed and that he had the money transferred so that the communists would not get it, Connally continued attacking the Chinese leader for his actions. “He didn’t stop anywhere. He first went out and stayed for a while at his own home, supposedly in China. Then, when the temperature rose, he hit it out for Formosa.” He repeated once again the dictionary definition, and then concluded, “He certainly did that. He secreted himself and is still secreting

himself out of range of the communist armies. So that answers that question.” The committees broke into laughter yet again.<sup>15</sup>

In the end, Connally’s amendment was amended further by Senator Vandenberg, who cleared up the dispute over the wording of who the aid would go to by suggesting a change that would provide the aid for “the general area of China.” The President would still have the discretion to use the funds as he saw fit. The committees approved the revised Connally amendment 16-5, with three of the five dissenters, George, Byrd, and Richard Russell, from the South. Three issues concerned the three senators: the already enormous cost, over two billion dollars since 1945, of China aid, the potential high cost of future military assistance, and the potential military involvement that would result. George had a strong and well respected reputation of being non-partisan on foreign policy and objected to the aid mainly because he tired of Chiang’s corrupt government and believed any future aid would be throwing good money after bad. He did not side with the China bloc; on the contrary, he wanted all aid to China to end. Byrd’s main argument in all foreign aid cases was the financial cost. The former Virginia governor and one of the architects of his state’s “pay as you go” system thought the Soviets would slowly but surely destroy the financial position of America, thereby weakening the country and making the United States less able to resist their efforts to conquer the world.

After having visited China in 1943, Russell shared George’s contempt for Chiang. As one of the first senators to come out against foreign aid during the Cold War, he certainly aligned himself with Byrd. However, Russell’s main concern was

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 9 September, 1949, 551-598.

the possible use of troops. At every threat of American intervention in the next few years, Russell despaired of sending troops to remote regions that would certainly put them in harm's way though he believed in, in his words, the "evil" nature of the Soviet Union. He saw the potential for intervention in continuing military aid to China. Despite the misgivings of the three influential southern senators, the final version of the bill, which included the \$75 million in aid to the general area of China, passed by voice vote in the Senate and by a vote of 224-109 in the House. By this time, the last vestiges of Nationalist resistance had crumbled, and the Truman administration had already determined a few months earlier that any more support for the Nationalists on the mainland was not feasible.<sup>16</sup>

Russell's fear over the potential for military involvement from this part of the bill would prove more prescient than any of them could have realized. The fall of China to the Communists set off a chain reaction that propelled America into Vietnam. As Robert Blum asserts, "The American containment policy in Southeast Asia arose from the ashes of its failed policy in China."<sup>17</sup> The communist victory in China provided the Republicans with a key issue with which they would hammer their political opponents for much of the next decade. Democrats made sure that they would not again suffer another blow like China—that they could not be accused of

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<sup>16</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 60. Statements illustrating Byrd's concerns over the potentially damaging financial situation that could result with increased foreign aid can be found throughout the Byrd, Sr. Collection. See Statement by Senator Harry Byrd to the People of Virginia for Release Sunday Morning, December 17, 1953, Box 406, for a specific example. For Russell's opinion of Chiang see Gilbert C. Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr., Senator from Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 251.

<sup>17</sup>Blum, *Drawing the Line*, 214.

being “soft on communism” because another domino fell in Asia under their watch. Among the Democrats who sat in the joint hearings was Texas’s new senator, Lyndon B. Johnson, who would remember the lesson well as he struggled to formulate a coherent policy to save China’s western neighbor from Communism. George Reedy, Johnson’s aid in the Senate and later his presidential press secretary, described the feeling the Texas senator and all Democrats shared regarding the Republican attacks:

[Because] the Republicans tore the Democratic Party to pieces on the basis of the fall of China to the Communists.... It sort of left in its wake a feeling that if one square inch of Asian soil fell again to the Communist that that’d be the end of everything...The Democrats were actually afraid that there would be a tremendous popular uprising against them that would sweep into office many ultra-isolationist Republicans if any more [of Asia] fell. And [this fear] made everybody reluctant to come out and say, ‘For the love of Christ, let’s stop messing around with this nonsense’...And I think that’s one of the reasons why the United States got into both Korea and Vietnam. I’m not saying it’s the only reason. I think there was a psychological impulse there.<sup>18</sup>

All in all, debate over the Mutual Defense Assistance Act would have a far-reaching impact for America. Southerners played an important part in that debate and expressed differing opinions over whether the aid should be approved and how much should be administered. But most southerners, along with the rest of Americans, agreed on the catastrophic nature of the “fall of China” and on the necessity of the United States government to prevent it from happening to any other Asian nation. Most in America still subscribed to a belief in monolithic communism and the Domino Theory. After Congress under the leadership and direction of Connally approved the

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<sup>18</sup>George Reedy, Phone Interview by Robert Mann, June 11, 1997, used by permission of Robert Mann.

Mutual Defense Assistance Act, which included funds for the general area of China, America would commit itself to the defense of the rest of Asia.

In the immediate aftermath of the communist takeover, the psychological impulse to act proved strong. As Chairman Mao came to power, the administration and the Congress scrambled to protect China's neighbors. In February, 1950, the State Department concluded several years of debate over Indochina by supporting the Elysee' Agreement, which made Bao Dai's Cochinchina government "an independent state within the French Union." The puppet of Japan during the war would now play puppet to the French colonial regime. The Asian experts in the State Department despaired of this decision, in no small part because of Bao Dai's dearth of support at home. In fact, State Department witnesses described the ceremony creating the "first provisional government of Vietnam" as "more of a funeral than a christening." The Europeanists again convinced the best way to fight the Cold War would be to keep France afloat to fight communism at home and in Indochina. Despite Ho Chi Minh's efforts in 1949 through letters, radio contact, and propaganda promising neutrality in the Cold War and investment opportunities to the French and the Americans, the administration sided with the Europeanists in the conclusion that Bao Dai stood as the only "acceptable alternative" in Vietnam. On February 16 the French asked the U.S. to provide economic and military assistance to their Asian colony.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Gary R. Hess, "The First American Commitment in Indochina: The Acceptance of the Bao Dai Solution, 1950," *Diplomatic History* 2 (Fall, 1978): 337-345.

Congress went along with the decision to recognize the new governments of Bao Dai and the other Associated States (Cambodia and Laos) of Indochina. Most congressmen in the foreign policy committees were preoccupied with what went wrong in China and what should be done to protect Chiang on Formosa, so they followed the State Department's lead. The diplomats pushed ahead with plans to aid the French colony. On April 24 the President approved NSC 64, "The Position of the United States With Respect to Indochina," which committed America to take "all practical measures to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia." Based largely on the Domino Theory, the memo suggested that if Indochina went Communist, Thailand and Burma would be next. It expressed doubts that the French and the Indochinese troops could contain Ho's forces and suggested "that military aid and a military mission be sent immediately."<sup>20</sup> Two weeks later, on May 8, 1950, Secretary Acheson announced that the U.S. would begin direct assistance to Indochina, the money being taken from the clause of the Mutual Defense Assistance Act dealing with funds for the "general area of China." American involvement in Vietnam officially began on this date. A month later the Korean War began, and President Truman announced as part of the American response to the North Korean invasion his plan to increase military assistance to France and to Indochina, along with the deployment of a U.S. military mission in each of the Associated States. In the

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<sup>20</sup>"The Position of the United States with Respect to Indochina," FRUS, VI, 745 747.

coming months Congress would also agree to economic and technical aid to Indochina, approving the measures with little debate or dissent.<sup>21</sup>

The beginning of America's direct involvement in Indochina came at a time when troubles were boiling over both in other parts of Asia and on the home front. For the first few months of 1950, the voices of Republican supporters of the China bloc in Congress became more shrill in their demands to send a military mission to protect Chiang Kai Shek's control of Formosa against possible Communist attacks. They were aided by a handful of conservative Democrats, including Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland, who blamed the loss of China on the "ineptitude of our diplomacy." He criticized the Yalta agreement for turning over much of Manchuria to Russia as being largely responsible for the loss of China. In response to a question, his statement turned to the rest of Southeast Asia: "We are witnessing at this time the greatest softening up process in history.... When we refused to defend Formosa, when we repudiated Chiang, when we let into Manchuria the greatest army of Asiatics on the continent. We permitted Southeast Asia to be softened, and, in addition, those countries would be afraid to ally themselves with us. [Since] we have repudiated China...what assurances could the people of Southeast Asia have that we would defend them." <sup>22</sup>

The congressional attacks on Truman and Acheson were complemented by savage character assassinations of State Department officials in the periodicals,

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<sup>21</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 73.

<sup>22</sup>Senate, CR, 81<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 26 April, 1950, 5760.



particularly *Time* magazine, whose publisher, Henry Luce, had been raised in China. *Time* characterized the State Department's policy on Formosa as "flaccid" and Acheson's explanation of the communist takeover as "apologia for its own miserable failure in China."<sup>23</sup> In addition, the rise of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy with his wild and unfounded claims of communists in the Far Eastern Division of the State Department and his personal attack on Acheson served to intimidate the administration along with steeling its resolve to not appear "soft" against the Communist threat. These attacks also served to further convince the Truman administration, along with many of their southern supporters in Congress, of the necessity to stop any further communist advances in Asia.<sup>24</sup>

The public attention to Indochina died down with the beginnings of America's involvement in the Korean War. As North Korean troops crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into South Korea, Truman set in motion plans that had been worked out months before to respond to Soviet-inspired aggression. In April, the National Security Council issued a policy paper, NSC 68, entitled "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security." In it the NSC posited that the Soviet Union was intent on "world domination," and that the United States, in response, would have to create an "adequate military shield" to halt this advance. The shield required America to build

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<sup>23</sup>*Time*, January 9, 1950, 9. *Time*, Jan 23, 1950, 9.

<sup>24</sup>Answering McCarthy's claim of Communist infiltration of the States Department, Acheson defended his diplomats, a list that included both Rusk of Georgia, Jack Hickerson of Texas, and Walton Butterworth of Louisiana, and Edward Barrett of Alabama. Belittling McCarthy's charges as he stood up for these men, Acheson referred jokingly to the group as "Southern Communists of the Hull-George-Connally type." See *Time*, May 1, 1950, 18.

up its military power and to “deter, if possible, Soviet expansion, and to defeat, if necessary, aggressive Soviet or Soviet-directed actions of a limited or total character.”<sup>25</sup> NSC 68 would have a lasting impact in that it would set up the policy of fighting the Cold War with the Soviets in a series of hot, limited “proxy wars” in smaller, usually Third World countries. The policy paper would serve as a blueprint for American Cold War military interventions and stands as another link in the chain that eventually bound the United States to Vietnam

Though the United Nations requested an American-led international peacekeeping force to prosecute the war against North Korea, the President had already made the decision to intervene. Using the advice set forth in NSC 68, Truman responded militarily to North Korean aggression and acted without Congress, upon his own authority as Commander-In-Chief. Truman did feel the need to consult or at least inform Congress of the decision, however. Once again, Truman called upon the advice of the respected and experienced Senator from Texas. On June 26, the President spoke with Connally and described the action he intended to take. He asked the Chairman whether he thought the President had the authority to commit U.S. forces without congressional approval. Connally replied, “If a burglar breaks into your house you can shoot him without going down to the police station and getting permission. You might run into a long debate in Congress which would tie your hands completely. You have the right to do it as Commander in Chief and under the U.N. Charter.”<sup>26</sup> Only after soliciting Connally’s advice did Truman meet with other

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<sup>25</sup>“United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” *FRUS*, 1950, I, September 30, 1950, 235-292.

selected Members of Congress. The Texas senator stressed that if the administration did not make a stand America would see all of Asia swallowed up by the Soviets. Most of the congressman wholeheartedly supported the President's action.

By the end of the year, the Chinese had entered the war, forcing the Americans to retreat. Congress began to question its decision to give Truman a free hand in fighting the war. An ensuing debate over Truman's announcement that he was sending more troops to Europe for assignment to NATO brought to the forefront the larger constitutional questions over war powers. Congress held hearings to consider the question of Presidential authority to send troops abroad without consent of the legislative branch. A resolution had been proposed to require the President to ask Congress before sending more troops to NATO. During the sometimes-heated debates over the measure, Senator Byrd led the forces that worried over the implications of Presidential war making powers. Byrd doubted that the resolution had any weight: "It says the President 'will consult.' When? It does not say consult in advance.... There is nothing in here whatsoever that gives Congress voice in anything."<sup>27</sup> The resolution, which supported the present troop requests but stipulated that Congress should be asked to approve future NATO requests, passed anyway. The issue would be revisited again in 1964, and President Lyndon Johnson, learning from Truman's "mistake," got congressional support for his actions. But because of the precedent set by Truman in Korea, he did not have to ask for a declaration of war. Congress would only gain the initiative eleven years later, when

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<sup>26</sup>Connally Tom, *My Name is Tom Connally*, 346.

<sup>27</sup>*SFRC*, III, pt 1, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 6 March, 1951, 143.

Mississippi Senator John Stennis, another constitutional conservative from the South, led the successful fight to pass the War Powers Resolution.<sup>28</sup>

In 1950, however, most southerners in Congress backed Truman's Korean intervention, and this support spilled over into attempts to increase aid for Indochina. Along with economic and technical aid being approved for "the general area of China," the extension of the Mutual Defense Assistance Act passed with a similar provision with only one dissenting vote in both houses of Congress. In August a supplemental request for military assistance, a part of which was earmarked for Indochina, passed almost unanimously. At the same time the State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff grew increasingly concerned over the situation in the French colony. Both proposed a larger American role and did not rule out military intervention. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and Georgia native Dean Rusk prepared a memorandum entitled "Possible Invasion of Indochina." In the memo, Rusk accurately foresaw the coming Vietminh offensive and suggested that since the French stood as the only military in the region that could adequately defend against it, the Americans should stay on the sidelines and continue helping the French. The Joint Chiefs kept the door open for intervention, but only as a last resort. In the end, all parties in the debate came to the conclusion that the long-term solution in Indochina was for the French to make sweeping economic and political concessions to the native peoples, culminating ultimately in the granting of self-government to the three

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<sup>28</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 80-81.

Associated States. Only a policy promoting independence would gain public support in Indochina.<sup>29</sup>

Though Southern Congressmen continued to support Truman's and Acheson's Indochina policies, a familiar administration supporter also verbalized his doubts and fears over the increasingly difficult situation. On August 8, 1951, as Dean Rusk testified on behalf of increased aid to several Asian countries through the new Mutual Security Act, Connally exploded. "I do not subscribe to the doctrine that we are obliged in any sense whatever to intervene in these quarrels between these countries in Asia, unless they affect directly the interests of the United States. You folks do not realize that our back is going to break after [a] while. I have not heard you mention a country that you are not in favor of going in and doing something."<sup>30</sup> Six months later Acheson tried to assure the Foreign Relations Committee that the French had given the Vietnamese "all the liberty and opportunity that they can possible handle or want," and that they just lacked the personnel to govern effectively. Connally remained doubtful. Acheson then reiterated the need for France to stay on in Indochina and predicted a great blow to their prestige if they pulled out. Connally interjected, "Ultimately, I think France is going to have to get out or acknowledge this anticolonialism, because they [the Vietnamese] are not going to put up with [it] any longer."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>30</sup>SFRC, *Mutual Security Act of 1951*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., August 8, 1951, 540.

<sup>31</sup>SFRC, IV, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 8 February, 1952, 149-152.

Connally's impatience in executive session hearings did not indicate he had changed his mind or started to resist administration policies. In an increasingly confusing and volatile situation, he became uncomfortable, as many Congressmen had, with supporting French colonialism in Indochina. Although he recognized and accepted the need for American involvement in many parts of the world and the apparent necessity for continuing the containment strategy, the Texas senator realized that America could not support everyone at all times—there had to be a breaking point. However, the Texas senator stopped short of advocating an abandonment of Indochina because he realized the China lobby would more viciously attack Truman should the communists take over the French colony. Therefore, though he tried to reign in those advocating even greater increases in aid for Southeast Asia, the political necessity of allowing a small amount of aid to the region under presidential control opened the door wide enough for American involvement in Indochina to begin. Tom Connally, the colorful, persuasive, politically skillful Foreign Relations chairman would retire from the Senate in early 1953, and his prudent and sometimes dissenting voice would soon be missed as America inched its way into Indochina.

Senator William Fulbright, the voice that eventually would resume the tradition set by Connally, also made himself heard in the midst of this debate. After Acheson had fielded questions on the possibility of France abandoning Indochina, the Arkansas senator took it a step further, asking him what the United States would do in that case. Acheson demurred, saying he did not know. Fulbright, however, was still not yet

ready to question the assumptions that fueled Cold War interventionist policy, so he asserted, as many would throughout the Vietnam era, “We have to do something.”<sup>32</sup>

Korea, however, still demanded congressional attention and grabbed most of the headlines. As the battlefield stalemate continued and the negotiations dragged on, many southerners in Congress grew weary of the struggle and urged the administration to “do something” more decisive to bring about its end. Relative newcomer Senator John Stennis of Mississippi suggested that if the American negotiators could not get an honorable settlement, then the military should “[hit] the enemy with everything we have until the terms are met.”<sup>33</sup> At the end of 1950, when the Chinese entered the war and the U.S. forces retreated, Senator John Sparkman of Alabama suggested a full military and economic mobilization for Korea.<sup>34</sup> One of the most powerful southern senators, and 1952 Democratic Presidential candidate, Richard Russell exhibited more caution when confronted with U.S. setbacks and delays on Korea. Initially he supported Truman’s decision to enter the war. When the Chinese came in, however, he advocated the immediate pullout of all American troops from Korea and the subsequent bombing of an important target a day in China until the Chinese troops left. Russell would comment later on his change of stand, expressing an opinion that perhaps reflected his consultation with military leaders who would use the same argument against intervention in Indochina in 1954: “I did not want to fight a land

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<sup>32</sup>Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *Mutual Security Act of 1952*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 3 March, 1952, 178.

<sup>33</sup>Michael Scott Downs, “A Matter of Conscience: John C. Stennis and the Vietnam War” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Mississippi, 1989), 22.

war with the Chinese.”<sup>35</sup> However, many southerners sided with Sparkman and Stennis in advocating the use of all military means necessary to win. They wanted the war to end quickly and decisively and expressed frustration at the delay in negotiations.

As 1952 ended, and the new Republican administration took over the White House, the problems in Indochina began to overshadow the stalled Korea talks. President Eisenhower had won the election in part by focusing on Truman’s loss of China and the Korean stalemate. Though the new President, like Truman, had worried more about defeating communism in Europe, the necessity of building a winning coalition made it necessary to listen to the “Asia firsters” and the China Lobby which in part made up the right wing of the Republican party. Eisenhower reluctantly accepted the Republican platform that pledged “no more Koreas” and “no more Chinas” and vowed to stop the “neglect” of the Far East. Eisenhower won decisively with fifty-five percent of the vote, being the first Republican Presidential candidate since Reconstruction to carry five southern states: Florida, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. Many southerners had the utmost respect for the military leader, and his promise to “go to Korea” to bring about a settlement greatly increased his popularity. However, he did not have the luxury of an equally agreeable Congress.

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<sup>34</sup>John Sparkman to Carl Hutchins, December 21, 1950, Box 119, Sparkman Collection.

<sup>35</sup>Gilbert C. Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr., Senator from Georgia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 253.



The Republican party controlled Congress only by the barest of margins, and it was so factionalized he had only a tenuous hold on them.<sup>36</sup>

The President vowed a new American foreign policy that would address more forcefully and more cheaply the growing threat of Communism. The “New Look,” as the President and his strident evangelical Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles referred to it, called for strengthening and increasing the number of nuclear weapons while cutting back on conventional forces. In addition, the administration would increase covert operations and provide military aid to smaller countries fighting communism. Furthermore, the New Look would practice what Dulles eventually called “brinkmanship” under which the administration would “talk tough” in response to Soviet and Chinese aggression. They would, at least in their rhetoric, be willing to go the “brink” of global warfare to scare the communists into retreating.

In practice in Indochina, however, the New Look very much resembled the old. The Eisenhower administration accepted the conclusions reached in Truman’s final National Security Council policy statement, NSC 124/2. The document affirmed the domino theory and warned that the loss to communism of any single country in Southeast Asia would threaten the survival of the free world. While stopping short of advocating direct American military intervention, the memorandum stressed the importance of French efforts in the region. In the transition meetings in late 1952, outgoing Secretary of State Dean Acheson warned Eisenhower that if the French

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<sup>36</sup>Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 12-16.

efforts faltered “the new administration must be prepared to act.”<sup>37</sup> Despite the administration’s strident rhetoric and budgetary concerns, the President-elect vowed to strengthen the Truman administration’s opposition to Communism in Indochina. As the Korean peace negotiations neared a settlement, Indochina moved again to the forefront of American foreign policy discussions.

After reviewing the situation for themselves the Eisenhower administration did not change its conclusions on Indochina. It increased military aid to Indochina so much that American dollars financed more than forty percent of the French war effort by 1953. It nearly doubled in the coming year. The purposes of the continuing support of the French were twofold: to prevent the Communists from winning military victories that would leave the French no choice but to withdraw, and to prop up the French so that they could join other European nations in accepting the European Defense Community Treaty. The treaty would strengthen the continent’s defenses against possible renewed Soviet aggression. Given the considerable task of keeping containment alive in both regions, the Eisenhower administration saw no other choice than to help the French hold the line in Indochina.<sup>38</sup>

American concerns in the French colony were many. The U.S. grew increasingly impatient with the slowness of France’s progress, particularly in the lack of aggressiveness both of French military movement and of the training of indigenous troops to fight the Vietminh. Furthermore, the French would not give the people of Indochina something to fight for, namely autonomy and true independence. When

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 1-3.

<sup>38</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War Part I*, 121.

the new administration could not convince French officials of the need for reform.

Eisenhower said in his memoirs that French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault rebuffed all his suggestions and “refused to commit himself to an out-and-out renunciation of any French colonial purpose.”<sup>39</sup>

On the military front, the French offered only a sketchy military plan, which proposed a series of offensives by French Union troops and Vietnamese regulars, starting in the south and moving north, after which the Vietnamese forces would occupy and maintain security in the conquered territory. Though American officials complained of the plans chances for success and high cost, they reluctantly accepted it because they lacked any suitable alternatives. The plan, named the Navarre Plan after the new French commander in Indochina, General Henri-Eugene Navarre, would necessitate a massive expenditure of American money to make it work. The President requested additional mutual security funds of \$400 million in military aid to be given directly to the Associated States. Later that year the administration asked for and got an additional \$385 million to help defeat communism in Indochina. As the French faltered, the Americans became increasingly involved.<sup>40</sup>

Though Congress in general backed the President, the intransigence of the French inspired what Robert Mann describes as the “first meaningful full scale debate

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<sup>39</sup>Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate For Change, 1953-56* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1963), 168.

<sup>40</sup>FRUS, 1952-54, XIII, 458-464. See also, Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 124-25.

in the Senate over Indochina since the fighting had erupted in 1945.”<sup>41</sup> The debate ensued in response to an amendment to the \$400 million authorization for aid to Indochina. In the summer of 1953, Freshman Republican Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona proposed the amendment stating that “no such expenditure shall be made until the government of France gives satisfactory assurance to the President of the United States that an immediate declaration will be made to the people of the Associated States setting a target date...for their complete independence.” Goldwater asserted, “The People of Indochina have been fighting for the same thing for which 177 years ago, the people of the American colonies fought. Yet here today we are proposing to support a country, France, that has colonial intentions; we are going against the wonderful second paragraph of our Declaration of Independence.” He also perceptively warned that unless the aspirations of the people in Indochina were met, the war would go on endlessly and the U.S. would inevitably replace the French in Indochina. “As sure as day follows night our boys will follow this \$400 million,” Goldwater concluded.<sup>42</sup>

Southerners would significantly influence the debate on both sides. Moderate Republican Earle Clements of Kentucky, A. Willis Robertson of Virginia, and conservative Democrat Russell Long of Louisiana supported Goldwater’s amendment. Long, who would emerge later as one of the more vocal “hawks” on Vietnam, suggested forcefully on the day before the vote that the French set a date for Indochina’s independence. He also complained, as Senator John F. Kennedy did

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<sup>41</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 111.

<sup>42</sup>CR, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, July 1, 1953, 7779-7780.

earlier that day, that the French government only granted concessions when their government was under pressure.<sup>43</sup>

Southern opponents of the bill, however, would have the last word. Kentucky Senator John Sherman Cooper, who would later be the main Republican to turn against the war in 1967, sided with the opposition. He shared Goldwater's and Kennedy's desire for independence for the Associated States, but suggested that refusing aid to France in Indochina would produce the exact opposite—a Communist victory. He added that the French would not accept such an ultimatum anyway. Perhaps the most persuasive opponent of the amendment was Walter George, the ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, who spoke just before the vote as taken. He concurred with Cooper's conclusions and added, "Believe me, the total withdrawal of France from Indochina at this moment might present us with graver problems than the continuation of the unhappy state and condition that exists in that quarter of the globe at this time."<sup>44</sup>

The amendment failed decisively, 64-17. Southern members of the Senate solidly voted against it, with the exception of Clements, Robertson, and Long. Two future presidents would vote on opposite sides of the issue—Kennedy supporting Goldwater, and Johnson voting against the amendment.<sup>45</sup> In an ironic twist, Goldwater, who would be labeled as a military extremist on Vietnam in 1964 by his incumbent Presidential opponent, stood up because he was convinced that American

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 7787-7789.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 7785-7790.

troops would be sent to fight an Asian war. Under President Johnson, Goldwater's fear was realized.

Two months after the debate over the amendment, the Eisenhower administration increased the commitment to Indochina. Responding to a French warning that they would have to withdraw from Indochina unless they received more military aid, the National Security Council advised approval of the French request. Eisenhower agreed, but, mindful of the attacks on Truman for leaving Congress out of the decisionmaking process, urged "careful consultation with members of the appropriate Congressional committees."<sup>45</sup> In mid-September, Thruston Morton, the assistant secretary of state for congressional relations, informed Senators George and Richard Russell of the decision. Morton caught up with George at his farm in Vienna, Georgia, and the senator accepted the news without question. The diplomat and future Kentucky senator traveled to Atlanta and got quite a different reception from Russell. Morton summarized the meeting in a memo he prepared for the White House. Russell believed that the French "out-traded us and that they could probably carry more of the burden if forced to." In a later account, Morton commented further on the meeting. Russell had said he would "keep his mouth shut," but that he believed the administration was "pouring [money] down a rathole; the worst mess we ever got into, this Vietnam.... I'll tell you right now we are in for something that is going to be one of the worst things this country ever got into." Russell later reported that he regretted not taking a stronger stand in 1953. With his public silence on the matter

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 7789.

<sup>46</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 138.

secured, however, and with the approval of a number of other congressional leaders, the money was approved with little debate.<sup>47</sup>

During the remaining months of the year the NSC and the State Department continued to evaluate the situation in Indochina, particularly in the very likely event that the French would withdraw. Both groups as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff debated the possibility of sending American troops in addition to an increase in aid to the Associated States. In the midst of these debates, Senator George met with Secretary of State Dulles to express his concern over the worsening situation in Indochina. George hoped that the administration would not attempt to get Congress's approval for ground troops. The two men did discuss air and sea actions, and according to the Dulles memorandum of the conversation, George "did not seem seriously to object."<sup>48</sup> Two weeks later Congressman Henderson Lanham of Georgia also questioned the possible use of American troops in Indochina. Partially criticizing the strident words of the New Look, Lanham queried, "Have we made up our minds to fight, or are we just going to run a colossal bluff, or do we really mean to back it up?" Dulles answered that the President would consult Congress before sending troops, which did not satisfy Lanham: "Even if it meant the loss of Indochina in the meantime?" Dulles reiterated that Congress would be consulted.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Interview with Thruston Morton, January 29, 1979, Congressional Research Service, 2. Morton, later a Senator from Kentucky, would join Cooper in turn against the war in 1967.

<sup>48</sup>FRUS, 1953-53, XIII, 939-40.

<sup>49</sup>HFAC, XV, *European Problems*, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 19 January, 1954, 423-426.

Lanham was not the only southerner to object to sending American troops to Southeast Asia. Just under two weeks later a Mississippi senator and member of the Armed Services Committee became one of the first to publicly question the wisdom of deepening the commitment in Indochina. John Stennis, a former judge, gained the respect of Russell and would eventually earn a reputation among some lawmakers for personal integrity and fairness. He would later in the year sit on the committee that voted to censure Senator Joseph McCarthy. On February 1, however, Stennis shared his concerns over the possible inclusion of ground forces in a letter to Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson and the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He realized that the administration had been “steadily moving closer and closer to participation in the war in Indochina.” Though he did not object to policies already implemented, he recommended that the U.S. “stop short of sending our troops or airmen to the area, either for participation in the conflict or as instructors.” He said that U.S. forces were already overburdened with obligations in Europe, in the Pacific, in Korea, and elsewhere, and could not afford to take on one more assignment. He added prophetically, “As always, when we send one group, we shall have to send another to protect the first and we shall thus be fully involved in a short time.”<sup>50</sup> A short time thereafter, Stennis would publicly share his misgivings on the floor of the Senate, and

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<sup>50</sup>John Stennis to General Nathan F. Twining, Washington DC, Feb 1, 1954, John Stennis Collection, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS, Series 55, Box 5. See also Downs, “A Matter of Conscience: John C. Stennis and the Vietnam War,” 34. Relating to Stennis’s reputation for fairness, Senator Mark Hatfield, who would become one of the foremost doves during the Vietnam War, expressed his opinion about the Mississippi senator and conservative “hawk:” “[When we got to the Senate], some of us freshmen were sitting around....and we agreed that if we found ourselves charged with some terrible crime, we would pick John Stennis to judge us. See Michael Scott Downs, “A Matter of Conscience,” 10.



the congressional debate over the worsening French situation in Dien Bien Phu would ensue shortly thereafter.

The result of the debates inside the administration did not did not satisfy doubters like Lanham and Stennis because it did little to clarify administration policy. In truth, Eisenhower had not yet made up his mind on whether the United States should intervene militarily. His decision however would not be long at-hand. The executive and legislative branches convened this debate because of the worsening situation for France in Indochina. During the last weeks of 1953, General Navarre began to man and fortify an isolated outpost near the mountain village of Dien Bien Phu, hoping to draw the elusive Vietminh guerillas into a set-piece battle that would finally destroy them.<sup>51</sup> To the surprise of the French, Vietminh commander Vo Nguyen Giap was able to place artillery on the ridges above the garrison and surrounded the valley with a force that outnumbered the French two to one. By March the final battle for Dien Bien Phu began. At about the same time, leaders of both the major Western Democracies and the Communist nations met in Geneva to discuss Asian problems. The French agreed, along with Ho Chi Minh, that a possible Indochina settlement would be discussed. So while the battle raged, the negotiations began for ending the nine-year-old war.

The Battle of Dien Bien Phu awakened the Congress and the country to the possibility of another war in Asia. Before the Vietminh surrounded the French

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<sup>51</sup>Descriptions of Dien Bien Phu come from several sources. See George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-75* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1979), 28-38; David L. Anderson, *Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 22-23; See also Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of*

garrison, Indochina had been an area of vital concern to only a small number of legislators, most of whom served on foreign policy and military committees. With the impending French disaster, and with confusing and sometimes contradictory public statements coming from members of the administration and the military establishment, the battle would capture the attention of many Americans who had just endured three years of stalemate in Korea. Southerners led both foreign policy and military committees in the Senate, and so in some sense represented the opinion leaders of that body.

Most southern congressmen, as did many others, wanted to step back from the brink of war. They had grown increasingly critical of the last “limited conflict” in Korea, feeling that the U.S. fought, in the words of John Stennis, “with one hand tied behind its back.” Southerners did not feel comfortable in a war they were not allowed to win outright. In addition, southerners grew weary of internationalism in Korea. They resented the overwhelmingly American commitment in the U.N. “police action” in Korea, complaining that the U.S. supplied most of the money and about ninety percent of the troops.

Some southern legislators felt even less comfortable backing a decaying French colonialism in Indochina. A few, like Russell, saw only disaster in furthering the pursuit of containment in the French colony. Stennis also highlighted a difficulty that southerners had with the New Look foreign policy—it reduced conventional forces, which, along with the possibility of the closure of military bases in the South, would leave the armed forces unprepared as the administration contemplated moving into

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*How American Culture Let Us Into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William

Indochina. Southerners as diverse in opinion as Tom Connally and Russell Long realized that only true independence would suffice for the long-suffering people of the region.

The unwillingness to intervene with ground troops did not mean that southerners in Congress abandoned the ideological assumptions that fueled American involvement in the first place. The fear of Communism and the belief in the Domino Theory made most American leaders disregard evidence of the virulent nationalism prominent in the region. Though some paid lip service to the plight of the people of Indochina, the policies reflected the concerns over the “loss” of more territory to communism. Considered in that context, southerners, although at sometimes highly critical of the way the policies were carried out, never consistently and publicly assailed them. The recriminations over the loss of China and the stalemate in Korea served only to steel the resolve of southerners and the administration to continue the fight against Communism. Richard Russell, who opposed American military intervention in Indochina in 1954, never backed off from the beliefs he expressed in 1951. Echoing President’s Truman’s speech in 1947, Russell wrote that the world was divided into two camps—“Russia and her satellites” and the “United States and some of its allies.” Like many others in the South and beyond, he did not see the struggle in Indochina or anywhere else as mainly nationalistic in character. Furthermore, Russell believed the solution to this struggle would be for the United States to build up its military and economic power. Given that he chaired the Armed

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Morrow and Company, 1985), 81-83.

Services Committee, it was obvious which of the two he held as more important.<sup>52</sup>

Richard Russell at this time stood as one of the most powerful and influential senators on Capital Hill, influencing many, not the least of whom was the new Senate Majority leader, Lyndon Baines Johnson of Texas. In the end, Eisenhower would follow Russell's advice and back off from intervention in mid-1954, but in that same year America would effectively replace the French in Indochina.

Nevertheless, southern legislators expressed several diverse opinions on Cold War Asian policy. Some, like Claude Pepper, espoused liberal internationalism at a time when many associated it with communism. Like Fulbright, he wanted the United States to concentrate more on economic than military aid. His defeat in 1950 silenced the most liberal southerner in Congress. Connally and Fulbright, though agreeing with Pepper on staying engaged in the world, grew increasingly concerned with the expansion of American military commitments throughout the world. Both shared the feelings of most Americans in the early 1950s that military intervention in Indochina would lead to disaster. On the other hand, conservative senators James Eastland, John Stennis, and George Smathers, who defeated Pepper, aligned themselves with the China lobby. They severely criticized the Truman administration for their "appeasement" of communism in Europe and Asia, and called for a stronger military stand to enforce containment throughout the world. Harry Byrd, whose isolationist opinions place him as a polar opposite to Pepper, saw foreign aid and American involvement in "proxy wars" as an attempt by the Soviets to "bleed us white," in terms of money and manpower. He voted against money for the "general area of China"

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<sup>52</sup>Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr.*, 349.

which would enable the United States to get involved in Vietnam. Among and between all of these opinions stood Richard Russell. Like Eastland, Stennis, and others, he believed Truman's 1947 assertion that the world had been divided into two "armed camps." Like Byrd, he rejected non-military foreign aid. He supported Truman's decision to go to Korea, but, like Connally and Fulbright, grew increasingly concerned about America overextending itself militarily throughout the world. The powerful Georgia senator saw disaster looming in Indochina. Though he expressed his doubts privately to each successive administration, he would, in the end, support the increase in American military aid to Indochina that enabled America's descent into the quagmire of Vietnam.

However, in the early part of 1954 the decisions on the battlefield and the negotiating table remained in doubt. Though many in Congress had their doubts, a considerable number of them still shared the opinion of an American official that was part of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Saigon. In a *Time* article dated September 28, 1953, the unidentified official was quoted as saying "A year ago none of us could see victory. There wasn't a prayer. Now we can see it clearly—like the light at the end of a tunnel."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>*Time*, September 28, 1953, 22.

## CHAPTER 3

### DIEN BIEN PHU: DISSENT AND CONSENT

As the Vietminh surrounded and began to tighten the noose around the beleaguered French defenders of Dien Bien Phu in early 1954, American leaders in both the executive and legislative branches struggled over a coherent Indochina policy. A March 15, *Time Magazine* article summarized the conflict and assessed America's present level of involvement. The United States, it concluded, financed 70 percent of the war's financial cost and had supplied 360 warplanes, 390 warships, 21,000 trucks and trailers, 1,400 tanks, and 175,000 rifles and machine guns. The Eisenhower administration also maintained a Military Assistance Advisory Group in Indochina to help France train the native troops. In addition, in January the administration ordered 250 Air Force technicians to duty in Indochina.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of American technicians into the increasingly desperate situation of the French at Dien Bien Phu and the seemingly confused and sometimes apparently contradictory reactions by the Eisenhower administration to the crisis touched off howls of protest from Congress. John Stennis had publicly expressed his concerns in early February, and many other legislators also questioned sending troops to the region. Dissent by Stennis and other prominent southern congressmen helped prevent American military involvement in 1954, and also helped shape both the debate over Indochina and the policies that resulted from the debates

As the situation worsened, however, a number of southern congressional leaders warmed to the idea of a united stand by the U.S. and its allies to save

Indochina. When no such front materialized, and Dien Bien Phu fell, both Eisenhower and Congress struggled to prevent yet another part of Asia from falling under communist rule. As France reduced its commitment in Indochina and eventually withdrew, southerners in Congress backed the President's decision to commit the United States to oversee the containment of communist advancement in Southeast Asia. Partly because the domestic turmoil of McCarthyism and the Brown v Board of Education decision underscored for the majority of white southerners the issue of communist infiltration at home, their representatives and senators in Congress viewed the foreign conflict in Indochina as the second phase of the Soviet plan for world domination. Though non-southerners espoused similar views, southern congressmen held the leadership positions in the foreign policy committees and on the floor of both houses of Congress, which made their positions regarding Indochina policy centrally important. Though southern legislators by no means spoke with one voice on all aspects of Indochina policy, in the end they fell in line with the administration's decision to take over the anticommunist crusade in the region. In giving their approval to the administration, southerners and others in Congress followed a long-standing tradition of deferring to the executive in foreign policy matters. As Senate Majority leader Lyndon Johnson remarked at one point, "If you're in an airplane, and you're flying somewhere, you don't run up to the cockpit and attack the pilot. Mr. Eisenhower is the only President we've got."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, despite the dissent of some southerners over unilateral intervention, America became the protector of the region

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<sup>1</sup>"Indochina: The World's Oldest War," *Time*, March 15, 1954, 25.

against communism after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Though their support was in some instances begrudgingly obtained, southerners, because of their special influence in Congress over foreign policy matters, actually enabled America's deepening involvement in Vietnam.

On February 1, 1954, John Stennis sent a letter to the Secretary of Defense that stated his opposition to the administration's decision to send Air Force technicians to Indochina. When he got no response he expressed his concerns on the Senate floor eight days later. He warned his colleagues that "step by step we are moving into this war in Indochina....Should we get into [the] war, it could result in involving us further on an enormous, and, I believe, an endless scale." The deployment of technicians would only be the first step. "If we are going to send men to Indochina for the purpose of keeping planes on the firing line, it is only natural that we send pilots and the trigger men." Indirectly attacking Eisenhower's troop reductions as part of the New Look, Stennis suggested that if the Eisenhower administration really wanted to send members of the armed forces into a situation "fraught with the most terrible consequences" in Indochina it needed to raise taxes, call for a larger army, and increase the number of men drafted. The Mississippi senator made it clear that he opposed sending troops into a situation for which they were unprepared. But he feared that the "inch by inch" Eisenhower Indochina policy painted America into a corner from which it would eventually have "no choice except to go in there with ground forces." He even suggested that if the conflict in Indochina escalated and

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<sup>2</sup>James R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and American's Intervention in Vietnam* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 166.



China became involved, it could be the beginning of World War III.<sup>3</sup> In an interview soon after Stennis's speech, Richard Russell concurred with his colleague from Mississippi, calling the deployment "a mistake likely to lead the United States into piecemeal participation in the war."<sup>4</sup> Both senators, as well as many others, also complained that the administration did not inform or consult Congress before sending technicians to Indochina. In response, the President consulted with a number of worried congressmen in order to allay their fears.

However, Eisenhower did not totally convince the Mississippi senator. On March 9 Stennis again voiced his distress on the Senate floor over the implications of sending Air Force technicians to Indochina. His second speech caught the interest of Washington reporters, who the next day asked Eisenhower what the administration would do if one of the technicians were captured or killed. The President declared that the United States would not be involved in the war "unless it was a result of constitutional processes."<sup>5</sup> Seemingly satisfied for the moment, Stennis remarked, "I'm relieved that our policy on this is now firmed up against possible direct involvement." He added that he would like to see the mission end by June. Stennis's speeches inspired reporters to request a clarification of Eisenhower's decision to send technicians. Though others expressed their concerns over the Indochina situation, the

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<sup>3</sup>CR, Vol. 97, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., February 9, 1954, 1550-1552.

<sup>4</sup>Anthony Leviero, "Eisenhower Limits U.S. Participation in Indo-China War," *New York Times*, February 11, 1954, 1, 6.

<sup>5</sup>Eisenhower quoted in CR, Vol 97, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., Apr 29 1954, 5773.

Mississippi senator was one of the first and most passionate spokesmen against sending American troops into the region.<sup>6</sup>

The administration also had to justify its action to both foreign policy committees. In January and February the Senate Foreign Relations and the House Foreign Affairs committees questioned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Under Secretary of State W. Bedell Smith, and JCS Chairman Admiral Arthur Radford on the deployment of the mechanics and the deteriorating situation in Indochina. Smith assured the congressmen that the administration had no intention of creating the impression that “we were backing into the war in Indochina.” He reiterated the President’s assertion that he would consult Congress before any large-scale operation. Smith also played down the desperate nature of the situation at Dien Bien Phu, saying that the press exaggerated the reports of an imminent French defeat. In the Foreign Affairs committee, Admiral Radford echoed Smith’s assertions, saying that the military situation was “satisfactory.” The French forces were in “no danger” of being run out of Dien Bien Phu, he claimed, and the Vietminh’s lack of ammunition made it unlikely that it would engage the French in a showdown fight. When Dien Bien Phu fell three months later, Representative Burr Harrison of Virginia requested that Foreign Affairs close its May 11 meeting by quoting from Radford’s rosy February 18 forecast.<sup>7</sup>

In the Foreign Relations hearings, southerners did not challenge Smith and Radford’s predictions but they did raise other concerns. Senator John Sparkman of

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<sup>6</sup>Levierio, “Eisenhower Limits U.S. Participation in Indo-China War,” 1, 6.

<sup>7</sup>HFAC XVIII, *U.S. Policy in the Far East, Part 2*, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., February 18, 1954, 99, 159.

Alabama worried about the danger that a future French government might “advocate pulling out” of Indochina. Smith acknowledged the danger, but agreed with Sparkman’s own conclusion that America stood on “pretty safe ground” in assuming that France would not withdraw. Smith, however, cautioned that France had to be dealt with in a way that would not suggest to the world that they took orders from the Americans in the conflict.

Fulbright concentrated the main part of his questioning on the leadership of Vietnam. A few years later he would write a book, *The Arrogance of Power*, in which he assailed American foreign policymakers for trying to impose their will and their form of government on other people. During the hearings, however, the Arkansas senator seemed perfectly willing for the U.S. to interfere in the internal affairs of Vietnam: “It seems to me that we have often gone overboard talking about democracy in countries such as this. What we need is...a strong leader that can rally the people. [Otherwise] what we are going to be faced with is this interminable guerrilla warfare which never does stop.” He went further, suggesting that if Bao Dai proved insufficient “we ought to get another one.” Though Fulbright’s assumptions proved naïve in arguing that America could just go in and develop a native leader around whom the people would rally, he unwittingly pinpointed what would become one of the nagging and eventually debilitating problems the Americans would encounter in Vietnam. No American administration during the Vietnam War era could find or develop popular and competent political leadership in South Vietnam.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>SFRC VI, *Report by the Secretary of State*, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 7 January, 1954, 28. See also SFRC VI, *Report on Indochina* 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 16 February, 1954, 143-144.

At the same time as the Assistant Secretary and the Admiral eased the concerns of Sparkman, Fulbright, and other members of Congress, Secretary of State Dulles finished three weeks of meetings in Berlin with the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The diplomats agreed in Berlin to a five-power (all four plus China) conference in Geneva to settle the peace in Korea first and then negotiate a settlement in Indochina. The United States objected to adding Indochina to the conference's agenda, but the French insisted and the British supported them. Dulles, faced with a possible total French withdrawal from both Indochina and the European Defense Community, acquiesced to the French wishes. On February 24 he explained to the Foreign Relations Committee the administration's reasons for participating in the conference. His arguments met with general approval with the exception of Democratic Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. Humphrey doubted any coherent Indochina policy existed or that anything positive would come out of Geneva. In addition, Republican Homer Capeheart of Illinois suggested that if Dulles claimed Indochina was more important than Korea "then what are we waiting for now?" "If we were justified in going to war in Korea are we justified in going to war in Indochina?" The two southerners present, Fulbright and Sparkman, kept silent during the discussion on Geneva and Indochina policy.<sup>9</sup>

Dulles also reassured the congressmen that the situation at Dien Bien Phu had stabilized and predicted that there would be no "major or anything like decisive engagements during the remaining two months of March and April of the fighting season." All the French had to do, Dulles reasoned, was hang on during that period,

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<sup>9</sup>SFRC, VI 168-70, *Report by the Sec of State*, Feb 24, 1954, 168-170.

and in the intervening monsoon season they could augment their forces and go on the offensive. The Secretary did not have to wait long for his prediction to be proven wrong. On March 14, Donald R. Heath, American ambassador to Indochina, cabled the State Department that “the long expected Viet Minh attack on Dien Bien Phu...began last evening at 6 o’clock.” In the intervening two weeks the administration grappled with various proposals to aid the French defenders at the remote garrison, including air strikes of both conventional and atomic weapons.<sup>10</sup>

A week after the battle began, General Paul Ely, the chief of France’s military, arrived in Washington and met with Dulles, Radford, and Eisenhower in order to plead his case for American military intervention. The meetings proved inconclusive, but Radford gave Ely the impression that if the French government requested it, Eisenhower would approve airstrikes on Vietminh positions at Dien Bien Phu. Nevertheless, Eisenhower kept his options open. He did not rule out the possibility of a single strike, but did nothing for the moment. He did, however, maintain a strong and resolute public position on Indochina. On March 24, the President stated that the freedom of Indochina was of “transcendent importance to the entire free world.” He also approved the general ideas in an upcoming speech by Dulles, in which the Secretary of State would emphasize the importance of Indochina “from the standpoint of our peace, security, and happiness.” Therefore, America could not look upon “the loss to Communism of that area with indifference.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Part I*, 170-180.

<sup>11</sup>Walter H. Waggoner, “Eisenhower Calls Indochina Vital,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1954, 1. See also Memorandum of Conversation with the President, March 24, 1954, Department of

Dulles delivered this nationally broadcast speech to the Overseas Press Club in New York on March 29. After emphasizing the strategic importance of Indochina because of its natural resources and its position as the “rice bowl of Asia,” he insisted that a Communist victory “should not be passively accepted, but should be met by united action.” He concluded by saying that this action would involve risk, but it would be far better to act resolutely now than it would be a few years hence. Dulles did not fully explain what “united action” entailed, but he at least implied it would involve military intervention.<sup>12</sup> Dulles’s strident but imprecise speech led to serious confusion both among French allies and the U. S. Congress. Two days later Stennis, in a discussion with Democratic Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, admitted his confusion: “I have followed Secretary Dulles’ speech very closely and I have not been able to decide exactly what he meant by ‘united action’....I do not know what the policy is.” Stennis complained that the Senate could not approve or disapprove the administration’s Indochina policy unless the executive branch leveled with them. “No one is being dishonest, but members of [the Armed Services Committee] are not getting anything like the beginning of the facts on which to base judgment if we were called upon to act in an emergency.”<sup>13</sup>

Eisenhower tried to defuse the situation on the same day, suggesting that he agreed with the conclusions of Dulles’s speech, but saying that the Secretary’s key phrase only meant “the united action of all nations and peoples and countries affected

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State Document, March 24, 1954, Presidential Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower (microfilm), American Foreign Policy Center, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston LA.

<sup>12</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 140-141.

in that region [Southeast Asia] that we can successfully oppose the encroachment of communism.” Though just as unclear as Dulles, Eisenhower’s response seemed to rule out unilateral American military action. He further clarified his position, saying “I have said time and time again that I can conceive of no greater disadvantage to America than to be employing its own ground forces, or any other kind of forces, in great numbers around the world, meeting each little situation as it arises. What we are trying to do is make our friends strong enough to take care of local situations by themselves, with the financial, the moral, the political, and, certainly, only where our own vital interests demand, any military help.”<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower was, in fact, only restating the whole New Look philosophy of providing mutual security funds to help nations help themselves, with military intervention as a last resort.

In private, however, Eisenhower apparently still kept his options open. On April 1 he met with the National Security Council to discuss the possibility of air strikes on Dien Bien Phu. The President allowed Admiral Radford to make his case for intervention, knowing full well that the rest of the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed deepening involvement in Indochina. He then dismissed the meeting without making a decision and said only that he was unsure about what to do next, but it was a “question for statesmen.” Shortly afterwards Eisenhower met privately with a smaller group of advisors to discuss options. No record exists of the meeting, but Eisenhower made it clear that he wanted to include others in the decision-making process. It has been suggested by historian Melanie Billings-Yun and other Eisenhower historians that

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<sup>13</sup>CR, Vol. 97, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., March 31, 1954, 4209.

the President also looked to insure that if his final decision would result in failure, the administration would not take all the blame. Perhaps influenced by this motive, the President ordered Radford and Dulles to meet with key members of Congress to determine whether they would support U.S. airstrikes in Indochina.<sup>15</sup>

The meeting convened on Saturday April 3, a day chosen because few reporters would be working. Representing the executive branch were Dulles, Radford, Under Secretary of Defense Rogers Keyes, and Navy Secretary Robert Anderson. Dulles chose eight members of Congress who led what historian James R. Arnold calls “an informal coalition of conservative Republicans and southern Democrats who dominated the Senate.” The legislative group included four southerners: Senators Lyndon Johnson, Richard Russell, Earle Clements of Kentucky, along with Representative J. Percy Priest of Tennessee.<sup>16</sup> Radford briefed the legislators on the military situation in Indochina generally and at Dien Bien Phu specifically, emphasizing the desperate nature of the French position. He said the garrison could fall at any minute. Dulles then reiterated the importance Indochina played in the region and warned that if the Communists took it all of Southeast Asia would follow. He

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<sup>14</sup>Melanie Billings-Yun *Decision Against War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 78.

<sup>15</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Part I*, 183.

<sup>16</sup>There are several accounts of the April 3 meeting. They include: Memorandum: Conference with Congressional Leaders concerning the crisis in Southeast Asia, April 5, 1954, John Foster Dulles Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ; Chalmers Roberts, “The Day We Didn’t Go To War,” *Reporter* 11 (September 11, 1954), 31-35, CRS interview with Thruston Morton, January 29, 1979; George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: ‘The Day We Didn’t Go to War’ Revisited,” *Journal of American History* 71 (September, 1984). In addition, both Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, and Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Part I* provide excellent summaries of the meeting. See



proposed that the Congress support a resolution that would allow the President to use naval and air forces as necessary. Senator Knowland, the Majority Leader, initially agreed, but was overruled by the majority of the congressmen. Johnson forcefully led the opposition to intervention, and, according to one later account, “pounded the desk” to emphasize his dissent. He criticized Knowland for contradicting himself. The Majority Leader had stated that he wanted no more Koreans with America supplying ninety percent of the manpower. If Knowland could not accept the Korean situation, Johnson argued, then how could Indochina be suitable for intervention?

Radford countered by saying that the administration did not “contemplate the commitment of ground forces.” The French and Vietnamese forces would do the work on the ground. Russell, who had been Johnson’s mentor, remained skeptical. “Once you commit the flag, you’ve committed the country. There’s no turning back.” The Georgia senator told the assembled legislators, military leaders, and diplomats that he had grown “weary of seeing American soldiers being used as gladiators to be thrown into every arena around the world.” Though he remained supportive in public of the Indochina policies of each administration, Russell could never privately justify the sacrifice of American soldiers in a region that he thought held no American interests. The Georgia senator had long considered himself, by temperament, an isolationist. “I don’t believe in all this Asian stuff,” he remarked to President Johnson in 1965.<sup>17</sup> As a powerful senator who championed military interests in the Senate, he

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also James. R. Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, The Military and America’s Intervention in Vietnam* (New York: William Morrow and Company), 165-168.

<sup>17</sup>White House Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Russell, September 14, 1965, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, LBJ Library, Tape

would support the troops, the flag, and American “honor” if Eisenhower decided to intervene. Therefore, in 1954, the Georgia legislator did not want to be put into a position of backing a policy in which he did not believe.

Another congressman (by one account Kentucky Senator Earle Clements) then asked Radford whether airstrikes would save Dien Bien Phu. The Admiral replied that Dien Bien Phu was all but lost, but U.S. intervention would help the French regroup and win the war. The legislators also asked whether other members of the Joint Chiefs believed that American airstrikes alone would defeat the Vietminh. Radford admitted that none of the others agreed. Radford went on to say, according to one account of the meeting, that he knew better than the others because he had spent more time in the Far East. Nevertheless, the eight members of Congress came to the conclusion that they would only support a congressional resolution if the administration met three conditions: First, that Dulles would secure “definite commitments of a political and military nature” from Britain and other allies; second, that France guarantee its forces would not pull out of the fighting in Indochina until the coalition won; and third, that Paris accelerate the independence of the Associated states in order to ensure that Americans were fighting to keep communism out of Indochina, not protecting French colonialism. Some evidence suggests that Eisenhower wanted the almost impossible conditions placed on intervention by the congressmen because he did not want to intervene in Indochina in the first place. But whether or not Eisenhower ever seriously entertained the idea of airstrikes over Dien Bien Phu, Johnson and Russell aided greatly in clarifying the definition of “United Action.” The ambiguous term

now became a coherent policy for Eisenhower and Dulles to achieve. And Johnson, who would be the President most responsible for America's full-scale intervention in Vietnam, emphatically urged Dulles to keep American troops out of Indochina.

Russell, who had warned of disaster in the region since America got involved, remained consistent in his convictions. Like Stennis he saw the country being dragged "inch by inch" into a region he did not consider vital. Nevertheless, both the enormously powerful Georgia senator and his Texas protégé agreed to deepening the commitment to fight communism in Indochina if America could convince allies to join them. United Action became a policy both influential Senators could support.

Over the next three to four weeks discussions intensified over intervention. After the April 3 meeting the NSC further clarified the United Action strategy, and the President set strict conditions for American intervention. Eisenhower wanted the participation of Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, and if possible, some Far Eastern countries such as the Philippines and Thailand. In addition he insisted that the French agree to guarantee the future independence of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. As Eisenhower and Dulles began to solicit the help of Churchill, the French formally requested airstrikes and suggested that only this action could save Dien Bien Phu. The administration refused, and after National Security Council meetings over the next forty-eight hours the U.S. agreed to postpone a decision on direct intervention.<sup>18</sup> However, Eisenhower publicly left the door open, warning on April 7 that the loss of

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<sup>18</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Part I*, 197-200.

Indochina would set off a “chain reaction of disaster for the free world.” He did not elaborate on what America planned to do about it.<sup>19</sup>

The public uncertainty and confusion over intervention set off a tense debate in Congress. In the Senate on August 6 John Kennedy criticized the administration for being less than forthcoming with the facts. He would favor united action, he said, if it would lead to victory. But “to pour money, materiel, and men into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and self-destructive.” Stennis concurred with the Massachusetts senator and added that the United States should only go in if the people of Indochina and Asia in general have the will to fight. Unilateral intervention, Stennis asserted, would be a “trap from which there could be no reasonable recovery and no chance for victory.” Over the next week and a half a number congressmen, among them Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee and Representative James Davis of Georgia, challenged the administration’s Indochina policy. Kefauver echoed Kennedy’s concern; “I think the American people are getting a little tired of this controversy over the Old Look versus the New Look. What people want is a Good Look—a sound, sensible appraisal of the Indochina situation upon which to base necessary action.” Davis, echoing Senator Byrd’s earlier statements during the China debates, said that the Indochina situation should be handled by the United Nations. To intervene would be to play into the hands of Russia, which intended to “bleed us white, both as to finances and manpower” through Cold War proxy wars. “We cannot go on forever at the pace we have been

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<sup>19</sup>Anthony Leviero, “President Warns of Chain Disaster,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1954, 1.

maintaining of military spending and worldwide spending, and fight and finance wars in Asia, at times and places selected by Russia.”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time leading Democrats convened the weekly meeting of the Democratic Policy Committee in part to discuss Indochina. In the discussion Senator George played devil’s advocate and supported American involvement in Indochina. George usually commanded respect in the Senate, and as George Reedy, a witness to the proceedings, commented, “Nobody liked to be disrespectful to him.” However when the Georgia Senator said that if the United States did not intervene “we will lose face,” Senator Robert Kerr of Oklahoma slammed his fist on the table and jibed, “I’m not worried about losing my face; I’m worried about losing my ass.”<sup>21</sup> Minority Leader Johnson later reported to the President that the entire Senate Democratic leadership opposed intervention.

The debate continued in Congress and across the nation as Secretary Dulles traveled to Britain trying unsuccessfully to convince the British to support united action to save the French at Dien Bien Phu. Meanwhile, Vice President Richard Nixon injected himself into the debate, and his comments caused consternation among congressmen and the general public. In answering a reporter’s hypothetical question at a meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 16, Nixon said that the U.S. might have to send troops if the French withdrew. Most of the reporters interpreted Nixon’s comment as a change in the united action policy and assumed that the administration instructed Nixon to send up a “trial balloon” to see the reaction to

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<sup>20</sup>CR Vol 97., 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 6, 13, and 15 April, 4671-4681, 5072, and 5210.

<sup>21</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 206.

unilateral American intervention in Indochina. Published in every major newspaper the next day, Nixon's statement set off a firestorm of controversy. Dulles did damage control three days later, saying that while he did not reject the deployment of American troops, he felt direct military intervention was "unlikely."<sup>22</sup>

Southerners in Congress expressed their opposition to the prospect of unilateral intervention. Senator George Smathers of Florida said that he would not agree to send troops to Indochina "until other nations of the free world" were "willing to make an equal contribution of materiel and men in accordance with their capabilities, the natives...had agreed to assist us in such a venture," and "it was understood and agreed by everybody that if we went into Indochina, we went in to win."<sup>23</sup> Congressman Bruce Alger, the only Republican member of Congress from Texas, later criticized his own party for its lack of candor.

We have witnessed a startling exhibition of evasiveness, of alternate threats and withdrawals of contradictory statements from immature voices high in Republican circles....The Vice President...announced one day that American ground troops were going to be sent to Indochina. Another day, the White House denied it. 'Massive retaliation' was threatened against the Red aggressors by the Secretary of State. Yet the Reds march on and prove his words empty.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Joseph A. Loftus, "Dulles Says U.S. is unlikely to put men into Indochina." *New York Times*, Apr. 20, 1954, 1.

<sup>23</sup>Speech before Student Officers of Florida, May 3, 1954, George Smathers Papers (hereafter cited as Smathers Papers), University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, Box 98.

<sup>24</sup>CR, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 24 August, 1954, 8932.

The general public also joined the debate. An opinion poll found sixty eight percent of people surveyed opposed the introduction of ground troops into Indochina. Constituents flooded Congressional offices with mail demanding that their representatives oppose intervention. One complained about the exorbitant cost in men and materials. Another hoped that America could avoid another Korea, and, using the Korean War as a guide, concluded that it seemed that “a nation can fight till [sic] they tire and then turn it over to us so our young men can be murdered for nothing.”<sup>25</sup> Still another correspondent espoused a form of isolationism only a bit more extreme than conservative southerners Senators Byrd, Long, and a number of others in Congress: “Military intervention in Indo-China...is WRONG! We have the right only of self-defense. Have we gone mad so as to casually and cold-bloodedly think of involving ourselves in another foreign conflict? The President’s powers must be checked or he will commit us to things that the American people will not support.”<sup>26</sup> All in all, most of the constituent correspondence largely reiterated the opposition to intervention expressed by southern congressmen themselves. They differed only in sophistication and bluntness of language.

As the public and their representatives in Congress spoke out against war, Dulles attempted to persuade the British to help make American intervention possible. The Secretary was concerned that Dien Bien Phu would fall before or just after April

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<sup>25</sup>Mann, *A Grand Illusion*, 160. See also Grady Thigpen to Rep Wm Colmer, Apr 16, 1954, William Colmer papers (hereafter cited as Colmer papers), McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, Box 363.

<sup>26</sup>Hugh W. Shankle to John Stennis, May 5, 1954, John Stennis Collection (hereafter referred to as Stennis Papers), Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS, Legislation 1948-1955, Box 5.

26, the beginning of the Geneva Conference, which would mean the French would negotiate from a position of weakness. He met with British and French Foreign ministers, Anthony Eden and Georges Bidault, for a further discussion of united action. As Bidault called for direct large-scale American intervention, Eden, after conferring with Churchill, stated that it would be a mistake for Britain to join with the U.S. in sending forces to Indochina. The Prime Minister replied unequivocally on April 24 that the Americans effectively asked the British to “assist in misleading Congress into approving a military operation, which would itself be ineffective, and might well bring the world to the verge of a major war.” Despite Dulles’s efforts, the Geneva Conference opened on April 27, 1954, without an agreement on united action and with military defeat only a matter of days away at Dien Bien Phu.”<sup>27</sup>

On the home front, administration officials brought a number of congressmen around to the possibility of intervention. Eisenhower met with Republican congressional leaders and stressed that America would have to keep up the pressure for united action and collective security so that the communists could not keep “chipping away at any part of the free world.” Under Secretary of State Bedell Smith briefed members of the Far East Subcommittees of the Foreign Relations and Foreign Affairs committees (which included Fulbright and Representative Omar Burleson of Texas) and found them receptive to a discussion of a resolution authorizing the President to use air and naval forces in Indochina.<sup>28</sup> Thus, after consulting with the administration and despite having spoken out against a new American war, some

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<sup>27</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Part I*, 214-215.



southerners in Congress began to warm to the idea of united action against communism in Indochina.

Conservatives of both parties, however, feared military intervention without congressional consent. They did not want to be placed in the position of having to “rubber stamp” executive decisions after the troops landed in Indochina. Accordingly, Representative Robert Coudert of New York offered an amendment to a defense appropriations bill that stated that none of the funds could be used “for any of the expenses of maintaining armed conflict anywhere in the world” unless Congress declared war or a foreign country attacked the United States. Though the amendment lost handily, the comments of one supporter, Representative Graham A. Barden of North Carolina, deserve mention. Barden, a senior member of the House and a staunch conservative, offered a spirited constitutional defense of Congress’s right to declare war. The amendment, he stated, would insure that “Congress, and only Congress, except in an emergency, could commit a nation to war.” The North Carolinian recalled that Korea was an “undeclared war” that went “on and on” and suggested that Congress, not the President, should have decided whether Americans intervened militarily. He feared a similar situation would develop in Indochina. Barden also reiterated the concerns of many in Congress that they were not being consulted. “The thing that disturbs me most is that we must now exist on rumors and speculate whether or not we’ll wake up some morning in an undeclared war. It hurts me to be asked a thousand questions about Indochina and when our boys are going to war and every day they are dragging them out of the colleges and off the farms and

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 216-217.

out of the shops and putting them in uniform.” Sixteen years later, in order to bring an end to the Vietnam War, Democratic and Republican liberals like Fulbright and John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky would use the same types of amendments to appropriations bills and would use the same types of constitutional arguments the archconservative Barden had employed.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next few days, as Dulles worked behind the scenes in Geneva, the administration continued to grapple with the possibility of intervention. As the area of land defended by France at Dien Bien Phu continued to shrink, a number of southern congressmen intensified their criticisms of the New Look. On May 3 Congressman Henderson Lanham of Georgia, an influential member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, forcefully attacked the administration. He began by asking, “Mr. Speaker, where, oh where is our so-called bold and new foreign policy.” Lanham suggested that the administration talked tough but did not follow through. “Like an ostrich with its head in the sand the present administration has shut its eyes to the real situation in Indochina and members of the Foreign Affairs committee have been lulled with soothing predictions of an early triumph of the Navarre plan.” He complained that, though Eisenhower recently declared Indochina to be of such importance that it could not be lost to communism, the President was now “meekly resigned...to the loss of these associated states” and proposed “abject surrender at Geneva.”

Though he blasted the administration for its failure to defend Indochina, Lanham did not suggest American intervention. Instead he criticized Eisenhower and

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<sup>29</sup>CR, Vol. 97., 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup>, Sess., 29 April, 1954, 5774-5775.

Dulles for misjudging the nature of the struggle. He felt the administration had focused too much on military action and aid and therefore lost an opportunity to “capitalize upon [the] nationalist spirit and this longing for freedom” among the Indochinese people “as the Communists have done.” In an ironic twist considering the white South’s overwhelming condemnation of the efforts of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement at the time, Lanham expressed solidarity with the people fighting for freedom in Indochina, who were “suspicious of the white man and did not trust the promises of the French.” With American preoccupation with “big guns, atomic bombs, military might and the materialistic forces of life,” the U.S. did not emphasize what Lanham called “the spiritual forces and nationalist aspirations that are beginning to animate the minds of the peoples of the Orient.” Since the problem was not solely or even chiefly military, Lanham opposed “getting bogged down in a war from which it would be even more difficult to extricate ourselves than Korea.” He concluded by saying that America would have to convince the native people that they were “fighting for the minds and hearts of the people of the Orient by spiritual forces and a demonstration of our friendship and the sincerity of our efforts to help improve their lot and attain real freedom...Until the natives...are convinced that the free world can assure them of their freedom, they have no will to fight, and without the will to fight, victory cannot come to Indochina.”<sup>30</sup>

In the second to last phrase, Lanham conjured up the arrogance and paternalism that Americans would display in Vietnam. The wise superpower would somehow determine, often without consultation, the “minds and hearts” of the people

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 3 May, 1954, 5874-5875.

of Indochina and would convince a people that had repelled Western and other invaders for centuries that the Americans worked in the best interest of the Asians. In the latter phrase Lanham unwittingly stated the main problem the next two administrations would never adequately solve in Vietnam. The people of Vietnam never fully believed that Americans were fighting for their freedom. And largely because of their mistrust of the Americans and the South Vietnamese government, the people of South Vietnam never demonstrated the will to successfully repel Ho Chi Minh.

Despite its strong opposition to unilateral American intervention in Indochina, Congress did not accept the “loss” of another Asian state to communism. Therefore, while southerners and others in Congress “talked tough” publicly against sending American troops, they would accept American involvement only if the administration could secure united action. Dulles, however, had failed to “sell” united action to the British and other allies. Thus, on May 4 when Secretary of State Dulles arrived in Washington from the Geneva Conference, *New York Times* reporter James Reston predicted “the most serious criticism of his career” would emerge from a Congress disappointed in his failure to secure united action in Indochina. In the same article Reston called the results of Dulles’s efforts a policy of “disunited inaction.”<sup>31</sup> On the following day, the Secretary and other State Department officials briefed congressional leaders from both houses on the conference. He outlined the French requests for airstrikes and the events and attitudes of allies that prevented him from making a

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<sup>31</sup>James Reston, “Dulles Returning to Face Criticism of Asiatic Policy *New York Times*, May 4, 1954, 1, 6.

convincing case for of united action. The Secretary said he had reached three conclusions: that the United States should not intervene unless the preconditions discussed on April 3 had been met; that the administration would attempt to establish a Southeast Asian defense agreement; and that the most likely outcome at Geneva would be temporary partition of Vietnam, a withdrawal of foreign troops, a coalition government and general elections. The end result would most likely be “the loss of Vietnam to the Communists.” <sup>32</sup>

Initially the criticism of the administration that Reston predicted did not develop. Most congressmen completely agreed with Dulles’s work and goals. Johnson, however, saved his attack for a Democratic fundraiser the next day: “What is American policy in Indochina? All of us have listened to the dismal series of reversals and confusions and alarms and excursions over the past few weeks. We have been caught bluffing by our own enemies, our friends and Allies are frightened and wondering, as we do, where we are headed. We stand in clear danger of being left naked and alone in a hostile world.” <sup>33</sup> The morning Johnson’s comments appeared in the *New York Times*, the 8,000 to 10,000 French defenders of Dien Bien Phu surrendered to the Vietminh.

Southern congressional reaction to the fall of Dien Bien Phu varied along both partisan and ideological lines. Moderate Kentucky Republican John Sherman Cooper backed the administration’s efforts and hoped that the bravery of the French soldiers would inspire their compatriots to fight on. Many southern Democrats, however,

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<sup>32</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Book I*, 222-223.

roundly attacked the administration for the failure of united action and criticized Western European allies for promoting at Geneva what the southern legislators thought would be “another Munich.” Moderate Senator Kefauver of Tennessee emphasized the apparent confusion over the administration’s Indochina policy. He called for a “total reexamination of our foreign policy and the means by which we implement” it.<sup>34</sup>

Other more conservative southerners wanted a reorganization of American foreign policy priorities because of the disappointing returns of the present program. Senator Byrd of Virginia repeated his concern for economy, saying that the Russians continued to “sap our strength and weaken us financially and militarily by trapping us into sideline wars...in which there is no chance for military decision.” George Smathers of Florida, a conservative in the mold of Byrd, suggested that the failure to rally Britain in particular against the communist threat in Indochina served as an indictment both for the foreign aid programs to the Western European democracies and the alliance system itself. Smathers assumed, as did an increasing number of southerners in Congress, that foreign aid money would buy Western European support and enthusiasm for American anti-communist policies. Therefore, Smathers suggested that if Britain and France were set on “appeasement” by giving concessions to the Asian communists, America should decrease its aid to these allies. Instead, more aid should be distributed to American anti-communist efforts in Latin America. Senator Long of Louisiana, already a chief opponent of the foreign aid program, expressed his

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 224-225.

<sup>34</sup>CR, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., May 10, 54, 6247.

support of Smathers's position.<sup>35</sup> Smathers and Byrd, though they both advocated strong efforts against anti-communism, did demonstrate in their statements and attitudes a particular neo-isolationist bent very similar to some of their Republican colleagues. However, their hostility to foreign aid in the wake of the disappointments in Korea and Indochina reflected the attitudes of an increasing number of southerners in Congress. The refusal of American allies to embrace united action had contributed to a further decline in southern internationalism.

Most southern congressmen, however, along with their colleagues from other regions, worried that America would ultimately replace the French militarily in Indochina. During a Foreign Relations Committee hearing on May 12, moderate to liberal Arkansas Senator William Fulbright had Dulles clarify the administration's position as to the future of Indochina. The senator commented that America found itself "in a devil of a difficult situation" in its support of colonialism in Indochina. Fulbright wanted to know if the administration would consider intervening, even with troops, to defend Indochina if the French pulled out and granted independence. Dulles did not answer directly, suggesting only that he would discuss the matter with the French. A month later the Arkansas senator grilled Assistant Secretary of State Everett Drummond on further foreign aid funds for Indochina. Fulbright, who had been growing in influence on the committee and would become its chairman in 1959, still could not reconcile how the U.S. could support French colonialism and support the freedom of the Associated States at the same time. As Tom Connally did a few years earlier, he also lamented the seemingly endless stream of foreign aid flowing into

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., May 10 and 11, 1954, 6268-6270, 6337.

the region without any definitive plan for success. He asked Drummond, “What is the long-term solution, assuming we are not going to war?” Drummond said that the State Department had been studying the question but obviously did not have a definitive answer yet. Fulbright suggested that the only solution, short of invasion, was economic—“to build our allies up to where they themselves are strong.” However, Fulbright did not react adversely to possible future unilateral intervention after the French departed. A month later, just after the Geneva Conference ended, he suggested that he would have been open to intervention had the French granted Indochina true independence.<sup>36</sup>

The senator’s comments reflected a growing feeling in both the legislative and executive branches that America could help Indochina fight communism most effectively only after the French left. Even Stennis suggested enhancing the aid to the native peoples to fight communism, although he did not advocate direct U.S. military intervention. His solution, however, reflecting the character of both Stennis and his advisors on the Armed Services Committee, stressed military aid almost exclusively. He reacted positively to an article by General Van Fleet that suggested that the American military should train and equip soldiers throughout Southeast Asia who were willing to “resist communism to the death.” Stennis suggested that unless a strong commitment to fighting communism existed in these states, he would be against any attempts at Asiatic pacts or collective action because “they will be doomed

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<sup>36</sup>Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Mutual Security Act of 1954*, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 11 May, and 15 June, 224-229, 274-279.



eventually to certain failure...[W]e cannot long preserve freedom on behalf of those who are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to retain their own freedom.”<sup>37</sup>

Stennis unwittingly hit upon the chief problem Americans would find in aiding South Vietnam over the next twenty years, but, like many leaders of the time, he assumed that the Vietnamese defined freedom as the defeat of communism. Not all southerners held this view. On May 26, Representative Brady Gentry of Texas gave an impassioned speech against military intervention in which he raised a fundamental question about the nature of the conflict in the region: “Can the struggle of the natives in Indochina for their freedom from France be considered as a Communist movement? Not at all. It is a struggle for independence that has been going on for more than 40 years. It is the same movement that has flamed in all Asian countries, the continuing effort of the brown race to throw off the yoke of their white oppressors.”<sup>38</sup>

Though a few southerners such as Gentry continued to warn of disaster if the administration increased its military presence in Indochina, most southerners in Congress agreed with Stennis on America’s ability and responsibility to stop the spread of communism in Indochina. The President advocated more arms to help the French fight the Vietminh. Therefore, in June and early July Congress approved an additional one billion dollars in military aid for Indochina, even though the French had not issued any new offensives since the Navarre plan, which had already failed miserably. Though the bill passed easily, Representative Burr Harrison of Virginia did

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<sup>37</sup>CR, Vol. 97, 83<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 11 May, 1954, 6360.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., May 26, 1954, 7192.

revisit one important issue that would have significance throughout the Vietnam period. During Foreign Affairs Committee hearings on the bill, Harrison proposed an amendment that would have affirmed Congress's power to declare war and that would have explicitly stated that the Mutual Security Act did not delegate this power to the executive. Harrison's amendment failed by a 6-7 vote of the committee. All of the southern Democrats on the committee save Harrison voted against it. Though an overwhelming majority of the public and the Congress opposed American military intervention, the legislators still believed that the loss of Indochina would topple over the other "dominoes" in the region. And many on the committee and in the House (Harrison proposed a similar amendment during the House debate) thought that the amendment would demonstrate weakness of the executive to American allies and would have no legal effect on the President's actions.<sup>39</sup>

As Congress discussed the French defeat and the continuing Geneva negotiations, the administration set plans in motion to take over for the French in Indochina. In the beginning of June, after several debates within and between the NSC, the JCS, and the State Department, Dulles announced that Eisenhower would not ask Congress for a resolution to intervene in Indochina. All the while members of the executive branch debated intervention. On June 12, the French government fell, and the new Prime Minister, Pierre Mendes-France, promised to either obtain a cease-fire in Indochina by July 20 or resign. The administration reacted by further distancing

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<sup>39</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 246-248.

itself from the French. Dulles said that it would probably be best to “let the French get out of Indochina entirely and then try to rebuild from the foundation.”<sup>40</sup>

Though Dulles wanted to stay away from the Geneva discussions over Indochina because he assumed Mendes-France would accept any agreement that would end the war, many within the State Department suggested the Secretary of State return to the bargaining table. Eisenhower and Dulles did not want to be associated with a capitulation to the communists, so the diplomat stayed away, leaving Undersecretary of State Smith there as an observer. The upcoming mid-term elections influenced Eisenhower because Democrats in Congress sought an issue they could exploit to win back congressional control. Fulbright and others urged Mansfield to make Indochina that issue, and on July 9 he attacked the policy in the Senate, calling the administration’s actions “the diplomacy of bluster and defeat.” The next day Dulles and Vice-President Nixon met with several key congressmen, including Minority Leader Lyndon Johnson. Both Johnson and Nixon suggested that Dulles stay home, intimating that the results at Geneva would be perceived as, in Nixon’s words, “a sellout—a failure of diplomacy.”<sup>41</sup> Dulles remained in Washington as the Conference reconvened on July 14 to settle the Indochina question.

On July 21, 1954, a few hours after Mendes-France’s deadline, the agreement at Geneva was finalized. It partitioned Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel and promised elections to reunify the country two years hence. An international control

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<sup>40</sup>FRUS, 1952-54, Vol XIII, 1716.

<sup>41</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 172-173.

commission would supervise the truce and the elections. The conference negotiated different provisions for Laos and Cambodia. All in all, the administration realized that things could have been much worse. The U.S. only “noted” the agreement, thereby freeing it of any blame for the loss of North Vietnam. The treaty barred America from concluding an alliance with the rest of Indochina, but did not preclude Americans from helping make viable the new “nation” of South Vietnam and aiding them to defend against the probable renewal of hostilities with North Vietnam.

As Smith observed in Geneva, Dulles pursued a goal of providing collective security for Southeast Asian nations against communist aggression by North Vietnam or any other communist nation. Before the Geneva Conference opened Dulles had already begun negotiations among allies in the region as well as Britain and France as part of the united action strategy. As the conference closed Dulles continued talks which would conclude with the formation of SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). Meanwhile, CIA operative Colonel Edward Lansdale arrived in Vietnam to organize American covert operations to prop up the new South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem regime as well as to sabotage Ho Chi Minh.

Southerners had made these operations possible. Southerners chaired the Senate committees and served as ranking members of the House committees that had secured funding for these operations by insuring the passage of foreign aid. The money used for the Lansdale operations came out of foreign aid funds “for the general area of China” which Senator Tom Connally of Texas helped steer through the Senate five years earlier. In addition, William Fulbright, though he did not yet sit in the

chairman's position, had emerged as an expert on foreign policy. Despite his skepticism regarding American military intervention in Indochina in 1954, the Arkansas senator enthusiastically supported foreign aid. Though he preferred economic and technical aid, he had voted for the initial bill providing funds in 1949, and for every subsequent increase in military aid, especially after the French withdrew. Similarly, Representative John Kee of West Virginia and James Richards of South Carolina who chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee from 1949 to 1951, and 1951 to 1953, also supported the military aid bill for China and the general area around it, and were instrumental in its passage. Therefore, all covert and other early American operations in Indochina were supported by the Congress, and, in a sense, enabled in part by the political expertise of southern congressmen.<sup>42</sup>

From the organization of the United Nations through the fall of Dien Bien Phu, a small number of prominent southern congressmen exerted a significant influence on Indochina policy. But as American involvement in Vietnam embarked upon a new phase, southern legislators were by no means monolithic in their views on the possible effects of the increasing commitment. More conservative southerners emphasized the negative consequences that would follow if America deepened its involvement. John Stennis foresaw the disaster that was to come with the unilateral introduction of troops. Richard Russell did not believe Indochina to be important to American interests. Harry Byrd thought the enormous foreign aid expenditures would weaken the U.S. financially. Therefore foreign aid to these "proxy countries" in the fight against communism would weaken the financial position of the U.S. and make it more

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<sup>42</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 250-265.

difficult to defeat their masters in the Soviet Union. Similarly, conservative Representatives Harrison Burr and Graham Barden, reflecting a long-standing southern belief in a strict interpretation of the Constitution, worried that the executive would usurp Congress's power to make war. Only moderate to liberal Senators William Fulbright and Henderson Lanham suggested that a possible solution should emphasize economic rather than military aid. This is particularly surprising in Lanham's case because of the enormous amount of military spending flowing into Georgia during the period. And of all statements by southerners on Indochina during the debates over Dien Bien Phu, only veteran representative Lanham and freshman representative Brady Gentry of Texas mentioned the intense spirit of nationalism in Vietnam that fueled the Vietnamese independence movement. Nevertheless, most southern members of Congress voted for the increase in military aid to the new Geneva "creation" of South Vietnam, hoping to nurture democracy where none had ever existed. Their commitment to anticommunism overrode all other concerns.

Despite their disparate views on foreign aid and other aspects of the conflict, southerners supported the administration's replacement of the French in Vietnam almost solely because of the threat of communism, both in Vietnam and everywhere else. 1954 marked the pinnacle of internal communist investigations, culminating with the televised Army v. McCarthy hearings. After McCarthy was discredited and censured, white southerners continued to search for communists in the wake of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which ordered the desegregation of schools. The court handed down its ruling on May 17, ten days after Dien Bien Phu fell. A few months earlier, as rumors about the imminent Supreme

Court decision circulated, Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, member of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, headed a task force that investigated apparent communist infiltration in educational organizations in the south committed to the desegregation of schools.<sup>43</sup> Eastland's hearings were a part of a concerted effort by southern leaders both in and out of Congress to equate integration with communism. In the wake of the Brown decision, while the Justice Department suggested that segregation had to end because the Soviets used the oppression of blacks in their propaganda against the United States, Richard Russell and Georgia Governor and later Senator Herman Talmadge concluded conversely that if the Soviets opposed segregation, then it must reflect good policy. Though not all southerners supported Eastland, McCarthy, Russell or Talmadge, the centrality of the issue of the apparent threat of Communism at home, coupled with the actual communist advances abroad brought even the very few southern skeptics in line with administration anticommunism efforts. Therefore, while at the same time mounting a massive effort to resist the freedom and full participation of nonwhite members of their own region, southerners in Congress supported the United States in their new role of aiding the South Vietnamese in their fight for "freedom." Southern expertise in the Foreign Relations and Armed Services committees of both houses, and their votes for aid to South Vietnam, in a sense, made this role possible.

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<sup>43</sup>Dorothy Zellner, "Red Roadshow: Eastland in New Orleans, 1954," *Louisiana History* 33, (Winter, 1992), 31-60. See also Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 89, 111.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **“PREDATED DECLARATIONS OF WAR”**

In the remaining five and a half years of Eisenhower’s presidency, Vietnam dropped off the front pages as threats in Formosa and elsewhere took precedence. At the same time, however, the United States effectively replaced France in Vietnam and increased enormously its military and economic aid to the newly created South Vietnam. It also propped up the dictatorial regime of Ngo Dinh Diem for lack of another strong and popular anticommunist leader. South Vietnam became, in the words of Senator John F. Kennedy, “our offspring.” Southerners, though they complained about the exorbitant cost associated with nation-building in South Vietnam, never challenged the assumptions that justified it. As the Cold War intensified in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, Congress established the legal precedents that would make possible United States military involvement into Vietnam. Southerners worried about the consequences of the Formosa and Middle East resolutions authorizing military intervention. Most still supported the Formosa resolution, but influential southern leaders balked at the possibility of an open-ended commitment in the Middle East. As North Vietnam renewed the military conflict in 1959, the Eisenhower administration continued to embrace Diem’s oppressive and unpopular rule. Though southerners in Congress were uncomfortable with the cost and rampant corruption associated with American aid to South Vietnam, all but the staunchest fiscal conservatives voted for military aid to the South Vietnamese leader in the fight against communism. In addition, the administration frequently briefed a few influential southerners on covert operations in the region and used their significant



power to make sure funding for these programs continued. As always, southern senators and representatives espoused differing viewpoints on specifics, but as a whole they did not challenge the Republican administration's efforts in Vietnam, even though most in the South were Democrats.

During the period from 1954 to 1957, Congress, as advised by the recommendations of the Foreign Relations and Foreign Affairs committees, voted for the legislative precedents that made full-scale troop deployment in Vietnam possible. The first of the measures, ratification of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), created a fairly weak form of united action that John Foster Dulles had been seeking for the defense of Dien Bien Phu. In September 1954, the United States signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, which set up SEATO. It's charter members, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan, promised only to "consult" with one another should communist aggression threaten a nation in the region. The Geneva settlement prevented Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from joining SEATO, but the members of the organization agreed to a special protocol stipulating that Indochina would be protected from communist aggression. Secretary Dulles, in order to insure ratification of the SEATO treaty, invited Senators Mike Mansfield and H. Alexander Smith to the negotiations in Manila. Both legislators, in an unprecedented move, signed the treaty for the United States. Therefore the questioning in the Foreign Relations Committee, with Dulles as the principle witness, ensued without much controversy or rancor.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 271-275.

The major questions that concerned southerners on the committee were the possibility of future American involvement in the region, and the question of whether Congress would be consulted. The treaty said that the signatories, in the event of communist aggression in the region, would meet the danger “in accordance with [their] constitutional processes.” Dulles assured the committee that Eisenhower would come to Congress in the event he decided to intervene militarily in Southeast Asia, except in an emergency situation. When Senator Homer Capehart of Indiana worried that a President might define an “emergency” as he saw fit, Chairman Walter George of Georgia, who also had been closely involved in the creation of NATO, suggested that there would be no way to define a President’s power to intervene under the SEATO treaty. George suggested, as he had in helping draft the committee report on NATO, that nothing in the committee’s final recommendations on SEATO would either “add or detract from the powers of the President or the powers of Congress.” Fulbright concurred and added that he saw no way to “escape the risk of having someone [as President] who is arbitrary or ill advised.” The Arkansas senator hoped that Americans would never elect Presidents “who are so unwise or arbitrary or uncivilized as to exercise arbitrary powers under the President’s powers, which he does have.” Under the leadership of George, Fulbright, and Mike Mansfield, the committee vote on SEATO was 14-1. It passed the House and Senate with a nearly unanimous vote.<sup>45</sup> In 1964 and 1965 President Lyndon Johnson invoked the SEATO treaty as partial justification for his actions.

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<sup>45</sup>SFRC, Volume VII, *Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty*, 84<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., January 21, 1955, 59-61.

A second Congressional action in early 1955 strengthened the power of the President to send troops and escalate a conflict without a declaration of war. The Formosa Resolution passed Congress in early 1955 in response to Chinese communist attacks against the small Nationalist Chinese-held islands Quemoy and Matsu, just off the coast of the mainland. The first communist attacks, coming at the same time as the SEATO conference in Manila, was thought to be provocative to United States efforts at containment in Asia. In addition, the “offshore islands,” as the military referred to them, were considered a key part of the “Western Pacific Island chain” which included Formosa. With one exception, the Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated bombing of the islands to stop the Chinese communist invasion. Eisenhower hesitated, but when the Communist China attacked the islands again in January, 1955, the President asked Congress to approve a resolution authorizing him to protect Formosa and the offshore islands.

The ensuing joint Senate Armed Services-Foreign Relations Committee hearings on the Formosa resolution, with Secretary Dulles as chief witness, centered on the scope of the area to be defended under the resolution and the larger constitutional question over the grant of war powers to the executive. The committees debated the second question the longest. Dulles dismissed the charge that the resolution would encourage Presidential warmaking. There “has never been any President of the United States who was not able, if he wanted to, to involve the United States in war....If the President wants to get us into a war, resolution or no resolution in my opinion he can do it,” the Secretary observed. A senator also asked that if the

resolution were approved, could a President involve America in a “progressively developing war” with China, without coming back later to ask for a declaration of war. The Secretary doubted that such a course would occur in the conflict with China, but he assured the committees that the executive would get congressional approval for any additional troops or funds. Both Senate and House committees considering the resolution agreed that the Formosa resolution did not give the President any powers he did not already possess. In fact in the House debate, Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas made clear to the representatives that the resolution did not set a precedent that would “bind [the President’s] action in future crisis.”<sup>46</sup>

During the floor debate several southern congressmen in the House and Senate commented on the desire to present to the rest of the world a strong and united front against Asian communism. Both Russell Long of Louisiana and Strom Thurmond of South Carolina stressed the necessity to convince other nations that, in Long’s words, “we are ready to stand with the President in the defense of Formosa and the Pescadores [Islands], and if those islands are attacked we are ready to go to war with Red China.” Thurmond called the resolution “a step towards the preservation of peace,” suggesting that war would certainly come if America displayed “weakness...disunity...or hesitation” in response to Chinese aggression.<sup>47</sup>

Congressman William Colmer of Mississippi, future chairman of the powerful Rules Committee, suggested that “we must either give the President the authority he

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<sup>46</sup>*Congressional Quarterly Almanac, Vol 11(1955)*, hereafter referred to as CQA (Washington: Congressional Quarterly News Features, 1955), 278.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, 276-277.

seeks or we must get out of the Western Pacific....I welcome this first opportunity I have had in ten long years of appeasement to go on record for an affirmative foreign policy.”<sup>48</sup> Howard W. Smith of Virginia, the Rules Committee chairman, called for the unanimity of the Democrats and reported the resolution under a “closed rule,” which assured only limited debate by not permitting amendments to be introduced. In addition, powerful and influential South Carolina Congressman and future House Armed Services committee chairman L. Mendel Rivers expressed his support of the resolution with a militancy, recklessness, and tactlessness for which he had already become known: “I am voting today to give [the President] authority to use whatever is necessary, including nuclear weapons, which he has marked for Chinese Communists, and I hope he will start at Peking and work right down.”<sup>49</sup> Both Colmer and Rivers embodied the martial traditions associated with southerners.

Colmer, a former member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and a former chairman of a House postwar economic and planning committee, had, after a fact-finding mission to Europe just after World War II, warned President Truman about the aggressive and expansionist nature of the Soviet Union. Since then, he had advocated taking a “hard line” with the Russians and later the communist Chinese. He believed the Soviet Union had planned all the communist moves in Asia, but did not want war. He lamented Truman’s “no-win” policy in Korea and sided with General Douglas MacArthur’s contention that there was “no substitute for victory.” Russia

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<sup>48</sup>“The Gentlemen From Mississippi,” *The Biloxi-Gulfport Daily Herald*, March 3, 1955, 10 Colmer Papers, Box 363.

<sup>49</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 1*, 280.

intended, he declared, to “bring about the economic collapse” of the United States through “chaos, confusion, and continuation of the Cold War.” The remedy, Colmer suggested, was the pursuit of a new “positive policy” in the Cold War, by which he meant unilateral and sometimes pre-emptive military action. The Kremlin “had been calling all the signals and we have been running the defensive plays. Wars and battles of diplomacy, like football games, cannot be won that way.” Colmer, an enthusiastic Cold Warrior, saw Eisenhower’s serious consideration of military action a breath of fresh air after the “appeasement” policies of Harry Truman.<sup>50</sup>

Rivers agreed with Colmer’s assessment, mainly because of his closeness to and advocacy of the military. Rivers consistently supported the opinions of generals and admirals over politicians and diplomats on Cold War policy in Asia and elsewhere. “If there is anybody in this country who knows completely, and in detail what communism is and its dangers are,” Rivers later commented, “it is the professional military man.” While the South Carolina congressman and second-ranking member of the Armed Services committee can be considered a “true believer” when it came to a preference of military over civilian foreign policy analysis, the fact that his alliance brought an enormous financial boon to his congressional district may have served to bolster his support. Because of his influential position and eventual chairmanship of the committee, Rivers managed to transform Charleston, South Carolina, into, in the words of one journalist, “a microcosm of military-industrial civilization.” As Armed Services chairman Carl Vinson of Georgia later joked, “You put anything else down there in your district, Mendel, it’s gonna sink.” Therefore, by belief and because of

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<sup>50</sup>Edgar Poe, “Ike’s Action on Formosa is Praised by Rep. Colmer,” *The Times-Picayune*

self-interest, Mendel Rivers would emphasize, along with a number of other staunch southern conservatives, a solely military solution to the problems of communist aggression in Asia.<sup>51</sup>

Other southern legislators, however, criticized certain parts of the resolution. Senator Estes Kefauver worried over the dangerous implications of the resolution and suggested that Congress reword the resolution in a way “that will result in the least possible chance of war [while] still maintaining our honor.” Mississippi Congressman Arthur Winstead used his time to speak out against one tenet of the New Look, declaring that the Eisenhower administration engaged in “mental gymnastics” in recommending a reduction in the armed services while pushing a resolution that could lead to “all out war.”<sup>52</sup>

In addition, southerners cast two of the three dissenting votes in the House. North Carolina’s Graham A. Barden, the southern conservative who during the Indochina crisis worried over executive usurpation of the power to declare war, remained consistent. He voted against this resolution that in his view would accomplish the same result. Republican Congressman Eugene E. Siler of Kentucky also voted “no.” Both southerners stressed their concerns over the growing trend in American foreign policy to entrust all power in the executive branch. Their concerns were well founded. The resolution authorized the President to protect the islands and Formosa against communist Chinese attacks. This authorization would expire when

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(New Orleans), Colmer Papers, Box 324. See also “The Gentleman From Mississippi.”

<sup>51</sup>Will Huntley, “Might Rivers of Charleston” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1993), 184. See also Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 146-147.

the President could determine that the area was safe and secure. The Formosa Resolution was the first time Congress delegated their power to declare war to the executive. Or as Senators Alben Barkley of Kentucky and Harry Byrd of Virginia characterized it, Congress granted the President a “predated declaration of war.” Though hotly debated in the Senate and to a lesser degree in the house, the Formosa Resolution passed 410-3 in the House and 83-3 in the Senate.<sup>53</sup>

The third congressional action that helped establish a strong precedent for supporting executive-ordered military action came in 1957 with the Middle East Resolution. The Eisenhower administration asked for it to counter possible Soviet moves into the “power vacuum” created by the aftermath of the British-French invasion of Egypt in late 1956. The administration had more trouble getting the resolution passed than the other two, largely because of dissent from some of the most influential southern senators. The Middle East Resolution stated that if the President determined the necessity of intervention in that region, the “United States is prepared to use armed forces to assist any nation or group of nations requesting assistance against armed aggression from any country controlled by international communism” provided this action was “consonant with” the Constitution. The administration’s original wording of the resolution had Congress “authorize” any military action decided upon by the President, but the Foreign Relations committee changed the language to say only that America was “prepared” to use armed force against communism. Stennis and others believed that the President already had the authority

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<sup>52</sup>*CQ A*, 1955, 278.

<sup>53</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Book 1 280-281.



and that as originally written the resolution would reduce the President's power by forcing him to get congressional approval when exerting his constitutional prerogatives as Commander-in-Chief.

In January and February a Joint Foreign Relations-Armed Services committee held hearings in executive session to consider the resolution. Non-southerners, including Hubert Humphrey and Mike Mansfield, expressed their reservations about what Humphrey characterized as another "predated declaration of war." Southerners, however, dominated the debate. Richard Russell, Sam Ervin of North Carolina, Harry Byrd, Russell Long, and William Fulbright spoke out forcefully in opposition during the hearings.

As in 1954 over Dien Bien Phu, Russell voiced his objections only in private. He lamented the "small war idea" that would lead America into Vietnam, worrying that it would "get chewed up over there over a period of time with a lot of little wars." However, the Georgia senator, using language that he would repeat constantly during the Vietnam War, did not suggest a limited scale of involvement if Eisenhower decided to send troops. "Are we going to fritter away our time," he said, "fighting these Russian volunteers...as we did in Korea...or we going to really let the Russians know that this is it, and we are going to let them have it?" Russell also criticized the administration's refusal to reveal specifics about any economic and military action the United States would initiate in the region. "In my opinion," he commented, "the Congress of the United States is being treated as a group of children, and very small children, and children with a low IQ at that....Here you have a group of Arabs going back to Saudi Arabia who know exactly what they expect to get out of this resolution,

but there is not a single Member of the Senate that I know...who has the slightest idea what commitments we have made.” Russell went on to attack what he called “this pig-in-a poke military and economic assistance” package which the administration proposed as a companion to the Middle East resolution.

Sam Ervin joined in the debate, agreeing with Russell that Eisenhower and Dulles did not fully inform Congress on the situation in the Middle East and also did not adequately convince the Congress that an emergency existed. To the delight of the Senators, Ervin used homespun humor to convey his message:

The Secretary of State, in his insistence on this untying of \$200 million (for military and economic aid) reminds me of my friends. We had two mule drivers in my hometown, Bob Goodson and Vance Powell; and Vance came to my office one day and he said.

About 6 month ago I went over to Tennessee and I bought a consignment of mules on the joint account of myself and Bob Goodson, and Bob Goodson has been complaining about it ever since. He came to see me yesterday and asked me to go back with him over to Tennessee and buy another consignment of mules on [the joint] account...I told him I wasn't going unless I got a legal document to fix it up that would protect me.

And he said,

I want you to draw up a paper according to law that says Vance Powell will go over to Tennessee and buy a consignment of mules both for himself and Bob Goodson, and that in so doing, that Vance Powell can do like he damn pleases in selecting the mules, and that there will be no hereafter about any of the mules from Bob Goodson.”

Ervin continued dramatically, echoing Russell's fears of over the breakout of proxy wars in the Middle East. “This resolution,” he said, “is not directed against Russia; it is directed against that nations which we fear will become Communist in the Middle East...and it is a perfect invitation for another Korea, with Russia furnishing arms and us (sic) furnishing the boys to do the dying.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>SFRC, Vol. IX, *Resolution Regarding the Middle East*, 85<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., January 2,

Stennis proposed an amendment that changed the wording of the original resolution. His amendment stated that Congress “approved” rather than “authorized” military intervention, since he believed passage of the original resolution would diminish the power of the President. “There will come a time,” he warned, “that a strong President will have a forward sound policy that might not be momentarily backed by a majority of Congress, and under these precedents he would be left at their mercy.”

Ervin, Byrd, and Fulbright disagreed with Stennis. Ervin made the distinction that the President only had the power to involve the country in a “defensive” war. He did not want Congress to create a precedent that would give the President a right “to engage in offensive warfare without authorization from Congress.” Congress alone has that power. The committee defeated Stennis’s amendment, with all three of the southerners voting nay. Nevertheless, another amendment that addressed the Mississippi senator’s concerns passed so that the word “approval” was deleted.

Of all the dissenting southern voices in the debate over the Middle East Resolution, William Fulbright’s was the strongest. He agreed with Russell that neither the President nor his Secretary of State had convinced the Congress that emergency conditions existed in the Middle East. In January, therefore, Fulbright requested that the administration provide more information. It did, but the new information did not convince Fulbright to support the measure. The day before the February joint committee hearings, the Arkansas senator voiced his opposition on the floor of the Senate. The executive branch asked Congress, Fulbright suggested, to give them “a

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1957, 24-25, and February 12, 1957, 244-246, 296.

blank grant of power over our funds and Armed Forces, to be used in a blank way, for a blank length of time, under blank conditions, with respect to blank nations, in a blank area....The President need not consult, much less be accountable to any other constitutional order organ of government.” “Shall we strike down,” he continued, “the Senate’s rights and duties in the conduct of foreign affairs as defined by 168 years of constitutional practice....Shall we say yes to a radical proposition whose adoption would mean that we are abandoning our checks and balances; that from now on, naked Executive power will rule the highest and most fateful interests of the Nation?” Fulbright did not believe Congress should relinquish their war-making powers. He concluded with a warning: “History will demonstrate that the periods of the greatest danger to the rights of the people, in a democracy, are those periods when adulation for a popular idol diverts their attention momentarily from the implications of their actions.”<sup>12</sup> Seven years later as he helped steer the resolution that made massive military intervention in Vietnam possible, the Arkansas senator would fall into the trap he described in 1957.

Despite the dissent of Fulbright and the other southerners, the resolution passed by a large margin in both houses of Congress, but, unlike the Formosa resolution, by nowhere near a unanimous vote. Southerners furnished twelve out of the nineteen “no” votes in the Senate and twenty-two out of the thirty-five dissenting Democratic votes in the House. Most southern opponents of the resolution were conservatives, such as Russell, Ellender, Long, James Eastland of Mississippi, Byrd, and Ervin. However, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee joined his like-minded

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<sup>12</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 345-347.

colleagues Wayne Morse of Oregon and John C. O'Mahoney of Wyoming as the only members of the "liberal" wing of the Democratic party to vote against the resolution. Fulbright was absent. The final wording of the act, which avoided authorization for the President to send troops in order to avoid constitutional disagreements over war powers, set, in the words of historian William C. Gibbons, "a very important precedent for avoiding such authorization in the future."<sup>13</sup> Thus in 1964 the Johnson administration worded the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution to merely affirm the right of the President to use the armed forces. Therefore, because the Tonkin resolution did not authorize the President to act, its subsequent repeal by Congress in 1970 had no power to force the United States to withdraw from Vietnam.

The SEATO treaty ratification and the Formosa and Middle East Resolutions refined the relationship regarding war powers between the executive and legislative branches. Some southerners understood that the sum total of the two resolutions was a diminution of legislative warmaking power. Senator John Sparkman of Alabama, in a 1956 speech to the National War College in Washington, quoted a former Supreme Court Justice on the subject: "The twentieth century [has] ushered in an era of undeclared wars and thereby drained much of substance out of the Congressional power to declare war. It is apparent now that the President can so handle foreign

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 348. In the fall of 1962, Congress passed the Cuba and Berlin resolutions that mainly used the wording of the Formosa and Middle East resolutions. Both passed with very little debate and a nearly unanimous vote. All southerners supported the 1962 resolutions.

affairs and the armed forces as to leave Congress no real choice but to declare war or...to involve us in warfare without any declaration.”<sup>14</sup>

As always, southerners did not speak with one voice during the debates over each action. Yet most of them fell in line with the executive branch, in all situations except for the last. Though southerners for and against the resolutions often emphasized contradictory points, both sides raised concerns that had been echoed by southern leaders since the beginning of the Republic. First, both proponents and opponents of the resolution feared a consolidation of executive power. Even though most believed that the President already had the powers they voted him in the resolution, they appreciated the fact that the Eisenhower administration sought their advice and consent since Truman had bypassed the Congress in committing troops to Korea. Second, southerners exhibited a desire for a strict interpretation of the Constitution regarding war powers. By 1957, both conservative southerners like Sam Ervin and moderates like William Fulbright and John Sparkman had grown increasingly concerned that SEATO and the two resolutions had eroded the congressional authority to declare war. Third, most southerners, though they had reservations, ultimately followed the tradition of deferring to the executive in foreign policy decisions. Fourth, archconservative southerners in particular expressed a determination to uphold the honor of the United States by chiefly military means against any real or perceived threats from outside. They went way beyond defense of the United States to advocate the use of nuclear weapons in China, as Mendel Rivers

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<sup>14</sup>“The Legislative Branch and National Security,” Speech to the National War College, Washington, D.C., March 6, 1956, John Sparkman Collection, Box SP-4.

did. Strom Thurmond also defied even the conclusions of some prominent generals such as Matthew Ridgeway when suggesting that America be prepared to fight a land war in Asia if the Chinese attacked the tiny islands of Quemoy and Matsu. Even liberal Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver, though wanting to avoid war with China, would only agree to do so if American honor could be preserved. Though most Americans during the McCarthy era felt an uneasiness toward and a mistrust of the Soviet Union and China, few, after three bloody and frustrating years in Korea, would have gone as far. Even Eisenhower, the former Supreme Allied Commander in World War II, who used the threat of “massive retaliation” to convince the communist countries to retreat from aggression, always refrained from intervening.

As the Cold War intensified in the Middle East and Asia, America attempted to nurture its “creation” of South Vietnam and protect it against Ho Chi Minh. The American government spent billions during the remaining years of the Eisenhower administration to prop up the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem, a western educated Catholic who served as President of an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation, would never gain the support of the people. During times of crisis he would promise the United States to carry out democratic reforms; once the storms passed, however, he brutally punished his enemies and further consolidated his power. His one strength, according to his American benefactors, was the absence of other leaders on the horizon. Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana was one of Diem’s strongest supporters in Congress, and the senator’s word carried influence with the administration because of his several visits to the region and his background as a professor of Asian history. Upon consultation with Mansfield, Eisenhower and Dulles

approved a plan to help train the Diem-controlled South Vietnamese military. The President sent a letter to the South Vietnamese leader in October, 1954, promising to examine the best way to undertake an aid program to help stabilize Diem's government. The administration wanted South Vietnam to become "a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means." Eisenhower expected Diem to implement democratic reforms in return for the aid, which would produce a government "responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance."

At the time, Diem had his hands full defending his government against two powerful and militant semi-religious sects that controlled parts of the country. Though some American advisors predicted his downfall and suggested that the Eisenhower administration cultivate another leader, Diem held on. With the help of the CIA and other American advisors, Diem's forces defeated and disbanded the sects by the summer of 1955. With his position more secure, Diem, with American support, repudiated parts of the Geneva Agreement. He refused to meet with communist leaders to discuss the 1956 elections mandated by the Geneva Accords that would have unified North and South Vietnam. Diem reasoned that since his government did not sign the Geneva Declaration and because free elections could not be guaranteed, South Vietnam was not obliged to participate. Instead, the South Vietnamese leader announced that there would be a referendum in October in which voters would choose between a Diem-led republic and the reinstatement of the monarchy under Bao Dai. Diem won ninety eight percent of the vote, garnering more votes in some villages and cities than there were registered voters. Having fully consolidated his power, in early



1956 Diem asked the remaining 15,000 French military forces to leave South Vietnam. With this act, America officially became the sole protector of the new Asian nation.<sup>15</sup>

During the fall of 1955 several members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee visited South Vietnam to assess the situation there. The delegation, which included Representatives John Jarman of Oklahoma and Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, returned highly impressed by the South Vietnamese leader. They admired his courage and strength in facing seemingly insurmountable problems. To help Diem stay in power over the next six years, the United States greatly increased its aid.<sup>16</sup>

Though southern congressmen generally supported the efforts to keep South Vietnam from falling into Communist hands, many became increasingly critical of all foreign aid, particularly non-military aid. In the Senate, southern votes in support of foreign aid dropped from eighty four percent in favor during 1947-1948 to forty-one percent a decade later. Similarly, between 1956 and 1962 southerners in the House cast half the votes against all foreign aid bills, while holding less than one quarter of the seats.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Richard Russell, Russell Long, Harry Byrd, Allen J. Ellender of Louisiana and many other powerful conservative senators, along with liberals like Fulbright, tired of the waste and inefficiency involved in the Mutual Security and other aid programs to Vietnam and elsewhere. Several factors explain the further shift away from the internationalism southerners had espoused during the 1940s and early 1950s.

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<sup>15</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, Herring, *"America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975"* and several other secondary sources provide excellent accounts of the relationship between Diem and the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations.

<sup>16</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 301.

<sup>17</sup>Herring and Hess, "Regionalism and Foreign Policy," 264-265.

First, the increasing costs of foreign aid. During the mid-to-late 1950s the U.S. aid program totaled between \$1.5 and \$2 billion (the U.S. had already spent a similar figure during the first half of the decade). This did not include money for Laos and Cambodia, as well as the cost of the American military advisory group. Additional money also went to support various programs to develop the infrastructure and government of South Vietnam. The flow of cash did not lessen the fledgling government's dependence on the United States—it enhanced it. Richard Russell complained that the foreign aid program in the State Department “was so sterile of ideas that the only answer they have to the Russians is to ask for more money.”<sup>18</sup> Both Russell and Long, along with several others, wanted foreign aid grants to be converted into loans. Liberal Senator William Fulbright lamented that some of the foreign aid funds, originally approved on a temporary basis, had now increased and become permanent. Byrd, continuing his long struggle to reduce government expenditures, voted against foreign aid consistently. Without foreign aid, he commented, “we could balance the budget and reduce taxes across the board by 5 ½ percent.” Ellender tacked onto every Mutual Security act several amendments lessening or doing away with portions of the aid. In the House, Louisiana Congressman Otto Passman stated every year that the executive branch requested far more money than it could spend for the Mutual Security program.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr.*, 354.

<sup>19</sup>For Byrd quote, see CQ Almanac, 1955, 238. To find Ellender's amendments and Passman's comments see the CQ Almanac's coverage of each year's Mutual Security Act for the years 1955-1961.

The decline in southern support for foreign aid could be linked to the significant changes in the South itself. Historians George Herring and Gary R. Hess suggest that the fundamental economic and social changes in the region which began during World War II and greatly increased during the 1950s and 1960s, led to a “revolt” against certain aspects of American foreign policy. Wartime military and other government spending in the South sped up the pace of industrialization and urbanization. In addition, the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 threatened white supremacy and contributed to a “crisis mentality” among white southern politicians. This assault on southern traditions and institutions, historian Charles Lerche suggested, heightened southern regionalism and led to “a touchiness and querulousness unmatched in any earlier period except the decade preceding the Civil War.”<sup>20</sup> The growing opposition to foreign aid also reflected the shift in aid from Europe to Asia and Africa. The explosion of newly independent states in Africa starting in the late 1950s and peaking in 1960, the “year of Africa,” in which seventeen nations on the continent declared independence resulted in the opposition of southern conservatives to aid for the new nations. They rejected the liberal internationalism they had supported in the 1940s and early 1950s, which they associated with vast foreign “give away programs,” and projected their attitudes of African Americans to the leaders of nonwhite nations who they considered to be childlike, illiterate, and incapable of spending the money wisely. Southerners also rejected funding for another internationalist institution, the United Nations, for similar reasons. “The United

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<sup>20</sup>Herring and Hess, “Regionalism and Foreign Policy,” 265-270; Charles Lerche, *The Uncertain South: Its Changing Patterns of Politics in Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 219-221.

Nations,” declared Mississippi Senator John Bell Williams, “is now controlled by semi-literate and tribal groups domiciled in Africa and Asia.” Indeed the growing number of nonwhite nations in Asia and Africa meant that their power in the United Nations increased. In 1962 Williams stated further that American recognition of new African governments that overthrew their former European colonial masters only served as a “racist” and cynical policy designed by the Kennedy administration to win the black vote. Colmer concurred with his Mississippi colleague. He doubted the ability of the U.N. to bring about peace “when it started taking in African tribes, who are unable to govern themselves, and giving each of them an equal voice with the United States.” Such vitriolic and racist comments also reflected how white southern frustration over integration also affected their attitudes on Cold War foreign policy concerns. Additionally, unspoken in William’s and Colmer’s racist attitudes is an implicit fear that the defeat of oppressive European colonialism in the nonwhite world would focus the attention of the world more clearly of white supremacist rule in Alabama, Mississippi, and other southern states.

Colmer and other southerners such as Senators Sam Ervin and Harry Byrd also objected for financial reasons to non-military aid to the developing countries, worrying that, in Colmer’s words, America would “play into the hands of Russia by spending ourselves into bankruptcy.”<sup>21</sup> Yet most conservative southerners were more likely to support the military components of foreign aid. Conversely, William Fulbright, though

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<sup>21</sup>John Bell Williams to E. Forrest Thomas, February 26, 1963, John Bell Williams Papers, Correspondence files, Box 2, , Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS. See also William Colmer to Mrs. E.E. Deen, May 10, 1957, William Colmer to John Chandler,

sometimes frustrated with the immense cost of foreign aid, enthusiastically supported the program. He preferred non-military aid and lamented the preoccupation with the military among his colleagues. He observed in a 1958 attack on both the administration's foreign policy and his colleagues' support of it, "...when it has been a question of meeting the desperate needs of people elsewhere for economic and social progress, we have been pinchpenny in our approach. But when it has been a question of aid for the military establishment of other countries, the hand has gone deep and unhesitatingly into the pockets of the American people." About a month later, in September of 1958, Fulbright, along with John Sparkman of Alabama and several other non-southern senators, sent a letter to President Eisenhower requesting greater emphasis on economic over military aid. <sup>22</sup>

Moderate-to-liberal southerners like Fulbright lamented the American emphasis on military solutions to solve problems in countries that lacked infrastructure, technical knowledge, and a stable economy. Virginia Representative Porter Hardy, Chairman of the Foreign Operations subcommittee, criticized the foreign aid program in Southeast Asia for ignoring the needs of the people: "We are supporting and helping to train enlarged military forces and furnishing large quantities of military hardware. We are building numerous monumental projects, such as the several superhighways under

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January 3, 1962, Colmer Papers, Box 374. See also Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 153.

<sup>22</sup>CR, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., August 6, 1958, 16319. For reference to the letter to Eisenhower, see Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 322.

construction....But we are spending mighty little of this money on activities which will produce an immediate impact on the average citizen of these countries.”<sup>23</sup>

Between 1957 and 1959, discontent over foreign aid from both ideological perspectives centered on abuses of the program in Indochina. But the criticisms of a number of southern leaders did not kill the programs. In 1957 the Foreign Relations committee along with Richard Russell and other senior members of the Armed Services Committee commissioned a study of the foreign aid program. The report, completed by Chairman of the Board of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Clement Johnston, concluded that American aid had enhanced security in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Johnston recommended cutting aid by at least half and increasing the emphasis on technical and economic assistance. He also warned of the possible dangers of America using the aid program to interfere in the internal affairs of the country in order to influence political developments. Despite the conclusions of Johnston’s thoughtful and insightful report, the Senate did not act forcefully to bring about changes in the program. The senators obviously did not know enough about “nation-building” to question the program or challenge its existence.

The controversy over American aid to Vietnam also included discussion of the corrupt Commodity Import Program, or CIP, which made dollars available to the Vietnamese and Laotian government to purchase goods, primarily from the U.S., which the Vietnamese would resell to foreign buyers. By manipulating the local currency, overcharging the United States, and colluding with importers, both the South Vietnamese and Laotian government officials enriched themselves while the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, February 25, 1958, 2793.

South Vietnamese economy did not become any less dependent on the largesse of the United States government. Despite the knowledge of corruption within the program, the foreign policy committees left it in the foreign aid bills with very few reductions.<sup>24</sup>

The most sensational scandal over the foreign aid program in Vietnam occurred in 1959, with the publication of a series of articles in the Scripps-Howard newspapers by reporter Albert Colegrove. It prompted the most thorough investigation of U.S. aid to Diem's government. Colegrove reported the massive corruption among both South Vietnamese and American officials. His articles described the American practice of giving millions of dollars worth of "Jeeps, trucks, guns, tractors, factories, even whole radio networks," to a nation that had no idea or training on how to use them effectively. Since American aid did not accompany these grants with training, the program only made South Vietnam more dependent on America rather than fostering independence and strength. Colegrove wrote also of the unwillingness of any American officials to "rock the boat" and report the abuses for fear of ruining their careers.<sup>25</sup>

Emboldened by such scandals, conservative southerners such as Harry Byrd and Strom Thurmond of South Carolina reiterated their long held desire to reduce significantly or abolish entirely the foreign aid program. Even more liberal senators such as Mike Mansfield, John F. Kennedy, and Ernest Gruening started criticizing the program. The Scripps-Howard newspaper organization, which hired Colegrove to

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<sup>24</sup>Gibbons, *The United States Government and the Vietnam War, Part I* 316-321.

<sup>25</sup>The Colegrove articles were reprinted in U.S., House, Committee on Foreign Affairs,

write the articles, called for a congressional investigation. Fulbright, now chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, reacted in a more guarded fashion. The Arkansas senator, though an advocate for reform of the foreign aid program, did not want to hold full-blown hearings for fear the program would not survive. In discussing the upcoming hearings with retired General John O'Daniel, former head of the American advisory group in Vietnam and chairman of the "American Friends of Vietnam, a powerful pro-Diem lobby, Fulbright worried that the Colegrove articles "have done a great deal of damage...to our efforts in Vietnam." <sup>26</sup>

The chairman clashed with Mansfield, who as chairman of the Subcommittee on State Department Organization would lead the investigation. Mansfield's desire for more extensive hearings won out, and he questioned several officials as well as Colegrove himself. The House Foreign Affairs Committee also conducted hearings, but theirs were far less critical of the aid program. With the exception of Mansfield's subcommittee report, most in Congress turned their ire towards Colegrove and his articles, characterizing them as "yellow journalism" and even suggesting that the stories served only to embolden the communist cause. In the end, even though Mansfield's report adopted many of the reporter's criticisms of the aid program, there is no evidence to suggest that any of its recommendations, which involved the eventual fazing out of both military and economic aid, ever influenced policy. <sup>27</sup>

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*Current Situation in the Far East*, Hearings before a Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific, July 27, August 3, 11, 14, 1959, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 228-301.

<sup>26</sup>For Thurmond and Byrd quotes see CR, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess, July 21, 1959, 13769-13770. For Fulbright's comment see Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 216-217.

<sup>27</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 217-18. See also Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 325-327.



As part of the investigations spurred by Colegrove's articles, two members of the Mansfield's subcommittee, Senators Albert Gore of Tennessee and Gale McGee of Wyoming, held hearings in Vietnam for the first and only time in the entire history of American involvement in Vietnam. Gore particularly looked into the resettlement program, in which South Vietnamese peasants would be relocated into secure areas in order to separate the populus from the Vietcong. Gore, who like Fulbright would emerge as an early critic of America's involvement in Vietnam, characterized the Vietnam program as "an economic monstrosity."<sup>28</sup> In April of 1960, a few months after returning from Vietnam, Gore called for a reappraisal of the entire American foreign aid program. The Tennessee legislator worried that, in backing Diem and other Third World anticommunist strongmen, "our Government has either openly or tacitly aligned itself with dictatorial regimes." He, along with others, grew impatient that Diem had not made any significant "progress toward democracy." To illustrate his point, Gore noted the overwhelming margin of Diem's election victory in 1956 and commented that the ninety eight percent tally had "a certain Iron Curtain flavor." The senator hoped that rather than "merely sustaining the regimes that happen to be in power," the United States aid program would help "improve the status of the people as individuals."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Jim G. Lucas, "Senator Differs on Viet Nam Land Program," *Washington Daily News*, December 11, 1959, 7, Albert Gore Collection, hereafter cited as Gore Papers, Albert Gore Research Center, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN, Box 64.

<sup>29</sup>CR, 86<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., April 29, 1960, 8987-8988.

Frustration grew among many southerners in Congress with the exorbitant cost, the rampant corruption, and the lack of effectiveness of the foreign aid program in Vietnam. Conservatives emphasized the cost and seemed ready to abandon all but military aid. Fulbright, Gore, Sparkman and others wanted to reform the program and shift the emphasis from military aid. Though the committees investigated the abuses of the program, foreign aid increased and continued in Vietnam largely because America could not find a strong, popular, and acceptable alternative to Ngo Dinh Diem. In the end, the hawks won the debate over what type of aid would be stressed. The Eisenhower and subsequent administrations, unaccustomed to and unprepared for nation-building in a faraway Buddhist country led by a dictatorial Catholic, would emphasize in foreign aid what they could control—American military power. The corruption and inefficiency continued, along with America's deepening involvement in Southeast Asia.

After the revelations uncovered by Colegrove and the foreign policy committees on the Vietnam aid program, the administration came to share Fulbright's and Gore's frustration with Diem. A few years earlier Eisenhower and Dulles had celebrated what they called Diem's "miracle" of keeping South Vietnamese afloat despite threats from without and within. However, Diem never allowed democratic reforms, preferring to rule mainly through his family members. He repressed any and all dissent to his programs. He alienated himself from the people of his country, who derogatorily referred to him as "My-Diem" (American Diem) to illustrate his dependence on the United States. He took personal control of villages, thereby breaking the ancient tradition of village autonomy. He implemented the disastrous

agroville land program, which forcibly removed families from land they had occupied for centuries and put them in “protected” villages. The communists easily infiltrated many of the villages and turned often-willing peasants against the South Vietnamese leader. In 1959, the North Vietnamese increased guerilla activity in the South. A year later the communists formed the National Liberation Front to organize Ho Chi Minh supporters among the South Vietnamese. The communists controlled large areas of the South Vietnamese countryside. Despite American efforts to keep the Southern Vietnamese leader in power, Diem’s rule seemed more tenuous than ever.

Despite the stark realities, State Department officials and military personnel painted a rosy picture in their reports to Congress. In early 1959 Secretary of State Dulles reported to the Foreign Relations Committee that the situation in Vietnam was satisfactory. In April 1959, while Diem struggled to forcibly install the agroville program, both military and diplomatic officials assured Congress and the public that internal security in South Vietnam was close to being achieved. When Fulbright and Mansfield read a newspaper article reporting that the size of the American advisory group in Vietnam would be doubled, the senators asked Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, commander of the group, to explain. The general assured them that the report was false and added that the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) in Vietnam would actually be decreased in size and would eventually “work itself out of a job.” Therefore, while many officials privately became frustrated with Diem’s rule, they did not communicate their doubts to Congress. Both southerners and non-southerners in Congress accepted the conclusions of the administration.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part I*, 338-339.

Except for a few highly placed members of the legislative branch, most of Congress knew little about CIA-run covert operations, which made up a significant part of American efforts in Vietnam during the Eisenhower and all subsequent administrations. Congress funded the agency, but high-level classified discussions regarding covert operations only involved the chairman of the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees. Two or three times a year during the Eisenhower administration, CIA director Allen Dulles met with the full membership of both House and Senate Armed Services and Appropriations Committees. Here Dulles would only speak generally about the CIA programs. However, the Chairmen of these four committees, including Richard Russell and Georgia Representative Carl Vinson, met with the director more frequently and were privy to the classified information on covert operations. The procedure of the meetings would follow a specific pattern. The whole of each committee would have brief perfunctory hearings, after which Allen Dulles would meet privately with Russell, Vinson, and the two other committee chairmen to brief them on pending covert operations. In addition, Russell would often consult with Lyndon Johnson and Harry Byrd regarding Agency activities. Russell in particular wielded enormous power in determining the CIA budget.

In 1955 and 1956, Senator Mansfield proposed a resolution to establish a joint oversight committee for the CIA. Russell forcefully opposed the measure and asserted that he would never divulge any of the information, including budget items, to either the Congress or the public. He suggested that nothing in the United States “should be held so sacred behind the curtain of classified matter” as “the activities of this agency.” Mansfield’s resolution failed in the Senate, 59-27. The most powerful southerners,

Russell, Lyndon Johnson, Stennis, and former Vice-President Alben Barkley of Kentucky, voted against it. All but a handful of southerners followed the lead of the majority. Moderate-to-liberal southerners William Fulbright, Earle Clements of Kentucky, Lister Hill of Alabama, Kefauver, and Albert Gore supported the bill. Sam Ervin of North Carolina was the only southern conservative to vote for the bill.

Within the next few years, however, both the House and Senate Armed Services and Appropriations Committees created formal CIA oversight subcommittees. Nevertheless, the cast of characters remained essentially the same. Vinson chaired the House Armed Services CIA oversight subcommittee, which had regular meetings and almost daily contact with the agency. Russell appointed himself as well as Lyndon Johnson and Harry Byrd to the Senate Armed Services CIA oversight subcommittee. However the most frequent contact Dulles had was with Russell one-on-one. All legislators involved kept their promise to keep CIA operations secret.<sup>31</sup> The great influence of Russell and Vinson over CIA operations further enabled covert activities in Vietnam that deepened America's involvement. The legislative silence on the nature and scope of CIA involvement certainly helped save the lives of agency operatives. It also, however, allowed the agency great leeway to plan and carry out a "secret war" in Laos throughout most of the 1960s and early 1970s as well as sometimes questionable and possibly illegal activities of the CIA led Phoenix program in Vietnam.

In the years between the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the election of John F. Kennedy as President, Vietnam, though perceived by many in Congress as vital to

American interests, did not capture public or even congressional attention. The crises at Quemoy and Matsu, Formosa, Hungary, and the Middle East dominated the headlines. Despite its lack of attention during this period, South Vietnam became a new non-communist nation, created seemingly out of whole cloth. This “miracle” had been attributed to the strength and determination of a South Vietnamese autocrat. In reality it survived the period because of a continual injection of American money, arms, and “experts.” Congress, including many influential southerners, squabbled about the cost, but supported military aid to South Vietnam. They also supported the determination to keep the region from being the next domino to fall to international communism. During the period, William Fulbright was the only southerner to publicly question the basic tenets of the Domino Theory. “If there is a single factor,” he said in 1958, “which more than any other explains the predicament in which we now find ourselves, it is our readiness to use the specter of Soviet communism as a cloak for the failure of our own leadership.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1961, as the Kennedy administration took office, the growing crisis in Vietnam still did not rank high on the list of pressing foreign policy topics Foreign Relations Committee Chief of Staff Carl Marcy compiled for Fulbright to discuss in the coming year.<sup>34</sup> For the incoming President, the trouble in Vietnam took a back seat to a crisis involving its western neighbor. In an NSC meeting on December 31,

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 329-331. For Russell quote, see Fite, *Richard Russell, Jr., Senator from Georgia*, 369.

<sup>32</sup>CR, 85<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., August 6, 1958, 16318.

<sup>34</sup>Memorandum: Carl Marcy to William Fulbright, December 27, 1960, William Fulbright Papers, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AK, Series 48, Box 1.

1960 the outgoing President grew alarmed at the communist advance in Laos, he stated emphatically that the United States “must not allow Laos to fall to the communists, even if it means war.” In a transition meeting with the new administration, Laos was on the top of the agenda. Eisenhower told Kennedy that the U.S. should not allow the communists to take Laos or else “it would be just a matter of time” before the whole region would fall. He suggested that Kennedy be prepared to “go it alone” if American allies refused to honor their SEATO treaty obligations.<sup>35</sup> Though Diem’s government held on by the barest of threads—hounded by enemies from without and within who plotted his downfall, in the January meeting with Kennedy neither Eisenhower nor his advisors mentioned Vietnam.

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<sup>35</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 8-9.

## CHAPTER 5

### HAWKS, DOVES, AND DIEM

The Kennedy administration soon fully realized the tenuous situation the Americans faced in South Vietnam. As Eisenhower had suggested, however, Laos took first precedence. After Kennedy consulted his advisors as to his options in Laos, the President spoke before a national television audience on March 23, 1961, and threatened to use military force to insure an independent, “neutral” (meaning government containing both communist and non-communist officials) Laos. Over the next month the new President weighed all the alternatives, ranging from the enthusiastic advice from Joint Chiefs of Staff to intervene militarily to more cautious members of Congress such as Richard Russell, who suggested the United States “get our people out and write the country off.” However, the Bay of Pigs disaster in mid-April convinced Kennedy to question the advice of his military leaders. Though he feared the possible political repercussions of a communist takeover in Laos, he doubted the military could successfully carry out what seemed to be sketchy American military plans. As a result, in May the Kennedy administration consulted Soviet leaders, and both countries agreed to support a cease-fire and to work towards a negotiated settlement at Geneva.<sup>1</sup>

As the superpowers worked during the summer and early fall of 1961 toward a peaceful solution, some southerners in Congress, who would often be left out of the decisionmaking process during Kennedy’s presidency, grew uneasy at the growing

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<sup>1</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part II*, 20-40. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 225-233.



crisis in Southeast Asia. Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee expressed serious concerns not just over Laos but over the checkered history of American involvement in the region. “France lost the war” in Indochina,” he said, “not because they did not have a superior military establishment, but because they had for years and years followed the policy of don’t spoil the natives....It was a very great mistake to pick up the chips of a disintegrating French colonial empire. And I stand as equally as responsible as anyone else, because I voted for this.” <sup>2</sup>

The Tennessee senator also questioned some of the main tenets of the containment strategy itself. On June 14 in an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relation Committee, Gore challenged the recommendations on Laos in the wake of the cease-fire by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lyman L. Lemnitzer. After questioning the general on the situation in Korea, Gore continued, “You have said that...if the United States withdrew from Korea, that consequences would follow into Japan and [elsewhere]....Did you take a similar position with respect to Laos?” Lemnitzer answered that he advised the use of SEATO forces, which were overwhelmingly manned by American troops, if the sides broke the cease-fire. Gore responded, incredulously, “Then you did recommend involvement of United States forces in combat operations, if combat operations were necessary?” Lemnitzer replied affirmatively and, under questioning, admitted that not all the Joint Chiefs shared his view. Gore drove the point home. “Then with all of the logistics that appear apparent even to a layman, you recommended involvement of the United States forces in an inland country, without a port, next door neighbor to Red China, half way

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<sup>2</sup>SFRC, Volume XIII, Part 2, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., June 7, 1961, 17.

[sic] around the world from the United States?”<sup>3</sup> Though most members of Congress opposed military action in Laos, Senator Gore challenged the military and civilian leaders more than any other southern Democrat at the time. However, as in the case of Richard Russell, the Tennessee senator would express his dissatisfaction with Southeast Asian policy only in private, while at the same time supporting the administration’s decisions in public.

A few minutes later in the June 14 hearing the topic shifted to Vietnam. Gore continued his interrogation of Lemnitzer and also asked several questions of new Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The Tennessee legislator challenged information from intelligence reports that stated that 12,000 Vietcong forces from North Vietnam had infiltrated into South Vietnam. Gore had heard from a United States official that the infiltrators were actually South Vietnamese citizens. McNamara assured Gore that the intelligence correctly stated that the majority of the forces had come from North Vietnam. A few minutes later, Gore interrupted a discussion between Chairman Fulbright and Lemnitzer on the likelihood of sending guerillas into North Vietnam to counteract the Vietcong. He once again assailed the Diem government and presented a view that would gain in popularity as the Vietnam War progressed. “There are many students of the problem,” he observed, “who say that vast military expenditures worsen rather than help the problem—that it cannot be solved militarily. That unless the population in this delta area is favorable to the prevailing government, then you cannot solve the problem.” After the senator reminded the General and the Secretary of Defense of France’s difficulties in

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, June 14, 1961, 113-115.

Indochina, Lemnitzer assured the committee that the example did not apply. Although the communists had increased its presence South Vietnam, the general believed that the situation had not reached the crisis proportions the French experienced in 1954.

Gore then took another tack, asking McNamara why American forces remained in Vietnam.

Gore: [Are there] minerals of strategic and necessary importance to us in either Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam?

McNamara: I cannot speak with authority on it, but I do not believe so.

Gore: So the importance of this great portion of this area rests on the falling domino theory—that if Laos falls, then everything else is going to fall. This is the same thing we have had—hold every inch

Well, as the chairman of the committee says, there is a question of the commitments and our ability to hold every inch around the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite apparently agreeing with his Tennessee colleague on the questionable assumptions of the Domino Theory, Foreign Relations committee chairman William Fulbright took an altogether different attitude toward the new President’s foreign policy. The Arkansas senator was eager to work with the young president and admired his vigorous prosecution of containment. He hoped that Kennedy’s enthusiasm for an activist foreign policy would infuse Americans with a “‘zest of action’ so greatly needed if we are to win the contest of will [with the Soviets] which engages us today.” Kennedy, with some prodding from Vice-President Johnson, initially considered Fulbright for Secretary of State. He changed his mind, in part

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 117-118.

because of Fulbright's stand against civil rights, which his advisors suggested might hurt American prestige abroad. There may have been another reason, according to historian Eugene Brown. The President-elect met with Dean Acheson, Secretary of State under Truman, and asked him to evaluate Fulbright. Acheson objected to his appointment, saying that Fulbright was "not as solid and serious a man as you need for this position." "I've always thought," he continued, "that he had some of the qualities of a dilettante. He likes to criticize—he likes to call for brave, bold new ideas and he doesn't have a great many brave, bold new ideas."

Another possible reason for the President's rejection of Fulbright involved Kennedy's preference for a "certain type of man" to hold the job. Fulbright, though an intellectual and a congressional authority on foreign policy, did not run in the same circles as the President. In fact, the whole process by which the President decided upon his Secretary of State attests to his attitude towards southerners and could be a hint as to why they largely were kept out of the inner circle. Instead of Fulbright, the President chose Georgian and career diplomat Dean Rusk. Rusk, reporter David Halberstam observed, was "everybody's number two." Rusk met the profile of what Kennedy, who thought he could be his own Secretary of State, desired. The President eliminated the best-known because they were too old. He wanted a Democrat so that disqualified others like McGeorge Bundy. Rusk had the right qualities—hard-working, patient, steady, and experienced in diplomacy. The Georgian knew the military and strategy, but, unlike Fulbright, was not "too southern"—meaning he supported a Civil Rights Act and opposed any southern obstructionism. He also led the Rockefeller Foundation, another "establishment" institution. Still, Rusk could not

communicate effectively with the President, who preferred the counsel of his Eastern establishment cronies. Southerners like Rusk may have been useful to him, but the President valued his opinion less than Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, or his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy.<sup>5</sup> If he was not able to communicate with his hand-picked Secretary of State, he certainly would not consult with the southern members of Congress on Vietnam.

Despite being passed over for Secretary of State, Fulbright approved of Kennedy's unapologetically activist foreign policy to such a degree that the senator wondered if Congress should grant the Executive more power to carry out American interests abroad. "For the existing requirements of foreign policy," Fulbright asserted, "we have hobbled the President with too niggardly a grant of power."<sup>6</sup> He backed the President's March 23 statement threatening military action in Laos, but suggested that the situation in Vietnam should take precedence. In a letter to the president delivered the day after the speech, Fulbright predicted that the stability of Vietnam would affect the scope of the involvement in Laos. "It would be embarrassing, to say the least, to have Viet-Nam collapse just as we are extended in Laos." In April, the Foreign Relations chairman appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press*, and further emphasized the importance of and the more favorable conditions for intervention in Vietnam over Laos. The rugged terrain and the peaceful nature of the people convinced the senator

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<sup>5</sup>David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (New York: Random House, 1969), 26-33.

<sup>6</sup>Eugene Brown, *J. William Fulbright: Advice and Dissent* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985), 44-45.

against intervention in Laos. On the other hand, he would support sending American troops to Thailand or Vietnam, if the countries requested it, because he believed that native populations would actively participate in their own defense. Fulbright reiterated his views to President Kennedy in a private meeting on May 4, but added he did not think the United States should “go it alone” for fear the conflict would drag out over a long period of time.<sup>7</sup>

The Kennedy administration, with the negotiations over Laos progressing, turned its attention to Vietnam. With the increasing criticism by conservative Republicans after the American defeat at the Bay of Pigs, the bullying of the President by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the U.S.-Soviet summit conference in early June, and the perceived “appeasement” of communism in Laos, holding the line in Vietnam became of primary importance. “Vietnam is the place,” said advisor Walt Rostow, “where we must prove that we are not a paper tiger.” The President created a Vietnam Task Force, which then warned that if the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate the National Liberation Front would set up a rival government and the country would erupt into an “open civil war.” Kennedy approved the task force’s plan of action. It included an increase in U.S. funds to increase the South Vietnamese army to 200,000, a deployment of 3,200 U.S. military “instructors” to assist and train Diem’s troops, and a further increase of 100 regular army troops along with 400 Army “Green Berets” to act as instructors to the South Vietnamese special forces.<sup>8</sup> With the South Vietnamese government under Ngo Dinh Diem seemingly

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<sup>7</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 22.

teetering on the brink of extinction, Kennedy also needed a high official to travel to Saigon to discuss the increase of American money and troops with the truculent South Vietnamese President. He turned to the formerly powerful Majority Leader from Texas, now languishing in his role as Vice President.

In 1959 journalist Stewart Alsop called Senator Lyndon Johnson the second most powerful man in America. “There are those that argue,” he continued, “that Johnson is in fact, if not in theory, the country’s most powerful man, because he loves to exercise power and President Eisenhower does not.”<sup>9</sup> Two years later, advisors and admirers of John F. Kennedy would sarcastically remark at Georgetown dinner parties, “What ever happened to Lyndon?” The Vice President suffered in his new office, drinking more heavily than usual and having to compete for the President’s attention with a number of bright, sophisticated Kennedy aides who, according to one writer, viewed him as “Uncle Cornpone.” He tried initially to retain his power in the Senate. Johnson won a vote to retain the chairmanship of the Senate Democratic Caucus, which would have effectively made him Majority Leader as Vice-President. Because of the rancor the vote caused among both liberal and conservative Democrats, however, he decided not to accept the position.<sup>10</sup> As the Kennedy administration struggled to its fifth month, the President gave an extremely unhappy

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<sup>8</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 232-233.

<sup>9</sup>Stewart Alsop, “Lyndon Johnson: How Does He Do It?,” *Saturday Evening Post*, January 24, 1959, found in LBJ Library, LBJA Subject File.

<sup>10</sup>John A. Goldsmith, *Colleagues: Richard B. Russell and His Apprentice, Lyndon B. Johnson* (Washington: Seven Locks Press, 1993), 83-88.

Lyndon Johnson the task of visiting Saigon to speak with Diem about increasing American involvement in South Vietnam.

Johnson refused to go several times over the course of the first week in May. “Mr. President,” he said, “I don’t want to embarrass you by getting my head blown off in Saigon.” “Don’t worry, Lyndon,” Kennedy retorted, “If anything happens to you, Sam Rayburn and I will give you the biggest funeral Austin, Texas ever saw.”<sup>11</sup> As Johnson remained resistant to undertaking the trip, he heard on the radio on May 9, 1961, that the Vice-President would be leaving that day to lead the delegation going to Vietnam and several other Asian countries. He protested vigorously in an NSC meeting later that day—but Kennedy had made up his mind. “You’re going tonight,” he said, “and the Foreign Service and McGeorge Bundy will brief you.” Johnson stormed out and proceeded to get drunk. Later that evening he let the Foreign Service representatives in and was in a foul mood. “I want you State Department folks to know that I think you’re a bunch of little puppy dogs leaking on every hydrant.” His mood did not improve when he learned that the President’s sister and brother-in-law would accompany him on the trip to help the administration convince Diem of their desire to repair the tenuous relationship between the governments. Carl Rowan, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and member of the American delegation traveling to Saigon, wrote later that Johnson complained several times during the trip that “he had not been born rich like the Kennedys,” and that he had gone to “a little crappy Texas college” instead of Harvard. “Johnson,” Rowan concluded, “had one of the greatest inferiority complexes I ever saw in a high-level public official.” This

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<sup>11</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 234.



insecurity born of his comparatively “humble” education and his embarrassment at being southern, would stay with him throughout his Presidency and would affect his decision-making on Vietnam<sup>12</sup>

Kennedy chose Johnson for the mission to Saigon in one sense to bolster his spirits. There were several other reasons, however. Johnson’s power of persuasion was legendary, and he wielded considerable influence in Congress. Because the Vice President’s presence in Saigon would suggest to the public that recommendations he made were his own, and not Kennedy’s, the President could make it appear that he was not directly involved in taking another small step that deepened America’s military involvement in Vietnam. Americans would not weigh every word that a Vice-President would say in Vietnam or any other country and would figure that since Kennedy did not decide to go himself, the trip held only moderate importance. Johnson’s clout with Congress would also insulate Kennedy from criticism by conservatives, particularly southerners, who were loath to attack the Vice President because of their formerly close relationship with him in the Senate.<sup>13</sup>

Though he did not relish the assignment, Johnson followed the carefully orchestrated script in Saigon while adding a few personal touches of his own. After shunning reporters during the early part of the trip, Johnson, once in Saigon, invited them to his hotel room. When Carl Rowan went in first to announce the arrival of the reporters, the Vice President, in his underwear, replied, “Hell, bring ‘em on in.”

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<sup>12</sup>John M. Newman, *Kennedy and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 67-70.

<sup>13</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 41.

According to Rowan, “there followed the only press conference that, to my knowledge, a senior official held in his skivvies.” In Saigon streets the Vice-President, having recovered from his fear of assassination, plunged into the crowd, greeting the South Vietnamese people as if, in the words of reporter Stanley Karnow, Johnson “were endorsing county sheriffs in a Texas campaign.” Further, he engaged in extreme hyperbole in praising Diem, calling him the “Winston Churchill of Asia.” Behind this political “ad-lib” lay a carefully conceived plan to boost the confidence of the South Vietnamese leader and to assure him of the continuing American support for his government.<sup>14</sup>

In his first private meetings with Diem, Johnson gave the South Vietnamese President a letter from President Kennedy informing him that the United States had approved additional aid to South Vietnam. “We are ready,” the letter continued, “to join with you in an intensified endeavor to win the struggle against Communism and to further the social and political advancement of Vietnam.” Diem initially ignored the letter and lectured the Vice President on Vietnamese history and politics. After Johnson pressed Diem for a response to the letter, the South Vietnamese president addressed each point Kennedy had enumerated. He approved the increased aid, but hesitated on the suggested economic and political reforms the administration viewed as vital to South Vietnam’s existence. When Johnson initially broached the subject of a possible U.S.-Vietnamese mutual defense pact, Diem did not seem enthusiastic about American soldiers mixing with the South Vietnamese people. He would, however,

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<sup>14</sup>Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, 70-71. Also see Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 236-238.

welcome additional American troops for further training of South Vietnamese troops. He also wanted, however, funds to increase substantially the size of his own country's forces. Both sides agreed on the compromise—Diem's agreement to accept American ground troops sent, under the guise of a training mission, in return for America's financial and military help in expanding the South Vietnamese army.

After meeting with the South Vietnamese President twice, Johnson gathered U.S. embassy and military officials in Saigon to discuss the military situation. He demanded a coherent plan to “end this situation” in Vietnam. “The American people are getting tired of what is going on over here,” Johnson said. “We’re spending something like three hundred fifty million dollars a year on this country, and they’re tired of spending that kind of money. They want to wind it up. Now what’s it going to take...to get rid of the Communists?” Throughout the meeting the Vice President continued to press the matter with Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in South Vietnam. McGarr reluctantly replied that an increase in funding and soldiers might end the war within a year. Though McGarr's hesitant response should not have been interpreted as a solid and coherent prediction based on detailed planning, Johnson left the meeting convinced that America could rid South Vietnam of Communists by increasing aid. In the end, the Vice President and Ngo Dinh Diem issued a joint communiqué agreeing that the United States would increase military and economic aid and that both governments would “infuse into their joint actions a sense of high urgency and dedication.” Diem insisted that any mention of political or economic reforms be removed from the document.

The Vice President came away from the meetings unsure of Diem's reaction. "I tried to get knee-to-knee, belly-to-belly with this fellow," he told Carl Rowan, "but I don't know if I got to him." The administration, however, raved about Johnson's performance. Said Ambassador Kenneth Young in reference to the impact Johnson and Jean Smith (Kennedy's sister) had on South Vietnam, "They came, they saw, they won over."<sup>15</sup>

Upon returning to Washington, Johnson reported to the President. The Vice President's efforts in Saigon, the written report stated, "arrested the decline of confidence" of the Asian countries in the United States. It did not, however, "restore any confidence already lost." Johnson's report presented the President with a stark choice for America: "We must decide whether to help these countries [in Southeast Asia] to the best of our ability or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a 'Fortress America' concept." The Vice President expressed a more realistic analysis of President Ngo Dinh Diem than in his public statements in Saigon. "He has admirable qualities, but he is remote from the people, is surrounded by persons less desirable than he." In the end, however, Johnson stated that the United States had no choice: "We must decide whether to support Diem—or let Vietnam fall."<sup>16</sup>

The next day Johnson testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, using essentially the same report as his opening statement. In addition to committee

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 72-77. See also Mann, 237-238.

<sup>16</sup>Memorandum to the President from the Vice President, May 23, 1961, Vice-Presidential Security File, Box 1, LBJ Library.

members, several other senators attended. In all, fifty-seven senators attended, including twelve southerners. Historian John Newman suggests that because Johnson's "ties to Congress were anchored in years of personal experience and associations...testifying must have been particularly painful to him." It worried him also that four weeks earlier he had told a group of senators that he advocated sending U.S. troops into Laos. After discussing the matter with Diem and Asian leaders, he had to reverse his position. "I don't see what we can do there," he concluded. "I don't think anything good is going to come out of the [Geneva] conference. I think the Russians are going to bust it up and I think that the Communists will practically have it."

The Vice-President did not feel as hopeless about the situation in South Vietnam. An increase in aid, though, was vital to protect the country and maintain American prestige in the region, Johnson told the committee. "If a bully can come in and run you out of the yard today," he explained, "tomorrow he will come back and run you off the front porch." However, Johnson suggested that an increase in American military aid would not mean the introduction of combat troops. "Asian leaders at this time do not want American troops involved in Southeast Asia other than on training missions." He concluded this thought with a cogent, insightful comment, a somewhat ironic one given his decisions as President: "Americans fail to appreciate fully the subtlety that recent colonial peoples do not look with favor upon governments which invite or accept the return this soon of Western troops."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>SFRC, Volume XIII, Part 1, *The Vice President on his Recent World Trip*, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., May 25, 1961, 629-651.

Though Lyndon Johnson's 1961 Vietnam trip did not result in a massive deployment of combat troops, the success of the mission did pave the way for it. Johnson's report to the President and Congress, having been influenced and approved by the State Department, significantly changed America's role in Vietnam from a provider of economic and technical assistance to a willing participant in "joint actions" to defend South Vietnam against communism. Over the next six months the administration implemented the suggestions made as a result of the Johnson mission and the observations of other advisors traveling to Vietnam. Except for the discussions on Laos and the Johnson testimony, the Kennedy administration did not consult Congress on its foreign policy plans in Southeast Asia. This was perhaps by design, but it also reflected Kennedy's preoccupation with more pressing matters. The upcoming Kennedy-Khrushchev summit and the Berlin crisis took precedence in the summer and fall of 1961.

Nevertheless, Johnson's testimony had the desired effect. Other than some non-hostile questioning by Republican leader Everett Dirksen on Vietnam, none of the senators challenged Johnson's explanation of the administration's policies. In fact, since Johnson visited several Asian countries on his trip, the discussion covered many non-Vietnam topics including the situation on Laos, the general communist threat in Asia, and developments in the Philippines. Of all the legislators present, which included conservative southerners Harry Byrd of Virginia, Russell Long, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, Allen Ellender of Louisiana, Everett Jordan of North Carolina, John Stennis of Mississippi, and Herman Talmadge of Georgia, no senator expressed alarm at the additional deployment of American troops or challenged Johnson's assertions on

Vietnam. The increased military and economic aid to Vietnam passed easily, with little discussion in either the Foreign Relations or other committees in Congress.<sup>18</sup>

Within a month of Johnson's testimony, however, Senator Fulbright began to have second thoughts about American involvement in Southeast Asia. He understood that the Vice President's trip to Saigon represented a deepening of the American commitment in the region. The Arkansas senator sent a private memorandum to the President urging him to "reconsider the nature of American policies in Southeast Asia, specifically U.S programs in Korea, Taiwan, South Vietnam, Laos and Thailand." He followed up the memo with a floor speech on June 29 in which he expressed concern that the growing list of foreign policy setbacks in Cuba, Laos, and Berlin "would bring Americans to the wrong conclusions. What [the prevailing] voices are saying," continued Fulbright, "is that United States is the strongest country in the world, and should not hesitate to commit its strength to the active defeat of the communist empire." The senator considered this to be "dangerous doctrine." Though Fulbright more than most southerners in Congress had supported American efforts to aid developing countries, his June 29 comments echoed the concerns of more conservative "anti-foreign aid" southerners senators such as Harry Byrd and Russell Long. The Arkansas senator suggested that "nothing would please Communist leaders more than to draw the United States into costly commitments of its resources to peripheral struggles in which the principle Communist powers are not involved." The President should ignore these "voices," the senator cautioned.

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<sup>18</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 52-53.

The administration should instead, Fulbright argued “endow [its] actions with greater wisdom, judgment, and consistency than has been the case in recent years.” In a statement that could have been regarded as an attack on Diem, Fulbright proscribed that America should stop defending “what may be regarded as indefensible—the regimes of certain anachronistic leaders whose only virtue was anticommunism.” When specifically discussing South Vietnam, however, Fulbright characterized Diem’s regime as “necessarily authoritarian,” and his government and the American aid program as a “qualified success.” “Yet,” he observed, “the emphasis has been too heavily weighted on the military side.” Fulbright suggested that South Vietnam’s future would be determined by “the economic and social progress that flow from the programs and policies of the Government.” America certainly should help South Vietnam cope with the Communist guerillas, but it should “devote at least as much effort to assisting and guiding the Vietnamese people in their struggle for dignity and independence.” Therefore, while Fulbright sounded like a conservative in lamenting the increasing cost and number of American commitments, his solution differed greatly from those southerners rejecting foreign aid altogether. In addition, those same southern conservatives would be far more accommodating to increased military spending—something that the Arkansas senator argued against.

If he led a Southeast Asian country, Fulbright argued, he would adopt a policy of neutrality in the Cold War. He would ask for economic assistance, but would also not object to some limited aid from the Communists. He would, however, inform the Americans that they could not “with guns, tanks, jeeps—or even dollars—keep communism out of my country.” America could only help keep communism away by



“imaginatively and dispassionately supporting my efforts to promote the welfare of my people.” If America acted precipitously in Vietnam or other developing nations threatened by communism, it might result in “the alienation of most of Latin America, Asia, and Africa.”<sup>19</sup> Despite Fulbright’s observation, Kennedy continued on the path of aggressive efforts to fight communism and did not reevaluate the situation in Southeast Asia. Though the President increased economic aid to South Vietnam, his administration viewed the struggle as mainly military. When Kennedy analyzed South Vietnam he did not see a developing country that needed to stabilize its economy and society. The President saw, in the words of writer Robert Mann, “a government under increasingly fierce attack from armed communist subversives who were dutiful agents of the Soviet Union.”<sup>20</sup> In the future, Kennedy advisors predicted, these “dutiful agents,” the Vietcong, would significantly increase its infiltration and activities in South Vietnam. As a consequence, the Kennedy administration developed plans in the fall of 1961 to again increase the American military commitment in Vietnam. The President’s advisors, however, did not all agree on the exact steps to be taken. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, military advisor to the President, Walter Rostow deputy National Security Advisor, Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, and Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Defense Secretary all advocated “bold action,” meaning a significant increase in American troops in Vietnam. George Ball, Undersecretary of State, chosen for the job in part on the recommendation of Senator Fulbright, was

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<sup>19</sup>CR, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, June 29, 1961, 11702-11705.

<sup>20</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 243.

appalled when reading Taylor's report advocating eight to ten thousand additional troops and predicted that within five years "we'll have three hundred thousand men in the paddies and jungles and we'll never find them again. That was the French experience." Vietnam, he concluded, "is the worst possible terrain both from a physical and political point of view."

Kennedy rejected Ball's advice saying he was "crazier than hell" if he believed the American commitment would reach such a significant level. The President was reluctant, however, to send the number of troops advocated by Taylor, McNamara, and other more hawkish advisors. He realized that he had, as he put it, "a congressional problem. Russell and others are opposed." Kennedy had already received a memorandum from Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield expressing his opposition to sending combat troops to Vietnam. For these reasons the President refused to send American troops for combat purposes, saying that it would only be a matter of time when more would be requested. Carving out a middle course between each of the proposals, Kennedy approved National Security Action Memorandum No. 111, authorizing the U.S. to increase the number of helicopters and aircraft with U.S. personnel at the controls. In addition American military advisors would be sent to train the South Vietnamese army and civil guard, along with the equipment necessary to improve their operations in South Vietnam. The President also proposed economic assistance and demanded that Diem reform its South Vietnam's military establishment and command structure, as well as mobilize the country's resources to "put the nation on a wartime footing." Diem rejected the President's demand, and the administration, seeing no other alternative, did not press the matter.

The President, while steering clear of a full-scale American military commitment, realized the monumental step he was taking in approving NSAM-111. He declared that “the United States is prepared to join the Viet-Nam Government in a sharply increased joint effort to avoid a further deterioration in the situation in South Vietnam.” He made the new commitment to South Vietnam in November 1961, when Congress was out of session. In a 1961 renewal of the Act for International Development, Congress had given the President authority to dispatch non-combatant military troops abroad without its consent. In addition, the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with Vietnam, which Congress approved in 1960, also gave Kennedy the power to send equipment and military personnel to Vietnam. Most members of Congress, with the possible exception of Mansfield, remained unaware of the administration’s actions until well into 1962. More specifically, the South’s representatives and senators had no influence on the formulation of and no knowledge of the President’s acceptance of NSAM—111. Reporters, not the administration, supplied the information to the legislators and the American public, and their pronouncements proved more accurate than the infrequent, vague, and generally positive administration statements on Vietnam.

James Reston, *New York Times* Washington Bureau chief, reported on February 14, 1962, that “The United States is now involved in an undeclared war in South Vietnam. This is well known to the Russians, the Chinese Communist, and everybody else concerned except for the American people.” *Newsweek* characterized the Vietnam War as the “biggest in the world” and speculated whether further

escalation would be ordered and whether U.S. strategy would “win the war.”<sup>21</sup>

Republicans in Congress wondered aloud whether Vietnam would turn into “another Korea.” Senator Mike Mansfield took the senate floor to rebut Reston’s and Republican claims. Citing several instances of congressional fact finding missions to Saigon, he suggested that it “borders on the irresponsible to suggest that Congress has not been well-informed.” He chastised Republicans for making Vietnam a domestic political issue.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, southerners and others on the Foreign Relations committee admitted their confusion over the administration’s intentions in Southeast Asia. On February 20, 1962, Senator Gore expressed his frustration after hearing a recent statement by Attorney General Robert Kennedy. “We are here to win,” said the Attorney General upon his arrival a few days earlier in Saigon, “and we are going to stay here until we do win.” Gore pressed Averell Harriman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, to tell him whether Kennedy’s statement had been authorized by the administration. “I have no desire to criticize the Attorney General,” Gore declared, “but this is a very dangerous and a fluid situation here....If [American] troops are there as advisors, that is one thing. But if our troops are there[to stay until we win] I am not sure that does not go further than the question of technical

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 243-247, 256-257.

<sup>22</sup>CR, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, February 15, 1962, 2325-2326.

assistance.” Harriman assured the senator that the President did not authorize the Attorney General’s statement.<sup>23</sup>

Senator Strom Thurmond, on the other hand, welcomed the Attorney General’s comments. “This is more encouraging news to me,” Thurmond stated, “because this is one of the few times I can recall in recent years when an administration official has stated that we are actually going to win an encounter with the forces of world communism....The statement may be another indication that the administration is firming up its determination in the cold war.”<sup>24</sup> Extreme hawks like Thurmond, a Major General in the Army Reserves, continually sought a military solution to the conflict in Vietnam. However, the majority of Congress, including most southerners, though wanting Kennedy to show firmness in response to the communist threat, had no desire for America to get involved deeply in a war in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, in 1962 very few members of Congress expressed discontent with or even an interest in the administration’s Vietnam policy.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, southern legislators did want to be informed on administration decisions. Senator Russell Long of Louisiana, another southerner on the Foreign Relations Committee, complained to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in May about the lack of consultation with Congress regarding American foreign policy decisions in Southeast Asia. He spoke specifically about Laos, but expressed a concern that would be echoed by many in the next year over the deepening

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<sup>23</sup>SFRC, Volume XIV, *Laos and Vietnam*, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., February 20, 1962, 200-202.

<sup>24</sup>CR, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, February 21, 1962, 2751.

involvement in Vietnam. “If we are going to get involved in a.... matter that might lead to general war,” in Southeast Asia, the administration must come to Congress “for its suggestions or a resolution one way or the other.” He countered Rusk’s denial of withholding information by saying “This silence-gives-consent business does not work too well when the thing starts to go poorly.” Senator Sparkman concurred with his southern colleague.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the furor over the Reston and other articles and the Robert Kennedy statement, most in Congress, including a majority of southerners, still considered Vietnam to be a minor problem. Most knew little about the region, and despite some occasional complaints, deferred to the American “experts” on Southeast Asia. In fact, during the spring of 1962 the administration did inform a few key members of Congress, including Fulbright, Russell, and John Stennis, as to the progress of the Geneva negotiations, but none of the southerners expressed much of an interest. Only Stennis commented that he was concerned how a settlement with the communists would affect the rest of Southeast Asia and the prestige of the United States. Similarly, key members of the Armed Services Committee, (which definitely would have included Richard Russell and most likely John Stennis) were certainly informed that American advisors participated in combat missions in Vietnam, even though officially the administration denied it. The senators said nothing publicly, and, despite Russell’s well-known disdain for American involvement in the region, did not use their

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<sup>25</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Book 2*, 118-127.

<sup>26</sup>SFRC, Volume XIV, *NATO, CENTO, and SEATO*, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., May 15, 1962, 467-468.

influence to pressure the administration to change course. In the House Foreign Affairs Committee, some members questioned the validity of the administration's claim that American troops worked only in an "advisory capacity" in South Vietnam, but they seemed eager for the troops to fight. "I am in favor of it. That is a hot war....It is not a cold war," said Georgia Representative J. L. Pilcher, member of the Far East Subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs Committee. "When you send these boys over there," he continued, "they are going to shoot back." For the most part, as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chief of staff Carl Marcy observed later, "the war was being waged by the executive branch" with, at least initially, very few complaints by southerners in Congress.<sup>27</sup>

There are several reasons for both Kennedy's decision to set his own course without the consultation of congress and the southerners' public acceptance of the decision. Kennedy knew he had at his disposal legislative acts that provided a legal defense for the administration to withhold information from Congress. The President also believed implicitly in his and his advisors' judgments. They were, after all, the "best and the brightest." They thought they could "manage" events. Though the administration would bargain with powerful southerners on domestic policies, the administration would keep its own counsel on foreign affairs because it thought it had the expertise.<sup>28</sup> This marked a change from previous administrations. While Truman and Eisenhower consulted key southern senators on the implementation of the containment strategy, and the decisions to wage war in Korea and to refrain from it at

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<sup>27</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 119, 126.

<sup>28</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 228. See also Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 26-30.

Dien Bien Phu, Kennedy did not seek out prominent southerners in Congress to review options on Southeast Asia. For the most part, Mansfield was the only legislator who discussed Vietnam with the President.

Though the President broke with the tradition of congressional consultation on Asian policies, the majority of southerners did not object. Americans, as illustrated in Fulbright's 1962 article, had a long-standing tradition of deferring to the executive in the making of foreign policy decisions. Southerners in Congress who had long been known for their adherence to tradition, did not object to following this one. In addition, as Russell, Long, and other southern conservatives later pointed out, it would be impractical to have foreign policy made by such a large unwieldy institution as the United State Congress. Furthermore, both the administration and southern legislators had not abandoned the domino theory or the strategy of containment, although Russell and Gore questioned the wisdom of its application in Vietnam. In addition, Democratic partisanship made several southerners hesitant to assail the administration's Vietnam policy in public.

The decision not to fully inform the appropriate southern-led foreign policy committees led to a lack of a clear understanding of the possibly disastrous result of gradual expansion of America's military mission in Vietnam. As Fulbright said in 1966, he had not seriously analyzed America's involvement in Vietnam in the early 1960s because it was one of a number of countries the Foreign Relations committee considered when discussing American commitments abroad.<sup>29</sup> In addition, up to

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<sup>29</sup>Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966—Vietnam*, 89<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 28 January, 1966, 12-14.



1962, any discussion of a “crisis situation” in Southeast Asia involved Laos, not Vietnam.

One more possible reason deserves mention for the southern legislators’ relative “ignorance” on Kennedy’s Southeast Asian policies. Among several influential southern legislators, only Russell and Stennis, owing to their positions on the Armed Services Committee and the CIA oversight subcommittee, were often privy to information excluded from other senators. The Georgia senator in particular kept a close reign on the CIA watchdog subcommittee, which approved funding for agency operations. Russell, above all, sought to prevent leaks and to stop challenges by Fulbright, Mansfield and others to bring Foreign Relations committee members on the subcommittee. Russell would hide the figures on funding for the CIA in the Defense Budget legislation and keep secrets on operations, including some agency-led programs in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Stennis took over the subcommittee in 1969 and continued the tradition. Though Fulbright attempted to “open up” the subcommittee in 1966, he could not convince the Georgia senator, who the *New York Times* referred to as “the uncrowned king of the Senate’s inner establishment.”<sup>30</sup> American military actions and covert operations remained closely-held secrets in part because two prominent southerners would not reveal anything that would look unfavorably on the defense and intelligence infrastructure they helped build.

The increasingly critical news reports of the burgeoning crisis in Vietnam did not allow members of Congress to remain complacent, however. Restin, Homer Bigart, and particularly David Halberstam, a 28-year old Harvard graduate who had

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<sup>30</sup>Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr.: Senator from Georgia*, 389-392.

previously covered the civil rights movement in Mississippi and Tennessee, added to public skepticism over the administration's policy in the region. These and other reporters rejected the "official line" and relied on information from junior officers in Vietnam who spoke truthfully about their disappointment with the incompetence of the South Vietnamese army. Halberstam countered the rosy estimates of progress expressed by McNamara and others by accusing the administration of, at best, wishful thinking. "In the continual attempt to judge how well the war is going and how the increased American aid has affected it," Halberstam reported, "there sometimes seems a tendency to describe results before they have been attained and a parallel tendency to discredit pessimistic reporting."<sup>31</sup>

The conflicting conclusions between administration officials and reporters on the scene frustrated the President. Kennedy sanctioned a congressional fact finding mission, led by Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, to Southeast Asia and Europe in late 1962. The visit included a few meetings with President Diem. Mansfield, who had formerly expressed praise and confidence in the South Vietnamese leader, found him withdrawn, distant, difficult, and seemingly unconcerned about the difficulties faced by his countrymen. Later in the trip the senator held an off the record conversation with American reporters. Unlike other American officials, Mansfield listened intently to what the reporters said and incorporated it into his report for Kennedy. It concluded that Diem had done little to rally the people around his rule or to shore up the political structure of his country. It also warned of the growing influence of Diem's anti-

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<sup>31</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 267-268.

American brother and head of the security forces in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Nhu. While South Vietnam wallowed in its dependency to the U.S., Mansfield reported, the Vietcong grew in strength in South Vietnam. At the end of his report Mansfield questioned whether America had vital national security interests in Vietnam. “We may well discover,” he concluded, “that it is in our interests to do less rather than more than we are now doing.”<sup>32</sup> Although the document never mentioned it, Mansfield claimed in 1969 that he advocated during the December 1962 meeting with Kennedy that the U.S. cut back on its commitment and eventually withdraw from Vietnam. The President reacted angrily to the report, saying initially, “Do you expect me to believe this? This isn’t what my people are telling me.” Kennedy later begrudgingly accepted Mansfield’s assessment, and later hinted to the Majority leader that he was seriously considering removing all troops from Vietnam if he were re-elected. There is no definitive evidence that he intended to do so.<sup>33</sup>

As 1963 began, however, the President still wanted America engaged in South Vietnam, but he remained perplexed about the situation there. This confusion also infected his advisors, who did not agree on what to do to shore up the increasingly unpopular Diem regime. The events in the upcoming months would finally turn the administration against the South Vietnamese president and convince them to covertly support a coup to remove him. In January the South Vietnamese army, assisted by American military advisors, suffered an embarrassing and costly defeat at the hands of

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<sup>32</sup>Mike Mansfield, Memorandum to President on Southeast Asia—Vietnam. December 18, 1962, Mike Mansfield Collection (hereafter cited as Mansfield Collection), K. Ross Toole Archives, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, Series XXII, Container 95.

<sup>33</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 270-276.

the outnumbered Viet Cong near the farming village of Ap Bac, about forty miles west of Saigon. The South Vietnamese commander ignored American advice, leaving several soldiers, including Americans, stranded under intense gunfire almost immediately after they stepped off the helicopters. Three Americans and fourteen South Vietnamese soldiers died in the battle. It was, as Colonel John Paul Vann, chief American military advisor for the Seventh Division and eyewitness to the battle, described it, “a miserable fucking performance, just like it always is.” In the wake of American criticism over the battle and other unfolding events, Diem and Nhu tired of the presence of U.S. troops. The South Vietnamese leaders told the *Washington Post* that they would like to see “half of the 12,000 to 13,000 American military stationed here to leave the country.”<sup>34</sup>

The South Vietnamese were not the only critics of the deployment of American troops in their country. In Congress, a few Republicans speaking on the Senate floor attacked Kennedy’s lack of candor on Vietnam as well as what they labeled his inept handling of the situation. In April, Representative Bruce Alger of Texas, one of the few southern Republicans in the Congress, lamented the news reported by the *Wall Street Journal* of the eightieth American to die in South Vietnam. Alger asked, “Why are American boys dying in a war the President refuses to call a war yet commits our forces to it? What does the Nation tell the parents and loved ones of these boys....What are we, the Congress, going to tell the American people as we stand by and allow American boys to be engaged in a war not declared by Congress?” He urged

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 278-280.

the Congress to “exert its constitutional responsibility and notify the President that we expect him to live up to the supreme law of the land.” Alger’s and other Republican criticisms of Kennedy’s Cold War foreign policy made the President more determined to find a solution to the problems posed by the repressive South Vietnamese government.<sup>35</sup>

The actions that finally turned Kennedy against Diem and Nhu involved the Diem government’s persecution of Buddhists in South Vietnam, who made up seventy to eighty-five percent of the population. On May 8, Diem’s troops fired upon and attacked Buddhists marching peacefully in opposition to a government order banning a display of flags to commemorate the birthday of the Buddha. Buddhists protests against Diem’s treatment increased, climaxing on June 11 with the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in downtown Saigon. Photos and films of the grisly suicide protest were broadcast to the American public, along with the later gleeful response of Madame Nhu, the outspoken wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu and the official “first lady” of South Vietnam (Diem never married). Madame Nhu called the monk’s protest “a barbecue” and commented to a reporter, “Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands.” Facing mounting protests from the Buddhists and increasing sometimes-public criticism from the Kennedy administration, Diem in April 1963, declared martial law and sent Nhu’s special forces to raid Buddhist pagodas throughout the country. They arrested over a thousand monks, nuns, and students. Massive demonstrations

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<sup>35</sup>CR, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, April 29, 1963, 7278.

followed. In addition, rumors emerged that Diem and Nhu had been holding secret peace negotiations with the communists.<sup>36</sup>

Just after the Buddhist self-immolation protest, the American ambassador to South Vietnam, Francis Nolting, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He claimed that despite all evidence to the contrary, the war was going well. Most on the committee showed their concern, but only Senator Stewart Symington suggested any course of action. He proposed that America either increase its military actions or withdraw. Fulbright, although never challenging Nolting's assertions, did press him to justify the American presence in Vietnam. Fulbright had not publicly condemned Diem, but had commented in earlier executive sessions of the committee that he did not oppose administrations efforts to influence a change in government in South Vietnam. Uneasy about the increasingly tense situation, the Arkansas senator had the ambassador confirm the amount of money being spent in South Vietnam for fiscal year 1963. "What do you think is the justification for this kind of expense?" he asked. "What is the importance of Vietnam and its continued independence to us?" Nolting argued that losing South Vietnam to the communists would upset the balance of power in the region and lead to the fall of other "dominoes." In addition, he repeated the opinions of many in the administration and in Congress that American prestige and influence would suffer a blow if Ho Chi Minh took over South Vietnam. A few minutes later, Fulbright pressed again, asking whether Nolting was optimistic about future developments in Vietnam. Nolting

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<sup>36</sup>Several sources cover the 1963 South Vietnamese Buddhist crisis. See Mann, *A Grand Illusion*, and Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, as well as Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, Herring, *America's Longest War*, James Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the*

responded that despite the difficulties he thought the situation was progressing. In the end, despite Nolting's defense of Diem and his claim that no viable alternative ruler appeared on the horizon, the chairman still seemed fairly uncomfortable about the repressive and unpopular leadership in South Vietnam.<sup>37</sup>

Kennedy shared Fulbright's concern over Diem's government, and very soon made the fateful decision to help bring about its downfall. On August 24, while most of the military and foreign policy leaders were out of Washington for the weekend, Averell Harriman, John Forrestal, and Roger Hilsman, three of the most "anti-Diem" advisors in the administration, drafted a cable to the new American ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, instructing him to offer South Vietnamese military leaders assistance in organizing a coup to overthrow Diem and Nhu. Before sending the cable Undersecretary of State George Ball called Kennedy at his home in Hyannis Port. The President, after learning of the three advisors' enthusiastic support for sending the cable, asked where Secretary of Defense McNamara was. Ball informed him that McNamara was mountain climbing in Wyoming. Kennedy instructed Ball to telephone Secretary of State Rusk and Deputy Defense Secretary Ross Gilpatric, and if they agreed with the recommendations and conclusions of the cable, Ball should send it. Gilpatric gave his approval perfunctorily, believing the cable to be chiefly a State Department matter. Ball phoned Rusk, who was in New York. Conversing on an unsecured line, the Undersecretary could only speak vaguely about the cable. Assuming that Kennedy realized the actions the cable proscribed, the

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<sup>37</sup>SFRC, Volume XV, *Situation in Vietnam*, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., July 9, 1963, 391-392.

Secretary of State replied, “Well, go ahead.” Therefore, a momentous decision that would have dire consequences for the United States was reached after incomplete and unclear communication while most of the major policymakers and advisors were out of town.<sup>38</sup>

Upon arriving back in Washington on Monday, McNamara, Vice President Johnson, and Maxwell Taylor forcefully opposed a coup to topple Diem, and believed that Harriman, Forrestal, and Hilsman executed an “end run” by waiting until most advisors left for the weekend to send the cable. Kennedy also felt, as Nolting described later, “uneasy” about sending the cable and the implications of the policy it outlined. He approved it being sent after apparently getting assurances that most of his advisors agreed to do so. A week later Vice-President Johnson, in a National Security Council meeting, responded strongly against a coup. In addition, he and most other advisors rejected another suggestion made by Foreign Service Officer Paul Kattanburg, that since Diem, whom he had known for ten years, would likely not reform his government, the United States should “withdraw honorably.” The Vice President had “great reservations” about a coup because no one could produce a genuine alternative to Diem. He felt, however, that it would be disastrous to pull out. According the account of the meeting in the Pentagon Papers, the administration, said Johnson, should stop “playing cops and robbers and get back to talking straight to the

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<sup>38</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 286-289.



GVN (Government of Vietnam), and that we should once again go about winning the war.”<sup>39</sup>

Though the President still had doubts about the coup, he never rescinded the August 24 cable. He instead ordered the State Department to ask Lodge and General Harkins, military commander of the U.S. forces in South Vietnam, to give their opinions on its prospect for success. Lodge cabled back that he and Harkins supported the coup. He dramatically illustrated his view in a later cable, saying that “We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government.”<sup>40</sup>

Although still uncertain about the consequences of a coup, Kennedy publicly expressed his disappointment with Diem. On September 2 he told CBS news reporter Walter Cronkite: “I don’t’ think that unless a greater effort is made by the [South Vietnamese] Government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war.”<sup>41</sup> The administration also encouraged the efforts of Senator Frank Church of Idaho to introduce a resolution to end U.S. aid to South Vietnam unless Diem reformed his government. Church got over thirty co-sponsors of the bill, including seven southerners—Senators Russell Long, John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, Olin Johnston of South Carolina, Harry Byrd of Virginia, J. Howard

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<sup>39</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 161.

<sup>40</sup>*Pentagon Papers, The Senator Gravel Addition, Volume 2*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 738.

<sup>41</sup>Comments by President Kennedy on the Vietnamese Situation in an Interview with CBS Television 6:30 p.m., September 2, 1963, Roger Hilsman Papers, John F. Kennedy Library, Countries Files, Box 4.

Edmondson of Oklahoma, Herbert Walters of Tennessee, and Ralph Yarborough of Texas.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the public criticism of Diem, the Kennedy administration still struggled throughout September and October to decide whether it would go ahead with its support of a coup or would try one more time to pressure Diem to reform his government. On September 23 Kennedy sent McNamara and Taylor to Saigon to analyze the situation and consult with Diem. They returned October 2 and reported that the military campaign had made “great progress” and that if the political situation would stabilize, victory could be achieved by 1965. They advised against a coup, proposing instead that the administration implement “selected pressures” on the Diem regime, including threatening to withhold aid if it did not reform the government. They did suggest, however, the promotion of “alternative leadership” in case a coup should be necessary later. They also recommended an increase in combat operations, but at the same time proposed the withdrawal of one thousand American troops by the end of 1963 as the beginning of a program to replace U.S. soldiers with trained South Vietnamese without harming the war effort. Though later many realized that the Secretary and the General badly misread the situation in South Vietnam, the President used it as the guideline for future Vietnam policy. On October 5, Kennedy made the decision to implement the series of “selected pressures,” on the Diem government, including the withholding of funding to Nhu’s special forces, the stopping of shipments of commodities and the recalling of the CIA station chief. The President hoped

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<sup>42</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 167. For all co-sponsors of the resolution, see CR, 1963 Index, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 3762.

without any real evidence that Diem and Nhu would respond to these pressures, but he knew full well that the coup plotters would see this as a sign to proceed. In effect Kennedy knew that his decision would greatly increase the possibility of a coup.<sup>43</sup>

In the meantime, most congressmen either kept quiet or supported the administration's Vietnam policy. Southerners followed this trend. No southerners were included among the earliest dissenters on Vietnam. In fact, in the entire Senate, only Democrats Wayne Morse of Oregon, a member of the Foreign Relations committee, and George McGovern of South Dakota publicly proposed the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Morse, the more outspoken of the two, emphatically declared, "Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy."<sup>44</sup> Though the Foreign Relations Committee remained relatively quiet, the policy changes that resulted from the McNamara-Taylor report prompted on October 8 some tough questions by a few senators. For the most part, only two senators, Morse, and Senator Albert Gore, criticized American involvement in Vietnam. Gore attacked the Defense Secretary and the general, calling into question the justification for the administration's policies. Earlier in the hearing General Taylor had defended Diem's dictatorial rule. "We need a strong man running this country," he said, "we need a dictator in time of war and we have got one." He also stated asserted that South Vietnam found itself in the midst of a civil war, and the country needed a dictator to carry out an effective defense. Gore did not challenge Taylor's claims, but their implications disturbed him. He said that since Diem was "our dictator," the South Vietnamese people perceived him as an

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 183-191.

<sup>44</sup>CR, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., September, 9, 1963, 16488.

“American lackey.” Taylor denied Gore’s claim, saying he had not found anything during the visit that supported it. “I wonder,” the senator continued, “how many of these coolies down in the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta have made an ideological commitment to communism.” McNamara stated that he believed that the South Vietnamese peasants had not committed to either ideology. They only wanted personal security and the promise of a better life.

Gore still remained skeptical. After questioning the two men on the CIA’s role in Vietnam, the senator got to the heart of the matter, challenging the fundamental assumptions of the American involvement in the country:

I can certainly lay no claim to being an expert on the situation...but I must say I have questioned the enormous importance which the military attaches to South Vietnam. I know of no strategic material that it has. I know of nothing in surplus supply there except ignorant population and rice. It seems to me we have no need for either....Why must we suffer such great losses in money and lives for an area which seems to me unessential to our welfare, and to freedom, there being none there?

Gore had hoped that the administration would have used the Buddhist crisis as an excuse to withdraw American troops. “We would regret to lose [South Vietnam] to the communists,” he concluded, “nevertheless, from our expenses there it might be good riddance.”

Taylor responded by saying Senator Gore’s sentiments disturbed and worried him. He reminded the Tennessee senator of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s speech in 1960 declaring Soviet support for “national wars of liberation.” Gore corrected Taylor, saying, “We didn’t pick it up (support for South Vietnam) then, we

picked up after Dien Bien Phu.” McNamara then took over the defense of the American mission in South Vietnam in response to Gore’s interrogation and challenged the senator’s statement that no freedom existed in South Vietnam. The Secretary asserted that the country had more freedom today than 10 years before, and a lot more than there had been 20 years before. Gore shot back, “I thought it was General Taylor who said we had a dictator.” McNamara pushed on, reiterating the containment strategy and the Domino theory and assuring the committee that the military strategy was working. He predicted that the expenditures would be reduced and one thousand troops would be withdrawn within two years. Gore interrupted once again: “I seem to have been listening to just such optimistic forecasts by the military through the past several years none of which have been verified by subsequent events.”

He concluded with a strong indictment of American Cold War military involvement. He reminded McNamara and Taylor that he had not voiced his dissent publicly. But he worried that the administration oversimplified the struggle. “We have there a very difficult situation at the very best, and...the success of the military depends and is interwoven with the political problems in the country. The political problem is made up in part by religious strife, by racial hatred, and by the civil war between factions and elements between the country.” Since Kennedy did not see fit to use the Buddhist persecution as an excuse to withdraw from South Vietnam, America had again become “identified” in the eyes of the world “with suppression of freedom, with dictatorial regimes.” Gore said that his complaints probably came too late to change policy. He believed that because of the rosy reports submitted by the leaders

of the American military mission in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration had decided to stay with Diem.<sup>45</sup> Gore wrote later that he also met privately with the President to urge him to withdraw American troops from Vietnam because of Diem's treatment of the Buddhists. The next day, according to the senator, a friend and confidante of the President met with Gore and remarked, "After Cuba [Bay of Pigs] and with China going Communist under Truman, no Democratic President can pull out of Vietnam." Though the friend of Kennedy did not associate this opinion with the President, Gore knew that he had his answer.<sup>46</sup> What Gore could not have known was that at that crucial juncture, despite the objections of McNamara, Taylor, and others advisors, the coup planning continued with American support.

On November 1, the South Vietnamese generals, with aid and financial support from the CIA, carried out the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. Within two days, its leaders captured and murdered both Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Kennedy seemed genuinely shocked at the murders of the two South Vietnamese rulers, apparently never having realized that the coup leaders would execute Diem and Nhu. As the ruling military junta took over the country, the Kennedy administration quickly recognized the new South Vietnamese government. In the next few years, several coups would be carried out in Saigon, and the government would change hands many times.

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<sup>45</sup>All Gore, McNamara, and Taylor quotes come from SFRC, Volume XV, *Situation in Vietnam*, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 737, 740-746.

<sup>46</sup>Albert Gore, *Let the Glory Out: My South and Its Politics* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 160-161.

Most congressmen said very little publicly after the dramatic turn of events in South Vietnam. Most, as usual, followed the administration and supported the recognition of the new military government in South Vietnam. In the Senate, only Majority Leader Mansfield, a former supporter of Diem, spoke at length on the assassination. He said that the “tragic events” would only have “constructive significance” if the administration realized that “the effectiveness of our Asian policies cannot be measured by an overthrow of a government, by whether one government is ‘easier to work with’ than another, by whether one government smiles at us when another frowns.” What would be constructive would be if American Vietnam policy made possible “a progressive reduction in the expenditures of American lives and aid in Vietnam,” and to “the growth of popularly responsible and responsive government.”<sup>47</sup> An Alabama constituent writing to Senator John Sparkman responded more bluntly: “We set up a government and allow it to become a tyranny....I wish the U.S. had a good set of principles on which to base foreign policy....We will now probably support another dictatorship while we say we are fighting communists....[By acting in this manner] we merely set the stage for war and not peace.”<sup>48</sup>

The Kennedy administration did indeed set the stage for a wider war in Vietnam by deepening the American commitment to the military, economic, and political future of South Vietnam. Kennedy’s belief in bold action in fighting the Cold

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<sup>47</sup>CR, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., November 5, 1963, 21061.

<sup>48</sup>R.W. Taylor to John Sparkman, November 6, 1963, Sparkman Collection, Foreign Relations Committee Files, Box 2.

War led to the addition of over 15,000 American troops in South Vietnam during his presidency. Though southern Senator Gore and, to an extent, Fulbright, expressed doubts about the increased military presence in Southeast Asia, none of them “went public” with their concerns. Their public silence can be explained by an adherence to tradition in deferring to the President on foreign policy, partisanship, and a belief in administration spokesmen who promised conditions would improve. Though the two senators did advocate an increased emphasis on social and technical aid over military assistance, in the end they kept their doubts private in deference to the President and his foreign policy “experts.”

Other southerners, Strom Thurmond and J.L. Pilcher among them, welcomed American military intervention and believed that only a tough stand by the U.S. would result in a communist retreat. Thurmond, who has been described as a “professional anticommunist,” saw subversion within and without and, as a member himself of the Armed Forces, advocated militant and often extreme proposals to eradicate the communist threat in South Vietnam and elsewhere. He believed, as a newspaper editor summarized, that military men “understood the Red menace better than the White House or the State Department.” Therefore, Thurmond characterized any efforts to achieve something less than victory against communism as “appeasement” of or “softness” on communism. The South Carolina senator served as the embodiment of the southern martial tradition and the “new Right” that would find its first messenger in Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964.<sup>49</sup> His call for “all out”

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<sup>49</sup>Jack Bass and Marilyn W. Thompson, *Ol Strom: An Unauthorized Biography of Strom Thurmond* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1998), 190-191. See also Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 284-285.



victory would gain more popularity after hundreds of thousands of American troops in Vietnam had not produced a positive outcome in the war.

Between the “moderate-to-liberal” and “extreme militant conservative” southerners stood Richard Russell and John Stennis. Both had long expressed doubts as to the wisdom of committing American aid and military forces to an increasingly unstable situation in Vietnam. Russell would repeat publicly within a year of Johnson’s ascension to the Presidency that Southeast Asia held no strategic interest for the United States. However, as he had previously, the Georgia senator, along with his Mississippi colleague, did not at this point criticize the Kennedy or Johnson administrations in public on Vietnam policy. While the conservative southern senators, like their moderate and liberal colleagues, sought to uphold the practice of executive preeminence in foreign affairs, tradition alone does not explain their hesitance to express public dissent. Russell and Stennis also stood as the “ultimate insiders” regarding military and CIA operations, and so had a desire for and a commitment to secrecy. Though the Kennedy administration did not always give them the full story on Vietnam, the southern conservatives were determined to uphold the military and spying institutions because they in part were responsible for creating and sustaining them. Therefore, while the private expression of doubt in order to remedy possible problems was totally acceptable, public dissent that would serve to break down the institutions in which they held an interest and for which they had responsibility, was not. Their public reticence would last only as long as a small number of American soldiers advised and fought in Vietnam. When Kennedy’s successor greatly expanded the conflict, and America “showed the flag” in Vietnam,

their opinions would be more aligned with their more militant South Carolina colleague.

Just a few weeks after Diem and Nhu died, Kennedy himself fell victim to assassination. Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson, the former “Master of the Senate,” became President of the United States. Just a few short weeks after Johnson assumed the duties of Chief Executive, he outlined what he expected from his advisors with regards to Vietnam: “We should all of us let no day go by without asking whether we are doing everything we can do to win the struggle there.”<sup>50</sup> Just six months later, he agreed with his mentor, Senator Richard Russell, who described the conflict as “the damn worst mess I ever saw.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Tom Wicker, “Johnson Affirms Fair in Rusk; Asks Patience in World Affairs,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1963, 10.

<sup>51</sup>Michael Beschloss, ed., *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* New York: Touchstone Books, 1997), 363.

## CHAPTER 6

### JOHNSON, FULBRIGHT, RUSSELL, “THE HARVARDS” AND THE GULF OF TONKIN RESOLUTION

As the Johnson administration neared the fateful decision that would send hundreds of thousands of American troops to Vietnam, they invited Columbia University historian Henry Graff to interview members of the “Tuesday Cabinet”—the group of advisors who met with the President for lunch every Tuesday to discuss and often decide foreign policy issues. Johnson hoped to demonstrate to the public that both he and his advisors had a firm grasp of the worsening situation in Vietnam and believed a historian might have a broader perspective than a journalist caught up in the day-to-day Vietnam reporting. Graff’s original account, published in the *New York Times Magazine* in June 1965, left out several of Johnson’s more revealing comments. However, it did accurately portray, in the words of historian Lloyd C. Gardner, “a President nearly obsessed with self-image” as he stood on the brink of the most momentous decision on Vietnam.

In comments not originally published in the article, a somber Johnson revealed to Graff his great bitterness toward those who came before and a great frustration at his seeming inability to measure up to the office. After discussing his deep involvement in foreign policy questions from World War II to the present, he continued: “Now they say I’m not qualified in foreign affairs like Jack Kennedy and the other experts.” “Kennedy was on the Labor Committee,” Johnson asserted, while he had served on foreign policy-related committees and as Majority Leader. With what

Graff called “deep and biting” sarcasm, the president quipped, “I guess I was just born in the wrong part of the country.”<sup>1</sup>

Lyndon Johnson was never fully comfortable with being from the South. Mississippi Congressman Thomas Abernathy later commented that the President “even tried to take Texas out of the southern orbit by asserting it was a western state, which was an attempt on his part to divorce himself from his background and raising.”<sup>2</sup> His insecurity led him to envy and resent the “Harvards” he inherited from John F. Kennedy’s cabinet yet at the same time to respect and sometimes be awed by them. “My Daddy always told me,” Johnson later confided to historian Doris Kearns-Goodwin, “that if I brushed up against the grindstone of life, I’d come away with more polish than I could ever get at Harvard or Yale. I wanted to believe him, but somehow I never could.” In late 1963, however, as Johnson assumed the reigns of power, he believed he could shine, but he realized he needed “the best and brightest” to do it. “Without them,” he said later, “I would have lost my link to John Kennedy, and without that I would have had absolutely no chance of gaining the support of the media or the Easterners or the intellectuals. And without that support I would have had absolutely no chance of running the country.” The fact that the President so mistrusted his own considerable political talents that he felt he needed the support of Eastern intellectuals attests to both his abundant confidence in them and an almost debilitating insecurity. His advisor Jack Valenti, a Texan with an M.B.A. from

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<sup>1</sup>Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 226-228.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas J. Abernathy Oral History, 1974, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS, 111.

Harvard, noted that Johnson “placed almost Olympian store by what he called educated people.”<sup>3</sup>

The part of Lyndon Johnson that resented the “Harvards,” as he called them could not erase the memory of his humble beginning in Johnson City, Texas. Though sometimes embarrassed by his southern roots, the President in a sense never forgot the lessons he learned from his early life in the Texas hill country. His father, a southern Populist, was forever suspicious of the men, who, in the words of historian Lloyd C. Gardner, “sat in leather chairs behind mahogany desks presiding over the nation’s affairs from large offices on Wall Street.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Johnson felt particularly proud that he, a graduate of obscure San Marcos State Teachers College, had final authority over, as he would introduce them, “a dean from Yale, a professor from Princeton, and a department head from Harvard.”<sup>5</sup> Due to Kennedy’s untimely death, they were now “his” intellectuals. However, Johnson’s “lack of expertise” on foreign affairs would allow Kennedy’s men to lead Johnson gradually into war in Vietnam.

When Johnson took office, the South Vietnamese government was in a shambles. Over the next two years, coups, confusion, corruption, and leadership changes would characterize South Vietnamese politics. In addition, the Vietcong made impressive gains in rural areas in part due to the disastrous American-backed strategic hamlet program, which forcibly moved South Vietnamese peasants off the

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<sup>3</sup>Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1976), 91, 177-178. See also Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 37.

<sup>4</sup>Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 5-6.

<sup>5</sup>Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, 38.

land some had farmed for generations. In the Mekong Delta, the communists controlled most of the area outside the major cities. Johnson, in his first presidential meeting on Vietnam on November 24, 1963, expressed his determination to stay the course there, mainly because he believed his political life depended on it. Ever mindful of the plight that befell Truman in 1949, Johnson pledged to his advisors that he “was not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China did.” Considering mainly the domestic political ramifications in the light of the upcoming congressional battles over Civil Rights, tax cut, and War on Poverty initiatives as well as the upcoming election year, the President wanted only to help stabilize the South Vietnamese regime and to make those changes that would maintain the status quo for a while.<sup>6</sup>

The only members of Congress Johnson consulted on Vietnam during the national period of mourning over the Kennedy assassination were Fulbright, Russell, and Senate Majority Leader Mansfield. Fulbright, in a phone conversation on December 2, 1963, suggested that the President do very little for the moment in order to give the new leadership in South Vietnam a chance to establish itself. Foreshadowing his later public proposal for a “Titoist” Vietnam government, the senator suggested that one solution would be “some kind of semi-neutralized area in which they’ll keep out—by that I mean the Chinese.” Mansfield suggested something similar to the President during this period. Fulbright, however, showed the frustration he felt over the situation, “I’ll be goddamned if I don’t think it’s hopeless,” he

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<sup>6</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 306-307.

continued. “I think the general situation is against us as far as real victory goes.” Fulbright advised against sending more Americans—it was not worth the cost. “Some things you can’t do anything about unless you want to go all-out and I don’t believe you want to go all out.” Five days after Fulbright spoke with the President, Russell expressed even more pessimism over Vietnam in a phone call to Johnson. “We should get out, but I don’t know any way to get out.”<sup>7</sup> Later Russell recalled telling the President during this period, “I’d spend whatever it takes to bring to power a government that would ask us to go home.” Johnson listened attentively to his southern friends and Mansfield, but followed McNamara’s advice to reject negotiations to create a neutral Vietnam because the Secretary of Defense believed it would only invite a communist takeover. “The security situation is serious,” McNamara warned, “but we can still win.” Johnson, looking for a policy that would not disturb his domestic agenda, agreed.<sup>8</sup>

However, Johnson could not rely on McNamara and the other “Harvards” to maintain support for his Vietnam policy in Congress. For that task Johnson relied on his two most trusted former colleagues from the South. Johnson needed the leadership of Fulbright and Russell on the Senate foreign policy committees. It also helped that both southerners had been friends of their former colleague over their long years of Senate service. The President would not always heed their advice, but he listened, sometimes agreed, but almost always tried to use their influence to his advantage.

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<sup>7</sup>Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 88, 95.

<sup>8</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 306-308.

As two of Johnson's closest southern confidantes in Congress, Richard Russell and William Fulbright, would both make possible America's descent into Vietnam and would also serve as some of the President's most prominent critics on the war. Though both the Georgia and Arkansas senators supported and then assailed Johnson's Vietnam decisions for different reasons, both viewpoints embraced some aspect of southern political traditions. Russell was born on November 2, 1897, into a patrician family and grew up, in the words of historian Caroline F. Ziemke, "with the bitterness and frustration of the post-reconstruction South." This mistrust of outsiders would lead Russell, though intimately involved in foreign policy debates and discussions, to characterize himself as an "isolationist" who only reluctantly agreed to support U.S. economic or political "interference" outside the Western Hemisphere. His father, like Johnson's, espoused Populist causes and, according to Ziemke, instilled in Russell "a combination of honor, populism, and pragmatism."<sup>9</sup> His brilliance as a politician carried him to the position, as many accounts have affirmed, of the most influential member of the Senate. Between 1964 and 1968, the Georgia Senator both chaired the Armed Services Committee and served as a ranking member on the Appropriations committees. But his provincialism on Civil Rights and his romanticism regarding his southern heritage meant that his ambitions could be carried no further. In the heat of the debate over the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Johnson told press aid Bill Moyers, "Jim Crow put a collar on more smart men as sure as if they were sentenced to a chain gang in Georgia. If Dick Russell hadn't had to wear Jim

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<sup>9</sup>Ziemke, "Senator Richard B. Russell and the 'Lost Cause,'" 31-33.



Crow's collar, Dick Russell would be sitting here right now instead of me.”<sup>10</sup>

Johnson realized, however, that southern conservatives like Russell would give him far more trouble on Great Society programs if he did not hold the line in Vietnam.

Russell's expertise on military matters put him in a unique position to comment on the military side of Vietnam operations. Russell had from the very beginning opposed American involvement in Vietnam. He was not a typical hawk. The senator believed that it held no value of any kind to the United States in part because American long-range missile systems did not necessitate an American bulwark against communism there. Although he knew little about the Asian country, his upbringing in rural Winder, Georgia, gave him some insight into the mentality of rural South Vietnamese peasants.

I don't know these Asian people, but they tell me they worship their ancestors and so I wouldn't play with their land if I were you. You know, whenever the Corps of Engineers has some dam to dedicate to Georgia, I make a point of being out of state, because those people don't like economic improvements as much as they like being moved off their land.<sup>11</sup>

Of all the advisors and officials involved in Vietnam policy, only Russell realized in the early 1960s the probable responses of ordinary South Vietnamese to American policies such as the building of hydroelectric power dams on the Mekong River, the designation of certain civilian areas South Vietnam as “free-fire zones,” and the forcible movement of peasants into “strategic hamlets.” Russell exhibited as much

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<sup>10</sup>Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 98.

<sup>11</sup>Ziemke, *Senator Richard B. Russell and the 'Lost Cause'*, 62.

provincialism with regards to the Vietnamese people as did Johnson—but his southern rural experience enabled him to understand the connection of farmers to the land. And his southern upbringing made him aware of the distrust of outsiders indicative of traditional rural societies.

Fulbright, Johnson's other "old friend" in the Senate, was a Rhodes scholar born of a prominent Fayetteville, Arkansas, banker, who led a privileged city life far removed from the rural Winder, Georgia, countryside Richard Russell experienced as a child. The Arkansas senator held a high regard for promoting education and opportunity. He embraced the Jeffersonian republican ideal of government by an educated, enlightened elite. Therefore, he could enthusiastically support American experts administering economic and technical aid to Vietnam, just as he championed the educational exchange program that still bears his name. However, he did not believe in using the power of the United States to remake South Vietnam in its own image, just as he objected to the Federal Government imposing Civil Rights decisions on a reluctant white South, or, as Fulbright suggested, his father's generation objected to the northern "occupation" of the South during Reconstruction. "If we are modest in the use of our power and responsive to the sensibilities of the new nationalism," Fulbright said in June, 1965, "the peoples of emerging nations may come to acknowledge that Americans are fairly decent people just as we southerners have to admit that at least some Yankees are not so bad as they used to seem."

Fulbright also had his own interpretation of a southern Wilsonian internationalism. While Rusk and others in the Johnson administration clung to a Wilsonian vision tied to, as historian Walter Russell Mead describes it, "the spreading

of American democratic and social values throughout the world,” Fulbright interpreted Wilson’s vision as a commitment to national self-determination, regardless of ideology.<sup>12</sup> As Fulbright biographer Randall Bennett Woods attests, “Rusk never seemed to perceive the contradiction between Woodrow Wilson’s desire to see other nations enjoy the right of self-determination and his efforts early in his administration to export democracy forcibly. Fulbright did.” Therefore, several times in 1965 the Arkansas senator advocated negotiations between the warring parties and the acceptance of a neutral regime in South Vietnam, even if it should resemble the neutral communist “Titoist” government in Yugoslavia. Senators Albert Gore of Tennessee and Republican John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky would adopt similar positions over the course of 1965 and 1966. Fulbright, though dissenting with most of his fellow southerners in Congress, came to his viewpoint on Vietnam in part based on his experience as a southerner. Just as Fulbright complained throughout his career about Arkansas’s being an economic colony of the North, Fulbright’s comments on Vietnam would decry what he perceived to be increasing efforts to create by force a democratic “colony” in South Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, it was the President’s respect for the intellect of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, the Harvard graduate and former president of General Motors, that would most influence Johnson’s decisions on Vietnam. Richard Russell observed that the Defense Secretary seemed to “exercise some hypnotic influence over

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<sup>12</sup>Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), xvii.

<sup>13</sup>Randall Bennett Woods, “Dixie Dove,” 536-537, 548-550.

the President.”<sup>14</sup> Though Johnson had considerable legislative experience dealing with defense and other foreign policy issues, his expertise lay largely in domestic affairs. Therefore, the President trusted and leaned on McNamara’s “whiz kids” at the Pentagon and his other Eastern establishment advisors to steer a winning course in Vietnam.

Johnson leaned on McNamara and the other Kennedy men because, though he visited the country in 1961, he knew little about Vietnam. Johnson demonstrated his fairly provincial worldview in an argument with a senator over Vietnam. The senator leaned over and put his hand on the president’s knee, according to Johnson advisor Walt Rostow, and said “But Lyndon, they’re not our kind of people.” The President told Rostow later that he realized that he deeply disagreed with the senator “because he felt that they were our kind of people in Vietnam and Asia.” Though Johnson’s comment seemed appropriate given the senator’s racist assumptions, his belief that the South Vietnamese, different in culture, language, and history, would somehow think and react the same way that an American, or a southerner, would pose insurmountable problems in trying to formulate a coherent policy in Vietnam. As his Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, commented later, “to LBJ, the Mekong and the Pedernales (a river in Texas) were not that far apart.”<sup>15</sup>

In the first half of 1964, McNamara proposed and Johnson continued to steer the same middle course between neutralization and escalation, including more

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<sup>14</sup>Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves*, 38. For Russell quote, see Fite, *Richard B. Russell, Jr., Senator from Georgia*, 441.

<sup>15</sup>Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 33.

resources and energy into the strategy that had so far not produced stability or results. Johnson remained in close contact with the prominent Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee. In response to Mansfield's speech advocating neutralization in Vietnam, the President wanted Senator Fulbright to speak against it. In a phone conversation on March 2, 1964, Johnson, in explaining to Fulbright the choices he faced in South Vietnam, asserted, "The only thing I know to do is more of the same and do it more efficiently." He suggested that any formula for neutralization would lead to the loss of South Vietnam to the communists. The President outlined his solution, which consisted of continuing "our present policy of providing training and logistical support for the South Vietnamese forces." Fulbright agreed: "that's exactly what I'd arrive at under these circumstances for the foreseeable future." Johnson, forever trying to make Fulbright and others commit to and thereby share responsibility for, the outcomes of his Vietnam decisions, hinted that if the situation remained critical in South Vietnam by the time Secretary McNamara returned from his trip there, some tough decisions would have to be made about Vietnam policy. He wanted the Chairman to do "some heavy thinking" on the subject.<sup>16</sup>

Fulbright, feeling privileged to be one of the president's closest advisors, supported the administration's policy in Vietnam on the Senate floor. On March 25, 1964, Fulbright began by saying that the proposals for neutralization being forwarded by France and having been supported by Mansfield would not, under presently difficult circumstances, lead to "the freedom of South Vietnam." "It is extremely difficult," he

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<sup>16</sup>Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 264.

continued, “for a party [in] a negotiation to achieve by diplomacy objectives which it has conspicuously failed to win by warfare.” Rejecting neutralization and withdrawal of American forces, Fulbright listed, without showing any preference, two “realistic options” for American policy: expanding the conflict or increasing the ability of the South Vietnamese to prosecute the war. “Whatever specific policy decisions are made,” Fulbright concluded, “the United States will continue to meet its obligations and fulfill its commitment in Vietnam.”

The main premise of the speech, however, belied Fulbright’s insistence that America maintain its commitment in Vietnam. Entitled “Old Myths and New Realities,” Fulbright proposed a total revamping of American Cold War assumptions. Saying America should start “thinking some unacceptable thoughts,” the Arkansas senator posited that the communist world was not monolithic. Russia’s apparently less aggressive attitude after the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Test Ban Treaty illustrated that not all communist regimes posed a threat to the United States. Fulbright named Cuba as a non-threatening communist nation that, despite American wishes and predictions, was here to stay. Communist China, on the other hand, remained a threat, but was still “the only China worth considering.”<sup>17</sup> Fulbright, however, stopped short of calls for diplomatic recognition of China or Cuba. Even though he supported the administration’s line on Vietnam, Fulbright’s widely publicized speech brought condemnation from conservatives in the Senate. Republican John Tower of Texas and Strom Thurmond of South Carolina claimed Fulbright advocated “appeasement.” Many in Congress and the media suggested that Fulbright’s speech

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<sup>17</sup>CR, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., March 24, 1964, 6230-6232.

had been approved by the administration as a “trial balloon” for a potential change in foreign policy.<sup>18</sup>

Though Vietnam historians William Gibbons, William C. Berman and others suggest that the administration may have seen and approved the Vietnam portion of Fulbright’s speech, a phone conversation between the President and Florida Senator Spessard Holland suggests a different conclusion. Johnson said that he was “mighty blue over Bill Fulbright’s speech.” When Holland replied that he thought Fulbright made the speech at the President’s suggestion, Johnson snapped, “Oh hell!... We just have gotten over Mike’s (Mansfield) speech on neutralizing Vietnam and pulling out and now Bill gets up and makes a speech.” Later that day, a disgusted LBJ responded to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy’s question of why Fulbright did not mention it to the President while Johnson and the Arkansas senator dined together a few nights earlier. “Fulbright is that way though,” said the president. He’s a very unpredictable man....As Truman said one time, he’s ‘half-bright’!”<sup>19</sup>

Russell also joined in the criticism of what Wayne Morse began to call “McNamara’s War.” On March 31 on the floor of the Senate, Morse and Ernest Gruening asked Russell to use his position as Chairman of the Armed Services committee to obtain from the Department of Defense information on whether the administration planned to send additional American troops to Vietnam. The Georgia

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<sup>18</sup>Mann, *Grand Delusion*, 321.

<sup>19</sup>William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part II*, 242-243. See also, William C. Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist* (Kent, Kent State University Press, 1988), 15-16. For Johnson quote see Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 297-298.

senator agreed to supply them with the information and concluded his remarks by reiterating his position on American involvement in Vietnam. Though he did not directly attack Johnson's Vietnam policy, Russell questioned the whole assumption behind the presence of American troops there: "I could not see any strategic, tactical, or economic value in that area. Certainly from a military standpoint in this day of missiles and long-range planes, that area has no significant value as a base for military operations." Morse, who had filled up nearly two hundred pages of the *Congressional Record* in the spring of 1964 attacking the increasing American military presence, called Russell's response "the most important statement that has been made to date by anyone in this country on the folly of South Vietnamese operations."<sup>20</sup> In addition to Russell, Senator Allen Ellender of Louisiana, a conservative and top-ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee who had visited Vietnam several times during the 1950s and early 1960s, agreed with Russell that the United States should not be in Vietnam and approved Morse's call for withdrawal of all American troops. In May Senator Olin Johnston of South Carolina, a liberal on economic issues but a conservative on defense and foreign policy, praised Morse's criticisms of American involvement in Indochina and agreed with his proposal to let the United Nations adjudicate the peace in Vietnam.<sup>21</sup>

However, only a small minority of legislators criticized Johnson's Vietnam policies. A *New York Times* informal survey of senators showed that a majority

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<sup>20</sup>CR, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., March 31, 1964, 6629-6630.

<sup>21</sup>Mann, 322.



reluctantly approved Johnson's Vietnam policy. Nevertheless, the vocal criticisms from Russell, Ellender, Johnston and a few others, particularly coming in the midst of the southern Democratic filibuster over the Civil Rights Act, convinced the President of the need to be perceived as decisive on Vietnam without drastically increasing American involvement during an election year.

Johnson worried over the growing criticism of his newly emerging Vietnam policies. After southern critics suggested that America try to disengage from Vietnam, Republicans criticized the President in May, charging that the United States was not going far enough militarily in Vietnam. (Up to this point most of the Republican leadership supported his Vietnam moves). The President confided his fears, as he often did, to Richard Russell. In a revealing phone conversation, the President solicited Russell's analysis of the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. After calling the situation "the damn worst mess I ever saw," Russell continued, "I don't see how we're ever going to get out of it without fighting a major war with the Chinese and all of them down there in those rice paddies and jungles...I just don't know what to do." Johnson concurred saying he had been feeling that way since he became President. After disagreeing over the relative importance of Vietnam, Russell, who had met with McNamara and other military advisors over the last few months, suggested that Johnson widen his scope of experts. Russell's analysis of McNamara could have been used for many of Johnson's Vietnam advisors:

He was up here testifying yesterday before the (Armed Services) committee. He's been kicked around on it, so where I'm not sure he's as objective as he ought to be in surveying the conditions out there. He feels like it's sort of up to him personally to see that the thing goes

through. And he's a can-do fellow. *But I'm not too sure he understands the history and background of those people out there as fully as he should* (emphasis added). But even from his picture, the damn thing ain't getting any better.<sup>22</sup>

At this point Johnson also expressed frustration with his Secretaries of Defense and State. He complained that the two Secretaries and other diplomats dismissed the possible entrance of China into the war if the Americans pushed too far.

I spend my days with Rusk and McNamara and (Averill) Harriman and (Cyrus) Vance and all those folks...and [they say that] we've got to show some power and some force, they do not believe—they're kinda like McArthur in Korea—they don't believe the Chinese Communists will come into this thing. But they don't know and nobody can be really be sure....And in any event [they say] that we haven't got much choice, that we are treaty-bound, that we are there, that this will be a domino that will kick off a whole list of others, that we've just got to prepare for the worst....I don't think the American people are for it.

Later in the conversation, Russell conveyed his ultimate fear: "It's just one of those places where you can't win. Anything that you do is wrong." The President, in a candid moment that staggers the imagination considering the depth he would commit America in Vietnam, replied, "I don't think we can do anything." A few minutes later in talking to McGeorge Bundy, the President confirmed his doubts: "I don't think it's worth fighting for and I don't think we can get out. It's just the biggest damn mess I ever saw."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 323. For Russell quote, see Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 363-364.

<sup>23</sup>Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 365-370.

Johnson by mid-1964 also faced difficulties with the new South Vietnamese President. General Nguyen Khanh ousted General Duong Van Minh and took over the government. Khanh, to keep his unstable government afloat, announced that he would take the war to the North, thereby putting pressure on the United States to back his efforts. At the same time, Republican presidential frontrunner Barry Goldwater criticized Johnson for not using sufficient force in Vietnam. Goldwater also hinted that if he was elected he might use tactical nuclear weapons on North Vietnam. Goldwater's attacks also coincided with several congressional statements charging that Johnson had no plan to win the war. For instance, in a June Foreign Relations Committee hearing to which he had been invited, Armed Services committee member and South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, who would within a few months switch to the Republican Party and campaign for Goldwater, asked Henry Cabot Lodge, who had recently resigned as ambassador to South Vietnam, why the Johnson administration had not adopted a policy of pushing the Communists out of both North and South Vietnam. "I'm am just wondering how much longer we are going to be there," Thurmond sniped, "and whether we are going to spend hundreds of millions of dollars and then bring about a neutralist state which will go Communist....Don't you think if we are going to free Vietnam of the Communists, that you have got to go into North Vietnam to do it...and not just defend [South Vietnam] and not just oppose Communist aggression? Even if you clean them out of South Vietnam completely, you have still got the source of the trouble in North Vietnam." Comments like Thurmond's reminded the President of the right-wing

attacks Truman suffered over the “loss” of China, which made Johnson all the more determined to be perceived as strong in his Vietnam decisions.<sup>24</sup>

As Thurmond’s comments attest, Johnson had to contend with southern attitudes more bellicose than Fulbright’s and Russell’s. Most southerners espoused the belief that the war had to be won quickly and decisively, with massive force. The “true” southern hawks in Congress, who came to their positions, in the words of historian Joseph A. Fry, “from a less thoughtful perspective” called for drastic increases in military action to bring about “victory” in Vietnam. Russell eventually sided with these legislators, but Senator Strom Thurmond, Congressman Mendel Rivers and others embraced the bellicosity of the southern military tradition and the frustration with limited warfare. Both Thurmond and Rivers advocated the use of nuclear weapons against the North Vietnamese in 1964 and 1965—John Stennis of Mississippi hinted at the same strategy early in January 1966. These congressmen fell under Mead’s “Jacksonian” category in that they believed that when other countries start wars with the United States, there would be “no substitute for victory.” By 1966, a majority of southerners would agree.<sup>25</sup> The President’s “limited war” in Vietnam therefore, would not enjoy the benefit of wholesale southern support for very long.

Southerners also exhibited less patience with the President in part because their opposition to his domestic policies. With only a few exceptions, southern legislators

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<sup>24</sup>Mann, *A Grand Illusion*, 327-331. For Thurmond’s quotes, see SFRC, Volume XVI, *The Situation in Vietnam*, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., June 30, 1964, 265-267.

<sup>25</sup>Joseph A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 283-284. See also, Mead, *Special Providence*, xvii.

virulently criticized Johnson's efforts to successfully secure passage of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts. His fellow southerners reacted predictably. Senator Lister Hill of Alabama called the President a "turncoat son of a bitch" and Congressman F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana characterized the President as "the most horrible man that ever lived."<sup>26</sup> In addition to overcoming southern obstacles to pass the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, Johnson also maneuvered legislation through Congress to combat poverty. The former "Master of the Senate" had an ambitious vision for America that was deeply rooted in the Texas populism espoused by his father and refined by his New Deal experiences in Texas. Now that he had helped reassert the rights of poor African Americans in the South, the President committed the nation to aiding poor people throughout America. The money, however, to pay for both the social policies southern legislators opposed and military operations in Vietnam that a number of hawks supported would have to come from congressional committees controlled by conservative southerners. In order to finance both "guns and butter," therefore, he had in some degree to placate southern supporters of increased Defense spending, in particular, Richard Russell, Russell Long, and Representatives George Mahon and Wright Patman of Texas and Wilbur Mills of Arkansas because of their control of the "money" committees, Appropriations, Finance, and Ways and Means. Because southern hawkish legislators would call for increased military spending and a corresponding reduction in the funding of Great Society programs if America seemed to be losing in Vietnam, Johnson had to keep the war's cost under control while convincing the prominent southerners that America was making progress. Though the

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<sup>26</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 273.

domestic policies, particularly Civil Rights and the war on poverty, were not directly related to Vietnam, southern congressional resistance to them made Vietnam policies harder to maintain.

The President could not lose Vietnam and hope to save his Great Society programs or his administration from defeat in November. Therefore he sent several of his advisors on fact-finding trips to Vietnam to analyze the deteriorating situation. Most of them had proposed, as Johnson revealed in his conversation with Russell, that the United States “show some force and some power.” Whatever move he made, the President once again was determined not to repeat what he regarded to be one of Truman’s worst mistakes regarding Korea. This time Congress would be included in the decision to deepen American involvement in the war.

To that end, McNamara, Rusk, Bundy and others debated the need for a congressional resolution to authorize the president use, if necessary, “all measures, including the commitment of armed forces.” After debating over the resolution the first week of June 1964, Johnson decided to postpone any introduction of a resolution because of the specter of a potentially divisive full-scale Vietnam debate during an election campaign. Fulbright, responding to the news in a phone conversation with advisor George Ball, agreed wholeheartedly, and, perhaps aware of Johnson’s anger after his March speech, promised not to “do any talking” on Vietnam for the time being.

The increased American effort in Vietnam during this period led to events that made a resolution before the election favorable to the President. America participated in the Desoto patrols in which United States destroyers such as the *U.S.S.*

*Maddox* were deployed to the Gulf of Tonkin. The Desoto patrols would move within the allotted twelve-mile territorial limit off the coast of North Vietnam to determine the location of radar sites. Though no one still knows for certain, the military actions which violated the territorial integrity of North Vietnam strongly suggest that Johnson sought to provoke the country into responding, thereby clearing the way for the congressional resolution.<sup>27</sup>

On August 2, naval officials reported that the *U.S.S. Maddox*, which, according to the official accounts at the time, had been on “routine patrols” in “international waters” in the Gulf of Tonkin, had apparently come under attack from North Vietnamese patrol boats. In reality the ship had been deployed the Desoto patrols, which, in addition to spying, also provided cover for CIA-led South Vietnamese “hit-and-run” attacks, codenamed OPLAN-34, against North Vietnamese radar sites.<sup>28</sup> The *Maddox* returned fire, crippling one of the North Vietnamese boats, and possibly damaging the other two. Johnson, after informing Democratic congressional leaders of both the attack and his plans to retaliate, deployed the *U.S.S. C. Turner Joy* to resume the Desoto patrols, and this time ordered a combat air patrol to protect the destroyers. On August 4, Washington got a message that the North Vietnamese appeared to be attacking the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*. However, no one could ever determine decisively whether the attack, which took place in total

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<sup>27</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 272, 282-283. See also Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 136, and Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 345.

<sup>28</sup>A vast number of secondary sources provide excellent accounts of the Gulf of Tonkin Incidents in late July and August, 1964. The following description comes from several sources, including Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), and James Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

darkness, had ever occurred. Johnson half-jokingly suggested later that, because of the confusing situation in the Gulf of Tonkin that night, the sailors, for all they knew, could have been shooting at “some flying fish.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the President proceeded as if the conflicting reports coming back from the Gulf of Tonkin were irrefutable evidence of an attack, and ordered retaliatory air strikes on North Vietnam.

The administration had consulted with Congress throughout the first few days of August, and most legislators reacted as Johnson wanted them to. On August 3, Fulbright, in a phone conversation with George Ball, characterized the first attack as “a little suspicious and thought probably that the incident was asked for.”<sup>30</sup> Later on that day, however, Fulbright and others members of Congress met with Rusk, McNamara, and General Earle Wheeler and they accepted the administration's description of the North Vietnamese attack as “totally unprovoked” by the Americans. On the evening of August 5, Johnson met with congressional leaders and presented them his proposal for a congressional resolution. The President hinted that the resolution would only have Congress approve his retaliation for the Gulf of Tonkin attacks. The resolution, as had already been drafted by the president's advisors, however, gave far broader powers to the executive to escalate the war in Vietnam. The only dissenter in the meeting was Mike Mansfield, who suggested the president was making an international incident out of a minor skirmish. Johnson ignored Mansfield's advice to treat the attack as an “isolated act of terror” and to refrain from

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<sup>29</sup>Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 139.

<sup>30</sup>David M. Barrett, editor, *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 62.



responding militarily. Near the end of the meeting, he polled everyone in the room, saying, “I have told you what I want from you.” Fulbright responded immediately and affirmatively saying, “I will support it.”<sup>31</sup> Late that night Johnson went on national television to inform the country of the attacks on the ships and the retaliatory air strikes that were “now in execution against targets in North Vietnam.” He assured Americans that the incidents underscored the “importance of the struggle for peace and security in southeast Asia. He pledged that the American response was “measured and fitting” and that he sought “no wider war.” The next day he delivered an address at Syracuse University, in which he recalled the lessons of the Munich conference, and assured the audience that North Vietnamese aggression would be met by the United States. “The world remembers—the world must never forget—that aggression unchallenged is aggression unleashed.”<sup>32</sup>

The ensuing committee and floor debates did not take very long. The House Foreign Affairs Committee voted 29-0 to report the bill without amendments to the floor. Florida Congressman Dante B. Fascell, a member and later chairman of the committee, remembered that most committee members concluded that “the President wants this power and he needs to have it. It had relatively little to do with the incident.” No one in the committee, Fascell recalled, questioned or seemingly cared whether the attacks occurred or whether the President reported accurate information. So, Fascell concluded, “the resolution was just hammered right on through by

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 67-72.

<sup>32</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 355.

everybody.” After a forty-minute non-contentious debate on the House floor, the resolution passed 416-0. Republican Bruce Alger of Texas was the only member of Congress to express doubts about the resolution. Alger, who had criticized both Eisenhower and Kennedy’s Vietnam policy, said that though he voted for the resolutions for “reasons of unity...I have grave reservations involving congressional abdication of responsibility in declaring war.” He only agreed to the resolution on the assumption “that Congress will not be bypassed later.” Congressman Eugene Siler of Kentucky, who had made a statement in June saying he was running for President and, if elected would serve one day in office in order to bring the troops home from Vietnam, voted “present” as did one other congressman. Siler said that such resolutions were “unnecessary” and accurately suggested that it would be used “to seal the lips of Congress against future criticism.”<sup>33</sup>

The Senate was only somewhat more deliberative. The Joint Senate Foreign Relations Committee-Armed Services Committee hearing lasted an hour and forty minutes, with Rusk, McNamara and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Earle Wheeler answering the senators’ questions. Only Senator Morse directly challenged the conclusions of the administration and its characterization of the North Vietnamese as “aggressors” in the incidents. Of the southerners who spoke, most were unapologetic hawks. Russell Long of Louisiana supported the resolution and asserted that Congress could not afford a long deliberation on the subject. “As much as I would like to be consulted on this kind of thing the less time you spend on consulting and the quicker you shoot back the better off you are.” Thurmond voiced his frustration with

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<sup>33</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part II*, 307-310.

the concept of limited war, an argument with which many southerners would agree throughout the Vietnam era. Worrying that Vietnam would be a “stalemate” like Korea, he asserted, “I think we ought to make up our minds that we are going to have victory in the war in Vietnam or get out.” The joint committee favorably reported the resolution by a vote of 31-1. Mansfield, Russell and Fulbright did not ask a question during the hearings.<sup>34</sup>

Fulbright acted as floor manager for the resolution in the Senate.<sup>35</sup> Several southerners and others either commented or brought up objections. Fulbright, the foreign policy expert and Johnson intimate, convinced some concerned senators that approving the resolution would not relinquish the pledge of the administration not to expand the scope of the war. In his opening statement, the Arkansas senator praised the “limited and measured” nature of the American retaliation and emphasized the necessity of the action. He also asserted that Congress should be clear that the policy of the administration was to uphold the Geneva agreements of 1954 and 1962 and to keep Southeast Asia “free and secure of domination from Peiping and Hanoi. America had no desire to “bring the nations of Indochina under our own domination.” He assured former and future dissenter George McGovern of South Dakota that the war would not be expanded to the North, as Khanh had insisted, and that the overall policy had not changed. He also convinced Louisiana Senator Allen Ellender that the American ships did not provoke the North Vietnamese. Using the information he had

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<sup>34</sup>Congress, Senate, Joint Hearing, Committee on Foreign Relations, Committee on Armed Services, *Southeast Asia Resolution*, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., August 6, 1964, 18, 24-25.

been given by McNamara and other administration officials, he asserted that the DeSoto patrols and the South Vietnamese OPLAN-34 raids were not related and that the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* had been on patrol duty only, in international waters.

Several Senators, including John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky expressed concern on the open-ended nature of the resolution, which “approved and supported the determination of the President to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack...*including the use of armed force* (emphasis added).” Fulbright admitted that the resolution gave the President vast authority, but that administration officials assured him that the United States would use mainly its sea and air power to deter the communists from spreading the war.

Cooper, a Yale graduate, distinguished former judge, and former Ambassador to India, asked Fulbright to clarify further the Constitutional questions involving the power to make war. “Are we now giving the President advance authority to take whatever action he may deem necessary respecting South Vietnam and its defense?” Fulbright said that was correct. “Then, looking ahead,” Cooper continued, “if the President decided that it was necessary to use such force as could lead into war, we will give him that authority by this resolution?” Fulbright replied, “That is how I interpret it,” adding that the resolution’s third section, which Russell insisted on including, stated specifically that the measure could be repealed by concurrent resolution. So the Congress could act if it so desired to withdraw the power it gave to the President at any time. Cooper, who turned against the war in 1967, would trust the President for the time being, but still had doubts. “I know that a progression of

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<sup>35</sup>The following debate can be found in CR, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, August 6-7, 1964,

events for 10 years has carried us to this crisis,” he observed. “As long as there is hope and the possibility of avoiding with honor a war in southeast Asia...I hope the President will use his power wisely, and that he will use all other honorable means which may be available” to bring about a peace settlement.

Several southerners, whether cautiously or enthusiastically expressing their approval of the President’s action and support of the resolution, emphasized that America should protect it’s honor in whatever course it took in Vietnam. Stennis, one of the most outspoken opponents of American involvement in Indochina in 1954, wholeheartedly supported the President’s retaliatory strikes and the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. “None of us are happy about the situation in Vietnam and about our position there,” he said. “But that bridge has since been crossed....Today we have no choice. Our flag has been attacked and our country has been challenged in international waters.” He insisted that the American position would be weakened if we show the “slightest weakness or hesitation.” Stennis then predicted the inevitability of a war with China, suggesting that “if we must have a showdown, it is far better that it comes before Red China obtains nuclear weapons. Our honor, our safety and our security are at stake.”

Russell, who, like Stennis, still had doubts about American involvement, said that it would serve “no useful purpose to debate the original decision to go into Vietnam.” The ships had been attacked, and the only thing for the country to do was retaliate. “Our national honor is at stake,” he declared. “We can not and we will not shrink from defending it. No sovereign nation would be entitled to the respect of

other nations, or indeed, maintain its self respect, if it accepted the acts that have been committed against us without undertaking some response.” Though he did not mention Munich specifically, the Georgia senator concluded by warning, as Johnson had the day before, what would happen if the United States did not retaliate. “There is much more danger in ignoring aggressive acts,” he observed, “than there is in pursuing a course of calculated retaliation that shows that we are defending our rights.” If Russell’s last statement suggested he only favored “calculated retaliation,” his comment a minute before removed all doubt as to his support of further military actions against the enemy: “If future events demand a more vigorous response, this nation has the power, and I believe our people have the will, to use that power.” Stennis and Russell sounded a clarion call for military action in defense of American honor, a call that would only become more strident from both southerners as the war escalated. Once the flag was there, and the men were there, neither senator would publicly question the wisdom of being there.

Cooper also sounded a call to honor, but a different purpose. “Like many other senators I have had some experience in war,” he commented. “Anyone who has had such experience knows that it does not make one less afraid or less courageous. It makes one more determined to protect the security and honor of this country. But it makes one also more determined and more thoughtful about seeking out every honorable and just course to avoid the possibility of a great war.” Cooper would be one of the few Republicans to turn away from the war because of his belief that his version of American “honor” was not being pursued effectively.

At the end of the debate, the Senate voted overwhelmingly for the resolution. Only Morse and Gruening dissented. As William Gibbons points out, all the future leaders of the anti-war movement as well as all those who would call for full-scale escalation of the war voted for the resolution. Fulbright, to his eventual embarrassment, had done Johnson's bidding brilliantly. He successfully allayed the fears of a larger conflict, even discouraging the formal proposing of an amendment suggested by Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin that would have limited the scope of the President's escalation of the conflict. Approval of the amendment would have forced the bill to a conference committee to iron the differences out between Senate and House versions. The administration and Fulbright did not want to hold up the process during a crisis situation. Though Morse said later that Fulbright had "played the game, when he should have known, and in fact, did know better," the senator had, in the words of Johnson press secretary, George Reedy, "got a terribly raw deal."<sup>36</sup>

For all practical purposes, Fulbright had been misled and used by the President. He had no reason to doubt Johnson's and McNamara's version of events, as he saw no reason to question his friend the President's assurances that the conflict would remain limited. Johnson also worked on Fulbright's vanity. The senator enjoyed being thought of as a "wise and trusted counselor" to the President. Finally, and possibly most importantly, the outcome of the upcoming election played on Fulbright's mind. He would explain later that he made the "tragic mistake" of not holding full hearings on the Gulf of Tonkin because he was "afraid of Goldwater."

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<sup>36</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 329-330, 334. For the Morse quote, see Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War*, 25.

Throughout America's involvement in Vietnam, Fulbright always feared the entrance of China into the war. If Goldwater was elected, the Arkansas senator reasoned, any "Wilsonian" vision of aiding the South Vietnamese peacefully while keeping the military situation limited would be swallowed up in a full-scale military conflict. He feared, as Johnson did, that a right-wing backlash would ensue if the President did not respond strongly to the attacks. With the passage of the resolution coming on the heels of Johnson's "measured and limited" retaliation for the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, Fulbright played a significant role in enabling the President to effectively campaign as the "Peace candidate" in comparison to the "extremist" statements of Goldwater.

Nevertheless, Fulbright asserted later that the Congress never intended to vote for war in approving the resolution.

In Vietnam we fought a long, costly and ultimately futile war with no more constitutional sanction than the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. To my lasting regret I played a major role in securing the enactment of that Resolution, which I surely did not anticipate would be invoked as legal sanction for a full-scale war. If the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was, as claimed, the "functional equivalent" of a declaration of war, it must stand as the only instance in the nation's history in which Congress authorized war without knowing that it was doing so—indeed, in the belief...that we were acting to prevent war.<sup>37</sup>

Just after the President left office, his friendship with Fulbright destroyed over Vietnam, Johnson had nothing but scorn for the senator's stated regret for aiding the passage of the resolution. "It was a shame somebody didn't think of calling it the

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<sup>37</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 334.



Fulbright Resolution, like the Fulbright Scholars thing, because Senator Fulbright introduced it with his approval, his consent,” he sarcastically remarked. “Don’t tell me a Rhodes scholar didn’t understand everything in that resolution,” Johnson continued, deriding Fulbright as he had several times for his status as an intellectual, “because we said to him at the White House that the President ...is not about to commit forces...unless and until the American people through their Congress sign on to go in.” Once securing Congressional approval, Johnson used the resolution as a hammer to bludgeon any would-be legislative critics of his Vietnam policies. “He pulls it (a copy of the resolution) out of his pocket and he shakes it at you,” observed one Republican Senator. As Johnson advised Dean Rusk in early 1965, “I’d keep those 504 congressmen [who voted for it] chained to me all the time with that resolution.”<sup>38</sup>

The Gulf of Tonkin incident, its response, and the resolution served as a public relations triumph for Lyndon Johnson. The President scored an approval rating of eighty five percent for his handling of the Vietnam situation, which was a marked increase from fifty eight percent only a month before. The majority of people in the country believed that Johnson’s moderate moves saved Americans from war. The President capitalized on his manufactured position as the “peace candidate.” On September 25 in Oklahoma, Johnson asserted, “We don’t want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. We don’t want to get involved in a nation with 700 million people (China) and get tied down in a land war in Asia.” Though the press emphasized the preceding quote, Johnson did not suggest America would withdraw.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid, 333-334. See also White House Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and Dean Rusk, February 25, 1965, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, LBJ Library, Tape WH6502.06, Program 4.

“There are some that say we ought to...get out and come home, but we don’t like to break our treaties and leave people who are searching for freedom.” In New Hampshire a few days later, he qualified his statement even more saying that “for the moment” he did not think the administration was ready to let American boys do the fighting for Asians. From August through the election, Johnson kept his word, refraining from further attacks until re-elected.

Fulbright campaigned enthusiastically for the president, describing him as a “man of understanding with the wisdom to use the great power of our nation for the cause of peace.” At the Democratic National Convention, the Arkansas lawmaker distinguished the president’s vision in foreign policy from that of Goldwater. His rhetoric called to mind his own concept of a “Wilsonian” order made possible by American leadership.

The Goldwater Republicans propose a radical new policy of relentless ideological conflict aimed at the elimination of Communism and the imposition of American concepts of freedom on the entire world. The Democrats under President Johnson propose a conservative policy of opposing and preventing Communist expansion while working for limited agreements that would reduce the danger of nuclear war.<sup>39</sup>

Fulbright said later that he got so involved in the partisanship and so opposed to Goldwater that it clouded his judgment. He might have guessed, but could not have known that while Johnson preached peace, he and his advisors planned for a wider war

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<sup>39</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 374-375. For Fulbright quote, see Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 358.

whose purpose was in part to impose “American concepts of freedom” on South Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 7

### ESCALATION AND DISSENT: THE END OF A FRIENDSHIP

Just after Johnson won the election by the largest margin in American history up to that time, an ad hoc National Security Council group appointed by Johnson to study the Vietnam situation made a report outlining “three broad alternatives” in Vietnam: a continuation of the present policy, with some exception for reprisal attacks, a dramatic escalation of the war with only a lessening emphasis on negotiations, or a “slow, controlled squeeze on North Vietnam in order to bring about negotiations, increasing gradually our present level of operations against the North.” The third option appealed most to Johnson. He could continue the war slowly and deliberately, which would buy him time to use his electoral mandate to push through his Great Society programs. He wanted to keep his options open in Vietnam, particularly because of the continuing instability of the South Vietnamese government. “When you crawl out on a limb,” he said at the time, “you always have to find another one to crawl back on.” However, even as McNamara, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and others urged the president to order a sustained bombing campaign and possibly send combat troops, Johnson still struggled with his final decision. He did order the first phase of bombing on December 1, but the President gave no indication if or when the second phase would occur. He did suggest that members of the administration talk to Congress. “Give good and bad,” the President advised, “and ask for suggestions.”<sup>1</sup>

On December 3, Taylor testified before the chairman and three non-southern members of the Foreign Relations Committee. The ambassador informed the senators

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<sup>1</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 375-376. See also Barrett, *Lyndon B.*

that the administration had been considering stepping up air attacks on infiltration routes and in retaliation for Vietcong attacks. Though he freely admitted, however, that the unstable nature of the South Vietnamese government made such attacks problematic, Taylor felt that American action might shore up the South Vietnamese leadership. His answer disturbed Fulbright. “It seems so futile to go on expanding it [American military action] when the government is so shaky. If you cannot create a reasonably stable government that has the support of a good solid majority of the local people, what are we going to come back to? What are you fighting for? We don’t want this country.”<sup>2</sup>

As the hearings went on, Fulbright became more and more agitated at the thought of the United States entering major military operations to defend a government that did not have the support of its own people. He further decried any effort by Americans to “create” a government acceptable to U.S.” In the last few minutes of the hearing, Fulbright revealed his staunch opposition to a wider war. “If you want to go to war, I don’t approve of it. I don’t give a damn what the provocation is. If they come up here, I am not going to vote to send 100,000 men, or it would probably be 300,000 or 400,000.” Taylor replied that America should “respond with our air, punish them appropriately, and let it go at that.” Fulbright remained skeptical. If the air attacks did not succeed, he believed that the United States would “just go all out.” Taylor agreed that the United States should not limit

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*Johnson’s Vietnam Papers*, 91-93.

<sup>2</sup> SFRC, Volume XVI, *The Situation in South Vietnam*, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., December 3, 1964, 355.

itself to a choice between “all war or no war.” Fulbright tried to clarify his position further by concluding, “This is a hell of a problem. I don’t think it is worth a war.”

In one of his last statements of the hearing, the Arkansas senator replied to Illinois Senator Bourke Hickenlooper’s contention that Communist aggressors had patience enough to realize that to conquer the whole world would take time. And they would be willing to wait twenty-five or even fifty years for the “ultimate conquest of communism.” Fulbright disagreed. “You have a lot more faith in communism than I have,” he replied. “I don’t think it is nearly as great a system of society as you apparently do. I think it is a very poor system and given a little time they are going to collapse.”<sup>3</sup> Though he did not at that time advocate the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, Fulbright was gradually coming to believe that large-scale American military involvement would be a mistake of disastrous proportions.

By the beginning of 1965, the President too could see disaster looming on the horizon. In his later conversations with Doris Kearns Goodwin, Johnson revealed the depths of his fears and insecurities as the year began. If they accurately represent his true feelings in early 1965, the feeling of impending doom must have been nearly debilitating at times. His comments also demonstrate how he and most members of congress often thought of foreign policy only in terms of its domestic impact. “I knew at the start I was bound to be crucified either way I moved,” he said. “If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home...But if I

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 369-370.

left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.”

The President continued, saying that he could “see it coming.” Tracing the historical precedents of when war put an end to popular programs, Johnson asserted that once the war began congressional conservatives “would use it as a weapon against the Great Society.” They never wanted to help poor people or blacks, the President insisted. But, faced with the financing of a war, they could make their opposition to social programs “sound noble in a time of great prosperity.” The war made it possible. “Oh they’d use it to say they were against my programs, not because they were against the poor—why they were as generous and as charitable as the best Americans—but because the war had to come first.”<sup>4</sup> Johnson accurately predicted how many conservatives—a number of them southerners—would react to attempts to fund both “guns” and “butter.”

But the President also believed the political consequences would be too politically debilitating if he withdrew from Vietnam. Johnson remembered how Truman lost his effectiveness after China fell to the Communists, and he did not want that to happen to him. Once again recalling his concerns to Goodwin, Johnson foretold what he believed would happen to him if South Vietnam fell.

This time it would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy’s commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly

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<sup>4</sup>Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 251-252.

man. A man without a spine....Every night when I fell asleep I would see myself tied to the ground in the middle of a long open space. In the distance, I could hear the voices of thousands of people. They were all shouting at me and running toward me: 'Coward! Traitor! Weakling!' They kept coming closer. They began throwing stones. At exactly that moment I would generally wake up...terribly shaken.<sup>5</sup>

Many senators shared Johnson's concerns about South Vietnam falling to the communists, but a large number stopped short of supporting escalation of the war. An Associated Press poll of the Senate on January 6 revealed that 41 of the 100 lawmakers supported some form of a negotiated settlement. Senator Cooper expressed the anxiety of many over South Vietnam's inability to create a popular government. "If these people in [South] Vietnam will not fight and cannot stabilize their government," he said on January 7, "I don't see how we can stay there." Russell, who traveled to the President's Texas ranch over Christmas, 1964, privately counseled Johnson to find a way out of Vietnam. Publicly he sounded a somber note. After repeating Cooper's belief in the necessity of a stable South Vietnamese government, the Georgia senator accurately predicted the future: "This situation is at best a stalemate that promises to be prolonged endlessly."<sup>6</sup>

Though the article reporting the Senate survey did not provide all the names of the forty-one legislators, it did include several specific proposals suggested by southerners. Olin Johnston of South Carolina proposed that the United Nations "set up a buffer zone between North and South Vietnam and police it." Senator Tower of

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 253.

<sup>6</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 398.



Texas and Sparkman of Alabama took a slightly more hawkish position in recommending the bombing of Communist supply lines in the North. Neither favored the deployment of American troops. By far the most hawkish comments came from Strom Thurmond, who suggested the administration “give the South Vietnamese all the supplies they need to bomb the North Vietnamese, but if necessary, bomb them with United States troops, planes, and ammunition.” Allen Ellender, who held an exactly opposite viewpoint, found as little support for his views as his South Carolina colleague. Ellender, the only southerner in the Senate to voice an extreme dovish opinion at this time, advocated that the United States withdraw “without any ifs or ands.” Though the survey revealed a fairly divided body, most of the 63 senators who responded to the survey shared a sense of frustration that there seemed to be no way of ending the war quickly. They did favor a major debate so that the administration and the Congress could clarify American Vietnam policy.<sup>7</sup>

The Foreign Relations committee kicked off the discussions on January 8 as two of its members, Fulbright and Sparkman, along with Vice-President elect Hubert Humphrey heard the testimony of Major General Edward Lansdale, who served in Vietnam as an advisor to Diem and others in the South Vietnamese government, and who had developed a positive relationship with many of the Vietnamese people. Other key members of the staff of the current United States technical and economic aid program in Vietnam testified and generally agreed with Lansdale’s conclusions. The staff members were encouraged to speak frankly and informally, and they and Lansdale

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<sup>7</sup>“Senators Divided on Vietnam Stand,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1965, 1-2.

presented a scathing critique of the present administration of economic and technical aid, as well as an indictment of the entire U.S. mission in South Vietnam. They all believed that America would win the war, but it would have to, according to Lansdale, assign administrators to Vietnam “in positions where their influence can be decisive, whom the Vietnamese trust to share the Vietnamese desire to be free in a way understood by the Vietnamese.” They charged that the present civilian officials in Vietnam, including Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, did not communicate with the average Vietnamese person or try to motivate them politically. To put it in the popular Vietnam War vernacular, the civilian administrators in Vietnam, dealing mainly with the South Vietnamese military and educated classes, did little to actually win the “minds and hearts of the people.” They also criticized the military program, saying in one instance that its sheer strength and size made it unwieldy as a weapon against the smaller Vietcong platoon. “We have tried to meet the small Communist platoon...with a division, [which] takes hours to [organize]. By the time we have got it going, the Communists know it is coming and they are gone, or they ambush it on their way. It is like a lion or an elephant trying to fight a fly, using elephantine methods.” The administrators also criticized McNamara for making a recent speech in Saigon heaping praise on President Nguyen Khanh. “The easiest way to get one of these leaders killed off politically,” one administrator told Fulbright, “is to come out and give him the official U.S. blessing the way Secretary McNamara raised Khanh’s hand.” What were needed, they all suggested, were aid workers and politicians who understood the “Asian mind.”

The testimony deeply troubled the three senators, Fulbright especially. At one point after the Chair asked if a strong and popular South Vietnamese leader could be found quickly, he revealed the depths of his despair over the situation. “If we can’t do this in the very near future, I am afraid I am about to give up on it.” Rather than drag things out, Fulbright said, he would “rather admit we have failed.” The senator reiterated what he had said to Taylor a month earlier: “I don’t want to escalate this war. I am not going to do that, at least with my vote, under any circumstances.” Agreeing with Lansdale and the others that American leaders needed to be found who understood Vietnamese culture and society in order to promote support of the South Vietnamese regime, Fulbright assailed the decision to send a prestigious Massachusetts patrician (Henry Cabot Lodge) followed by a four-star General and former head of the Joint Chiefs (Maxwell Taylor) as Ambassador. “You can’t expect [men of the caliber and character of Taylor and Maxwell] to talk to these minor [South Vietnamese] officials in an informal manner. It is just against their nature to do that.”<sup>8</sup> Fulbright, John Sparkman, and Humphrey all agreed that the President should be informed immediately of the true state of the American civilian mission in South Vietnam. The Chairman reported in a later hearing in May that their revelations got a “very cool reception” from the President. In addition, one of the chief administrators who risked his job to tell the truth about what was happening in Vietnam, was fired for testifying.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>SFRC, Volume XVII, *The Situation in Vietnam*, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., January 7, 1965, 45, 69-81.

<sup>9</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part 2*, 399.

On January 8, the day after Lansdale and the others spoke, Dean Rusk testified before the committee. Because the aid administrators testified informally and off the record, and out of the official channels, neither the chairman nor Sparkman mentioned any of them by name or the content of their specific testimony. But the effect of their testimony on Fulbright was obvious. “Is there anything we can do to change our approach to this thing?” he asked the Secretary of State. “It strikes me that maybe we have thought of this entirely as a military operation, or practically so, and that we have not been willing or able to help them (the South Vietnamese) generate a stable political organization which could then be the basis with which we work.” Fulbright also asserted that he was no longer fully convinced that South Vietnam was strategically vital to American interests. The bottom line, as Fulbright saw it, was that the present policy would not succeed. “...It looks very bad. The only reason I and others have entertained the possibility, even entertained the thought, that maybe we might want to negotiate is simply that it looks hopeless....It just isn’t working.” Rusk defended the administration’s efforts in contacting the Soviets and others to discuss peace, but did not address any possible changes to the way the Americans prosecuted the war or administered the aid program.<sup>10</sup>

In the same hearing, Senator Gore of Tennessee expressed a position consistent with Fulbright’s. He voted for the resolution, and had said at the time that any doubt that remained about America’s involvement in Vietnam was “water under the bridge” after the North Vietnamese attacks on American ships. Behind the closed

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<sup>10</sup>SFRC, Volume XVII, *The Situation in Vietnam*, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., January 8, 1965, 102-104.

doors of the Foreign Relations Committee executive sessions, though, the senator had for a number of years questioned the relevance and wisdom of America's presence in Vietnam. He again repeated his long-held views, agreeing with Fulbright that "South Vietnam has little importance to us, comparatively little." The only consequence he could foresee from America's military involvement in Vietnam would be a major war with China. For that reason, asserted Gore, he had been "urging the administration to find a pretext or to create one to disengage from this great hazard (war with China) that I think we run." The senator then listed other reasons for withdrawal. "Because of the anticolonial feelings of the Indochina peninsula, the intensity of racial feeling, the intensity of religious strife, [and] the inability to follow democratic procedures, perhaps lack of sympathy for democratic processes, political stability may be impossible and (therefore American) success there impossible. [Under those circumstances] it would appear to me that we should find some honorable way to cut our losses."

Fulbright, recalling the vague and frustrating answers of Maxwell Taylor in December over a further American escalation in the conflict, asked Rusk late in the meeting whether it was still the policy of the United States not to escalate the war until a stable government existed in South Vietnam. Rusk said yes and assured the senator that if the President "should come to any other conclusions he would do so in consultation with the leadership of the Congress." Fulbright pressed further, saying that he hoped that the administration was not now contemplating escalating the war in the North to stabilize the government in the South. "I have made it very clear, that I don't think anything can justify the escalation of the war." Rusk replied that the

President and the leadership would discuss the issue. Fulbright wanted more clarification. “Will we be told after the decision is made or before?” he queried. “Will we be invited to a meeting at the White House and told we have made up our mind tomorrow morning or in 30 minutes to launch an attack?” Rusk equivocated, reminding Fulbright that he had been informed of the ongoing covert operations that Johnson had approved. Fulbright, unconcerned about small-scale operations, wanted to know if the President would consult the Congress, as Eisenhower had done in 1954, before ordering any major action. He hoped that Johnson would not make a decision to launch a major attack before at least “feeling the pulse of this committee.” Rusk was noncommittal. “I think, Mr. Chairman, perhaps the reasonable thing on a matter of such importance is to report your remarks to the President.” Fulbright agreed.<sup>11</sup>

As many senators pondered Vietnam policy, Johnson planned for a larger conflict. He had in December generally approved a gradual “phased” escalation, but had not decided on a timetable, or even whether to put “Phase II,” or the sustained bombing of North Vietnam into action. Events in Vietnam convinced him that the time had come. On January 26 yet another coup took place in South Vietnam, with General Khanh dismissing the civilian Premier and installing another one, and at the same time usurping almost dictatorial powers. “Stable government or no stable government,” the president declared to his advisors the next morning, “we’ll do what we ought to do. We will move strongly.” On February 3, the president ordered the first Desoto naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin since they had been suspended the previous September. As McNamara, Bundy, and others advised the president to take

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 112-116, 136-140.

“new action,” things got worse. In the early morning hours of February 7, communist guerillas staged a mortar attack on the U.S army barracks in Pleiku, which killed eight Americans and wounding one hundred twenty.<sup>12</sup>

That evening Johnson convened a meeting of the National Security Council and the congressional leadership of both parties to discuss the administration’s response to the attack. Johnson, however, had already decided. The only thing open to debate was the severity of the response. Majority leader Mansfield stood alone in his dissent. The Montana senator, who usually preferred a one-on-one discussion after having submitted a detailed memorandum to the president, openly challenged Johnson’s decision, saying, as Fulbright and others had done, that the local populace did not support either the South Vietnamese government or the Americans. He also worried about a larger conflict with China. Johnson, in what Bundy described as a “terse and biting” response, said that he had “kept the shotgun over the mantelpiece and the bullets in the basement for a long time.” He had to defend the Americans in Vietnam. To do otherwise, he suggested would be appeasement and cowardice. “Cowardice” the President declared, “has gotten us into more wars than response has.” Johnson revealed to advisor Carl Rowan his personal fear of being labeled a coward. “That damn cigar-smoking [Air Force General] Curtis LeMay is pushing me, and I gotta let him know that I’m as tough as he is.” As Lloyd Gardener suggests, the

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<sup>12</sup>William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part III: January-July 1965* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 45-60.

insecure President might have also been determined to prove that he was also as tough as the hawkish former Kennedy advisors McNamara and McGeorge Bundy.

The National Security Council meeting ended with Johnson ordering 132 U.S. and twenty-two South Vietnamese airplanes to bomb North Vietnamese army barracks in the southern portion of the country. The next morning, February 8, Johnson and McGeorge Bundy then met with congressional leaders. Fulbright and Russell, because they were not elected leaders of the Senate, were not invited. The President announced the American retaliatory strikes had been carried out at a “manageable level.” “As of this moment,” Bundy informed congressional leaders the following day, “we do not plan any further operations related to the incident.” The President also had stressed the “limited” nature of the American military response in his conversation with Carl Rowan. “Just between you and me,” he informed Rowan, “all I want to do is bloody their noses a little bit and maybe they’ll leave their neighbors alone.”<sup>13</sup>

While most members of Congress supported the President, Fulbright, as the *New York Times* reported, was uncharacteristically silent on the matter for a short while. The report suggested that Fulbright had been “snubbed” by Johnson because he chose not to act as floor manager for the upcoming foreign aid bill. The President called the senator on February 9, made a joke of the matter, and invited him to the White House at about 1 PM that day. Fulbright and his wife also dined with the president on February 14, a day after Johnson had decided to step up aerial attacks on North Vietnam. A week later Fulbright publicly supported the President’s action because he believed that Johnson thought that some bombing was necessary to bring



Hanoi to the conference table. The senator praised Johnson for his restraint: “The President has resisted pressures from the hawks to hit a wide range of targets.”<sup>14</sup>

In between the time of Johnson’s meeting with Fulbright and their dinner at the White House, the Vietcong bombed a hotel on the coastal city of Qui Non, killing twenty-three American soldiers. Johnson once again called on his advisors to debate whether the United States should retaliate, even though he had already decided to do so. After announcing his decision to the NSC, he once again met with congressional leaders, who, with one exception, remained silent and supportive. Mansfield did not speak, but, as usual, gave Johnson a memorandum advising that he seek peace before it became necessary to send American combat troops into South Vietnam. A few days later, Khanh’s government fell and was replaced by a civilian official with the backing of the South Vietnamese generals.

The President, ignoring Mansfield’s advice, took another step in deepening America’s commitment in Vietnam. He approved the long-planned “Operation Rolling Thunder,” a bombing campaign of “sustained reprisals” against targets in North Vietnam in order to relieve the pressure from the South Vietnamese government. Fulbright’s worst fears had been confirmed—the President, with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in his pocket, did not feel the need to “feel the pulse” of Foreign Relations or any other committee before ordering a significant escalation of the war. Johnson

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<sup>13</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 394-399, Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Part III, 65-69, Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 169.

<sup>14</sup>E.W. Kenworthy, “Johnson Backed on Capitol Hill,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1965, 1. See also, Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Part III, 70, and Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War*, 35.

agreed to the bombing, but remained skeptical as to its outcome. “Bombers won’t bring ‘em [the North Vietnamese] to their knees—unless we do something we wouldn’t do [meaning bombing population centers in North Vietnam]. We’ll be called warmongers—elsewhere, and here in the U.S. that’ll be more pronounced. Peacemakers’ll be after us.”<sup>15</sup>

In order to preempt the “peacemakers,” Johnson endeavored to persuade most of the Congress to back his Vietnam policy. He met with several members in order to secure their support. With his chief dissenters being mainly moderate-to-liberal Democrats such as Mansfield, Morse, Gruening, George McGovern, and, most recently Frank Church, Johnson began courting Republicans, particularly Minority Leader Everett Dirksen. The President also secured the support of former President’s Eisenhower and Truman for his policies. Of the group having reservations about Vietnam policy, only Morse, Gruening, and McGovern spoke out publicly and forcefully against Johnson. Prominent southerners kept silent. They still hoped, and were assured by administration advisors, that Johnson would not expand the war further.

In addition to lobbying legislators outside his party and former chief executives for support, the President increased the pressure by staging ten congressional briefings on Vietnam to which all members of Congress were invited. Though advisors such as Rusk, Bundy, or McNamara filled in the details, Johnson dominated most of the briefings. Minnesota senator Eugene McCarthy compared the president to a “carnival barker” who used his significant powers of persuasion as well as “folksy stories” to

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<sup>15</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 400-404.

strengthen his argument.<sup>16</sup> At one briefing, Johnson demonstrated not only his penchant for “folksy stories” but also his provincialism. Senator Ross Bass of Tennessee asked the President why America “permitted all these coups” in South Vietnam. Johnson responded:

Let me tell you about the time we needed a good sheriff down in Blanco County in my state. We got a guy to run and he was great for the first two years. Then he got himself a fancy car, and the next thing you know he was keeping a woman; and we couldn’t get rid of him. Now if I can’t get rid of a sheriff, how can I get rid a government in South Vietnam?<sup>17</sup>

Most congressmen realized that Johnson did not hold the briefings to hear opinions, particularly those of his dissenters. On the contrary, he often used his meetings to attempt to destroy support for their arguments. On the same day he expressed his doubts about the success of Rolling Thunder, a defensive Johnson presided over a congressional briefing. The President had grown increasingly distressed at the attitudes of those such as Mansfield and Church. Even Russell had publicly attacked the administration: “We are on a dead end street [in Vietnam] and ours is a bankrupt approach. We ought to negotiate.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, Johnson responded with derision to United Nation’s Secretary General U Thant’s offer to discuss a peace treaty with the North Vietnamese.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 412.

<sup>17</sup>“Southeast Asia: The Waiting Game,” *Newsweek* (March 15, 1965): 25-26.

<sup>18</sup>“The Ultimate Self-Interest,” *Time* (January 22, 1965): 15.

With obvious resentment over the challenges to his Vietnam decisions, he described his interpretation of the events after the Vietcong attack on the American barracks at Pleiku. “I didn’t hear any of these congressmen call a meeting...or get up in protest,” he said bitterly. “I didn’t hear any of the apostles of peace in the world come to me and say, ‘Isn’t this tragic?’” Johnson could not be silent in the wake of the attacks. He had a duty to protect the soldiers, he asserted, and had to make sure Hanoi got the message that “they cant’ come in and murder Vietnamese and murder our people from across the line and go back and me just say ‘thank you.’”<sup>19</sup>

At a briefing nine days later, the president went on the attack once again, charging, as most hawks would throughout the war, that those who publicly disagreed with him only encouraged the enemy. He read part of an intelligence memorandum that summarized Communist attitudes towards negotiations. It reported that Hanoi had rejected all proposals to negotiate because it had a new confidence that had been bolstered by the belief that world and American opinion supported them. The Hanoi government “reads some of our Senators speeches [that say] why don’t we sit down here and be nice folks and get around the table. They have reprints of them and distribute them, and our soldiers walking down the streets of Saigon are asked, when are you leaving? Are you going tomorrow?”<sup>20</sup>

The briefings, however, did not stop the Senate on February 17 from staging a major debate on Vietnam policy. Southerners by and large did not participate in this

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<sup>19</sup>White House Congressional Briefing on Vietnam, Transcript from Tape, February 16, 1965, 18, LBJ Library, Congressional Briefings on Vietnam, Box 1.

<sup>20</sup>White House Congressional Briefing on Vietnam, Transcript from Tape, February 25, 1965, 11, LBJ Library, Congressional Briefings on Vietnam, Box 1.

debate—with a few hawkish exceptions. John Tower of Texas emphasized that the public should be made aware that “we must take stringent action in Southeast Asia if we are to deter and discourage further aggressive adventures by the Communists.”

A.S. Mike Monroney of Oklahoma concurred and said that any attempts at negotiations while the South Vietnamese government remained unstable would be “folly in the extreme.” The senate debate resumed in early March, with Russell Long of Louisiana joining others in supporting the President’s policies.

In the House, Majority Leader Carl Albert of Oklahoma joined most of his colleagues in backing the President’s tougher stance in Vietnam. Congressman Dante Fascell of Florida, a future Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman and co-author of the first War Powers Resolution, also backed the President. However, he emphasized, as Fulbright had in early January, that tactics on the war should be reconsidered. “We have not solved the basic problem of how to deal effectively in non-military terms with what is commonly called subversion, either military, economic, or political.” The administration had prepared to intervene militarily, but should also, according to Fascell, “be working to obtain those solutions which will permit us to deal effectively with subversion without being forced into a partial or full military response.”<sup>21</sup>

Conspicuous in his silence was William Fulbright, one of the Senate’s foremost foreign policy experts. The Arkansas senator still followed the long-held tradition that he had advocated in 1962 of deferring to the executive on foreign policy matters. In addition, his personal ties to the President and his apparent importance to the

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<sup>21</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 131-139.

administration kept Fulbright quiet on Vietnam during the spring of 1965. Fulbright later admitted that he thought this close relationship would make the president agree to stop escalating the conflict. “I thought I could persuade him to change his mind,” the senator remembered. Russell, his comments in early January notwithstanding, did not further criticize the administration on Vietnam. Both experienced legislators also probably considered it unwise to challenge a President who had just won reelection by the largest landslide in American history. With Mansfield also publicly acquiescing to Johnson’s policies, the major “debate” in early 1965, in the words of Robert Mann, was left to “enthusiastic, high-profile supporters and marginally influential detractors.” Even with the expressions of support and dissent, none of the participants in the debate offered anything close to a coherent proposal to bring a settlement. Most dissenters such as McGovern and Church only called for a negotiated settlement, not a total withdrawal. Nevertheless, without either the strong and influential personalities of Russell and Fulbright or the convocation of hearings to investigate alternative solutions, most ignored the detractors and the President pressed on with his escalation.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson, faced with increasingly unfavorable reports of Vietcong infiltration and control of many areas in the South, along with the chronic instability of its government, seemed at a loss as to what to do next. After bombing missions began on February 26, the president revealed his fears to McNamara. “I don’t think anything is going to be as bad as losing,” he said. “I don’t see any way of winning but I would

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<sup>22</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 414.

sure want to feel that every person that had an idea that his suggestion was fully explored. But I do think this bombing has added something.”<sup>23</sup> It took only four days for the president to come to a different conclusion. “Bomb Bomb Bomb. That’s all you know,” the President snapped at Army chief of staff General Harold Johnson. “Well I want to know why there’s nothing else. You generals have all been educated at the taxpayers’ expense, and you’re not giving me any ideas and any solutions for this damn little pissant country. Now I don’t want ten generals to come in here ten times and tell me to bomb. I want some solutions. I want some answers.”<sup>24</sup> Johnson saved the most heart-rending discussions on Vietnam for his conversations with Richard Russell. On March 6, the president revealed the depths of his despair to the Georgia senator. “A man can fight if he can see the daylight down the road. But there ain’t no daylight in Vietnam.” Russell responded as he had previously that Vietnam was the “biggest damn mess I ever saw in my life. You couldn’t have inherited a worse mess.” Johnson replied fatalistically, and, as it turned out, prophetically, “Well [if] they say I inherited it, I’d be lucky. But they’ll say I created it.”<sup>25</sup>

The President, though willing to increase the American military operations in Vietnam, did not want to lose control of decisions over future escalation to the military. He granted General William Westmoreland’s request for additional troops, deploying 3,500 Marines who arrived on March 8 at the American air base near the

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<sup>23</sup>White House Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert McNamara, February 26, 1965, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, LBJ Library, Tape 6502.06, Program 6.

<sup>24</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 416.

coastal South Vietnamese city of Da Nang. However, the President limited their mission to guarding the airbase and performing defensive operations against the Vietcong. No one in the administration believed that the additional troops would be enough. On March 20, the Joint Chiefs informed McNamara that the situation continued to deteriorate and that two additional divisions were needed. On March 23 at his regular “Tuesday Luncheon,” the President asked if the bombing had been working and if Hanoi was ready to negotiate. No one could give conclusive answers to either question. The President wanted to explore all options. Johnson suggested at first that American bombers should revisit some targets. “I don’t want to run out of targets and I don’t want to go to Hanoi. I was a hell of a long time getting into this. But I like it.” Over the next two weeks or so, the Johnson administration debated whether to greatly increase America’s military presence in Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> At the same time however, Johnson made a public statement on March 25 in which he emphasized that he would be willing to travel anywhere at any time and meet with anyone to secure an honorable peace. He also added a fairly new proposal—a promise of economic and social development projects that would help America create a Southeast Asia “free from terror, subversion, and assassination.” The next day, however, Johnson talked tougher on Vietnam as he commented on the arrests of suspects for the recent murder of a white Civil Rights worker during the march from Selma to

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<sup>25</sup>White House Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Russell, March 6, 1965, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, LBJ Library, Tape WH6503.03, Program 1.

<sup>26</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 148-180. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 418.



Montgomery, Alabama. “We will not be intimidated by the terrorists of the Ku Klux Klan,” he emphatically declared, “any more than we will be intimidated by the terrorists in North Vietnam.”<sup>27</sup>

As members of Congress learned that the administration planned to increase American involvement, several grew uneasy at the prospect of a wider war. Republicans in the Senate proposed several resolutions backing the President’s military retaliation to Vietcong attacks, but also emphasizing the need to seek out honorable negotiations. John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky, in backing one such resolution, declared that even though North Vietnam seemed intransigent in its demand for American withdrawal as a precursor to negotiations, “it is the tradition of the United States, and consonant with our system of government, that we take every reasonable step to reach a peaceful settlement without resort to war.”<sup>28</sup>

Fulbright, though working behind the scenes to change Johnson’s mind on escalation, still publicly supported the President. On *Meet the Press* in mid-March he said that a full-scale debate on Vietnam by the Foreign Relations Committee or the entire Congress would be dangerous in the light of the critical situation in South Vietnam. At the same time he quietly offered alternatives to the administration that stopped short of escalation. In mid-March Fulbright met with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, who informed him that the Kremlin responded with “deep embarrassment and concern” to American air strikes on North Vietnam. The Soviets, Dobrynin continued, would have to reluctantly step up the shipment of supplies of

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<sup>27</sup>Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 185-187.

<sup>28</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 209-210.

military equipment to their communist comrades. Fulbright, the internationalist who believed that détente with the Russians would drive a wedge between them and China, tried to convince Secretary of State Dean Rusk to explore an exchange of an American bombing halt with Soviet promises to pressure North Vietnam to stop the flow of men and material into the South. If that could be accomplished, Fulbright foresaw a reconvening of the 1954 Geneva conference to agree on national elections in Vietnam. The administration rejected his proposal. A few weeks later Fulbright tried to enlist Johnson's other southern confidante, Richard Russell, in the effort to promote negotiations. Russell, after repeating his familiar refrain of his initial opposition to American involvement and disgust with the lack of progress in Vietnam, disagreed with the Arkansas senator. The United States, once engaged in the region, had to use all necessary force to bring about an honorable solution.<sup>29</sup>

Undeterred, the Arkansas senator met with the President in late March and spoke at length; Johnson seemed to be listening. Emboldened by the meeting, Fulbright worked with Foreign Relations Committee staffer Seth Tillman to compose a six-point memorandum on Vietnam that he would send to the President. Fulbright warned Johnson that a massive ground and air war would “not only be extremely costly, but it would also revive and intensify the Cold War which had begun to cool off” after the Cuban missile crisis, “and would lead to a revival of jingoism in the United States.” Suggesting that an expansionist China, not the threat of Communism, posed the greatest threat in Asia, he once again revisited his idea for an independent

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<sup>29</sup>Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography*, 366-367.

Titoist communist regime in South Vietnam, “oriented to Russia” instead of the Chinese. To accomplish that end the United States, Fulbright advised, should “declare a moratorium” on the bombing and make it clear through Great Britain or Russia that it would accept an independent regime in South Vietnam “regardless of its political makeup.” He gave the memo to Johnson at a White House dinner on April 5. He never got a response.<sup>30</sup>

With rumors of a possible escalation intensifying, the Arkansas senator asked Johnson advisor General Maxwell Taylor to testify before the Foreign Relations Committee. Taylor opened the session by informing the Senators that America was not losing the war, “we are just not winning in terms of recapturing the people.” The “stagnation of pacification” in South Vietnam would have to be addressed, probably, Taylor admitted under a barrage of questions, by an increase in American troops. One senator wondered whether Congress should rescind the Gulf of Tonkin resolution if it would be used to justify massive numbers of American ground forces. Taylor said that the administration had not made a decision to order a deployment of that scale, but was simply debating what should be done to meet the shortage of manpower in Vietnam. Fulbright commented that although the administration had not decided on the scope of the escalation, it looked as though “in essence the decision has been made to proceed unless the North Vietnamese very unexpectedly say they are sorry and they will go home.” He asked if the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was being “interpreted to mean a full authorization [to send] either 300,000 or 500,000 or 1 ½ million people to

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<sup>30</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 211-212.

South Vietnam?" If so, the senator declared, the Congress "ought to be consulted." Taylor assured Fulbright that "no one I know of in the Government is talking about the figures you have been talking about," but that if the administration ever considered making a massive increase in ground troops "this committee would be most thoroughly consulted."

Fulbright was not satisfied. "You won't put 300,000 [in] all at once, you can't do that. It is only 10,000 at a time," the senator asserted. He repeated Taylor's earlier emphasis on the importance of Southeast Asia to American security and concluded; "if we make up our mind to hold [the region]...it seems to me the only conclusion you can draw is that you are going to" send massive numbers of troops. Fulbright continued, once again questioning the importance of Vietnam to American interests. "It wasn't very long ago that I didn't know where Vietnam was. We had no interest. How had it become vital to us that this particular piece of real estate must be retained at all costs?" As Taylor began to explain using the traditional emphasis on communist aggression and the domino theory, Fulbright interrupted. "Maybe we made a mistake in committing ourselves publicly." Taylor retorted, "We would make a bigger mistake if we give up there, Senator."<sup>31</sup>

Senator Stennis and others from the Armed Services Committee were present at the hearing. The Mississippian voiced concerns similar to Fulbright's. "This matter of putting those land troops in there—I tell you, that is where the serious part comes in," he observed. "It looks to me like we are moving rather rapidly in that direction on a large scale." He continued, "Senator Fulbright has well raised the points here—are

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<sup>31</sup>Volume XVII, *The Situation In Vietnam*, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., April 2, 1965, 366-367.

we doing to do all that and just keep on doing this under this resolution we passed last fall?” He perceptively observed that if Congress did not “intervene or assert ourselves,” it would be “making a decision here.”

Near the end of the hearing, Fulbright addressed the neutralization proposal he had been formulating with the committee staff. He asked Taylor if he could see any circumstances in which the administration would accept a “Titoist-type of Socialist-Communist government” in South Vietnam. Taylor said that if the government came about as a result of American “capitulation” or against the will of the South Vietnamese people, the United States would not accept it. Fulbright pressed Taylor again to imagine a situation in which America would, without either side capitulating, accept an agreement by all parties that would result in a communist neutralist South Vietnam. “It wouldn’t be acceptable to the people we want to help,” Taylor responded. “They don’t want to be Titoist Communists or any other kind.” The frustrated chairman responded perceptively, “Of course, we don’t know that.”<sup>32</sup>

Fulbright, though he may not have fully realized it at the time, hit upon one of the major flaws with United States involvement in Vietnam—a seemingly willful ignorance of South Vietnamese character, motives, or culture. The vast majority of the country’s peasants were, by one account, “always less interested in Washington, Moscow, or Saigon than in their water buffaloes.”<sup>33</sup> Administration leaders should have taken one fact to heart—if anything can be learned from the long violent history of Vietnam, it is that the country’s inhabitants resist foreign powers that try to

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., SFRC, 393-403.

<sup>33</sup> Baritz, *Backfire*, 91.

dominate them. The administration had already learned that lesson to some small degree. Taylor had been recalled as ambassador in part because he used to “preach” to or “lecture” the Vietnamese instead of communicating with them on an equal basis. Fulbright’s fears which he expressed in January about Taylor’s inability to relate to the South Vietnamese people seemed to be fully realized after hearing the former general’s testimony in April. Furthermore, Fulbright worried that Taylor, McNamara, and others would lead an insecure president into a major escalation in Vietnam. The Arkansas senator, though at this point not breaking with Johnson’s policies, grew increasingly concerned that his concept of a Wilsonian order on the basis of the “self-determination of peoples” would get lost in the drive to contain communism in Southeast Asia. However, his worldview had only come to its present state gradually. In 1956, when the Geneva agreement called for elections to unify Vietnam, Fulbright supported Diem’s successful efforts to prevent them.

The President had heard the criticism and uneasiness among the legislators and other groups. On March 24, several elite universities began “Teach-Ins” to inform people about the war and to call for negotiations instead of escalation. In part to quiet the rumblings both within Congress and among the small number of eastern elites he detested yet feared, on April 7 at Johns Hopkins University, Johnson stated his willingness to enter into “unconditional discussions” with the North Vietnamese. He did not order or suggest a cease-fire, however. In a highly ambiguous move, the President called for a solution that would suggest another kind of Wilsonian order—a developing Southeast Asia that would be remade in America’s image—a Southeast Asian “Great Society.” Reminiscent of the progressivism that the last southern

president championed before World War I along with a heavy dose of the New Deal programs that the president had seen work wonders in Texas, Lyndon Johnson unveiled his plan to bring Ho Chi Minh to the conference table. The centerpiece of his speech was the “Mekong River Project,” a proposed system of dams to irrigate more efficiently and to electrify effectively a broad area of Southeast Asia, including parts of North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The program, already begun on a small scale, would be greatly enhanced under Johnson’s new initiative. Johnson stood now on firmer footing—he could deal with Vietnam in a world he understood. If the North Vietnamese would stop fighting they would get a program that would dwarf the New Deal Tennessee Valley Authority Program. He waxed poetic of how a beneficent government changed the landscape in the American South.

In the countryside where I was born and where I live, I have seen the night illuminated, and the kitchen warmed, and the home heated, where once the cheerless night and the ceaseless cold held sway. And all this happened because electricity came to our area along the humming wires of the REA (Rural Electrification Association).<sup>34</sup>

Johnson never forgot the southern Populism of his father, with its emphasis on government helping the “have-nots,” nor of his first political experience with a powerful and magnanimous New Deal government, run by the “Eastern establishment,” that in Johnson’s view finally enabled the South and West a chance to share in the American dream. His experience as head of the Texas office of the National Youth Administration in the 1930s taught him that government could “break

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<sup>34</sup>Gardner, *Pay Any Price* 185-192.

the poverty cycle.” In a sense, Johnson would propose in 1965 to do for Vietnam what he had done in Texas, and what he planned to do for the poor in America of all races. “The vast Mekong River,” Johnson informed the audience at Johns Hopkins, can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA.” The President, ignorant of Vietnam, its history, or its people, believed a New Deal type of reform would appeal to Ho Chi Minh as it did for the people in the Tennessee Valley.<sup>35</sup> He would use America’s money and resources to “improve the life of man in that conflict-torn corner of the world.”

Johnson, who in Fulbright’s words was more of a “doer than a thinker,” admitted that before he went to sleep each night he would ask himself, “Have I done everything I can to unite this country? Have I done everything I can to help unite the world, to try to bring peace and hope to all the peoples of the world? Have I done enough?” On the other hand, he countered this beneficent and generous proposal to the enemy with a different type of activism. “We *will not* be defeated. We *will not* grow tired. We *will not* withdraw. We must stay in Southeast Asia—as we did in Europe—in the words of the Bible: ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.’”

An exuberant President spoke to press secretary Bill Moyers on the helicopter ride back to the White House. “Ole’ Ho can’t turn me down. My God, I’ve offered Ho Chi Minh \$100 million to build a Mekong Valley.” Moyers said later that he marveled at Johnson’s confidence that this offer would somehow end the war. Displaying his provincialism once more, Johnson again referred to the offer he just made Ho Chi Minh. “If that’d been George Meany [an American labor leader],” he

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 6, 192.



said, “then he’d have snapped at it!” Even as he deepened America’s military involvement, Johnson clung to the transformation of Vietnam using the same activist government that transformed the Texas hill country. “I want to leave footprints of America in Vietnam,” he said in 1966. “I want them to say when the Americans come, this is what they leave—schools, not long cigars. We’re going to turn the Mekong Delta into a Tennessee Valley.”<sup>36</sup>

Most of the Congress along with an overwhelming majority of the country responded favorably to the speech. Fulbright also praised Johnson’s proposals, but admitted to reporters that he wished the president would have followed them up with an announcement of a bombing halt. The bombing, Fulbright declared, only caused North Vietnam to “dig in” and prevented Russia from discussing any efforts to use its influence to get negotiations started. What harm, he asked, would there be in halting the bombing temporarily to facilitate dialogue between the two countries? Rusk publicly dismissed Fulbright’s proposal, which raised the ire of the Foreign Relations Committee Chief of Staff Carl Marcy. He wrote the chairman later in April, “I think the time has come for Mr. Rusk to go,” he said. “He was a good Secretary when Kennedy was president. Kennedy had a sophistication about international relations and Rusk was good man to take policy guidance from a President who...knew about foreign policy. LBJ, on the other hand, is a babe in the woods in the field of foreign policy.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 193-197.

<sup>37</sup>Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography*, 369.

Fulbright's bombing halt proposal played well with the public. The senator's mail was overwhelmingly supportive. Johnson reluctantly and resentfully agreed to the bombing halt for six days in May and suggested he only ordered it to show "Mansfield, Fulbright, and the *New York Times*," that the United States made the first move towards peace, only to have Hanoi "spit in our face." In addition, in a briefing with congressional leaders of both parties on May 2, Johnson, according to a press report, made it clear that he was upset about Capital Hill sniping." Throughout most of his dialogue, the report stated, "Mr. Johnson was glaring at Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, his old friend who had called for a pause in the bombing of North Vietnam." <sup>38</sup>

A few days earlier the Arkansas senator pressed Secretary Rusk to tell him whether the President intended to come to the Congress with another resolution in light of the increasing number of American soldiers in Vietnam. The Chairman stated that America's increasing military commitment "appears to be quite an enlarged operation from that which was contemplated last summer when the [Gulf of Tonkin] resolution was passed." Rusk stated unequivocally that the administration had no intention of recommending another Congressional resolution "unless there is some substantial development from the other side in the general scale of operations, unless the situation takes quite a turn." He did not tell Fulbright or the others on the committee that Johnson had already approved troop increases up to 82,000 and was considering 42,000 more. Fulbright later revisited his concerns over the enlargement of the war. He stated that Congress affirmed in August 1964, an existing and limited

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 369-370. See also Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*,

American commitment in Vietnam. “But we are—for practical purposes—waging war on North Vietnam. I do not know if we are going to send 30,000, 50,000, 100,000 men, that the Congress might have a say about it.” Fulbright summed up his frustrations by stating that though he remained loyal to Johnson, his faith was being tested. “This operation in Vietnam has obviously been controversial. A lot of us have been quiet. We do not want to embarrass the administration...because we realize this is a very difficult situation.” Fulbright was sending a thinly veiled threat of ending his relative public silence on Vietnam if his committee did not receive answers.<sup>39</sup>

Just as it seemed Johnson’s Vietnam policy would be subjected to a long Congressional debate, fate intervened. In late April, in what the administration touted as a crisis, the President dispatched the Marines to the Dominican Republic to, as he initially reported, “protect American lives.” Two days later he announced another goal of preventing “the establishment of another Communist government in the Western Hemisphere.” Juan Bosch, the liberal, democratically-elected president had been overthrown in 1963 by a right-wing military coup backed by conservative businessmen, church leaders, and landholders. In a scenario that had been and would be replayed in Latin America, the U.S. supported the military junta that overthrew Bosch because of its strong anticommunist stand. When pro-Bosch rebels posed a threat to the unpopular military rulers, Johnson exaggerated the Communist threat and sent the Marines in part to deflect criticism of his Vietnam policy.

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<sup>39</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 239-240.

To silence congressional critics, as well as to tie them to the administration's policies, Johnson proposed what even advisor William Bundy described as a "gimmick." The president asked for a seven hundred million dollar supplemental appropriation to continue American efforts in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. The president's request made it clear what Congress would be voting for, in addition to the money. Each "member of Congress is also voting to persist in our effort to halt communist aggression in South Vietnam. Each is saying that the Congress and the President stand united before the world in joint determination that the independence of South Vietnam shall be preserved and communist attack will not succeed." He wanted to make this small appropriation request, in Bundy's words, into a "small-scale Gulf of Tonkin Resolution." Any "no" vote could then be interpreted as a refusal to support the American soldiers in harm's way in Vietnam.

On May 4, 1965 Johnson met with the Speaker of the House John McCormack, Mansfield, and the more senior members of the foreign policy, Armed Services, and Appropriations Committees from each house of Congress. He also invited the press in the briefing. Johnson emphasized America's commitment to the defense of South Vietnam, claiming that a loss would trigger "endless conquest" by the communists. "Thus, we cannot and we will not withdraw or be defeated" he declared. The President proposed that America should continue this defense until "somehow, somehow, we find a civilized solution and a readiness to exchange views across a conference table." In addition, Johnson, emphasizing the limited nature of American involvement, said that "in the long run there can be no military solution to the problem of Vietnam." He assured the legislators, however, that he and his advisors were

“relentlessly pursuing every possible alternative.” At the end of his speech, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mendel Rivers of South Carolina and House Appropriations Committee chairman George Mahon of Texas expressed their support of the President’s policies and of the new appropriation.<sup>40</sup>

Over the next two days Congress debated the bill. The House remained solidly behind Johnson and the war. Rivers, as many southern conservatives would throughout the war, criticized congressional and other critics. “There are voices of dissent in the country and in Congress,” he observed. “These voices must be shown as unrepresentative of the great weight of public opinion.” A near unanimous vote for the appropriation “would be a way to do it.” Congressman Robert L. F. Sikes of Florida, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee subcommittee dealing with military matters, agreed with his colleague from South Carolina. A vote for the appropriation, Sikes declared, was “a vote for victory with the least possible delay.” “It will show that there is no serious division among the American people on the question of standing together against enemies of our way of life,” he concluded. Most in the House went along with the president. They passed the supplemental appropriation 408-7. No southern House members dissented.

In the Senate, Russell Long, the Majority Whip, sounded a note similar to his colleagues in the House. After affirming the administration’s commitment to have a “show of strength” he lambasted anyone who advocated an American withdrawal from Vietnam. Such critics “contribute to the Communist notion that they can put pressure upon us, and that if they continue their campaign of assassination and terror and step it

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 242-243

up, America will pull out.” Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia concurred. He said that the administration had to make it clear it would stay the course because a recent Washington protest march and the “Teach-In” movement that began in late March might have made Hanoi “confused” as to American resolve.<sup>41</sup>

A significant number of senators voted for the appropriation, but made it clear that they did not want their affirmative vote to be thought of as unconditional support for the President’s Vietnam policy. John Sherman Cooper said he would support the policy, but urged the president to continue to “seek a [negotiated] solution consistent with our honor and our freedom.” Gore revealed that he had for the last four years in executive sessions of the Foreign Relations Committee “expressed my grave concern, doubt and reservation about the wisdom, advisability, and effectiveness of the policy being pursued in South Vietnam.” He further warned that America was “tempting fate and is practicing brinksmanship with the greatest tragedy that might face this country.” Escalation of the war, he asserted, could only lead to two outcomes—endless war and reconciliation between Russia and Red China. Therefore he urged the United States to undertake a “peace offensive” and praised Johnson’s pledge to “negotiate for peace without conditions.”<sup>42</sup>

John Stennis, the floor manager of the bill, tried to allay the fears of Gore, Cooper and especially Frank Church regarding the implications of accepting Johnson’s “gimmick.” Church asked whether passage of the appropriation would mean that

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 244-247.

<sup>42</sup>CR, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., May 5, 1965, 9497-9499.

“each one of us endorses whatever action may take place in the future?” Stennis asserted that he did not think that the Congress was signing a “blank check” by endorsing the bill. Stennis still believed the President acted in good faith toward the Congress. He said the only question that the administration posed to the legislative branch in requesting the appropriation was, “Are we going to give them men who we have already sent off to do the jungle battle the tools with which to fight?” If the Congress did not pass the resolution, the Mississippi Senator asserted, “It would be a direct message sent to our fighting men that we are not going to back them up....It would be the first time that this great government ever sent its men on foreign soil, or to fight on any soil, and then failed to provide the necessary money with which to purchase the tools of war.” The senator concluded with a dramatic flourish: “God save our nation from such a day. God save our boys from such a fate.”<sup>43</sup>

Congressman Dante Fascell of Florida later commented on the significance of the vote. He said that most members of Congress felt they had to vote for the appropriation because “it was a situation where you’ve got to back up the men at the front.” Its success made future Vietnam appropriations easier to pass, and the patriotic appeal used effectively by Johnson in this case, became, in Fascell’s words, “the linchpin for greater involvement in Vietnam.” Stennis call to “support our troops” no matter what any individual doubts on the wisdom of the war, served as, in the words of historian William C. Gibbons, “the most single determinative factor in Congress’ support throughout the war.” Throughout the course of the war, Congress resisted every attempt to eliminate funding for the prosecution of the war. Even the

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<sup>43</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 436.

Senate's most harsh critics, including Fulbright, Church, McGovern and others, would support appropriating money for a war they came to believe was immoral.<sup>44</sup>

As the 1965 bombing halt proved indecisive, and the South Vietnamese government went through yet another coup, Johnson received more bad news. The air war had not been effective by mid-May in halting infiltration of soldiers and materials from North Vietnam into South Vietnam. Johnson pressed onward, making a speech at the end of May to request for an additional eighty-nine million dollars to the Foreign Aid bill as part of his economic development project for Southeast Asia. The President wanted Fulbright to lead the fight for the amendment and the bill itself. Though the Arkansas senator had been apprehensive about possible further escalation of the conflict in Vietnam, he had of late been encouraged by Johnson's seeming restraint in the bombing campaign in not targeting population centers and by Johnson's shrewd choice of Eugene Black, a man Fulbright greatly respected, to administer the economic program. He gladly accepted the challenge to sponsor the amendment and agreed to act as floor manager for the foreign aid bill.

In the June 3 hearings on the economic development fund request, Fulbright expressed to Secretary Rusk the hope that the program would show to the communists the good faith of the Americans. Sounding much like Johnson did in his Johns Hopkins speech, Fulbright characterized the aid program as giving promise to the people of Southeast Asia "that there is hope for a better life, and [that the people of the region could] substitute hope and food for guns and bullets." It would be,

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<sup>44</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Volume III*, 249-250. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 437.



Fulbright asserted, “a downpayment on the pledge that we would like to spend money in improving the conditions there in hopes that this would affect even the attitude of the Vietcong.” Fulbright hoped that a successful economic development program would finally have in convincing the enemy, who had thus far been unresponsive to talks, to begin negotiations to bring about a truce.<sup>45</sup>

On June 7, Fulbright, in the floor debate over the amendment, once again preached a message of bringing hope to the Vietnamese people through economic development. But he advised that America not try to use this aid to impose its will or values on Southeast Asia. “The peoples of the emerging countries are caught up in a new nationalism, a force more meaningful to them and therefore powerful than either of the two competing ideologies.” We must help these nations, Fulbright insisted, but “they also must have our respect.” Just as the people of the American South felt suspicious about their compatriots cozying up to “Eastern interests,” Fulbright reasoned, so did the developing nations suspect their leaders if they align themselves too closely with the West. If the Americans aided the Vietnamese, but also allowed them to “resolve their own problems in their own ways” then Fulbright hoped to come to an understanding with the people that would lead to an end to the war. “What appeals to me most about the proposal,” he said, “is the possibility—I hope it is a probability—that the emphasis would be changed from escalating the war into construction and reconstruction and development in that area.”

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<sup>45</sup>SFRC, Volume XVII, *President's Request for Additional Aid for Southeast Asia*, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Session, June 3, 1965, 622.

John Sherman Cooper suggested that the paltry eighty-nine-million-dollar sum would not only be woefully short to meet the needs of the people, it would be just another addition to an economic program that had not shown results since its inception in 1954. He hoped, however, that the money would be an opening salvo in a “broad-scale program centered on the President’s Johns Hopkins Speech.”<sup>46</sup> The amendment passed, but no one, including Fulbright who steered it through the Senate, thought that it would be enough to turn the tide in Vietnam. The Arkansas senator felt he would have to speak on the war again soon, this time more forcefully.

On the same day of Fulbright’s speech, Johnson received another request from Westmoreland for “46,000 troops immediately, with another 35,000 to follow. Johnson was skeptical. “Wouldn’t sending in massive numbers of American troops,” he asked his National Security group on June 11, “only lead to the demand for more? How do we extricate ourselves?” He rejected McGovern’s proposal to “talk to the Vietcong” and did not accept Westmoreland’s numbers. Russell, who was the only member of Congress at the meeting, suggested that Johnson’s preferred “gradual escalation” strategy would not work either. Johnson eventually decided on a middle course between the military and the doves. He agreed to escalate the war “little by little” in order to provide political cover domestically, a policy he hoped would provide “the maximum protection for the least cost.” Fulbright’s fears of the war being expanded “10,000 soldiers at time” inched closer to reality.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>CR, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., June 7, 1965, 12732-12738.

<sup>47</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 441-442.

In order to shore up support from the “reservationists” who supported the President yet called for a negotiated settlement, Johnson summoned his old friend from Arkansas to the White House on June 14. The President wanted Fulbright to make a speech on the floor of the Senate supporting the administration’s Vietnam policy. Fulbright would not entertain proposals to escalate the war. “All right Bill, you think we should negotiate,” Johnson replied testily. “Let me show you how many times we have offered to talk with them,” the President said, hastily pulling scraps of memoranda from his pockets. “They have spit in our eyes,” he continued. “How do you negotiate with that?” Fulbright, after enduring a lecture, as he later described it, “at a machine-gun clip” from the President, said plainly that he would oppose an escalation. Johnson asked that the senator to at least mention in the speech how patient the President had been after extending the olive branch on April 7. He did not want to send more troops, but American honor was at stake. Fulbright did not retreat from his position, but agreed to make the speech.<sup>48</sup>

In his June 15 Senate speech Fulbright did enthusiastically support the administration, but neither the senator’s conclusions nor the Republican and public response pleased the President. Fulbright praised Johnson’s “great leadership” in resisting the pressures for full-scale escalation. He stressed that Johnson remained “committed to the goal of ending the war at the earliest possible time by negotiations without preconditions.” “In so doing,” he continued, “he is providing the leadership appropriate to a great nation.” However, the senator’s notions on how to proceed in the war differed markedly from the President’s. As Johnson privately wanted to find a

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 444-445.

way to get “our foot on the neck” of the Communists in order to make them capitulate, Fulbright stated that most Americans, and the administration, as far as he knew, believed that “a complete military victory, though theoretically attainable, can in fact be attained only at a cost exceeding the requirements of our interests and our honor.” On the other hand, the Arkansas senator was “no less opposed to an unconditional American withdrawal.” He therefore concluded that the administration’s policy “has been, and should remain—one of determination to end the war at the earliest possible time by a negotiated settlement *involving major concessions by both sides*”(emphasis added). In response, Republicans charged that Fulbright, and by extension, the Johnson administration, would accept a negotiated settlement that would weaken South Vietnam by including the communists in a coalition government.<sup>49</sup>

Fulbright appeared on NBC’s *Today Show* the next morning to clarify his remarks. He assured reporter Sander Vanocur that the President had not seen his speech before he delivered it and that he took “full responsibility” for its content and conclusions. “I do not attribute them to the president,” he said unequivocally. When Vanocur asked Fulbright whether a “major concession” in negotiations would be the inclusion and the recognition of the Vietcong, the senator went on record as one of the first influential political leaders to support their participation. “I think that they should

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<sup>49</sup>CR, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., June 15, 1965, 13656-13658.

recognize the parties involved whether or not they are legitimate in the sense of traditional legitimacy, but they are the major force there.”<sup>50</sup>

Within the next two days, several major Republicans attacked Fulbright’s speech. Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen, a Johnson ally on Vietnam, blasted Fulbright’s conclusions. “Any who talk of concessions have an obligation to specify the kinds of concessions which they are prepared to advocate,” he insisted. “They have an obligation too to indicate the limits beyond which they are prepared to advocate.” House Minority Leader Gerald Ford also criticized Fulbright’s proposal of Vietnam-wide elections based on the 1954 Geneva accords. “Anyone who thinks that a free election was possible in Communist North Vietnam knows little of how Communists could have fallen into a Moscow-Peking trap,” he concluded. In addition, Richard Nixon suggested that Fulbright’s statement might give the enemies of the United States the impression that America was divided on “the crucial importance of prosecuting the war.” Any negotiations at this point, Nixon insisted, would be “surrender on the installment plan.”<sup>51</sup>

Johnson, foreseeing a replay of the “right-wing” backlash that plagued Harry Truman as well as a threat his Great Society agenda, quickly disavowed any connection with the conclusions of the Arkansas senator. He called Fulbright right after the *Today Show* interview and heatedly advised the senator of what he already

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<sup>50</sup>“Senator Fulbright is Interviewed,” Transcript, *Today Show*, National Broadcasting Company, J. William Fulbright Papers (hereafter referred to as Fulbright Papers), Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AK, Series 48, Box 44:1.

<sup>51</sup>“GOP Says Fulbright ‘Distorted History’ in Call for Meeting,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 20, 1965. See also “Nixon Assails Fulbright Plea,” *Arkansas Gazette*, June 20, 1965, Fulbright Papers, Series 48, Box 44:1.

knew, that his views did not represent those of the administration. In a press conference the next day the President publicly opposed any efforts to legitimize or recognize the Vietcong. He also reiterated that he had the authority to act as he had been in Vietnam because of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Fulbright himself commented on Johnson's possible difficulty with conservative Republicans. "As the Republicans see it," he observed, "the President is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. If there are a lot of American casualties, they'll talk about the 'Johnson war' the way they talked about 'Truman's war' in Korea. If the war is settled by negotiation, they'll claim that we 'lost' Vietnam the way we 'lost' China." The next day, as if to reemphasize Johnson's resolve in Vietnam, Secretary McNamara announced the deployment of 21,000 additional troops to Vietnam.<sup>52</sup>

Since the beginning of the year the calls for a decisive and more militant Vietnam policy had also been increasing among conservative southern Democrats as well. In the wake of the Pleiku attacks, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mendel Rivers advocated "as tough a policy as possible." He insisted that the United States should be prepared to "do anything to protect our own troops."<sup>53</sup> Senator John Stennis warned in early April that the United States should prepare to "fight a stepped up war in Vietnam for an indefinite period."<sup>54</sup> In one of the most militant statements by any member of Congress during 1965, Majority Whip Russell Long of

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<sup>52</sup>Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War*, 43.

<sup>53</sup>Huntley, "Might Rivers of Charleston," 293.

<sup>54</sup>"Fulbright Urges Raid Halt; Stennis Sees War Step-Up," *Dekalb (Mississippi) Commercial Appeal*, April 14, 1965, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

Louisiana, on a February 28 taping of NBC's *Meet The Press*, advocated using whatever methods...and weapons necessary to win," even nuclear weapons.

If Communist China comes in we will take them on and if Russia wants to deal herself a hand, we will go ahead, but there will be no sanctuary....We have [to have] the courage to face these people and they might as well know it now as some other time and many of us feel we would do well to fight here as somewhere else.<sup>55</sup>

Almost every letter to Long in response to his statement condemned the senator for his reckless bellicosity. Though most of Long's most critical correspondence on his television appearance came from outside the South, many letters from the region expressed alarm at what the Louisiana Senator proposed. "Goldwater was labeled trigger happy," a Dallas woman wrote, "You top him three-to-one."<sup>56</sup>

Although many southern legislators would not have gone as far as Long suggested, they did advocate an increased effort to bring about a military victory, and blamed the lack of effectiveness of Johnson's Vietnam policies on the Defense Department. Rivers, Russell, Stennis, and other leaders saw a contradiction in fighting an "undeclared war" while at the same time closing several military bases. McNamara championed the effort to cut costs, which rankled several southern legislators for reasons of national and self-interest. While southerners considered it inadvisable to reduce bases and forces when escalating a war, they also complained because several of the proposed closings would be in the South. Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia

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<sup>55</sup>*Meet the Press*, Transcript of Television program, National Broadcasting Company, Russell Long papers, hereafter cited as Long papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Box 600.

<sup>56</sup>Eula M. McNabb to Russell Long, February 28, 1965, Long papers, Box 600.

and other southern states had a financial stake in increased military spending.

Therefore, their senators and representatives soundly attacked McNamara.

Southern legislators also suspected that Johnson's decision to fight a "limited war" had been designed by McNamara. Many of them respected the views of the Joint Chiefs much more than the civilians running the war. Congressman Jamie Whitten of Mississippi, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, suggested that McNamara busy himself running the Defense Department, and "leave the military decisions to military people acting on the advice of our most experienced advisors on the Asiatic or eastern mind." In an exaggerated statement, but one fairly typical of southern sentiment, Whitten concluded that it would be difficult "to impress either the Vietcong or the Vietnamese when moving about over the rice paddies like a boy scout."<sup>57</sup> As American involvement deepened, the large number of southerners would increasingly call for harsher measures against the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong to secure an American victory.

A question on a June 28, 1965, Gallup poll illustrates the extent of southern feeling on the war by mid-1965. In response to the question "*All in all, what do you think we should do about Vietnam now? We can follow one of three courses: Carry the ground war into North Vietnam, at the risk of bringing Red China into the fighting; negotiate a settlement with the Communists; or continue to try to hold the line there to prevent Communists from taking over South Vietnam. Which do you favor?*" Southerners approved of carrying the war North more than any other region,

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<sup>57</sup>CR, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., June 23, 1965, 13965.



by a very slight margin. However, those southerners who supported negotiation only numbered eighteen percent, which was significantly lower than that in all other regions. In all, southerners, while not unanimous, did back a continued and heightened American military effort slightly more than other regions.<sup>58</sup>

In the face of criticism from both hawks and doves, the President still agonized in late July over his next moves in Vietnam. He revealed in a press conference on July 9 that U.S. manpower needs “are increasing and will continue to do so.” “Whatever is required,” he declared, “I am sure will be supplied.”<sup>59</sup> On July 21, Robert McNamara returned from consultations with Lodge and others in Vietnam and reported his observations and recommendations to the President. “The situation in Vietnam is worse than a year ago (when it was worse than a year before that),” he said. The Secretary outlined three choices for the President: withdrawal, continuation of the present policy, or the one he favored, expansion “promptly and substantially [of] the U.S. military pressure against the Vietcong.” He proposed a total of 175,000 American troops in Vietnam by October, a call-up of the reserves and National Guard troops, and an increase in the regular armed forces by 375,000. After deliberating a week with the Cabinet and NSC, Johnson rejected the reserve and National Guard call up, but agreed to an increase of 50,000 additional troops in Vietnam.<sup>60</sup>

As Johnson grew close to a decision, White House assistant Douglas Cater tried to line up several congressional speeches supporting the upcoming decision, even

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<sup>58</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 352.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>60</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 448-458.

though it had yet to be announced. On July 24 he spoke with Carl Marcy, Chief of Staff of the Foreign Relations Committee, who complained that the administration did not communicate regularly enough with the committee and said that the chairman had considered the idea of getting together with several senators, including Russell, Aiken, Stennis, Church, and possibly others, to discuss alternatives in Vietnam. Marcy had suggested the notion to Fulbright a few days before, warning that the administration seemed to be “on the verge of another important decision,” and that the senators should discuss alternatives and ask for a private meeting with the President. Marcy suggested that it would be the “last chance to do something that may halt this constant progression toward war.”<sup>61</sup> It would have been unlikely that the senators could have persuaded the President to slow down the pace of escalation. Nevertheless, the meeting did not take place until after Johnson had made the decision.

The President announced his decision to eleven congressional leaders at about 6:30 PM on July 27. Southerners included House Majority Leader Carl Albert of Oklahoma, Majority Whip Hale Boggs of Louisiana, and Senators George Smathers of Florida and Russell Long. The President summarized five options he had considered in responding to Westmoreland’s request for more troops. Three, going “all out,” withdrawing, and keeping the status quo, he rejected out of hand. That left two viable options. The first involved declaring a national emergency, calling up the Reserves, and asking Congress for a massive appropriation and a significant increase in troops. The President told the legislators that he rejected it because such action might provoke

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<sup>61</sup>Memorandum: Carl Marcy to William Fulbright, July 22, 1965, Marcy papers, NARA, Chronoloical files, 1965, Box 5.

the Soviets or the Chinese. The second more palatable option would be to give Westmoreland what he needed in the short run, to increase draft calls, to ask Congress for one or two billion dollars, and to “defer a full presentation of requirements” until January. The President made it clear that he supported the latter option.

Most members of Congress supported the President’s decision and accepted that the war would be long and costly. Long enthusiastically backed Johnson, reducing the decision to a question of whether the United States should “put more men in or take a whipping.” “We’d better go in,” he declared emphatically. Senator Smathers questioned whether Johnson’s new Vietnam initiative marked a change in Vietnam policy. Johnson assured him that his decision represented a further step to keep the South Vietnamese from being overrun. “As aid to the VC increases, our need to increase our forces goes up. There is no change in policy,” he said. Of all eleven influential members of Congress, only Mike Mansfield dissented. However, he said that in his capacity as senator and Majority Leader he would support the President. Not at any time did the President ask for suggestions—he only informed the Congressmen of his decision.<sup>62</sup>

The Majority Leader had spoken with the President earlier in the afternoon, informing Johnson that Fulbright had requested a meeting with the Mansfield and several other influential senators. Johnson seemed distressed over the meeting and expressed his disappointment that the senators would consult each other before he advised them on his decision. During the conversation with Mansfield, the President took out some of this frustration by lashing out at Fulbright. “Bill’s never going to be

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<sup>62</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 427-430.

much of a leader because he's always going to find things that *worry* him and *concern* him," he stated condescendingly. "He's really worried about things in Vietnam, [but] when I sit down with him he AGREES with me when I get through." Later in the conversation the President revealed that his main problem with the Arkansas senator was that he did not back the president one hundred percent all the time, and, in doing so, shoulder the burden, and the blame, for the war. "I've asked [Fulbright] and whoever he wants on the committee, to be available every Tuesday morning, or any morning that Bill says, to go there regularly and keep right up with the constant surveillance of this thing. Instead of "bellyaching about it outside" the President concluded, "I would give anything if he'll assume any of the responsibility for it." <sup>63</sup>

Given Johnson's intense desire for consensus, the memorandum the President received from Mansfield later that day could not have been pleased him. Just after his phone conversation with the President, Mansfield met with the most knowledgeable and influential senators on foreign policy—the memo reflected their collective views. William C. Gibbons described the meeting's participants in this fashion. "In short, these six men constituted an extraordinary 'privy council.' They were accomplished men of power and influence, whose insight and good judgment made them among the most respected American political figures of the time." Four of the six congressional "wise men" were southerners. In addition to Fulbright and Russell, John Sherman Cooper, a soft-spoken scholarly lawyer, former judge and

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<sup>63</sup>Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and Mike Mansfield, July 27, 1965, LBJ Library, Recordings of Telephone Conversations—White House Series, Tape WH6507.08.

ambassador, and John Sparkman of Alabama, a high-ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, attended the meeting.

The memo included nineteen points that the senators discussed. Though Mansfield admitted that not all participants agreed with every point, there was “substantial agreement” on many of them. All six did agree that “we are deeply enmeshed in a place where we ought not to be; that the situation is rapidly going out of control; and that every effort must be made to extricate ourselves.” Some of the conclusions emphasized options for bringing about a negotiated settlement. One point centered on the United Nations as a possible “important link in a way out of the situation.” Another suggested setting up an “underground contact” with the Russians or the Chinese, and still another called for a “bombing halt of longer duration.” A second grouping of some of the memo’s conclusions centered on criticisms of both administration actions and assumptions. One point stated simply that the President was “ill-advised to begin the bombing of North Vietnam” and that the administration then “compounded” the error by its limited character. Another point directly challenged the Secretary of Defense, stating that “McNamara has been a disappointment in his handling of the situation, probably because he is being used in a way in which he ought not to be used.” The memo stated that South Vietnam was by no means a “vital area of concern for America.” Therefore, if America aided South Vietnam in achieving victory, “what have you achieved?” One of the most important conclusions of the prestigious group of legislators could only be discouraging to Johnson. “The country is backing the President,” the senators agreed, “because he is President, not necessarily out of any understanding or sympathy with policies on

Vietnam.” Lying beneath public support, the senators insisted, was “deep concern and a great deal of confusion which could explode at any time.” The President responded by answering most of the nineteen points save the one in which all six agreed—that the United States should not have been in Vietnam.<sup>64</sup>

The next day, July 28, 1965, the President briefed a gathering of thirty-three influential senators and representatives, which included the leadership of both parties in both houses as well as the chairs and ranking minority members from the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, Appropriations Committees, and House Foreign Affairs and Senate Foreign Relations committees. Of the thirty-three influential legislators, twelve southerners attended the meeting. Only Fulbright asked Johnson why he thought “this particular area” deserved massive American military support. Johnson responded by restating the Domino theory and the fear of communist expansion. To placate Fulbright, he then added, “There are military men who’d like to go a lot further.”

At noon the President announced his decision to increase immediately the number of American troops in Vietnam from 75,000 to 125,000, to increase in the draft from 17,000 to 35,000 men a month, and to request an additional appropriation from Congress. The President presented the latest escalation in the same terms and the same assumptions that drove the previous ones. He used the Munich analogy, emphasized the necessity of honoring America’s commitment to its friends, and again utilized the Domino theory to warn of a possible threat of further communist

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<sup>64</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 432-436.

aggression in Asia. As he had assured Senator Smathers the day before, his brief announcement suggested a continuation and expansion of the administration's policy, not a change. Though the President hated to send "the flower of our youth, our finest young men," into the jungles of Southeast Asia, he said that America had to resist aggression or else be overrun. America would not be "swept away in the flood of conquest," Johnson declared. "We will stand in Viet-Nam." In fighting back, America would finally convince the Communists that they could not succeed by force, which would convince them to negotiate a peace agreement. Ironically, Johnson's rhetoric after that previous spring after the historic signing of the Voting Rights Act, which stopped for a time the aggression of segregationists in the South, was cloaked in the same militaristic language. He called the legislation a "triumph for freedom as huge as any victory won on the battlefield."<sup>65</sup> The President, believing now that he had helped secure freedom at home, increasingly turned his attention to the battlefields of Vietnam.

Most members of Congress expressed their support for Johnson's decision, though a number of them emphasized negotiations more than Johnson's rather forceful statement about America making a stand in Vietnam. Cooper, though he privately harbored doubts, praised the President for his commitment to explore negotiations and his restraint in not calling up the Reserves. Cooper, however, also urged the President to submit the Vietnam issue to the United Nations and to seek another congressional resolution that supported his escalation—both of which Johnson would

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<sup>65</sup>Dudziac, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 237. See also Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and The Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 190-191.

have rejected out of hand. Prominent southern House Democrats also praised Johnson's policies, including Appropriations chairman George Mahon of Texas, Armed Services Chairman Rivers, and senior House Democrat Ed Edmonson of Oklahoma.<sup>66</sup>

Johnson's close friend Richard Russell expressed lukewarm support in an August 1 interview on the CBS program *Face The Nation*. But his criticisms of and his concerns about American involvement in Vietnam far overshadowed his support for Johnson's policies. Calling the Vietnam War "the most frustrating problem that has ever confronted the American people," Russell asserted that America had made "every conceivable blunder" in the Asian country. "Our greatest mistake," he continued "has been in overemphasizing the military and not putting sufficient emphasis on the civilian side." He predicted that without a stable government in Vietnam "the war can run on there interminably." In addition, and to Johnson's great chagrin, Russell said that if a plebiscite were held in South Vietnam, "I think that it would be highly likely that [its citizens] would vote to place themselves under Ho Chi Minh rather than any one of those that are in control now."

Immediately after Russell's response reporter John L. Steele of *Time Magazine* followed up by asking that if the South Vietnamese wanted Ho Chi Minh to rule, then why was America there and why was it increasing its commitment. Russell responded to the first part of the question by explaining that the United States went to Vietnam because the South Vietnamese requested its assistance. When explaining why the administration expanded American involvement in the war, his comments suggest that

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 436-447.



the Georgia senator had not fully evolved into the “war hawk” that he would be later. “I have never been able to understand the attitude of those who are demanding an all out war against Communists ten thousand miles away, when we have a terrible logistics problem in supplying our people, . . . getting them there, and bringing them back when they are wounded.” Though he thought the loss of South Vietnam would be a blow to American prestige, he did not think “the area has any value strategically.” “If we can depend on our missiles to defend us from here, we don’t have to have South Viet Nam to hold back the hordes of communism,” Russell asserted. To emphasize the point further, Russell said that although he heard mention of the Domino theory with regards to South Vietnam, “I don’t’ think that it is necessarily true. I don’t agree with that completely.” The stake that Russell saw for America in Vietnam would be to “show the world when the United States pledges its honor and its word in any written document to carry out any treaty or agreement, even if we are mistaken in signing it, that we will do it.” In addition, as Johnson had feared, both Russell and his colleague on Armed Services, John Stennis, wanted a full accounting of the cost of the war. Furthermore, Russell suggested in response to a question on *Meet the Press* that he hoped the President would cut Great Society programs because “the security of the country comes first.”<sup>67</sup>

Though Morse predictably attacked Johnson’s escalation with the most vehemence, Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, though praising Johnson for his emphasis

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<sup>67</sup>*Face the Nation*, Transcripts of Television program, Columbia Broadcasting System, August 1, 1965, Russell Collection, Series IIIZ, Box 84.

on negotiations, criticized the President for the decision to send more troops to Vietnam and to expand America's role in the war.

We now find ourselves involved in a war that defies analysis in traditional military terms; in a war that makes little sense as it is being waged; in a war that we have scant hope of winning except at a cost which far outweighs the fruits of victory; in a war fought on a battlefield suitable to the enemy, in a place and under conditions no military man in his right mind would choose; [and] in a war which threatens to escalate into a major power confrontation.<sup>68</sup>

Gore's frustrations reflected a long-held view; the forcefulness of his statement took him one step closer to outright opposition. The maverick Tennessee senator who had early in his career won against the state's entrenched political machine, and who had recently opposed his southern colleagues by voting for the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, neared a decision, as did his colleague from Arkansas, to make a break with Johnson over Vietnam.

Fulbright refrained from attacking the President's newest Vietnam initiative. But over the next month or so he came to the realization that Johnson had used him. In August the senator learned in secret hearings on the Dominican Republic intervention that Johnson deceived Congress and the country and greatly exaggerated the communist threat in an effort to keep the democratically elected leader from regaining power. The administration even fabricated some of the more gruesome details when in reality the United States had suffered no casualties or deaths. The revelations from the hearings, combined with the statement by the President that the Vietnam War could last several more years shook Fulbright's confidence in Johnson.

On September 15, Fulbright, though having deleted the passages of his speech which directly blamed the President, charged in the Senate that the President had received “bad advice” and that during the whole Dominican affair the administration displayed a significant “lack of candor.” He said that the American “over-reaction” in the Dominican Republic had “lent credence to the idea that the United States is an enemy of social revolution in Latin America and that the only choice Latin Americans have is between communism and reaction.”<sup>69</sup>

Though Fulbright tried to assure Johnson beforehand that the criticism was not personal, going so far as to even give him a copy of the speech a day earlier, Johnson viewed Fulbright’s action as a betrayal. In a phone conversation with Richard Russell the day before, the President, speaking softly, sounding weary and devastated, revealed the depths of his despair and frustration with his friend from Arkansas. After nasally imitating Fulbright’s voice, which he characterized as “whiny,” Johnson attacked the senator’s intellectualism and his ineffectiveness, saying “he causes all kinds of trouble and doesn’t do anything constructive.” The President had to make spot decisions on the Dominican Republic while Fulbright “just sits there.” Johnson’s usually booming voice became even quieter. “Looks like he’d try to find something his government does right and try to help us instead of hurt us. And particularly his own goddamn party.” Johnson, slowing his speech for emphasis and getting angrier

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<sup>68</sup>CR, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., July 28, 1965, 18571-18572.

<sup>69</sup>Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War*, 46-47. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion* 473-474.

with each word, concluded, “I don’t guess he gives a God damn. Just gripes.”<sup>70</sup> From then on, the friendship of the two southerners, forged by years of triumph and struggle in the Senate and beyond, fractured, and eventually, perished.

With hindsight, the rift between the two seemed inevitable due in part to the differing interpretations of a doctrine formulated by the last southern president before Johnson. Fulbright, espousing a Wilsonian belief in self-determination with respect for native beliefs and customs, could not accept an anti-communist crusade in Vietnam if the South Vietnamese, or the citizens of the Dominican Republic, for that matter, did not support it. On the other hand, Johnson wanted to “make the world safe for democracy” by fighting Communism in South Vietnam, and leaving the “footprints of America” there.

In addition, both Johnson and Fulbright, along with several other southern hawks and doves on Vietnam had different interpretation of American “honor” and how to protect or uphold it. Johnson, as did Russell, Rivers, Long, and others, wanted the United States to honor its commitment to the South Vietnamese, and defend American honor against North Vietnamese aggression. On the other hand, Fulbright, along with Cooper, and Gore, wanted an “honorable” peace and suggested it would despoil American honor to go to war to defend a South Vietnamese government its own people would not support. It must be remembered, however, that none of the more “dovish” southerners suggested in 1964 or 1965 that American honor would be served by an immediate wholesale withdrawal of troops from the

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<sup>70</sup>White House Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Russell, September 14, 1965, LBJ Library, Recordings of Telephone Conversations, White House Series, Tape 6504.04.

Southeast Asian country. In addition, short of withdrawal or defeat, none of them had a workable solution to the problems of defending South Vietnam, or convincing North Vietnam to participate in peace negotiations. By 1966 Fulbright, having been rebuked and snubbed by Johnson, would effectively “join the opposition” and hold full-scale public hearings on Johnson’s policies in Vietnam. The President would escalate the war by degrees and send hundreds of thousands of addition troops to Vietnam over the next three years.

Johnson’s outright deception on both the Dominican Republic and his temporary shelving of negotiation efforts in the wake of an escalation in the bombing of North Vietnam in September convinced Fulbright that Johnson could not be held to his word. He was right. The President had misled the Congress as to the “aggression” committed by the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. He promised the Congress and the public he sought “no wider war” as his administration formulated plans for one. As Kearns has commented, the President only told Congress and the public “no more than absolutely necessary” regarding Vietnam policy. He scheduled the press conference for noon, announcing the deployment of 50,000 additional troops when few Americans would be viewing. He only asked for 1.8 million dollars when he knew that the total cost that year would be significantly higher. Furthermore, he called for an increase in the draft and an extension of enlistments instead of mobilizing the reserves. The President, in effect, as Kearns described it, wanted to wage a “covert full-scale war” in an effort to save the war on American poverty and the creation of a Great Society.

As Goodwin suggests, not many Presidents would have attempted to take on both wars at once. Among the character traits Goodwin listed that sustained Johnson him and made him successful, yet would contribute to his downfall over Vietnam was “his faith in the nation’s limitless capacity.”<sup>71</sup> Wedded to this was a faith born of his southern Populist upbringing and his early New Deal experiences in the capacity of the American government and a willingness to channel its power to uplift the downtrodden of the world. Johnson felt the need to dissemble to the Congress and the American public on Vietnam because he believed that there was so much he needed to save. However, his chief concern centered on his own political future and legacy. As the President found that he could not “buy” Ho Chi Minh with a promise of a “Mekong River TVA,” Johnson, while rejecting an “all out” military commitment, listened to McNamara and the other more hawkish “Harvards.” He escalated the war in order to save South Vietnam, the Great Society, and to protect himself from conservatives who he had seen destroy the political career of Harry Truman. Guided by his fears, his heritage, and his insecurities, Lyndon Johnson made the decision in July 1965 to commit the United States to eight years of costly warfare in the jungles of South Vietnam.

“Johnson’s War” as it became known, raised the ire of both southern hawks and the fewer southern doves. From July 1965, onwards southerners in general sided with the former group. In a poll taken that month, southerners more than people in any other region were the most inclined to believe that America would win the war on the battlefield rather than through the “minds of native people living in that country.”

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<sup>71</sup>Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American dream*, 281-285.

In addition, they accepted more than others that “wars are sometimes necessary to settle differences.” A year later, the South stood most in favor of the United States “going all out” to win a military victory in Vietnam. As Johnson continued his gradual escalation, several of the South’s representatives in Congress proclaimed the will of their constituents. “Words are fruitless, diplomatic notes are useless,” declared South Carolina’s Mendel Rivers. “There can only be one answer for America: retaliation, retaliation, retaliation.”<sup>72</sup> After a month-long ineffectual bombing pause in December, 1965 and January, 1966, Richard Russell finally joined his hawkish southern colleagues, and pleaded with the president to strike hard at the enemy: “For God Sakes, don’t start the bombing half way. Let them know we are in a war. I’d rather kill them than have American boys die. Please Mr. President, don’t get one foot back in it. Go all the way.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Ahead*, 261, 269.

<sup>73</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 480.

## CHAPTER 8

### **“RESPECTABLE” PROTEST, A CALL TO HONOR, AND A CORRUPT BARGAIN**

In August 1965, Lyndon Johnson complained to Speaker of the House John McCormack about the extreme language and belligerent attitude of House Armed Services Committee chairman Mendel Rivers. “He’s already damn near ruined me by [suggesting the United States] bomb Peking....The damn fool that’s out here advocating bombing Peking ain’t got no business being chairman of a committee—he ought to be removed.” Regarding the South Carolina congressman’s rantings about Vietnam, Johnson’s voice raised louder. “Here’s what Rivers says last week in New York,” Johnson reported with some amusement, suggesting that the Speaker write it down. Johnson’s voice boomed on the first word of the quote: “ ‘I’ (now underline it) ‘I will accept nothing but total and complete victory in Vietnam.’ Who the hell is I? What meat does this Caesar feed on John?”<sup>1</sup>

As the Johnson administration escalated American military actions in Vietnam, the words of both southern hawks and doves became more strident, and, in some cases, a lot less responsible. Nevertheless, both sides wholeheartedly agreed on one thing—Lyndon Johnson was steering a fatally flawed course in Vietnam. In the same meeting where Richard Russell advocated “going all the way,” Rivers concurred with the Georgia Senator and suggested that America should either “win or get out.” He further advised that from then on the military, instead of the President, should choose

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<sup>1</sup>White House Telephone Conversation, Lyndon B. Johnson and John McCormack, August 23, 1965, Tape 6508.10.



the targets to strike from the air. Fulbright also spoke up, but advocated the opposite position--a continuation of the bombing pause in order to continue the quest for a negotiated settlement.<sup>2</sup> Johnson, who had decided upon the bombing halt only half-heartedly, seemed to want to resume sorties over North Vietnam as soon as possible.

The possible reinstitution of the bombing campaign raised the ire of William Fulbright and his Foreign Relations Committee. They would soon embark, for one of only a few times in American history, on a formal and public debate of the wisdom of fighting a war as it was being fought. At the same time, southern hawks supported Johnson's desire to restart the bombing, but believed the overall campaign did not go far enough. Senator John Stennis, second-in-command to Richard Russell on Armed Services and chairman of the Armed Services Military Preparedness Committee, responded by holding his hearings to trumpet the cause of greatly increasing American bombing and troop strength against the North Vietnamese and Vietcong in order to force them to the conference table. Over the course of the next two years, committees and subcommittees chaired by prominent southern legislators dissected Johnson's policies and for different reasons found them to be wanting. As the Congress investigated the shortcomings of American Vietnam policy, the scope of American involvement increased to a level beyond which anyone in Congress could have predicted when it approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964. By the beginning of 1966, nearly 200,000 American ground troops were in Vietnam; by 1968, the number stood well over 500,000. The massive number of casualties along with the seemingly endless struggle convinced southerners that other steps had to be taken.

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<sup>2</sup>David Barrett, editor, *Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam Papers*, 317-320.

When faced with the deepening conflict, many in Congress concluded that America should try to gradually disengage from Vietnam, the majority of southerners in and outside of Congress sided with those calling for the United States to go “all out” to achieve a definable military “victory.” However, a small yet increasingly influential southern minority urged Johnson to negotiate and to de-escalate.

Thus, though southerners in general were, based on public opinion polls, fairly unified in their calls for victory,<sup>3</sup> their most prominent leaders in Congress were divided. In the process of debating the increasingly bloody and frustrating war, southern hawks and doves experienced an important change in their own worldview. Nowhere was this change more evident than in the leader of the doves in America, William Fulbright. The Arkansas senator, who previously championed internationalism and multilateral engagement in the world, called for a reassessment of American commitments and a corresponding reduction of foreign aid. He was joined initially by two others, Albert Gore and John Sherman Cooper, in active dissent from Johnson’s policies. Later on, in a dramatic reversal, former hawk Thruston Morton of Kentucky also joined the ranks of the doves. Of the four main southern doves, however, it was Fulbright above all who felt it important enough to study the history of the region and consult almost anyone with “expert” knowledge on Indochina before coming to his now-famous dissent. Had his fellow southerner and now “former” friend in the White House done so, executive decisions on Vietnam might have come out differently.

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<sup>3</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 269.

Conversely, the hawks, Russell and Stennis particularly, who had in 1954 desperately wanted to keep America out of messy entanglements such as Vietnam, now advocated intensifying American involvement to such a degree as to risk war with China. Southerners, although divided, played prominent and significant roles on both sides of the war and shaped the nature of the debate both in Congress and to some degree in American society. And in November 1968, evidence suggests one archconservative southern hawk, John Tower, more than likely involved himself in illegal activities, the end result of which would condemn the United States to over four more years of war in Vietnam.

The period from mid-1965, when President Johnson first ordered a significant number of troops into Vietnam, through 1968, which saw the Tet Offensive and the first efforts at peace, serves as the crucial period of American involvement in Vietnam. Once Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, Johnson used it in a very short time to bring America to war and to assail any member of Congress who opposed his escalation. As the body bags came home, the protests increased, and the dissent from Johnson's middle course mounted. America became a divided society. With the Tet Offensive, the country could see that Johnson's Vietnam policies, despite the administration's rosy reports, were not working. However, though the 1968 North Vietnamese offensive changed attitudes throughout America, for most southerners, with at least one celebrated exception in the "defection" of Kentucky Senator Thruston Morton, it only intensified their deeply held convictions—hawks called for tougher measures to win the war, doves for increased pressure for either a negotiated settlement or a withdrawal of American troops. As historian Joseph Fry attests, the

South “took center stage” in the Vietnam conflict—the leaders on both sides of the debate influenced the thinking of Americans well beyond their region.<sup>4</sup>

One of the war’s foremost congressional hawks, Senator Stennis, began 1966 with what turned out to be a fairly accurate prediction of the final scope of American escalation of ground troops in Vietnam. “By the end of 1966,” he began, “there may very well be 350,000 to 400,000 American troops in South Vietnam and I would not be surprised if we were ultimately required to commitment 600,000 men to battle.” He went on to suggest that if Communist China joined the war, America should be prepared to use “every weapon we had.” He also warned that if the administration did not resume and greatly increase the bombing of North Vietnam, the war could drag on for “ten or fifteen years.”<sup>5</sup> The statement of a Chairman of the Armed Services Preparedness Subcommittee held particular weight, mainly because most realized that he closely consulted almost daily with military leaders.

At the same time, several liberal senators, none of them southern, sent a letter to the President requesting him to follow Fulbright’s and Mansfield’s suggestion to extend the bombing pause. Johnson’s terse and dismissive reply angered several of them. It stated in part that the President “continued to be guided by the resolution of the Congress approved on August 10, 1964 (the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) by a

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 261.

<sup>5</sup>Kenneth Toler, “15 Senators Ask LBJ To Extend Bomb Lull; Stennis urges Blows,” *Commercial Appeal* (Jackson, MS), January 28, 1966, 1, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

margin of 504-2.” During the same period the administration also requested a staggering 12.7 billion dollars in supplemental spending on Vietnam.<sup>6</sup>

After learning of the new request for funds from the administration, Fulbright saw his opportunity to launch a full-fledged public discussion of the Vietnam War. Since his break with Johnson in September, he had read widely on the region and consulted with several experts. Johnson even unwittingly aided in Fulbright’s “education” on Vietnam. In November 1965, the President, still seething over the Arkansas senator’s September 15 Dominican Republic speech, refused to provide a jet for Fulbright when he traveled to New Zealand to lead the American delegation to an international conference. A slow, antiquated but still luxurious C-118 was provided instead, which had to make several stops along the way. Designed to punish the senator, it had the opposite effect. Fulbright took the extra time to reflect both on *Street Without Joy*, a book he had just finished by Bernard Fall on Vietnam during the French colonial period, and to discuss Asian history with Senator Hiram Fong of Hawaii.<sup>7</sup>

By January, Fulbright had read widely on the history of Vietnam and came to the conclusion that the Vietnam War was not solely, as the administration insisted, a matter of communist aggression from the North. It was, rather, a civil war fueled by Vietnamese nationalism. To many Vietnamese on both sides, America now only took the place of the French as interlopers in their war-torn country. Given his new education on Southeast Asia, Fulbright could not understand Johnson’s massive

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<sup>6</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 481-82.

increases in troops and the enormous construction of infrastructure being built by the Americans to facilitate its forces. “It gives the appearance that we are there to stay, does it not?” he asked Undersecretary of State George Ball in early January.

Furthermore, the Arkansas senator could not fully understand American actions in Vietnam enough to explain them logically to his constituents. “It is very difficult for me to see where the United States has a commitment or a moral obligation,” he commented to Ball. “I certainly do not think it is a legal one, to give these people a government....No matter how pure our motives are, it is practically impossible to have a complete victory, unless we are prepared to stay there and run the country. If we withdrew after complete victory, I think [Vietnam] would revert right back to the way it is.” Troubled by the seeming lack of historical and political perspective among the administration’s Vietnam policymakers and by the massive escalation that transformed the conflict into an “American war,” the Arkansas senator committed himself to getting the executive branch to publicly clarify and explain its concepts about and intentions for Vietnam. The administration’s supplemental appropriation request for Vietnam gave the chairman the opening he needed to call for public hearings.<sup>8</sup>

On January 28, 1966, the nationally televised hearings began. Of the southerners on the committee, Fulbright and Albert Gore of Tennessee, the only two southerners in Congress up to that time to break publicly with Johnson over the war, represented the doves. John Sparkman supported the administration, and Russell Long, the Majority Whip, though still ostensibly supporting the President, in his

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 475.

<sup>8</sup>SFRC, Volume XVIII, *The Situation in Vietnam*, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 12 January, 1966, 94.

bellicose rhetoric, represented an increasingly hawkish position. Long, did not question Rusk on the first day, but would play an important part in subsequent Vietnam hearings. Directly across from the senators sat Secretary of State Dean Rusk, a Georgian and the long-time defender of Johnson's version of Wilsonianism and containment in Vietnam. After Rusk finished his statement emphasizing American commitment against outside communist aggression, Fulbright, obviously enlivened by the hearings, squinted into the lights through his black-rimmed glasses and began forcefully. "Mr. Secretary, I need not tell you many of us are deeply troubled about our involvement in Vietnam and it seems to us that since this is the first bill [of] this session dealing with the subject, now is an appropriate time for some examination of our involvement there for the clarification of the people in this country."<sup>9</sup> For the rest of the morning the committee challenged or questioned almost every aspect of American policy decisions regarding Vietnam.

Rusk had to endure an extremely thorough interrogation from Fulbright and the others, along with several speeches dissenting from the administration's policies. The chairman asked Rusk what American objectives were in Vietnam. Rusk answered simply that the United States committed itself to ensure that the South Vietnamese could "make their own decision about their own affairs and their own future" without having decisions imposed on them from outside forces. Fulbright shot back, "do you think they can be a completely free agent with our occupation of their land with 200,000 or 400,000 men?" Gore reread the part of Rusk's opening statement in which

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<sup>9</sup>Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966—Vietnam*, 89<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 28 January, 1966, 6.

he asserted that the South Vietnamese, with American help, would come to know that “the struggle is worth their suffering and personal tragedies.” The Tennessee senator applied his statement to Americans in order to “come to the heart of one of the most excruciating difficulties of our democratic society today....Many members of Congress do not believe, that the costs, the risk of nuclear war, and the dangers of war with China or Russia are worth the endeavor.”<sup>10</sup>

Fulbright later resumed his attack on the administration’s Vietnam policy. He refuted Rusk’s assertion that Congress had already debated Vietnam in depth over the previous five years. “I would submit,” he replied, “that the discussion has been rather superficial.” The senator had no inkling at the time of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution debate, that the United States would widen the conflict. He worried that the United States, after “inadvertently, perhaps for irrelevant reasons...stepping into a colonial war in 1950 on the wrong side,” would continue to escalate the conflict resulting in a war with the major communist powers. “It seems to me,” he observed, “that something is wrong or there would not be such great dissent. I do not regard all of the people who have raised these questions as irresponsible.”

Fulbright also suggested that most Americans did not see the communist threat in Vietnam in the same way they viewed the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor or the North Korean attack on South Korea. “Vietnam is subtle,” Fulbright asserted. “It needs to be understood if we are to approve of it in the sense of voting these large sums.” If America continued to pursue the administration’s policy, and Johnson

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 9, 14-15.



resumed the bombing, Fulbright declared, “then we are committed, and will have passed the Rubicon. I think that is what justifies some discussion of this.”<sup>11</sup>

Both Fulbright and Gore pressed harder to determine the exact justification for the American military presence in Vietnam and for the vast expansion of America’s role in the preceding six months. Rusk responded by invoking the provision of the SEATO treaty that allowed the member nations to intervene against any aggression “in accordance with its constitutional processes.” The Secretary claimed that congressional approval of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution satisfied the treaty requirement of a “constitutional process” necessary for intervention. Gore asked if a declaration of war was a constitutional process. When Rusk answered affirmatively, but said that it was not the only constitutional process, Gore forcefully asserted that he voted for the Tonkin Resolution “as approving the specific and appropriate response to [an] attack....I certainly want to dissociate myself with [sic] any interpretation that this was a declaration of war or that it authorized the administration to take any and all steps toward an all-out war.”<sup>12</sup>

Fulbright later continued the line of questioning on SEATO. Rusk did not convince the chairman that the SEATO treaty justified or compelled American military involvement in Vietnam. The treaty language, the senator observed, only required that signatories consult with one another in the event of aggression against any member. He claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that he had not believed earlier that Vietnam was a “serious situation.” “I thought of it primarily as another country

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 43-44.

among many to whom we were giving aid...I had paid no particular attention to it until about the time of the Bay of Tonkin (attacks).” Rusk sarcastically responded, “I am a little concerned that formal acts of the Government over a period of years in a variety of ways would appear to catch people by surprise at the moment when things begin to get difficult.” When the secretary concluded the point by saying that he hoped the Senate would take its voting on alliances more seriously, the chairman retorted, “We have a difference of view of what the alliance means.”<sup>13</sup>

Chairman Fulbright, in light of Stennis’s predictions of troop escalations and his comment on nuclear weapons and China, expressed his deep concern over the widening scope of American involvement in the war, repeating that he and many others in Congress had no idea when voting for the Tonkin resolution that Johnson would set America on a course of continual escalation. Rusk admitted that the situation had changed, but only because the enemy had increased its infiltration—a fact that he claimed could not have been foreseen. Besides, Rusk asserted, Congress had been consulted frequently since 1964 on Vietnam matters. Fulbright pressed the point, saying that Majority Leader Mansfield had recently agreed with Stennis in predicting an “open ended conflict.” When Rusk responded weakly that dangers existed in any situation, Fulbright insisted, “Don’t you think we ought to understand what we are in for, and that the Congress should give its further approval of this changed situation?” The chairman then asked if approval of the supplemental funds could be interpreted to mean Congressional endorsement of an unlimited expansion of

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 50-51.

the war. When Rusk's answer did not really address the question, Fulbright, annoyed, responded, "You do not have to answer if you do not like....But do you or don't you think it should be interpreted that way?" A weary Dean Rusk smiled, and said only, "I will have to take that under advisement."<sup>14</sup>

The January 31 decision by President Johnson to end the bombing pause made the Arkansas senator more determined to continue the committee's public review of Vietnam policy. The hearings continued throughout the middle of February. The committee called retired General James Gavin, who advocated the end of bombing in the north and the maintenance of the current level of troops in the South. He also advocated concentrating American ground forces into coastal enclaves while the Americans sought a diplomatic solution. George Kennan, the "author" of the containment doctrine, also appeared and suggested "liquidating" American military involvement in Vietnam without somehow damaging American prestige or stability. Neither, however, advocated a precipitate American withdrawal or had a definitive formula for either starting negotiations with Hanoi or bringing the war to an end.<sup>15</sup>

On February 17, sparks flew again before the television cameras as the committee questioned former Joint Chiefs chairman and ambassador to South Vietnam, Maxwell Taylor, who now served as a military advisor to Johnson. The most contentious moment of the hearings occurred when Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon verbally jousting with Taylor, saying after a heated exchange that the general and the President had been "badly misguiding" the nation "for a long time" on Vietnam.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 60-61.

Fulbright, Gore, and Long contributed more to the substantive discussions on policy, however. Both Gore and Fulbright pressed Taylor to defend his claim that the administration intended to limit the conflict in Vietnam. The general had stated that America had as its military objective to convince the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong to stop their “aggression” in the South. To Fulbright, Taylor’s response sounded like the United States would “use whatever force is necessary to make them give up. This is just another way of saying ‘unconditional surrender,’” he concluded. Taylor disagreed, asserting that he had not heard any administration official say that the United States would not negotiate until the other side surrendered. Fulbright was not convinced. “The idea of negotiating a compromise, which is something less than we want, seems to me to be consistent with a limited war. But if they give up and come to our terms, this is what I would call unlimited commitment...using whatever we need to use to bring about the result.”<sup>16</sup>

Gore expanded on Fulbright’s contention that the administration had no plan to limit the number of ground forces. He asked Taylor whether the only limit the administration placed on troops would be whatever was necessary to convince Hanoi to capitulate. Taylor denied that Johnson wanted unconditional surrender and outlined the steps necessary to stop the aggression of North Vietnam against South Vietnam. Ground troops only constituted one-fourth of the American effort in South Vietnam. “Then,” Gore concluded, “there are no limits insofar as policy is concerned except the force sufficient to achieve the objectives you have stated in general terms?” Taylor

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<sup>15</sup>Kennan’s and Gavin’s testimony can be found at Ibid., 8, 10 February, 1966, 225-430.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 17 February, 1968, 454-455, 496-498.

could not or did not satisfy Gore's curiosity as to how far the administration would be willing to escalate American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

Later on the chairman returned to the questioning on the intended scope of the American commitment, driving his point home in colorful fashion: "Maybe I'm too stupid to understand what it means when you say, 'We are going to do what it takes to make them come to the conference table.' This to me means they are going to have to, as they used to say in the Ozarks, holler 'Enough' or say 'calf-rope.'" <sup>18</sup> A few seconds later, Fulbright finally elicited the general's, and, by implication, the administration's true response to the question of whether the executive branch fully considered a true compromise. The chairman suggested that the objectives in a limited war should be to seek a compromise "in which we don't necessarily get our way, and they don't surrender. We don't surrender, but we seek a settlement of it." Taylor, in a telling remark, responded, "how do you compromise the freedom of 15 million South Vietnamese, Senator? I don't understand that.... They are either free or not free." Taylor's statement revealed that the administration, even though they made a concerted effort to negotiate during the bombing pause, did not actually want to compromise. They had every intention of defending the status quo of the South Vietnamese government, and would not accept anything less than having the North Vietnamese return home without winning anything except the doubtful prospect of a "Mekong TVA" and other such rebuilding programs. Furthermore, Taylor's comments obviously in part were for public consumption—he and administration

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 524-525.

officials knew that the South Vietnamese people did not live under a “free” government. Fulbright, also aware of the character of the Saigon government, expressed skepticism regarding “nation building” in South Vietnam. “I do not think that you or any of our Government officials,” he concluded, “are capable of creating out of whole cloth the kind of democratic regime in this area which some people seem to imagine they can create. They are going to have to create it for themselves, and the sooner we allow them to get at it, the better.” Though Taylor agreed with Fulbright, and emphasized that the United States only wanted to defend the South Vietnamese government from the communists so its citizens could make their own decisions, American policy from the very beginning reflected continual interference in the domestic affairs of the Asian nation.<sup>19</sup>

Another issue touched on by both Fulbright and Russell Long was the nature of atrocity in war. Long, a member of the committee who only infrequently attended hearings, took the opportunity of the public forum to defend the war effort against what he considered unfair attacks that gave aid and comfort to the enemy. While many on the committee took the opportunity to make speeches in front of the television cameras, Long seemed to make more of them than most of the other committee members, save possibly Fulbright. He used the forum as a bully pulpit to justify the administration’s policies and the Domino Theory and to pay tribute to Taylor and the American and South Vietnamese military. In a rambling opening statement, the Louisiana senator remarked that the communists, and some senators,

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 545.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 545-546.

had charged that America by its actions in Vietnam was an “international criminal.” Long appointed himself as defense attorney to “plead my nation Not Guilty.” After going through the legal and treaty justifications for American involvement and also asking Taylor to attest to the excellence of several American military units, he contrasted the American efforts with those of the Vietcong. Long claimed that the South Vietnamese communists had killed 50,000 civilians, including, “in one year alone, 456 mayors in little villages.” Taylor suggested that the senator multiply the official figure by twenty to get close to the actual numbers. He then challenged the senators and the television audience to consider “how we would feel if that many mayors or officials in our community had been destroyed.”<sup>20</sup>

“War is inherently a rather atrocious activity, is it not?” Fulbright observed when his time came around again to speak. The General agreed. “If we are going to talk about such things,” Fulbright continued, “we are reminded about air raids on Tokyo, or Hiroshima, or Nagasaki.” When Taylor protested, saying that Japan used ruthless tactics treating prisoners and attacking Pearl Harbor, the Arkansas senator observed, “Isn’t it true that each country always believes the other one commits the atrocities, and that God is on their side? Isn’t this typical of all wars?” Fulbright characterized the discussion on North Vietnamese atrocities as insignificant because people use drastic measures against an enemy to win a war. “I am not sure that it makes much difference whether you shoot him or decapitate him or burn him up.” Fulbright concluded that references to atrocities seemed to be “designed to arouse emotions and the usual chauvinism necessary to carry on a war, regardless of justifying

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 462-466.

factors. That has been typical of nearly every war.” Partially in response to Long’s statement that Americans were the “international good guy” in the war, Fulbright described the horrendous loss of civilian casualties in the Tokyo firebombing. “What difference, really, morally or any other way, do you see between burning innocent little children and disemboweling innocent citizens? Isn’t it only the means you use?” he queried. The purpose of his questioning, Fulbright insisted, was not to justify the heinous acts of the communists. He was attempting to debunk one of the chief tenets of American society, one that inspired American involvement in Vietnam. “We sometimes think we’re the only good people, and I certainly don’t think we are bad people. But I don’t see any great distinction between using the weapons we happen to have to kill innocent people” when our enemies do the same. “I don’t think we should claim any great superiority because we happen to have nuclear bombs and the other side doesn’t.” <sup>21</sup>

Long could not have disagreed more. After recounting several efforts during World War II of bombers warning the enemy of impending air raids, Long had Taylor affirm the policy that the American bombing raids purposefully tried to avoid civilian casualties. He turned again to that time worn concept of honor. “Would you be willing to make the unqualified statement,” he declared, “that you just think our people are just better and more honorable and more moral than the Communists?” Taylor did not disappoint. “They’re certainly behaving that way in South Vietnam.” Later, however, Long seemed to contradict his own statement. “Don’t you think it would be rather foolish to take on a Communist adversary who is bent on destroying

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 498-499, 544-545.



you, and fight him by the Queensbury rules while he is fighting you by the law of the nail and clawing out your eyeballs and punching you beneath the belt?”<sup>22</sup>

The hearings wound up where they started. Dean Rusk returned to the Foreign Relations Committee chambers on February 18, 1966. The exchange that brought out the differences between the administration and Fulbright centered on the failure of negotiations and the value of Vietnam to United States interests. Fulbright contended that the administration failed to make clear to the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong, that it would be allowed to participate in discussions. “After all, Vietnam is their country. It is not our country,” Fulbright declared. “We are obviously intruders from their point of view....What bothers me, and, I know, a number here [think] that this is in one sense a relatively minor matter. In another sense it seems to be the trigger that may result in a world war.” The heated discussion continued as the two southerners held their positions—the senator, a Wilsonian believer in self-determination convinced that the administration would rather fight to maintain a anticommunist bulwark in America’s own image than accept “reasonable” compromise, and the Secretary, an devotee of Wilsonian “collective security” who thought the senator wanted to abandon Vietnam to the communists no matter what the cost. In a sense, both were right about the other. In any event, the gulf between them was unfathomable:

Fulbright: I believe this country is quite strong enough  
to engage in a compromise without losing its prestige as  
a great nation

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 550-554.

Rusk: Mr. Chairman, we wouldn't have much of a debate between us on the question of compromise and a settlement, but we can't get anybody (from Hanoi) in the discussions for the purpose of talking about it.

Fulbright: I think there is something wrong with our approach.

Rusk: Senator, is it just possible that there's something wrong with them?

Fulbright: Yes there is a lot wrong with them. They are very primitive, difficult, poor people who have been fighting for 20 years and I don't understand myself why they can continue to fight, but they do.

Rusk: And they want to take over South Vietnam by force.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, the 1966 Vietnam hearings solved little, but still had a significant impact on American attitudes about the war in Vietnam. After the hearings Johnson's approval ratings on Vietnam plummeted from sixty-three percent in January to forty-nine percent in February. Southerners were the most discontented with the Texas President. However, despite the forceful arguments of the chairman, Gore, and others, the hearings did not convert many to the cause of American disengagement from Vietnam. Though they disagreed on specifics, most people favored some sort of military solution. The majority of Southerners agreed with Russell Long's desire for increased military action in order to win the war. In a larger sense, however, Fulbright's Vietnam hearings legitimized dissent on Vietnam. Pat Holt, a Texan and a member of the Foreign Relations Committee staff, observed that, because of the hearings, America suddenly realized that "the dissenters were no longer a bunch of crazy college kids invading dean's offices and so on; they were people of

substance.”<sup>24</sup> The Arkansas senator’s decision to hold hearings on Vietnam policy made him the most prominent “dove” both in the Senate and in the nation.

Johnson tried to steal the thunder of Fulbright by hastily arranging a meeting with the South Vietnamese leadership at the Honolulu conference. On a few occasions the networks pre-empted television coverage of the Vietnam hearings to carry statements from Johnson and Generals Ky and Thieu. The President also instructed the FBI to monitor all future Foreign Relations Committee hearings to determine if Fulbright, Gore and other doves were receiving information from communist sources. He also ordered the Bureau to monitor the activities of committee members and record if they made any contacts with foreign, particularly communist, government officials. The President met with Assistant FBI director Cartha DeLoach and instructed him to monitor any meetings with foreign officials. During the meeting the President belittled Fulbright, saying he did not “know what the smell of a cartridge is,” and that he was “a narrow-minded egotist trying to run the country.”<sup>25</sup> But as Johnson’s paranoia ran wild about the doves, southern hawks began to attack the administration’s policies.

As the number of American casualties grew significantly, southern hawks became increasingly impatient with the President’s gradual escalation. In the 1966 Vietnam hearings, Russell Long expressed a discontent with the fighting of a “limited war” in Vietnam that resonated throughout the South. Though at the time the Senate

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 18 February, 1966, 661-665.

<sup>24</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 497.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 496.

Majority Whip from Louisiana remained ostensibly a supporter of the administration's efforts, he wanted public assurances from the administration that they would stay the course. "If you're going to send these boys, Mr. Secretary, let them fight," he declared. "Don't send them over there with their hands tied behind them."<sup>26</sup> To Long, who had already advocated war with China in a previous interview, Americans had to win decisively in Vietnam or else be fated to meet the communist threat in a place "less favorable." Most southerners agreed. An opinion poll in June 1966 revealed what most already knew—southerner whites and, to a somewhat lesser extent, African-Americans, were more inclined to believe that the United States would secure an "all out victory" in Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> As Stennis, Rivers, and others prominent southerners publicly stated during the Korean conflict, and Long repeated regarding Vietnam in 1966, America should not send troops to war "with one hand tied behind their backs." The proud southern members of the Armed Services Committee, who were influenced by almost daily contact with military leaders, wanted a military victory in what was, for the most part, a confusing internecine political struggle. "We are in Vietnam," Richard Russell wrote, "our flag is there—and above all, American boys are under fire there."<sup>28</sup> While "our boys" fought in Vietnam, American lives and honor were on the line, and so Americans had to both support the troops and give them what they needed to win. Because of these deep convictions, limited warfare had never sat easily with them, and, in response, they attacked the administration for what Texas

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<sup>26</sup>*Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966—Vietnam*, 598.

<sup>27</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Ahead*, 269, 279.

Republican Senator John Tower derisively, and accurately, portrayed as a “policy of gradualism.”<sup>29</sup>

Long, in his 1966 comments in the Vietnam hearings, concluded with a warning to the administration: “If the 1<sup>st</sup> Division has to pull Old Glory down a flagpole it is going to be because somebody over here made a mistake not somebody over there.”<sup>30</sup> Increasingly for southerners, those “somebodies” were Lyndon Johnson and his chief Vietnam advisor up to that time, Robert McNamara. While southerners, who hated the President’s activism on Civil Rights and the War on Poverty, wished he would be more active in Vietnam. Even as McNamara busied himself answering Fulbright’s questions, he took more abuse from southern hawks. A newspaper article in April 1966 reported that at one time or another the Defense Secretary had “riled such key members of Congress” as House Armed Services Chairman Mendel Rivers, ranking House Democrat on Armed Service F. Edward Hebert, Committee Chairman Richard Russell, and Preparedness Subcommittee Chairman John Stennis.”<sup>31</sup> The southerners on the Armed Services committee had a proprietary attitude towards military matters. With the advice of the military leaders, Russell, Stennis, and in some cases Thurmond crafted armed forces legislation—this

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<sup>28</sup>Fite, *Richard Russell Jr., Senator From Georgia*, 445.

<sup>29</sup>“Cooper Raps Republicans’ Televised Comments on Vietnam,” *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), January 24, 1968, 2.

<sup>30</sup>*Supplemental Foreign Assistance Fiscal Year 1966—Vietnam*, 598.

<sup>31</sup>Ray McHugh, “Stennis-McNamara Collision Course,” *The Shreveport Journal* (Shreveport-Bossier City, LA), April 15, 1966, 1, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

was “their turf,” and their states profited handsomely from the association.<sup>32</sup> It did not sit well with southern committee members that a civilian systems analyst wanted not only to revamp the Defense Department, but also, in reality, served as the chief architect of Vietnam military policy. Southerners on Armed Services detested both McNamara’s perceived arrogance and his attempts to quantify every military question in his management of the war and the Defense Department. Rivers went out of his way to rankle McNamara, instructing his committee’s chief council to get Navy workmen to make a plaque and place it in the front of the rostrum where it would face the secretary. The plaque read:

U.S. Constitution—Art. 1—Sec. 8—The Congress shall have the Power...To raise and support Armies...provide and maintain a Navy...make rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval forces.<sup>33</sup>

Stennis was not prone to personal attacks, but he was no less disturbed by McNamara and his prosecution of the war. In April 1966 he told reporters that the military had been “held back too long” in Vietnam. The American people, Stennis continued, “want to know that something is being put in motion to win.”<sup>34</sup> In the wake of new Buddhist anti-government and anti-American protests in Saigon, however, southern hawks and doves began to question American involvement. In the wake of the demonstration, emerging doves such as Kentucky Republican John Sherman Cooper expressed doubt about whether the United States should continue in

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<sup>32</sup>For the economic impact on the South of Defense Department spending, see Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt To Sunbelt*, 135-173.

<sup>33</sup>Huntley, “Mighty Rivers of Charleston,” 264.

Vietnam. Even hawks such as Stennis concurred with his Kentucky colleague. The Mississippi Senator asserted that the United States could not win the war, “if the people we have come to help resent our presence.”<sup>35</sup> He also expressed his doubts during the 1966 Senate Armed Services Preparedness Investigating committee hearings on America’s national commitments abroad. In reference to Vietnam, Stennis advised that America should not become “overly preoccupied with one area of the world or one set of problems.”<sup>36</sup> Russell also shared Stennis’s view. In an interview in May, he declared that if United States troops had to get “caught up in the tides of religious and political controversy and philosophical disagreements to the point that the lives of American boys are endangered when they walk down the streets of a city they have come to save from the Communists—then it’s time we re-examine our entire position.” The doubts, though lingering with the doves, proved short lived among the hawks. Stennis called for an “all-out assault” by air on strategic targets in North Vietnam. Further, in the same interview in May, Richard Russell advocated “applying greater force” militarily against North Vietnam. Such mixed messages reflect both the confusion of the unfolding events and the frustration Stennis and most Americans felt in trying to determine the right course of action to end the war.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>William Peart, “Stennis Says Army Doesn’t Have ‘Green Light’ to Win, *Jackson* (MS) *Daily News*, Vertical File, Stennis Collection.

<sup>35</sup> Downs, “A Matter of Conscience: John C. Stennis and the Vietnam War,” 73.

<sup>36</sup>CQ Almanac, 1966, 388.

<sup>37</sup>“Senator Russell on Vietnam: Go in and Win or Get Out,” *U.S News and World Report*, May 2, 1966, 56-57. See also “Stennis Calls for Bigger Air Strikes,” *Meridian Star* (MS), Vertical File, Stennis Collection.

Some southern hawks, those historian Joseph Fry characterizes as “less well informed” on Vietnam, did not agonize over their opinions. In 1966 Rivers called for the annihilation of Hanoi and Haiphong. If China should join the war as a result, the House Armed Services Chair said, Americans would be “foolish” not to retaliate with nuclear weapons.<sup>38</sup> In addition to Rivers, Strom Thurmond, Congressman F. Edward Hebert, and other southern hawks advocated the use of nuclear weapons if it were necessary to win the war. “We must stand ready to offer our lives on the altar of freedom,” Hebert declared when announcing his support of a possible nuclear attack in Vietnam. “If we do not,” he continued, “we are not worthy to be called Americans.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, Congressman John Bell Williams of Mississippi, who would in 1968 be elected governor of the state, declared that United States should “take such military steps as may be needed in order to bring this conflict to a conclusion, even if it means bombing North Viet Nam (sic) completely off the map.”<sup>40</sup> The legislators may not have been less well informed on military matters, but they never approached an understanding of the complex situation in Vietnam except in terms of its prominence in the Cold War and the American commitment to “stop communist aggression.”

Just as southern hawks grew impatient with Johnson and McNamara for not pressing harder for victory, they had no time either for members of Congress such as

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<sup>38</sup>Huntley, “Mighty Rivers of Charleston,” 295-297.

<sup>39</sup>Mark D. Carson, “F. Edward Hebert and the Congressional Investigation of the My Lai Massacre,” Masters Thesis: University of New Orleans, 1993, 6.

<sup>40</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 285. See also John Bell Williams to J.S. War, Jr., December 14 1965, John Bell Williams Papers, Speeches Files, Box 1.



Fulbright or street protesters who publicly criticized American involvement in Vietnam. However, hawks differed on whether the government should try to limit dissent in times of war. Sam Ervin, a constitutional scholar and member of the Judiciary committee detested the public protests, but affirmed the right of citizens to protest. He suggested America did not want to adopt bad policy as John Adams had done with the Alien and Sedition Acts. Though both Ervin, and his North Carolina Senate colleague Everett Jordan, resented and criticized Vietnam protesters, they found themselves in early 1967 having to answer to them. They met with a group participating in a two day “Washington Mobilization” sponsored by the Clergy and Layman Concerned about Vietnam Committee. In facing the religious group, the North Carolina senators heard Vietnam dissent not from longhaired hippie college students, but among the well-dressed conservative clergy and laymen of a church community. The group did not speak with one voice, but most favored de-escalation. Ervin, in a particularly poignant exchange, emphasized his belief that public protests encouraged the enemy. The senator suggested that if he did as Senator Wayne Morse did and spoke out against the war in the United States Senate, “I think Ho Chi Minh would appreciate my saying it.” Reverend Charles Webster, a worker in High Point, North Carolina, for the American Friends Services Committee, retorted, “I think Jesus Christ would also, sir.” Though the senators maintained their hawkish opinions, they clearly lacked the facility to deal effectively with the “establishment” Vietnam protest groups which increased in number and gained converts as American participation in the war increased.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Lloyd Preslar, “Tar Heels Complain to Senators on War,” *Winston-Salem Journal*,

John Stennis, however, took aim at the student protesters. He supported a bill to cut off government financial aid to any student participating in “disruptive and unlawful campus disturbances.” When CBS television broadcast anti-draft seminars held by the Students for a Democratic Society, he roundly criticized the network for publicizing “this deplorable and shameful activity on the part of those who have no regard for duty, honor, or their country.” He further recommended that the movement began by SDS “should be jerked up by the roots and ground to bits.” The senator also became enraged when, in May 1967, an employee of the Mississippi Head Start Program, a Great Society creation that Stennis and other conservatives opposed, refused to take the oath to enter the military because he opposed the war. The employee was neither jailed nor fired, which prompted a volatile response from Stennis in the Senate. “We have reached a deplorable situation when one branch of the Federal Government passes laws requiring our young men to go into military service and risk their lives in combat,” he asserted, “while another branch of the Federal Government supports financially and otherwise those who refuse to serve.”<sup>42</sup>

Stennis’s statement not only illustrates the resentment expressed by southerners over Vietnam protesters. It also attests to the attitudes of many southern hawks toward Great Society programs in general. As Johnson had predicted in 1965, as the war progressed, Russell, Stennis, Thurmond, Hebert, Rivers, Long and a host of others believed that the President should choose between guns and butter. Stennis’s comments in September 1966 again represented most southern hawks: “It is high

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February 2, 1967, 6.

<sup>42</sup>Downs, *A Matter of Conscience*, 69, 84.

time that both the Congress and the Executive branch realize that the War on Poverty is not the only war we are fighting.”<sup>43</sup>

As 1967 began, the “other war” in Vietnam now included over 400,000 United States troops. American casualties mounted and the war remained hopelessly stalemated. Nevertheless the military reported progress, prompting Johnson to continue to escalate both the ground and air war, although he gave lip service to potential peace talks. Senator Fulbright directly participated in encouraging one of the peace feelers, only to be rebuffed by the administration. In January, Harry Ashmore, director for the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and former editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, and Williams Baggs, editor of the *Miami Herald*, visited Hanoi for nine days. They met with Ho Chi Minh for two hours, and the North Vietnamese President conveyed to the Americans a message for President Johnson. The North Vietnamese would not enter into talks if the bombing continued, but they would discuss terms of a meeting, and if the two sides agreed to those terms and the bombing stopped, all other terms could be discussed. The North Vietnamese proposal represented a significant concession by the Communists, who had continually demanded American withdrawal and Vietcong takeover of the South Vietnamese government. Though Ho demanded that the NLF be part of a coalition government in the South, he also said that he would accept the separation of North and South “for quite a long time.” Ashmore and Baggs, after getting no response from the State Department to Ho Chi Minh’s message, spoke to Fulbright. The senator broached the

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 68.

subject with Johnson at a White House social function. Johnson dismissed the matter, saying, “You know Bill, I can’t see everybody that goes over there and talks to Ho Chi Minh.” Johnson apparently reconsidered and invited Fulbright, Ashmore, and Baggs to meet with State Department officials. Fulbright realized Johnson merely sought to deflect any possible charges of disregarding a possible peace feeler. When he arrived, Ashmore recalls, the Senator “came in shooting.” He said that he believed the meeting was a “bunch of shit” and a waste of time. “All you guys are committed to a military settlement,” he said. Instead of finding a way to negotiate, Fulbright declared, the administration was “bombing that little piss-ant country up there, and you think you can blow it up....It’s a bunch of crap about wanting to negotiate,” Fulbright repeated. The senator accurately depicted the situation; at the same time the two southerners returned with Ho’s message, Johnson had sent a hard-line letter to the North Vietnamese President demanding an end to communist infiltration into South Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

The enormous and rapid increase of American military forces in Vietnam also affected southern congressional support of the war. In the summer of 1967, Congressman Claude Pepper of Florida, a former Senator and member of the Foreign Relations committee in the 1940s, and a former law professor of Senator Fulbright’s at the University of Arkansas, withdrew his support of Johnson’s Vietnam policy because of the lack of a foreseeable end to the conflict, a refusal of America’s major allies to help shoulder the burden of war, and the apparent unwillingness of the South Vietnamese army to fight. The congressman concluded, “Vietnam is no longer worth

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<sup>44</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 528-529.

the heavy burden in money and lives.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, Kentucky’s senators, both Republicans, joined the ranks of the doves. The least surprising of the two to break publicly with Johnson was John Sherman Cooper, the soft spoken, well respected former American Ambassador to India and the newest member of the Foreign Relations committee. A Kentucky newspaper article described Cooper’s reputation among his congressional colleagues as one of the “small number in both parties who speak mainly to the substance of an issue....When they speak, the rest of the Senate listens, even if the general public does not.”<sup>46</sup> In May, Cooper, since 1965 an enthusiastic advocate of a negotiated solution to the war, won praise from several senators when he proposed that the administration limit the bombing of North Vietnam as a way to encourage negotiations. The senior senator from Kentucky feared that American bombing of North Vietnam, which had greatly increased in tonnage and targets over the course of the year, would lead to China’s involvement in the war. To prevent this, Cooper asked the administration “to confine and restrain its bombing...to infiltration routes near the demilitarized zone where men and supplies enter South Vietnam.”<sup>47</sup>

In a July 27, 1967 on the Senate floor, Cooper advocated the unconditional cessation of bombing in North Vietnam. He came to this conclusion in part because of geopolitical considerations. The tensions between the Soviet Union and the United

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<sup>45</sup>“Pepper Stands Up—Any One Else Care to be Counted?” *Miami News*, August 9, 1967, 16A.

<sup>46</sup>William Greider “Vietnam in a Kentucky Mirror,” *Courier-Journal & Times Bureaucrat* (KY), October 8, 1967, Editorial Section, 1.

<sup>47</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., May 15, 1967, 12579.

States had heightened in part due to the Six Day War in the Middle East. He believed that a bombing halt would bring a peace conference closer. In October, he reaffirmed his call for an end to the bombing in North Vietnam and also suggested that the United Nations reconvene the Geneva Conference and begin negotiations. Cooper even declared that if the cessation of bombing did not bring about negotiations, it should be continued anyway because the United States should curtail its “dangerous expansion of the war.”<sup>48</sup> Though never a hardcore hawk, Cooper’s criticism of Johnson’s policies officially moved him into the ranks of the doves.

Among the senator’s colleagues who congratulated him on an insightful speech was Thruston Morton, also of Kentucky, who had a more dramatic public change of heart during 1967. Morton supported Johnson’s initial escalation in early 1965 and suggested that if negotiations took place, the United States could only enter them “from a position of strength.” As late as June 1967, the junior senator from Kentucky scolded the Johnson administration for not instituting a naval blockade of the port of Haiphong. In August on a Washington television program, however, Morton, a former Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional affairs and former Republican national chairman, for the first time publicly turned against the war. Nearly a month later, the congressman spoke to a National Committee for Business Executives for Peace in Vietnam where he outlined his turnabout in more a more systematic and dramatic fashion. Over the previous three years, he began, America had “witnessed a disastrous decline in the effectiveness of our foreign policy.” The root cause, he

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 20379-20381.

asserted, was “the bankruptcy of our policy in Vietnam.” In 1965, Morton repeated, he supported President Johnson’s escalation of the war. The senator paused, and added, “I was wrong.” Suggesting that the President had been “brainwashed” by the military industrial complex, Morton proposed several options including the cessation of all American bombing of North Vietnam, the end to “search and destroy” missions conducted in South Vietnam by American soldiers, the concentration of American soldiers in coastal and populations centers of South Vietnam, the heightening of pressure on the Saigon government to enter into negotiations and institute internal reforms, the implementation of an internal and regional settlement probably decided by an all-Asian peace conference, and a communication to Hanoi that America’s “honorable disengagement” deserved an appropriate response. Morton’s abandonment of American military action could not have been more complete or stunning in its scope. As one reporter observed, Morton had moved from “the sword to the olive branch.”<sup>49</sup>

*Washington Post* reporter Don Oberdorfer realized the significance of Morton’s decision, because of the senator’s reputation as “political weathervane and the forthrightness of his confession of error.” His defection was by no means unique. As Oberdorfer observed, during the summer and early fall of 1967, “millions of voters—along with many religious leaders, editorial writers and elected officials—appeared to be changing their views about the war.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, even though most

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<sup>49</sup>William Greider, “Morton Modifies Vietnam War Views: ‘I Was Wrong,’” *Courier-Journal & Times Bureaucrat*, August 8, 1967, Cooper Collection, Box 548. See also Address of Senator Thruston B. Morton, R.-KY before the National Committee of Business Executives For Peace in Vietnam, Cooper Collection, Box 569.

southerners remained committed to increasing military involvement in order to win the war, a handful of significant and prominent southern legislators bucked the regional trend to express their conscience on Vietnam. Their public stands likely influenced people both in and beyond their constituencies.

Southern legislators also did not speak with unanimity when considering ways to bring an end to the war, as a Kentucky newspaper article demonstrates. The *Courier-Journal & Times Bureaucrat* canvassed the Kentucky congressional delegation on Vietnam and found a variety of viewpoints. While agreeing in general to disavow Johnson's Vietnam policies, opinions on possible alternatives ranged from "Representative Tim Lee Carter's call for a prompt withdrawal of American forces to Representative William O. Cowger's demand for a stronger military offensive." Most wanted a quick end to the war, some preferring a military solution, others, as did the Kentucky senators, a negotiated one. Two congressmen, however, stated that they would settle for "any reasonable approach to end the war."<sup>51</sup> The newspaper article stands as an illustration of the confusion that most southerners experienced as they came to grips with an increasingly frustrating and bloody struggle.

Fulbright, the leader of the doves in Congress, tried to take advantage of this confusion by making several efforts in 1966 and 1967 to educate the public and influence the administration on America's Vietnam War policy. After the 1966 hearings the chairman gave lectures and published a book entitled *The Arrogance of Power*. In it he argued that America's arrogance led it to believe that it could "go

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<sup>50</sup>Don Oberdorfer, "The Wobble on Capital Hill," *New York Times Magazine*, December 17, 1967, 30-31.



into a small alien underdeveloped Asian nation and create stability where there is chaos, the will to fight where there is defeatism, democracy where there is no tradition of it, and honest government where corruption is a way of life.” Calling upon the history of the region of his birth, Fulbright suggested that the Vietnam War, contrary to the administration’s claims, was not unlike the American Civil War. What were the North Vietnamese doing, he said, “that is different from what the American North did to the American South a hundred years ago, with results few of my fellow southerners now regret.” In addition Fulbright held hearings on China and the communist world in which he called upon several Asian experts to explain the history of the conflict and the present situation in the region.<sup>52</sup>

As Johnson continually increased the troop levels and bombing targets, Fulbright, now completely estranged from the administration, did not hold anything back when consulting with the President. In a July 25 meeting between Johnson and the Senate Committee chairs, the President outlined several of the difficulties he faced both on foreign and domestic matters. Fulbright responded bluntly. “Mr. President, what you really need to do is stop the war,” he declared. “That would solve all your problems.” The senator continued, observing that he had noticed a shift in Senate attitudes against Johnson’s policies. Labeling the war a “hopeless adventure,” Fulbright posited that Vietnam was “ruining our domestic and foreign policy.” After previously supporting foreign aid measures that facilitated American involvement in Indochina, the Foreign Relations chairman, a sworn internationalist since the 1940s,

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<sup>51</sup>Greider, “Vietnam in a Kentucky Mirror,” 3.

<sup>52</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 507.

insisted that he might vote against the legislation “and may try to bottle the whole bill up in committee.” <sup>53</sup>

Johnson remained calm and said that if the Congress “wanted to tell the rest of the world to go to hell,” they could do it. Fulbright stood his ground. “My position is that Vietnam is central to the whole problem. We need a new look. The effects of Vietnam are hurting the budget and foreign relations generally.” “Bill,” Johnson replied testily, “everybody doesn’t have a blind spot like you do. You say don’t bomb North Vietnam on just about everything. We haven’t delivered Ho yet.” The President informed the senator that he would not stop the bombing because he could not tell the troops “to put their right hands behind their backs and fight only with their left.” The President concluded, as he always did when challenged by members of Congress on Vietnam, that Fulbright at any time could introduce a resolution to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Johnson, knowing Fulbright had never forgiven himself for acting as floor leader for the resolution, baited him further: “You can tell the troops to come home. You can tell General Westmoreland that he doesn’t know what he’s doing.” <sup>54</sup> Fulbright, saddened by the exchange, remained silent. Everyone in the room knew full well that his silence did not mean consent.

The chairman continually fought for some sort of congressional effort to slow down the pace of escalation at the very least. Of major concern to Fulbright and other southerners was the seeming irrelevance of the legislative branch in determining the

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<sup>53</sup>Barrett, *Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam Papers*, 452.

<sup>54</sup>Barrett, *Lyndon B. Johnson’s Vietnam Papers*, 451-453.

course of the war. In late February, Fulbright supported a nonbonding “sense of Congress” resolution introduced by Senator Clifford Case of New Jersey. The resolution proposed that American troops would be limited to 500,000 and the air war would be stopped unless there was a declaration of war. The Arkansas senator used the measures as another opportunity to debate the war in the Senate. He engaged his southern colleague Richard Russell, floor leader of the military appropriations bill to which the resolution was attached by amendment, in a two hour debate. The *New York Times* described the scene:

The two southerners stood a few feet apart and addressed each other in a quiet, courtly manner. Other senators gathered around and people in the galleries had to lean forward and cup their ears to hear the exchange.<sup>55</sup>

Fulbright, in a veiled way, reminded him of their participation in several filibusters to prevent the passage of Civil Rights legislation in order to get him to support the resolution. “The senator from Arkansas knows, from past experience, that the Senator from Georgia has been greatly concerned about the increase in the powers of the executive branch of the Government, particularly with regard to certain domestic issues.” Russell agreed, and after further questioning, admitted that the exercise of executive power in Vietnam, along with the growth of executive power elsewhere alarmed him enough to want to have a “review” in order to “take this country back to the proper separations of powers and the proper weighing of our system of checks and

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<sup>55</sup>John Herbers, “Fulbright Backs Vietnam Limit of 500,000 G.I.’s,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1967, 3.

balances.”<sup>56</sup> With regard to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, Russell agreed with Fulbright that he did not foresee the conflict escalating to the extent that it had, but he believed that unless the Senate annulled the original resolution, the question had no bearing on the present situation. “We are in a war now,” he declared. “It does no good to recite the history and incite recriminations.” The Georgia senator suggested that since Congress did not use its power to stop the administration from committing massive numbers of American troops, “we were all culpable.” The resolution was later watered down considerably, and, despite Russell’s opposition, it passed. Though non-binding, it was the first time the Senate had officially acted to provide a general framework for ending the war and bringing American troops home. It would act as a precedent for later actions.<sup>57</sup>

A few months later, Fulbright again called on his colleague from Georgia to define further the constitutional responsibilities of the legislative branch in shaping foreign policy. The Arkansas senator asked the Georgia patrician to support another resolution that would assert congressional participation in the making of national commitments. Russell, as he expressed in February, had been increasingly concerned about the growing power of the executive as a result of Vietnam policy, particularly in light of the unilateral American military intervention in the Congo that Johnson had just ordered. With Russell’s promise of support, Fulbright proposed another “sense of Congress” resolution that declared it unconstitutional for the executive branch to enter

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<sup>56</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., February 28, 1967, 4715.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 4716-4718. See also Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 585-602.

into national commitments with foreign nations without some legislative action. He also scheduled public hearings to consider the matter—they opened on August 16, 1967.<sup>58</sup>

Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach testified as chief witness for the administration and in opposition to the resolution. Katzenbach aggressively defended the legality of Johnson's actions on Vietnam and characterized the resolution as confusing. "It could be interpreted to seek to join the Congress with the President on those matters which I think the President has the constitutional authority to do," he reasoned. Fulbright wanted to know whether Congress still had the constitutional power to declare war. Katzenbach replied that the Congress could indeed do so, but in a world of rapidly moving instances where nations attempted to aggressively conquer other territories, the phrase "declare war" was outmoded. The interpretation shocked the committee, but Katzenbach had only begun. With regard to Vietnam, the Under Secretary of State asserted that congressional approval of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution acted as a "functional equivalent of the constitutional obligation expressed in the provision of the Constitution with respect to declaring war." In effect, the administration, through Katzenbach, now said that the legislative branch effectively had no say in foreign policy. Senator Gore protested that it had neither been his nor the Congress's intention to enter into a full-scale war when they voted for the resolution. While Katzenbach refined his statement, saying that he did not mean that congressional approval of the 1964 resolution was "tantamount to a declaration of

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<sup>58</sup>Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, Part III*, 808-811.

war,” it did authorize the President to use the Armed Forces and, after voting for the measure, the Congress could not “proceed to tell the President what he shall bomb, what he shall not bomb, where he shall dispose his troops, where he shall not.”<sup>59</sup> Given the diplomat’s reasoning, senators could neither extricate themselves from culpability nor find a way to change the course the administration steered. In the words of one newspaper report the Senate “caught” itself “in its own net.” “President Johnson will do precisely what he wants to do. The ‘advice and consent’ of the Senate is something he gets if he can but can get along without.”<sup>60</sup>

The committee, outraged at Katzenbach’s statement, continued the hearings to highlight what the chairman, Gore, Cooper and others felt was a constitutional imbalance in foreign affairs. They called upon another long-time southern senator and constitutional scholar Sam Ervin, chairman of the Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Separation of Powers. Ervin complained of a “marked departure during the last 25 years from the balance struck by the Constitution between the Congress and the Executive branch in matters of foreign policy.” He said the trend would have to be “arrested if we are to avoid the fear of the Constitution’s framers that unchecked executive power might develop along tyrannical lines and pose the greatest threat to our democratic government and to the liberty of our people.” With regard to Vietnam, Ervin repeated the contention that he expressed earlier in the year—the United States had no legal or constitutional authority to intervene militarily

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<sup>59</sup>Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Commitments to Foreign Powers*, 90<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 16, 17, 21, 23, August, and 19 September, 1967, 79-81, 89-9.

<sup>60</sup>Mary McGrory, “Senators Caught in Own Net,” *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), August 18, 1967 Cooper Collection, William Miller Files, Box 662.

in Vietnam. The North Carolina legislator said a distinction should be drawn between offensive and defensive war. The President, he reasoned, could use the armed forces to defend United States territory in the event of a sudden attack on United States territory. Any other use of the armed forces could be taken “only upon congressional authority.” The senator also challenged the administration’s invocation of the SEATO treaty as justification for intervention. While the treaty was difficult to interpret, his reading of it suggested that though SEATO gave “the signatories to the treaty the power to go to the relief of a nation which is attacked in Southeast Asia if it is requested to do so by that nation, it does not impose upon any obligation to do so.” In addition to opposing the Johnson administration’s interpretation of the constitution and SEATO treaty, Ervin also rejected the theory of containment. “I have never favored the idea,” he declared, “that democracy is so very good that we should try to give it to everybody on the face of the earth, even those people who don’t know what democracy is and have no experience in exercising it.”

Nevertheless, the senator’s reading of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution led him to conclude that the Congress granted the President the authority to fight the war. In response, Senator Gore contended that the Senate and House did not intend by their approval of the resolution a seemingly limitless escalation of the war. Furthermore, he reminded the committee that Johnson had assured the American public that he would not enlarge the conflict. Ervin dismissed Gore’s argument and suggested that he would have to interpret the resolution by what it said “rather than what the President or Congress thought concerning what the President said.”

Though disavowing the legal and ideological justification for war, Ervin still disagreed with the doves. Like the majority of southerners, he supported fighting the war “with sufficient force to either win it or to bring the enemy to the conference table.” After offering his comments, the senator said further that he was unhappy with Johnson’s half measures. “I think some in authority would do well to read a little Shakespeare,” he mused. “Shakespeare said, ‘Beware of entrance to a quarrel, but, being in, bear it, that the opponent may beware of thee.’ The United States, Ervin suggested, ignored the Bard’s advice on both counts. It rushed into “quarrels” such as South Vietnam, Korea, the Congo, and Rhodesia. Once in, however, America did not make their opponents beware of them. After his eloquent argument, his conclusion echoed a familiar refrain: “I think we ought to turn over the fighting in South Vietnam to the admirals and generals, and see if they can’t win the war.”<sup>61</sup>

Ervin’s hawkish stand seems puzzling in light of his rejection of the administration’s justifications for war. He, like other southern congressional hawks, suggested that the time had passed for arguing the wisdom of getting into war in Vietnam. “We are faced with a condition and not a theory,” he said, quoting Grover Cleveland.<sup>62</sup> Having rejected the theories that created the condition, however, it seems puzzling that the senator could advocate escalating the war in order to defend both the theories of containment and the belief in the necessity to export America’s brand of democracy. Perhaps Ervin, also a member of the Armed Services committee, had been convinced by his southern hawkish colleagues, or military officials of the

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<sup>61</sup>*U.S. Commitments to Foreign Powers*, 189-195, 197-199, 205.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 196-197.



necessity to fight to win in Vietnam. The frustration of the war along with the lack of a cogent “honorable” solution in Vietnam sometimes created strange and conflicted arguments in the halls of Congress. The members of the committee, perhaps sensing their own logic just as tortured in regard to the conflict, did not press the North Carolina senator on the point.

The support among both hawks and doves for Fulbright's Commitments Resolution can in part be attributed to the Arkansas senator's resistance to Civil Rights legislation. Though Fulbright, Russell, Ervin and other southerners agreed on little else, they shared a fear of the growth of executive power. Because Fulbright acted upon this fear by joining Russell and Ervin in the attempt to kill in the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, he could impress upon them the necessity to defend the Constitution once again against what he and the others perceived as another assault on legislative power in foreign affairs. So continued the odd legacy of the Arkansas senator—forever associated with an internationalist viewpoint and a “principled” stand on Vietnam, but also tainted by his association with racism, legalistic arguments, and obstructionism. As he grew increasingly impatient with Johnson's unwillingness to de-escalate the conflict, his growing disgust with the foreign aid program because of Vietnam moved him closer to the more “neo-isolationist” attitudes of his southern hawkish colleagues. In 1968, he broke with his own twenty-five year tradition and voted against the foreign aid program.

Johnson had said previously that he would be more concerned with the defection of the hawks than the doves. Johnson, who remembered vividly the disastrous political effects of the right-wing reaction to Truman's China policies,

worried that a similar thing would happen to him over Vietnam. Now it appeared that the President realized another one of his major fears. As a majority of the members of Congress grew closer to the doves, the hawkish southerners grabbed the headlines. In August 1967, John Stennis, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, concerned about conflicting reports between civilian and military authorities as to the effectiveness of the bombing campaign, convened seven hearings in August. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who had lost faith in the war and had quickly fallen from Johnson's esteem, sent a memorandum to the President suggesting that no amount of bombing would force the North Vietnamese to negotiate. Members of the Joint Chiefs and other military commanders completely disagreed with the Secretary, and Stennis set out to hear their side of the story. As historian Michael Scott Downs asserts, the hearings "had all the quality of a wild west lynching party, with Robert McNamara as the guest of honor." Besides the Defense Secretary, only one non-military man, a retired general, testified.<sup>63</sup>

Stennis's opening statement set the tone. "It would be a tragic and perhaps fatal mistake," he declared, "for us to suspend or restrict the bombing." The real question the chairman wanted answered was "whether we are doing what we can and should do in the opinion of our military men." The committee was predisposed to take the side of the military in any dispute with civilian officials in part because Stennis, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Harry Byrd, Jr. of Virginia all represented states that had benefited financially from lucrative Defense Department contracts.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Downs, "A Matter of Conscience," 87.

The committee concerned itself with two major questions. The first was the selection process of targets, particularly in North Vietnam. Johnson's Tuesday Cabinet selected most of the targets, but it almost always did not bring any representative from the military in on the decisions. A second matter of contention involved the unwillingness of the Johnson administration to allow the bombing of certain targets in North Vietnam, particularly Hanoi and Haiphong out of concerns that China would enter the war. Johnson, realizing that Stennis's support was vital to the passage of his military appropriations, approved sixteen of the previously restricted targets as the hearings opened.<sup>65</sup>

The military officials testifying included, among others, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific, and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Senator Thurmond, a former officer in the Army Reserves, conducted his questioning of the military officials in a "cheerleading" fashion, obviously convinced that there was no difference between the Vietnam War and World War II.

Thurmond: In World War II there were no exempt targets. It was an all-out effort to win. It was a mass effort to win. There wasn't any placating or appeasing or ideas for stalemates. Victory was the goal. Can we win in Vietnam?

Admiral Sharp: I think we can win. Yes sir.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Senate, Armed Services Committee, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Air War Against North Vietnam, Part 1*, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., August, 1967, 2-3.

<sup>65</sup>Downs, *A Matter of Conscience*, 87-89.

<sup>66</sup>*Air War Against North Vietnam, Part 1*, 57.

Despite the militant rhetoric, the military leaders made a formidable case against the administration's bombing policies. They suggested that sharper more effective air attacks had been refused by the administration. They also asserted that any reduction or suspension of the bombing would increase American casualties and result also in the deployment of additional combat troops. On the other hand, the military officials concluded that if the administration allowed the Air Force to bomb Hanoi, Haiphong, and all the restricted targets, the North Vietnamese would surrender. The committee treated the military witnesses with the utmost respect when they testified.

The attitude changed when the troubled Secretary sat down to testify before the committee on August 25, 1967. McNamara, however, had not softened his convictions on the bombing. "A selective, carefully targeted bombing campaign, such as we are presently conducting, can be directed toward reasonable and realizable goals," he asserted. "A less discriminating bombing campaign, against North Vietnam would do no more. We have no reason to believe that it would break the will of the North Vietnamese people or sway the purpose of their leaders. Bombing at any level of intensity would not meet our objective."<sup>67</sup> McNamara concluded that ground operations would be where the war would be decided.

The Secretary had to endure a six-hour grilling from a hostile subcommittee. Thurmond, as usual, attacked the Secretary in the most strident fashion. He suggested that the Secretary cared more about North Vietnamese civilian casualties than

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<sup>67</sup>Senate, Armed Services Committee, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Air War Against North Vietnam, Part 4*, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 25 August, 1967, 273.

American casualties in South Vietnam. He also accused the Secretary of placating and appeasing the communists. "It is a statement of no win," he continued. "It seems to me that if we follow what you have recommended that we ought to get out of Vietnam at once, because we have no chance to win, and I deeply regret that a man in your position is taking that position today." <sup>68</sup>

In the end, the subcommittee report, which Chairman Stennis quickly made public, expectedly decided in favor of the military, not McNamara. Stennis, by calling the hearings, gave "equal time" to military criticism of Johnson's Vietnam policies, and made explicit both his and his constituents' frustration with limited war.

The cold fact is that this policy has not done the job and has been contrary to the best military judgment. What is needed now is the hard decision to do whatever it is necessary, take the risks that have to be taken, and apply the force that is required to see the job through...It is high time to allow the military voice to be heard in connection with the tactical details of military operations. <sup>69</sup>

Though the President did not follow the advice of the Armed Services committee subcommittee, his policies seemed more in line with them than with those of the doves. By the end of 1967 almost 500,000 troops were in Vietnam and the air war had been increased considerably over the last year, both in the North and South. The debates in Congress as well as the confrontations between the doves and the administration continued throughout the year. After Senator Morton turned against the war, in early October Minority Leader and Johnson Vietnam supporter Everett

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 294-297.

<sup>69</sup>Downs, *A Matter of Conscience*, 93.

Dirksen had a tense two-hour Senate debate with Fulbright. In addition, Fulbright, according to an Associated Press report, apparently clashed with Vice President Humphrey in mid-October. The Arkansas legislator had expressed alarm earlier in the year over some statements by the Vice President during his Asian trip that suggested a continuing “open-ended” American commitment in Vietnam. During a White House briefing, Fulbright charged that dissent existed within the administration itself over war objectives. He remarked that Arthur Goldberg, the United Nations Ambassador, believed that the United States fought in Vietnam to insure South Vietnamese determination. Humphrey’s recent statements, Fulbright asserted, claimed that the real enemy was Red China. Fulbright concluded that if Humphrey’s interpretation were correct, it implied a permanent U.S. occupation of South Vietnam, even after negotiations ended. Fulbright then asked his question. “Just who is our enemy here?” The Vice-President, who always appeared defensive when upholding Johnson’s Vietnam policies because he disagreed with them, replied testily, “You don’t have to ask the GI whose leg has been cut off who the enemy is.” The Vice-President said nothing else and went on to the next question by another member of Congress. As 1968 began, the rift between Fulbright and the administration could not have been more complete.<sup>70</sup>

The Tet Offensive changed considerably both the course of the war and the length of Johnson’s presidency. Up until the offensive, which began in late January 1968, the President, Secretaries McNamara and Rusk, and General William

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<sup>70</sup>Jack Bell, “Fulbright and Humphrey Clash at White House,” *Baxter Bulletin* (AR), October 10, 1967, 1, Fulbright Papers, Series 48, Box 45:1.

Westmoreland had painted a rosy picture of American progress in the war. As late a month before, the general had said that America was winning the war of attrition with the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. In his state of the Union address on January 17, 1968, President Johnson declared that the enemy had been “defeated in battle after battle,” resulting in a significant increase in the areas of South Vietnam under government protection. Though the administration had some indication that the enemy had been planning a massive military action, they felt confident enough to continue the tradition of ordering a bombing halt in observance of the Vietnamese Tet holiday. On January 31, during the truce, the Vietcong attacked almost every major city and provincial capital in South Vietnam, including Saigon. In the capital city they assaulted both General Westmoreland’s headquarters and, as American television cameras recorded the event, the American embassy in Saigon. Though every Vietcong attack ended in failure, and the Americans killed over 25,000 members of the Vietcong during the Tet offensive, many Americans, both hawks and doves had lost confidence in their President to tell them the truth about Vietnam. In the wake of Tet, Johnson’s approval rating on Vietnam dropped to twenty-six percent.<sup>71</sup>

Southerners in Congress, as usual, did not speak with one voice in response to the Tet offensive. For most southern legislators, the North Vietnamese offensive just strengthened their existing opinions. Russell Long accepted the administration and Westmoreland’s claims. “Considering the fact that [the Vietcong] lost 25,000 and we only lost about 600, and our allies lost a few hundred more than we lost, it would

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<sup>71</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 570-575.

seem to be a major victory for our side.”<sup>72</sup> Most southern hawks, however, were more critical. Representative Gene Snyder of Kentucky attacked the administration for telling American troops “not to win a military victory” while at the same time sending aid to Communist countries that supported the North Vietnamese. “If we are not going to change the course of direction; if we are going to let our own resources funnel back to the enemy, then this Administration has the blood of dying Americans on its hands,” Snyder emotionally asserted.<sup>73</sup>

“How is it that the Viet Cong [sic] could mount such a series of coordinated attacks against American bases and provincial capitals?” queried Senator Harry Byrd, Jr. of Virginia. “Is it now not time,” he continued “for a reappraisal of our policies and procedures for obtaining our objectives?”<sup>74</sup> Richard Russell, while publicly calling for increased attacks on the Vietcong and approval of additional bombing targets in North Vietnam, privately communicated to the administration his doubts on continuing the war. Hearing of Westmoreland’s pending request of up to 200,000 more troops, the Georgia senator advised the President that he should not grant the request “until there was a complete reappraisal of Vietnam, primarily on the will and desires of the people of South Viet Nam.” His comments centered mainly on his doubts of the will of the

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<sup>72</sup>Transcript of a press conference, Washington, DC, February 11, 1968, Long papers, Box 606.

<sup>73</sup>Arlo T. Wagner, “Snyder Demands LBJ ‘Stop Vietnam War,’” *Kentucky Post*, March 2, 1968, Cooper Collection, Legislative Files, Box 568.

<sup>74</sup>Speech before Marian, VA Chamber of Commerce, February 8, 1968, Harry Byrd, Jr. Papers, hereafter cited as Byrd, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, Box 55. See also “The Mood of Virginians,” Transcript of senate speech, Box 55, Byrd, Jr. Papers.



South Vietnamese to fight. “If they did not show more interest to defend [South Vietnam] we should consider getting out.”<sup>75</sup>

Even southerners who had enthusiastically supported Johnson’s prosecution of the war harbored doubts after Tet. In a presidential briefing of some leaders of Congress on February 6, 1968, Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia charged that the administration had poor intelligence and was not prepared for the attacks.

Furthermore, he felt the Americans both underestimated the “morale and vitality” of the Vietcong and “overestimated the support of the South Vietnamese government and its people.” When Johnson disagreed, and insisted that the administration knew the Vietcong had been planning a general uprising, Byrd did not back down. “I have never caused you any trouble on this matter on the Hill,” he reminded the President. “But I do have serious concerns about Vietnam.” Johnson continued his denials, saying that he did not underestimate North Vietnamese and Vietcong strength. “Something is wrong over there,” Byrd accurately observed, and pointed out that the Vietcong achieved their objective. The communists wanted “to show that could attack all over the country and they did.” Johnson still dismissed Byrd’s criticism and said that he took more stock in the opinions of the military and diplomatic men than congressional carping. “Anybody can kick a barn down,” he said, quoting former Speaker of the House, Texas’s Sam Rayburn, “It takes a good carpenter to build one.”

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<sup>75</sup>Notes of conversation between Richard Russell and Robert McNamara, February 12, 1968, Russell Collection, Box 200.

Byrd stood his ground. “I do not want to argue with the President,” he said. “But I am going to stick to my convictions.”<sup>76</sup>

The Tet offensive marked the final straw for John Stennis. Though, like Russell, he had publicly called for increased efforts to win the war, he had never attacked Johnson’s overall policy. In the aftermath of the Vietcong offensive, the Mississippi senator made a final break with the administration. Under Johnson’s policies, Stennis observed, the American action was contained “by the boundaries of Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam.” At the same time, the enemy used the port of Haiphong and several other ports restricted from American bombs to resupply and rearm its troops. Under those circumstances, Stennis reasoned, America could expect to wait a long time and lose more men in order to “force an honorable and effective solution” to the conflict. With the realization that after years of war Vietnam was no nearer to an acceptable settlement, Stennis posed a question: “Is it more men that we need for the present policy? Or is it more men that we need for a new policy?...In short, it is clear to me that we are now compelled to choose between a hard-hitting war or no war at all.”<sup>77</sup>

To southern doves, Tet stood as further proof of Johnson’s duplicity and the moral bankruptcy of American policy. Albert Gore repeated calls for a negotiated settlement and posited that the war had both drawn Russia and China together and increased the danger of Chinese intervention. He also implored Secretary of State Dean Rusk to agree to reconsider his two-year refusal to meet with the Foreign

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<sup>76</sup>Barrett, *Lyndon B. Johnson’s Vietnam Files*, 584.

<sup>77</sup>Downs, *A Matter of Conscience*, 100.

Relations Committee in public. John Sherman Cooper captured the attitude of a growing number of Americans when he questioned the purpose of American's utter destruction of South Vietnam as a result of the war. The Kentucky senator quoted reporter James Reston, who questioned how America could win a military victory in South Vietnam without "destroying what we are trying to save." Cooper continued, "Is it not time for us to ask whether we are crossing that line, when South Vietnam's major cities, such as Hue and parts of Saigon, are systematically reduced to rubble and dust?"<sup>78</sup>

In the aftermath of Tet, William Fulbright continued to push for a clarification of the administration's objectives. On February 5 he put into the record an article by columnist Tom Wicker on the differences between the statements of the American military and civilian officials in Vietnam, who were encouraged to be optimistic, and the more realistic accounts of the reporters who traveled with ordinary troops. A few days later the Foreign Relations committee voted to again ask the President, as they had over the past few months, to allow Secretary of State Rusk to testify publicly in order to explain the current situation in Vietnam. In a letter to the President, Fulbright observed that some members, presumably including the chairman himself, "felt strongly that what is now at stake is no less urgent a question than the Senate's constitutional duty to advise, as well as consent, in the sphere of foreign policy."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 7 February, 1968, 2445-2447, 2494.

<sup>79</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., February 5, 1968, 2080-2085. See also J. William Fulbright to Lyndon Baines Johnson, February 7, 1968, Fulbright papers, Series 1:1, Box 4:1.

While waiting on a response, Fulbright convened hearings to study the incidents that prompted the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Since early 1966 Fulbright, in light of other inconsistencies in Johnson's statements, had begun to question the administration's conclusions about what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August 1964. He had never consulted the logbooks of either the *Maddox* or *C. Turner Joy*, but a retired Navy admiral had commented to him that the events "sounded unrealistic." In the wake of Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach's insistence that the chairman knew the full implications of the 1964 resolution when he convinced questioning senators to vote for it, and the Under Secretary's characterization of the resolution as a "functional equivalent of a declaration of war," Fulbright instructed his staff to investigate the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. They uncovered several facts inconsistent with Defense Secretary McNamara's explanations in August 1964. The South Vietnamese "OPLAN-34" raids on the North Vietnamese Coasts, and the American "Desoto patrols" had been related. In other words, the American ships had acted provocatively and almost invited attack. In addition, doubt still remained as to whether the second incident, in which the *Maddox* was allegedly attacked, had ever occurred. Fulbright called for hearings. McNamara, now out of office and by some accounts at the point of a nervous breakdown, reluctantly agreed to testify.<sup>80</sup>

The former secretary continued to claim that the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* had no knowledge of the OPLAN-34 attacks. Fulbright then read a cable sent from the *Maddox* at the time that referred to the operations. McNamara's response seemed like

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<sup>80</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 577-579.

pure nonsense. “We can find no basis,” he declared, “for the commander making that statement.” Eventually McNamara confirmed the commander actually sent the cable, but he disagreed with its conclusions. Fulbright quoted another cable from a naval commander who reviewed the second incident and cast doubt on whether the North Vietnamese ever fired torpedoes at the *Maddox*. McNamara stood by his convictions, saying he was convinced the attack had taken place.

Fulbright could not contain his contempt and despair. He exclaimed that if he had knowledge of the full story he would not have pushed for quick passage of the resolution. “We accepted your statement (in 1964) completely without doubt.”

I went on the floor to urge passage of the resolution. You quoted me, as saying these things on the floor....All my statements were based on your testimony. I had no independent evidence, and now I think I did a great disservice to the Senate. I feel very guilty for not having enough sense at that time to have raised these questions and asked for evidence. I regret it...I regret it more than anything I have ever done in my life.

The mounting evidence that proved McNamara’s duplicity convinced Gore also. He asserted that no second attack had taken place. McNamara disagreed, saying he had proof that the North Vietnamese shot at the *Maddox*. He pulled one bullet out of his pocket. Gore responded angrily, “You hold one bullet and we sent 64 ships [he meant planes] in retaliation.” The Tennessee senator believed that Johnson misled Congress and the country about the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. The Johnson administration, he continued “was hasty, acted precipitately, unadvisedly, unwisely, out of proportion to the provocation in launching 64 bombing attacks on North

Vietnam out of a confused uncertain situation on a murky night, which one of the sailors described as dark as the knob of hell.”<sup>81</sup>

McNamara never accepted the conclusion of the two southern Senate doves. Without informing the committee, the Secretary released a twenty-one-page statement saying that Johnson and he had acted responsibly in August 1964. It further condemned Fulbright, Gore and others for impugning his and the administration’s integrity. The President had not, McNamara asserted, provoked the incidents to escalate the war. Fulbright retaliated. He insisted that the administration misled Congress in 1964 and continued to cover up its duplicity. He revealed that when a navy commander contacted the committee in November 1967 to provide information on McNamara’s lack of candor immediately after the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, Pentagon officials confined him to a mental ward for a month. Fulbright, to complete the public humiliation of the administration, released the full transcripts of the hearings. Americans now knew that their President had lied to them about Vietnam.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the administration’s weakening in the wake of the Tet Offensive, new rumors caused Fulbright considerable alarm. In early March, the Foreign Relations chairman heard that Westmoreland had requested 206,000 additional troops. On March 7, 1968, he rose in the Senate to discuss the rumor and touched off one of the most spirited debates on Vietnam in months. Using information he gained from the

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<sup>81</sup>Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *Gulf of Tonkin, The 1964 Incidents*, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 20 February, 1968, 53-53, 76-80, 101-102.

<sup>82</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 580-581.

recent hearings, Fulbright reasoned that because the President had gained approval for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution by misleading Congress, then the measure, “like any other contract based on misrepresentation...is null and void.” He blasted the administration for creating an emergency environment in August 1964 that “prevented any meaningful debate from taking place in this body.” The determination of the senate, Fulbright advised, should be to find out what the President planned to do.

At several points a number of senate hawks, including Stennis and Texas Republican John Tower along with a few administration supporters, tried to shut down the debate. Tower, who had made one of the speeches for Republicans directly after the President’s State of the Union message criticizing Johnson’s “policy of gradualism” in Vietnam, welcomed the escalation. “Now the administration is doing what a number of us have been saying for 2 ½ years—that you cannot win a war by a graduated response.” He refuted the contention that America had suffered military defeats during the Tet Offensive. What the enemy had done, Tower posited, was to “frighten so many people in this country into wanting to get out, to negotiate, into believing we cannot win, into believing we are losing and we just have to withdraw unilaterally.” Senator Vance Hartke challenged Tower by saying that if he wanted to defend the administration’s policies, why did he not want Johnson “to tell us what his policies are.”

Fulbright, as usual, saved the best for last. The United States, he asserted, now had a serious decision to make in Vietnam. In deciding a course of action the administration should be aware of the total cost engendered by an increase of over 200,000 troops. He listed how escalation would affect the country. The war affected

the deficit and the balance of payments. It also greatly influenced the decision whether to remain on the gold standard, and the strength of the United States “to hold up a crumbling international financial structure.” He then outlined what he saw as one of the unintended and disastrous consequences of Johnson’s choice to fight the war. “Were it not for the war diversion, the diversion of money in vast sums...were it not for our care and concern for the men who are being killed in increasing numbers every minute of every day, we could concentrate in this country on the absolute fundamental duty that we owe our own people here at home. It is the war that had distracted us.”<sup>83</sup>

Arkansas intellectual William Fulbright, the initiator of legislation in 1943 to create the United Nations, a firm believer in internationalism and foreign aid, now realized in part what the cost of one of America’s commitments had wrought. His words in one sense had been reminiscent of southern “neo-isolationists” such as Harry Byrd, Sr. of Virginia, who opposed several American commitments abroad because of their cost. Like Russell, Stennis, and others, Fulbright had also come to question American commitments. However, the difference from Byrd and other southern long-time foreign aid opponents rested in the Arkansas legislator’s belief that government could positively affect people at home. Byrd, Russell, Stennis, Rivers, and others wanted more money for military spending. The Arkansas legislator believed more in technical and economic aid programs to help poor farmers in Arkansas, and poor people elsewhere. He came to the same conclusion his former friend and southern colleague Lyndon Johnson did when he left office—involvement with that “bitch of a

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<sup>83</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 7 March, 1968, 5644-5667.



war” in Vietnam would ruin the relationship with the woman Johnson really loved and Fulbright admired—the Great Society.

Fulbright had finally come to oppose the foreign aid he had enthusiastically supported since the early 1940s mainly because it sewed the seeds of American military involvement in Vietnam. The initial American investment in Southeast Asia went to the French in 1950 because of fears of a communist takeover. Fulbright believed in a brand of internationalism, in which a “wise” and benevolent United States improved conditions in the Third World without interfering in the internal affairs of the host country. Vietnam soured this belief. He saw the technical and economic foreign aid programs he had voted for in the 1950s go increasingly both to pay for military actions and to prop up non-communist dictatorships in countries like South Vietnam. The disillusionment over American support of tyrants who would help to contain communism in part led him to oppose America’s escalation of the Vietnam War. To Fulbright, the United States had abandoned, or possibly never fully embraced, his conception of Wilsonian self-determination, which foreign aid was supposed to encourage. His support of antiwar efforts came as a reaction to a “betrayal” by Johnson and two immediate predecessors of the purposes of the program.

To keep the pressure on the administration in the wake of the proposed escalation, Fulbright continued to press for Rusk to testify before the Foreign Relations Committee to explain the administration’s future plans in Vietnam. Though he had not heard from Johnson by early March, the chairman had some control over events. The senator made it known that if the Secretary of State did not testify, he would make good on his previous threat to kill the foreign aid bill for fiscal 1969.

Therefore, on March 11, 1968, for the first time in two years, Georgian Dean Rusk faced the television cameras as he sat down to testify in the Foreign Relations Committee Chamber. Though the cameras added to the drama, the Secretary revealed nothing new. As *Newsweek* described it, the testimony “was almost a verbatim replay of position statements that the participants had made many times.” The difference from the 1966 Rusk testimony was that many more on the committee, even nonsouthern hawks like Stuart Symington and Carl Mundt, had doubts about continuing the war. Both John Sherman Cooper and Albert Gore pressed Rusk to confirm or deny rumors of Westmoreland’s request of a 200,000-troop increase. Cooper worried that even more risk would be involved in the move, and “less assurance that it would have any end...through military acts.” Rusk did not give a specific answer regarding the request. He said only that “the entire Vietnam situation is under consideration, from A to Z.” Gore also pressed Rusk on whether Congress would be consulted if the administration decided to significantly increase the numbers of ground troops. Near the end of the ten and a half hours of hearings over two days, Rusk answered the question generally, saying that if more troops were needed, the President would consult “with the appropriate members of Congress.” Though the growing division of the country made the hearings of particular interest to some, less than one-third of Americans watched. Of those, only about six percent said they had changed their minds on Vietnam, most of them moving to the administration’s position.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>“Growing Dissent,” *Newsweek*, March 25, 1968, 33, 26. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 588.

Fulbright and others on the committee also incurred criticism by conservatives for holding the hearings. On a nationally televised program on which Stennis and Fulbright appeared, the Mississippi senator said the contentious hearings only gave “encouragement to the enemy.” When Fulbright denied his claim, the Mississippi senator, with some emotion, suggested that the soldiers in Vietnam would be bewildered by the hearings. “They are being told they are there illegally, but no one is willing to say bring them home, and no one is willing to remove restrictions so they can fight to win,” he declared.<sup>85</sup> In addition, conservative southern newspapers such as New Orleans’s *States-Item* published editorials calling Fulbright and Morse “broken records” and pointing out the aggression committed by the North Vietnamese during Tet.<sup>86</sup> In addition, some constituents of southern members of the Foreign Relations Committee let their senators know of their opposition to the hearings. A prime illustration of the frustration felt by southern conservatives over their more liberal senators on the committee is found in a statement made in a March 13, 1968 letter to Senator Gore from a constituent in Madison, Tennessee. “If you are in Washington to represent Tennessee then you should take into consideration the feelings of the people of Tennessee,” the writer advised. “We are doing the right thing in Vietnam and I would appreciate deeply you representing my feelings about this war,” the man advised.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>“Stennis Calls War Hearings Aid to Enemy,” *Jackson Daily News*, March 12, 1968, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

<sup>86</sup>Hermann Deutsch, “Morse, Fulbright: Two Broken Records,” *States Item* (New Orleans, LA), March 13, 1968, 21.

The President himself, though publicly declaring throughout February and March that Americans would win in Vietnam, began to doubt the prospects of continuing to fight to win the war or to extend his presidency. The war, the sluggish economy, and the riots in the cities also diminished his personal approval rating to the all-time low of his presidency. An unexpectedly strong showing by Democratic Presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary, and the subsequent entry of his old nemesis Robert Kennedy into the race, added to his personal pressures. Senator Russell, his close confidante throughout his presidency, dreaded meeting with Johnson during this period because the President often cried uncontrollably. Having also lost key hawks such as John Stennis on the war, Johnson gradually came to the conclusion that he should begin de-escalation of the conflict. On March 31, 1968, he proposed a halt in the bombing of North Vietnam north of the Demilitarized Zone. The President would not grant Westmoreland's request—he would only send 13,500 more troops over the next five months. Johnson also promised to reduce “substantially the present level of hostilities.” The President hoped that the moves would encourage the North Vietnamese to begin peace negotiations. At the end of the speech he dropped a bombshell—in order to concentrate on ending the war he would not seek or accept the Democratic nomination for President.

The stunning announcement brought a positive response from both supporters and opponents alike. Of the southerners who made comments, Russell said Johnson demonstrated “the good faith of his efforts for peace.” Robert Byrd said the President had acted out of “selfless devotion to duty.” Even non-southern but influential doves

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<sup>87</sup>Stanley R. Houle to Albert Gore, March 13, 1968, Gore collection, Issue Mail, Vietnam,

such as Wayne Morse of Oregon and George McGovern of South Dakota responded favorably to the President's speech.<sup>88</sup> Fulbright, accustomed by now to holding the unpopular yet sometimes more insightful opinion, complained on April 2 in the Senate that Johnson, while talking peace two days before, significantly raised the level of bombing on April 1. On that day bombers flew twice the normal number of missions and dropped bombs as far north as eighty miles south of Hanoi. Fulbright urged the President to clarify his statement that he would end the bombing of most of North Vietnam. In view of the expansion of air attacks, the senator could not "imagine how this President or hardly anyone else can say anything or do anything that would impress the Vietnamese or the enemy with our intentions hereafter to move in a significant way to bring the bombing to a close."<sup>89</sup> When other senators and critics protested Johnson's actions, he restricted the bombing to an area between the Demilitarized Zone and the twentieth parallel. On April 3, Hanoi contacted the United States. Formal peace negotiations between American and North Vietnamese officials began a month later.

As the talks began and the situation in Vietnam stabilized somewhat, Fulbright directed more of his energies to a seemingly tough reelection bid. He would not have that difficult a time. Though they may not have agreed one-hundred-percent with the senator, voters in Arkansas took pride in the fact that Fulbright stood up to the President and his "Harvard" advisors. As one *Newsweek* reporter observed, in a state

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Box A-5.

<sup>88</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 600-604.

<sup>89</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 2 April, 1968, 8569-8572.

known mainly for “hillbillies and Razorback hogs,” the Rhodes Scholar, law professor, college president, congressman and long-time senator “convinced his constituents that a local boy from the Ozarks can compete with the very best the Northeast can produce.” The reporter also found that several of Fulbright’s constituents respected the senator’s stand on Vietnam in part because the war directly affected the economy of Arkansas. Vietnam, the *Newsweek* article continued, “dries up Federal funds for the state and brings harder times for farmers and growing grief for parents.”<sup>90</sup> Most Arkansas voters saw Fulbright as someone who actively worked to get America out of the war, and to bring back their prosperity. The senator took full advantage of the war’s impact on the Arkansas economy, illustrating the point in the Senate as he outlined the cuts for Federal funding to aid economic development for farmers. He concluded that Arkansans needed the aid, but it was being delayed “because of a war halfway around the globe, which is costing the American taxpayers over \$30 billion a year and with little prospect for success.”<sup>91</sup>

The Presidential campaign, however, proved much more difficult for the Democratic nominee. Having lived through the assassination of Robert Kennedy, one of its major antiwar candidates, a deeply divided Democratic Party went to Chicago in late August to nominate its candidate, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. The 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago stands as one of the most contentious and divisive

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<sup>90</sup>“Candidate Fulbright,” *Newsweek*, March 25, 1968, 34. See also Johns H. Averell, “Vietnam Aids Fulbright in Reelection Campaign,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1968, Part 1A, 4-5.

<sup>91</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 4 March, 1968, 5006.

in American history. As Mayor Richard Daley's police force attacked protesters outside the convention hall, a ruinous and vitriolic debate erupted on the floor over Vietnam policy. On one side stood the Chairman of the Platform committee, House Majority Whip Hale Boggs of Louisiana, a staunch Johnson ally. Predictably Boggs followed the administration's line of continuing the fighting and bombing as well as peace talks. On the other side, Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, the maverick Democrat who a growing number of Tennesseans considered too liberal for the state, helped lead a spirited fight to adopt a more dovish Vietnam plank to the Democratic platform. Gore took the podium and proposed a Vietnam platform that advocated an unconditional ending to the bombing of Vietnam, a mutual phased withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese troops, and direct negotiations between Saigon and the National Liberation Front. In an impassioned speech, he also criticized the continuation of the status quo as represented in the administration's Vietnam platform proposal and lamented the result of what he considered America's tragic involvement in Vietnam.

What harvest do we reap from this gallant sacrifice? An erosion of the moral leadership, a demeaning entanglement with a corrupt political clique in Saigon, disillusionment, despair here at home, and a disastrous postponement of imperative programs to improve our social ills.

The American people, in my opinion, and overwhelmingly in that regard, think that we made a mistake. And yet, read the proposed platform. We're called upon not only to approve the disastrous policy, but even applaud it. I wonder if the American people are applauding it—they want to change it.

His state's representatives at the convention, however, did not agree. The *Nashville Tennessean* reported that he received "rousing cheers from other delegations, his own was silent during this appearance on the platform." In fact, they voted against Gore's proposal, 49-2.<sup>92</sup> Since the senator would not face reelection until 1970, he may have figured that he could recover whatever ground he might lose by his participation. He never did.

A number of southerners did not support Humphrey because of his association with Johnson and his liberalism. Many preferred Richard Nixon, who boasted of a "secret plan to end the war" while maintaining American honor and military strength. He also promised a return to "law and order" in response to increasingly volatile Vietnam protests. However, Independent candidate George Wallace got most of the attention and adulation in the South. Therefore, many southern members of Congress running for reelection could not afford to criticize or ignore the former Alabama governor. A *Charlotte Observer* canvass of the North Carolina delegation in September 1968 concluded that the state's legislators acted as if Humphrey did not exist. Most congressional Democrats in North Carolina, when asked about their choice for President, would apologetically refer to the oath they took to vote for the party's nominee. Even the usually gregarious and politically active Sam Ervin refused to compliment the Vice-President. He said he would support him, while at the same time complimenting Wallace for "raising some issues that are fundamental."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Robert Clyde Hodges, "Senator Albert Gore, Sr., and the Vietnam War" (Masters Thesis, University of Kentucky, 1989), 83-85.

<sup>93</sup>James K. Batton, "N.C. Democrats Act Like Humphrey Doesn't Exist," *Charlotte Observer* (NC), September 8, 1968, 3B.



Though they did not say it expressly, one reason, in addition to Humphrey's liberalism, why southerners did not enthusiastically support the Vice President was his support of Johnson's Vietnam policies. Undoubtedly, one of the "fundamental issues" Ervin said that Wallace addressed was a commitment to win the war.

The Republicans nominated Nixon, and his ambiguous statements on the Vietnam War made him seem like a hawk to some and a dove to others. A considerable number of southerners, however, preferred him to Humphrey. The election, nevertheless, remained close until the very end, in part because of Wallace's strong southern support. In September, 1968 Humphrey officially distanced himself from Johnson on Vietnam by stating he would stop all bombing of North Vietnam in order to hasten the peace process. The Vice President's polling numbers rose, and he regained the support of the Democratic doves. As October began, Humphrey had reenergized his candidacy and extended his base of support. Humphrey's resurgence worried Nixon. As the two major candidates' percentages drew closer, the Republican candidate needed to find a way to dash the hopes of the Vice President.<sup>94</sup>

He found it in South Vietnam, by way of China and, apparently, Texas. During the March 7, 1968 Senate debate on the rumor of a further troop increase by Johnson, Texas senator John Tower stated that he wished that America would adopt some policies of the Vietcong. The enemy, Tower observed, followed "a strategy not always of overt, but covert aggression." During the latter days of the Presidential election, the Texas senator who won Johnson's seat in 1960 would follow his own

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<sup>94</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 617-619.

advice and help use “covert means” to affect the course of the Vietnam war, the Presidential election, and American history.<sup>95</sup>

Nixon had opened up a secret channel of communication with Bui Diem, South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, one made possible by Anna Chennault, the China-born widow of famed General Claire Chennault, Louisiana native and leader of the World War II “Fighting Tigers.” Chennault, now an American citizen and an extremely hawkish supporter of the American military action in Vietnam, had extensive contacts throughout Asia and had even interviewed South Vietnamese Vice President Ky in 1965. She joined Nixon’s campaign in early 1968 and had sent several memos to the candidate that provided in-depth analysis of the situation and attitudes in Vietnam and also offered advice to Nixon regarding Vietnam campaign strategy.<sup>96</sup>

Chennault’s entrance into the Nixon campaign as an “advisor” was in some ways facilitated by Tower. The Tower family and Anna Chennault had become close friends during the 1960s. The senator’s papers contain several letters exchanged between Tower and the Chinese reporter/businesswoman between 1964 and 1970. Chennault had arranged several meetings for Tower with Taiwanese and other Asian officials such as Chiang Kai Shek in 1967. She had even entertained Texas Republican women for Tower, including Mrs. John Tower, at her penthouse apartment in Washington. In 1967, Chennault described Tower as one of her “closest friends.” In

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<sup>95</sup>CR, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., March 7, 1968, 5648.

<sup>96</sup>Anna Chennault to Richard Nixon, March 25 and April 4, 1968, John Tower Papers (hereafter cited as Tower Papers), A. Frank Smith, Jr. Library Center, Southwestern University, Georgetown, TX, Box 977.

addition, Anna Chennault served in the Nixon campaign as Co-Chairman of the Women For Nixon Advisory Committee, a group for which Mrs. Tower served as executive secretary. Furthermore, when Chennault's sister Loretta, who was married to a Vietnamese man and lived in Saigon, visited Washington, the Tower family extended their hospitality to her.<sup>97</sup> The Nixon campaign enthusiastically accepted Chennault into the campaign—but her influence did not end there. In the discussion in early 1968 between Nixon and Diem, the Republican candidate instructed the South Vietnamese ambassador to rely on Chennault “from now on as the only contact between myself and your government.”<sup>98</sup>

As the election grew closer, a series of events followed that would aid in Nixon's victory. In order to secure victory the Republicans committed illegal, and, as Robert Mann suggests, “possibly treasonous” actions in which Chennault, Nixon, and, at least in some capacity, Tower, participated. In late October 1968, with Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey gaining in the polls, the American negotiators in Paris seemingly had made a breakthrough with the North Vietnamese. Under an assumption that serious peace talks would ensue, the American government agreed to stop the bombing of Vietnam. The National Liberation Front and the South Vietnamese would be included in the talks as well. The South Vietnamese government under Nguyen Van Thieu had yet to join the talks, but had promised to do so. When Chennault learned of

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<sup>97</sup>Box 977 of the Tower papers includes several letters from Tower to Chennault and vice versa. In addition, there are letters from Chennault to the Taiwanese Minister of Defense, the Commander of the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Command, and the Chief of Protocol that announced Tower's desire to meet with the officials. Anna Chennault to John Tower, August 23, 1965 includes a copy of her interview with South Vietnamese General Ky as well as a reference made to Chennault's sister's trip to Washington. Several memos from in Nixon campaign stationery attest to Chennault's connection to the Nixon campaign.

the agreement she contacted the Nixon campaign, who instructed her to advise Diem to convince Thieu to hold out for a better deal after Nixon won the election. Diem cabled the Saigon government and advised that the Nixon campaign through Chennault had promised that the Republican Presidential candidate, if elected, would send an unofficial representative to Saigon and consider visiting himself before taking office. Nixon, Diem reported, would make sure negotiations would not be entered into unless it would be from a position of strength. By implication Nixon's message to the South Vietnamese suggested that the present talks would allow the Johnson administration to "sell out" Saigon in order to win victory for Hubert Humphrey.

President Thieu, in part on the basis of Nixon's promises, rejected the agreement. The North Vietnamese countered with a more specific deal: a complete bombing halt beginning October 30, followed by four-way negotiations starting November 3. Johnson accepted the deal without the South Vietnamese and taped a speech to the nation on October 31 announcing he would end all air, naval, and artillery bombardments in Vietnam as of the following morning. He had already notified Nixon and Independent Presidential candidate George Wallace earlier that day and did not complain about Nixon's interference, though he knew from wiretaps of the South Vietnamese embassy in Washington what the Nixon campaign had been doing. On November 3, Thieu publicly rejected the North Vietnamese proposals and said he would boycott the talks. Two days later, Richard Nixon narrowly defeated Hubert

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<sup>98</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 620.

Humphrey in one of the closest elections in American history. Nixon aid William Safire noted later that Nixon would not have been elected were it not for Thieu.<sup>99</sup>

The evidence of Tower's connection to the efforts by the Nixon campaign to scuttle the 1968 peace negotiations is circumstantial, but considerable. In addition to the personal friendship and political contacts with Chennault, the senator chaired the Nixon Campaign's Key Issues Committee and helped draft campaign statements on Vietnam. Furthermore, when word surfaced after the election of a possible connection between Nixon, Chennault and the South Vietnamese refusal to enter into peace negotiations, Chennault told the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Any news will have to come from Mr. (John) Mitchell (Nixon's campaign manager) or Senator Tower." Tower denied that he himself urged the South Vietnamese to delay the talks, and said further that the last time he had seen Diem was three months before the election. As a postscript to the story, Peter Flanigan, assistant to President Nixon, wrote a letter to Tower on July 15, 1970, which included a memo confirming the administration's appointment of Chennault, which Tower apparently requested, to positions on the Advisory Board for the United States and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. After mentioning the appointments, the memo concluded mysteriously, "We understand that she is now very happy."<sup>100</sup> It strains credulity to believe that Tower

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<sup>99</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 620-624.

<sup>100</sup>Memorandum, John Tower to Richard Nixon, Draft Statement on Vietnam, undated, Tower Papers, Box 817. See also several newspaper articles, including: Thomas W. Ottenad, "Pre-Election Contacts of GOP and Saigon," and "Tower Charges Coverup-Denies GOP Tried to Stall Peace Talks," *St Louis Dispatch*, January 3 and 11, 1969, 1,12, and 1, 6, Ymelda Dixon and Joy Billington, "Tower Denies 'Dragon Lady' Role," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), February 11, 1968, B-7, Vera Glaser and Malvina Stephenson, "Far East Visitor—No Official Status," *Sunday Star* (Washington, DC), July 20, 1969, E3, and Sarah McClendon, "The Mysterious Anna Chennault,"

did not either have knowledge of, or actively participate in, the “covert actions” of Chennault to help Nixon sabotage the peace talks in order to beat Humphrey. Years later, Chennault acknowledged that only Nixon, Mitchell, Nixon advisor Robert Hill, and Senator John Tower knew about her connections with the South Vietnamese government.<sup>101</sup>

With the election of Richard Nixon, most southerners in Congress saw a figure much more in line with their attitudes on war, race, and several other issues. The inhabitants of the South tired of the Vietnam protests, high casualty rates, and an endless war. They longed for a stronger, more conservative approach than the “policy of gradualism” under Lyndon Johnson. Nixon seemed an answer to their prayers. Though he did not speak in any specifics on Vietnam, the former Vice-President’s anti-communist reputation and his emphasis on “law and order” suggested to southerners that he would “crack down” on protesters and either win the war or leave it. None of the southern majority hawkish population believed he would choose the latter. Neither did the President himself.

With the election of the new Republican President, America had thoroughly rejected Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam policies. The attitudes of southerners who voted to repudiate Johnson had been greatly influenced mainly by the hawks. Despite the efforts of Fulbright, and Gore in particular, southerners still supported the move for a

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*Examiner*, July 17-19, 3, all from Tower Papers, Box 977. See also, Peter Flanigan to John Tower, July 15, 1970, and an attachment to the letter, Memorandum to Peter Flanigan from Harry Flemming, July 10, 1970, Box 977, Tower Papers.

<sup>101</sup>Catherine Forslund, *Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 75.

military victory, as evidenced by the enthusiastic support of George Wallace for President. Southern hawks, on the other hand, by their refusal to actively support Humphrey, enabled Nixon's victory.

Johnson's rejection also had much to do with the "middle course" he steered in Vietnam between hawks and doves. He stood more with the former, wanting to escalate the war enough so that the North Vietnamese would surrender. He was more influenced by his old friend Richard Russell, and his former colleagues John Stennis and Mendel Rivers, as evidenced by his approval of additional bombing targets as the air war hearings began. Though he viewed his "former friend" William Fulbright's dissent as more a nuisance than a threat, he could not ignore the mounting criticism and "responsible" protests which the Vietnam hearings had, in part, inspired. The strength of the antiwar movement, as evidenced by the early success of dovish candidate Eugene McCarthy, played a part in Johnson's decisions to refuse re-nomination and to halt the bombing of North Vietnam. As he left office, the proud but broken Texas politician still harbored resentment for the Arkansas senator. They never reconciled.

As Nixon ascended to the Presidency, John Stennis rose to the chairmanship of the Armed Services Committee. The Mississippi senator and the California-born President would become close allies. During Nixon's presidency, Stennis would be one of the few in Congress the secretive President would consult regarding Vietnam policy. Nixon in turn would reward Stennis's loyalty by his own brand of obstructionism in Civil Rights.

The doves remained vocal, but relatively weak. After Thruston Morton did not run for reelection to the Senate, only Fulbright, Gore and Cooper remained. The two intellectuals, Fulbright and Cooper, spoke eloquently in defense of their positions but saw their role as more of “educating” the Congress and the public on foreign affairs rather than organizing supporters against the war. They had a powerful ally in Mike Mansfield, but the Majority Leader’s passive style did not lend itself to mobilizing the opposition in the Senate. In early 1969, however, all southerners, hawk and dove, breathed a collective sigh of relief that Johnson was leaving office. The new president had given several indications that he would stop the war. Fulbright stopped his calls for de-escalation during that period because, as one Washington columnist observed, “he is persuaded that Richard Nixon wants to end the war and is prepared to let him use any means he wishes to go about it.”

Regarding Vietnam, Nixon, as it turned out, shared the same convictions as his southern predecessor. Like Johnson he vowed that he would not be the President to see South Vietnam fall to the communists. He also had a debt to repay. South Vietnamese President Thieu by most accounts greatly influenced the outcome of the 1968 American presidential election. Nixon would stubbornly support Thieu for as long as he could. As Nixon took the oath of office, hope sprung eternal among southern hawks and southern doves. It would not last for most of them.



## CHAPTER 9

### NIXON AND THE UNSOLID SOUTH

“Throughout my presidency,” Richard Nixon states in his memoirs, “my strongest and most dependable support in foreign affairs came from conservatives of both parties.” The President came to rely particularly on “a group of Southern Democrats including Sonny Montgomery of Mississippi, George Mahon of Texas, William Colmer of Mississippi, and Joe Waggoner, Eddie Hebert, and Otto Passman of Louisiana in the House, and Dick Russell of Georgia, John Stennis of Mississippi, and John McClellan of Arkansas in the Senate.”<sup>1</sup> Of the group, Stennis, Russell, and Hebert emerged as the most important regarding his Vietnam policy. Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s National Security advisor, suggested in his memoirs that southerners, Stennis and Russell particularly, were “towers of strength” on national security and foreign policy.” Kissinger attributed their attitudes in part to their place of birth, a region “that had known its own tragedy.”

They understood, as most other regions did not, that there can be irrevocable disasters, that mankind is fallible, that human perfection cannot be assumed, that virtue without power is impotent. Courtly, wise, and patriotic, Stennis, like his distinguished colleague Richard Russell, was one of the men who made the separation of powers function despite its formal intractability. Presidents could rely on his integrity; Cabinet members could count on his respect for their efforts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 351.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 496.

Stennis and Russell “made the separation of powers function” on Vietnam issues by allowing Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to prosecute the war without “interference” from the Senate. The two main southern hawks deferred to the President in foreign policy just as they had for the most part with Lyndon Johnson. Both southerners, but particularly Stennis, wholeheartedly agreed with the Nixon administration that the pursuit of a “virtuous” or “honorable” peace could only be gained through strength. Since Russell’s declining health kept him away from the Senate for long periods between 1969 and his death in 1971, Stennis emerged as the chief leader of the Vietnam hawks in the Senate. Consequently, the Mississippi senator would be one of the only members of Congress Nixon consulted before implementing his Vietnam decisions. He and other hawks enthusiastically supported the President, thereby enabling him to prolong the war another four years.

In 1969, Stennis led efforts to pass Nixon’s massive defense budget in order to, in part, give him what he needed to fight in Vietnam. Stennis, ascending to chair of Armed Services at the beginning of Nixon’s presidency, directed the approval of military spending, which became increasingly difficult as doves William Fulbright, John Sherman Cooper, and an increasing number of non-southerners attempted to include amendments that would reassert congressional power in denying funds to prosecute the war. F. Edward Hebert handled similar duties in the House as ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee until 1971, when he ascended to the chairmanship after the death of Mendel Rivers. Hebert also presided over the Armed Services subcommittee that investigated the war’s most publicized atrocity—the My Lai massacre. Feeling that it was a political necessity to maintain southern support in

Congress and among southerners in general in the wake of the strong third party presidential candidacy of Governor George Wallace of Alabama, Nixon and his advisors felt the need to formulate what became known as his “Southern Strategy.” In 1969 especially, Nixon supported efforts to further “analyze” the Voting Rights Act as it came up for renewal, to nominate two southern “strict constructionists” to the Supreme Court, and to slow down the pace of busing to achieve racial integration in schools. In return, the President got almost all of the military hardware he asked for that year, along with the enthusiastic southern congressional support of his policy of “Vietnamization” of the war. Although there is no direct evidence of a strict “quid pro quo” arrangement between the southern legislators and the Nixon administration, it is clear that both sides understood one another. Nixon, always ready to reward loyal supporters, did not need a formal arrangement—he was only too happy to oblige the white southerners because their attitudes mirrored his own.

Both Nixon and the southern hawks shared a commitment to achieving an “honorable” solution in Vietnam. During the 1968 presidential election, Nixon promised to “end the war and win the peace.” It became very clear early on in his Presidency that the phrase came to mean an enormous increase in the bombing of North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, along with the seemingly contradictory gradual withdrawal of American ground forces from Vietnam. He also refused to abandon the dictatorial South Vietnamese government under Nguyen Van Thieu, despite the rampant corruption and the South Vietnamese leader’s unwillingness to reform the system. For the President, “peace with honor” could only mean the support of the loyal South Vietnamese leader who helped Nixon get elected.

The policy pleased hawkish southerners who had called for increased bombing as early as 1966 and 1967. Furthermore, bombing would produce far fewer American casualties than the “search and destroy” ground operations that characterized the Johnson administration’s Vietnam military policy. In fact, the strategy seemed more designed to quell the growing domestic dissent than to “win” a lasting peace. At each step when the President’s domestic support came under fire because of his escalations, his troop withdrawals would calm for a time the expanding number of protesters. The emphasis on peace through strength appealed to southerners more than any other region.

At the same time, doves fought diligently against Nixon’s policies, and eventually drafted amendments to military spending bills and other appropriations measures to limit the President’s escalation. Southerern doves had lost a influential ally with the retirement of Kentucky’s Thruston Morton, but as Nixon revealed that his Vietnam plans included heightened bombing of North Vietnam and incursions into Laos and Cambodia, they gained a number of “converts.” For some, however, there was a limit to their dissent. They criticized Nixon but did not go as far as non-southern doves who tried to legislate an end to the war. Upholding a long-standing southern tradition of deference to authority, they refused to vote for amendments that set a definite date of withdrawal. Fulbright served as the exception in that he voted for most end-the-war amendments. However, although the Arkansan respected Vietnam protesters, he did not participate in the marches, and hoped that the “respectable and responsible dissent” would dominate the antiwar movement. The leader of Vietnam

congressional protests was something of a political maverick in the Senate—outside of it, he seemed to some as just another member of the “establishment.”

As Nixon first took office in January, 1969, the main southern doves, Fulbright, Cooper, and Gore held back from any criticism. They supported the President’s efforts in Vietnam and hoped that he would implement his “secret plan” to end the war. As Nixon gradually revealed his intentions to bring peace only by escalating the war, Fulbright and Cooper helped lead several efforts to assert congressional power in the making of military commitments, to set limits on American involvement in Cambodia and Laos, and to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. In addition, House doves such as Robert Eckhardt of Texas and Claude Pepper of Florida also contributed to the efforts of their southern counterparts in the Senate. Even though the number of southern dissenters remained small, they played a prominent role in hastening the American withdrawal from Vietnam and defining the acceptable parameters of American military involvement in Indochina.

Fulbright, the leader of “respectable” Vietnam protest in America, desperately wanted to believe that Nixon and his National Security adviser, Henry Kissinger, wanted to end the war quickly. The President and Kissinger were more than willing to cultivate this belief. In a meeting with the two of them in late March 1969, Fulbright warned that unless Nixon ended the war by the middle of his first term, his administration would be on “an irreversible path towards repudiation.” In response to the senator’s questions, Nixon and Kissinger assured Fulbright that they had no intention of escalating the war. The Arkansas senator quickly learned over the course of the year that the new President had no intention of keeping his promise. In fact,

three days before his meeting with Fulbright, Nixon had ordered the bombing of several North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia near the South Vietnamese border.<sup>3</sup> Fulbright had to find out from a reporter that the President was considering making the raids.

Nixon's honeymoon with the doves did not last long. The President quickly lost the support of Fulbright, Gore, and Cooper as he gradually revealed his intentions for insuring peace in Vietnam. The Foreign Relations committee chairman initially expressed his disgust with the Nixon appointment of former Lyndon Johnson advisor U. Alexis Johnson for Undersecretary of State for political affairs, the number three position in the State department. In the confirmation hearings in February, Fulbright, with Gore supporting him, lashed out at Johnson's defense of past policies in Vietnam. The senator did not, however, criticize Nixon directly. He also did not convince the rest of the committee to reject the nomination. Fulbright and Gore cast the only two votes against Johnson, who was eventually confirmed by the full Senate.<sup>4</sup> Undeterred, Fulbright re-introduced his National Commitments resolution, a non-binding Senate action that asserted that the President would have to gain approval of Congress before entering into any national commitment to a foreign power. Since the resolution did not apply to the present situation in Vietnam, most southerners in the Senate enthusiastically supported the effort to reassert congressional power in foreign policy. Cooper amended Fulbright's original resolution to include both military and financial commitments, and the Senate passed it in June 1969. Of all the southerners in the

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<sup>3</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 629.

Senate, only “superhawk” Republicans John Tower, Strom Thurmond, and Edward J. Gurney of Florida voted against the resolution.<sup>5</sup>

As southern doves grew increasingly concerned over Nixon’s policies in Vietnam, the President on May 14 finally spoke to the nation regarding his “secret plan.” He dashed the hopes of many doves by declaring that, though he would no longer seek a military victory, he would not withdraw all the troops from Vietnam immediately. The President proposed a cease-fire followed by an agreement signed by both parties in which the United States would disengage from South Vietnam over the course of one year if North Vietnam agreed to do the same from South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. He also predicted that South Vietnamese forces would soon take over much of the fighting, thereby allowing American troops to come home. Nixon, in effect, pledged his administration to continue the struggle to protect the South Vietnamese government and to prevent an American defeat. A few days later Secretary of State William Rogers briefed the Foreign Relations committee on his recent visit to Vietnam. As the Secretary began to paint a rosy picture of the situation in South Vietnam, Fulbright angrily interrupted him. “You sound exactly like Mr. McNamara and Mr. Taylor when they used to report to us year after year....The generals were always first rate, the morale was fine, everything was just fine.” Fulbright concluded that “there is not the slightest idea of changing anything that the previous administration has been doing.”<sup>6</sup> Gore had accurately predicted Nixon’s real

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<sup>4</sup>“Fulbright Votes ‘No’ as Nixon’s Nominee Approved,” *Arkansas Gazette*, Feb 5, 1969, 1.

<sup>5</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Ahead*, 290.

<sup>6</sup>Randall Bennett Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War*

message a few days before Nixon's speech. He lamented what he saw as an attempt by the administration to prop up the Thieu-Ky regime and ignore any needed reforms. Gore believed that Nixon would withdraw troops "in increments" over a number of years while retaining a permanent presence in South Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh also saw through Nixon's proposal and rejected it out of hand. Fulbright, in response to a belligerent Nixon speech critical of the Arkansas senator and other Senate doves, once again declared that he would hold a new set of hearings on Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

While Fulbright had to find out from other sources about Nixon's emerging Vietnam policies, for Stennis and Richard Russell, in contrast, the information came from the top. In his memoirs, Nixon stated that, in order to preserve the secrecy of the Cambodia bombing, he informed only the two southern senators. Kissinger said later that he gave Russell and Stennis a "full briefing." Neither the President nor the National Security advisor revealed whether the senators were informed of the massive cover-up and falsification of military records that enabled the secret bombing to continue until it was made public in 1973. Stennis commented later that he had only been given a vague description of the operation and denied any knowledge of the fraud perpetuated by the Nixon administration. Historian Michael Scott Downs suggests that Stennis's claims ring true because of Nixon's well-known penchant for secrecy. However, given the Mississippi and Georgia senators' vast experience with military affairs, it is questionable whether they could not have known. At any rate, the secret was by no means well hidden. By one account, over the four years of covert American

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*Policy*, 203.

<sup>7</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 633.



bombing of Cambodia, the President, two National Security officials, and three hundred colonels in the Pentagon knew about the operation.<sup>8</sup>

Nixon could not have chosen a better confidante than John Stennis. Intensely loyal and a staunchly conservative, the Mississippi senator believed, as Nixon did, that the loss of Vietnam to the communists would mean the loss of all of Southeast Asia and a loss of honor for America. “All nations must understand,” the senator stated in May 1969, “that once we have committed the flag of our country to battle, we will not back down or be forced into a dishonorable diplomatic settlement.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to backing Nixon’s Vietnam policy, the Mississippi senator agreed with the President on the need to continue to strengthen the American military. Therefore, Stennis as new Armed Services committee chairman, helped Nixon by shepherding his defense bills through an increasingly dovish Senate. Stennis’s ascension to the job, described one writer, was comparable to “being promoted to commander of the fort just in time to see the Indians come swarming over the walls.”<sup>10</sup> To diffuse further dovish influence within the committee itself, Stennis broke with tradition in maintaining his chairmanship of the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, denying it to Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri. Symington, the only senator who was a member of both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees, had turned from hawk to dove in part because of Fulbright’s influence. While Stennis had previously used the

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<sup>8</sup>Downs, “A Matter of Conscience,” 108-110.

<sup>9</sup>“Peace Role Given Class by Stennis,” May 5, 1969, *The Commercial Appeal* [MS], Stennis Collection, Vertical files

<sup>10</sup>James K. Batton, “Why the Pentagon Pays Homage to Senator Stennis,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 1969, 45.

subcommittee to promote military attitudes, as evidenced in the 1967 hearings on the air war in Vietnam, Symington, possibly in consultation with Fulbright, would have made the committee more critical of the armed forces and Nixon's Vietnam policy. Stennis would not enable the doves to have another prominent congressional forum. The Mississippi senator's unprecedented move to chair both the full committee and the Preparedness Investigating subcommittee, critics charged, caused the subcommittee to become dormant.<sup>11</sup> In Stennis, Nixon would have a powerful and consistent ally in the Senate for his Vietnam policies.

Stennis's support of the military and emphasis on American honor would be reinforced by other southern hawks. Russell, Strom Thurmond, and Mendel Rivers had made careers of supporting military foreign policy opinions. Their influential positions on the Senate Armed Services and Appropriations Committees, in addition to Mendel Rivers's House Armed Services Committee, allowed them to secure lucrative Defense contracts for Georgia and South Carolina. Therefore, according to 1971 and 1972 figures, Georgia and South Carolina, two small relatively poor southern states that ranked thirty fourth and forty-seventh, respectively, in per capita income, ranked tenth and nineteenth in Defense Department funds per capita. Other southern legislators followed suit. Over forty percent of southern House Members and thirty-seven percent of southern senators served on military committees. In addition to using their prominence on committees to bring military pork to their districts and states, many southerners had constituencies who either depended on military spending or belonged to the military itself. For instance, Congressman Robert

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<sup>11</sup>Downs, "A Matter of Conscience," 106-108.

L. Sikes, a staunch supporter of Nixon's Vietnam policies and Chairman of the Military Construction Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, represented a district with a 1970 population of 489,000 which included 44,000 military and civilian personnel on ten major installations. Florida also had the third largest retired military population in the country.<sup>12</sup> The President's decision to increase the number and intensity of air raids over North Vietnam, as well as the subsequent invasion of Cambodia, therefore, met with great approval from those who had been listening to the advice of the military from the beginning of America's involvement in the war.

The intense loyalty of Stennis and other hawks to Nixon on Vietnam was not only because of Nixon's increased military measures in Vietnam. One major domestic issue played a part as well. The South had been impressed with Nixon's commitment, as characterized by White House advisor Harry Dent of South Carolina, to "treat all regions equally." Dent, the former political advisor to Strom Thurmond, helped Nixon implement his "Southern Strategy," which in part involved efforts to slow down the desegregation of southern schools. Stennis also sought help from the President in slowing down of the recent court order for Mississippi public schools to desegregate and used his position as chair of Armed Services spending as leverage. At the end of the an August, 1969 meeting with Nixon, in which Senate supporters discussed strategies to win an increasingly contentious struggle to approve the President's anti-ballistic missile program, Stennis stayed to discuss the school desegregation issue with Nixon. The Mississippi senator, increasingly frustrated about the volatile ABM debate

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<sup>12</sup>"Southern Militarism," 69-71, 72, 83. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 641n.

and the school “crisis,” threatened to quit as floor manager of bill to fund the weapons system unless the President granted a delay in implementing school desegregation in Mississippi, according to news reports. The President instructed advisor Bryce Harlow to make sure that the situation “would be handled as acceptably to the Senator as possible.” Although Nixon denied any threats, he did acknowledge discussing the matter with Stennis. In late August the administration abruptly announced a three-month delay in the court order to desegregate schools in the southern state.<sup>13</sup>

Another reason southerners felt some kinship to the President was his commitment to bring “peace with honor.” Since large-scale American involvement in Vietnam began in 1965, southerners had agreed that once American troops entered Vietnam, American honor was at stake. Though many Americans had abandoned calls for a decisive military “victory,” the South and its congressional leaders, including Senators Russell, Stennis, Strom Thurmond, Russell Long, James Eastland of Mississippi, Sam Ervin of North Carolina, A. Willis Robertson of Virginia and Representatives Mendel Rivers, F. Edward Hebert, George Mahon of Texas, Sonny Montgomery of Mississippi, Robert L. Sikes of Florida and many others, had tired of Johnson’s “half measures” and wanted to retrieve American honor by hitting the enemy harder. According to opinion polls, southerners in 1969 were the least willing to concede that American intervention was a mistake. Southerners also were the least

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<sup>13</sup>Memorandum, Staff Secretary to Bryce Harlow, “Congressional Meeting with the President,” President’s Office Files, Box 4, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Materials Staff (hereafter cited as Nixon Staff Papers) National Archives at College Park, MD. See also Willard Edwards, “Stennis Works Out a Deal,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 1969, Stennis Collection, Vertical Files. See also “Dent and the ‘Southern Strategy,’” *Newsday*, Nixon Staff Papers: White House Special Files: Special Member and Office Files: Harry Dent, Box 8.

sympathetic citizens with subsequent congressional proposals to withdraw U.S. troops within a mandated time period. Though war weary, most still believed that America had a duty to deny communism to Southeast Asia. For Strom Thurmond the war remained a crusade for freedom. He claimed that the South Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians were all “anticommunist and want to be free.” Their will to do this, Thurmond suggested, “is directly proportional to the backing of the United States.” And Nixon’s policy of withdrawing American troops while increasing the bombing of North Vietnam won praises for its “decisiveness” from Thurmond and others.<sup>14</sup>

However, a significant minority of southerners and a larger number of non-southerners grew impatient over the administration’s unwillingness to end the conflict quickly. African Americans again bucked the dominant white southern trend. In 1969, 56% of southern blacks had turned against the war. Reflecting disgust with Nixon’s policies on race, a growing identification with nonwhites fighting against colonial domination, and the correct perception that blacks had been drafted in numbers disproportionate to their population, African American southerners joined white “former” segregationist senator Fulbright, and integrationist Gore and Cooper in rejecting Nixon’s Vietnam policies.<sup>15</sup>

Nixon countered with more efforts to reduce public dissent over his evolving Vietnam policies. In May he proposed changes in the Selective Service system that effectively reduced the chances of young men over nineteen to be drafted. The relief

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<sup>14</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 270, 285-286. See also Press Release, Strom Thurmond, May 1, 1970, Nixon Staff papers, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman, Box 116.

<sup>15</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 279.

from the burden of exposure to the draft greatly reduced student protests. A month later the President announced the withdrawal of 25,000 American troops from Vietnam. With the secret peace negotiations between Kissinger and North Vietnamese leaders at a standstill, Nixon's decision of a token troop withdrawal could only be interpreted as an effort to, in the words of *New York Times* reporter Robert Semple, "hold public support for the long negotiating process ahead."<sup>16</sup>

While Cooper applauded Nixon's moves and was convinced of his sincerity in bringing the war to an end, Fulbright and Gore grew increasingly impatient. In Foreign Relations Committee hearings on July 15 Gore asked Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird seven times if Johnson's military policy of applying "maximum pressure" to the enemy was still in effect. Laird evaded the Tennessean's question until he produced a document with the current fighting order in Vietnam. In response to Gore's eighth query as to whether the policy had changed, Laird replied, "No."<sup>17</sup> Laird officially announced on July 27 that the administration's policy had changed from "maximum pressure" to "protective reaction." A few months later in the Senate Gore questioned whether a change had actually occurred. He quoted an Army spokesman in Vietnam who, when asked by reporters what protective response meant, replied, "Protective reaction. Hey, that's good. Give me a half an hour and I'll dream

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 634.

<sup>17</sup>"Bringing Us Apart: The Nixon Administration, Part II," Research Division, Democratic National Committee, 78, Ervin Papers, Correspondence files, Democratic party, File 7966.

up something.” Gore concluded that the American people “had a right to ask, ‘What goes on here?’”<sup>18</sup>

Fulbright also lost his patience with Vietnamization. On September 4, Ho Chi Minh died, and the Arkansas senator, seeing a possible opportunity for the administration to facilitate more fruitful negotiations, sent the President a message in which he endorsed an Arkansas constituent’s suggestion that the President send a representative to Ho’s funeral. When Presidential assistant Bryce Harlow wrote Fulbright back rejecting the constituent’s proposal as “inadvisable,” he relayed the administration’s message in a letter to the Arkansas constituent. “This reply of the President’s,” the Arkansas senator wrote, “fortifies my belief that he intends to support the Thieu government through thick and thin, and is not seeking a real settlement, other than the establishment of a client state, in South Vietnam, an objective which I believe to be quite unrealistic under the circumstances.”<sup>19</sup> Gore agreed with the chairman and pointed out on September 9 that 60,000 casualties had been suffered since Nixon became President. “How long must American boys, fight and die in Vietnam?” he asked the Senate.<sup>20</sup>

As the two senators suspected, Nixon did intend to support Thieu. The President began to reveal his “secret plans” to the public to end the war and keep Thieu in power. They did not seem very different from Johnson’s plans. Like his

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<sup>18</sup>CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 4 November, 1969, 32791

<sup>19</sup>William Fulbright to General W Peyton Campbell and Reverend Mouzon Mann, Sept 8, 1969, Fulbright papers, Series 1:1, Box 4:4

<sup>20</sup>CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 9 September, 1969, 24860-24861.

predecessor, Nixon believed he could intimidate North Vietnam into surrendering. Two months before Ho Chi Minh's death, the President communicated to the North Vietnamese leader that if there were no "serious breakthroughs" in the negotiations by November 1, the United States would resort to "measures of great consequence and force." Secretly the administration drew up plans, code named "Duck Hook," to implement the "measures" that included massive bombing of North Vietnam in previously restricted areas such as Hanoi and Haiphong, the mining of harbors and rivers, a possible invasion of North Vietnam, and a proposal to strike the Ho Chi Minh trail with tactical nuclear weapons. The North Vietnamese did not know the extent of the plan, but the forceful message from Nixon did lead to secret negotiations between Kissinger and Xuan Thuy, the head of Hanoi's negotiation team. Nevertheless, the talks quickly became stalemated. The North Vietnamese had heard American threats before. The Vietcong further demonstrated their resolve in early August by staging attacks in more than one hundred cities, towns, and bases in South Vietnam. As more Americans called for an end to the war, it appeared that, like Nixon, the enemy had no intention of negotiating a peace on any terms other than its own.

Nixon shared Johnson's determination to fight the war long enough to win an acceptable peace. He had to contend with an increasingly dovish Congress, which had just begun efforts to legislate an end to the war. In response, the President suggested that though he planned to stop the fighting as soon as possible, any efforts by Congress to name a date for American withdrawal or to otherwise try to limit his actions would prolong it. Privately however, he pledged to Republican members of Congress that he would not be the "first American president to lose a war" and



promised actions, that he did not specify, to end it by November 1970.<sup>21</sup> To appease the hawks, according to Nixon biographer Stephen Ambrose, the President made known some of the details of the Duck Hook plans. When hearing a newspaper account of the administration's plans for the possible blockading of Haiphong and invasion of North Vietnam, Tennessee Republican Senator and Nixon supporter Howard Baker called to express his alarm over the possible escalation. Nixon did not respond because he himself had leaked the story.<sup>22</sup>

While suggesting a heightened war, Nixon counseled restraint and patience from his detractors in Congress. When Senate Republican leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, speaking ostensibly for the administration, called for a "sixty-day moratorium" on Vietnam criticism, Fulbright exploded. "It has been nine months since the President took office, the normal period of gestation for humans to bring forth their issue. Nobody expects a miracle, but many of us did expect the President to make progress in delivering on his campaign promises to give birth to his plan to end the war." Now, Fulbright sarcastically remarked, the majority leader pleaded for patience because Nixon "needs more time" to implement his Vietnam policy. "How many times have we heard that?" he replied. "Rather than a moratorium on criticism, which kills no one," he continued, "we who criticize continuation of this war seek, instead, a moratorium on killing. When will this administration bite the bullet instead of firing it and present to the American people the plan to end this war which

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<sup>21</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 638-639.

<sup>22</sup>Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon, Volume Two: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 301.

practically all knowledgeable observers now believe we should never have been involved in?”<sup>23</sup>

Scott’s initial statement was in response to the planned activities of the antiwar movement’s “Vietnam Moratorium” scheduled for October 15, 1969. In the same speech against the Minority leader’s proposal to postpone criticism of the administration, Fulbright gave his blessing to the demonstrators, saying that their actions were “in the best American tradition of peaceful protest for the redress of grievances.” While celebrating the shift of the antiwar movement to what historian Randall Bennett Woods calls “the political and cultural center,” he preferred to remain detached from direct involvement in the Moratorium. Thus while fellow antiwar senators George McGovern and former Vice President Hubert Humphrey took part in the historic event, the one senator who effectively made constructive and “respectable” dissent possible stayed away. Owing to his personal aloofness and his disdain for politics in general, Fulbright preferred to lead in the Senate, and hoped the “patriotic, law-abiding, churchgoing, property-owning Americans” would either participate in or embrace the movement.<sup>24</sup>

Although Fulbright, Gore, Pepper, Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma and a few other southerners expressed support for peaceful moratorium protests, Robert Eckhardt, a Texas congressman from a liberal Houston district, was the only southern member of Congress to participate. Eckhardt spoke on October 15 in Houston and

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<sup>23</sup>Statement by Senator J.W. Fulbright in the U.S. Senate, October, 1, 1969, Series 78:8, Box 51:1, Fulbright papers.

<sup>24</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 205;

emphasized a theme that would resonate with a large number of southerners—finding a peace with “honor.” America, the Texas congressmen asserted, was not willing to “adopt a course of action simply because it works. We must gloss the theory behind the course of action with the varnish of honor.” Unlike Nixon and the southern hawks, Eckhardt believed that the most honorable way to end the war would be to end it immediately. The fallacy under which the hawks operated, Eckhardt declared, was that it would dishonor the American dead to recognize “the simple truth [that] the cause was questionable and the victory unattainable.” According to the congressman, the concept of honor throughout history has sometimes been attributed to questionable activities. “In the South,” he observed, “names like Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee stir our blood, but they fought for a cause as questionable and for a victory as unattainable as that in Vietnam.” Nixon’s insistence on achieving an honorable peace, Eckhardt reasoned, rested on ground just as rocky—“that honor is lost if we do not place in secure authority a democratic government in Saigon.” Eckhardt dismissed the administration’s reasoning because the South Vietnamese had never lived under a democracy and because the war could be characterized as a civil war rather than a case of external aggression.

In addition, the cost of maintaining such an undemocratic and unreliable ally had been great on America. “The war,” Eckhardt concluded, “divides our people, brutalizes our minds, confounds our economy, and brings untold tragedy to hundreds of thousands of American families.” He listed the number of dead on all sides up to that point, 45,000 Americans, 95,000 South Vietnamese and 550,000 North

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See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 638.

Vietnamese and Vietcong. The figures, the Texas legislator continued, did not tell of the “broken homes, ruined businesses, psychological disturbances and all the sordid side effects of a war.” The “annals of tragedies,” he declared, “are written in every Congressman’s correspondence file.” To Eckhardt, and a small vocal minority of southerners, the cost of continuing the war far outweighed the hawkish call to a questionable formulation of honor.<sup>25</sup>

The Moratorium attracted broad support in every region of the country except the South. However, the files of Nixon advisor John Dean reveal that moratorium protests occurred, though in smaller numbers than in the northeast, in every southern state and included crowds of 7,500 at Arkansas A. M. & N College, 5,000 at the University of Texas and the state capitol, 3,000 at the University of North Carolina, and 2,000 at Tulane University in New Orleans.<sup>26</sup> Though southern college students more than in any other region generally expressed approval for Nixon’s Vietnam policies, a poll in November, 1969 revealed that a surprisingly large number, thirty-four percent, disapproved.<sup>27</sup>

The President had stated a few weeks before that he would “under no circumstances” be affected by the antiwar movement actions. His actions belied his assertion. He had announced the withdrawal of additional American troops and the

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<sup>25</sup>Statement of Congressman Bob Eckhardt, Miller Memorial Theatre, Houston, TX., October 15, 1969, Robert Eckhardt Papers (hereafter cited as Eckhardt papers) The Center For American History, University of Texas at Austin, Box 147-5.

<sup>26</sup>Memorandum, Oct 15, 1969 Vietnam Moratorium Demonstration, October 15, 1969, Civil Disturbance Group, Interdivision Information Unit, Oct 17.1969, Nixon Staff Papers, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: John Dean, Box 81.

<sup>27</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 271.

cancellation of draft calls for November and December. Furthermore, the success of the moratorium, Nixon admitted later, undermined his threats to the North Vietnamese. He abandoned Duck Hook and instead embraced the idea of Vietnamization—or the gradual withdrawal of all American troops as South Vietnamese units were trained to take over the fight. In addition, the President planned a major address to the nation on Vietnam in order to explain Vietnamization policies and “go over the heads of the columnists” to affect public opinion.

On November 3, 1969, Nixon spoke to the nation from his desk in the Oval office and said that though he had been urged to end the war immediately by many of his advisors, his “greater obligation” was to “win the peace.” The President could not order a “precipitate withdrawal” of American forces because it would be both disastrous for South Vietnam and a defeat for the United States. Nixon echoed Johnson’s argument that if America for the first time lost a war it would result in “a collapse of confidence in American leadership not only in Asia but throughout the world.”

The President blamed North Vietnamese intransigence at the conference table for the continuation of the war and said that the enemy felt it only had to wait until the United States grew tired of the war and it would get what it wanted. While Johnson’s solution was to Americanize the war, Nixon would “Vietnamize the peace” by gradually withdrawing its forces “on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom.” It would not be the easy way, the President declared, but “it is the right way.” The President closed by appealing to the patriotism of his supporters. “And so tonight—to you, the

great silent majority of my fellow Americans, I ask for your support.” He then blamed the protestors and dissenters for the impasse of the peace talks. “The more divided we are at home,” Nixon asserted, “the less likely the enemy is to negotiate.” In his final defiant and defensive phrases that belied the calmness of his delivery, Nixon stated what he believed the dissenters were doing to the country. “Let us be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.”<sup>28</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the speech, Nixon got the response he desired. A Gallup poll immediately after the speech showed a seventy seven percent approval of Nixon’s Vietnamization policy. Nixon specifically ordered advisor Bryce Harlow to send a “personal copy” of the poll to Fulbright “in the event you had not noted it in the papers.”<sup>29</sup> In part, the outpouring of support had been manufactured. Nixon aide Alexander Butterfield later admitted that administration officials had been instructed weeks before to meet with labor unions, veterans organizations, Republican governors, and state party chairman to arrange an enthusiastic response to the President’s speech. Nixon advisor Harry Dent coordinated the effort in the South. Several memoranda in Nixon’s personal office files attest to Butterfield’s assertion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 644-645.

<sup>29</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 207

<sup>30</sup>For Butterfield’s admission, see Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 645. There are several memoranda in the Nixon Staff Papers that corroborate Butterfield’s claim. See in particular Memorandum: Alexander Butterfield to Harry Dent, Peter Flanigan, Jim Keogh, Henry Kissinger, Herb Klein, Jeb Magruder, Lyn Nofziger, Bill Safire, Charles West, Jim Allison, and Dick Garbett, October 28, 1969, Nixon Staff Papers, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Harry Dent, Box 11.

The South responded enthusiastically to the call to support the President. Armed with over 10,000 signatures, seven busloads of North Carolinians, according to a North Carolina newspaper “one of the largest out-of-town contingents,” gathered with others in early November for a “We support the President” rally at the Washington monument.<sup>31</sup> In the Senate, Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge elaborated more directly on Nixon’s veiled criticism of both Senate doves such as Gore, Fulbright, and McGovern, and the rank and file Vietnam protesters. “To persist in demonstrating against our own Government,” he asserted, “provides aid and comfort to the enemy.”<sup>32</sup>

Nixon’s speech angered Fulbright, who, as biographer Robert Bennett Woods described it, “could barely contain himself” when Bob Hope wrote asking the senator to join the entertainer in a “week of national unity.”<sup>33</sup> He expressed his frustration further in a letter to a constituent who agreed with his dissent. “According to Gallup, 77% of the people approve of the President’s speech and apparently love him. I believe you are losing touch with the great American public, and I, too, feel out of step if that report has any truth in it whatever.”<sup>34</sup> The Arkansas and Tennessee senators were not the only southerners in Congress to lament the popularity of Nixon’s new strategy. Florida representative Claude Pepper confided to his diary on November 5,

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<sup>31</sup>Roy Parker, Jr., “Tar Heels Demonstrate for Nixon,” *News and Observer* (Raleigh, NC) November 12, 1969, Roy Parker, Jr. Ervin Papers, Correspondence, 1969, File 8477.

<sup>32</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 646.

<sup>33</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 208.

<sup>34</sup>William Fulbright to Tristram Coffin, Nov 6, 1969, Fulbright papers, Series 48:18, Box 56:3.

“The confrontation is now about to begin in earnest between [Nixon] and the opponents of the war. Yet if the trend is towards Nixon and what he stands for...God help the Country.”<sup>35</sup>

Though Fulbright, Gore, Pepper and other doves condemned Nixon’s policies and tactics, they could not escape the success of the public relations campaign. Even though the popularity of his speech was, in Alexander Butterfield’s words, “spring loaded” by the administration, it did tap a deeply held feeling by people who thought of themselves as the “forgotten Americans.” Fulbright, who, as Robert Mann attests, thought of himself more as an “intellectual” than a legislator, could educate his colleagues and college graduates on what he had learned about Vietnam, and discuss and debate options, but he did not have, as Nixon’s aides correctly assumed, any point of connection with the “silent majority” of Americans. “The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” Fulbright’s biographer attests, “lived in a world that took no notice of pickup trucks, country music, celebrity sports, or religious fundamentalism.” For the “forgotten Americans,” many of whom lived in the South, Vietnam, Woods observes, stood as a “test the nation could not afford to fail.” Defeat would mean “loss of face, personal as well as national humiliation.” To Fulbright, and other southern elites who played a part in the congressional antiwar movement, the prosecution of a war against a tiny country threatened America with humiliation. Their dissent could be traced in part to a belief in self-determination espoused by southerner Woodrow Wilson, or a contention, born of their parents’ recollections of

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<sup>35</sup>Claude Pepper Diary entry, November 5, 1969, Pepper Collection, Series 439, Box 1, 81.



the Civil War and Reconstruction—a hostile strong aggressor occupying a country where they were not wanted and did not belong.<sup>36</sup> It did not mean, however, that they felt a special kinship with the majority of parochial, undereducated Americans that populated the South. Nixon’s silent majority speech, in tandem with his “pro-South” civil rights policies, tapped a wellspring of resentment that resonated more deeply among the majority of whites in the southern states than in any other region. Throughout his presidency, most polls showed southerners as the most enthusiastic supporters of Nixon’s Vietnam policies.<sup>37</sup> Reflecting in part a reaction to Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” the one major group of southerners that dissented from the majority of southerners were African Americans. They continued the trend of favoring withdrawal and against escalation far more than their white neighbors in the South.<sup>38</sup>

Although senators like Fulbright and Gore felt alienated from a majority of their constituents, there were always a small percentage of southerners who agreed with the Vietnam dissenters. Senator Gore eloquently expressed the opinion of one of them in a newspaper article a few months later. In February 1970, Gore reported, a nineteen-year-old soldier and Tennessee native was killed in Vietnam. Just before his death he sent a letter home and requested that his family read it at his funeral if he was killed. The letter denounced the futility of the war and the ‘uselessness’ of his own death. “And indeed, it did seem useless,” Gore declared, “to have one’s life arbitrarily

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<sup>36</sup>See pages 195 and 314 of this study regarding Fulbright’s comparisons of America’s involvement in the Vietnam with southern attitudes of the North’s prosecution of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

<sup>37</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 208. See also Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 269-274.

<sup>38</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 279.

snatched away for a cause which its leaders could not carry out, which its defenders could not justify, which the world could not approve, and in a war in which the President had 'ruled out' victory." Gore, however, believed that the boy's death would not be considered useless. "Will it not be said, and rightly so, that in this voice beyond the grave the silent majority of Americans found their most eloquent spokesman?" The statement, Gore insisted, did not come from a citizen who "disdained his country." It was "a voice crying out in witness, not for his own safety, but for the safety of his friends and comrades still living who may be destined to a similar fate." Gore concluded that the debate over Vietnam had changed from "What is to be gained?" to "What can be saved?" The Tennessee senator, along with his colleagues from Arkansas, Kentucky, and Florida fought a battle themselves that, though sidetracked by Nixon's public relations machine, grew in strength in much of the country. Their voices, though small in number, gave legitimacy to Vietnam dissent and made sure that the smaller voices were heard.<sup>39</sup>

Despite his frustration over the apparent popularity of Vietnamization, Fulbright continued to speak out against the continuation of the war and the veil of secrecy fostered by the administration over Vietnam. Fulbright and Stuart Symington had learned when questioning former American Ambassador to Laos William Sullivan and CIA Chief Richard Helms that America had conducted a "secret war" from 1964 to the present, which included the bombing of targets on the Ho Chi Minh trail and communists positions in Laos. In late 1969 Fulbright began to outline in the Senate what he learned in executive session hearings from Sullivan and Helms. Stennis, who

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<sup>39</sup>Albert Gore, "Capital Commentary," Unknown newspaper, March 13, 1970, Gore

chaired both Armed Services as well as the CIA oversight subcommittee, protested that the Arkansas senator had just leaked classified information. Several members of the Armed Services committee repeated the senator's concern. Implementing a rarely used rule, Majority Leader Mansfield quickly brought the entire Senate into executive session. Fulbright's revelations led directly to an amendment, introduced by Cooper and Idaho senator Frank Church, to a Defense Appropriations bill that forbid the use of ground troops in Laos without congressional approval. The amendment passed 80-9 in the Senate with southerners providing eighteen yea votes and all nine nay votes. Most of the dissenters were members of the Armed Services Committee.<sup>40</sup> In speaking up, Stennis attempted to protect the administration from the potentially damaging political consequences that Nixon would suffer from a full revelation of American involvement in Laos. Because of his prominent position, he surely had been aware of the "secret war" for a long time. The majority of southern senators, however, had grown tired of escalation. They wanted an honorable settlement, but not by an expansion of the conflict into a neighboring country.

Nixon had hoped that his troop withdrawals along with the new policy of Vietnamization would lessen the intensity of antiwar protests and the dissent in Congress. The partial public disclosure of the American covert war in Laos did not markedly alter the public mood. However, the public speculation over Laos, coupled with the sensational revelations of an American war atrocity re-energized the antiwar movement and shocked the nation. On November 17, 1969, the *New York Times*

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Collection, Box 43.

<sup>40</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 209.

broke the story of the My Lai Massacre. During the Tet Offensive, an American infantry company commanded by twenty-six-year-old Lieutenant William Calley conducted a search and destroy mission in the small hamlet of My Lai. My Lai was part of Quang Ngai province, an area declared a “free-fire zone” by the Americans in which all civilians were suspected of being members of the Vietcong or Vietcong sympathizers. In the raid Calley led on My Lai, leaders of the platoon entered the hamlet with no resistance from the inhabitants. At the time of the raid, most of the South Vietnamese men were away at market. Calley apparently ordered his men to kill everyone in the village. Based on the indictment of the first lieutenant, at least one hundred and nine men women and children were massacred. In addition, several rapes occurred before the women were killed.

After the story broke, the army charged Calley, his superior, and a few others with premeditated murder. A number of hawks in Congress and in the South in general opposed the army’s action. Senator Ernest Hollings of South Carolina asked whether the decision to try the lieutenant meant that all soldiers who committed a “mistake in judgment” would be tried “as common criminals.” North Carolina Democratic Representative Roy A. Taylor criticized the press coverage for potentially biasing the trials of Calley and the others.<sup>41</sup> With the publication of the pictures in the December 5 issue of *Life*, Stennis, appearing on ABC’s *Issues and Answers*, called for the President to name a fact-finding commission composed of non-government, non-military officials. He said that this potentially impartial panel would be better able to investigate the massacre than formal congressional hearings that he feared “might go

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<sup>41</sup>CQA, 1969,853.

off in a half-dozen or a dozen different directions.”<sup>42</sup> Stennis’s comments suggest that the Mississippi senator was attempting damage control. House Armed Services committee chairman Mendel Rivers completely dismissed the charges, saying after a preliminary hearing on the matter that he had heard or seen nothing that indicated that a massacre had occurred. “I’ve seen some pictures of dead bodies,” Rivers remarked to reporters on December 9, “but I haven’t seen pictures of anybody shooting anybody.”<sup>43</sup>

After two days of hearings by the full thirteen-member Investigating subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, the chairman could no longer avoid investigating the massacre. While Rivers announced that he had obtained “no evidence sufficient to convict anybody of any massacres,” he admitted that the committee now had “sufficient evidence and testimony” to probe the matter “in depth.” Rivers chose Louisiana archconservative and superhawk F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana to chair a four-member panel of the committee’s Investigating Subcommittee.” Under charges by some that the chairman intended a “whitewash” of the matter, Rivers promised that Hebert would have a “blank check” to investigate the massacre. In addition to Hebert, the panel included one other southerner, Republican William Dickinson of Alabama. The *New York Times* reported that all four senators

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<sup>42</sup>J. D. Alexander, “Citizen Probe of My Lai Urged,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 1969, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

<sup>43</sup>Press Release, Congressman Richard D. McCarthy, December 11, 1969, Armed Services Committee Files, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, Box 1004. See also “Rivers Differs with Nixon on Songmy,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1969, 12.

were of “moderate and conservative bent.” The chairman obviously believed he could control the subcommittee investigation.<sup>44</sup>

Hebert, a former city editor of the New Orleans *States* who had made his reputation in 1939 by investigating corruption of the political machine left over after Huey Long’s assassination, had chaired the Investigating Subcommittee for a number of years. Though he had investigated several incidents of cost overruns and other military problems, Hebert, like other southern hawks, had a protective attitude toward and a proprietary interest in the military. Like Rivers, Hebert had secured an enormous amount of military pork for his district. In addition, he continued to hold a firm belief in the domino theory and the monolithic nature of communism. Complementing his fierce anticommunism was, as his daughter Dawn described it, “a Norman Rockwell kind of patriotism.” He saw America in uncritical, idealized, and romanticized terms.<sup>45</sup>

The Louisiana congressman knew that he could not conclude that the Army was faultless in covering up the My Lai Massacre. His task was further complicated by the concurrence of two other Army-led investigations of My Lai. Several times Army officials badgered the congressmen for information and put pressure on him to “go easy” on them. Chairman Rivers also made several untimely statements that served to undermine the credibility of the investigation. In April 1970, Rivers said that

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<sup>44</sup>“Rivers Picks Four to Study Songmy,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1969, 12.

<sup>45</sup>Mark Carson, “F. Edward Hebert,” 4-5.

he would not let the Army get away with court-martialing Calley and the others. “I’m going to have something to do with stopping this,” he told an Oklahoma audience.<sup>46</sup>

As his comment about Calley revealed, Rivers wanted to protect the soldiers involved as much as possible. Hebert, though publicly silent during his panel’s hearings, shared Rivers opinion. Given this not exactly impartial viewpoint, the Louisiana congressman, after seven months of fighting over evidence and testimony and after over a thousand pages of testimony taken between April and June 1970, released the panel’s fifty-three-page report. It said that a “tragedy of major proportions” occurred at My Lai that was “so wrong and so foreign to the normal character and actions of our military forces as to immediately raise a question as to the legal sanity at the time of the men involved.” The report also concluded that the military and State Department personnel organized a “concerted action...to suppress all evidence of the allegation and its investigation.”

Once dispensing with preliminary criticism of the procedures of reporting incidents and the cover-up of the My Lai massacre by the military and State Department, the report from Hebert’s panel stopped short of recommending any punishment for the Army or any larger conclusions about Vietnam. Instead, it criticized the Army for “overreacting” in charging the officers with what remains the worst reported American war atrocity in history. The House panel also claimed that the press had distorted what had happened. It spent an inordinate amount of its time in hearing testimony and space in the final report on the roles of Army photographer Ronald Haeberle and Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson.

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 16.

Haeberle, an army photographer at My Lai, had two cameras on the day of the massacre. He turned in the black-and-white Army camera's film to his superiors. He kept the more graphic color pictures from his personal camera which he later sold to *Life* magazine. The committee members expressed their disgust in Haeberle's profiting from the pictures and demanded financial records from the photographer. The report tried to correct the army procedure that allowed Haeberle to keep pictures from his personal camera. No matter how distasteful the photographer's action in selling the gruesome photos, the fact remains that if Haeberle had not kept the pictures, the story may have never surfaced.

Thompson, a helicopter pilot and Louisiana native, spotted the massacre from the air and set his craft down to protect a number of South Vietnamese women. He rescued the women after telling the officer in charge, apparently Calley, to stop his troops that had been advancing toward the women.<sup>47</sup> A considerable amount of testimony and twelve pages of the report went to discussing the medal Thompson received for his actions at My Lai. The congressmen badgered the pilot regarding the medal, and, ignoring the fact that he saved several South Vietnamese women from senseless killing at the hands of Calley and the others, expressed shock that he may have "trained his guns on American soldiers" in order to bring about the rescue of the women. The committee also questioned the validity of the report that recommended Thompson's citation for his actions. As General William Peers, head of an Army investigation of My Lai, commented later, the subcommittee panel's questioning had Thompson "so confused he did not know which way to turn." It was indeed a

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 10-11.



shameful way to treat the only soldier who cared enough to protect innocent noncombatants at My Lai.<sup>48</sup>

After the committee released the report, Hebert tried to influence the ongoing courts-martial trials for My Lai. As the trials proceeded, the Louisiana congressman remarked that he would like to see those accused of atrocities at My Lai allowed to plead temporary insanity. Additionally, since the panel's report claimed that the news media distorted the public's image of what happened and thereby "convicted [the accused] in the public's mind, Hebert tried to right the balance by making some favorable statements about he accused. For example, after Lieutenant Calley was convicted and considered an appeal, Hebert blithely noted "it is terrible to let Cassius Clay walk the streets of America while William Calley, who was trying to do his duty, is incarcerated."<sup>49</sup> In all, Hebert's investigation and comments after it, though initially critical of the Army, did nothing to probe the failed policies that led to such brutality. In the end, a number of southern conservatives concluded that Lieutenant Calley, the only man convicted for perpetrating the massacre, was a hero.

In early May, 1971, the military courts convicted Lieutenant William Calley of premeditated murder in the massacre at My Lai. In the wake of Calley conviction and the President's further escalation of the war, several supporters of Nixon in the House voted against an extension of the draft for the first time. "I shall continue to support the principle of military service to maintain a strong national defense," remarked Democrat John J. Flynt, Jr. of Georgia, "but I will not today or hereafter vote for a

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 26-27.

draft bill to start or to continue an undeclared war.” Though the congressman realized that the bill did not deal specifically with Vietnam, he believed that “this is the nearest thing to a vote that we will have in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress to vote in support of or opposition to an indefinite continuation of the war in Indochina.” When he finished, the Georgia congressman received a standing ovation from about half of the members and some of the visitor’s gallery.

More hawkish representatives such as M.G. Snyder of Kentucky addressed the Calley matter more directly. “I cannot in good conscience vote to send American boys to fight a ‘no win’ war for a government that then allows the American boys to be tried for discharging their obligation.” John Rarick of Louisiana, calling Calley “a true soldier and a great American,” opposed the draft bill, and introduced an amendment providing that no member of the U.S. armed forces could be indicted for murder as a result of a combat action unless he killed an American. “What is war,” he concluded, “but not premeditated murder?” His amendment was defeated by voice vote.<sup>50</sup>

Though not everyone in the South considered the Lieutenant a hero, several southerners on both sides of the Vietnam issue considered his conviction outrageous. Doves were convinced of Calley’s guilt, but saw him as a scapegoat for immoral military plans and practices. Hawks saw the Lieutenant’s conviction as one more indication that America lacked the will to win in Vietnam. Nixon sided with the hawks when he ordered Calley released into “house arrest” at Georgia’s Fort Benning. He then promised to review the soldier’s conviction. Though Nixon took no action in the end, the Army reduced Calley’s sentence, and he spent just over two years mainly

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<sup>50</sup>CQA, 1971, 267.

under House arrest in a comfortable officer's quarters at Fort Benning. Nixon's decision to review the case came after a tremendous public outcry of support for the Lieutenant. In the South, politicians spoke in support of Calley, including Governor John Bell Williams of Mississippi, Lieutenant Governor Lester Maddox of Georgia, and Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia.<sup>51</sup>

As Hebert investigated events that happened in 1968, Fulbright and the Foreign Relations Committee grew increasingly concerned about future events as 1970 began. As Nixon expanded the war into Laos and Cambodia, both dovish and hawkish southerners increased the level and intensity of debate. While hawks praised the President for his aggressive actions to punish the communists and protect American troops, doves worried about a greatly expanded conflict and the seeming unwillingness of the administration to make any concessions to the North Vietnamese in order to bring about peace. Though the majority of southerners held the former opinion, the expansion of the war brought a number of southern members of Congress to the dovish side.

The Foreign Relations Committee, fearing that the administration introduced Vietnamization as a cover to widen the war, sent two committee consultants to Vietnam to study the program. Fulbright also wanted to silence administration "hatchet man" Vice President Spiro Agnew, who suggested that the senator should visit Vietnam to find out for himself whether Vietnamization was working. Fulbright demurred and repeated his long-held belief that if he traveled to Southeast Asia he

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<sup>51</sup>Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours at My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 340-341, 355-357.

would only be fed American propaganda. In February 1970, the investigators issued a report that contradicted Nixon's claims of success. While senior American military officials told the investigators that the North Vietnamese army had been severely weakened and the South Vietnamese strengthened, the junior officers and journalists painted a far bleaker picture. The South Vietnamese army could not defend the country against a massive attack, even with American military support. Some said that they would never gain the capability to do so. Additionally, though the consultants discovered that, contrary to the administration claims that record numbers of the enemy had been killed, the Vietcong infrastructure was still "in tact." Though the investigators admitted that Vietnamization resulted in some small improvement, they warned that the gains "could easily be wiped out overnight by a major enemy push." Overall, the report concluded that the war "appears not only far from won but far from over." <sup>52</sup>

On the heels of the report, the *New York Times* revealed that B-52s had been diverted from South Vietnam to attack enemy forces in Laos. In response, several Senate doves, including Gore and Cooper, attacked the administration over its secrecy and its disregard of the amendment passed in late 1969 restricting the use of American ground forces in Laos. Gore and Majority Leader Mansfield also demanded the publication of the secret Foreign Relations committee testimony taken the previous October in which the committee found out about the "secret war." Nixon responded by saying that the administration had no intention of sending "ground combat forces" into Laos. Most members of Senator Symington's Foreign Relations subcommittee

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<sup>52</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 652-653.

who had heard the October testimony knew the President was lying—ground forces had been there for quite a while. Two days later the *Los Angeles Times* reported the combat death of an American captain in Laos. Embarrassed Pentagon officials had to admit that he was not the first. Nixon went on television the following evening. While insisting that no ground combat troops were there, he revealed to the country that Americans “advisors” had been stationed in Laos, and that military forces had conducted bombing raids and airlifts. He promised that he would follow the 1969 amendment to the spending bill by keeping American ground forces out of the country. To tighten the apparent loophole over the Presidential actions in Laos, Fulbright proposed a broad resolution that would have prohibited the use of U.S. forces “in combat in or over Laos” without the approval of Congress.<sup>53</sup> To the doves and to a growing number of Americans, Vietnamization seemed to be a veil for further escalation of the conflict.

As the furor over the expansion of the war to one of Vietnam’s western neighbors subsided for a short time, another larger controversy surfaced over American involvement in the other one. Cambodia’s neutral government under Prince Norodom Sihanouk had for years played both sides off against the other. Sihanouk accommodated North Vietnam by allowing them to station forces in various “sanctuaries” near the South Vietnamese border. At the same time, he appeased the Americans by allowing the Air Force to bomb the sanctuaries. In March 1970 while Sihanouk vacationed out of the country, pro-American Cambodian Prime Minister Lon

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 653-654.

Nol seized power and tried to deny use of Cambodian territory to the North Vietnamese. North Vietnamese troops responded by attacking Lon Nol's government. Nixon welcomed a friendly Cambodia government that would help him eliminate the sanctuaries once and for all. The Americans quickly recognized Lon's government, and Nixon, against the advice of Kissinger, Secretary of Defense Laird, and Secretary of State Rogers, decided to invade Cambodia to destroy the sanctuaries. Nixon justified his decision to take what he knew would be a wildly unpopular move, because he wanted to protect withdrawing American troops. To do this the American military needed to drive the communists from the Cambodian sanctuaries and locate and attack the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam. However, Nixon had other reasons not related to military actions. The embattled President wanted to demonstrate his toughness against the Senate, which had criticized his Vietnam policies and had recently rejected two of his Supreme Court nominees, both "strict constructionist" southerners. Nixon in particular directed his anger at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who had just unanimously voted to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in order to try to stop the secret war in Laos. Nixon, an avid football fan, told Nelson Rockefeller that he was determined to "go for the big play" in Cambodia.<sup>54</sup>

To soften the blow, and to quiet some critics, the President promised in a nationally televised speech on April 20 to withdraw 150,000 additional American troops by the end of 1971. He also assured the public that the administration was

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<sup>54</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 219. See also, Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1991), 247.

drawing near to “the just peace we are seeking.” In actuality, he planned for a wider war. The only senator given advance notice of the invasion was his staunch ally John Stennis. Kissinger briefed Stennis and used Nixon’s argument that the incursion into Cambodia was necessary for the success of Vietnamization. After the briefing, the President made a pre-arranged call to Kissinger, and Stennis took the phone to pledge his support. The Mississippi senator also made a speech on Cambodia only a few hours before Nixon informed the public, in which he said that the move was “long overdue.” Stennis added that North Vietnamese in the Cambodian sanctuaries posed a threat to the withdrawal of American troops. Senator Symington of Missouri, angry that Stennis was the only member of Congress privy to the President’s decision, remarked sarcastically, “Inasmuch as the United States has now decided to invade a new country...would it not be advisable for the Armed Services Committee to have a briefing as to just what is going on?”<sup>55</sup>

A few hours later on April 30, 1970, Nixon made a speech to stunned nation announcing his decision to send American ground forces into Cambodia. The President denied that the action constituted an invasion and assured the national television audience that the American troops intended only to drive the North Vietnamese from the sanctuaries, not to occupy territory. He outlined what was at stake if America failed in Southeast Asia, invoking phrases that revealed his continued belief in the domino theory. “If when the chips are down,” he declared, “the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant,

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<sup>55</sup>Downs, “A Matter of Conscience,” 120.

the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world.” Nixon concluded that he would rather be a “one-term President” and do the right thing than win re-election and “see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud one-hundred-ninety year history.”<sup>56</sup> Nixon’s Cambodia speech attempted to take an extremely volatile and complex situation and fashion it to American Cold War orthodoxy. To most Americans who suffered through over 40,000 American deaths in a seemingly endless and now expanded conflict, the pieces did not fit together.

A significant number of legislators condemned Nixon’s action in Cambodia. Cooper characterized Nixon’s action as a “U-turn” in U.S. policy in Southeast Asia.” The Kentucky Republican said he supported Nixon’s policies, and wanted to stop the U-turn. Fulbright predicted that the only result of the invasion would be “a terrible destruction to a rather fine little country that was not bothering anybody.”<sup>57</sup> In a meeting between the President and members of the Foreign Relations and Foreign Affairs committees, Gore challenged Nixon directly. When the President promised to go no more than thirty-five kilometers into Cambodia, Gore replied, “What is the difference, in principle, between invading thirty-five kilometers and fifty kilometers? The important event was the crossing of the boundary of a sovereign nation with an invading army, which you ordered without authority from or even consultation with

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<sup>56</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 658-659.

<sup>57</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 220.



Congress. Yet you tell us now you will not go beyond thirty-five kilometers without the approval of Congress? What is the principle and where is the logic?”<sup>58</sup>

On the other side, Stennis, John Tower, Strom Thurmond, Rivers, Hebert, Mississippi Senator Sonny Montgomery, and Speaker of the House Carl Albert and House Majority Leader Hale Boggs of Louisiana all backed the President’s decision. Tower applauded the invasion and said that it would improve the “military tactical position” and result in “fewer American casualties in the long run.” Thurmond called Nixon’s move a “bold and courageous action” that “the doves have refused to allow for several years.” Surprisingly, however, several consistent southern supporters of Nixon’s Vietnam policies broke with the President over Cambodia. Herman Talmadge of Georgia, who had advocated military victory in Vietnam, said the move would widen the war. According to Talmadge, Nixon used precisely the type of language “that led to our costly and deep involvement in Vietnam.” Similarly, Representative Paul Rogers of Florida said that the announcement sounded “like a carbon copy of what we saw in Vietnam in 1964-65.” The congressman wished that the President had explained to Congress why he thought it vital to national security to send American troops into Cambodia. “At this time,” he concluded, “I certainly don’t think it is.” Harry Byrd, Jr. was more direct. He called the President’s decision to send American troops to Cambodia a “grave error in judgment.” Even Stennis himself had reservations. While he praised Nixon’s decision and suggested it might be a “turning point” in the war, the senator said he would oppose any proposal to set up a program of “massive arms aid” to Cambodia. When a reporter asked Stennis whether he

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<sup>58</sup>Gore, *Let the Glory Out*, 230-231.

thought the defense of Cambodian capital Phnom Penh was “essential to Vietnamization,” the Mississippi legislator replied, “Not with me. You have to draw the line somewhere.”<sup>59</sup> A surprising number of other southerners agreed that the line should have been drawn at the South Vietnam-Cambodia border. Even though the South supported the Cambodian invasion more than any other region, a significant percentage of southerners, thirty four percent according to a Harris poll, opposed the President’s action.<sup>60</sup>

Nixon had promised that most of the American troops would finish the operation and leave Cambodia by June 30, 1970. Senator Cooper, along with Senator Frank Church of Idaho, proposed legislation that would take the President at his word. They proposed an amendment to the extension of the Foreign Military Sales Act of 1968 that would cut off all funds for American ground forces or military advisors in Cambodia by June 30. Senators George McGovern and Mark Hatfield of Oregon sponsored a stronger amendment to a military procurement bill that would stop all funds for the war after December 1970 and require all American troops to leave by June 30, 1971 “unless Congress shall have declared war.”

On May 4, 1970, as American soldiers entered Cambodia, four Vietnam protesters were killed when a group of National Guardsmen overreacted and fired into the crowd. A defiant and unsympathetic Nixon blamed the demonstrators. “This

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<sup>59</sup>Memo: William E Timmons to H. R. Haldeman, “Recap of 4/29 and 4/30 a.m. Capital Hill reaction to Cambodian situation,” April 30, 1970, Nixon’s Staff papers, White House Special Files, Staff Member and Office Files: Haldeman, Box 116. See all other April 30 memos from William E. Timmons, same citation.

<sup>60</sup>Louis Harris, “Public Backs Cambodia Step by Narrow 50-43% margin, *Washington Post*, May 25, 1970, 1.

should remind us all once again,” he said, “that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy.” The statement did not calm the campuses. A second incident occurred during Vietnam protests at the predominantly African-American Jackson State University resulting in the deaths of two students and the wounding of twelve more. In response to both incidents, students at over four hundred universities staged protests, some of which shut down universities. In addition 100,000 protesters marched in Washington and barricaded the White House. <sup>61</sup>

Most of the protesters remained nonviolent and respectful. In late May a number of young antiwar college students personally lobbied their representatives or senators. Senator William Spong of Virginia met in Washington with about a hundred and fifty young men and women from Washington and Lee Graduate School of Business. Similar groups met with other southerners. In all, the respectful demeanor and seriousness of the young antiwar demonstrators impressed most legislators. “These aren’t the long haired kids,” Stennis remarked, “These are the short-haired, earnest students.” Not all southern members of congress shared the opinion of the Mississippi senator. According to *Time* magazine, Georgia representative Benjamin Blackburn argued briefly with a law student and then snapped, “Get out of my damn office.” <sup>62</sup>

Nixon shunned the antiwar movement, except for an impromptu early morning encounter with protestors at the Lincoln Memorial. The President had become, like

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<sup>61</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 659-661.

his predecessor before him, a “prisoner” in his home. In January 1969 Nixon vowed that he would get America out of Vietnam. He would never get bogged down like the proud Texas politician who sent the majority of troops into the war-torn Southeast Asian country. Just a year and a half later, with peace nowhere in sight, and an American-led invasion of Cambodia, it had become Nixon’s war. And the President had to contend with powerful southerners in Congress on both sides of the issue.

Nixon, ever combative, urged his advisors not to worry about divisiveness. “Having drawn the sword, don’t take it out—stick it in hard—no defensiveness.” The administration launched a plan to effectively delay a vote on the Cooper-Church amendment and to demonstrate to the nation that Nixon’s made the right decision on Cambodia and that Vietnamization was working. To accomplish the first task Nixon advisor H. R. Haldeman wanted “3-4 good gut fighters” in the Senate to lead the delaying action against Cooper-Church.<sup>63</sup> It was only natural that the only senator consulted on the Cambodia operation, John Stennis, would be one of them. On May 15, 1970, Stennis clashed with Fulbright over whether Nixon actually intended on removing U.S. forces from Cambodia by July 1. Stennis insisted that Nixon had estimated an amount of time that the troops would need. “I don’t see how any president can call to a day certain when the battle would be over, can assure there won’t be reverses,” he remarked. Fulbright suggested that Stennis’s answer confirmed his fears. “He didn’t mean it when he said we would be out by July 1; it could be

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<sup>62</sup>David Rosenbaum, “Antiwar Youths Impress Senator, *New York Times*, May 24, 1970, Cooper Collection, William Miller Files, Box 664. See also “The New Student Crusade: Working in the System,” *Time*, May 25, 1970, 20.

<sup>63</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 660-661.

December 1.” Stennis testily replied, “You’re putting words in my mouth which are false. I repudiate them.” He insisted that events could happen that would cause the President to change the date of withdrawal. Fulbright agreed, but said he was surprised that the Mississippi senator, “one of the strongest advocates of strict construction (of the constitution) in this body,” would not want to “uphold the prerogatives of the Senate.” Stennis said that though he had long been unhappy that America went into Vietnam without a declaration of war, the point was moot. “If you pass this amendment,” he warned, “you are going to almost totally destroy the negotiating power of the President, and that may be the most important point of all.” He later came back to that theme, saying that the passage of the Cooper-Church amendment would cause “unrestrained jubilation in Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, and every other Communist capital in the world.”<sup>64</sup>

Other southern hawks aided Nixon’s efforts to drum up public support for his Cambodian and Vietnamization policies by accepting the President’s invitation to go to Cambodia. Two such fact-finding missions traveled there in June and August 1970. The first one, a four-day visit of, as *Time Magazine* described them, “a carefully selected group of hawkish Senators, Congressmen, and Governors,” seemed geared more to, “showmanship and semantics” than substance. Southern congressmen on the trip included John Tower and Representative O.C. Fisher of Texas, third-ranking member of the House Armed Service Committee. The visitors were flown by

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<sup>64</sup>“Stennis, Fulbright Collide On Troop-Restriction Plan” *Clarion Ledger* (MS), May 16, 1970, Stennis Collection, Vertical File. See also John W. Finney, “Stennis Decries Moves to Curb Nixon on War,” *New York Times*, Cooper Collection, William Miller Files, Box 663.

helicopter to a mountaintop fire-support base six miles inside Cambodia. Three barbers who cut the hair of the soldiers to make them more presentable to the dignitaries had preceded them. After the politicians inspected a cache of captured North Vietnamese weapons, the Army staged what the *Time* article called “a spectacular aerial bombardment of a nearby hillside.” The hill was more than likely unoccupied.<sup>65</sup> The second trip, led by staunch Nixon supporter Representative G. V. “Sonny” Montgomery, went off with very little fanfare, except for what an administration memo called an “unfortunate” incident that occurred when Montgomery and another congressman, reporters in tow, toured the Con Son Prison in South Vietnam. The memo did not mention specifically what occurred during the tour, but Con Son had garnered some negative press earlier that year. Fulbright had reported in the Senate about the horrendous mistreatment and torture of Thieu’s dissenters in the prison, as illustrated in the housing of them in “tiger cages.” Nixon told the two Congressmen that the incident “overshadowed the favorable publicity” that the administration sought by recommending the congressional trip.<sup>66</sup>

Senate doves chafed under the administration’s “full court press.” Fulbright and Gore showed their frustration in hearings over the Cambodia invasion. After listening to the testimony of Secretary of Defense Laird, and Navy Chief of Staff, Admiral Thomas Moorer, the chairman testily replied, “I’ve been hornswoggled long enough!” He then angrily asked Moorer if he knew of any plans “to invade any other

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<sup>65</sup>“No Confidence in Cambodia,” *Time*, June 22, 1970, 15.

<sup>66</sup>Memo for President’s file, Briefing on Congressional trip, Nixon Staff Papers, August 13, 1970 White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Haldeman, Box 116. See also CR, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 15 July, 1970, 24359.

country in the foreseeable future.” In late May, Gore inserted in the *Congressional Record* a letter to the Retired Officers Association from its president, Vice Admiral W. R. Smedberg III. Smedberg claimed that the President informed him of the Cambodia decision two days before he told the nation. Gore characterized it as shocking that Nixon “discussed the matter with private citizens while withholding it from Congress.”<sup>67</sup> The administration denied the charge, but it had at least a ring of truth to it considering the its closeness to such organizations as well as it’s partnership with them to start letter-writing campaigns to try to defeat the Cooper Church amendment.

After a contentious six week debate, in which the Cooper-Church amendment was amended several times to make it appear that it supported the administration’s efforts to withdraw the troops and that it would not prevent the President from exercising his power to “protect the lives of U.S. armed servicemen wherever deployed,” the bill finally passed the Senate. Part of the change in language came as a result of efforts by moderate hawk Robert Byrd of West Virginia. Byrd’s first amendment to Cooper-Church would have allowed Nixon to send troops back into Cambodia to protect American lives and facilitate the withdrawal of troops. He initially intended, as Fulbright remarked, to weaken the original amendment by giving the President authority to intensify American involvement in Cambodia at any point after withdrawing troops. Byrd’s first amendment was narrowly defeated, but his second, which declared that nothing would prevent the President from exercising his constitutional power, “to protect the lives of U.S. armed forces wherever deployed,”

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<sup>67</sup>“The Senate: Unloving Acts,” *Time*, June 1, 1979, 9. See also CQA, 1970, 937.

won passage. The final language of the bill included Byrd's amendment. On June 30, the date that the amendment set for the removal of troops from Cambodia, the Cooper-Church amendment passed 58-37 with the southerners divided on the issue 10-18.<sup>68</sup> Notable among the ten were hawkish southerners supporters, Everett Jordan of North Carolina, Ernest Hollings of South Carolina, and Robert Byrd of West Virginia. On July 15, Jordan electrified crowds of liberal North Carolinians in the Democratic State Convention by striding up to the podium and flashing the two-fingered "peace sign." The convention supported the amendment, and a stronger antiwar amendment, sponsored by George McGovern of South Dakota and Mark Hatfield of Oregon, to the military procurement authorization bill.<sup>69</sup>

During the debate over Cooper-Church, another important antiwar amendment passed the Senate. As the debate on the first Byrd amendment continued, firm administration supporter Robert Dole of Kansas sponsored an amendment to the Foreign Military Sales Bill that would repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. The senator's amendment, because it would require the President's signature, would not follow the language of the first resolution that required only a concurrent resolution. Fulbright opposed Dole, saying that his amendment was "improper in its form." Additionally, if both Dole's and Byrd's amendments passed, the same bill would repeal the congressional support for fighting the war while at the same time giving the President the power to "initiate military action whenever and wherever he might wish."

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<sup>68</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 662-665. See also CQA, 1970, 945.

<sup>69</sup>Jack Childs, "N.C. Democrats Back 'End-the-War' Move," *Raleigh News and Observer* (NC), July 15, 1970, Ervin papers, Correspondence, 1970, File 9265.



Sam Ervin noted the irony in having the administration fighting the Cooper-Church amendment to limit its authority in Cambodia while one of its spokesmen proposed “an amendment which would not only take away his power to act in Cambodia and Laos, but also take away his power to act in South Vietnam.” Neither senator could stop Dole’s amendment, which passed 81 to 10, with Fulbright voting against the majority. Knowing that the Tonkin repeal would probably have been excluded from any House-Senate conference report on the bill, Fulbright proposed a concurrent resolution to repeal Gulf of Tonkin. It passed easily, 57 to 5. The five voting against the bill were all southerners: James B. Allen of Alabama, Ervin, Spessard Holland of Florida, Russell Long, and John McClellan of Arkansas. Allen Ellender was absent, but recorded his vote as paired against. The hawkish House overwhelmingly rejected both the Cooper-Church amendment and the Gulf of Tonkin repeal. Only a few southern members of Congress voted for both measures.<sup>70</sup>

In the end both sides could claim victory in the struggle over Cooper-Church. For the first time the Senate had voted to deny funding for the prosecution of American military policy in the war. Conversely, the administration, with help from their Republican and southern Democratic allies, slowed down the senate doves, and though they still opposed Cooper-Church, played a part in making the amendment more palatable to the President. Stennis strengthened his position as chief administration confidante, influential supporter, and enabler of Nixon’s Vietnam policies.

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<sup>70</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 664-665.

The Mississippi senator demonstrated his willingness even to sacrifice his consistency to back the President. A Mississippi newspaper editorial quoted from a Stennis press statement released before Nixon's Cambodia speech. "Senator Stennis expressed his great and growing concern about the situation in Southeast Asia particularly with the developments in Cambodia," the statement read. It concluded by saying that the Mississippi senator was "totally opposed to our going into Cambodia with combat troops under any circumstances." The editorial writer sarcastically remarked, "There are some comforts to being a United States Senator from Mississippi and Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. One of them, apparently, is that you can be on both sides of crucial issues."<sup>71</sup> To Stennis, his support of the military and personal loyalty to the President would take precedence over his doubts about the operation.

As the Cooper-Church Senate vote neared, Stennis again demonstrated his loyalty to the President on Vietnam policy. As American troops left Cambodia, Stennis, speaking on a national television news program, said he would support a second American incursion into Cambodia if the President felt it necessary to clear out North Vietnamese sanctuaries again. When the senator made a similar comment a few months later during the debate over American operations in Laos, McGovern bitterly remarked, "Any senator who talks about sending American forces into Cambodia ought to lead the charge himself."<sup>72</sup> Senator Gore had expressed similar frustration

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<sup>71</sup>"Before and After," *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, MS), June, 10, 1970, Stennis Collection, Vertical file.

<sup>72</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 677.

earlier. “We’ve gone too far in this business of old men making wars, and boys fighting the wars,” he told a radio audience in early May 1970.<sup>73</sup>

Though some southerners in the Senate showed a willingness to challenge Nixon over Cambodia, far fewer supported the Hatfield-McGovern amendment, which would have cut off all funds for Vietnam, except for withdrawal purposes, by December 31, 1971. The co-authors of the amendment had gone to Fulbright before introducing the measure, but he counseled against it. He worried that the measure would get very few votes and would only encourage the administration to widen the conflict further. McGovern and Hatfield ignored the Arkansas senator’s advice. While the amendment garnered widespread support throughout the country, it did less well in the Senate. Even John Sherman Cooper balked at supporting the measure. He said later that he did not vote for the McGovern-Hatfield amendment for several reasons: the inability to accurately assess the situation to determine whether troops could be withdrawn by December 31, the lack of consideration in the bill for the release of prisoners of war and the possible further operations in Cambodia or Laos, and the possibility that American troops would be withdrawn under the bill without a peace settlement. “If we got out over there after spending all these years,” he remarked, “and fighting goes on and there is no settlement in Southeast Asia, it (sic) will be years wasted.”<sup>74</sup> While the Kentucky senator by no means could been

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<sup>73</sup>Albert Gore radio spot, undated, CA May, 1970, Gore collection.

<sup>74</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 666-667. For Cooper’s comments, see *Issues and Answers*, Transcript of Television Program, American Broadcasting Company, April 4, 1970, 10.

characterized as a hawk, his statement suggests that by mid-1970 he still did not support removing American troops until the war ended.

Gore also voted against the McGovern-Hatfield amendment because he feared it would “tie the President’s hands” in negotiations. While there is no evidence to suggest that Gore’s statement lacked veracity, the Tennessee veteran found himself in a difficult position. Locked in a tough re-election battle, he did not want to further alienate his constituents who felt now more than ever that he was “too liberal” for Tennessee. Some sample quotes from two constituents reveal the depths of discontent among some Tennesseans with the senator. One resident was not sure whether Gore had “turned commie or hippy (sic) or both.” Another said that he was so “fed up with your representing the most liberal element of this country...that I could VOMIT.” (emphasis in original) Therefore, Gore could not effectively campaign for an amendment that would label him further as a “defeatist.”<sup>75</sup> Cooper’s and Gore’s refusals to support the amendment could also be attributed to a long-standing deference to the executive in foreign policy. Though neither senator agreed with Nixon’s escalation, he was still, as Lyndon Johnson had said of Eisenhower in the 1950s, “the only president we’ve got.”

In the end, the Hatfield-McGovern amendment was defeated, 55-39, with only three southerners, Fulbright, Fred Harris of Oklahoma, and Ralph Yarborough of Texas, voting for it. Nevertheless, the significant Senate support of McGovern-Hatfield convinced both doves in the Senate and hawks in the administration that Nixon’s policy of widening the war would become increasingly harder to continue.

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<sup>75</sup>Robert Clyde Hodges, “Senator Albert Gore, Sr and the Vietnam War,” Masters Thesis,

For some southern doves, mandating a specific date for cutting of funds for American troops proved farther than they were willing to go. Nevertheless, after the Cambodia invasion, some southerners grew impatient with the President's inability to end the war. Nixon suffered another setback in August when, in a meeting at the White House hawkish supporter Harry Byrd, Jr. urged the President to withdraw quickly from Vietnam.<sup>76</sup> Byrd publicly confirmed his fears a few months later on the Senate floor. "I would like to see this war ended—or at least the United States participation in it—at the earliest possible date, preferably tomorrow." Though he continued to support the President's policies, he added that if Nixon had not been successful in already withdrawing large numbers of American troops, "I would not be on the floor of the Senate speaking on his behalf." Nixon confided to NSC advisor Henry Kissinger that while he could deal with criticism from the left because their only alternative was to "bug out" or abandon South Vietnam, he had to answer his right-wing supporters. "When the Right starts wanting to get out," he told Kissinger, "it's our problem."<sup>77</sup>

On October 7, the President, realizing that he would again have to find a way to shore up flagging support for his war policies while mounting a concerted effort to defeat liberal congressional candidates in 1970, made yet another peace offer mainly for domestic consumption. Nixon proposed an internationally supervised standstill cease-fire throughout Southeast Asia. Though the President realized it would be difficult to implement and maintain, he said, "an unconventional war may require an

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University of Kentucky, 1989. 97-98.

<sup>76</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 672. See also CQA, 1970, 42-S.

<sup>77</sup>Speech by Senator Harry F. Byrd, Jr., March 11, 1971, Byrd, Jr. Papers, Box 59. See also

unconventional truce.” Congress greeted Nixon’s announcement with widespread support. Fulbright said the proposal was “better than nothing,” but still flawed because it kept President Thieu and Vice President Ky in office. Nevertheless, the Arkansas senator joined every other members of Congress in signing his name to a resolution supporting the President. Stennis backed his commander-in-chief as usual, but admitted Nixon’s newest peace offered the North Vietnamese very little.<sup>78</sup>

Nixon’s peace proposal eased tensions with Congress and the public for a time, and the President took to the campaign trail in an attempt to exorcise what he considered to be the “radicals” from the Senate. The “political target number one” in the Republican’s 1970 “Southern Strategy” was Albert Gore of Tennessee. Agnew stumped the state for Gore’s Republican opponent, but his belligerent and venomous statements only made the election closer. Nixon then traveled to the state to drum up support. In the end, however, Tennesseans responded more to the youthful energy and superior organization of moderate Republican challenger William Brock than to an appeal by Washington outsiders. The vote against Hatfield-McGovern could not erase decades of voting his conscience rather than the will of his constituents. The loss of Albert Gore in 1970 marked the beginning of the end for the “old guard” dissenters on the Foreign Relations Committee.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, however, the Nixon administration’s campaign strategy, though at least helping oust Gore and two non-southern liberal senators, did not effect

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Kissinger, *White House Years*, 969.

<sup>78</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 673.

<sup>79</sup>Hodges, “Senator Albert Gore, Sr. and the Vietnam War,” 99-110. See also “Tennessee’s

widespread change in the Senate or House. In addition, the Republican Party lost governorships and House seats. In the aftermath of a mean-spirited campaign by the administration which characterized anyone who disagreed with Nixon's Vietnam policies as a dangerous radical who showed disloyalty to his country, Senate Majority leader Mike Mansfield preached reconciliation. "Let the election recede into history," Mansfield implored his fellow Democrats at the Senate Democratic Conference on November 16. Fulbright bristled at Mansfield's suggestion, in the wake of what the senator called "malicious" and "fraudulent" tactics. "Being agreeable with the President doesn't sit too well with me. The Vice President came to Arkansas to attack me," the senator reminded his colleagues. Warning that the Senate could destroy the democratic process if it "turned the other cheek," Fulbright concluded, "I don't think the Senate should lie down and take it."<sup>80</sup>

Recent events in Vietnam added to the senator's unwillingness to reconcile. In November the Nixon administration began bombing North Vietnam for the first time since the fall of 1968. The initial bombing raids had served as a diversion for a daring raid by the Air Force and Army Special Forces at the Son Tay prison camp near Hanoi. It appeared that the raid had been a public relations ploy—the North Vietnamese had taken American prisoners and left the site days before. Just after the Secretary of Defense loudly trumpeted the determination of the administration to do everything within its power to secure the release of the POWs, a suspicious Fulbright heard testimony on the raid.

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William Brock, *Time*, November 16, 1970, 18.

Fulbright had particularly been angry at the administration's maneuverings on the matter because, since 1969, he had sent several letters to North Vietnamese leaders to get lists of prisoners and to implore the enemy to treat them humanely. In addition, several family members of POWs met with the chairman and supported his efforts to end the war quickly. In hearing testimony on the Son Tay raid before the Foreign Relations committee, Fulbright found inconsistencies. Secretary of Defense Laird testified that he and the President ordered the action in response to a report saying that several prisoners had been killed. When the chairman questioned the private citizens who wrote the report, they denied that any prisoners had died. Furthermore, a *Washington Post* reporter reasoned that if the Son Tay raid had been successful, it would have resulted in subjecting the other American prisoners to further torture or possibly death. The reporter observed that the raid had "a smell of desperation" about it. "It is not the considered action of a great power," he concluded. Fulbright concurred and believed the action had been concocted only to co-opt the sensitive POW issue from the doves.<sup>81</sup>

On November 9, he appeared on ABC's *Face the Nation* opposite South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, who was a guest on NBC's *Meet the Press*. The senator declared that Laird had "misrepresented the facts" about the Son Tay raid, while stopping short of calling him a liar. He then severely criticized both the Defense Department and its allies in Congress. He charged that the Defense

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<sup>80</sup>Minutes of the Senate Democratic Conference, November 16, 1970, 8-9, Mansfield Collection, Series XXII, Container 90.

<sup>81</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 236-237.



Department had overpowered the State Department and now made foreign policy and influenced “everything that goes on in our government.” They had the real power, Fulbright asserted, and the military supporters in the Senate, of which he included Stennis and Russell, were effectively paid off with defense plants in their state. Fulbright’s power as Foreign Relations chair could only be described as “secondary.” The Arkansas senator’s argument reflected the major thrust of his book, *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine*, which had just been released. Clearly, the Foreign Relations chairman was not in a conciliatory mood with the Nixon administration.<sup>82</sup>

For a short time, it seemed that a number of Fulbright’s colleagues disagreed. As 1971 began, Nixon’s Vietnamization policy still commanded a majority of Senators, albeit a shrinking one, and a larger percentage of House members. Over 200,000 troops had come home and American combat deaths had been reduced. However, no one could foresee an end to the war. Morale among the soldiers had declined, as evidenced by the Defense Department estimate that as many as 40,000 of the remaining American troops had become heroin addicts. Furthermore, Nixon had continued to prop up an obviously corrupt and dictatorial Thieu regime whose armed forces seemed no nearer to being capable of taking over the war. With the peace talks seemingly hopelessly stalled, Nixon remained determined to prove Vietnamization was working.<sup>83</sup>

Nixon chose another adventure in Laos to prove the mettle of South Vietnamese troops and the viability of his Vietnam policy. Codenamed “Dewey-

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 234-236.

Canyon II,” the plan included an invasion of Laos using South Vietnamese troops. The President would not technically violate the Cooper-Church amendment because he would only supply American air support, not ground troops or advisors. As usual the administration consulted only with Stennis before the operation. The National Security advisor and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs briefed the Mississippi senator, according to Kissinger’s memoirs. “When Stennis agreed that the operation made sense, Nixon gave the ‘execute’ order,” Kissinger added.<sup>84</sup>

American reaction to the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos was swift and negative. The President’s approval rating dropped close to Johnson’s low of twenty-six percent low just after the Tet offensive. Cooper, on CBS’s *Face the Nation*, on February 7, opposed the Laos invasion and, under a reporter’s persistent questioning, suggested that if the President would not seek congressional approval for his actions then all U.S. troops should be withdrawn from Vietnam even if it meant an American defeat.<sup>85</sup> The military also imposed an embargo on American news reporters covering the operation, which led to the embarrassing situation where the Soviet Premier and a Japanese news service reported the invasion before members of Congress had been informed. Normally hawkish senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia condemned the embargo as “inexcusable bungling.”<sup>86</sup> Fulbright had seen it all before. When a reporter asked him whether he was annoyed at not being informed, he quipped, “Good

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<sup>83</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 676.

<sup>84</sup>Downs, “A Matter of Conscience,” 127-128.

<sup>85</sup>*Face the Nation*, Transcript of Television Program, Columbia Broadcasting System, February 7, 1971, 8.

<sup>86</sup>“The Last Big Push?—Or a Wider War?” *Newsweek*, February 15, 1971, 24.

heavens, no. That is part of the shell game. I'm sort of inured to it." <sup>87</sup> A month later he apparently had a change of heart, when he complained in the Senate that Nixon and Kissinger made all Vietnam decisions and did not consult with Congress. The problem, Fulbright argued, was that "the people's representatives in Congress are denied direct access not only to the President himself but to the individual who is the principle architect of our policy in Indochina." <sup>88</sup>

On February 23, 1971, the Senate Democratic conference debated a resolution that defined the purposes for the majority party in the upcoming Congress. The first goal listed was "To end involvement in Indochina and to bring about the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and the release of all prisoners in a time certain." Stennis argued forcefully against the resolution. "What better message can we give to the enemy?" he declared. "He can just wait it out." If the amendment passed, Stennis asked his Democratic colleagues, "how do we send a man into battle?" He continued with obvious emotion:

I have sat and talked to these young men behind closed doors and they ask me, 'why are you sending me to Vietnam—why don't you stop it.' Suppose they disobey, what do we do? Are we going to try them? Are they to be charged with treason? I don't have the nerve to face them....Not a single President intended on getting us into war, but we are in it, and many of us in this room are equally at fault. I'm am backing the flag as I see it....I won't be a party to running up the flag of surrender then sending our boys to fight. <sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>"Widening the War to Wind it Down?" *Newsweek*, February 8, 1971.

<sup>88</sup>"The President Defends a Policy an a Man," *Time*, March 15, 1971, 13.

<sup>89</sup>Minutes of the Senate Democratic Conference, February 23, 1971, 7-8, Mansfield Collection, Series XXII, Container 90.

Despite the passionate call to support the troops, most of the war-weary Democrats had seen too much killing and executive deception. The resolution passed 35 to 12. Though southerners comprised ten of the twelve dissenters, seven other Southerners, including previous administration Vietnam supporters William Spong of Virginia and Ernest Hollings of South Carolina voted for the measure. In addition hawks Robert Byrd and Herman Talmadge supported the Vietnam portion of the resolution but had a reservation on the last four words, “in a time certain.” Regarding Nixon’s Vietnam policy, the South in the Senate looked anything but solid.<sup>90</sup>

Polls showed, however, that most Americans had turned against the war. In addition, the Laos incursion, despite Nixon’s claims of success, resulted in a hurried withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces. The retreat was by no means organized, as members of Thieu’s army hurried to American helicopters. By some accounts, when the full “choppers” lifted off the ground some desperate South Vietnamese soldiers still dangled from the skids.<sup>91</sup> Even administration supporters such as Tennessee senator Howard Baker were, in Robert Mann’s words, “badly shaken” by the results of the Laos operation.<sup>92</sup> At a private dinner, Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott declared to his moderate Republican colleagues that the only hawks in the room were “ex-hawks.” At the same dinner Senator Marlow Cook of Kentucky, one of the ex-hawks, pressed Defense Secretary Melvin Laird as to how quickly the troops could be

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>91</sup>George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam*, 241.

pulled out of Vietnam. Laird guessed it would take nine months. Cook responded by saying he would introduce a resolution calling for the pullout of all forces nine months after Hanoi freed the POWs.<sup>93</sup>

For two years, Richard Nixon had counted on the support of southerners in Congress for his policies in Vietnam. After Laos, that support, though still significant, began to lessen. Southern doves, who had given Nixon time to implement his secret plan, had gone back on the offensive when the President made it quite clear he would neither entertain their proposals or even consult with them. As a result, the National Commitments Resolution, the Cooper-Church Amendment, and the repeal of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution served as the opening salvos in a battle led by Fulbright, Cooper, and an increasing number of non-southerners that challenged the executive monopoly on war decisions. Though many southern hawks rallied around the President, the policy of escalating the war while withdrawing from it frustrated some of them enough to make them “ex-hawks.”

Nevertheless, those southerners most concerned with upholding American honor still wielded enormous power in the Senate. F. Edward Hebert felt such a strong need to protect the military that he preferred fixing technical problems than fully addressing the ideological, strategic, tactical, and moral failures that made the My Lai massacre possible. And John Stennis, Nixon and Kissinger’s “tower of strength,” continued to support the President’s decisions, even though he sometimes did not totally agree with them. As the majority of troops left Vietnam over the next two

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<sup>92</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 678.

<sup>93</sup>“You Don’t See any Hawks Here,” *Newsweek*, April 19, 1971, 27-28.

years, Stennis would feel more inclined to express his dissent with the system of complete deference to the President on future war decisions. He never, however, abandoned Nixon on Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 10

### THE LIMITS OF DISSENT, DISHONORABLE PEACE, AND FINAL CONSENSUS

In April and May 1971, some of the largest and most intense Vietnam protests erupted throughout the country. Most of the protests were peaceful. The demonstrations differed from previous efforts in that Vietnam veterans in large groups played a significant role. One incident in particular showed the distance between hawk and dove, ideology and bitter reality. A group of protesters found itself riding with extreme hawk Strom Thurmond in the Senate subway. When the protesters argued their case, Thurmond responded, “Boys, we all want this war to end, but we want to end it in an honorable way.” Chris Jiordana, an ex-marine who lost an arm in combat, replied, “Senator, we ain’t got no honor left.”<sup>1</sup> The invocation of traditionally southern concepts of “honor” did not resonate with those who had lost greatly in a seemingly endless, and, to many of them, pointless, American military misadventure in Vietnam.

From 1971 to 1973 the doves in Congress continued to gain strength, and the administration realized that they could not continue indefinitely their policy of escalating the bombing while de-escalating the use of ground troops in Vietnam. The attempts by leading doves to pass legislation to force the President’s hand came closer to success, with a growing number of southerners voting for them. In response, Nixon encouraged Kissinger to push harder for a negotiated settlement and used increased bombing to get it done. As troop withdrawals increased dramatically, southerners

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<sup>1</sup>“Protest: A Week Against the War, *Time*, May 3, 1971, 12.

could now express their dissent over Vietnam policies without showing dishonor to the flag or the remaining troops. While a few changed their votes in the remaining “end-the-war” amendments, the chief way in which they registered dissent was in voting for the War Powers Act, which finally curbed the power of the executive branch in making war. Southerners exhibited more unity in voting for the act because most could agree on the loss of congressional power and the desire to remake the laws so that they followed what was perceived to be the “original intent” of the framers of the Constitution.

As Thurmond encountered the protesters who staged massive rallies and arranged meetings with lawmakers in May, 1971, the Foreign Relations committee had been hearing legislative proposals on ending American military involvement in Vietnam. They invited organized groups to present their plans to end the war. The most stirring testimony came from John Kerry of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. “In our opinion, and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam that threatens the United States of America,” he declared. “To attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom is to us the height of hypocrisy.” With regard to those soldiers still in Vietnam, Kerry asked the senators, “How do you ask a man to be the last to die in Vietnam? How do you ask to be the last to die for a mistake?” Fulbright and the rest of the committee sat silent and respectful to hear the eloquence of the thrice-wounded war veteran, and the chairman implored him not to give up on the system.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>“Let’s Try and Glorify the Living,” *Time*, May 3, 1971, 12-13. See also Senate, Foreign



In contrast, the chairman had far less patience with groups offering more radical solutions. Several members of a self-styled “revolutionary” group, Students and Youth for a People’s Peace, informed the senators of its intent to stop government actions by interfering with its operations, particularly military work. While Fulbright and the group agreed on several solutions to Vietnam policies, the senator could not abide those who did not work within the system. “If the actions of the demonstrators result in physical intervention, there is no question but that the government itself has the power to control this kind of intervention,” Fulbright insisted. “I do think that this would set back and seriously hinder the efforts of those who are trying within the structure to end the war.”<sup>3</sup> In another instance, demonstrators burst into the chambers and accused Fulbright and the others of being imperialists and war criminals. Fulbright and George Aiken of Vermont, two of the most consistent antiwar senators, sounded like, as one reporter put it, “a right-wing bumper sticker” in responding to the three agitators. “Why the hell do you stay here if other countries are so much better?” the elderly Aiken shouted. Fulbright followed Aiken’s lead. “If you were in an authoritarian country,” the chairman told the protestors, “you’d all be in jail.” While the clashes between more extremist students did not add very much to the debate or to solutions, the otherwise positive nature of the protests encouraged the Senate and the House to continue the fight to end the war.<sup>4</sup>

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Relations Committee, *Legislative Proposals Relating to the War in Southeast Asia*, 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., April 22, 1971, 198-203.

<sup>3</sup>*Legislative Proposals Relating to the War in Southeast Asia*, 249.

<sup>4</sup>“The Chess of Ending a War,” *Time*, May 3, 1971, 12-13.

However, Fulbright's reaction to the more extreme protesters demonstrate that his dissent had limits. The chief congressional dissenter, along with his southern colleague John Sherman Cooper and several other "establishment" Vietnam protestors, respected the institutions of the Senate, the military, the executive branch, and the legal system. Therefore they could not condone illegal activity even under the banner of righteous "civil disobedience." For that reason, Fulbright counseled against the radical groups' actions, just as he had earlier advised young Arkansan men who thought the war immoral not to "dodge" the draft. To Fulbright, the individual could do more to correct America's "transgressions" by "staying within the system and laws than by going outside them." At the same time, however, he sympathized with people who emigrated rather than live in a country whose government prosecuted an "immoral" war. On the other hand he felt contempt for young people, many from the South, who enthusiastically supported the war. Pro-war stalwarts, the Arkansan suggested, were "the raw material for the brown shirts." Therefore, though Fulbright could not condone illegal activity and sometimes grew impatient when face-to-face with those suggesting more radical solutions, he felt those condoning militarism were a far greater threat to America.<sup>5</sup>

A more "establishment" offshoot of the Vietnam protests was a congressional "barnstorming tour" sponsored by several liberal House members. Of the twenty members of Congress participating, Robert Eckhardt of Texas was the only southerner. Eckhardt belonged to the Morning Breakfast Group, more frequently known as simply "The Group," which was one of several informal and small, often

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<sup>5</sup>Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography*, 534.

secretive organizations of like-minded legislators. In 1970 the Group sponsored a conference on war and national responsibility in which an impressive array of academics, lawyers, soldiers, clergy, diplomats, politicians, and writers participated.<sup>6</sup> Out of the conference came a book published by the Group, *War Crimes and the American Conscience*.

Eckhardt, appearing on CBS's *Face the Nation* in early April 1971, and debated Georgia House hawk Jack Brinkley over the Calley case and other related Vietnam matters. He argued that Americans had been taking a closer look at a conflict in which soldiers "moved whole villages out of their villages, whole areas out of their areas and into detention camps." The Houston representative suggested that as individuals analyzed the war, they concluded that America had involved itself in "a situation in which the game is not worth the candle." What should the United States do, Eckhardt asked, "for a people if you destroy its culture in attempting to bring it peace...if you lay waste its forest and its fields, and leave hundreds of thousands of refugees and many dead. How can you possibly do anything for them?"<sup>7</sup> Eckhardt wanted to further investigate the larger causes that could bring about a My Lai massacre. The congressman wrote House Armed Services Chairman F. Edward Hebert requesting hearings on alleged American atrocities in Vietnam. The chairman, predictably, stonewalled any hearings that would further expose American soldiers to

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<sup>6</sup>List of Participants, "Congressional Conference on War and National Responsibility, Feb 18, 1970, Eckhardt Papers, Box 147/304. See also Norman Miller, "Chowder and Marching Society Does More than Eat and Strut," *Wall Street Journal*, Eckhardt Papers, Box 147/208.

<sup>7</sup>*Face the Nation*, transcript of television program, Columbia Broadcasting System,, April 4, 1971, 14-15, Eckhardt Papers, Box 149/33.

criticism. Nevertheless, Eckhardt had been one of the few southerners in the House of Representatives who actively and passionately fought to bring the Vietnam War to as early an end as possible.<sup>8</sup>

Brinkley, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, also wanted to find a quick end to the war. However, his opinions differed markedly from Eckhardt's and reflected the increasing frustration of southern hawks. He had earlier believed that "the important thing in this country was one of unity behind the President. He acted like a Joshua or a Caleb in saying, follow me and we'll unify this country by Vietnamization." Since Brinkley could not see "the light at the end of the tunnel," he wanted the United States to "either get out or achieve a military victory." Further, when asked why he thought his Georgia colleagues, Representatives Phillip Landrum and John Flynt, had voted against the extension of the draft, which the interviewer called "a strong stand against the Vietnam war," Brinkley explained, "I do think the people from Georgia are fundamental people...they feel that one American life is more important than all the tea in China, and I think that contributed to their feelings." Brinkley admitted that he had "rassled (sic) with" the problem himself. "Is it morally right to send draftees to Vietnam to fight, wholly committed with their very lives? With the nation not being fully committed, we are asking more of them than we are requiring of ourselves." Yet Brinkley, unlike Eckhardt or his Georgia colleagues, voted for the extension because he felt America had an "obligation to those prisoners of war." Echoing several southern hawks, Brinkley also supported an extension

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<sup>8</sup>Phillip Burton, John Conyers, John Dow, Don Edwards, Henry Helstoski, Bob Eckhardt,

because America “had to keep strong.” It was this hawkish position that posed a new threat to Nixon’s policies. The administration could not hold on forever to its policy of extending the war while withdrawing troops. Therefore, though southerners Brinkley and Eckhardt held divergent views as to the deficiencies of Nixon’s Vietnam policies, they agreed on America’s rapid disengagement from Vietnam.

In the midst of the volatile debate, even the chief southern hawk seemed to be speaking in more dovish tones. In January, John Stennis participated in a Mississippi Chamber of Commerce seminar on the war. He expounded upon the lessons Americans should learn from Vietnam. His answers, according to a UPI newspaper article, could easily have come from his colleague from Arkansas. First, the United States lacked the resources to respond to every communist threat around the world. Second, America should not defend nations who lacked the unity and dedication to defend themselves. Third, the Vietnam War can be characterized as a civil war, not “aggression from the North.” Fourth, and most important for Stennis, never again should a President send troops into extended combat “without Congress’s prior and explicit consent.”

With regards to the fourth point, the Mississippi lawmaker rejected the concept “that the President has certain inherent powers as commander-in-chief” which gave him the authority to send troops without approval by the legislative branch. On May 11, 1971, the hawk that Nixon most trusted proposed a bill that would reduce the President’s warmaking powers in all future conflicts.<sup>9</sup> Though he assured his

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Robert Kastenmeier, Edward Koch, Abner Mikva, Benjamin Rosenthal, and William F. Ryan to F. Edward Hebert, March 30, 1971, Eckhardt Papers, Box 147/208.

colleagues his actions had “nothing whatsoever to do with the handling of the war in Indochina” the long frustration he felt over the endless conflict had compelled him to act. As the Senator reflected on the lessons learned from the war, he concluded that the United States “must return to our original safeguard before the Nation can be committed to a state of actual war.” Under the Constitution the question of war belongs “to the elected representatives of the people.” The decision to go to war, Stennis concluded, “is too big a decision for one mind to make and too awesome a responsibility for one man to bear.” <sup>10</sup>

Though Republican dove Jacob Javits characterized Stennis’s “conversion” as nothing short of a “miracle,” Stennis had not retreated from his hawkish stand. He had said as early as 1967 that the way American gradually deepened its commitment in Vietnam should not be repeated. Therefore, Stennis proposed one version of what came to be known as the War Powers Act to clarify the ambiguity between the power of the commander-in-chief to deploy armies and the legislative branch to declare war. Further indicating that the Mississippi senator had not undergone a transformation, later that year in a War Powers debate he stated that despite any law that resulted from the consideration of the bill, the President “should be able to show the flag in times of crisis.” As historian Michael Scott Downs attests, apparently Stennis had forgotten that the ships in the Gulf of Tonkin were “showing the flag” in 1964, with deadly and disastrous consequences for all nations involved. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>“Stennis on Vietnam Lessons: The Hawk that Cooed...” *Washington Daily News*, January 12, 1971, Stennis Collection, Vertical Files.

<sup>10</sup>CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 11 May, 1971, 14334

In June, George McGovern and Mark Hatfield tried once more to legislate an ending date to American military involvement in the war. They resurrected their amendment, this time tied to the Selective Service extension bill. Signs looked favorable, as the President's approval rating hit its lowest point, 31%, while at the same time 72% of Americans now favored a deadline for ending the war. Looking to gain more support, Hatfield and McGovern agreed to a proposal made to them by Florida Senator Lawton Chiles to push back the deadline on the resolution from December 31, 1971, to June, 1972, before funds for Vietnam would be cut. Chiles promised that he could deliver at least three southern votes. Chiles could not deliver on his promise. Though four more voted for the measure, only one southerner, Everett Jordan of North Carolina, changed his vote from the last time. It failed 55-44. The original McGovern-Hatfield amendment also failed by a 55-42 vote. A similar measure in the House introduced by Claude Pepper of Florida, failed, 237-147. However, seventeen southerners voted for the amendment, almost twice as many as in previous votes.<sup>12</sup> It seemed as though, as Pepper observed in his diary, "The tide is rising in the House against the war in Indo-China (sic)."<sup>13</sup>

As the Senate and House continued to propose and debate legislation to cut off funding for the war and to define war powers, more revelations surfaced regarding executive deceit in the making of Vietnam decisions. Two Southerners in Congress would play prominent roles in the slowly breaking story. On June 13, 1971, the *New*

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<sup>11</sup>Downs, "A Matter of Conscience," 136-137.

<sup>12</sup>CQA, 1971, 282. For Pepper's proposal and roll call vote, see CR, 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 17 June, 1971, 20588-20589.

*York Times* published the first of a series of stories based on a massive 1967 Pentagon study commissioned by then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara on the history of American involvement in Vietnam from World War II to mid-1968. Daniel Ellsberg, former Defense Department analyst and former advisor to Kissinger on Vietnam, had left the government and turned against the war in 1969. He made copies of the study in the hope that members of Congress could leak it and further discredit America's involvement in Vietnam. He went first on November 6, 1969, to Fulbright with an envelope that contained several documents, hoping to entice the senator into calling extensive hearings on the war.

Since Fulbright knew that Ellsberg had stolen the documents, he was hesitant to make them public. Other senators such as George McGovern had not accepted them from Ellsberg for the same reason. Fulbright had his staff file them away in the office safe and wrote a letter to Secretary of Defense Laird asking for a copy of the entire 7,000-page study. The secretary refused for reasons of "national security." Fulbright made several inquiries to the secretary and was rebuffed each time. In the meantime Ellsberg had shipped by airfreight two boxes of documents, which contained about half of the study. The chairman and his staff read through some of the materials and did not find any startling revelations that would be helpful in stopping the war. Ellsberg testified before the committee on May 13, 1970, but only spoke generally of how Congress and the public had been misled about the war. Fulbright continued trying to persuade Laird. He inserted copies of his correspondence with the Defense secretary in the *Congressional Record* and complained that once again the executive

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<sup>13</sup>Claude Pepper Diary entry , June 17, 1971, 28, Pepper papers, Series 439, Box 3.



branch had withheld information from Congress. The Arkansas senator added, “I hope that the first enterprising reporter who obtains a copy of the history will share it with the committee.” Ellsberg, having had no luck convincing other members of Congress, contacted Neil Shehan of the *New York Times* <sup>14</sup>

Fulbright and Eckhardt also played significant roles in the ensuing fight over publication of what became known as the *Pentagon Papers*. When the *Times* released the first few articles based on the study, America got a glimpse of the extent of the deception perpetrated by previous presidents on Vietnam. The President, realizing the full publication of the papers could undercut his Vietnam policies, ordered the Justice Department to file suit to stop the publication of any more of the papers. As the initial court ruled in favor of Nixon, a group of House members led by Eckhardt and Representative Abner Mikva filed a petition in U.S. district court seeking to continue publication of the articles on the grounds that members of Congress were being deprived of information on the war’s background. <sup>15</sup> Though the judge dismissed the representative’s claim, the Supreme Court eventually overturned Nixon’s lawsuit. The full publication of the papers were serialized in the *New York Times* and then made into a best-selling book. In order to avoid a congressional investigation, in August, John Stennis introduced a resolution that would commission a “nonpartisan and disinterested” study of the Vietnam War. The measure died in committee. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 684-685.

<sup>15</sup>Untitled Newspaper Article, *Washington Post*, June 18, 1971, *Eckhardt Papers*, Box 147/304.

<sup>16</sup>Downs, *A Matter of Conscience*, 134-135.

On June 22, Fulbright announced his committee would launch a full-scale investigation into the history of American involvement in Vietnam. He again requested from the administration a copy of the *Pentagon Papers*. Nixon agreed, but still wanted to keep the official records classified. The President made the decision because he knew that Fulbright already had a copy in his safe. The *Pentagon Papers* resulted in a second “victory” for the Arkansas senator. Since 1969 most of the committee requests for information from the administration had been denied because the President claimed executive privilege. Fulbright complained to strict constructionist Sam Ervin, Chairman of a Senate Judiciary subcommittee, to investigate. For a long while the North Carolina senator resisted his colleague’s request. With the attempt by the Nixon administration to circumvent the First Amendment in preventing publication of materials, and the recent efforts by hawkish colleague John Stennis to curb the President’s war powers, Ervin acquiesced to Fulbright’s request. The North Carolina senator opened up hearings of his subcommittee to hear testimony on various measures that would prevent the administration from withholding information from Congress.<sup>17</sup>

Despite many efforts, however, the Congress could not successfully pass a bill that would set a definite date of withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. Majority leader Mike Mansfield successfully passed by a 62-37 margin a nonbinding resolution attached as an amendment to the military procurement bill that called for the withdrawal of all troops within six months of the approval of the bill provided that

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<sup>17</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 250-252.

North Vietnam freed the POWs within six months. He then had to endure the further weakening of the amendment by House forces led by F. Edward Hebert in the conference committee.<sup>18</sup> The bill passed the House and the President signed it, stating that Mansfield's resolution was not administration policy and "without binding force or effect." Senators Cooper and Church sponsored an amendment to the foreign aid bill that would have prohibited the use of funds for American military forces in Indochina other than for protecting forces as they withdrew. Though the vote was close, the Senate voted to table or kill the amendment, 47-44, with all but five southerners rejecting the Cooper-Church measure. When the entire foreign aid bill came up for a vote, the Senate rejected it 41-27. In the twenty-five years of the foreign aid program, Congress had never rejected foreign aid. Stennis, Russell Long and other conservatives had voted against the program since the late 1940s or early 1950s. The doves, who wanted the money for domestic programs, supplied the margin of defeat. Others, such as Fulbright and Jennings Randolph of West Virginia also feared prolonging of the war in Cambodia and the starting of other wars. They remembered that American involvement in Vietnam began with foreign aid. For the Arkansas senator, 1971 marked his third vote in a row against foreign aid. From 1948-1967, the senator had enthusiastically supported the program. He now believed, as he explained on a *Face the Nation* television broadcast, that foreign aid only

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<sup>18</sup>Spencer Rich, "End-War Rider Still Stymied," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1971, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

enabled the United States to dominate smaller nations. Vietnam turned him away from America's brand of unilateral involvement in foreign countries.<sup>19</sup>

Though he had not become an isolationist, Fulbright viewed America's role as more limited in the world, and he decried the liberal activism that led America into Vietnam and Nixon's *Realpolitik*, which the Senator came increasingly to believe was characterized by amorality, deception, secrecy, and brute force. In a *New Yorker* article in early 1972, the Foreign Relations Chairman outlined the attitudes that resulted in the decisions for American troops to enter and to stay in Vietnam. None of the architects of the policy, he argued, "conceived of themselves as power brokers pure and simple."

Having been reared in the tenets of Wilson-Roosevelt internationalism, and having lived through the disaster of appeasement in the inter-war years, they came to regard themselves as 'tough-minded idealists,' as 'realists with vision,' and, above all, as practitioners of collective security against aggression. What the United Nations could not do the United States could and would do, with allies if possible, alone if necessary....It was up to us, if all else failed, to curb aggression, to accept whatever sacrifices had to be made in order to defend the 'free world' against the new Communist predator....Many young Americans, and some older ones, are appalled not only by the horrors of the Vietnam war but by the intellectuals who came into government in the sixties, of a permanent, purposeless struggle for power and advantage. We seem to be discovering that without a moral purpose there can be no such thing as 'advantage.'<sup>20</sup>

Nixon, however, still pressed for his own advantage against a patient enemy in Vietnam and Paris, and an increasingly hostile Congress. On January 25, 1972, he

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<sup>19</sup>CQA, 1971, 42-S, 401.

revealed that National Security Advisor Kissinger had been meeting secretly with North Vietnamese negotiators for the past two and a half years. Nixon then unveiled a new American peace proposal under which the United States would withdraw its forces six months after a cease-fire and a return of the POWs. In an added incentive, the President reported that Thieu had offered to resign one month before a new presidential election. The speech and the plan were a rousing success—even the doves could do nothing more than praise the President. John Sherman Cooper called it a “fair and just” proposal. While other doves fell in line with Cooper’s statement, Fulbright was skeptical. To the Americans, the terms seemed generous. However, the senator suggested, “We may have to do more to get a favorable response from North Vietnam.” It bothered Fulbright that the administration remained committed to the corrupt Thieu government. Now, as one of Fulbright’s advisors suggested to the senator, the North Vietnamese had to rely on the “good faith” of the Americans and South Vietnamese to make sure they got a “fair shake” in determining who controlled South Vietnam.<sup>21</sup>

Nixon followed up his statement with two other extremely popular moves. First he announced further troop withdrawals in early February, bringing the total to 139,000 American troops still left in Vietnam. Second, and most importantly, he set off on a historic trip to Communist China. With this trip, Nixon the beleaguered and unpopular militant anticommunist became Nixon the statesman, just in time for the 1972 presidential election campaign. When he returned home he briefed a number of

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<sup>20</sup>William Fulbright, “In Thrall to Fear,” *New Yorker*, Jan 8, 1972, 61-62.

<sup>21</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 693-694.

senators on his trip. Grossly exaggerating the simplicity of the Chinese leaders in order to silence his domestic critics, he told the congressional gathering, which included Fulbright, Stennis, Ellender, Hebert, Boggs, and several others, “They read everything said in the Senate and House and read the newspaper editorials and columns. They think that whenever a columnist speaks that that is the United States speaking.” Though he said “columnist,” everyone in the room knew what he really meant. To re-emphasize the point, at the end of the meeting the President stopped Fulbright and informed him that Secretary of State Rogers would be coming over to brief Fulbright personally. The president “urged” the Arkansas senator “not to ask any public questions about Vietnam or POWs because they are delicate issues and the ‘string’ could break if we get into a hassle over this issue.” The President pointed his finger at the senator and said forcefully, “Ok Bill, agreed?” Fulbright, according to the memo of the meeting “stood there in some disbelief—nodding his head.”<sup>22</sup>

The Senators were not silenced for long. In March the War Powers Act, sponsored by John Stennis and Jacob Javits of New York, passed unanimously out of the Foreign Relations Committee and onto the Senate floor for debate. The Mississippi senator again used the Vietnam example to make his argument. Stennis urged passage of the bill because it would insure that the executive “will not be tempted to risk a war which the nation will not support.” He also justified his seemingly dovish position. “I lean toward military preparedness, everybody knows

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<sup>22</sup>Memo: Clark MacGregor to Richard Nixon, Meeting with Bipartisan Congressional Leaders, January 25, 1972, 6, 8, Nixon Staff Papers, President’s Office File: Box 88, Memos Beginning January 23, 1972.

that, but that doesn't mean I have to abandon common sense and throw away this safeguard." Another southern "ex-hawk," Herman Talmadge, concurred. The decision to make war, Talmadge concluded, "is too great for one man to make, no matter how thick his hide or how broad his shoulders."<sup>23</sup>

Fulbright proposed a number of amendments, one that exemption of the Vietnam War under the act "did not imply any authority to pursue hostilities not otherwise conferred on the President by the Constitution or by law." In other words, he wanted to make sure that the act, while excluding the Vietnam conflict, did not give any new approval for Nixon to continue the war. Another Fulbright amendment to the bill would have required the President to come to Congress for approval before using nuclear weapons. The Arkansas congressman had never forgiven himself for sponsoring the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Therefore he wanted to reduce presidential power as much as possible. Florida Senator Lawton Chiles accurately responded by saying that if the Vietnam War were included in the action, there would be no possibility it would pass. Both of the Foreign Relations chairman's amendments were defeated by large margins. The bill itself won approval by a 68-18 vote, with southerners expressing their approval by a 19-6 margin.<sup>24</sup> The House, however, passed a version of the bill that removed the requirement for congressional approval for military action beyond the Senate's 30-day limitation on the executive deployment of troops. By the end of the year the conference committee still had not agreed on a final version of the bill.

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<sup>23</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 697.

Throughout the Vietnam War, Stennis and several southern hawks had frequently reminded their colleagues and constituencies that they initially had opposed the Vietnam War, but when the United States committed troops their former dissent was “water under the bridge.” Now that Nixon hoped to wind down American involvement, enough troops had gone home for them to retreat from their former almost total acquiescence to the prerogatives of the executive branch in foreign policy. They felt more comfortable in their dissent. As Robert Mann attests, it is to the great discredit of Southern Democrats that they did not redress the constitutional imbalance earlier.<sup>25</sup> It is certain that if many of the southern legislators decided to turn against the war when Fulbright did, they would have faced severe opposition from a majority of their constituents. However, in reality, though the majority of southerner hawks in the Senate, and eventually in the House, supported the War Powers Act, they by no means rejected Nixon’s handling of Vietnam. As the President once again intensified the struggle, southerner conservatives in Congress would still be Nixon’s most staunch supporters.

Fulbright’s great concern over possible loopholes in the War Powers Act came not just from the painful lessons learned from his past experience in guiding the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to passage in 1964. “There was a period when the [Nixon] administration had apparently persuaded the American people that the war was disappearing,” he remarked during the fight over his amendments to the measure, “but

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<sup>24</sup>CQA, 1972, 22-S.

<sup>25</sup>Mann, 698.



the news of the past few days leads us to a different conclusion.”<sup>26</sup> Since the beginning of the year, Nixon had intensified the bombing of North Vietnam. On April 27, 1972, in an attempt to increase public support, the President announced further troop withdrawals that reduced the number of American soldiers in Vietnam to 49,000. He refused, however, to stop the bombing until the North Vietnamese stopped their 100,000-man offensive into South Vietnam. In an appeal to the public and a backhanded slap at the Senate for supporting the War Powers Act, the President insisted that because of the massive, and, thus far, successful communist offensive “all we have risked and all that we have gained over the years now hangs in the balance.” He claimed that the “one remaining hope” among the North Vietnamese and Vietcong was “to win in the Congress of the United States and among the people of the United States the victory it could not win on the battlefield.”<sup>27</sup>

The North Vietnamese in Paris, on the other hand, believed everything had turned to their advantage with the initial success of the invasion. They felt they had an ally in the American Senate—William Fulbright. At tense secret negotiations between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese diplomat Le Duc Tho, Kissinger asserted that though the United States wanted peace it would not “negotiate at gunpoint.” There would be no need for further talks until the North Vietnamese ‘invading forces’ ended their offensive. Le Duc Tho dismissed the American diplomat’s claims and charged that Americans “and no one else have used military pressure in negotiations to impose your conditions on us.” He said it was “something natural” for the inhabitants “in both

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<sup>26</sup>CQA, 1972, 848.

zones of Vietnam” to resist American attacks. “Senator Fulbright,” he added, “has admitted to this fact.” When Kissinger refused to discuss U.S. affairs, Le Duc Tho quoted the Arkansas senator’s April 8 statement that the North Vietnamese offensive served as a “natural response” to the American policy of undermining the 1954 Geneva agreements. “I’m giving you an example to prove that Americans share our views,” he replied.<sup>28</sup> Though the necessity of American involvement in Vietnam can be reasonably questioned, there is no doubt that the claims of hawks of the South and all other regions were justified—the American antiwar movement encouraged the North Vietnamese and Vietcong leaders to continue the fight. As a chief congressional leader of the movement, Fulbright shares part of the responsibility for the continued determination of the Vietnamese communists to continue the struggle. It must be added, however, it is exceedingly doubtful that the dissent Fulbright, Gore, and Cooper mounted against American Vietnam policies provided the deciding factor in the war. They had been fighting since 1946. Though they used Fulbright’s arguments, North Vietnamese resilience could not be fully attributed to others.

In early May, Stennis, after a series of North Vietnamese military victories in the offensive, warned of a possible military disaster. He described the military situation in Vietnam as a “crisis.” The Armed Forces chairman, who had in 1967 lobbied hard for the unleashing of the destructive power of the Air Force in bringing

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<sup>27</sup>“Statement on Invasion, 4/27/72,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1972, 1.

<sup>28</sup>Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 127-128.

about an end to the war, hinted that even an increase in American bombing would not stop the enemy. “It is up to the South Vietnamese,” he concluded.<sup>29</sup>

Nixon thought otherwise. On May 8, 1972 the President announced the military move that southern hawks had been advocating for a number of years. He had ordered the mining of all North Vietnamese ports, including Haiphong harbor, and had greatly intensified the bombing. Clearly the President, as he expressed in a memo to Kissinger the next day, had decided to “go for broke.” Nixon briefed several members of Congress before he spoke to the nation. After he left Admiral Thomas Moorer spoke to the legislators on the military situation. Mansfield and Fulbright both protested. The Arkansas senator agreed with the Majority leader that the move constituted “an enlargement of the war.” He also questioned the legality of the action since the Gulf of Tonkin resolution had been repealed. Nevertheless, both legislators could do nothing to stop Nixon. The next day Fulbright introduced a resolution in the Senate Democratic caucus, which disapproved of the latest escalation, which they overwhelmingly adopted.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, a significant number of southern hawks, including Stennis, Thurmond, Tower, and Long, and Hebert approved of the action. They had proposed mining Haiphong harbor since 1966.

The doves, however, had gained supporters. As American ground troops continually withdrew while the bombing of North Vietnam precipitously increased, the Senate finally passed an end-the-war amendment. Kentucky Senator John Sherman

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<sup>29</sup>“Stennis Thinks Hue Saigon Defense Key,” *Clarion Ledger*, May 8, 1972, Stennis Collection, Vertical File. See also Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1470.

<sup>30</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 699-701.

Cooper offered a floor substitute of a Mansfield amendment to the foreign aid bill that would cut off funds for Indochina in four months after its enactment without conditions except for the withdrawal of American forces. The senator anticipated arguments on whether he should include as part of the amendment a release of the POWs as a condition for troop withdrawal. Cooper had proposed such qualified amendments before, but this time he did not feel it necessary to do so. "If negotiations are not successful," he asserted, "I see no hope of the release of our prisoners except by the withdrawal of our forces. I think it reasonable to believe that, as has occurred in past wars, our prisoners will be released."

Cooper had finally come to the conclusion that American troops should not continue to die while the administration sought a political solution with a seemingly intransigent enemy. He insisted that the amendment, because it did not depend on North Vietnam to meet any conditions before Americans could withdraw troops, offered the only alternative to negotiations as a way to end the war. "We have come to the critical time," he declared, "when a fundamental question concerning U.S. participation in the war must be squarely faced and voted upon. It is the question of whether we shall support amendments...whose conditions actually prescribe continued U.S. participation in the war." When Senator Edward Brooke successfully added an amendment to Cooper's amendment that conditioned the fund cut on the POW release, the Kentucky senator vowed to vote against his own measure, which he did. Despite his opposition, the measure passed on July 24 by a 50-45 vote. The Senate, however, rejected the entire foreign aid bill. Fulbright and other doves, save Frank Church of Idaho, saw outright rejection of the bill as a more practical solution to

withhold funds for additional Vietnam action than attempting to get an “end-the-war” amendment through a more hawkish House. Surprisingly, after the Senate rejected the foreign aid bill, the House Foreign Affairs committee adopted for the first time an amendment similar to Mansfield’s original amendment. The vote was 18-17 along party lines. Southern Foreign Affairs committee members, however, remained committed to the President except for Dante Fascell of Florida. Fascell, already one of the chief forces involved in drafting the House version of the War Powers Act, would later help aid its final passage in 1973.<sup>31</sup>

Though Kissinger and other members of the administration had yet to face a legislative action that would tie their hands, they knew that time was running out. At the same time, Nixon’s approval rating skyrocketed because of troop withdrawals, the popularity of the bombing that, in part aided in the stalling of the North Vietnamese offensive, and the disastrous presidential campaign of Democratic nominee George McGovern. As the election drew near, the peace talks intensified, and a deal seemed in the offing.

On October 8, the North Vietnamese representative proposed a standstill cease-fire with a complete withdrawal of American forces with sixty days followed by the return of the POWs. South Vietnamese President Thieu would stay in power, but would have to recognize the National Liberation Front as an “administrative entity.” Further, communist troops would remain in Vietnam, but could not be reinforced. The Vietnamese would negotiate the political settlement later. Kissinger applauded the proposal and accepted it three days later, even though on all accounts it would

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<sup>31</sup>CR., 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., July 24, 1972, 5782. See also CQA, 464-465, 469.

have ensure Thieu's downfall. The South Vietnamese president, realizing this, rejected the agreement. While Kissinger announced to the public, "Peace is at hand," Thieu insisted on sixty-nine modifications to the agreement. Throughout November, Nixon and Kissinger tried to pressure Thieu into supporting the negotiated settlement.<sup>32</sup>

When Nguyen Phu Duc, Thieu's special assistant for foreign affairs, arrived in Washington in late November to discuss the situation with Nixon, the President warned him that he could not restrain congressional action if Thieu would not go along with the peace agreement. Nixon told Duc that he learned from friendly members of Congress, including Stennis, that if Thieu stood as the only obstacle to peace, Congress would vote to cut off military and economic aid to South Vietnam when they reconvened in January, 1973. While Duc and the South Vietnamese President set up obstacles that might scuttle the agreement, the North Vietnamese, having launched a costly last-minute offensive in anticipation of the cease-fire, grew angry at the delay. In mid-December they walked out of the talks. Nguyen Van Thieu, the spoiler of the 1968 peace negotiations, had struck again.<sup>33</sup>

The communists thought it had the advantage because Kissinger's public announcement had embarrassed the President in the wake of Thieu's intransigence and mounting congressional discontent. In a sense, they miscalculated. As Kissinger later observed, "Nixon was never more dangerous than when he seemed to run out of options." Facing almost a certain rebuff by Congress when they reconvened, the

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<sup>32</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 708-711.

President ordered the most intensive bombing campaign of the war. For twelve days starting December 18, 1972, American planes flew three thousand missions and dropped as much as 40,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam. By one account, Hanoi and Haiphong were reduced to a “mass of rubble.” In the raids, Americans lost twenty-six aircraft.<sup>34</sup>

A considerable number of southerners opposed Nixon’s “Christmas” bombing. Several senators, including Harry Byrd, Jr., Robert Byrd, John Sparkman, Sam Ervin, Howard Baker, Bennett Johnston of Louisiana and Marlow Cook of Kentucky reported constituent mail running heavily against the President’s action.<sup>35</sup> Congress reacted angrily. The Democratic caucuses of both Houses voted to end appropriations for the war after the troops withdrew and the POWs were released. On January 2, 1973, Fulbright convened the Foreign Relations committee to formulate legislation that would cut off funds for the war. He told reporters that if a settlement was not reached by the January 20, “it is our intention to employ legislative power to bring the war to a close.”<sup>36</sup>

On January 8, the North Vietnamese returned to the talks. They quickly came to an agreement. Nixon, since 1969 Thieu’s protector, finally lost patience with the South Vietnamese leader who in part helped insure his 1968 election as President. He wrote a letter threatening Thieu that if he refused to sign a peace agreement “I shall

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<sup>33</sup>Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 199-201. See also Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 711.

<sup>34</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 712. See also Downs, “A Matter of Conscience,” 144.

<sup>35</sup>Spencer Rich, “Senators’ Mail Runs Heavily Anti-Bombing,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 1973, 12, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

have to explain publicly that your Government obstructs peace. The result will be inevitable and immediate termination of U.S. economic aid which cannot be forestalled by a change of personnel in your government.”<sup>37</sup> On January 18, administration supporters Stennis and Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, described in a *New York Times* article as “two of the Saigon government’s strongest supporters in the United States Senate” and as legislators who maintained “close contacts with the Pentagon and the White House,” publicly stated that the South Vietnamese government would lose support in the United States if they tried to block a settlement of the war. Kissinger admitted in his memoirs what most already knew—the administration had asked the two senators to make statements that would pressure the South Vietnamese leader. Thieu gave in. On January 23, 1973, Richard Nixon announced to the national television audience that had initialed the agreement “to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.”<sup>38</sup>

Southerners in Congress shared the relief and excitement over Nixon’s historic announcement. Harry Byrd, Jr. commended the President and his National Security Advisor for their “patience and diligence” in handling “a very difficult and delicate matter.” Robert Byrd credited Nixon for not abandoning South Vietnam. John Tower sounded a stridently cold-warrior stance in his praise of Nixon for negotiating a peace that not only would “preserve a climate of self determination” in Indochina, but would

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<sup>36</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 267.

<sup>37</sup>Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 713n.

<sup>38</sup>David E. Rosenbaum, “Goldwater and Stennis Tell Saigon Not to Balk,” *New York Times*, January 19, 1973, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.



also “preserve the credibility of the United States at a deterrent to aggression.”

Speaker of the House Carl Albert of Oklahoma, added his congratulations to the President, but also expressed sorrow that Lyndon Johnson, who, ironically, died the day before Nixon announced peace in Vietnam, did not live long enough to see it.<sup>39</sup>

Stennis lavished praise on the President for “toughing it out.” He foresaw, however, “a potential trouble spot “ because North Vietnamese troops remained in South Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> Claude Pepper agreed. Though he applauded the peace he had accurately predicted in December that the communists would take over the South “within two or three years thereabouts.”<sup>41</sup> Fulbright called Nixon to congratulate him on the peace treaty but was more guarded with reporters. “It is inevitable,” he said, that many difficulties will arise out of the liquidation of this long and costly struggle.” Nevertheless the Arkansas senator asserted his readiness to begin “a new era of cooperation” with the administration.<sup>42</sup>

Nixon had no intention of letting his political “enemies” off easily. His “victory” against the doves had only made him increasingly bitter and determined to punish them. He instructed Kissinger in his dealings with Congress to “give no quarter

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<sup>39</sup>Memorandum: William Timmons to H.R. Haldeman, January 23, 1973, Nixon Staff Papers, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Box 178. For Tower’s quote see Press Release, January 23, 1973, Tower papers, Box 25.

<sup>40</sup>David S. Broder, “Critics of War Join in Hailing Peace Accord,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 1973, Stennis collection, vertical file.

<sup>41</sup>Claude Pepper Diary entry, December 12, 1972, 69, Pepper Collection, Series 429, Box 4.

<sup>42</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 268.

to the doves.” Nixon wanted to further publicize his contention that the House and Senate Democratic caucuses “prolonged the war” by pledging themselves to set a date of withdrawal from Vietnam. “The simple point must be made” one administration memo stressed, “that out opponents in Congress wanted to end the war with dishonor and...an abject surrender and defeat for the United States. We persisted in seeing it through until the war was ended with honor.”<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, Nixon ordered William Timmons, the administration’s congressional relations coordinator, to compile lists of loyalists in voting on Vietnam measures. Timmons and his subordinates were to contact each House and Senate member who backed the president’s Vietnam policy and thank them for their support. In addition, in a February 5, 1973 memo, Timmons, on orders from Nixon, instructed his staff to find various ways to reward administration loyalists in Vietnam, including “social events, correspondence, patronage, notification of contract awards, and other forms of cooperation.” On the other hand, opponents would get the “cold treatment by executive departments and agencies and the White House.” The Senate supporters lists included Democrats James Allen and John Sparkman of Alabama, James Eastland and John Stennis of Mississippi, Russell Long and J. Bennett Johnston of Louisiana, Sam Ervin of North Carolina, John McClellan of Arkansas, newcomer Sam Nunn of Georgia, and, in an apparent oversight considering their recent support of “end-the-war” amendments, Herman Talmadge of Georgia and Harry Byrd, Jr. of Virginia. Southern Senate Republicans included Howard Baker and William Brock of

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<sup>43</sup>Memorandum, William Timmons to H.R. Haldeman, January 23, 1973, Nixon Staff Papers, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman, Box 178.

Tennessee, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and John Tower of Texas. The House lists included over fifty southerners, with an increasing number of them Republicans.<sup>44</sup>

There is no direct evidence to suggest Nixon rewarded his southern congressional allies. However, the main reason most likely was Nixon's rapid fall from grace. A few short months after Nixon's historic announcement ending the war, his power to reward his supporters waned with the damning revelations coming from Senator Sam Ervin's Watergate Investigating Subcommittee. No better reflection of this decline could be found than the President's trip to Meridian, Mississippi, to a Naval Air Station to dedicate a training facility in honor of the closest Nixon loyalist, Senator John Stennis. Stennis accompanied Nixon on Air Force One. It had been rumored that H.R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, two of Nixon's closest advisors, would be resigning in the wake of their implication in the scandal. As Stennis, Nixon, the two advisors, several others, and a contingent of press flew to Mississippi, White House staffer John Andrews reported "an oppressive feeling" among the President's "men." Stennis walked into the staff area several times, and Andrews commented that he looked "incredibly hale and spry" for a man who was still recovering from near-fatal gunshot wounds as a result of an attempted robbery a few weeks before. Nixon's wife Pat held hands with Stennis's wife Coy as they made their way through the compartment—Andrews recalled this later when Stennis spoke at the ceremony, reminding the audience of his family's twenty-five-year friendship with "Miss Pat."

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<sup>44</sup>Memorandum: William E. Timmons to Richard Nixon, February 5, 1973. Nixon Staff Papers, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman, Box 178.

At the dedication ceremony, Andrews related, Stennis “looked and sounded the very archetype of the old-time Southern Senator.” He spoke glowingly about Nixon’s special relationship with the South. “Mr. President, we admire you for the worker you are,” he said. In a reference to both his past accomplishments and his present difficulties, Stennis tried to comfort the President: “You worked your way up against adversity and you do not panic when things go the wrong way, or when the going gets rough. You know what it is to tough it out.” Stennis said that Mississippians, who gave the President seventy-eight percent of the vote in the 1972 election, “admire that quality because we have had to tough it out a lot.” Turning to two recently released POWs in the audience, the Mississippi senator praised their courage and suggested that were it not for the efforts of a “courageous and unyielding President you would still be in prison.” For Nixon, who had heard nothing in recent weeks but charges of scandal, the words of the Mississippi senator, one reporter commented, “ must have been particularly sweet.”<sup>45</sup>

The weakening of Richard Nixon’s presidency in the wake of the Watergate scandal made it possible for Congress to pass two more measures related to the Vietnam War. In late March 1973 Fulbright heard of reports that American planes were still carrying out bombing missions in Cambodia. At this point all American ground troops had withdrawn from Vietnam. On the Senate floor Fulbright wondered where Nixon got the authority to bomb, given that there were no troops to protect, and no public commitment to the Cambodian government. “Does the President

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<sup>45</sup>Memorandum: John Andrews to Richard Nixon, “Trip to Meridian Mississippi, April 27, 1973,” Nixon Staff Papers: President’s Office Files, Box 91.

assert—as Kings of old—that as Commander-in-Chief he can order forces anywhere for any purpose that suits him?”<sup>46</sup> When a bill passed both houses of Congress that contained a provision immediately cutting all funds for American combat activities in Cambodia and Laos, Nixon vetoed it. Fulbright, who had mended fences with Henry Kissinger, introduced a compromise measure that would stop all bombing by August 15. Fulbright angered many doves, particularly Church and Mansfield, who wanted the bombing stopped immediately. The doves supplied a number of the no votes in the Senate. However, only two southerners voted against the measure. In a similar bill in the House, southerners voted 100-16 for the bill. The dissenters included Pepper and Fassel of Florida and Eckhardt of Texas.<sup>47</sup>

The second bill, the final passage on November 6, 1973 over Nixon’s veto of the War Powers Act, did not directly relate to Vietnam, but passed largely because of what many perceived to be executive usurpation of warmaking powers. The bill, though it maintained the power of the President to send U.S. troops into combat, required that within sixty days of the deployment, the executive had to secure approval from Congress in order to keep them there. By November, Nixon had been severely weakened because of Watergate. Stennis, who was still recovering from his wounds when the Senate debated the original bill, sent a message to the Congress in support of the final version. “It is of the utmost importance to the future of this nation,” Stennis wrote, “that we do not again slip gradually into a war that does not have the moral

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<sup>46</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Policy*, 270.

<sup>47</sup>CQA, 1973, 41-S, 70-71\_H.

support and sanction of the American people.<sup>48</sup> Southerners in both houses supported the override by large margins, voting 21-6 in the House and 65-33 in the Senate to help pass the bill over Nixon's veto. Southern opponents mainly included archconservatives.<sup>49</sup> One exception, however, was Texas Representative Eckhardt who had fought for a bill to further restrict the president's power to make war.<sup>50</sup> Though Fulbright voted for the bill, he agreed with Eckhardt. He believed that its stipulation giving forty-eight hours to the executive to inform Congress and also granting the President the power to deploy the troops for sixty days before gaining congressional approval gave far too much leeway to the executive. He would have preferred making the President get approval before he sent troops into another country. He learned from Vietnam that once American troops are committed, it is difficult to withdraw them.<sup>51</sup> Fulbright again proved prescient, for although presidents have asked for congressional approval for some deployments, they have generally ignored the War Powers Act. Had he not been so weakened by Watergate, Nixon's veto might not have been overridden.

For over four years, Richard Nixon, with significant assistance from conservative southern members of Congress, implemented a confused, vindictive, and ultimately failed American policy in Vietnam. The peace settlement in January 1973

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<sup>48</sup>Downs, "A Matter of Conscience," 150.

<sup>49</sup>CQA, 130-H, 76-S.

<sup>50</sup>"Alternative to the War Powers Resolution," Extension of Remarks, Robert Eckhardt July 17, 1973, Eckhardt Papers, Box 3M16.

<sup>51</sup>Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 276.

looked very similar to what negotiators had in principal agreed to in late 1968. One main difference was that North Vietnam now had the military advantage and would take over the South, as Representative Claude Pepper predicted, in just over two years. Placated by the President's racial policies and his emphasis on a strong military, influential conservative southern legislators voted for increased defense spending, and against, often decisively, most measures to set an ending date for the war. After 1970, southern hawks only had two influential senators from their region that opposed them. However, war weariness, and the President's various attempts to escalate the conflict, turned some southern hawks into "ex-hawks." Nevertheless, Stennis and other "true believers" still managed to hold off the forces wanting to legislate an end to the war. In the end, most legislators from the South realized that they had played a large part in making the war possible. Consequently they were generally unified in their efforts to clear up the congressional ambiguity regarding the power to make war. Southern conservative members of Congress cannot take all the credit for the War Powers Act, nor could they take all the blame for starting or prolonging the war. However, the influence of Russell, Stennis, Rivers, and Hebert, on military committees made them the "opinion leaders" among conservatives of both parties on foreign policy issues. And their emphasis on honor and military preparedness led the executive branch into thinking of solving foreign policy problems militarily.

Conversely, Fulbright, Gore, Cooper, Eckhardt, Pepper, Fascell, and a few others cannot claim total "credit" for applying the brakes to a President who seemed capable of anything in an effort not to be the first commander-in-chief to lose a war. However, they also served as opinion leaders of like-minded legislators who grew tired

of the excesses and mistaken applications of the policy of containment. However, in the case of Gore and Cooper, they did not go as far as Mark Hatfield or George McGovern in their dissent. In the case of the southern House doves, their influence cannot be compared to their senate counterparts—theirs was a much more of a “guerrilla war” for peace. Aided by several liberal northeasterners and westerners, they challenged the entrenched hawkish establishment of the House. While Southern House doves had less to do with reigning in the more militant impulses of Nixon than the antiwar southern Senate leaders, their presence again played a part in the accelerated troop withdrawals that hastened a peace agreement. By all indications in January, 1973 the House would have joined their senate colleagues to vote to cut off funding for Vietnam had the administration not been able to convince Thieu to sign the peace treaty.

It is important to note that all of the chief southern dissenters to American Vietnam War policy came from the peripheral South—Arkansas, Kentucky, Texas, and Florida. The Deep South maintained its commitment to a strong military and to the strategy of containment. Its citizens and congressional representatives applauded Nixon’s moves to increase the bombing and to mine the port of Haiphong. Some of them, as evidenced by the dissent of Georgia representatives over the draft extension, grew tired of the war and wanted the President to end it. Some dissented, as Georgian Representative Jack Brinkley observed, because the United States should withdraw from Vietnam if it did not want to “go for a win.” Most however, did not support amendments to end the war, believing as Stennis did that he could not justify telling



the troops already engaged to continue fighting while the United States ran up “the flag of surrender.”

Though the majority of southerners leaned towards the hawkish side, its senators and representative in Washington did not speak as one when considering Nixon’s Vietnam policies. Only when deciding the relationship between the executive and legislative branch did an overwhelming majority of the South’s senators and representatives act in a unified fashion. Because the flag or the troops were no longer committed, southerners could now openly question the wisdom of the decision to allow the executive to make war in Vietnam in order to prevent future “Vietnams.” At work to unify southerners were the traditionally southern concern over a more strict interpretation of the Constitution, that had reached a fevered pitch with the successful passage of the Civil and Voting Rights acts. Just as white southerners objected to the efforts of an activist government to reduce the power of the legislative branch in domestic affairs, they feared executive power unrestrained by Congress in foreign policy matters could result in another undeclared and unpopular war. Nixon made the war his own, but the revelations of the My Lai massacre, the Pentagon Papers, and the frustration of the Cambodia and Laos involvement convinced an increasing number of southerners that the war should end as quickly as possible. In Congress, all but the “true believers” stood ready to vote against continuing the war in January 1973. The group did not include the most prominent southern Nixon supporter in the Senate, John Stennis. Though he worked hard to pass the War Powers Act, Stennis remained devoted to Nixon long after the last troops left Vietnam.

## CONCLUSION

The decline of President Nixon's authority also coincided with the beginnings of the decline of power of Southern Democrats in Congress. In many ways, the powerful southerners on the Appropriations and Armed Services committees had enabled Presidents to make fateful decisions on starting and continuing American involvement in Vietnam. Because of America's torturous, deadly, and ultimately unsuccessful military intervention, Stennis found it exceedingly difficult to shepherd Defense spending bills through Congress. There were several other indications of the decline of southern control. A few years earlier, Russell Long had been defeated as majority whip by Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. In addition two powerful "institutions" of the Senate, Allen Ellender and Richard Russell, had died. By 1974, the bloc of Southern Democrats had shrunk to sixteen, which marked a significant decline from the high of twenty-six twenty-five years before. Republicans had captured the ten seats. Southern Democrats still controlled the four major committees, Armed Services, Foreign Relations, Appropriations, and Finance and four others out of the seventeen standing committees. However, the Democratic Party in Congress had been increasingly controlled by northerners, who changed the Senate rules to force committee chairs to stand for re-election every two years. In 1974 the "young Turks" in the House attacked the entrenched seniority system, which resulted in the ousting of Armed Services Chairman F. Edward Hebert of Louisiana.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Spencer Rich, "South Rule On Senate Units Fades, *Washington Post*, July 12, 1974, Stennis Collection, Vertical Files.

On the other side of the Vietnam question, those members of Congress representing the South who fought the hardest against America's involvement in Vietnam were all out of office by the end of 1974. Gore lost his re-election bid in 1970, and seventy-two-year-old John Sherman Cooper, one of the last of the "Liberal Republicans," retired in 1972. Fulbright held on until the end of his term in 1974. The sixty-five-year-old Senator, badly out of touch with his conservative constituents, lost to popular Democrat Dale Bumpers. Ironically, Fulbright attributed his loss in part to the Watergate scandal. Though the senator could never have been accused of being associated with the President, the "anti-Washington" feeling among voters lent some credibility to the charge that he was more concerned with events in Washington and the world than in his own state. Fulbright did not help his chances. The previous six years the senator had only made thirty public appearances in Arkansas. He seemed completely disconnected from his constituents. As one of them wrote, "We were undecided for awhile until the Senator started his arrogant and most holier than thou attitude and thinking he was indispensable."<sup>53</sup> While the war raged, Fulbright's intellectual power and questioning nature made some Arkansans proud. After the war was over, Nixon resigned, and the economy worsened. Arkansans and other Americans wanted to concern themselves more with parochial and local matters rather than arcane questions of foreign policy. Therefore, William Fulbright, the senator who championed internationalism in the 1940s and 1950s, enabled American unilateral

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<sup>53</sup>Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1976, 94.

intervention in Vietnam in 1964, and then doggedly fought to end it, now was seen as irrelevant by the people of his home state.

As the power shifted in Congress, the final votes on aid to Vietnam were taken in 1974 and 1975. The program had not been discontinued with the peace agreement, and the South Vietnamese requests for aid grew more desperate as the North Vietnamese made their final assaults on Saigon. Nixon had secretly promised Thieu that he would continue to protect the country against North Vietnamese attacks, but Congress would not agree to resumption of military activity or bombing. Therefore, Nixon ordered nine-thousand “former” American troops to leave military service in order to be assigned to “assist” the South Vietnamese government. Despite Nixon’s maneuverings, in the last months of his presidency, Congress would not grant his request for additional money for South Vietnam in mid-1974. Stennis, sounding the clarion call of American honor and duty, again led the fight for Nixon. “We came out of there with our flags flying,” he complained on the Senate floor. “I’m not willing to turn my back on American soldiers killed or wounded in Vietnam.” Stennis enumerated the reasons for additional aid, repeating that America had an “obligation to an ally” and that the funds served as a “part of the process of getting out as fast as we reasonably can.” Senator Edward Kennedy spoke for a majority of the Congress in responding to Stennis. “How long are we going to hear that argument,” he said. “We have heard it long enough.” The bill failed by a vote of 43 to 38, with most southerners supporting the President. A year later some southern legislators no longer felt the need to fund a terminally unreliable South Vietnamese ally. On April 18, 1975, as the communists began their final push into the South Vietnamese capital,

the Senate Armed Services Committee rejected by a vote of 8 to 7 additional aid requested by President Gerald Ford for South Vietnam. The vote marked, according to *New York Times* reporter David Rosenbaum, “one of the few times in years that the chairman had lost a vote in his committee on an important issue. Four southerners, Stennis, Thurmond, Tower and Dewey Bartlett of Oklahoma voted for military aid. Harry Byrd, Jr., and newcomers Sam Nunn of Georgia and Republican William Lloyd Scott of Virginia, voted against the aid. According to Rosenbaum, the margin of defeat was provided by Scott, for whom the Nixon administration had campaigned enthusiastically in 1972. Given the deteriorating situation in Vietnam, Scott reasoned, “I think we would just be wasting money.”<sup>54</sup>

A few days later, after Thieu resigned and Americans and many South Vietnamese in Saigon hurriedly made arrangements to leave, President Ford asked Congress for humanitarian assistance for the South Vietnamese and evacuation programs for Americans. The Senate voted overwhelmingly for the aid, 75 to 17, with only three southerners dissenting. The House, after a contentious debate, passed the measure by a vote of 230 to 187. Southerners voted for the measure by a 83 to 37 margin.<sup>55</sup> Amid the confusion of seven thousand fleeing Americans along with tens of thousands of South Vietnamese, including Nguyen Van Thieu, Saigon fell on April 30, 1975.

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<sup>54</sup>John Finney, “Senate Kills Aid,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1974, 1. See also David Rosenbaum, “Senate Bars Aid,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1975, 1, and Specer L. Lyons and Spencer Rich, “Viet Arms Aid Dealt In Senate Unit,” *Washington Post*, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

<sup>55</sup>CQA, 1975, 38H-39-H, 22-S.

As Congress conducted the final debate over aid to South Vietnam, southern hawks in Washington assessed the lessons they believed America should have learned from the Vietnam War. They all realized that the failure of American military power would bring greater congressional scrutiny of future Pentagon requests. House Appropriations Chair George Mahon of Texas acknowledged a call by some legislators to substitute American economic power for military power when aiding allies in nations threatened by communism. Mahon did not agree, however. The Texan used his position to pass relatively small cuts in military spending in order to prevent other senators from further slashing the Pentagon budget. To Mahon, American military power had to be maintained in order for the country to regain its prestige. John McClellan of Arkansas concurred with the Texas senator, and expressed opinions on several issues regarding Vietnam that most in his region would share. While rejecting all economic and technical aid programs, he asserted that the United States must remain “second to none” militarily. America, however should never again enter into a war “unless we intend to win it” and must be “far more selective” in choosing where to fight communism. Stennis repeated his colleagues’ call for maintaining a strong military and for being “more careful in using our military strength.” America, Stennis declared, had miscalculated in Vietnam because it never accurately measured “the will and the capacity of those we proposed to help.” In the future, “we’re not going to help anyone very much unless they’re willing to fight with everything they have to the bitter end.” Though Mahon, McClellan, and Stennis had learned the inadvisability of applying the strategy of containment in every country threatened by communism, their conclusions had challenged no assumptions of why America

intervened in the first place. To southern hawks, the war, essentially, had only been a mistake of judgment and tactics, not ideology. Even 58,000 American dead in Vietnam and a embarrassing loss could not shake their belief in the strategy of containment or convince them to avoid military solutions to fight communism. American honor, though bruised, had been preserved.<sup>56</sup>

The road had been long. At every step of the way while most southerners had expressed hawkish sentiments, enough prominent dissenters from this worldview existed to refute any claims of a “solid South” on American involvement in Vietnam. Since World War II, Southern Democrats had dominated foreign policy efforts in Congress. They fiercely upheld the flag and the honor of America during the war, and their sense of duty to create a new international order continued as the region’s members of Congress voted for William Fulbright’s 1943 motion supporting the creation of the United Nations as well as the first commitment of military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey. Even at that point, however, the region produced dissenters, such as Harry Byrd, Sr. to the high cost of internationalism. Senator Claude Pepper also assailed the unilateralist policy of containment as militaristic, but from a position of liberal internationalism. Although Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Tom Connally tried to fend off the vicious attacks from the China lobby which included some conservative southern Democrats, recriminations over the fall of China forced the Texas senator to appease them. The Texas senator steered through

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<sup>56</sup>See George C. Wilson, “Fallout From Vietnam, *Washington Post*, April 21, 1975, and Ed Issa, “Stennis Talks of Vietnam, Mideast,” *Delta Times Democrat*, May 4, 1975, Stennis Collection, Vertical File.

Congress a provision of a military aid bill which included a provision that President Truman used to extend the first direct aid to Indochina.

Most southerners in Congress opposed most foreign economic and technical aid from 1949 onward, but faithfully voted for increases in military spending and assistance. Though some such as John Stennis and Richard Russell, opposed American intervention in the region in Indochina 1954, southerners would support America taking the place of France as the protector of the region. Throughout, however, some of the dissenting voices in Congress came from southerners. Stennis, Russell, Fulbright, and Johnson criticized Eisenhower's Indochina policies, but in the end acquiesced to them because of the tradition of deference to authority, and because they had no viable alternatives save a "dishonorable" disengagement. With the onset of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the United States, enabled in part by powerful southern legislators, gradually descended into the quagmire of Vietnam. Nevertheless, some of the South's most influential senators served as key leaders in the congressional antiwar movement. With the election of Richard Nixon, southern hawks served as the California Republican's strongest supporters in Congress. However, prominent southern dissent continued and increased and forced Nixon and Kissinger to redouble their efforts to secure "peace with honor."

After the war ended, both southern Democratic dissenters and a significant number of hawkish supporters were no longer in Congress. Republicans now made significant inroads in the South. While the chief reason for Republican electoral and presidential success in the South remains Johnson's championing of the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam played a part. Southerners who decried judicial and legislative



activism in civil rights and social issues also lamented the activism in foreign policy that resulted in over-commitment of American military and financial resources throughout the world. Southerners were among the first to reject foreign aid programs. The attitude also explains the reluctance of Stennis and Richard Russell to initially support the United States in Vietnam. The South, however, for financial and traditional reasons, continued their support of the military and a strong defense. Stennis, Russell, Talmadge, Rivers, Hebert, and several others appealed to the sensibilities of a majority in the South when they expressed their impatience with the concept of limited war. Once America “showed the flag” in Korea and Vietnam, the southern leaders wanted to go for victory. As the emphasis on a military posture became increasingly unfashionable in the Democratic party of the mid-to-late 1970s many whites in the South suggested that they had not left their party—their party had left them. As the congressional hawks died or retired, Republicans, who made no bones about their support of military spending and their disdain for social programs, won in the South. The remaining Democrats had to either adapt somewhat to a new multi-racial Democratic Party coalition while facing increasingly successful challenges from conservative Republicans.

At the same time, the small yet strong contingent of southerners led, by William Fulbright, who wanted to lessen American military commitments and move beyond the policy of containment, fell out of favor in the South and were now gone—their dissident and strident voices no longer heard against the popular chorus of southern hawks. In 1970, the man who was Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee longer than anyone in history revealed that his greatest fear was

that “if we make too big a mess of things we’ll have a right-wing takeover here.”<sup>57</sup> Without his abrasive, dissenting, and questioning character, southerners increasingly followed the “prevailing wisdom” of the necessity of massive defense budgets and a continued, though smaller-scale, policy of unilateral military involvement. Just as white southerners had after the Civil War, most from the region expressed Arkansan John McClellan’s view that America’s involvement in Vietnam, as a noble and honorable cause that was, ultimately, winnable. They laid the blame for losing the war on Texan Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, the civilian leaders who did not allow the military to win. Because southerners remembered America’s involvement in Vietnam unapologetically as a “noble cause” emanating from the strategy of containment, they avoided what one writer described as the “self-flagellation that became almost a national pastime as the United States backed out of Vietnam.”<sup>58</sup> The new generation of foreign policy “true believers” in the South, those championing military preparedness and strong anticommunism, with a renewed commitment to preserve American honor, would increasingly fall under the Republican banner. And, ironically, the “Solid South” under Republicanism would be even more cohesive than its Democratic predecessors.

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<sup>57</sup>Elizabeth Wharton, “Right-wing Takeover Is Fulbright’s Greatest Fear,” *Arkansas Gazette*, April 19, 1970, 4A.

<sup>58</sup>Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 292-293.

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## **VITA**

Mark David Carson was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. He received his bachelor's degree in accounting from Loyola University in 1985. He earned a master's degree in history at the University of New Orleans in 1993. He is married with one child, and lives in Jefferson, Louisiana. He will receive the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the May 2003 Commencement.