were an election in Vietnam today, how would Diem come out?” Nothing turned to Trueheart for the answer. “I’m not sure that’s a meaningful question,” Trueheart answered, “because I honestly think that if you really were out in the boondocks of this country, I’m not sure that half the people know who Diem is, if you really mean the peasants.” Clearly annoyed by Trueheart’s answer, Mansfield said, “Well, I don’t take that. Diem has been here from this country for a long time.”

As he arrived in Saigon, Mansfield still firmly believed in Diem. He believed in the basic integrity and leadership of his old friend—a man in whom he had invested much hope and trust over the years. Following Diem’s leadership, he thought, remained South Vietnam’s only route to victory. Mansfield may have questioned Diem’s tactics, but never his honesty. Sometimes he doubted his wisdom, but never his patriotism. Yet, what he would see on this visit to Vietnam would completely change his opinion of Diem—and almost completely shatter his confidence in the South Vietnamese government.

During their first meeting, Diem staged a two-and-a-half-hour filibuster about the strategic hamlet program. Frustrated, Mansfield merely sat and listened. “There was primarily no opportunity to ask questions on other matters,” he later complained. But what most bothered Mansfield was the physical change he saw in Diem. “He seemed to be faltering in speech and not at all certain about what he was saying,” recalled Francis Viole, who observed the discussion. Mansfield recalled that the Diem he once knew as outgoing and energetic now seemed to have turned into a recluse. . . . He was very withdrawn, very secluded. He wasn’t the Diem I knew, so the only conclusion I could come to—and it was at best a guess, an estimate—was that he had fallen under the influence of his brother and his wife, and they were taking over control. . . . I think he was gradually being cut off from reality.”

Mansfield’s next conversation with Diem came during an official dinner hosted by the South Vietnamese leader. On this occasion, however, Mansfield found himself talking more with an agitated and “quite aggressive” Madame Nhu, who upbraided him for his Michigan State speech. “We can see the light at the end of the tunnel,” Harkins was just as encouraging, telling Mansfield that the U.S. efforts in Vietnam were “now beginning to pay off.” The months to come, he predicted, would bring a “rational improvement on the military side.” He insisted that he was “definitely encouraged” with the progress made and with “prospects for the future.”

The briefing’s only discordant note came from Nolting’s deputy, William Trueheart, Diem’s government, he reported, “could be considered an essentially a dictatorship.” When Pell asked Nolting, “If there
population would be living in strategic hamlets by year’s end. Nhu’s vision for the program, however, seemed to center on an unusual philosophy of government that, as he explained to Mansfield, involved using the forces of “authoritarianism and democracy to combat underdevelopment.” The strategic hamlets, he claimed, would be the testing ground for his theory. Mansfield and Nolting pressed Nhu to give American reporters more latitude and freedom.

By the time Mansfield arrived at a Saigon restaurant for a lengthy, off-the-record discussion over lunch with the American press corps, he was thoroughly persuaded that U.S. policy in Vietnam was so wrong track. His discussion with the reporters only solidified that conclusion. “If you wanted to get a non-official, non-embassy briefing in Saigon in those days,” recalled David Halberstam of the New York Times, “there was only one place—American reporters.” For several hours, Mansfield, who skipped an official briefing provided by American officials, discussed the war with a group that included Halberstam, Neil Sheehan of United Press International, Malcolm Browne of the New York Times, and Peter Arnett of the Associated Press. “What was clear,” Halberstam recalled, “was that Mike Mansfield was really listening. He wanted to know.”

The reporters—none of whom opposed U.S. military intervention in Vietnam—told a receptive military leader what they had told their readers for months: the South Vietnamese army was moribund and unwilling to fight. Dien was an impediment to a successful struggle. The blind optimism of Harkins and Nolting had led them to deceive Washington about the war’s bitter realities.

Mansfield had seen many of the dispatches those men had filed from Saigon in recent months. Even before he had arrived in South Vietnam, he had reluctantly concluded that their reporting was probably more reliable than the official reports he and Kennedy had received through official channels. Now, however, he was certain.

At the airport, as the majority leader and his party gathered to depart from Saigon, Nolting handed Mansfield a prepared statement—a courtesy the embassy customarily provided visiting dignitaries. In thanking the Diem government for its hospitality, the embassy suggested that Mansfield and his colleagues tell reporters that “we are convinced” that Diem had “found the key to victory and peace” and that the discussions in Saigon had strengthened “our belief in the United States on the right course in its determination to support your many-sided efforts to secure your freedom.” While it did “urge a more tolerant attitude” toward American journalists, the statement also applauded Diem for his efforts to “restore justice and respect for human liberties.” As he reviewed Nolting’s prepared statement, Mansfield must have known that the American journalists would find it soporific language absurd and surreal—especially in light of their excessive briefing on Diem’s shortcomings and the failings of the U.S. policy in Vietnam. To Nolting’s amazement, Mansfield refused to read the prepared remarks. Instead, he gave reporters only a brief statement of personal praise for Diem.11

Before he boarded his airplane, Mansfield walked through the assembled crowd and sought out Trueheart, the U.S. official who had earlier drawn Mansfield’s ire by speculating that few peasants even knew their president’s name. Shaking the diplomat’s hand, Mansfield acknowledged that “I think you’re right.” Although Trueheart did not affirm Mansfield’s decision to accept the reporters’ black assessment of the U.S. efforts in Vietnam, he believed that Mansfield’s reliance on their stories was wise. “These guys’ reporting over the time,” Trueheart later acknowledged, “had been a lot more accurate than ours had been.”12

In Washington, William Jorden, the special assistant to the under secretary of state for political affairs, saw the press stories in the same light as Trueheart. In March 1963, Jorden would inform General Herriman, the new assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs, that the press coverage coming out of Saigon was “extraordinarily good” and that the reporters had been unfairly maligned by U.S. officials. He would identify the major problem bedeviling Kennedy as he tried to guide the nation’s evolving policy in Vietnam: “To ignore the many negative features of the situation in Vietnam,” Jorden wrote, “is to dangerously delude ourselves. There is a vast multitude of problems and only by recognizing them can we hope to do something about them. A reporter who exposes such a problem may well be opening the door to its solution.”13 At the White House, meanwhile, Kennedy’s aides continued to assure the president that, troubling news reports from Saigon notwithstanding, the situation in Vietnam was well in hand.

By the time of his return to Washington on December 17, Mansfield—with Valéry’s help—had prepared a confidential, sixteen-page report to the president, detailing the grim news about developments in Vietnam. The next day, he sent the document to Kennedy at the president’s vacation home in Palm Beach. Kennedy called Mansfield the following week and invited Mansfield to Florida to discuss the report. When he arrived at the Kennedy compound on December 26, Mansfield found a lively party underway around the swimming pool. “Let’s talk awhile,” Kennedy said, as he turned the two men left for a two-hour cruise on nearby Lake Worth.14

The report contained a bombshell. Mansfield had finally reached the
painful realization that he had been wrong about his friend Diem. Diem's government had failed to live up to his promise as a champion of democracy. Mansfield's conclusion was that Kennedy should reconsider the level of American military support to South Vietnam. The Vietnam government, he informed Kennedy, had done "little with the time which was bought at Geneva in the sense of stimulating the growth of indigenous room for the political structure in Saigon. That structure is, today, far more dependent on us as it was than it was five years ago. If Vietnam is the cork in the Southeast Asian bottle then American aid is more than ever the cork in the Vietnamese bottle."

Despite the "new concept and a new American approach in Vietnam," Mansfield wrote that it had been "disturbing on this visit to hear the situation described in much the same terms as on my last visit, although it is seven years and billions of dollars later. Vietnam, outside the cities, is still an insecure place which is run at least at night largely by the Viet Cong. Diem's government had made little progress with the "ordinary people" in the countryside. "In short, it would be best to face the fact that we are once again at the beginning of the beginning." Although he praised the tentative success of the strategic hamlet program, he noted that it was too early to determine whether any real progress had been made against the Viet Cong.

"It is true that Vietnamese casualty counts have been rising," he acknowledged, "but the accuracy of these counts is open to question. Moreover, it should be noted that the estimates of Viet Cong core strength have also been rising." Currently, he said, the "optimistic predictions" came only from the promise of the strategic hamlet program and "the injection of new energy" from the American military. "The real tests are yet to come," he wrote. "If experience should prove that there is less rather than more truth in the assumption that fear or indifference are the keystones of the Viet Cong hold over the countryside, the target date for success will be delayed indefinitely beyond the year or two of the present predictions." Still, he argued that the strategic hamlet project might achieve results "if we were prepared to increase the commitment of men and military aid."

Turning to Diem, he noted that while he remained "dedicated, sincere, hardworking, incorruptible and patriotic," the South Vietnamese leader had grown "older and the problems which confront him are more complex" than when he faced, first, the French and then the French and Bar Dai and, then, the Viet Cong. He observed that Diem's brother Nhu was increasingly asserting himself and had assumed the primary "energizing role" in government. While he acknowledged that Nhu was talented, Mansfield also noted that "it is Ngo Dinh Diem, not Ngo Dinh Nhu, who has such popular mandate to exercise power as there is in south Vietnam. In a situation of this kind there is a great danger of the corruption of unbridled power." The real problem, he continued, was that the organization of the machinery for carrying out the new concepts. The difficulties in Vietnam are not likely to be overcome by a handful of paid retainers and sympathizers.

While Mansfield held out some hope "that success will be achieved quickly," he added a large caveat. "My own view," he said, "is that the problems can be avoided to liberalize present remedies, provided the problems and their magnitude do not charge significantly and proceed that the remedies are pursued by both Vietnamese and Americans (and particularly the former) with great vigor and self-determination" (emphasizes Mansfield's). Certainly, if these remedies do not work, it is difficult to conceive of alternatives, with the possible exception of a truly massive commitment of American military personnel and other resources—short going to war fully ourselves against the guerrillas—and the establishment of some form of neocolonial role in south Vietnam. That is an alternative which I most emphatically do not recommend. . . .

To ignore that reality will not only be immensely costly in terms of American lives and resources but may also draw us into an uncontrolled escalation of the current situation in which neither the United States has the capability to win.

The bottom line of Mansfield's report was a fundamental questioning of the notion that the United States had overriding national security interests in Southeast Asia. The real question which confronts us, therefore, is how much are we ourselves prepared to put into Southeast Asia and for how long in order to serve such interests as we may have in that region? Before we can answer this question, we must recognize our interests, using the word "interests" in the sense of "essential" with the greatest wisdom and restraint in the remainder. When that has been done, we will be in a better position to estimate what we must, in fact, expend in the way of scarce resources, energy and lives in order to preserve those interests. We may well discover that it is our interests to do less rather than more than we are now doing. If that is the case, we will do well to concentrate on a vigorous diplomacy which would be designed to lighten our commitments without bringing about sudden, dramatic upheavals in South Asia."

As he watched Kennedy read the report, Mansfield recalled that he could "see his neck getting red." The president had undoubtedly seen the report before Mansfield's arrival, but a second reading did not make the news any more palatable. "You expect me to believe this?" Kennedy asked.
me." Mansfield was resolute. "You've got my opinion, as I see things," he told the president. For two hours, Kennedy and Mansfield discussed the report. "His reaction was not a very happy one," Mansfield recalled in 1969. "He was perturbed by what I had to say, and he approved me closely, and, at times, it seemed aggressively on a number of comments and con- clusions which the report contained."

While he did not mention it in his formal report, in 1969 Mansfield remembered that he told Kennedy "that military intervention was not his answer" to the situation in Vietnam and that "I strongly advised a curt and then a withdrawal of U.S. troops." (In his report, Mansfield reached a slightly different conclusion. "If we were to withdraw abruptly ... there would be a major collapse in many places and what would follow is by no means certain.") Still, such a strong recommendation is not entirely implausible. It is possible that Mansfield might have regretted advice about withdrawal too explosive and controversial to put in writing—even in a secret communication to the president. To suggest that the United States should end its military assistance to South Vietnam would have been an audacious recommendation in the fall of 1962. One could understand why Mansfield—if, indeed, his memory was correct—might have hesitated to commit such counsel to paper. At the time, Mansfield did not know how his advice might have influenced Kennedy. "He did start to raise a few points," Mansfield said, "which was in disagreement with what I had to say. But at least he got the truth as I saw it and it wasn't a pleasant picture that I had depicted for him."96

Nolting, however, had definite opinions about the impact of Mansfield's report. It was, he later observed, "the first nai in Diem's coffin." The American ambassador for one, lauded Mansfield for the time he had spent with the American journalists. "He had got them most of his information," he said, "and points from the American guest corps in Saigon."97

In January 1963, information from another objective source further suggested that Mansfield's assessment had been correct. A CIA report observed that the Viet Cong "continue to expand the size and effectiveness of their forces" and had become "increasingly bold in their attacks." The war was, the report concluded, "a slowly escalating situation."98 General Harkins saw things differently. He and Nolting, fed optimistic reports by ubiquitous underlings, believed the Viet Cong had finally been forced into a corner. Like the French general Nivelle at Dien Bien Phu, Harkins longed for the chance to lure the enemy into the open where his army could finish them off. In January 1963, at the remote village of Ap Bac, Harkins would finally get his wish—with disastrous consequences for the U.S. military mission in Vietnam.

---

Ten American H-13 helicopters—they were commonly called Flying Bananas—thundered through the Mekong Delta mist southeast of Saigon early on the morning of January 2, 1963. Their mission was to assist the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as it engaged three Viet Cong companies thought to be hiding in the vicinity of Ap Bac, a small farming village 40 miles southwest of Saigon. The chief American military advisor for the Seventh Division, Colonel John Paul Van, had urged his Vietnamese counterpart, Colonel Bui Dinh Dan, to launch the offensive the previous morning. But Bui, a favorite of President Diem, had hesitated, saying that he wanted to give the American helicopter pilots time to recuperate from their New Year's Eve revelry.

The delay would be costly. Varmed of the attack, the Viet Cong guerrillas fortified their position and waited patiently among the trees and bush along a canal between Ap Bac and a neighboring village. As the South Vietnamese soldiers disembarked from the American helicopters in a nearby rice paddy, the Viet Cong held their fire until the last wave of soldiers hit the ground. In June, the guerrillas opened fire and turned the paddy into a killing field. Within hours, five helicopters were downed and dozens of soldiers were trapped by intense enemy fire.

Watching in horror from an observation plane high above the battle field, Van took to the radio and frantically relayed news of the situation to the Vietnamese armored command, pleading with him to dispatch armored personnel carriers to rescue the downed soldiers. Back came the terse reply: "I don't take orders from Americans." Three hours later, after the commando finally deployed his carriers, they crept onto the battlefield.
so slowly that Viet Cong machine gunners picked them off one by one. Later, on the ground, Vann would count the cost of the South Vietnamese retraction to engage the outnumbered Viet Cong. Fourteen South Vietnamese

To the east of the village, mayhem also reigned. As darkness fell across the delta, the Viet Cong entered through an area of open farmland. When Vann urged the South Vietnamese commander to deploy troops to block their retreat, General Cao balked. He argued that his men had suffered enough for one day. A political appointee under the direct supervision of Dien, Cao knew that his leader would not look kindly on the day’s losses.

His logic proved simple, if not perverse: if no more men were committed to battle, no more would die. To risk additional men, even to save those trapped on the battlefield, meant jeopardizing his job. For hours, Cao heard the distant gunfire and then the lives of his men. Only after an intense barrage of curiously badgering from Vann did the reluctant general finally send troops to intercept the fleeing Viet Cong, and then only after he was certain the guerrillas had escaped and were no longer a threat. In the darkness, however, ARVN paratroopers mistook other South Vietnamese soldiers for the Viet Cong and opened fire. When the barrage ended, the day’s casualty list totaled sixty-one ARVN soldiers dead and another hundred wounded. The Viet Cong, meanwhile, had escaped virtually unscathed.

The bodies of only three guerrillas were left behind.

To a distressed Vann, the battle was a “miserable fucking performance, just like it always is.” He shared that scathing assessment with the American reporters who rushed to Ap Bac as news of the botched battle found its way to Saigon. Of the guerrillas who had rounded the South Vietnamese army, Vann paid a grieving tribute. “They were brave men,” he said. “They fought well.”

“T hey gave a good account of themselves today.”

News of the debacle reached Washington on January 1 and dominated the reports from Vietnam for the next week. One press report described it as “a major defeat.” Another quoted Vann, described only as an officer, “in language more suitable for a family newspaper” as “a miserable performance.” Wrote reporter Hanson Baldwin in the New York Times: “More proof was provided this week—of any more was needed—that the war in South Vietnam is likely to be long and hard with the ultimate outcome in doubt.” Baldwin described that “the setback was perhaps unwelcome enough to set the aura of optimism about South Vietnam generated by over-optimistic Washington statements.”

American public had been given its most painful insight into “the "grunts" of the war—and the men it was disquieting, to say the least. Disturbed that the reports in the Washington Post and the New York Times were at odds with the dispatches coming to him from official sources

in Saigon, President Kennedy demanded answers. From South Vietnam came the soothing assurance that all—or almost all—was well. "It appears," Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric wrote Kennedy on January 3, "that the initial press reports have overstated both the importance of the action and the damage suffered by the [US] forces." General Harkins completely ignored warning signs that South Vietnamese military commanders were more concerned with their personal and political relationships with Diem than with aggression—challenging the spread Viet Cong influence throughout the country’s rural areas. "It took a lot of pat on the back to the [South Vietnamese] pilots and crew," Harkins wrote in a report that landed on Kennedy’s desk, "to go back into the area to rescue their jets." Harkins even suggested that the battle resulted in a partial South Vietnamese victory. This day they had got a hard by the tail and they didn’t let go of it," he wrote. "At least they got most of it." In another dispatch of a report of the battle, Admiral Harry Felt, the U.S. commander-in-chief in the Pacific, tried to shift blame for the debacle to the journalists. Felt insisted that the most critical problems was "bad news about American casualties filed immediately by young reporters who had not checked their facts. "There is good news which you may not read about in The Washington Post," he asserted.

Kennedy was still concerned, but accepted the assurances with few, if any, probing questions. He never seriously considered talking about Viet-

nam with the correspondents covering the story. "Kennedy gave me hell when I suggested that you meet more by talking to the correspondents coming back," George Ball recalled. "The idea that you talk more press about anything was anathema." Kennedy hated Harkins, in particular, Ball said. "He worried about a fellow who bad ideas that were so contrary to his own." But Harkins— and indeed most of the reporters in Saigon—had never questioned the wisdom of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. What they criticized was the dismal performance of the U.S.-backed South Viet-

manese military and the competence and integrity of Diem’s government.

Harkins, Nolting, and Felt, meanwhile, refused to see what had become so clear to the reporters and mid-level American commanders like Vann: the American effort in South Vietnam was doomed unless the United States persuaded Diem to clean up his government and recognize his military. Nolting was especially insensitive at this point. Although he may have been justified in believing there was no attractive alternative to Diem’s leadership, he was resolutely unwilling to demand reforms in return for the continued U.S. military assistance. Most of his superiors in Washington were reluctant to order him to do so, believing the war could be won despite the corruption and mismanagement in Diem’s regime. "I would not find it possible," Nolting confessed to Averell Harriman in a February 27
letters, "to be the agent in a change of US policy away from forthright support of the legitimate government."

Other than the newspapers and Mansfield's blunt assessment of December 1962, the only remotely reliable information that Kennedy received on Vietnam came from the CIA report in January that warned of a "slowly escalating stalemate" and a more optimistic report in January by NSC staff member Michael Forrestol. In late 1962, Forrestol and State Department official official Roger Hilsman had traveled to Vietnam at Kennedy's behest. While their subsequent report was upbeat, it was also laced with clear warnings about the obstacles facing the U.S. military. "The war in South Vietnam is clearly going better than it was a year ago," began Forrestol, drawing much of his optimism from official South Vietnamese government reports about the strategic hamlet program that boasted of four thousand protected villages around the country. Yet Forrestol also warned that "the negative side of the ledger is still awesome."

The Viet Cong continue to be aggressive and are extremely effective. In the last few weeks, for example, they fought stubbornly and with telling results at Ap Bac. Overall, the assessment, in sum, is that we are probably winning, but certainly more slowly than we had hoped. At the rate it is going now the war will last longer than we would like, cost more in terms of both lives and money than we anticipated, and prolong the period in which a sudden and dramatic event could upset the status quo already maker.

Most official news from Vietnam, including the Forrestol-Hilsman report, was unrealistically positive. Typical was the report of the Army chief of staff, General Earle Wheeler, who arrived in Saigon in late January to size up the situation for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In his report to Kennedy—which Forrestol later characterized as "truly euphoric" and described as "a complete waste" of Kennedy's time—the general claimed that the situation had been "reoriented from a circumstance of near depression to a condition where victory is now a hopeful prospect."

Wheeler, too, adopted the by-now-familiar practice of dismissing the discordant information coming out of Vietnam as a consequence of inaccurate press coverage.4

If Kennedy had an unrealistic view of the situation, the American people and Congress were being completely hoodwinked by American officials in Saigon and Washington. Returning from a conference in Honolulu with top U.S. military and civilian officials in Vietnam, McNamara's spokesman, Arthur Sylvester, told reporters in Washington that "the cor-

tering in Vietnam. In Honolulu he had requested from Harkins a plan to shrink the American military contingent in South Vietnam to about one thousand five hundred by the fall of 1967 and had complained that the current plans for force reductions were "too slow.

Like Kennedy, McNamara's optimism grew from a belief shared widely in Washington that Harkins, if given the right kind of weapons and men—and enough of them—could subdue the Viet Cong within five years. The alternative, rolling out completely before the job was completed, was unthinkable. But this is exactly what Mansfield may have suggested when discussing his December 1962 report with Kennedy. In March 1963, after Mansfield released a revised version of the report that suggested a reduction in U.S. aid to South Vietnam, reporters asked Kennedy if he agreed. Annoyed, Kennedy answered: "I don't see how we are going to be able, unless we are going to pull out of Southeast Asia and turn it over to the Communists, how we are going to be able to reduce very much our economic programs and military programs in Viet-Nam, in Cambodia, in Thailand."

Mansfield's blunt assessment of the situation in Vietnam gave White House officials headaches. Contrary to the official administration line, Mansfield had declared publicly that no grounds for "optimistic conclusions" about the conflict existed. After seven years and more than $2 billion in U.S. aid, "the same difficulties remain if, indeed, they have not been compounded."

The only way for Diem to rally the people around him, Mansfield insisted, was to institute economic and political reforms while broadening his government. The U.S. military, he believed, could not and should not fight a war for the South Vietnamese. "It is not an American war," he said. "It is their country and responsibility. We don't want to take the place of the French."5

Mansfield's report created a stir in Saigon. Diem's unresponsive sister-in-law, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, complained that Diem's critics—meaning Mansfield and the American reporters—"are driving us to the passive state of Halots, judging us worthy only to be mercenaries or abandoned halfway like so many other patriots who have courageously fought against the Communists." Her husband, Ngo Dinh Nhu, called the report "treachery" and told the U.S. embassy's public affairs officer, John Mekkin, that Mansfield's comment "contains everything, although he declined to elaborate on the exact nature of the change. Like his wife, Nhu seemed to believe that the harsh criticism of a brother ally like Mansfield would not have been released without Kennedy's approval. Mekkin tried to explain to a skeptical Nhu that the president had nothing to do with the report's dissemination and that official U.S. policy toward his brother's regime had not changed.
Secretary of State Dean Rusk, for one, decided the notion that Kennedy would have ever decided on a withdrawal of American troops, but delayed the decision for domestic political reasons. "That would have meant that he was committing men to combat for what would amount to domestic political purposes," Rusk said in 1970, as if all wars did not have their political components. "I just don't believe that President Kennedy, or indeed any president, would be cynical enough to commit men to combat for electoral purposes." Furthermore, as Rusk wrote in his memoirs, "Kennedy liked to put the breeze and toss ideas around. While it was possible that he might have left Mansfield with the impression that he planned to withdraw from Vietnam in 1965, Rusk insisted that "had he done so, I think that I would have known about it."*8 Judging by his actions and not his private rhetoric, Kennedy appeared as strongly committed as ever to an American presence in Vietnam. As then-Assistant Defense Secretary William Bundy argued, Kennedy was preparing for a "progressive reduction and eventual withdrawal" of the American advisors. But Bundy believed that he was doing so with the understanding "that the effort was working and that the South Vietnamese were growing in strength, so that they could handle the job... It wasn't the case of abandoning the cause or commitment at all."*9

Despite Mansfield's warnings and the troubling newspaper reports that he chose to discount, Kennedy had made a firm public commitment to Vietnam that he had enthusiastically reiterated on several occasions. Were he nursing a plan to order a precipitate withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam in 1965, it is doubtful that he would have discussed the idea with the Senate majority leader but not his own secretaries of state and defense or any other national security advisor. In fact, whether he planned to withdraw after the 1964 elections was an irrelevant proposition in early 1963, almost two years before the election. There was, in the meantime, a war to be won or lost. Two years was a lifetime in politics and war.

It is most likely that Kennedy, Mansfield's afterthought notwithstanding, had reluctantly decided that he could maintain an American presence in Vietnam for another two years—with slight, but steady reductions in troop strength. By then, perhaps, the South Vietnamese government—by virtue of political and military reforms or new leadership—would turn the tide so that the American people would view in eventual withdrawal as a victorious exit, not a cowardly retreat. Yet it is impossible to determine conclusively exactly what it was that Kennedy planned in Vietnam. He was undeniably, like the presidents before and after him, uncertain and fearful of the potential consequences of a massive American military commitment, but also aware of the political consequences if South Vietnam fell to
that he very much wanted to avoid getting in deeply in the war. At the same time he didn't want to be regarded as a coward.20

Dien and Nhu, meanwhile, appeared far more uncomfortable than Kennedy about the presence of U.S. troops in their country. Fed up with efforts to force governmental reforms, Nhu told the Washington Post, in a front-page story on May 12, that "South Vietnam would like to see half of the 12,000 to 13,000 American military stationed here leave the country."21 Some particularly gruesome events of that May, however, would persuade American officials that it was Dien, not U.S. troops, that had to go. An eruption of government-sponsored violence on May 8 in Hue, a coastal city south of the North Vietnamese border, only intensified the sentiment. That day, Dien's troops opened fire and brutally attacked a group of Buddhists gathered to protest a government decree banning the display of flags to commemorate the 5,527th birthday of the Buddha. The clash had been long in coming. Although 70 percent of the country's population considered themselves Buddhist, almost Buddhists like Dien and Nhu ruled the nation's government. Believing they were being persecuted for their faith, Buddhist leaders launched a sustained period of vocal protest, hoping to gain greater religious freedom.22

The protest finally reached a dramatic and appalling climax on June 11 in Saigon, when an elderly Buddhist monk doused with gasoline, spat in the middle of a busy downtown intersection and waited as another monk set him on fire. As the man burned to death before a horrified crowd, Associated Press reporter Malcolm Browne snapped photographs. The next day, Browne's disturbing picture—a Buddhist monk set on fire on the front page of virtually every newspaper in the world.23 To John McClellan, the photographer "had a shock effect of incalculable value to the Buddhist cause, became a symbol of the state of things in Vietnam.24 Observed William Colby, the top CIA official in Saigon: "The picture was almost in awe of the imagery that was affecting American opinion."25 Nhu and Nhu only reinforced the negative image of her brother-in-law's cruel, repressive regime when she reacted to the suicide with glee. She later called it a "barbecue," and told a reporter: "Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands.26

With nothing away from Saigon on leave, his deputy, William Trueheart, took temporary command of the embassy and—in contrast to Nhu's singleminded strategy of conciliation—immediately adopted a harder line toward Dien. "If Dien does not take prompt and effective steps to reestablish Buddhist confidence in him we will have to reexamine our entire relationship with his regime," Rusk told Trueheart in a June 11 cable.27 Trueheart enthusiastically delivered the message, but Dien was unmoved. The Buddhist problem had been blown out of proportion, he said, disregarding ample evidence to the contrary.28 Throughout the country, citizens were on the verge of revolt. It was not just the Buddhists who were exercising. College and high-school students, including some Catholics, gathered for massive protests of Dien's repressive policies. Meanwhile, the self-imposed deadline continued. As Diem propped up only token reforms, seven more mouths burned themselves to death.

Relations between Dien and the U.S. government reached an all-time low when the New York Times reported on June 14 that the Kennedy administration would probably condemn [Dien's] movement of the Buddhists unless he takes prompt action to meet their grievances.29 Despite official South Vietnamese protests that the U.S. approach was threatening Diem's negotiations with Buddhists leaders, Kennedy, Rusk, and other administration officials had clearly reached the limits of their patience with the intramural Diem. Jaws at Washington were the rumors, later proven true, that Dien and Nhu were seeking a negotiated settlement with Hanoi and were engaging in secret negotiations with the Communists.30 Rusk, meanwhile, urged Trueheart to press Diem even harder to reform his government, advising a "very hard-hitting approach."31

About the same time, Mansfield again weighed in and strongly urged Kennedy to reconsider continued U.S. military support to Vietnam. In an August 19 memorandum, he bluntly framed the issue. Whether to continue supporting Dien's government, Mansfield argued, was a "second-rate" question. "It is the question, to state it simply and frankly, of which way is likely to be least costly in American lives and money." The debate over the future of Dien's government was not paramount, Mansfield argued, because "with the present government or with a replacement—we are in for a very long haul to develop even a modicum of stability in Viet Nam.32 Mansfield concluded: "The die is not finally cast but we are very close to the point when it will have to be. Therefore, we may well ask ourselves, once more, not the tactical question, but the fundamental question: Is South Viet Nam as important to us as the premise on which we are now apparently operating ourselves?"

Mansfield answered his own question by observing that the United States had "overestimated South Vietnam's importance and that 'we have talked ourselves and 'agencies' ourselves into this positive.' Vietnam, he wrote, 'is not central to our defense interest or any other American interest but is, rather, peripheral to these interests.' The way out of 'the bind,' he advised, 'is certainly not by the route of over-deep involvement. To be sure it is desirable that we do not spend countless American lives and billions of dollars to maintain an illusion of freedom in a devastated South Viet Nam.'32

Kennedy's nascent doubts about Dien's viability were finally confirmed on August 21 when, fearing a coup, Diem declared martial law and
sent troops from his brother's special forces to raid Buddhist pagodas all across the country. Armed with rifles, machine guns, and teargas, the troops stormed the Buddhist sanctuaries and arrested more than a thou-
sand monks, nuns, and students. Public reaction throughout South Vietnam
was swift, as massive demonstrations erupted.

From Honolulu, Henry Cabot Lodge rushed to Saigon to succeed
Ambassador Nolting, whose two-year term had expired and whose loyalty to
Diem now made him ill-suited for the job. Kennedy chose Lodge—a
wealthy, 61-year-old former Republican senator from Massachusetts—
partially out of respect for his stature and toughness, but also because of
his need to bolster Republican congressional support for his Vietnam poli-
cies. Lodge—Kennedy's opponent in his first Senate race and later van-
quished again by Kennedy when he campaigned as Nixon's 1960 running
mate—proved an able choice. "The real problem," Chester Cooper
observed, "was that we needed in Vietnam an ambassador of sufficient
status so that the military commander would not overreach him either in
terms of rank or in other terms of prestige and power." Lodge tended to
fit the bill in every way. In his first meeting with Diem, on August 26, the
new ambassador was firm and direct when he told Diem that judging from
Madame Nhu's outrageous and incendiary statements, many Americans
erroneously believed that she, not Diem, was South Vietnam's chief of
state. Furthermore, he said, government persecution of the Buddhists was
"shocking American opinion which favors religious toleration." All these
factors, Lodge said, were "threatening American support of Viet-Nam."94

Lodge's exhortations, however, were largely pro forma. Only two days
before he had received a crucial telegram from Under Secretary of State
George Ball. Over the weekend, while most of the administration's lead-
ing military and foreign policy leaders were away from Washington, three
of Diem's strongest detractors, Harriman, Forrestal, and Hillman, had
drafted a message instructing Lodge to offer U.S. support to military lead-
ers plotting the overthrow of Diem's government. Ball, the official who
would sign the telegram in Rusk's absence, recalled that Harriman and
Hillman "appeared in a great sweat" at a public golf course where he was
finishing a round with Deputy Undersecretary of State Acheson Johnson.
"My position was that something had to give," Hillman later explained.
"We could not go on like this."95 Harriman and Hillman informed Ball
that Lodge had notified them that "certain generals" in the South Viet-
namese army were considering a coup.96 They urged Ball to approve the
telegram, which advised Lodge that Diem "cannot be preserved" and
instructed him to "tell key military leaders that [the US] would find it
impossible to continue support of [the] GVN militarily and economically"
unless reforms were undertaken "which we recognize requires [the]
to Lodge," recalled Nothing, who met with Kennedy in the days follow-
ing, "but he couldn't find any way to retrieve it.\textsuperscript{44} Instead, he wavered and
told his men that he saw no reason to support a coup without a good chance of
success. He instructed the State Department to ask Lodge and Harkin for
"their estimate of the prospects of a coup by the generals."\textsuperscript{45} Back came the
reply from Lodge: "On [the] basis of what we now know both General Harkin
and I favor [the] operation."\textsuperscript{46} Several days later came a more
definitive response:

We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turn-
back: the overthrow of the Diem government. There is no turning back
in part because U.S. prestige is already publicly committed to this end in
large measure and will become more so as the facts leak out. In a more
fundamental sense, there is no turning back because there is no possibil-
ity, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration, still
less that Diem or any member of the family can govern the country in
a way to gain the support of the people who count, i.e., the educated
class in and out of government service, civil and military—not to mention the
American people... I am personally in full agreement with the policy
which I was instructed to carry out by last Sunday's telegram.\textsuperscript{47}

Yet Kennedy remained cautious and worried about the consequences of
a U.S.-backed coup. "Until the very moment of the go signal for the
operation by the Generals," he told Lodge, "I must reserve a contingent
right to change course and reverse previous instructions... When we go,
we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than to fail."\textsuperscript{48}
But Kennedy's approval of the August 24 telegrams had released the genie from
the bottle. In truth, there was little the United States could do to stop
Diem's overthrow—short of warning Diem and confessing U.S. complic-
ity in the plot. Lodge's reply reflected this reality: "To be successful," he
said, "this operation must be essentially a Vietnamese affair with a momentum
of its own. Should this happen you may not be able to control it, i.e.,
the "go signal" may be given by the Generals."\textsuperscript{49} In other words, as the CIA's
Richard Helms observed, the telegram and the subsequent push for a coup
was a "truck that was rolling down the road.\textsuperscript{50}

Publicly, Kennedy turned up the heat on Diem by sending him a
strong message: reform or lose the war. In a nationally televised interview
from Hyannis Port on September 2 with CBS newsmen Walter Cronkite,
Kennedy said:

I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government to
win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analy-
sis, it is in their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can
help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there
A Grand Delusion 289
as advisers, but they have to win it, the people of Viet-Nam, against the
Communists.

As for withdrawing American troops from Vietnam, Kennedy was
emphatic. "I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw," he said.
"That would be a great mistake."\textsuperscript{51}

In the effort to pressure Diem to reform his government, Kennedy and
his men opened another front in early September—pointing to a congres-
sional resolution to end U.S. aid to South Vietnam. On September 5, after
a closed-door session of the Far East subcommittee of the Senate Foreign
Relations Committee, Democratic Senator Frank Church of Idaho had
threatened to introduce just such a resolution unless Diem's government
changed its ways. Also that day, Church's subcommittee colleague Demo-
crat Frank Lausche of Ohio sensed to signal a similar displeasure with the
course of events when he delivered a Senate speech advocating "a change
of policy" and "a charge of personnel" in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{52} In a telegram
that evening to Lodge, Hillman reported news of the possible resolution and
observed that the subcommittee's mood "augers heavy sledding" in the
upcoming debate over U.S. aid to South Vietnam. A delighted Lodge
responded that he had immediately put Hillman's telegram to use, appar-
ently sharing it with the plotting generals who, he said, planned to tell Nhu
that "he and his wife have no choice but to leave the country for six
months." Lodge also believed the telegram "would open the way for my
showdown conference with Diem.\textsuperscript{53}"

On September 9, Lodge had his meeting with Diem. Nhu had to leave
the country, Lodge insisted, and not return until at least late December—
\textsuperscript{54} after Congress approved the appropriations bill for Vietnam. But Diem
would not hear of it, insisting that his brother had been unjustly accused. He
put the onus on Lodge to persuade Congress to maintain U.S. assistance to
his country. "If American opinion is in the state that you describe," Diem
said, "then it is up to you, Ambassador Lodge, to dissuade American opin-
ion." Lodge left feeling that his discussion had accomplished little.\textsuperscript{55}

McGeorge Bundy and Hillman, meanwhile, encouraged Church to
pursue his resolution in hopes that Diem might respond to evidence con-
\textsuperscript{56}
\textsuperscript{57} cluding to cut off assistance to his government.
"Good idea," Bundy told him. "Keep going."\textsuperscript{58} Rebuffed by the White
House's support, Church circulated the text of his resolution—drafted
\textsuperscript{59} with help from the State Department—to every member of the Senate.
\textsuperscript{60} "Resolved, That it is the sense of the Senate that unless the Government of
\textsuperscript{61} South Vietnam abandons policies of repression against its own people and
\textsuperscript{62} makes a determined and effective effort to regain their support, military
\textsuperscript{63} and economic assistance to that Government should not be continued.\textsuperscript{64}"

\textsuperscript{54}
Kennedy, however, worried that the effort might backfire—especially if the resolution was offered and defeated.6 Later, he expressed concerns that Church's resolution might take on a life of its own, becoming not just an expression of congressional disapproval of Diem's regime, but a binding amendment to the foreign aid appropriations bill. Rusk also fretted that the resolution "might get out of control." He wanted to give senators the opportunity to "sound off," but hoped the resolution would not come to a vote.63 On balance, however, Kennedy's men believed a nonbinding resolution was worth the risk. Hillman told the president he believed it could become "useful ammunition" for Lodge in his discussions with Diem, especially if it passed the Senate by a wide margin.64 On September 12, Church and Republican Senator Frank Carlson of Kansas—supported by twenty-one senators, most of them liberal Democrats—offered the resolution in the Senate. "In pursuance of the support of such a regime," Church told the Senate, "can only serve to identify the United States with the cause of religious persecution, undermining our moral position throughout the world."65

At the White House, the debate over Church's resolution merely reflected the widening internal divisions over Diem that had developed in September. Kennedy was torn. On one hand, he knew he had given momentum to a conspiracy that might eventually topple the leader of South Vietnam. By September, however, he and his advisors had drawn back from their active support of a coup and focused more on ways to persuade Diem to save his regime, including banishing his brother and inter-in-law. In a September 9 interview, broadcast on the NBC television network, Kennedy told interviewers David Brinkley and Chet Huntley that "we are using our influence to persuade" Diem to take steps necessary "to win back support. That takes some time and we must be patient; we must persist." Despite his private support for Church's resolution, the president gave no public indication that he favored a reassessment of U.S. aid to Viet- nam or a withdrawal of U.S. troops. "If you reduce your aid, it is possible you could have some effect upon the government structure there," he said. "On the other hand, you might have a situation which could bring about a collapse." Kennedy, however, made one thing clear. He still believed strongly in the "domino theory.

I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla thrust of Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the communists. So I believe it.

As for removing American troops, Kennedy acknowledged domestic constraints from the general sense of the struggle as well as about the
AS LONG AS DIEM IS THE HEAD OF THE GOVERNMENT OF SOUTH VIETNAM, said the Senate on September 9, "we continue to support a tyrant; we continue to support a police-state dictator." Morse, who had first spoken out against American involvement in Vietnam more than a year earlier, was now even more certain that the United States should leave Vietnam "and save the American people the hundreds of millions of dollars that our government is pouring down that rat hole." Morse knew that his protest was not widely popular, in the Senate, in his home state of Oregon, or in most parts of the country. "But I shall continue to speak it," he vowed. "On the basis of the present policies that prevail there," he concluded, "South Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy." Morse was not alone in his belief that the United States should leave Vietnam. Another senator, freshman Democrat George McGovern of South Dakota, also nursed growing concerns about Kennedy's policies. An amiable, soft-spoken man of 41 years, McGovern had arrived in the Senate in January 1963, having been Kennedy's Food for Peace director and, before that, a member of the House of Representatives. From his positions on the Agriculture and Interior committees, McGovern—like most freshmen—had worked to protect his state's interests. Far more, though, than a parochial member of Congress who cared only about securing pork barrel appropriations for his state, McGovern was a thoughtful and passionate man, a former college history professor who combined a love of politics with an equally intense enthusiasm for liberal causes. That liberalism had come naturally. As the son of a Methodist minister, he was inculcated early with John Wesley's teachings about "practical divinity," a theology that stressed the church's role in fighting poverty, injustice, ignorance, and disease. He was undoubtedly influenced by the pronounced strains of populism and agrarian unrest that ran through much of the Depression-era Midwest of his youth.

Nothing, however, had influenced McGovern more than his formal education. It was during his graduate studies at Northwestern University, a bastion of liberalism in the 1940s, that he learned about the history and politics of Southeast Asia. With his familiarity with the views of China scholars like John King Fairbank and Owen Lattimore convinced him that the war in Vietnam was not the result of a communist-inspired, China-backed insurgency. "I felt then, as I do now," McGovern told a biographer in the early 1970s, "that U.S. foreign policy was needlessly exacerbating tensions with the Soviet Union and that we were wrong in our support of Chiang, the French in Indo-China, and the Vietcong. Asia was out of control, he believed, and Southeast Asia was "being convulsed by social and nationalist upheavals that couldn't be contained by the usual sources of military power."

Arriving in the Senate, the World War II bomber pilot was "shocked," he recalled, "by the fact that the basic Cold War assumptions were just widely accepted in the Senate and in the executive branch and that people applied it in Vietnam without discrimination—and, therefore, we had to stand firm." For months, McGovern had heard from various sources that the American effort in South Vietnam "wasn't working out too well." He suspected the reason for the lack of success was that "we didn't have popular support out there—the rank and file people were not all that opposed to Ho Chi Minh and not all that enamored of the regime that we were backing."

On September 24, 1963, McGovern declared that the nation's foray into Southeast Asia was a "failure." He told the Senate that "the current dilemma in Vietnam is a clear demonstration of the limitations of military power. There in the jungles of Asia our mighty nuclear arsenal—our $50 billion arms budget—even our costly new "Special Forces"—have proved powerless to cope with a ragged band of illiterate guerrillas fighting with home-made weapons or with weapons they have captured from us. The "trap" that had lured America into Southeast Asia, McGovern insisted, "will haunt us in every corner of this revolutionary world, if we do not properly appraise its lessons."

McGovern's September 24 speech was not aimed at challenging the fundamental premise of Kennedy's Vietnam policies. His remarks on Vietnam had actually been as aide. He had, instead, come to advance his proposal to reduce funding for weapons procurement and military research and development. Among his new ideas, McGovern, echoing Fullbright and Mansfield, "will exert a far greater impact for peace and freedom in Asia and elsewhere if we rely less on armaments and more on the economic, political and moral sources of our strength."
Two days later, on September 26, McGovern again took his concerns about Vietnam to the Senate floor and, after Morse, became the second member of Congress to call publicly for a withdrawal of U.S. forces. "The U.S. position has deteriorated so drastically," he told the Senate, "that it is in our national interest to withdraw from that country our forces and our aid." American guns and money, he said, "are being used, not to promote freedom, but to suppress religious freedom, harass and imprison students and teachers, and terrorize the people." Press coverage of the speeches was minimal. Neither Morse nor McGovern took their concerns about Vietnam directly to Kennedy.

While some members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in closed hearings, pressed McNamara, Rusk, and Taylor for more information, the leading foreign policy voices in Congress had fallen virtually silent during the months of September and October. "The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was incredibly quiet," Rusk later recalled, adding that Fulbright "raised no particular problems" about Vietnam. In fact, Fulbright had let it be known publicly that withdrawing U.S. forces from Vietnam would be "unacceptable." As Rusk noted, "there were no doves and hawks in those days... I think everybody hoped that somehow the most evident steps that were taken during the Kennedy administration would be enough to pacify the situation." As one of the few senators to speak out about Vietnam, McGovern was surprised that his speech did not spark some kind of reaction. "It struck me as a kind of a nugget that would catch some attention," he recalled, "but it didn't." McGovern concluded that "people just thought I was talking about a rather obscure and insignificant little country and that it really didn't matter that much." 

But Kennedy and Rusk knew they were only one or two incidents away from a public outcry over Vietnam. The reporters in Saigon, particularly Haldeman, continued raising troubling questions about the direction of U.S. policy in Vietnam and shed new light on the divergent views about Diem among Kennedy's foreign policy advisors. The thought of a public and a Congress growing restless over a fluctuating U.S. policy in Vietnam and the tough decisions among his own advisors worried Kennedy. "There is increasing concern here with strictly military aspects of the problem," Kennedy acknowledged in an "eyes only" cable to Lodge on September 17, "both in terms of actual progress of operations and of need to make [an] effective case with Congress for continued prosecution of the effort." 

Kennedy's response was another fact-finding mission. This time, he sent two of his top military advisors, McNamara and Taylor. Their largely optimistic conclusions, based on discussions with U.S. and South Vietnamese officials in Saigon, reinforced Kennedy's own inclination to plot a middle course between supporting Diem and promoting a coup. Claiming that "the military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress," McNamara and Taylor advised caution upon their return. While Diem's government had become increasingly unpopular, they insisted, inaccurately, as it turned out—"that there is no solid evidence of the possibility of a successful coup." Furthermore, they also led Kennedy to believe that American training of the South Vietnamese army would be completed by the end of 1965. "It should be possible," they said, "to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time." They encouraged Kennedy to announce that he would make a down payment on that expectation by withdrawing one thousand American troops by year's end. The McNamara-Taylor report recommended that Kennedy follow a policy of selective pressures: "purely correct" relationship at the top official level, continuing to withhold further actions in the commod- ity import program, and making clear our disapproval of the regime. A further element in this policy is letting the present impression stand that the U.S. would not be averse to a change of Government—although we would not take any remedial actions to initiate a coup." (Emphasis added) 

Besides drastically underestimating the prospects for a coup and presenting an unrealistic timetable for the South Vietnamese army to with- stand a U.S. troop withdrawal, the McNamara-Taylor report contained, in the words of William Bundy, the deputy assistant secretary of defense who accompanied McNamara to South Vietnam, "a clear internal inconsist- ency." On one hand, it claimed the war could be won if Diem made political reforms. Yet, at the same time, McNamara and Taylor said they doubted such reforms would ever be made. Later, Avraer Harriman and his assistant, William Sullivan, argued that the report was not only misguided—it contained a potentially false characterization of the situation in South Vietnam. "The [U.S.] military are trained when they are in a battle to make the best face of what they're up against," Harriman explained in a 1965 interview. Ultimately, McNamara, Taylor, and other military leaders, Harriman believed, "were taken in by their own statements." 

Sullivan later recalled that the State Department's opinion of the conflict—despite Rusk's averton to advancing this point of view in meetings with Kennedy—was far different from the Pentagon's. "We felt this was going to be a long, grinding sort of thing, and we shouldn't create any illusions or delusions in the American public that it was going to be something that could be taken care of very quickly." In any event, the Taylor-McNamara report became the new guiding light for Kennedy's Vietnam policy. After the National Security Council adopted the report in early October, Kennedy approved a statement...
announcing a withdrawal of U.S. forces. "By the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Viet Nam can be withdrawn." In the weeks following the report, the administration began implementing the recommended "selective pressures"; the CIA recalled its station chief, John Richardson, known to be one of Nhu's close friends; withheld funding for Nhu's special forces; and stopped all shipments of commodities like rice, milk, and tobacco.

Although these selective pressures were not specifically designed to make Diem more vulnerable, they certainly had that effect. By the middle of October, coup plotting was again in full bloom. Lodge, believing the U.S. effort would only be successful with Diem out of the picture, was the generals' primary American cheerleader. Urging McGeorge Bundy to give him the latitude to continue his support for the generals, Lodge argued that "we should remember that this is the only way in which the people in Vietnam can possibly get a change in government." Bundy did not reject that argument, but cautioned Lodge to "avoid direct engagement with the plotters and to only support an effort that was likely to succeed." An unsuccessful coup, he wrote, "however carefully we avoid direct engagement, will risk our present influence and American opinion almost everywhere." By October 29, according to Lodge, the coup was imminent. "We are not engineering the coup," Lodge assured Washington. "The sum total of our relationship thus far is: that we will not thwart a coup that we will monitor and report." Throughout, Kennedy—knowing that the momentum now belonged to the dissident generals—was little more than a bystander to the quickly unfolding events. Quoting Lodge, he told his national security advisors that the coup was "comparable to a stone rolling down a hill which can't be stopped." His advice to Lodge, to whom he had ceded most of the responsibility for the U.S. role in the Saigon intrigue, was simple and direct: "tell the generals that they must prove they can pull off a successful coup or, in our opinion, it would be a mistake to proceed. If we misconceal, we could lose our entire position in Southeast Asia overnight."

On the afternoon of Friday, November 1, the generals launched their assault on the presidential palace. Earlier in the day, Diem had suddenly turned conciliatory, asking Lodge to inform Kennedy that "I take all his suggestions very seriously and wish to carry them out, but it is a question of timing." By then, it was too late. Nothing Diem could do would have discouraged the generals. At 4:30 P.M., Diem phoned Lodge to inform him that a "rebellion" was beginning.

"What is the attitude of the U.S.?" he inquired.

"I do not feel well informed enough to be able to tell you," Lodge lied.
American leaders recognized "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 threatens or another frowns." Mansfield argued that the success of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia should, instead, be weighed in light of several "basic questions," including: "Do these policies make possible a progressive reduction in the expenditures of American lives and aid in Vietnam?" and "Do these policies hold a valid promise of encouraging in Vietnam the growth of popularly responsible and responsive government?"28

George Ball, meanwhile, failed to see how any of that mattered in the long run. The man whose August 24 telegram to Lodge had encouraged the generals' plotting against Dien believed that the war was lost, with or without Dien and with or without a change in U.S. policy. While opposed to Dien's murder, Ball believed that Dien still had to go—not because he was inept, but because he was a corrupt tyrant. "The Nhus were poisonous consiviers," Ball wrote in his memoirs, "and America could not, with any shadow of honor, have continued to support a regime that was destroying Vietnamese society by its murderous repression of the Buddhists."29

Yet Francis Vales, Mansfield's aide and a noted Asian scholar, believed that the administration's support for Dien's overthrow, for whatever reason, was symptomatic of another disturbing shortcoming that would soon manifest itself: an abysmal misunderstanding of Vietnam's problems and an undeniable American hubris in the pursuit of a solution to those perceived problems. "We made the wrong mistakes," Vales observed, "of looking for a Vietnameze administrator in lieu of Dien who would do our bidding more readily. I think that was the root of the disaster." Whether Dien was competent was not the issue. What was instructive, Vales believed, was how U.S. officials reacted when Dien proved reluctant to serve as the figurehead leader for Noling, Lodge, and Harkins. This is quite apart from whether Dien was capable of dealing with the problems that existed in the country or not, but the course we took was bound to lead in the quite opposite direction from what we hoped. We would eventually have to find that the cost of what we were doing, in terms of lives and in terms of money, would be so ridiculously out of proportion with any national interest that we had in that area, that we would have to pull out. I think Dien understood that. We did not. We were still confusing the technique and the machinery with the purpose. And we were good, and we knew we had great equipment, and we knew we had brave soldiers, and we knew we had a very professional military force. But this was not the answer in that situation.30

A day or so after Dien's assassination, a ringing telephone awakened friend, Margarette Higgins, the hawkish foreign correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune, was on the line. "How does it feel to have blood on your hands?" she asked.

"God, Maggie, this is a revolution, people get hurt in revolutions. No way you can stop that."31

On November 22, exactly three weeks after Dien's death, Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy in Dallas. In Vietnam, the slain president had left a tragic legacy. While Kennedy had wisely resisted the advice of his more hawkish advisors that he take a precipitous plunge into Vietnam, he had, nonetheless, presided over a sometimes naive and politically motivated policy that steadily ratcheted up the American role in Vietnam by degrees. All the while, he refused to examine fully the impossible challenges the United States faced in Vietnam and—like Eisenhowser before him—preferred the soothing reassurances of his military and diplomatic advisors over the honest and discomfitting reports from friends like Mansfield or the reporters in Saigon.

Under Kennedy's leadership—and with the unwitting support of most members of Congress—the nation was now heavily invested in South Viet-
nam's survival, having committed to the belief that the fate of Southeast Asia hung in the balance. Less than a year into his term, Kennedy dra-
matically altered the U.S. role when he approved increased military aid and economic support for an enterprise in which the United States and South Vietnam were to be partners. But the partnership was far from a success. Although his country had benefited from billions of American dollars and thousands of its fighting men, Dien proved a stubborn ally, almost always resisting military, political, and economic advice from the Americans. Advice was usually the strongest form of evidence that Dien received. For most of Kennedy's presidency, U.S. officials shrank from pressuring Dien to institute the kind of real reforms that might have attracted more popular support for his government. When the pressure was finally applied in 1963, the president's emissary in South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, inserted himself into the domestic political affairs of the country to an appalling and disastrous degree. In the name of saving the government, the United States engineered the overthrow and assassination of the nation's leader—and pushed its government into a downward spiral of repression, corruption, and ineptitude from which it would never recover.

Like Truman and Eisenhowser before him, Kennedy badly believed that he lacked the political freedom to ignore the perceived hegemonic threat that Communist China had for Southeast Asia. But his political calculations in Vietnam were also based on a genuine belief that the "fall" of South Vietnam to the Viet Cong would not only imperil his presidency but would be a stunning and disastrous defeat for Western democracy in general and
the United States in particular. While the U.S. military role in Vietnam under Kennedy's watch was puny compared to the massive presence commanded by his successors—at the time of his death there were about sixteen thousand American soldiers in Vietnam—the slain president and his advisors had made very public commitments to South Vietnam that would not be easily reversed or revoked. Haunted by the same political ghosts as Kennedy and also persuaded of Vietnam's importance to U.S. national security, Lyndon Johnson was not about to change the nation's course in Vietnam only a year before the 1964 presidential election. Kennedy's tragic crusade in Vietnam now belonged to Johnson.

PART FOUR

ESCALATION AND DECEPTION

The United States intends no aggression and seeks no wider war... We are a people of peace—but not of weakness and timidity. I should like to repeat again this our purpose is peace.
—President Lyndon Johnson, 1964

All we say and all we do must be informed by our awareness that this horror is partly our responsibility; not just a nation's responsibility, but yours and mine. It is we who live in abundance and send our young men to die. It is our chemicals that scourch the children and our bombs that level the villages. We are all participants.
—Senator Robert F. Kennedy, 1967