

COLD WARRIORS IN VIETNAM: MIKE MANSFIELD'S
ROLE IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. MIKE MANSFIELD	11
REFERENCES CITED.....	82

ABSTRACT

Following his election to the United States Senate in 1952, Michael Joseph Mansfield (D-MT) exerted tremendous influence on American foreign policy in East Asia, particularly in Vietnam. Throughout the 1950s, his unwavering support of Ngo Dinh Diem, president of South Vietnam, directly influenced the unfolding drama that became another conflagration of the Cold War, eventually claiming the lives of over 58,000 American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. Through his tireless efforts to advise three consecutive U.S. Presidents, Mansfield tried to moderate our presence and avoid full-scale war. After Lyndon Johnson escalated the conflict, Senator Mansfield spared no effort to bring the belligerents to the negotiating table. Using an array of secondary sources and extensive research at the Mike Mansfield library in Missoula, Montana, this paper explores the agency and impact of a genuine statesman on the evolution of Cold War policy in Vietnam.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A course once set in motion often develops its own momentum and rationale whatever the initial intentions.

Senator Michael Joseph Mansfield
June 1965¹

As he left the White House, George Washington's parting advice to avoid "entangling alliances" resonated for over a century, and influenced a revival of isolationist feelings in America on the eve of World War. Historian George Herring writes, "The enduring idea of an isolationist America is a myth often conveniently used to safeguard a nation's self-image of its innocence."² There lies an inherent naiveté to choosing to deny the importance of an active foreign policy founded upon national security and national interest. In the crucible of the Cold War, these two powerful agents manifested in Senate debates, proxy wars, regime changes, and, of course, billions upon billions of dollars in foreign aid. The State Department, Congress, the White House, and the Central Intelligence Agency all conspired to form the policies dictating the ascendant role of the United States in geopolitics.

In the early decades of the 20th Century, President Woodrow Wilson articulated the spirit of freedom and self-determination. From the yoke of European colonialism, Wilson envisaged still-developing countries eventually dubbed the "Third World" by the

¹ Memorandum from Senator Mike Mansfield to President Lyndon Johnson, June 9, 1965. MMA Series XXII, Box 97, File 7.

² George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

Cold War, would emerge sovereign and free. Years later, in the midst of the Second World War, President Franklin Roosevelt echoed these aspirations and lobbied for independence for dozens of would-be nation states. These locales would provide the battlegrounds in the nascent struggle between capitalist freedom and communist totalitarianism. Far away, in Southeast Asia, a small country called Vietnam challenged American policymakers for decades and eventually forced a schism in the entire perception of United States government.

For hundreds of years, the Vietnamese people fought to repel the Chinese aggressors from the north who considered the Indochina salient a logical extension of the empire. In the 20th Century, the Japanese, the French, and ultimately the Americans would come to know the extent of the Vietnamese resolve for independence. Born Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890 in a coastal province of Annam, Ho Chi Minh ultimately became the face of the tiny country of mountains and jungles.³ Ho grew up in a middle class environment, raised by his father Nguyen Sinh Sac, an educated government worker. Exposed at an early age to the oppression of French colonialism, Cung changed his name to Nguyen Tat Thanh at age 10, and was educated before leaving for France. After he spent two years at sea under yet another name, Van Ba, this precocious character from Vietnam embarked on a tour of Western Europe that included stops in London and Paris, where he joined the French Socialist Party.⁴

³ In the late 19th Century, French administrators divided Vietnam into three regions: Tonkin in the North, Annam in the center, and Cochin China in the South. See also Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, (New York: Random House, 2012), 7.

⁴ Brocheux, 195.

While cultivating the ideas of revolution in France, he drafted the *Demands of the Annamite People*. Above the signature, *Nguyen Ai Quoc*—Nguyen the Patriot—Ho presented the charter to the Versailles conference in June 1919, only to be ignored by Western Powers who were preoccupied with reparations and the military emasculation of Germany.⁵ For hundreds of years had struggled under the ominous hegemony of China to the north, and for nearly another century endured the French. Politically adept Quoc was also a realist who was willing to employ any means necessary to achieve his goal of an independent Vietnam.

Though enmeshed with a Confucian philosophy, the Bolshevik Revolution inspired Quoc and he displayed a proclivity toward the Soviet model of Communism. He traveled to Moscow in 1923 where he was present at many political congresses, imploring the Comintern that “capitalist poison” is aimed directly at the underdeveloped colonies and “primary objective of revolution in the colonies was the liberation of preindustrial societies, which are as open to revolution as the advanced capitalist nations.”⁶

A decade later, after years of globetrotting and performing incredible amounts of legwork, literal and figurative, Ho adjudicated the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party. Charged with organizing dissidents, exiles, and other anti-French elements, a new communist leader began to prepare to take independence from the

⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid*, 25, 27.

vainglorious French. From these efforts in the 1930s, the Vietnamese communists established nascent political bases and intelligence networks in Hanoi and Hue.⁷

In 1942, Nguyen the Patriot finally took the name Ho Chi Minh, “Well of Light.” During World War II, he worked with the resistance movement in Indochina battling the rapacious wave of Japanese resource allocation. Covertly working with the Office of Strategic Services during the war, Ho helped rescue downed American pilots from the dense jungles of Indochina. Though an ardent revolutionary Leninist, at this period he realized the political and logistical common sense in developing a positive rapport with the most powerful nation in the world. In 1944, Marine Lieutenant Charles Fenn, working with the OSS and Air Ground Aid Services met with Ho, deep in the Chinese jungle, and discussed compensation for the rescue of Lieutenant Rudolph Shaw the year before.

I asked him what he’d want in return for helping us. Arms and medicine, he said. I told him the arms would be difficult, because of the French. We discussed the problem of the French. Ho insisted that the Independence League [Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh]⁸ were only anti-Jap ... It was agreed that we should have a further meeting.⁹

In the wake of the Japanese surrender in 1945, Ho again took the world stage at a propitious moment, “The decisive hour has struck for the destiny of our people,” and on August 25 accepted the abdication of colonial emperor Bao Dai.¹⁰ Throughout the early years of his revolutionary movement, Ho Chi Minh consistently viewed the United States as the most important player in achieving independence for Vietnam and propagandized

⁷ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam*, (New York: Random House, 2012), 17.

⁸ *CIA.gov*, s.v., Thomas Ahern, Jr., “CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1964-63 (U), page 1. http://www.foia.cia.gov/vietnam/2_CIA_AND_THE_HOUSE_OF_NGO.pdf (accessed 1/21/2013) Hereafter cited as “CIA and the House of Ngo.”

⁹ Duiker, William J., *Ho Chi Minh*, (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 289.

¹⁰ Logevall, 94.

his association with the Americans during the war. Complicating matters, in August American OSS operative Archimedes Patti appeared in Hanoi with Ho Chi Minh when the communist “seized” power following the Japanese departure. With no clear orders beyond establishing an intelligence network, Patti built a working relationship with Ho. Despite the communist taint of his revolution, Ho appealed to the spirit of freedom articulated by Roosevelt, “Why don’t you live up to the provisions of the Atlantic Charter. Have you forgotten the Fourteen Points of [President Woodrow] Wilson? Why don’t you just support us? All we want is moral support.”¹¹ In a short time, Patti developed a certain respect for Ho, but despite historical allegation, the OSS presence in Indochina remained outside any political or military maneuvering. “I was there in Hanoi for the specific purpose of making the arrangements for the surrender of the Japanese to Chinese Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek. I was there for the specific purpose of assisting the allied POWs to be repatriated.”¹² The following month in Saigon, OSS operative Peter Dewey headed to the airport to leave the country, only to be murdered *en route* by a Vietminh ambush. Before leaving, Dewey reported, “Cochinchina is burning, the French and British are finished here and we ought to clear out of Southeast Asia.”¹³

In June 1946, Ho Chi Minh traveled to France to secure some fashion of independence. At the renowned Fontainebleau retreat outside of Paris, Ho Chi Minh appealed to internationalism and free trade. “If the capitalists come to our country, it will be a good thing for them. They will make money, but not as it was made in the old days.

¹¹ Quoted in Michael Charlton & Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ Quoted in Logevall, 117.

From now on it is fifty-fifty.”¹⁴ Sanguine, perhaps, but realistic as well, historian Frederik Logevall notes the absence at the Fontainebleau talks of high ranking French officials with the capacity to change policy. Ho understood this, and left France with little to show for his efforts.

That October, in an uncertain political environment, a skirmish broke out in Haiphong harbor that left “240 Vietnamese and seven Frenchmen” dead.¹⁵ Earlier in the year, France had reintroduced combat troops into Vietnam with convictions to reassert France’s image on the world stage and resume control over the bounty of natural resources. Following the attack, aggressive French officers responded with extreme prejudice, “The moment has arrived to teach a hard lesson to those who have so treacherously attacked us. By every possible means you must take complete control of Haiphong and force the Vietnamese government and army into submission.”¹⁶ Thus began the French Indochina War.

A month later, voters in Montana reelected Representative Mike Mansfield to another term. Humble and unassuming, Mansfield had arrived in Washington four years previous with a colorful story of dislocation, wanderlust, and a quiet, yet sincere patriotism. Born in New York City in 1903, Mansfield moved to Great Falls at an early age following the death of his mother. Raised by relatives, the precocious teenager worked his way into the United States Navy at fourteen and served aboard escort convoys to and from Europe in the early stages of World War I. By 1922, Mansfield had served in the Navy, Army, and the Marine Corps. During his service as a Marine, he travelled to

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁵ Logevall, 157.

¹⁶ Quoted in Logevall, 157.

the Philippine Islands and briefly to China. After the war, Mansfield did a brief stint in the mines of Butte, Montana, then returned to school and presented a Master's Thesis on the diplomatic relations between Korea and the United States in the latter part of the 19th Century. Fascinated by the intrigue of the Far East, Mansfield gained employment at the university in Missoula and taught history of the Far East and Latin America. In 1934, Mike Mansfield's thesis innocently offered a clue to the future. Discussing the United States' decision not to honor the "Treaty of Amity and Commerce," he concluded, "After all, we had no imperialistic designs in Korea; we had no class clamoring for a commercial or political foothold; we had no real and vital interests in the country; therefore, the treaty of 1882 notwithstanding, we had no business there. Thus, we departed and left Korea to her fate."¹⁷

Mansfield continued to lecture on Asia until the outbreak of World War II, when he entered politics. He ran for a seat in Congress after the political implosion of Montana's isolationist platform following Pearl Harbor, and his experience in the classroom and his military service earned him a place on the House Foreign Affairs committee and an appointment to a Franklin Roosevelt sponsored fact-finding mission to China in 1944. Personally and professionally devoted to the Far East, Congressman Mansfield's stature and authority increasingly grew into tangible influence over official policy in Southeast Asia. His prerogative would contribute to America's descent into Vietnam, but his tireless efforts would also help to extricate U.S. forces and end the war.

In Washington, decisions made in late 1946 and early 1947 by the Truman administration affected policymaking in Southeast Asia for three decades. Following

¹⁷ Quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 41-2.

World War II, players at the highest levels of government, both American and British, decided the fate of the 20th Century. Pervading thought linked European security with Asian stability. According to historian John Lewis Gaddis, “[E]vents in Southeast Asia [could not] remain separate from those in Europe: a French collapse in Indochina would surely undermine morale in France and thereby weaken NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).”¹⁸ France, meanwhile, vainly struggled to reclaim her stature and vigilantly confounded the prosecution of the Cold War. From the humiliation at the hands of the Germans for the second time in mere decades, to the insistence of reclaiming her colonial possessions after the war, France’s political failures would yet again cost the lives of thousands of American soldiers. Forced to respond to a global confrontations instigated by French insecurity, U.S. Presidents, Secretaries of State, and Congressional leaders faced an impossible situation that eventually demanded a reevaluation of foreign policy and the scrutiny of the extents of executive power.¹⁹

From Mike Mansfield’s staunch support of fellow cold warrior Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, to his complete reappraisal of what was truly vital to the security of the United States in the fight against communism, Mansfield became the Congressional authority on the Far East. His influence grew with his elevation to the Senate in 1952. The “Godfather” of Ngo Dinh Diem, Mansfield prevailed upon the Eisenhower administration in the face of concerted opposition by the State Department, the French, and a majority of the Vietnamese to sanction Diem’s regime.

¹⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 157.

¹⁹ Portions of the introductory pages appear in unpublished papers by the author.

A decade later, two presidents fell to assassins in the span of a few weeks, and Senate Majority Leader Mansfield began a campaign to reconsider our interests in Southeast Asia. This raised questions to the empirical motives behind American foreign policy in the midst of the amorphous and volatile climate of the cold war. The White House bristled. President Johnson had inherited a volatile situation he cared little about, and maintained principal Kennedy advisors to manage Vietnam, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. Kennedy and Johnson both missed opportunities to avoid war in Southeast Asia, but political imperatives wrought by the greater forces of the cold war mitigated those chances. Hubris and fear doth protest. Johnson and his advisors wasted little effort marginalizing Mansfield's conclusions. Intrepid and resolute, Mansfield pushed back with an exhaustive series of memoranda to the White House detailing alternatives to the growing mess in Vietnam.

Approaching the twenty-fifth anniversary of the general end of the cold war, the United States still deals with the legacy of foreign policy choices—from Roosevelt to Reagan. These choices cultivated the global perception of American ideals and motives that continue to influence the state of the world. Diplomatic challenges to policymaking today remain largely ideological, largely manifested in a fundamental religion unafraid to provoke the most powerful nations on earth. Lessons from the free world's half-century contest against Communism implore the need for competent and unequivocal leadership. Competent foreign policy demands active participation from the Congress to offer advice and consent to White House strategies in geopolitics. History has proven the complexity

of selling military action to the public, particularly when presidents have chosen to bypass Congressional counsel. Senator Mansfield vigilantly supported the primacy of the executive in foreign affairs, but at no time advocated the removal of Congress from policymaking. In a 1956 article in *Harpers*, editors noted, “Few Americans realize that Senator Mike Mansfield is widely regarded abroad as the chief architect of U.S. foreign policy for Southeast Asia.”²⁰ As the 1960s progressed, once-powerful voices on Capitol Hill became mute in the ears of Lyndon Johnson. Perhaps contemporary players in the “most dangerous game” of peace and war would be well served to seek guidance from the erudite tutelage of Private Mike Mansfield, U.S. Marine, professor, congressman, cold warrior, Senate Majority Leader, ambassador to Japan, and Montana statesman.

²⁰ Quoted in Olson, 71.

CHAPTER 2

MIKE MANSFIELD

[T]here is a good possibility of victory in Indo-china within a period of two years if we will not slacken in the sending of military materials to that area.

Senator Mike Mansfield
July 29, 1953²¹

Considered one of the most perilous times in American history, the Cold War sparked conflict throughout the world, from Europe to Southeast Asia, and reached even the most remote corners of the world. For hundreds of years, Chinese warlords invaded and intermittently conquered the mountains and jungles, but never the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. In a new century of democracy and self-interest in geopolitics, Vietnamese nationalist Ho Chi Minh appealed to the delegates at the Versailles Peace Conference following World War I. In 1945, at the end of World War II, Ho declared Vietnamese independence. An avowed Marxist, Ho failed to convince Western powers to support his quest for a unified, sovereign Vietnam. While the Soviet Union absorbed portions of Eastern Europe, Ho Chi Minh's communist ideology precluded any potential recognition by the Allies following World War II.

In 1949, Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist forces defeated the Nationalist armies of Chiang Kai-Shek. The political impact in Washington was profound. The following year, the outbreak of the Korean War and homegrown espionage galvanized American anticommunism. General Dwight Eisenhower won the presidential election in

²¹ Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield, *MSA Allocation to Indochina 7/29/53*, Mike Mansfield Archives, University of Montana, Missoula, MT, Series 21, Box 37, File 11. (Hereafter cited as MMA)

1952, and with the Republican assertion that President Harry Truman “lost” China, the incoming executive chose to make a stand in Indochina, bringing the ideas of “containment” to Southeast Asia. In Washington, D.C., policy debates became ideological contests embroiling an entire generation in a conflict that forever changed American politics. As the new administration increased its commitment to Indochina, an unassuming freshman senator began to play a principal role in foreign policy that helped lead America into the Vietnam War.

In the 1952 election, American voters also sent two congressmen to the United States Senate. The pair would play fundamental roles in the formation and conduct of official policy in Indochina. Fast friends, the charismatic young Democrat from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, and pragmatic Montana populist Mike Mansfield developed a mutual confidence that endured until Kennedy’s assassination a decade later. Shortly after their elevation to the Senate, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas hosted a luncheon on May 7, 1953, in honor of self-exiled, Vietnamese nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem came to the United States looking for help to both end the French presence and defeat Ho Chi Minh’s communist forces. Diem’s speech fell upon sympathetic ears concerned with religious freedom and economic opportunity.

Official support for Diem was instrumental to policy decisions made by President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. However, Senator Mansfield’s staunch backing of Diem—including threats to suspend all congressional funding to Southeast Asia should Diem be replaced—helped force the hand of American foreign policy makers. In a speech delivered in April 1953, Mansfield tipped his hand. “The

fundamental issue of United States foreign policy for the present and the future, then, is simply this: Will we continue to work with other nations for international stability and peaceful progress, or will we abandon our efforts on the verge of their fruition?"²² More was at play, though, than support by a pair of freshman senators who happened to share Ngo Dinh Diem's Catholic faith. Later, Kennedy would play the lead after his election to the White House, but in the early 1950s, Mike Mansfield represented powerful interests who had a specific idea for who would lead non-communist Vietnam. Although he went out of his way to support the administration's diplomatic tack, Senator Mansfield underscored that "the only check on the will of the Executive lies in the congressional power of the purse."²³ Under the auspices of cold war politics, religion, and economics, lay the foundations of the Second Indochina War.

In an interview in 1967, Justice Douglas remembered the lunch fourteen years earlier. "The one man who had survived the French, the corruption of the French, and had preserved his integrity, was Ngo Dinh Diem."²⁴ Convinced there "could be no liberty under the communists," Diem conveyed the dire situation in Indochina. Playboy and French puppet Bao Dai was unable to rally support from the masses.²⁵ Douglas considered, "I wanted some important people to meet Ngo Dinh Diem. So I gave a luncheon. I invited Mike Mansfield and Jack from the Senate."²⁶ At the lunch, Diem went

²² Address Before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Friday, 4/17/53, MMA Series 21, Box 37, File 3.

²³ Quoted in Gregory A. Olson, *Mansfield and Vietnam: A Study in Rhetorical Adaptation* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 2.

²⁴ William O. Douglas, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, 11/9/67, 15. John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

²⁵ Quoted in memorandum of Conversation by Edmund Gullion of the Policy Planning Staff, 5/7/53, *FRUS: 1952-1954*, 13:553-554.

²⁶ Douglas interview, 15.

on to assess the military situation in Vietnam. “In any case, the French could not beat the Communists and would have to rely on the Vietnamese to do it.” However, convincing the Vietnamese to fight depended on the French granting expanded freedom to the populace.²⁷

Beginning in World War II, American involvement in Southeast Asia evolved in response to changing attitudes of the cold war and diplomatic relations between the western powers. Despite President Franklin Roosevelt’s push to end European colonialism in the third world, grim realities of an expansionist Soviet Union forced ensuing administrations to triage diplomatic priorities. Instead of acknowledging Ho Chi Minh’s declaration of Vietnamese independence, President Truman instead chose to back the beleaguered French—who were determined to save face and fortune by reasserting their authority in Indochina.

Truman supported France’s return to Indochina out of consideration for her help in defending Western Europe against Soviet hegemonic expansion. In 1945, future Secretary of State Dean Rusk handled American military intelligence for Southeast Asia. After Roosevelt’s death, Rusk explained: “Mr. Truman was so heavily involved in becoming President and looking after problems arising from the occupation of Germany and the continuation of the war against Japan that he did not pick up the same [anticolonial] policy attitude and press it forward.”²⁸ He officially supported an end to colonialism, and promoted independence for self-determined states following the war. Of course, there was a catch. In 1947, Secretary of State George C. Marshall clarified the

²⁷ Quoted in memo of conversation, 5/7/53, *FRUS: 1952-1954*, 13:553-554.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

U.S. position, “it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empires and administrations supplanted by philosophy and political organizations emanating from and controlled by [the] Kremlin.”²⁹ France’s defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany further confounded Washington’s position on Indochina. As Justice Douglas explained, “[O]ur support of French policies in Vietnam made it possible for France to maintain in the world a tolerable image. Otherwise, France might not have been able to survive world opinion.”³⁰ Journalist and author David Halberstam agreed, “For to the French it was a distant war, a war of vanity and pride, whereas to the Vietnamese it was a war of survival; they would pay any price.”³¹

Truman chose paths outlined by the State Department’s George Kennan and General Marshall. Containment and recovery articulated a most efficient plan for war-torn Europe, desperate for investment. Truman emphasized in 1947, “That it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”³² Three years after Truman’s doctrinal speech to Congress, two events exerted tremendous influence upon the evolution of American Cold War policy: the alleged “loss of China” to the Communists and the outbreak of war in Korea. Harvard professor John Fairbank commented that, “The ‘loss’ of China is, of course, a laughable phrase, and yet I think it is worth using

²⁹ Secretary of State George C. Marshall to the Embassy in France, 2/3/1947, *FRUS: 1947*, 6:68.

³⁰ *Loc.gov*, s.v., William O. Douglas, “One Luncheon: Two Assassinations,” William O. Douglas Papers, Part II: Speeches and Writings. Box 888, page 4 (accessed 10/30/2012)

³¹ David Halberstam, *Ho*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 94.

³² *Trumanlibrary.org*, s.v., “Draft of speech, March 11, 1947,” http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/doctrine/large/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1947-03-11&documentid=9-9 (accessed 10/8/12)

because it symbolizes the shock to the Americans.”³³ That fall, while the U.S. forces fought Chinese and North Koreans, America also subsidized France’s efforts in Southeast Asia to the tune of billions of dollars—where the French Expeditionary Corps desperately fought an unconventional war against an unpredictable enemy in an unforgiving theater. Years later, Justice Douglas estimated the price of our aid to France’s recovery and their fight against the communists in Southeast Asia: “[O]ur Marshall Plan aid to France about equaled the cost of financing in Vietnam the suppression of the Vietnamese rebellion.”³⁴

The year 1950 proved critical for the United States. War abroad and spies at home emboldened American anticommunists. Following the conviction of Alger Hiss for perjury, author Stephen Whitfield noted that, “liberalism was forced onto the defensive. A single criminal conviction had encouraged the inference that *anyone* might be a Communist, and that any communist in government might be a traitor.”³⁵ Enter the controversial and vigilant Senator Joseph McCarthy, Republican from Wisconsin. In a notorious speech given at Wheeling, West Virginia, McCarthy fired his opening salvo. “While I cannot take the time to name all the men in the State Department who have been named as members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring, I have here in my hand a list of 205.”³⁶ Thus began the obstreperous crusade of Joseph McCarthy.

In an interview decades later, Senate authority and Mansfield aide Frank Valeo explained that, “[A]nything that happened in the world, any threat in the world came

³³ Quoted in Charlton & Moncreiff, 51.

³⁴ Douglas, “One Luncheon: Two Assassinations,” page 4 (accessed 10/30/2012)

³⁵ Quoted in Gary W. Reichard, *Politics as Usual: The Age of Truman and Eisenhower*, (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1988), 59.

³⁶ *Senate.gov*, s.v., “Communists in Government Service,” 2/9/50, http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Communists_In_Government_Service.htm (accessed 10/24/12)

from Moscow and went through a hierarchy.”³⁷ Initially, this inaccurate impression weighed upon forthcoming policy decisions, and advocated urgent response to communist activity in the third world. Yet, it became clear that the Viet Minh were far from isolated from their communist patrons. Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis revealed that “the Chinese decided to provide military assistance to the Viet Minh just as the United States was deciding to supply the French: both initiatives grew out of the Communists’ victory in China; both *preceded* the outbreak of the Korean War.”³⁸ As negotiations on Korea dragged on, U.S. policy in Southeast Asia in the early 1950s always considered the chance of confrontation with Communist China in Vietnam and the Associated States.³⁹

As 1952 moved toward the election in the fall, the French mission in Indochina became increasingly dependent upon U.S. dollars and materiel. Despite a significant advantage in troop numbers, the French Expeditionary Corps simply could not make appreciable gains in the jungles and mountains. Understanding and prosecuting the political war was an imperative lost on all but a handful of individuals in France or the United States. Unlike the familiarity of European social structures and governments, Asian culture progressed along different philosophies of the individual, ancestor worship, politics, and collective desires. Early that year, U.S. officials in Paris grew ever more concerned with France’s political and military agency. “We’re approaching now the same situation we faced in the spring of 1947 when things got too much for the British and they dumped Greece and Turkey in our laps. The French can barely hold what they have

³⁷ Quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 98.

³⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 161.

³⁹ Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos comprised the Associated States of Indochina.

now.”⁴⁰ Decisions made by the Truman administration squarely placed the role of policing the globe on the incoming administration. While it remains enticing to speculate how FDR would have responded in Indochina, Washington’s wider view of global communism still floundered in the monolithic perception that Moscow was a grand puppeteer bent on world domination.

At home, the 1952 election not only ushered a new president into the White House, but it also marked the ascension of Texas Senator Lyndon Johnson, staunch liberal and the embodiment of political perspicacity unfettered by conscience. Through adept maneuvering, Johnson won the position of Senate Minority Leader. Part of the support came from Montana Senator Mike Mansfield who in turn won Johnson’s largesse. Through deft measures, Johnson built the most effective possible foreign relations team in order to parley with the powerful Republican from Ohio, Senator Robert Taft. Telling the story in *Master of the Senate*, Robert Caro describes the motivation behind Johnson’s tactics: “Mansfield out-knows Taft and [Hubert] Humphrey can out-talk him.”⁴¹

Highly respected on both sides of the aisle, Mike Mansfield brought common sense and competence to Washington. Mansfield had served on the House Foreign Relations Committee and in 1952 found himself one of, if not *the* foremost congressional authorities on East Asia. “Now I’m going to hit you with the cold water,” Minority Leader Johnson told a steering committee in January, “Mike Mansfield for Foreign

⁴⁰ Quoted in Logevall, 312.

⁴¹ Robert Caro, *Master of the Senate*. (New York: Random House, 2002), 494.

Relations.”⁴² This unique position helped the Senator gain the accolades and confidence of the Eisenhower administration, particularly Secretary of State Dulles. Mansfield’s growing expertise in Asian affairs would influence diplomacy in Southeast Asia for another twenty years.

In July 1953, Mansfield first played the funding card. On the Senate floor, Mansfield went on the record to support the administration and declared,

I do not need to tell the senate that from a strategic point of view, the most important area in all Asia is in the southeastern part of that continent. Should Indo-China fall, it would mean that the oil, rubber, rice, and tin of Southeast Asia would shortly be in communist hands [endangering] the very existence of Burma, Thailand, Malaya, India, Pakistan and all the countries eastward [*sic*] to the Suez and Mediterranean.⁴³

Early in his first Senate term, Mansfield clearly agreed with global containment, and at the same time considered American economic interests. Rapidly assuming an expert role on Southeast Asia, Mansfield drew upon his academic career. Before his election to Congress, Mansfield taught East Asian and Latin American history at the university in Missoula, Montana. Mansfield also traded upon his military deployments to both the Philippines and a 1944 congressional mission to China. Although the Senator made few attempts to quell growing praise and his perceived stature, there were few members of government, or academia for that matter, who truly had a greater understanding of Indochina in the early 1950s. Prophetically, in his July speech Mansfield had noted, “I do not want American boys sent to Indo-China but I am afraid that a possible consequence we face, if this cut is upheld, is a withdrawal from Indo-China by the French.”⁴⁴ The

⁴² *Ibid.*, 504.

⁴³ Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield, *MSA cuts to Indochina*, 7/29/53, MMA Series 21, Box 37, File 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

debate also featured an amendment by Senator Barry Goldwater—later revised by Jack Kennedy—rendering the aid package contingent upon France granting independence to Indochina. The fiery Senator from Arizona proclaimed that if the French failed to offer freedom, “as surely as day follows night our boys will follow this \$400 million.”⁴⁵

In the fall of 1953, Mansfield made his first of several trips to Indochina to obtain a first-hand assessment of the situation. In his notes, the senator offered a bleak appraisal of the French efforts to defeat the insurgents: “despite the numerical, financial, and economic superiority of the French-Vietnamese forces, the military situation has been one of near-stalemate.”⁴⁶ In a theme that would repeat in the sixties and early seventies for American forces, the French had little experience and less success fighting the unconventional warfare waged by the Viet Minh in the dense jungle. Mansfield explained, “Unlike the Korean theater, there is no battle line in Indochina. This is guerilla warfare, the very essence of which is fluidity.”⁴⁷ With the Eisenhower administration concerned with leaner, cheaper defense capabilities and a general downsizing of ground forces, Mansfield’s trip also considered the taxpayer. “In all, it is estimated that the United States is contributing about 40 percent of the total cost of the Indochina War.”⁴⁸ Echoing his sentiments of July, Mansfield supported continuing military and financial aid to France. In his official report on his findings for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in October 1953, he stressed the obligation of the United States to share the burdens of the Cold War. “In the interests of our own security, therefore is necessary that

⁴⁵ Quoted in Olson, 22

⁴⁶ Notes of Senator Mike Mansfield, *Visit to Indochina*, 9/21-9/29/53, MMA Series 13, Box 7, File 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

American aid be continued.”⁴⁹ A month later, cold warrior Mike Mansfield again shared the administration’s monolithic perception of Soviet Communism,

We can see therefore that Russia in the final analysis is not getting weaker but is in fact getting stronger all the time. Their ultimate goal is still the same, security for the Soviet Union *and* world conquest. These two objectives can and should be viewed as mutually supporting and identical.⁵⁰

In November, Mansfield received several letters offering official encouragement following the Senator’s report on his first visit to Indochina—letters from persons familiar with the situation in Vietnam. On November 2, State Department counsel Douglas MacArthur II wrote, “I was struck particularly by the clarity with which you stated the problems involved and your estimate of future possibilities.”⁵¹ On the 17th, the day before his “defense and security” speech, Assistant Secretary of State Livingston Merchant wrote, “I think it is a remarkably clear and concise statement of the problem in that area of the world. Your report will serve a valuable purpose in clarifying the issues in Indochina.”⁵² His stature grew. Later that month, Frederick Nolting, special assistant to Secretary Dulles, regarded specifics: “Your report was heartening, not only because of its general endorsement of U.S. policy toward Indo-China, but [your conclusion] that the probability of success warrants the very large contribution that the United States is making.”⁵³ In the Senate for barely a year, Mike Mansfield began to validate the administration’s growing dependence upon him for matters related to Southeast Asia.

⁴⁹ Mike Mansfield, “Indochina: A Study Mission to the Associated States of Indochina, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos,” 10/27/1953, MMA Series 13, Box 7, File 5.

⁵⁰ Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield, *Our Defense and Security*, 11/18/1953, MMA Series 21, Box 37, File 13.

⁵¹ Letter from Douglas MacArthur II to Senator Mansfield, 11/2/1953, MMA Series 13, Box 6, File 1.

⁵² Letter from Livingston T. Merchant to Senator Mansfield, 11/17/1953, MMA Series 13, Box 6, File 1.

⁵³ Letter from Frederick E. Nolting, Jr. to Senator Mansfield, 11/24/1953, MMA Series 13, Box 6, File 1.

In January of 1954, Eisenhower committed the United States to the future of Vietnam with the approval of Nation Security Council paper 5405. “With continued U.S. economic and material assistance, the Franco-Vietnamese forces are not in danger of being military defeated by the Viet Minh.”⁵⁴ On February 8, Mansfield delivered another speech on the situation. In it he declared that “[I]n January the 400th ship carrying American assistance to Indochina arrived at Haiphong [carrying] ammunition, transports, and combat vehicles, military aircraft, navy vessels, communication equipment, small arms and automatic weapons, artillery, hospital supplies, engineering and other equipment.”⁵⁵ It soon became clear that the French were squandering the treasure. In the same speech, Mansfield addressed the fundamental problems facing Vietnam, in particular. Regarding the most efficient strategy in confronting the communist insurgents, the Senator noted, “[T]he state which can make the greatest contribution by far, if it will forget its internal squabbling and shoulder the responsibilities it must if it is to become and remain independent is the State of Vietnam.”⁵⁶

That spring, Vietminh forces responded to a defensive stand made by French commander Henri Navarre in a remote valley in northwest Vietnam near the Laotian border called Dien Bien Phu. Dien Bien Phu sat at a crossroads of muddy and rutted roads leading into China to the north, Laos barely a dozen miles to the west, and south-southeast through the Plain of Jars on the future Ho Chi Minh Trail, and represented a multi-faceted strategic goal. According to Logevall, control of the outpost also afforded control over the local opium trade that was integral to the financing of special operations.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Logevall, 427.

⁵⁵ Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield, *Indo-China Crisis*, 2/8/1954, MMA Series 21, Box 37, File 18.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

“Retaking Dien Bien Phu would ensure that the opium crop remained in effective French control.”⁵⁷ The potential of opium profits falling into Viet Minh hands justified to French commanders the importance of the region.

Senator Mansfield already had knowledge of the situation. On April 2, Arnaud de Borchgrave, reporter for *Newsweek*, wrote to the senator. “I don’t have to tell you that the fall of Dienbienphu would be a major disaster with incalculable consequences in Southeast Asia and in France.”⁵⁸ In Asia, perspective on the situation differed. Chairman Mao Zedong was determined that a French defeat would have “not only military but great political significance, and ... a great impact on [the] international situation.”⁵⁹ On the Senate floor, Mansfield outlined the diplomatic challenges waiting at the upcoming Geneva Conference. Senator George Malone from Nevada challenged Mansfield: “There is no doubt, I suppose, in anyone’s mind that Red China is behind the war in Indochina at this time.” Mansfield replied, “None at all.”⁶⁰ In fact, Chinese strategists urged a shift in theater from the deltas to the mountainous northwest. “We should first annihilate enemies in the Lai Chau area, liberating northern and central Laos, and then extend the battlefield gradually toward southern Laos and Cambodia, thus putting pressure on the Saigon.”⁶¹

General Navarre’s plan was a strategic blunder. The order came as “Personal and Secret Instructions for the Conduct of Operation No. 949.”⁶² The communists slowly encircled and decimated the French through costly human wave assaults and effective

⁵⁷ Logevall, 383.

⁵⁸ Letter from Arnaud de Borchgrave to Senator Mansfield, 4/2/1954, MMA Series 13, Box 6, File 2.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Gaddis, 162.

⁶⁰ *Congressional Record*, 4/14/1954, MMA Series 21, Box 37, File 29.

⁶¹ Quoted in Logevall, 387.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 392.

placement of artillery on the steep valley walls—artillery carried over the rugged mountain jungle by thousands of Chinese porters—compliments of Mao. On May 13, the communists declared victory. Vietminh General Vo Nguyen Giap crowed, “We have brought failure to the Navarre Plan and struck a rude blow against the intrigues of the French colonialist warmongers and the American interventionists who wanted to expand the Indochina War.”⁶³ After the battle, correspondent Larry Allen reported to Mansfield from Hanoi that, “Now that the epic battle is finished, the Reds are rapidly shifting their forces to the Delta. My guess is that the attack will come within six weeks, unless the shooting is stopped at the Geneva Conference.”⁶⁴

President Eisenhower made one of the most important decisions of the Cold War by *not* joining the battle at Dien Bien Phu. Presented with several options, Eisenhower and Dulles lobbied for a multi-lateral response to the situation. While the French solicited military assistance, particularly in the form of air support, the British paused, and helped seal the Legionnaires’ fate. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was resolute: “I have suffered Singapore, Hong Kong, [and] Tobruk, the French will have Dien Bien Phu.”⁶⁵ Vexing to the President, according to his biographer Stephen Ambrose, “he felt the French had to be dealt with like children.”⁶⁶ Paris continued to balk at the proposed European Defense Council, yet cried for American air strikes, possibly atomic, against the Viet Minh. Certain Americans supported the French requests, to which Ike responded: “You boys must be crazy. We can’t use those awful things against the Asians for the

⁶³ Quoted in Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1966), 423.

⁶⁴ Letter from Larry Allen to Senator Mansfield, 5/29/1954, MMA Series 13, Box 6, File 2.

⁶⁵ David L. Anderson, *Trapped By Success*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 34.

⁶⁶ Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 362.

second time in less than ten years. My God.”⁶⁷ These tense discussions in the spring of 1954 engendered the idea of a Southeast Asian alliance that would allow greater flexibility to respond to communist activity in the region.

Negotiating from a position of strength, representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam arrived at the table in Geneva with tangible hopes of recognition on the world stage. To the chagrin of Vietminh envoy Pham Van Dong, the Soviet Union and China played influential roles in the division of the country at the 17th parallel—roles that undermined the communist push for a unified Vietnam. On May 18, 1954, a deputy to Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai made it clear to the French, “[W]e are here to reestablish peace, not to back the Vietminh.”⁶⁸ Geneva helped nearly everyone involved except the Vietnamese. As the conference approached a settlement, Soviet Minister Vayacheslav Molotov adjudicated the proceedings. Without consideration for their Vietnamese comrades, Molotov and Zhou decided on the demarcation parallel that bisected Vietnam and scheduled free elections in two years. Incensed with Zhou, Pham Van Dong left the table with contempt: “He has double-crossed us.”⁶⁹ Recent sources corroborate the Chinese motivations at Geneva. “For the Chinese as well as the Viet Minh, clearly, one thing mattered most of all: keeping the United States out.”⁷⁰

Following yet another military defeat despite substantial American assistance, France’s power in Southeast Asia dissipated. Eisenhower’s decision not to provide direct military action to lift the siege at Dien Bien Phu and the subsequent consequences of the

⁶⁷ Quoted in Ambrose, 363.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 217.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 220.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Logevall, 599.

Geneva agreement that spring and summer effectively assigned the United States caretaker of Indochina. In France, Bao Dai realized he would lose his sponsor, and recognized that Ngo Dinh Diem's Catholicism offered a promising route to American aid. Cables between the State Department and Geneva deliberated over America's role in Vietnam following the conference. Secretary of State Dulles weighed the potential Diem option, "I believe this offer should be discreetly exploited." Historian David Anderson reported that Bao Dai seized the moment after Geneva and postulated, "[T]he time for the Americans had arrived."⁷¹

In his extensive study on race and religion in Vietnam, Seth Jacobs revealed, "the fact that Diem was a Christian and his rivals were not proved to be the organizing principle that Dulles and other policymakers seized upon in solving the riddle of Vietnam."⁷² Jacobs synthesized politics, religion, culture, and society in his study of Diem. Anticommunism offered a convenient pretext for promoting Christian values in third world governments. Racial and ethnocentric ideologies pervaded intellectual thought in the 1950s, and subsequently spilled over into policymaking. As early as 1951, Secretary of State Dean Acheson commented on Catholic agency in the fight against communism. "The Catholics are patriotic, sympathetic to the West, and have higher standards of probity and conduct than those generally prevailing in Vietnam."⁷³

Beyond being Catholic, Diem, according to former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Charles Spinks, was "anti-French, anticommunist, progressive, liberal, [and] a good

⁷¹ Anderson, 53.

⁷² Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

possibility as an American tool in Indochina.”⁷⁴ In late 1950, Diem arrived in Washington accompanied by his brother Ngo Dinh Thuc, Catholic Bishop of Hue. With the considerable largesse of a devoted Catholic faction, Diem’s new handlers presented to the American public an enlightened humanitarian concerned with advancing the rights of free men. One of Diem’s first contacts was political activist Christopher Emmet, who wrote a letter to Massachusetts Republican Christian Herter, asking him to introduce Diem to legislators Walter Judd, Mike Mansfield and Edna Kelly. Though Diem would not meet Mansfield until 1953, according to author Joseph Morgan, Diem impressed Representative Kelly.⁷⁵ Despite the warm welcome from certain ideologues in Washington, in September 1950 a pragmatic assessment made by the State Department in a cable to the Saigon embassy disagreed. Acting Secretary of State James Webb stated that Diem was “steeped in Oriental intrigue and concerned equally if not more, we suspect, with furthering his own personal ambitions than solving [the] complex problems of his country today.”⁷⁶

On paper, the Diem experiment held promise, hope, and legitimacy to stand up to the communist threat in Southeast Asia. Following the 1954 Geneva Accords, and with the backing of powerful factions within the United States government, Diem returned to Indochina to govern the pseudo-state of South Vietnam. From the American embassy in Thailand, Ambassador William Vanden Heuvel wrote to Mansfield, “Now that we have a Vietnamese leader without taint, I should hope that our government will lend every

⁷⁴ Jacobs, 26.

⁷⁵ Joseph G. Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 5.

⁷⁶ Telegram from the Acting Secretary of State to the Legation in Saigon, 9/28/1950, *FRUS 1950*, 6: 886.

means to build him into the strong figure that he must become.”⁷⁷ On paper, western media propagandized Diem as a “miracle man,” propped up by American tax dollars. A few years later, publishing mogul Henry Luce pontificated, “President Ngo Dinh Diem is one of the greatest statesmen of Asia and of the world ... In honoring him we pay tribute to the eternal values which all free men everywhere are prepared to defend with their lives.”⁷⁸

Mansfield made a second trip to Vietnam in 1954 in conjunction with the Manila Conference that drafted the South East Asia Treaty Organization. From the ashes of Geneva where Eisenhower and Dulles failed to obtain multilateral support to relieve the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, the Manila Pact contained a protocol that was “crucial in Dulles’s eyes. [I]t provided a legal basis for intervention in Indochina of the type that had been missing in the spring debate concerning United Action, and it was a pointer that Washington would not stand idly by if South Vietnam looked likely to go Communist.”⁷⁹ In a foreign policy speech delivered the following spring at Carroll College in Helena, Montana, Mansfield described the situation facing Diem. “[H]e has been opposed not only by the Communists, but by a fantastic assortment of gangsters, racketeers, ex-river pirates, witch doctors of strange religious sects and French colonial adventurers.”⁸⁰ David Halberstam writes, “It was a time of human bankruptcy in South Vietnam and Diem was the one straw for a grasping America.”⁸¹ The Senator stressed the dismal options

⁷⁷ Letter from William J. Vanden Heuvel to Senator Mansfield, 6/17/1954, MMA Series 13, Box 6, File 2.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Jacobs, 221.

⁷⁹ Logevall, 625.

⁸⁰ Speech by Senator Mike Mansfield, “American Foreign Policy in the Far East,” 5/22/1955, MMA Series 21, Box 37, File 62.

⁸¹ David Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964), 12.

remaining to lead the government outside other than Diem. Mansfield's convictions relieved American policymakers who envisioned the quintessential leader of a third world nation struggling for existence on the front lines of the Cold War. On paper, they were right.

After Geneva, Diem refused to open his government to political rivals who offered any potential to reach the masses and widen his base of support. Despite continual pleas from American advisors, this intransigence proved to be one of the primary failures in Diem's vision of government and helped to expedite his own demise. According to a CIA report declassified in 2009, Ngo Dinh Nhu commented on his brother's obduracy in 1954, "He won't listen," Nhu told the CIA, "he sits there with his ears closed." The operative agreed, "[Diem] lived with God, like a cloistered monk."⁸² In *The Vietnam Lobby*, Joseph Morgan accurately points out "By the time it became evident that he was pursuing a very different course of action, America had already committed itself deeply to the survival of his regime."⁸³

Neither the United States nor the newly created South Vietnam signed the Geneva Accords. The convention achieved an "official" cease-fire and marked the end of significant French military presence in Vietnam. One profound extant of Geneva involved a massive migration of mostly Catholics from the north that inflamed cultural animosities in Cochin China that Diem did little to ameliorate.⁸⁴ These animosities plagued the regime until American patience wore thin. Incapable of responding to

⁸² "CIA and the House of Ngo," 12.

⁸³ Morgan, 14.

⁸⁴ The historic regional names of Vietnam are Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China—North, Central, and South, respectively.

political realities in a mature, democratic fashion, and allowing his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu to operate a brutal secret police, Diem wasted a genuine opportunity to be a competent and responsible player in the war against communist aggression.

Within months of becoming head of a nascent, problematic government, Diem quickly gained critics. Considering the lingering problems of the puppet ruler Bao Dai, the truculent French, and Diem's inability to deal with the religious sects, Ambassador Donald Heath articulated the issue to the State Department on September 29. In light of recent coup threats by ambitious chief of staff General Nguyen Van Hinh, Heath cabled Washington, "Diem's intrinsic faults may yet create a situation making his replacement necessary."⁸⁵ After meeting Diem for the first time, Malcolm Macdonald, the British diplomatic authority in Southeast Asia, commented that, "He's the worst prime minister I've ever seen."⁸⁶

In October, President Eisenhower sent "Lightning Joe" Collins to Saigon to assess the situation with the rank of ambassador. In World War II, Collins had served as one of Eisenhower's most trusted corps commanders. In his 1979 autobiography, the General recalled meeting Diem. "My first impression," he wrote, "was of a pleasant, pudgy little man, self-conscious and not quite sure of himself. The tenacity and stubbornness that I later learned to know did not show in his round placid face, topped by a head of thick black hair."⁸⁷ With instructions to support Diem's government, Collins also discovered discord in General Hinh. On November 12, departing ambassador Donald Heath spoke

⁸⁵ Telegram from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Donald Heath) to the Department of State, 9/29/54, *FRUS 1952-1954*, 13: 2092.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Jacobs, 176.

⁸⁷ General J. Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe: An Autobiography*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1994), 383.

with General Hinh about Diem's refusal to subordinate control over the military. Heath cabled Washington, "[Hinh] said he realized Vietnam needs American aid but if that aid, employed under incompetent leadership, leads to certain defeat, Vietnam would do without it."⁸⁸ Hinh pondered whether he would answer Bao Dai's summon to France or not. In the same telegram, Heath assured the general of the efforts to impress upon Diem the importance of broadening his government. Hinh left the meeting declaring, "[H]e would decide in 48 hours whether to go to France or start a revolution and he said that if he did not leave there would be trouble."⁸⁹ Days later, General Collins "assured him (Hinh) that if he attempted a coup it would mean the end of military aid to Vietnam."⁹⁰ What little faith Diem's regime that Collins had, quickly disappeared.

At the same time, the CIA charged Colonel Edward Lansdale with assisting Diem in strengthening his government. After World War II, Col. Lansdale helped defeat an insurgency of the communist Hukbalahap rebels in the Philippines. By the summer of 1954, the CIA began parallel missions in South Vietnam: a "regular station" headed by Paul Harwood, and the "Saigon Military Mission," which Lansdale ran. Officially, an Air Attaché on loan from the Air Force, Lansdale enjoyed direct channels to the Director of Central Intelligence and the Secretary of State in Washington. "The key element in this was Lansdale's standing with the Dulles brothers," Thomas Ahern, CIA analyst and historian concluded, "which gave him more influence over policymakers in Washington

⁸⁸ Telegram from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Heath) to the Department of State, 11/12/54, *FRUS 1952-1954*, 13: 2239.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2241.

⁹⁰ Collins, 385.

than he exercised over the Vietnamese government in Saigon.”⁹¹ With civilian experience in advertising, Ed Lansdale was consistent in his belief in the value of humanitarian, economic, and societal concerns in the fight against communism. In mid-November, 1954, Lansdale suggested to Diem a public works project funded by the Binh Xuyen vice lords to simultaneously broaden the scope of Diem’s government and end a bitter feud all while building a much-needed highway. Bay Vien, the Binh Xuyen leader approached Diem with the proposal. Diem refused, stating, “After all, the man’s a scoundrel.” In his 1972 autobiography, Lansdale remembered, “I was shocked by his political obtuseness, and I told him so. He had failed to make use of a constructive solution to a vexing problem.”⁹² As has been asserted, Diem’s strict moral code and general suspicion prevented him from attaining effective political agency. Lansdale added, “A gangster scorned is as deadly as the proverbial female. One day there would be hell to pay.”⁹³

Adding to the challenges to Diem and his advisors, despite the end of political and temporal control in Vietnam, French presence in Saigon openly opposed the Diem regime and conspired with the sects. Frustrated, Lansdale cabled Allen Dulles. He entreated Washington to stop with the “French parlor game,” going as far as to suggest “a military coup in Paris to make [a] lady out of [a] slut.” He opined that it would take only a “handful [of] strong-minded US officials to change [the] entire complexion [of the] world picture.”⁹⁴ Footnotes of Ahern’s “CIA and the House of Ngo” indicate there was no response from Dulles to Lansdale’s suggestion of a coup in Paris.

⁹¹ Quoted in “CIA and the House of Ngo,” 17.

⁹² Edward Geary Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), 177.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Quoted in “CIA and the House of Ngo,” 30.

On December 13, Saigon cabled the State Department that the Diem family refused to relinquish control of the military. “At present I am highly dubious of Diem’s ability to succeed but prefer to reserve final judgment until the early part of January; [and] alternatives to support of Diem should be explored within [the] U.S. Government.”⁹⁵ Two days later, Under Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr.’s telegram to Saigon elucidated Mike Mansfield’s growing role in American involvement in Vietnam. “Senator Mansfield recognizes Diem’s weaknesses but emphasized his virtues of honesty, incorruptibility, patriotism, and self-evident anti-Communism. He fears replacement would create seriously increased confusion and even anarchy.”⁹⁶

Within a few months, General Collins became convinced that the obstinacy of the Diem regime precluded any formation of responsible and broadly supported government. Tensions mounted in Saigon when, in opposition to Diem’s government, the principal religious sects Cao Dai and Hoa Hao entered into a tenuous alliance with the Binh Xuyen. Despite repeated advice from many sources to make concessions, Diem refused to include representatives of the opposition. By spring, Collins was beside himself after sending a string of telegrams to Washington demanding the replacement of Diem. Just before midnight on March 31, 1955, Collins fired a cable to the State Department, “I am convinced that Diem has had a fair chance to establish [an] effective government. He himself has produced little if anything of a constructive nature.”⁹⁷ Just after noon the next

⁹⁵ Telegram from the Charge in Vietnam (Kidder) to the Department of State, 12/13/54, *FRUS 1952-1954*, 13: 2366.

⁹⁶ Telegram from the acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 12/15/54, *FRUS 1952-1954*, 13: 2378.

⁹⁷ Telegram from the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State, 3/31/1955, *FRUS 1955-1957*, 1: 169.

day, Dulles had a phone conversation with Eisenhower about the latest telegrams from Collins. In a memorandum of the call, Eisenhower at first hesitated, but then stated, “the Secretary still thinks we should talk to Mansfield, and the Pres[ident] indicated assent.”⁹⁸

An hour later, Dulles met with Mansfield to discuss the situation. The senator did not agree with Collins. “I said that all four alternatives [presented by Collins] were worse than keeping Diem in office; that if Diem quite [*sic*] or was overthrown, there would very likely be civil war.”⁹⁹ On orders to speak with French General Paul Ely, Collins found the French disdainful of Diem. Ely declared that, “it was in [the] interest of Vietnam and [the] free world that Diem not be saved,” and was “prepared to accept anyone but Diem.”¹⁰⁰ Recalled to Washington for a face to face with John Foster Dulles and President Eisenhower, Collins met with Lansdale before he left Saigon to discuss the official line coming from the State Department. “Collins replied flatly that I should tell Diem that the U.S. would support him.” Lansdale then remembered that Collins added “a strange remark. He told me that I might hear all sorts of rumors of other things, even stories that the U.S. wouldn’t support Diem. I was to disregard such tales.”¹⁰¹

On April 21, the General met with representatives from the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA. As Collins recalled, “It was obvious that several of the State Department people did not agree with my assessment of Diem.”¹⁰² Opposing camps in Washington parleyed over Diem’s immediate future. That same afternoon, Pierre Millet,

⁹⁸ Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation between the President and the Secretary of State, 4/1/1955, *FRUS 1955-1957*, 1:175.

⁹⁹ Memorandum of conversation with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, 4/1/1955, MMA Series 22, Box 107, File 7.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Jacobs, 199.

¹⁰¹ Lansdale, 276-7

¹⁰² Collins, 405.

Minister of the French Embassy in Washington visited Mike Mansfield. In a memorandum for his files, Mansfield guessed, “Evidently, he was here to pressure me into changing my position on Diem, but I still feel he is the only man who stands a chance, and it is a long chance of keeping South Vietnam free.” Mansfield’s support of Diem was resolute. Convinced of the vacuum of alternatives with legitimate agency in the Republic of Vietnam, the senator noted his growing influence in the same memo. “It appears to me that the administration in discussing the Indo-China situation with the French Ambassador here is in effect putting the major responsibility on me.”¹⁰³ On the 25th, Frank Valeo sent a letter to Mansfield summarizing a meeting with Wesley Fishel, a longtime Diem supporter. Valeo wrote, “Fishel believes that the latest difficulty is unquestionably related to the change of government in Paris and that the principal cause of trouble is with our ally France, no question of that. They are determined to get Diem out.”¹⁰⁴

According to David Anderson, Collins finally broke through on April 25. He met with Dulles for lunch, and the Secretary of State hesitantly “accepted a shift in U.S. policy but tried to hold out ... until a Vietnamese-inspired solution appeared.”¹⁰⁵ Two days later, after lengthy deliberations with the State Department, CIA, and Mansfield, cables went out to Paris and Saigon. Dulles acquiesced: “After full consultations with

¹⁰³ Memorandum of Conversation with Pierre Millet, Minister of the French Embassy, 4/21/1955, MMA Series 22, Box 102, File 7.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Frank Valeo to Senator Mansfield, 4/21/55, MMA Series 22, Box 102, File 7. Wesley Fishel headed a Michigan State University team sent to Vietnam to help Diem establish a functioning government and to form an effective police force. Numerous sources indicate this team worked with or for the CIA. For Fishel’s ties to the CIA see David Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 75-76. See also Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Anderson, 109.

General Collins it appears that some changes in political arrangements in Viet-Nam may be inevitable.”¹⁰⁶

Sources differ in the recounting of events immediately after the State Department wired the telegrams suggesting a change in Saigon. Anderson indicated that although the particulars of Lansdale’s role in the outbreak of the Battle of Saigon remain classified, there is little doubt of his involvement. Anderson tells of rumors heard by Americans in Saigon that “Diem precipitated the conflict” and “that Lansdale told him if you don’t start it today you won’t be in a position to next week.”¹⁰⁷ To counter, in 1991 Lansdale’s interpreter Joe Redick recalled, “Lansdale clearly did not urge Diem to avoid a showdown, but he said nothing to incite one either.”¹⁰⁸ Regardless, defeating the gangsters and the sects would allow Diem to consolidate his power and control in Saigon, and at the same time quiet his critics.

Just hours after the Dulles telegrams went out sanctioning the potential replacement of Diem and his brothers, the Secretary of State sent out additional cables, “blocking” the earlier directives and suspending any action against Diem for the moment.¹⁰⁹ The next day in a National Security Council meeting, it was decided, “the real trouble had begun on April 26, when Prime Minister Diem had ordered the removal of Chief of Police of Saigon, who was a member of the Binh Xuyen gangster group.”¹¹⁰

Secretary Dulles explained that fighting had erupted the night before, and “we have

¹⁰⁶ Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, 4/27/55. *FRUS 1955-1957*, 1: 294.

¹⁰⁷ Anderson, 113.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in “CIA and the House of Ngo,” 79.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, 110.

¹¹⁰ Memorandum of discussion at the 264th Meeting of the National Security Council, 4/28/55, *FRUS 1955-1957*, 1: 307.

instructed our people in Saigon to hold up action on our plan for replacing Diem.”¹¹¹

General Collins was present at the meeting and reiterated his opinion of Diem’s competence, “that after months of attempting to work with Ngo Dinh Diem he had reached the conclusion that the Premier did not have the executive ability to handle ‘strong-willed men.’”¹¹² Eisenhower stressed “[T]hat it was an absolute *sine qua non* of success that the Vietnamese National Army destroy the power of the Binh Xuyen.”¹¹³

The next day, in a speech prepared for the Senate, Mike Mansfield threatened to cut off funding to Southeast Asia,

In the event that the Diem government falls, therefore, I believe that the United States should consider an immediate suspension of all aid to Vietnam and the French Union Forces there, except that of a humanitarian nature, preliminary to a complete reappraisal of our present policies in Free Vietnam.¹¹⁴

The Senator was unequivocal. Two trips to Southeast Asia convinced Mansfield of the vacuum of feasible alternatives. “Unless there is a reasonable expectation of fulfilling our objectives, the continued expenditure of the resources of the citizens of the United States is unwarranted and inexcusable.”¹¹⁵

The timing was too perfect to be chance. Regardless of the motivating factor, Diem quickly achieved the upper hand in the fighting. In his memoirs, General Collins writes, “When word of Diem’s bold action and the army’s initial success reached Washington, whatever influence I might have had either with the congressional

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹¹² Summary of Remarks of General Lawton Collins, 4/27/1955, MMA Series 22, Box 102, File 7.

¹¹³ *FRUS 1955-1957*, 1: 311.

¹¹⁴ Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield for the Senate, 4/29/1955, MMA, Series 21, Box 37, File 57.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

committees I had briefed, or the State Department, was quickly dissipated.”¹¹⁶ Collins returned to Saigon to confirm that Diem was indeed in control of the battle. Between Diem’s move against the sects and the prevailing attitudes in Washington, the general folded. The final judgment of his analysis came in a telegram from Secretary Dulles on May 1. In response to the events unfolding in Saigon, Dulles advised,

There is increasing Congressional support for Senator Mansfield’s views with which you are already familiar. Reported developments, if confirmed and if followed through to a successful conclusion, would appear to overtake some of the principal reasons previously advanced for U.S. to support Diem’s removal.¹¹⁷

Despite Collins’s relationship with Eisenhower, and his experience as a statesman, Seth Jacobs addressed the oft-asked question of why the administration chose not to heed the advice offered by the general. “That Collins failed to blast through his superiors’ cognitive rigidity is a testament to the power of ideological mind-lock, of policymakers’ remarkable resistance to any challenge of their fundamental racial and religious beliefs.”¹¹⁸ Perhaps the relationship between Edward Lansdale and Allen Dulles trumped Eisenhower’s faith in “Lightning Joe” Collins. CIA historian Thomas Ahern suggests, “Wittingly or unwittingly, Lansdale lent that authority not only to his own reporting but to that of the regular Station. In doing so, he became the largest single influence on deliberations in Washington at the most critical point of Diem’s tenure before 1963.”¹¹⁹

Diem won the Battle of Saigon, defeating the sects and neutralizing the Binh Xuyen vice operations. Vocal opposition faded and Diem consolidated his power while

¹¹⁶ Collins, 405.

¹¹⁷ Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 5/1/1955, *FRUS 1955-1957*, 1: 344-345.

¹¹⁸ Jacobs, 174.

¹¹⁹ “CIA and the House of Ngo,” 83.

allowing token concessions to broaden his political base. The United States continued to support his regime until a fateful November in 1963 when the Kennedy administration finally ended the Diem experiment. In a 1966 interview, Mike Mansfield reflected that Dulles “leaned a little bit too heavily on me, to such an extent that I felt ... it was outside the ken of my responsibility and entirely within the purview of the executive branch under the Constitution.”¹²⁰ Over thirty years later, in an interview with Mansfield, biographer Don Oberdorfer reflected upon the senator’s unique position on Indochina.

What is really remarkable in this stuff is that they relied on you, although you didn’t know it, to be the representative in effect of the whole Congress. The only person they ever mentioned when they were saying, well we can’t do this because of congressional objections, was Senator Mansfield. And you were only a *freshman senator* [emphasis added] on the Foreign Relations Committee at the time in the mid-1950s. They agreed with your opinion—actually, Dulles agreed with it, [and] this guy Young agreed with it, I think Robertson agreed with it.¹²¹

Michael Joseph Mansfield became the longest serving Senate Majority Leader after his friend, John F. Kennedy won the White House in 1960. Though the statesman’s direct involvement in foreign policy decisions diminished following the Battle of Saigon, his appointment to the Senate Foreign Relations committee in 1952 afforded him certain powers over the “congressional purse.” Mansfield wielded this power to support Ngo Dinh Diem in the early 1950s, and facilitated the United States in replacing the France as the warden of Indochina. Though speculative, had General Collins prevailed over Senator Mansfield in the spring of 1955, the story of American involvement in Southeast Asia may have taken another path. Regardless, Mansfield was far from alone in his support of Diem. Two successive U.S. administrations found Diem the only viable option that

¹²⁰ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 142.

¹²¹ Don Oberdorfer interview with Mike Mansfield, MMA, OH: 391-22, 7/20/2001.

presented a remote chance to stand up to the communist threat north of the 17th Parallel, and establish a pro-American regime in South Vietnam. Ten years after Justice Douglas introduced Diem to Mansfield and Kennedy that experiment failed. As Douglas reflected, “It is a story of two men who first met at a luncheon I tendered in Washington, D.C. on [May 7,] 1953. They never met afterward more than casually, but each greatly affected the other in the political orbit he travelled; and each was assassinated in the same month of the same year.”¹²²

Senator Mansfield exerted considerable influence upon United States foreign policy in the early 1950s. Without his staunch support of a fellow Catholic and cold warrior Ngo Dinh Diem, critics of his regime, such as J. Lawton Collins, may have found a more receptive audience in Washington. China and Korea, Moscow and McCarthy, were all conspirators in the unfolding of attitudes and events that led to American involvement in Southeast Asia. In 1952, Mansfield became United States Senator from Montana, and within a few short years, established himself as the congressional authority on Vietnam who had the confidence of John Foster Dulles, and hence, President Eisenhower. In 2001, Oberdorfer asked Mansfield, “Fascinating. I’m sure you probably didn’t understand the role they were putting your remarks into.” The statesman replied, “I didn’t understand it until just now.”¹²³

During the Battle of Saigon, Ngo Dinh Diem effectively consolidated his control over Saigon, but not without the support of Mansfield in Washington. For the remainder of Eisenhower’s presidency, Senator Mansfield continued his official support of the Diem

¹²² Douglas, “One Luncheon: Two Assassinations,” page 1 (accessed 10/30/2012)

¹²³ Don Oberdorfer interview with Mike Mansfield, MMA, OH: 391-22, 7/20/2001.

regime. As the decade waned, growing criticism of the South Vietnamese government forced Mansfield to reevaluate his unconditional support for the “miracle man.”

The Ngo family continued to centralize power and Diem’s brother Nhu established an oppressive police state complete with similar trappings of a communist regime. A secret police, prohibition of any political opposition to the Can Lao* party, concentration camps, and limited, yet still contentious, land reform all frustrated the people of South Vietnam. One party rule enforced by violence and threat. As Nhu’s power grew, his influence on Diem concerned not only the locals, but also official supporters in Washington.

After Diem consolidated power in Saigon, the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) joined to extol the virtues of the new president of South Vietnam. Following his third trip to Southeast Asia, Mansfield joined to write an article for *Harpers* early in 1956. From the article came the assertion of Mansfield’s central role in East Asian policy. On paper, this would appear out of place during an Eisenhower presidency that boasted the larger-than-life John Foster Dulles who seemed destined from birth to become Secretary of State. At a time of tremendous prosperity, the United States still lagged in many academic fields, including a comprehensive knowledge and policy toward what the cold war dubbed the “Third World.” The previous spring, Mansfield’s actions at the outset the Battle of Saigon cemented Mansfield as a power player in Far Eastern affairs, and his resolute support of the new regime in South Vietnam earned the senator the title of “Godfather of Diem.” *Harpers* included the charge that “The French, especially, blame him for putting Diem at the head of the Viet Nam government in Indochina—and keeping

him there, in the teeth of French Intrigue, propaganda, and slander.”¹²⁴ Of course, the French would be bitter. France, however, could rest assured knowing that Mansfield helped turn the Indochina conflict into an entirely American concern.

In the adulatory article, Mansfield reaffirmed his faith in Diem and withheld any criticism necessary for a responsible assessment of the regime. Despite the lavish praise by the AFV and an enthusiastic letter of support from Connecticut Rep. Chester Bowles, not all were pleased with Mansfield’s policy influence. With time in the China and Southeast Asia working for the OSS, Hilaire du Berrier, castigated Mansfield. “Due to your position as the recognized American senator interested in South Viet Nam, your article had a singular effect abroad.” Du Berrier was explicit in assigning responsibility. “You have no idea to what extent Europe and the world look to you as the author of our policy vis-à-vis Diem and count on you to get all of us out of it.”¹²⁵ Mansfield replied in his consistent, rose-colored fashion of promoting the cult of Diem. “I cannot help but be impressed by the progress made by this remarkable man. [I]t is a fact that free Viet Nam exists at the present time and that in large part this free entity is the result of the efforts by Mr. Diem.”¹²⁶ Such statements were not lost on Diem himself. In sparse correspondence with Mansfield, Diem was grateful. “Vietnam has had no more far-sighted and understanding friend than you.”¹²⁷

At this point, administration policy was fully committed to the Diem regime; however, pragmatic assessments in the White House maintained some perspective. David

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

Anderson's *Trapped by Success* suggests Washington palliated Diem's weaknesses and flaws as long as "he remained adamantly opposed to any rapprochement with North Vietnam."¹²⁸ This included ignoring the mandates of the Geneva Conference in 1954 to hold reunification elections two years following. Few familiar with the political climate in Vietnam believed Diem could garner more votes than Ho Chi Minh, despite the violent contention over land reform in the North. The Soviets also declined to press the issue. According to British foreign minister Harold Macmillan, "unification based on free elections in Vietnam and resisting the same proposal in relation to Germany," smacked too hypocritical for Moscow.¹²⁹

For the remainder of Eisenhower's presidency, Mansfield lavished praise on Diem at any chance. In 1957, the AFV brought Diem to the United States. Upon his arrival to Washington, the senator declared, "[Diem] is not only the savior of his own country, but in my opinion he is the savior of all of Southeast Asia ... a man in whom the United States has unbounded confidence."¹³⁰ Diem toured the United States with pomp and circumstance, stage managed by public relations firms and legitimized by numerous accolades and awards. Not a simple dog and pony show, Diem appealed to Washington for more aid. Amid arguments over the expansion of the Vietnamese army without economic reform aggravated supporters but as Anderson contends, "The longer the Diem

¹²⁸ Anderson, 160.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 98.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 141.

regime depended on U.S. assistance for its survival, the higher became the U.S. investment in South Vietnam in both dollars and global credibility.”¹³¹

Meantime, in South Vietnam the regime governed with dictatorial powers, limited basic freedoms, and began a process of land reform designed to benefit the influx of Catholic refugees from the North. Any dissent faced neutralization through imprisonment or murder. As Nhu’s secret police liquidated the opposition, Diem returned from the United States to enjoy a period of relative quiet from communist insurgency. During the calm, the brothers effectively drove many disgruntled Vietnamese into the arms of the enemy, soon to be dubbed the Viet Cong—Vietnamese Communists—to avoid the nationalistic overtones of the Viet Minh. Pulitzer winner David Halberstam identified Diem’s regime “a suspicious, unresponsive and archaic family dictatorship.”¹³² At least, as General Marshall stated in 1947, they were not communists.

During the tenuous peace following the Battle of Saigon, Asian communists, particularly Chairman Mao, took exception to Party Secretary Nikita Khrushchev’s decision to reveal the horrors of Stalin’s reign at the 20th Party Congress in 1956. Clearly indicting Mao as well, Khrushchev quoted a letter from Karl Marx. “From my antipathy to any cult of the individual ... Engels and I first joined the secret society of Communists on the condition that everything making for superstitious worship of authority would be deleted from its statute.”¹³³ Just as American foreign policy repeatedly proved inflexible to mitigating situations, the Kremlin likewise struggled to accept any doctrine that did not

¹³¹ Anderson, 172.

¹³² David Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1965), xix.

¹³³ Modern History Sourcebook: Nikita S. Khrushchev: *The Secret Speech – On the Cult of Personality, 1956*, accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html>

emanate from Moscow. Four years prior to the infamous “Secret Speech,” Austrian sociologist Franz Borkenau predicted Sino-Soviet friction. “It is a hallmark of every totalitarian regime that it insists upon absolute orthodoxy concerning certain basic symbols and doctrines explaining or justifying its power.”¹³⁴ In 1958, for the second time in a decade, Mao shelled the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan straits—leftover skirmishes from the Chinese civil war under the communist promise to retake Taiwan from Chiang Kai-Shek’s nationalist regime. Henry Kissinger writes that Mao understood the hierarchy of the world’s great powers, and employed “the offensive deterrence concept [involving] the use of preemptive strategy not so much to defeat the adversary militarily as to deal him a psychological blow to cause him to desist.”¹³⁵ This posturing by Mao to embroil the Soviets militarily with the Americans further confounded the ideological schism between the two communist powers that Ho Chi Minh would adroitly use to his advantage as the Second Indochina War developed.

In regards to Southeast Asia, the increasing rift between the communist powers mitigated the possibility of a global confrontation, yet failed to assuage concerns in Washington of Chinese involvement in Vietnam. The Sino-Soviet split resulted from the philosophical differences between two dynamic yet competing personalities of Communism. Both rooted Marxist-Leninist indoctrination, Mao and Khrushchev butted heads for a decade on foreign policy and the future of the Revolution.¹³⁶ At the 1956 Congress in Moscow, Khrushchev voiced a desire “for the strengthening of world peace,

¹³⁴ John E. Tashjean, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Borkenau's Predictive Analysis of 1952*, p. 349. accessed December 1, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/653886>

¹³⁵ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 217.

¹³⁶ Taken from a previously unpublished paper by the author.

it would be of vital importance to establish firm, friendly relations between the two biggest powers of the world, the Soviet Union and the United States ... there is no fatal inevitability of war.”¹³⁷

In Washington, Eisenhower continued his cautious approach to East Asia while he formally committed to the defense of the Middle East following the Suez crisis. The president reinforced his global perspective on the cold war during test-ban deliberations that fall. In response to suggestions of a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, Eisenhower conceded, “then we have no recourse except to try to accept the communist doctrine and live with it.” He went on to state that “he would not want to live, nor would he want his children or grandchildren to live, in a world where we were slaves of a Moscow Power.”¹³⁸ Throughout the American involvement in Southeast Asia, Mao’s unpredictability always factored into U.S policy decisions, from Lebanon to Vietnam.

In 1958, the Ngo’s clamored for increases in military support. Senators Mansfield, Kennedy, William Fulbright of Arkansas, and Wayne Morse from Oregon sponsored a bill that entreated Eisenhower to consider priority to *economic* assistance over military stipends.¹³⁹ Bipartisan respect and his record on the Senate Foreign Relations committee helped Mansfield establish a trust with the Eisenhower administration, and on occasion Secretary Dulles requested the senator’s advice on other matters of foreign policy, though never to the degree of his involvement in Vietnam. Despite his first love of foreign affairs, the 1960 presidential election would change Mansfield’s role in the Senate

¹³⁷ Edward H. Judge and John W. Langdon, *The Cold War: A History through Documents*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 85.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Ambrose, 476.

¹³⁹ Anderson, 180.

forever. After winning the Democratic nomination, Jack Kennedy chose Senator Lyndon Johnson as his running mate, effectively neutralizing the Texan's power on Capitol Hill. With the position of majority leader vacant, Kennedy appealed to his old friend from Montana for loyalty and competence. After refusing Johnson, Mansfield hesitantly accepted the president-elect's personal offer. In 1961, Michael Joseph Mansfield became the country's longest serving majority leader in what Frank Valeo called "a different kind of senate." With new responsibilities, Mansfield left the foreign relations committee with complete trust in Chairman William Fulbright (D-AR). His direct influence on Vietnam policy decidedly changed, but until the end of the war, Mansfield remained permanently involved in America's most divisive military contest since the Civil War.

When Kennedy entered the White House in 1961, Eisenhower warned him of the growing problem in Laos. Laos? Continuing with the theory of falling dominos outlined by the outgoing administration, communist intervention into the remote country with nascent ideas of self-government would threaten all of Southeast Asia—possibly even Australia and New Zealand. Eisenhower and departing Secretary of State Christian Herter advised Kennedy to enlist other SEATO nations, but "if we were unable to persuade our allies, then we must go it alone."¹⁴⁰ Eisenhower apparently had faith in the reports coming out of Saigon, and said nothing to Kennedy about Vietnam. Eisenhower was not alone in cautioning Washington about the situation in Laos. In early January of 1961, Laotian Prince Souvanna Phouma entreated Senator Mansfield to exert his power to ameliorate the decay of stability in Southeast Asia. "[U]nder these conditions, pacification by arms is an impossible solution in view of the topography and

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Anderson, 196.

configuration of the country which lends itself to battles without end.” Speaking of Laos, the prince could have easily been referring to Vietnam, Cambodia, South China, or Thailand. All regions provide a less than desirable field for battle—at least within western military philosophy. “In any case, the moment has come for America to revise its Indochinese policy which is no longer adapted to events or to the development of the legitimate aspirations of the peoples of Southeast Asia.”¹⁴¹ Later that month, President Kennedy discussed the matter with Mansfield. Adding to the failures in policy detailed by Souvanna Phouma, Kennedy added that “The corrupting and disrupting effect of our high level of aid on an unsophisticated nation such as Laos.”¹⁴² On the surface, this appears to be a pragmatic conclusion whenever a massive influx of capital reaches a population toiling against complete impoverishment and ambitious local officials drooling for the opportunities of corruption. Yet, this very real concern seemingly failed to enter policy deliberations during the cold war.

From the decisions made by the preceding administrations, the incoming president faced a policy in East Asia that responded to a threat of continued Soviet aggression. Following Moscow’s acquisition of atomic technology, and the magnificent stalemate in Korea, Marxist historian Gabriel Kolko indicts the American perception of geopolitics. “By 1960 every preceding event required that the credibility of the U.S. power be tested soon, lest all of the failures and dilemmas since 1946 undermine the very

¹⁴¹ Letter from Prince Souvanna Phouma to Senator Mike Mansfield, January 7, 1961. MMA Series XXII, Box 97, File 3.

¹⁴² Letter from President Kennedy to Senator Mike Mansfield, January 21, 1961. MMA Series XXII, Box 97, File 3.

foundations of the system it was seeking to construct throughout the world.”¹⁴³ This determinant conclusion suggests Kennedy and his advisors had no choice in their decisions on Vietnam, and places culpability on the two previous administrations. Incoming Secretary of State took another view, “Part of the problem is that we have not kept our contact with some of the national movements and the demands for change which are part of the democratic revolution of our own tradition.”¹⁴⁴ Whether or not Kennedy would have made different choices in Southeast Asia than his successor, Lyndon Johnson, is irrelevant. During John F. Kennedy’s presidency, complete withdrawal from Vietnam would have required a wholesale reassessment of cold war policy—a paradigm shift in collective political thought that simply was not possible during one of the most perilous times of the cold war. The social upheaval caused by the Vietnam War and the credibility gap it fostered, pervaded well into the 21st Century and influenced American policy decisions henceforth.

Three months after taking office, the new president tacitly approved a CIA operation to join with anti-Castro Cubans to overthrow the communist regime. Following the successes in Iran and Guatemala during the previous administration, there was little concern about the chances for success. Frank Valeo writes, “As for the Democrats, the Bay of Pigs provided the kind of militant anticommunist action against Cuba for which so many had seemed to be clamoring during the presidential campaign. The majority leader

¹⁴³ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, (New York: Random House, 1985), 79.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas J. Schoenbaum, *Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 23.

avoided mention of it and quickly moved on to other matters.”¹⁴⁵ History, however, records a complete failure. Despite initial allegations that Kennedy “sold out” the CIA and the rebels, later findings implicate the entire planning of the operation as ill conceived.

In September, Mansfield articulated his perception of official policy in Vietnam to Kennedy, “The Vietnamese problem since 1955 has been a compound in which one part has been military and several non-military. Yet the remedy which has been applied to this problem has been a compound in which several parts have been military and only one part non-military.”¹⁴⁶ Oberdorfer writes that this was the consistent message Mansfield maintained throughout the American involvement in Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁷

As Kennedy faced communist challenges from Laos to Cuba and Berlin to Vienna, Mike Mansfield was acclimating to his new position of leadership in the Senate. With unquestioned loyalty, Mansfield had supported Lyndon Johnson for the 1960 Democratic nomination, despite his warm friendship with Kennedy. After the election, Johnson hoped to redefine the powers of the Vice President and retain operational power on the Senate floor. Don Oberdorfer explains, “The power of first recognition is more potent than it sounds, for it permits the Majority Leader to outflank any other senator in offering motions or amendments, and also to have the most important voice, rarely overruled, in shaping the nature and timing of the Senate business.”¹⁴⁸ In the Senate,

¹⁴⁵ Frank Valeo, *Mike Mansfield, Majority Leader: A Different Kind of Senate*, (New York: M.E. Sharp, 1999), 53.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Senator Mike Mansfield to President John F. Kennedy, September 20, 1961. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 10.

¹⁴⁷ Oberdorfer 185.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

Mansfield wielded this authority counter to Johnson, who had a craven thirst for power and the political mastery to achieve it through whatever means necessary. Bobby Baker, senior aide to both Johnson and Mansfield, claimed the difference was “like going home to mother after a weekend with a chorus girl.”¹⁴⁹

Rightly concerned over his impending loss of power, Johnson made a vain effort to maintain his control over the Senate. “Power is where power goes,” Johnson told reporters.¹⁵⁰ To the Vice-President-elect’s surprise, when Mansfield suggested Johnson sit as chairman of the Democratic caucus, the leadership revolted—despite Mansfield’s insistence the position would be entirely honorary.¹⁵¹ For nearly a decade, Johnson had insisted himself upon the legislators, indiscriminant in using them to promote his own power and agenda. Bobby Baker said he was “both astonished and horrified” at the suggestion. “Indeed, it seemed apparent that senators who long had chafed under LBJ’s iron rule would have conniptions at the very idea of his continuing to exercise control over its affairs.”¹⁵² In basic consideration of the constitutional separation of powers, and the bitter memories of a Johnson Senate, the old guard consummated Mike Mansfield’s power as the new Senate Majority Leader for the 87th United States Congress.

Never the overbearing force of his predecessor, Senator Mansfield conducted business on the Hill with practicality and foresight. Abandoning the long-standing institution of committee by seniority, he helped whittle at the power of the Southern oligarchy. He delegated with adroitness and liberated the Senate from the ramrod style of

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 172.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Caro, 1035.

¹⁵¹ Oberdorfer, 157.

¹⁵² Quoted in Caro, 1037.

Johnson, all while mitigating opposition to Kennedy's legislation through Congress. After the 1962 mid-term elections, Valeo writes, "Minimizing his own role, Mansfield stressed that the Senate as a whole was to be credited with the respectable record achieved in the previous Congress." Describing the celebratory mood, Valeo continued, "It was indeed a halcyon moment for the Senate."¹⁵³ Clearly tactical, JFK's choice of Johnson for vice president not only helped win more of the southern vote, but more importantly neutralized LBJ's power on Capitol Hill.

Late in 1961, President Kennedy responded to a letter from Diem who conveyed the dire situation in Vietnam.

From the beginning, the Communists resorted to terror in their efforts to subvert our people, destroy our government and impose a Communist regime upon us. They have attacked defenseless teachers, closed schools, killed members of our anti-malarial program and looted hospitals. This is coldly calculated to destroy our government's humanitarian efforts to serve the people.¹⁵⁴

Determined to stand up to the communist aggression, Kennedy declared, "We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort as well as help relieve the destruction of the floods which you describe. I have already given the orders to get these programs underway."¹⁵⁵ As the president increased American advisory presence in South Vietnam, Senator Mansfield again backed the official policy in Southeast Asia, particularly in support of the Diem regime. In a following report, Mansfield articulated the continued importance of Vietnam. He elucidated three major points concerning American policy. The fall of the Diem regime "would put the fabric of Free World

¹⁵³ Valeo, 55.

¹⁵⁴ Letter from Ngo Dinh Diem to John F. Kennedy, December, 1961. MMA Series XXII, Box 41, File 10.

¹⁵⁵ Letter from the White House to Ngo Dinh Diem, December 14, 1961, MMA Series XXII, Box 41, File 10.

strength and determination, [it] would give the Communists a base extending through the middle of Asia, and South Viet Nam's rice surplus would solve Communist Viet Nam's most pressing internal problem: food."¹⁵⁶ Despite the growing autocracy of the brothers Ngo, Mansfield maintained the vacuum of alternatives available.

Yet the reality was far from as simple as described by Diem. About the same time, Mansfield received a letter from Nguyen Thai-Binh of the Democratic Party of Viet-Nam, describing quite a different scene.

Some crimes, however, are worse than embezzlement. Not long ago in the province of Kien Tuong, seven villagers were led to the square, where their stomachs were slashed and their livers extracted. In another village, a dozen mothers were publicly decapitated. In still another village, expectant mother were invited to the square to be "honored." Their stomachs were slit and their unborn babies ripped out. Is this a lingering nightmare of the Nazi gestapo? No, these acts were committed by Diem police in South Viet-Nam. America has sent 11,000 men and spends \$1,500,000 daily to support the tyrant responsible for these outrages.¹⁵⁷

Mansfield deigned not to respond. Washington was not yet ready for a complete reappraisal of official policy in Southeast Asia.

While events simmered in Vietnam, in Washington a fresh problem arose in early 1962. The Washington Post published a series of articles summarizing official White House deliberations over Southeast Asia. "In South Vietnam, in truth, the U.S. has gone too far down the road, by now, to permit any second thoughts or turnings back."¹⁵⁸ After reading several columns by journalist Joseph Alsop, Mansfield became suspicious of Alsop's sources. "I do not wish to prejudge the matter but the composition of the columns strongly suggests to me that the leak in this case is from the Executive Branch rather than

¹⁵⁶ Unclassified report on Vietnam, January 2, 1962, MMA Series XXII, Box 51, File 10.

¹⁵⁷ Letter from the Democratic Party of Vietnam, MMA Series XXII, Box 51, File 6.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph Alsop, "Matter of Fact: After the White House Meeting," *Washington Post*, February 23, 1962.

the Congressional participants. It would seem to me that unless it can be shut off, you would want to consider recasting the pattern of these meetings on major foreign policy issues.”¹⁵⁹ To someone who took very seriously the conduct of foreign policy, and the executive imprimatur upon such policies, Mansfield could brook no latitude in loose tongues. As the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated, the Viet Minh presence in the south grew and Hanoi provided increasing aid to the Viet Cong. Official persecution of dissidents by the Diem regime expanded, and by December, Mansfield began to reconsider. “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 reassess our interests, using the words ‘vital’ or ‘essential’ with the greatest realism and restraint in the reassessment.”¹⁶⁰

In June, Mansfield made a commencement address at Michigan State University. Southeast Asia was on the menu. Continuing to support the executive in the arena of diplomacy, Mansfield added, “It is politics that needs to stop at the water’s edge, not serious consideration of the nation’s course in its relations with the rest of the world.”¹⁶¹ By late 1962, Kennedy had made his decision. David Halberstam writes, “In government it is always easier to go forward with a program that does not work than to stop it altogether and admit failure.”¹⁶² Abandoning Diem, and South Vietnam for that matter,

¹⁵⁹ Letter From Senator Mike Mansfield to President John F. Kennedy, February, 23, 1962. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 9.

¹⁶⁰ Senator Mike Mansfield, Report on Southeast Asia-Vietnam, December 18, 1962. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 9.

¹⁶¹ Senator Mike Mansfield, “Interests and Policies in Southeast Asia,” June 10, 1962. MMA Series XXII Box 98, File 7.

¹⁶² David Halberstam, *The Best and The Brightest*, (New York, Penguin Books, 1972), 262.

would admit failure to not only his, but the two administrations previous. Quitting our commitment in Southeast Asia would force complete reconsideration of American foreign policy goals and empirical philosophy of anticommunism. “Losing” China just over a decade before had devastated his party and helped start the rabid crusade of Senator McCarthy. Not only concerned with saving face, in January, the Joint Chiefs had warned Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara of the strategic advantages afforded to the “Sino-Soviet bloc if the United States did not deepen her involvement in Indochina.”¹⁶³ Kennedy doubted losing Vietnam to the communists would earn many accolades, and in the end, it was arguably an easy decision for the young executive to hold the line in Southeast Asia, for as Halberstam writes, “[T]he vital decisions in Vietnam had been made long ago, back when it was still called Indochina.”¹⁶⁴

Policy decisions in Asia, however, were not entirely culpable for the unraveling situation in Saigon. For years, Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem’s brother, consolidated power and established a ruthless secret police that operated without the shadow of due process. Following an exchange of letters that summer between Mansfield and Madame Tran Van Chuong, wife to the Vietnamese ambassador, in October Frank Valeo dined at the embassy for discussions on the situation in Saigon. Incidentally, Madame Tran was the mother of Ngo Dinh Nhu’s wife, Madame Nhu. Tension hovered over the dinner conversation as the ambassador’s wife conveyed the deterioration of Diem and his increasing reliance upon his brother to run the daily operations of the country. “The ambassador did not refute any of these statements. On the contrary, he underscored them

¹⁶³ Logevall, 705.

¹⁶⁴ Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 36.

with considerable bitterness. He said that his son-in-law and daughter were absolutely drunk with power.” This clearly exacerbated the problems in South Vietnam. Instead of garnering the support from the local populace, the ambassador “said that the animosity of the [Vietnamese] people was now largely centered on the Ngo Dinh Nhus and [the people] had “the right enemy.” Valeo deduced the dinner’s purpose was to feel out the response of Senator Mansfield in the event of a potential coup. With certain trepidation, Madame Tran closed the meal with an appeal for discretion. “At this point she emphasized again the need for the highest confidence with respect to the conversation, noting that I was the only person to whom she had communicated these concerns. She seemed almost in deadly [personal] fear of her own daughter and the daughter’s husband.”¹⁶⁵ There is little wonder how and why the United States faced such challenges in Vietnam when the most effective candidate to govern the new Republic was under the thumb of a ruthless sociopath.

The following month, on a globe-spanning journey, Mansfield returned to Vietnam. The longtime ally and supporter of Diem had little positive to say about his meetings with Diem or the lack of progress in expanding the base of his government. After a meeting with prominent journalists on location in Saigon—including David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan—the senator ignored the official report from the embassy and instead castigated the entire effort in South Vietnam, which Halberstam reported in the *New York Times*: “Mansfield is Cool on Vietnam War.”¹⁶⁶ Washington officials familiar with concerns in Southeast Asia quickly realized what General Paul Harkins

¹⁶⁵ Memorandum from Frank Valeo to Senator Mike Mansfield, October 30, 1962. MMA XXII, Box 100, File 13.

¹⁶⁶ Oberdorfer, 192.

described as a “crucial turning point” against Diem.¹⁶⁷ Mansfield maintained his personal admiration and respect for Diem, but by this time, had lost any real confidence in the regime’s efficacy or prognosis for success on any legitimate level. “[I]t seems to me most essential that we make crystal clear to the Vietnamese government and to our own people that while we will go to great lengths to help, the primary responsibility rests with the Vietnamese.”¹⁶⁸ After returning to the States, the senator met with Kennedy to discuss the situation. As Mansfield unfolded the story, the prospects dimmed, and the president bristled. “You asked me to go to Vietnam,” he told Kennedy. Despite his frustration, Kennedy later told advisor Kenneth O’Donnell, “I got angry at Mike for disagreeing with our policy so completely, and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him.”¹⁶⁹ Mansfield clearly had the ear Kennedy president in the realm of foreign policy in Southeast Asia, and like Eisenhower before him, Kennedy found himself relying on the advice of the Montana senator. Historians cannot refuse the temptation to speculate on Kennedy’s true motives in Vietnam. Assertions of his intent to withdraw U.S. troops by the end of his presidency have met both hagiographic endorsement and pragmatic criticism. The answers to these perpetual questions, though entertaining, remain essentially unimportant outside the veneration of a dead president.

After 1962, Diem’s government was on borrowed time. Although it would take Mansfield a bit longer to reevaluate his support of the Saigon regime, one of Diem’s earliest and influential supporters broke ranks within the Vietnam Lobby. Wesley Fishel penned a sixty-four page report titled “Vietnam Reconsidered,” detailing the implosion of

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Oberdorfer 192.

¹⁶⁸ Oberdorfer, 193.

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 194.

the Republic of Vietnam. With genuine emotion, Fishel turned on his one-time friend. “Today, more than 10,000 American military advisors, plus several hundred economic, technical, and information specialists, are in Vietnam assisting the Saigon government ... yet ... it is clear that there has been a profound deterioration in Vietnamese support for the Ngo regime.”¹⁷⁰ Fishel detailed the myriad problems facing Diem and his brother. Yet for all of the U.S. backing, both in morale and materiel, it was turning into a no win situation for American interests. Quoting a French official who understood the true nature of the conflict, Fishel reminds the reader of the incredible challenge of Vietnam. “If we are to achieve victory, the first thing to do is fight against the ‘creeping decay.’ This is largely a political problem. The key to victory will be the morale of the people of Vietnam.” According to Fishel, after eight years of the brothers Ngo, “The people of Vietnam are still waiting for leadership.”¹⁷¹

During the Buddhist crisis of 1963, Massachusetts Republican Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Saigon to assume full ambassadorial duties. By this time, South Vietnam bristled with frustration. A year before the deployment of U.S. combat troops into Vietnam, animosities flared. Halberstam writes of one local’s reaction to Lodge’s assignment,

It is always the same with you goddamn Americans. During the French Indochina War, you told us that if we fought the Communists for the French, you would see that we got independence very soon. Now you tell us to fight the Communists for Diem, and that when there is peace you will get us a good government. We are no longer interested in your goddamn advice.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Wesley R. Fishel, “Vietnam Reconsidered.” MMA, Series XXII, Box 51, File 6.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Quoted in Halberstam, *Making of a Quagmire*, 119.

As the fighting between Diem and the Buddhists raged, the press in Saigon became embroiled in a controversy that reached the highest levels of American media. Reporting from South Vietnam became a contentious affair depending on the parent news agency. Famously anti-communist, *Time-Life* boss Henry Luce led the charge trumpeting the official line in Southeast Asia. Halberstam considers the motives,

Part of the reason for this, I think, was the particular way in which *Time's* executives view the magazine: to a large degree, they see it not just as a magazine of reporting, but as an instrument of policymaking. Thus, what *Time's* editors *want* to happen is as important as what is happening. In Vietnam, where [the] U.S. [staked its] prestige against a Communist enemy, and the government was Christian and anti-communist, *Time* had a strong commitment to Diem.¹⁷³

Control of the press allows control of what a population sees, reads, and hears, thereby controlling how people think—a notion rarely overlooked by successful governments of any color.

August of 1963 found Mansfield increasingly wary of our role in Southeast Asia. The Buddhist crisis, Ngo Dinh Nhu's ruthless administration of perverted justice, and Diem's withdrawal from day to day governance all sowed considerable discord in Washington, and alternatives were being discussed by all pertinent players. With another ambassadorial change in Saigon, Republican Henry Cabot Lodge assumed the duties at the American Embassy. Satisfied with the choice, Senator Mansfield looked to the broader picture. "At this point, with the changing of Ambassadors, therefore, it is pertinent to examine this present premise of policy." Mansfield was intimate with the array of variables involved. At one point dubbed the "Godfather of Diem," Mansfield's influence stood over the previous decade of American involvement in Vietnam.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 150.

Is South Viet Nam as important to us as the premise on which we are now apparently operating indicates? Or have we, by our own repeated rhetorical flourishes on “corks in bottles” and “stopping communism everywhere” and loose use of the phrase “vital interests of the nation” over the past few years given this situation a highly inflated importance and, hence, talked ourselves into the present bind?¹⁷⁴

After years of unfettered support for the primacy of the executive in foreign policy, by 1963 Mansfield had established himself as a voice of authority in foreign policy on Capitol Hill. While casual students of history ask if Kennedy would have withdrawn the troops by Christmas (of 1963) or not, the more accurate question might be how Kennedy may have received Mansfield’s opinion of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Speaking to Saigon and other recalcitrant allies, Mansfield claimed, “In the absence of responsible and responsive indigenous leadership or adequate international cooperation in supporting social evolution in freedom, the essential interests of the United States do not compel this nation to become unilaterally engaged in any nation in Southeast Asia.”¹⁷⁵ Asked in 1998 of his opinions of the evolution of policy during Johnson, Mansfield discussed the fall of Diem’s regime. “Nor was I ever in any doubt about Ngo Dinh Diem. I don’t know who was truly responsible for his assassination. I didn’t have any respect for his brother Nhu, nor with Nhu’s wife, but I was for Ngo Dinh Diem *all the way*.”¹⁷⁶

Officially, the White House expressed disbelief and appall at the assassination, however after multiple CIA attempts to assassinate Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, it remains problematic to reconcile the professed ignorance of the full operation. “It was Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs,” historian Thomas

¹⁷⁴ Senator Mike Mansfield, “Observations on Vietnam,” August 19, 1963. MMA XXII Box 98, File 8.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Don Oberdorfer interview with Mike Mansfield, July 1998. MMA, OH: 391-02.

Schoenbaum writes, “who had been responsible for the coup cable in August, which had initiated without the knowledge of either Rusk or Under Secretary George Ball.¹⁷⁷ JFK would not have long to lament.

There was a sound of laughter; in a moment, it was no more. And so she took a ring from her finger and placed it in his hands.¹⁷⁸

Everything changed in Dallas. Amidst the grief following the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in November of 1963, the newly widowed Jacqueline entreated Senator Mansfield alone to deliver the eulogy. In a moment, the dream was over. Indeed a coup, Camelot was a memory. In a blaze of gunfire, Lyndon Baines Johnson became the 36th President of the United States. For the remainder of Kennedy’s term President Johnson generally followed his predecessor’s policies, but four short years following his election in 1964, Johnson would become one of the most controversial presidents of in American History. History has branded LBJ famous, notorious, a savior, debauched, Faustian, a criminal, a warmonger, a socialist, an altruist, a New Dealer, a capitalist, and possibly the greatest pure politician to sit in the Oval Office. He pushed the Civil Rights Amendments of 1964 and 1965 through Congress, effectively ending over eighty years of Jim Crow discrimination and violence. Johnson also oversaw the creation of Medicare, declared war on poverty, advocated funding for education, addressed gun control, and staunchly supported the race to the moon; and, of course, transformed our limited presence in Southeast Asia into the most contentious American military conflict of the

¹⁷⁷ Schoenbaum, 415-16.

¹⁷⁸ Statement of Senator Mike Mansfield, November 24, 1963. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 4.

20th Century. During a gathering on Christmas Eve, Johnson notoriously betrayed his true motives to the Joint Chiefs, “Just get me elected and you can have your war.”¹⁷⁹

Now, after a challenging start, Majority Leader Mike Mansfield prepared for an unpredictable working relationship with the new president. Far from Lyndon Johnson’s glad-handing, good old boy network of favors and pressure, Mansfield brought efficiency and egalitarianism to the Senate, which for so long existed on the antiquated importance assigned to seniority rather than the good of the legislative body and the country.

Mansfield and Johnson had a positive history. Yet Mansfield knew from the beginning that dealing with the new president would not be nearly as accommodating. Shortly after Kennedy’s assassination, Mansfield began a long series of memoranda to President Johnson regarding the decay of American policy in Vietnam. Within these notes to the new president, the senator’s tone changed. No longer advising an open-minded friend with common interests for the future of the nation, Mansfield knew to tread ever so lightly with Johnson. “I would most respectfully refer to the earlier memorandums which you requested on this subject and which were sent to you under date of December 7, 1963 and January 6, 1964.”¹⁸⁰

Although only a private citizen, whose only involvement in the situation came at the voting booth, R. P. Brede of Walled Lake, Michigan felt compelled to pen a letter to the “Triumvirate” of Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Defense Secretary McNamara. “You make a mockery of democratic government. Without declaration of war or consent of congress, you wage a ruthless war in tiny Vietnam, a sovereign nation

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in Olson, 127.

¹⁸⁰ Memorandum to President Lyndon Johnson from Senator Mike Mansfield, February 1, 1964. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 7.

half a world away. With the fate of mankind in your hands, you refuse to learn anything. Don't you see that, in the atomic age, brute force has reached its climax and its nadir simultaneously?"¹⁸¹ Mr. Brede pulled no punches and castigated the conduct of the Johnson administration for such an incredible bungle. Unfortunately, those in power could not resort to such vilification and maintain credibility and respect in Washington.

The summer of 1964 presented the new president with the opportunity to address his fears of appearing weak in the face of international events. U.S. Naval vessels *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* took fire from North Vietnamese patrol boats. Investigations following the incident reveal far less of an imminent threat than the commanders believed on the scene, and concluded that the skirmish was a reprisal to CIA operations along the North Vietnamese coast. Specifics were not a concern for the administration, and Johnson went to Congress seeking passage of a resolution that would grant unprecedented latitude to the executive. Although he expressed regret later, Mansfield voted for the resolution and prepared a memo on the subject before the hearings. "The communists are obviously, not going to be faced down. It now appears that they are not going to be stung down. That leaves only the possibility of mowing them down and that is going to take a lot of time and a great many lives. Unless we are prepared for that and in the absence of sound evidence to the contrary, therefore it might be advisable to consider [alternatives]."¹⁸² Unconvinced of the dire nature of the threat, Mansfield suggested caution, prudence, and the delegation of the matter to the United Nations. Johnson later held reservations to the

¹⁸¹ Letter to President Lyndon Johnson from R. P. Brede, March 12, 1964. MMA Series XIII, Box 49, File 1.

¹⁸² Memorandum regarding the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, August 4, 1964. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 7.

whole incident, “I’ll go to my grave believing the military pulled a fast one on me there. I just can’t fully trust the sons of bitches. Hell those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish.”¹⁸³

Author Gregory A. Olson’s *Mansfield and Vietnam* delves into the evolution of Mansfield’s strategy and tactics in dealing with each executive from Eisenhower through Nixon. With each president, Mansfield held a certain trust and respect, but after Kennedy’s death, the senator’s influence took a dramatic blow. Johnson came to respond to Mansfield’s string of recommendations through National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. “Senator Mansfield’s memorandum [is] characteristically thoughtful. There is a difference in emphasis between him and us, but certainly no difference in fundamental purpose,” and Bundy categorically emasculated each of Mansfield’s suggestions.¹⁸⁴ In 1965, a Marc Fasteau compiled an abstract of Mansfield’s policy recommendations regarding Vietnam. From January 1961 through June 1965, Senator Mansfield addressed the official policy in Vietnam sixty-seven times. In open forums on the Senate floor or public speeches, and in secret memoranda, Mansfield marshaled his efforts to bring a peaceful settlement to Southeast Asia and concurrently reevaluate the basic premises of American cold war policy.¹⁸⁵ Unlike dealing with the confident and cocksure Kennedy, Mansfield knew Johnson was a completely different animal. To add to Johnson’s overbearing, contentious demeanor, Oberdorfer describes the inner demons with whom Johnson dealt with daily. Intelligent, capable, and most efficient in politics, yet the

¹⁸³ Quoted in Schoenbaum, 431.

¹⁸⁴ Memorandum for the President from McGeorge Bundy, December 16, 1964. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 7.

¹⁸⁵ Memorandum to Senator Mansfield from Marc Fasteau, June 4, 1965. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 7.

impression of weakness petrified him. McGeorge Bundy articulated a portion of this fear in a memo to Johnson following the collective refutation of another Mansfield suggestion by Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara. “The political damage to Truman and Acheson from the fall of China arose because most Americans came to believe that we could and should have done more than we did to prevent it. This is exactly what would happen now if we should seem to be the first to quit in Saigon.”¹⁸⁶ Herein lay the crux of the development of official cold war policy. The “fall” of China remained the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in dealing with Asian policy until the hesitant acceptance of the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s. Blame and bluster and the omnipotence of the “perception of reality” all conspired to complicate the conduct of American diplomacy during the cold war. With the luxury of hindsight, it would seem Soviet-American relations at this time were far less complicated than the mess in Southeast Asia.

Amidst the policy debates of 1964, Mike Mansfield was up for reelection. Montanans like many Americans at the time were less concerned with Vietnam than domestic issues, and Olson writes that following the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, the legendary respect for Mansfield crossed the aisle. Republican Everett Dirksen of Illinois claimed “he would go to the moon to help Republicans, but please, don’t ask me to go to Montana” to campaign against Mansfield.¹⁸⁷

Mansfield’s memo of December 9, 1964 indicates a significant shift in the agency of the communists operating in South Vietnam. [T]he Viet Cong, a few weeks ago, pinpointed a major raid at Bien Hoa on an American installation and American personnel

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 220.

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Olson, 137.

scarcely a dozen miles from Saigon may be indicative of a graver deterioration in the general military situation than has heretofore been apparent.”¹⁸⁸ The Viet Cong’s ability to strike so deep into South Vietnam and so close to the capital illustrated the absence of real power or functional government in Saigon. After the bloody November the year before, none of the prospective leaders shared even the quasi-legitimacy of the Diem regime.

By March of 1965, Mansfield was growing weary of the resistance from the White House to his policy suggestions in Vietnam. The previous November, the American people elected Johnson to his own term, with Kennedy’s death carrying him to a landslide victory over Senator Barry Goldwater. Foreign Policy was not Johnson’s forte, and he delegated policy decisions to Kennedy holdovers Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy. As Mansfield continued his solemn duty to advise and consult the president, Johnson increasingly lined up his henchmen to marginalize the senator’s position. With mounting frustration, “In my judgment we were in too deep long before you assumed office. I shall not trouble you further with memorandums on this situation and I do not expect an answer to this letter.”¹⁸⁹

Oberdorfer describes the Johnson administration as “Years of Frustration.” Although never close, the relationship between Mansfield and Johnson strained after the death of JFK. In July, Johnson had McNamara pen a response to a lengthy memo from Mansfield. McNamara argued, “South Vietnam *is* vital to the United States in the

¹⁸⁸ Memorandum to President Lyndon Johnson from Senator Mike Mansfield, December 9, 1964. MMA XXII, Box 98, File 7.

¹⁸⁹ Memorandum from Senator Mansfield to President Lyndon Johnson, March 24, 1965. MMA Series XXII, Box 97, File 7.

significance that a demonstrable defeat would have on the future effectiveness of the United States on the world scene—especially in the area where people are depending upon our guarantee of their independence.” In this answer to Mansfield, it becomes clear the hawkish nature of the coterie of Johnson’s closest advisors. On every point contested, McNamara assures Mansfield of the necessity of each decision by the administration.

It seems fairly clear that termination of the bombing program will be worth a great deal to the other side, and we have every reason to believe that the strikes at infiltration routes have at least put a ceiling on what the North Vietnamese can pour into South Vietnam, thereby putting a ceiling on the size of war that the enemy can wage there. A side effect of the program has been to convey to both North and South Vietnam in unambiguous terms the U.S. commitment to see this thing through—a matter as to which there was, unfortunately, some doubt out there on both sides last February.¹⁹⁰

Mansfield’s time as a valued foreign policy advisor was nearly over. After Johnson’s reelection, one could opine he became drunk with power and refused to hear anything contrary to his predilections. Also considered, he was so completely in love with his Great Society legislation that he delegated foreign affairs to Kennedy’s “best and brightest.” Add the self-esteem demons that plagued Johnson in fears of repeating the mistakes by the Truman administration. Again, hindsight offers that Johnson may have been one of the least desirable men to occupy the White House during an international military crisis. Hyperbole suggests Johnson would have found far more success as a peacetime president. However, with a peacetime Lyndon Johnson, one could appreciably suspect a colossal expansion of government into society and the creeping socialism that is so very dear to progressives and liberals alike. Without the three most important and

¹⁹⁰ Memorandum for the President from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to Senator Mike Mansfield, July 28, 1965. MMA Series XXII, Box 97, File 7.

contentious wars of the twentieth century to rein in Wilson's New Freedom, FDR's New Deal, and LBJ's Great Society, America would have a profoundly different look today. McNamara closed the memo with reassurance to Mansfield that the administration knew better. "Everything reasonable is being done to find an acceptable solution. The exact combination of military and political action, which will produce settlement, cannot be predicted now. As I said earlier, the first order of business is to make it clear to the enemy that an early victory is not in sight for them."¹⁹¹

That will be all, Mr. Senator.

Fortunately, that was *not* all from Mansfield, and the administration continued to consult him out of the tremendous respect the senator had earned. Five months after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Viet Cong and the National Liberation Front attacked Camp Holloway at Pleiku in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. That evening, President Johnson convened his top advisors and invited Mansfield and House Speaker John McCormack. In deliberating an appropriate military response, Mansfield alone objected, "We are not in a penny anted game. It appears that the local populace in South Vietnam is not behind us, else the Viet Cong could not have carried out their surprise attack."¹⁹²

President Johnson launched Operation Flaming Dart to bomb selected targets in North Vietnam. The following month, on March 6, Secretary McNamara called Mansfield to inform him of the administration's response to a deteriorating situation at the U.S. airbase at Da Nang. "[McNamara] said they were considering sending in two battalions of Marines or 3500 men. He said the situation there was very difficult The South

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Quoted in Oberdorfer, 260.

Vietnamese were over-extended and he wanted to know what my reaction was to the idea of sending in the Marines.” Of course, Mansfield advised against the move, “I furthermore stated that the decision was, in any event, the responsibility of the President and Mr. McNamara and I assumed that a decision had already been made.”¹⁹³ McNamara responded in the negative, but two days later, Marines landed in Da Nang, officially becoming the first “combat” troops to enter Vietnam. According to the authors of the Pentagon Papers, “A mighty commandment of U.S. foreign policy—thou shall not engage in an Asian land war—had been breached. It also weakened the position of those who were, a few scant months later, to oppose the landing of further U.S. ground troops.”¹⁹⁴ Thus officially ended the foreplay and consummated what may have become inevitable in November of 1963. The deaths of Jack Kennedy and Ngo Dinh Diem, eliminated any real opportunity to end the conflict before the conflagration of warfare—however euphemized by rhetoric.

Later that month, George McGovern (D-SD) confronted Johnson over Vietnam. The president appreciated the inquiry none too much. “Don’t give me another goddamn history lesson. I’ve got a drawer full of memos from Mansfield. I don’t need a lecture on where we went wrong. I’ve got to deal with where we are now.” Clearly old Rufus Cornpone was agitated. McGovern left the meeting with genuine concern, “I literally trembled for the future of the nation.”¹⁹⁵ In response to the dissent from Mansfield and fellow foreign relations player William Fulbright (D-AR), Johnson grudgingly called for

¹⁹³ Telephone conversation between Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Senator Mike Mansfield, March 6, 1965. MMA Series XXII, Box 98, File 10.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 268.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Olson, 148. “Cornpone” (southern hick) was a derisive moniker given to Johnson by some of Kennedy’s “eggheads.”

a pause in the bombing. The reprieve was short lived, and when the president decided to end the pause for lack of result, McNamara came to the president's defense. "Mansfield ought to know Hanoi spit in our face."¹⁹⁶ Still, in the face of overt antagonism from the White House, Mansfield publicly maintained his official support of Johnson, while continuing his strategy of private memorandums and discussions with the administration. Fulbright seemingly lost his patience and broke with the White House to become a public critic of Johnson's policy.¹⁹⁷ "A Senator who wishes to influence foreign policy must consider the ... results of communicating privately with the Executive or, alternatively, of speaking out publicly. I do not see any great principle here: it is a matter of how one can better achieve what one hopes to achieve."¹⁹⁸

In May 1965, Johnson took another step to mitigate any opposition from the Senate. In a legislative request for funding to support the troops in Southeast Asia, the president effectively forced Congress into line. Ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee, Leverett Saltonstall reported, "We are faced with a realistic but simple fact, "Our troops are in South Vietnam and we must supply them."¹⁹⁹ According to William Conrad Gibbons, author of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's report on the government and the Vietnam War, Johnson's move was "probably the single most determinative factor in Congress' support throughout the war." Thereafter, Oberdorfer writes, "Congress found it impossible to deny the executive branch whatever funds it

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁹⁷ Olson, 149.

¹⁹⁸ Quoted in Olson, 150.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 272.

asked until the troops were withdrawn in 1973.”²⁰⁰ With the rejection of the advice and consent of the United States Senate, President Lyndon Baines Johnson assumed sole ownership of the Vietnam War. Robert Caro talks of Johnson’s profound fear of failure—partly due to his father’s penniless demise. “President Johnson’s fears about failure in Vietnam,” Robert McNamara remembered in his memoirs, “made him accept bombing, overriding whatever hesitation he still harbored about South Vietnam’s instability.”²⁰¹ This fear plainly affected politics and diplomacy in the 1960s, preventing Johnson to either share or concede power to any real degree. Fear of losing Vietnam as Truman lost China. Fear of failing to win a nomination. Longtime Senate aide and Johnson cohort Bobby Baker remembered, “Johnson feared losing, a deep fear of being defeated. He was haunted by fears of failure.”²⁰²

Don Oberdorfer conducted a series of interviews before the Senator passed. In a July 1998 session, Oberdorfer queried the senator on the conduct of opposition to the administration’s policy. “I felt as long as I was the majority leader I was in a better position to state my view, not only on the floor but to the White House directly. Otherwise, I would be just talking to the wind. I was talking to the wind anyway. But the wind was blowing less hard. With Fulbright, when he became anti-Vietnam war minded, I never had any difficulties.”²⁰³ The following year, in October 1999, Oberdorfer followed the questions into the nascent opposition to the war in the Senate. “The big success of the White House campaign was in keeping the key players in the Senate

²⁰⁰ Oberdorfer, 272-3.

²⁰¹ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York: Random House, 1995), 174.

²⁰² Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 17

²⁰³ Don Oberdorfer interview with Mike Mansfield, MMA, OH: 391-02, July 1998.

Democratic Leadership—Mike Mansfield, William Fulbright, and Richard Russell (D-GA), all of them opposed to the a larger war—from voicing strong opposition in these crucial weeks.”²⁰⁴ Johnson’s control, either direct or indirect, maintained his power over Capitol Hill and prevented significant debate on the Senate Floor. With emotion, Senator Mansfield remembered,

Well, I wasn’t really supportive of the war, I was walking a tightrope. I wanted to be heard. I’m second-guessing now—it was to uphold the institution of the presidency. It was difficult. Maybe I walked that tight line incorrectly, but it was the best I could do under the circumstances at that time. I think that I could have been more vigorous, I could have adopted another kind of procedure, but just didn’t know [voice breaks with self-restrained emotion] what it was and I did the best I could under extremely difficult and delicate circumstances because of the institutional relationship between the Senate and the White House. So I can give you no argument against it. It’s something I’m not proud of, but something which I did to the best of my ability. Let history speak for itself.²⁰⁵

Mansfield questioned the very premise of our motives in Saigon. “In short we are now at the point where we are no longer dealing with anyone [in South Vietnam] who represents anybody in a political sense. We are simply acting to prevent a collapse of the Vietnamese military forces—which we pay for and supply.” The senator directly asked what, precisely, is the incentive to continue in Southeast Asia? Cold war ideology slowly began to yield the floor for pragmatic reassessment. Posing three possible answers to his question, Mansfield castigated the amorphous nature of Johnson’s foreign policy. “The absence of a decision as to which of the above approaches serves our national interests, seems to me to be the crux of the difficulty which has confronted us all along.” Perhaps there never was a right answer for Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, or Johnson. Perhaps

²⁰⁴ Don Oberdorfer interview with Mike Mansfield, October 20, 1999. MMA, OH: 391-11

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

any decisions made in the ashes of World War II would have impelled the United States into war in Southeast Asia—or Africa or the Middle East or Latin America. Mansfield explained in his June 9 memo to the president, that at a certain point, foreign policy becomes an entity unto itself, with desires, goals, and motives vainly, but not altogether successfully, controlled by the diplomats and statesmen. “A request [for troops] at this time could set off a wave of criticism and of demands for inquiries which, in the end, even though a resolution were overwhelmingly approved, would not in any way strengthen your hand, render your task easier or make your burden of responsibility lighter.”²⁰⁶ Time was running out for the Senate. After Kennedy’s death, Johnson began to distance himself from the advice and consent of the Senate and increasingly depended on McNamara, Rusk, and Bundy to minister foreign policy. Later analyses of the Pentagon Papers considered the tack of incessant bombing of North Vietnam. “Once set in motion the bombing effect seemed to stiffen rather than soften Hanoi’s backbone, as well as to lessen the willingness of Hanoi’s allies, particularly the Soviet Union, to work toward compromise.”²⁰⁷ Throughout his memoranda debating President Johnson’s choices in Vietnam, Mansfield stressed the inability of the bombing to force the communist adversaries to the negotiating table—which was, of course, the ultimate purpose of the Senator’s efforts.

In June, General William Westmoreland’s “forty-four battalion request,” disturbed Secretary McNamara and impelled Johnson to call on Mansfield to gauge the reaction on Capitol Hill. Again looking ahead, Mansfield replied, “When McNamara

²⁰⁶ Memorandum from Senator Mike Mansfield to President Johnson, June 9, 1965. MMA XXII Box 97, File 7.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Oberdorfer, 274.

speaks about 300,000 American troops against [General] Giap's 31 divisions in North Vietnam, that's the absolute minimum."²⁰⁸ Johnson understood. No longer could the president manage the situation with limited engagement and continuous bombing. At the halfway point of the 20th Century, North Vietnam's industrial capacity was minimal. Outside the seaports of Hanoi and Haiphong, few valuable strategic targets existed, severely mitigating the efficacy of heavy bombing from the outset.

On July 27, 1965, a meeting of the senate leadership discussed the impending military escalation in Vietnam. Since his early days in the Congress, Mansfield consistently asserted the primacy of the executive in foreign affairs. Now he relaxed his usual poise. Mansfield again voiced his opposition to the decision that each day seemed more likely. In his 19th and final point of the meeting the senator opined, "McNamara has been a disappointment in his handling of this situation, probably because he is being used in a way in which he ought not to be used."²⁰⁹ Considering the logistics, cost, and public reaction at home, the senator found no merit in expanding the war. Following the meeting, Johnson aide Jack Valenti wistfully considered hyperbole:

Mansfield's discontent was remarkably prophetic. The majority leader never wavered in his assessment of Vietnam and its deadly impact on the nation. What might have happened if the president had listened to Mike Mansfield and given his view more weight in his own mind? Mansfield's assay of Indochina was probably closer to the mark than other public men, with the possible exception of George Ball. With Mansfield's comments to the president, the meeting had come to an end. The die was cast. The decision taken.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

²⁰⁹ Memorandum from Senator Mike Mansfield to President Johnson, July 27, 1965. MMA XXII Box 97, File 7.

²¹⁰ Quoted in Olson, 161.

Johnson was committed to his course of action. Valenti's point was erudite. The history of America's involvement in Southeast Asia could be remarkably different had Mansfield held the authority of the executive; despite outside chances at the job, the presidency was never in Mansfield's cards.

That December, Mansfield made yet another trip to Southeast Asia to reassess the situation. Accompanied by Senators George Aiken (R-VT), J. Caleb Boggs (R-DE), Edmund Muskie (D-ME), and Daniel Inouye (D-HI), Mansfield toured the Associated States soliciting first hand intelligence. In a meeting with Foreign Minister Tran Van Do, the senators heard testimony regarding the goals of the Vietnamese and the state of government in Saigon. In light of Johnson's offer to go to the negotiating table that spring, Minister Do explained: "It is so difficult to find a solution for this war because the Communists are afraid. They [Chinese Communists] realize that if they accept the end of the war and accept U.S. aid that will be the end of the Communist regime in the North." Senator Mansfield followed up by querying the degree of Peking's control over Hanoi. Tran Van Do responded, "Yes, in some ways Hanoi wants you to get rid of the Chinese influence. In the past they used the French to get rid of the Chinese and now they want you to fight the Chinese and deliver them from Chinese pressure." The senators posed the usual questions such as "How long can your people sustain?" or, to what degree are the criticisms of a corrupt Saigon regime accurate? In another conversation, Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky also assigned blame for the mess to Peking. "In my opinion as long as Mainland China is occupied by a Communist regime, small countries will never have peace, never, and in particular Viet-Nam." Echoing assertions of falling dominoes, Ky

continued, “If they can win in Viet-Nam the next steps in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia will be much easier in their plan of domination.” Senator Muskie challenged the Prime Minister: “Must Communist China be eliminated?” Nguyen Cao Ky replied, “If we get a cease fire and we have a time of peace, we know this may not last. We know the Chinese for four thousand years. As long as we face a Communist China sooner or later we will have to face Chinese Communists.”²¹¹

The previous day, the senators had met with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge for a meeting of the minds. In a fifty-page, declassified record of the conversations, the senators received the official government summary of the events in Vietnam. At the close of his lengthy opening remarks, Lodge speculated, “Now, as to the outlook for the future. I foresee that the intensity of military actions will continue to increase. I foresee the need for a great number of additional U.S. forces. I foresee a protracted conflict. We cannot afford this time to underestimate the enemy. And, as I see it, this war is beginning to take on an attritional character.”²¹² Present at the meeting, General William Westmoreland described the need for additional forces. “I have given my recommendations to Mr. McNamara very recently. In round numbers, I think we are going to have to double the force.” Later in the conversation, Mansfield asked the general and the ambassador for specifics, “I would like to ask a question of both of you: Just how good is our intelligence out here, [and] do you think that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong intelligence is superior to ours?” The ambassador claimed, “You never get enough. I wish we knew

²¹¹ Record of Conversations, Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister’s Office, December 3, 1965. MMA Series XXII, Box 94, File 1.

²¹² U.S. Mission Council Briefing for Codel Mansfield, America Embassy, Saigon. MMA Series XXII, Box 94, File 1, 12.

more. I think they have, unquestionably, they have spies, all over, there is no question about that. And the fact that we had so many changes in government, with changes of commanding generals, and a change of people all down the line, always gives the Viet Cong an opportunity to put someone in.”²¹³ Over the course of the hour-long conversation, the senators heard from the military, the embassy, the head of the CIA mission in Saigon, the head of the local press corps, and General Edward Lansdale who was back on the scene to revise and revamp the “pacification” program that started during the Diem regime as the Strategic Hamlet program.²¹⁴ With a comprehensive analysis of the situation, Mansfield left Vietnam even more concerned with getting to the negotiating table.

Back in Washington, Mansfield’s private report to Johnson presented few desirable options remaining. Diplomacy was imperative, but also important was tempering any illusions of a quick and decisive military victory. “This is a conflict in which all the choices open to us are bad choices. We stand to lose in Viet Nam by restraint; but we stand to lose far more at home and throughout the world by pursuit of an elusive and ephemeral objective in Viet Nam.”²¹⁵ In his continued efforts to forestall a wider war in Vietnam, Senator Mansfield challenged the empirical dogma of American

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

²¹⁴ A descendant of the failed “agrovilles,” the strategic hamlet program envisioned armed villages to defend against the Viet Cong and subsequently emboldening support for the Saigon government. Partly based upon the British efforts in Malaysia to deal with communist insurgents, author and journalist Stanley Karnow saw the program as “a means [for Diem and Nhu] to spread their influence rather than a device to infuse peasants with the will to resist the Viet Cong. (Karnow, 272-3) For a comprehensive analysis of pacification efforts in Vietnam, see Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure, Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam*. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002)

²¹⁵ Quoted in Olson, 170.

cold war policy authored by Truman and Dean Acheson, Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles.

With Johnson, hubris and fear subordinated geopolitical reality. Inexperience in foreign affairs and his devotion to Great Society legislation allowed Johnson to delegate Vietnam to Kennedy's advisors who were determined that the proper ideology supported by lots of bombs would win the war. According to Frank Valeo,

Johnson, as vice-president, already shared the prevailing view of many Americans that the advance of communism in Asia could be turned back by little more than a combination of greater emphasis on military aid to anticommunist elements, and a brandishing of U.S. military power in the region. Johnson received little advice to the contrary from American officials in Southeast Asia.²¹⁶

Mansfield sought alternatives. Ideas that remained welcome with Kennedy, but marginalized and eventually ignored by Johnson. When U.S. Marines landed at Da Nang on March 8, 1965, the U.S. Senate lost substantial agency in the creation and implementation of foreign policy. In the eternal battle for power between the executive and legislature, Johnson further empowered the White House. At home, Johnson's decisive moves of "gradual escalation" met minimal resistance from the public. Valeo reports, "the only flicker of dissent was produced by an obscure group known as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)." To protest, the group assembled in Washington with a crowd "barely large enough to draw the attention of the media, it created scarcely a ripple in official circles, where the SDS was dismissed as 'some kind of communist front.'"²¹⁷

For the next few years, Mansfield continued to oppose further military escalations, but supported the troops deployed. Fellow Senator William Fulbright

²¹⁶ Valeo, 183.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

plodded along in public criticism of Johnson's conduct of prosecuting the conflict. Along with Undersecretary of State George Ball, the senators represented the highest order of dissent within the government. In early 1966, Fulbright's efforts moved the debate into the public's eye. Deliberations escalated and Senators chose sides—Mansfield found himself in a bind. Although he still dissented privately Johnson's courses of action, publicly Mansfield maintained support for the executive and refused to join Fulbright's outspoken public crusade. The loyalty afforded Lyndon Johnson began to marginalize Mansfield's authority. Clearly, in the bag for the president, the relevance of his private criticisms of the war steadily diminished. During this time, Mansfield attempted to take the matter to the United Nations. Numerous players offered complex and disparate solutions to the situation, but none received consensus, and in late 1967, the plan died in theoretical committee.

In Vietnam, during an assumed relaxing of hostilities for the 1968 New Year festivities of Tet, the Communist forces launched a general offensive against South Vietnam. A military victory for American forces, the shock and carnage perpetrated in cities such as the imperial capital of Hue, illustrated the profound disconnect between the U.S. mission and the Vietnamese population. In March, Johnson met again with his group of advisors dubbed the "Wise Men." Among others, present were veteran cold warriors and statesmen including Dean Acheson, Douglas Dillon, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., General Omar Bradley, General Matthew Ridgeway, and current advisors George Ball and McGeorge Bundy. After the Tet Offensive, the "Wise Men" reversed their earlier

conclusions and recommended disengagement in Vietnam.²¹⁸ Seemingly bent on escalation, the next day Johnson met again with Mansfield to discuss a bombing halt and sending more forces to Vietnam. Mansfield continued his opposition.

I said, no, we've got to get out, should not have been there in the first place. I urged him as strongly as I knew how to bring this tragic war to an end because it was an area which was not and never had been vital to our security. I spent three hours there that night with Johnson. Three days later, I heard him deliver that Sunday night TV speech—which he had been working on that night—and I heard him add that he would not run for reelection.²¹⁹

With the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson, master of political maneuver, manipulated both legislation and legislators, and helped turn an entire demographic of educators and students against the government through a legitimate and increasing “credibility gap.” In his account of Mansfield’s years as majority leader, Frank Valeo writes: “Mansfield saw the administration’s fundamental failure as the failure to recognize that there were rational limits to the use of U.S. military power in Indochina.”²²⁰ For years, so-called “doves” in government entreated Johnson to change course, but instead, he ignored the cries of logic, and following the Tet Offensive, made the tremendous decision not seek the nomination for reelection 1968, effectively passing Vietnam off to the next president. Perhaps Johnson would have overachieved in a peacetime environment with his devotion to social democracy and profound concern for not only his own power, but for the everyday citizen disadvantaged by poverty and limited access to public services. Ascending to the executive during a most complicated and incendiary moment, cold war conflict in Southeast Asia challenged Johnson to make

²¹⁸ Olson, 193.

²¹⁹ Quoted in Olson, 193.

²²⁰ Valeo, 198.

an impossible choice between a wider war and the devastating humiliation of failure if Vietnam fell to the Communists on his watch. Senator Mike Mansfield not only provided an educated voice to three administrations, often voicing caution and temperament to discussions of changing policy to a more aggressive tone, but he also offered alternatives to both Kennedy and Johnson to deal with the situation. Superficially, it appears that Mansfield reversed his position on Vietnam by the middle 1960s. Instead, Mansfield consistently opposed American military involvement, but always supported Ngo Dinh Diem and his quest for Vietnamese independence. After the removal of the brothers Ngo in 1963, there was little agency left in Saigon in which to find any faith. Unlike many policymakers of the time, the Montana senator understood the imperative of winning the political war before achieving military victory. “It can be said,” Robert Hormats of Goldman Sachs claimed in 1992 “that politicians make decisions with a view to the next *election*; leaders and statesmen make decisions with a view to the next *generation*. The Founding Fathers understood this distinction.”²²¹ Mike Mansfield also understood this distinction and spared no effort to advise three administrations to keep a lid on Vietnam. As Johnson severed communication with Senator Fulbright and politely dismissed Mansfield’s recommendations, the president effectively shifted the balance of power in foreign policy from Capitol Hill to the executive’s will—so much for advice and consent.

²²¹ Robert D. Hormats, “Emerging New Democracies and Free Market Economies,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* Vol. 22, No. 4 (1992): 747, accessed October 18, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551038>

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