

AMERICAN TRAGEDY

KENNEDY, JOHNSON,
AND THE ORIGINS OF
THE VIETNAM WAR

DAVID KAISER



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American Tragedy



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The traits of American character were fixed; the rate of physical and economical growth was established; and history, certain that at a given distance of time the Union would contain so many millions of people, with wealth valued at so many millions of dollars, became thenceforward chiefly concerned to know what kind of people these millions were to be. They were intelligent, but what paths would their intelligence select? They were quick, but what solution of insoluble problems would quickness hurry? They were scientific, and what control would their science exercise over their destiny? They were mild, but what corruptions would their relaxations bring? They were peaceful, but by what machinery were their corruptions to be purged? What interests were to vivify a society so vast and uniform? What ideals were to ennoble it? What object, besides physical content, must a democratic continent aspire to attain? For the treatment of such questions, history required another century of experience.

—Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*

President Kennedy questioned the wisdom of involvement in Vietnam since the basis thereof is not completely clear. By comparison he noted that Korea was a case of clear aggression which was opposed by the United States and other members of the U.N. The conflict in Vietnam is more obscure and less flagrant. The President then expressed his strong feeling that in such a situation the United States needs even more the support of allies in such an endeavor as Vietnam in order to avoid sharp domestic partisan criticism as well as strong objections from other nations of the world. The President said that he could even make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions have been spent for years with no success.

—White House meeting, November 15, 1961

Our generation has a dream. It is a very old dream. But we have the power and now we have the opportunity to make that dream come true.

For centuries nations have struggled among each other. But we dream of a world where disputes are settled by law and reason. And we will try to make it so.

For most of history men have hated and killed one another in battle. But we dream of an end to war. And we will try to make it so.

For all existence men lived in poverty, threatened by hunger. But we dream of a world where all are fed and charged with hope. And we will help to make it so.

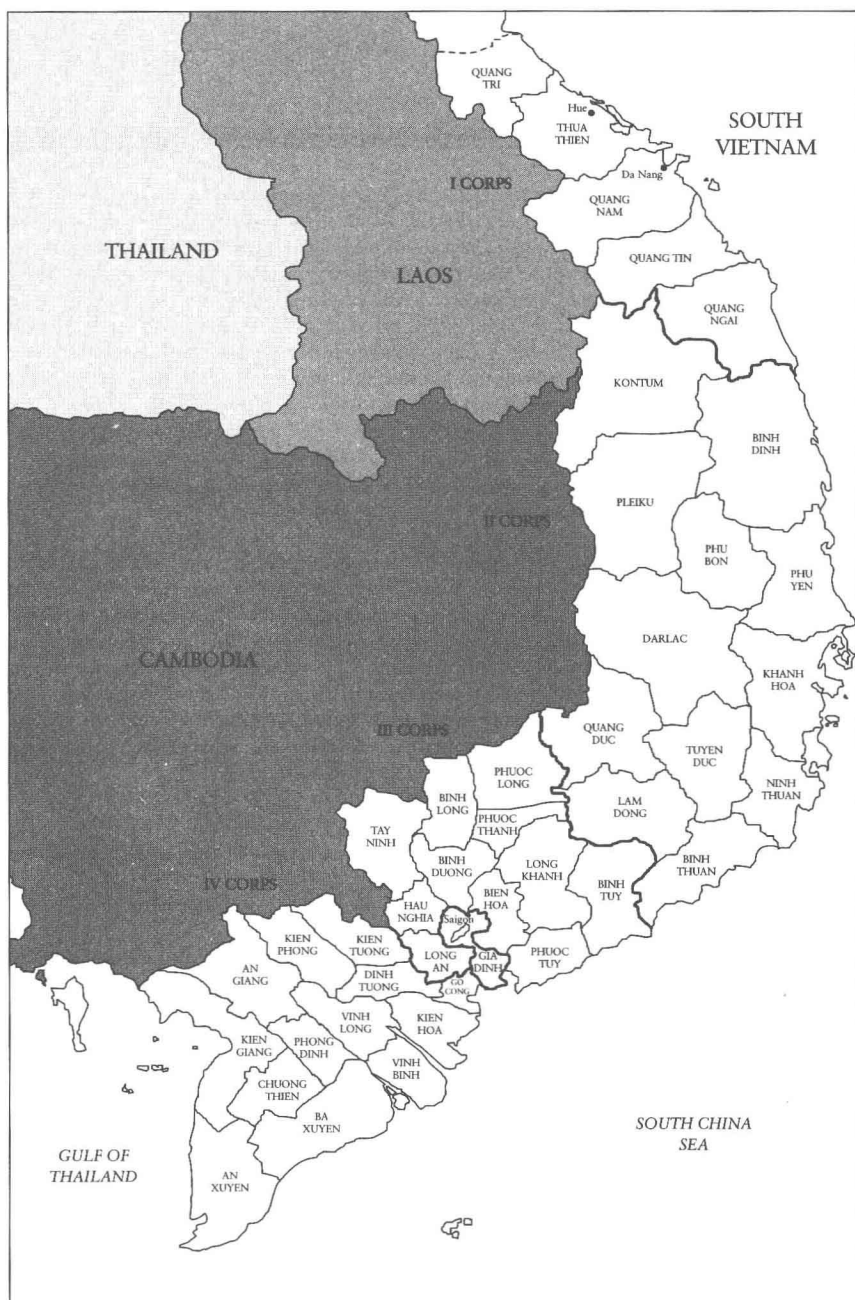
The ordinary men and women of North Vietnam and South Vietnam—of China and India—of Russia and America—are brave people. They are filled with the same proportions of hate and fear, of love and hope. Most of them want the same things for themselves and their families. Most of them do not want their sons to ever die in battle, or to see their homes, or the homes of others, destroyed.

Well, this can be their world yet. Man now has the knowledge—always before denied—to make this planet serve the real needs of the people who live on it.

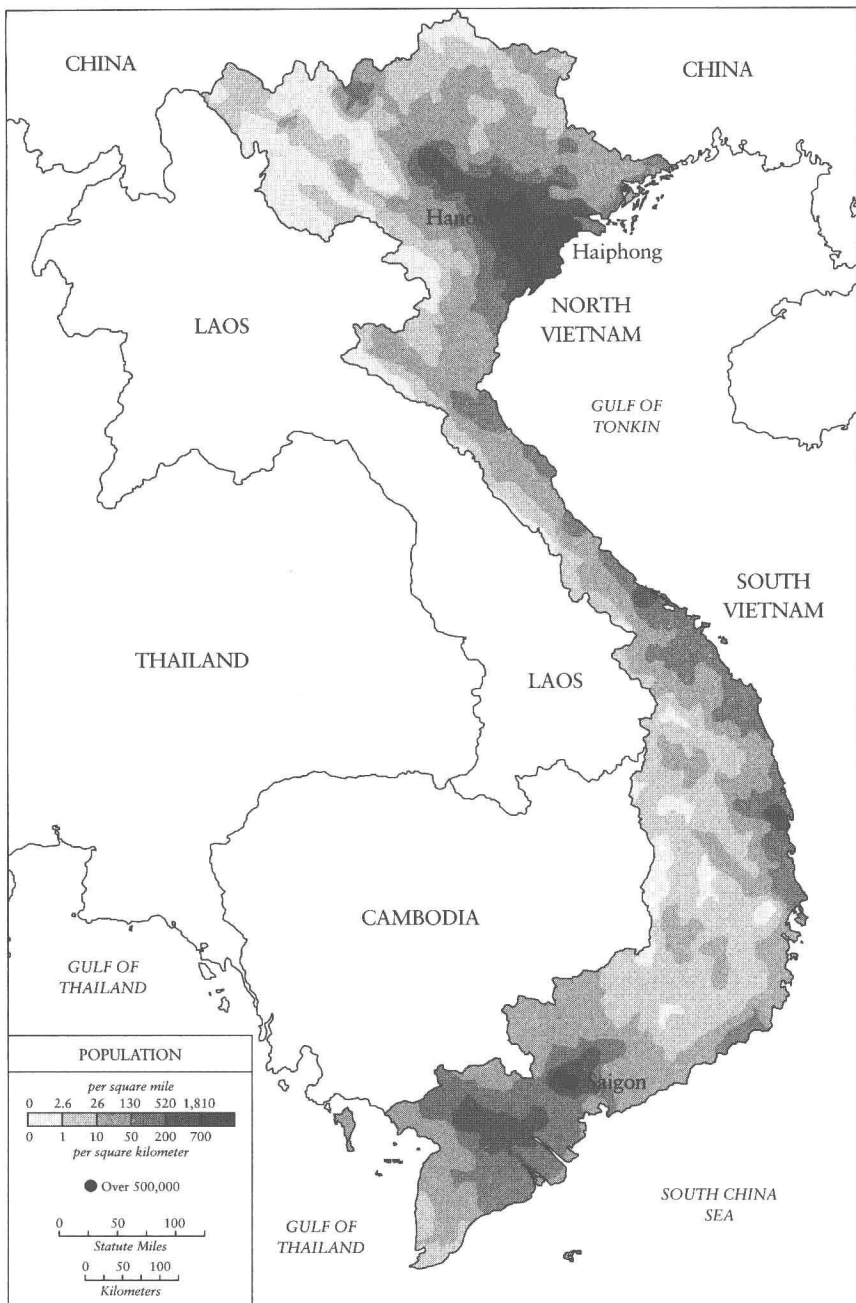
—President Lyndon Johnson, April 7, 1965

To history has been given the task of judging the past, of instructing men for the benefit of future years. The present attempt does not aspire to such a lofty undertaking. It merely wishes to show how things happened in their own right.

—Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples*



Provinces and Military Corps Boundaries of South Vietnam



Population Density of Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION



In the early 1960s the government of the United States probably enjoyed more prestige than at any other time during the twentieth century. The broad national consensus established by the New Deal and the Second World War had been strengthened by the Cold War, sustained economic growth, and progress toward civil rights for all Americans. American opinion showed particular unity with respect to the nation's role in the world and the need to contain Communism. These views had already involved the United States deeply in Southeast Asia, and the decision to fight in South Vietnam in 1965 certainly reflected contemporary conventional wisdom.

By the spring of 1968, when the escalation of the war finally reached an upward limit, this national consensus no longer existed, and by the spring of 1975, when Saigon fell, Americans' confidence in their government had fallen to a new low. Although the *international* consequences of the most unequivocal military defeat in the history of the United States turned out to be considerably less serious than policymakers had predicted, the lost war nonetheless remains the greatest policy miscalculation in the history of American foreign relations. And while its consequences did not compare to the those of Germany's miscalculations in 1914 and 1939, or that of the Confederacy in 1861 or even the British in 1775, they nonetheless included profound effects on American society and politics that persist to this day. The war in Vietnam remains a pivotal event in American history not because of its consequences in international politics, but because it brought an era of American history—the postwar consensus—suddenly and dramatically to an end.

Although the genesis of the war was the subject of large-scale treatments in both the 1970s and the 1980s, only in the 1990s have American archives opened their doors to reveal the genesis of American policy.¹ This book is the first treatment based upon a nearly complete documentary record, giving due weight to both long-term causes and short-term decisions, and telling the story of the early stages of the conflict itself.

Two thousand four hundred years ago, Thucydides the Athenian first explored the distinction between the long-term and immediate causes of conflicts in his history of the Peloponnesian War. The long-term causes of the American involvement in Vietnam, it is now clear, go back to the middle years of the Eisenhower administration, which decided upon a militant response to any new Communist advances virtually anywhere on the globe. The Vietnam War occurred largely because of Cold War policies adopted by the State and Defense Departments in 1954–1956 and approved secretly by President Eisenhower—policies that called for a military response to Communist aggression almost anywhere that it might occur, and specifically in Southeast Asia. These policies ensured that when American clients came under attack from Communist and other forces in Laos and South Vietnam the Pentagon and the State Department would propose American military action. They also ensured that military planners would rely upon nuclear weapons to make such action effective, and some continued to do so well into the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Ironically, while Eisenhower's supposedly cautious approach in foreign policy has frequently been contrasted with his successors' apparent aggressiveness, Kennedy actually spent much of his term resisting policies developed and approved under Eisenhower, both in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.² He also had to deal with the legacy of the Eisenhower administration's disastrous attempts to create a pro-Western rather than a neutral government in Laos—a policy he quickly reversed, thereby avoiding the need for American military intervention there.

Following the lines of policy Eisenhower had laid down, middle- and lower-level State and Defense Department officials began submitting one proposal for military intervention after another as soon as crises in Laos and South Vietnam became serious in 1960–1961. But while the military continually laid plans for action in Indochina, American war plans took relatively little account of the actual strategic situation there

or of the capacity of American conventional forces to affect it. War plans were consistently designed to deal with conventional Communist aggression, but the threats that developed in Laos and South Vietnam in 1960–1964 were political in Laos and largely unconventional within South Vietnam. The Pentagon's plans for Southeast Asia involved action against North Vietnam from the air, from the sea, and on land, and consistently foresaw Chinese intervention and escalation to general war as a possible result. When American advisers became actively involved in the Vietnam War in 1962, a few civilians, junior officers, and foreign observers raised basic questions about the nature of the war and American strategy, but the American military never changed its basic approach to the conflict.

The underlying causes of the Vietnam War, we shall find, were the growing Communist insurgency in South Vietnam, on the one hand, and the State and Defense Departments' reflexive proposals for implementing the Eisenhower administration's policies on the other. The more immediate causes of the war, however, and specifically the American decision in late 1964 and early 1965 definitely to begin it after declining to do so in 1961–1962, show the influence of both personality and chance. The appointed senior foreign policy leadership of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, and most of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—never questioned the assumptions of the Pentagon and State Department, and supported intervention in Southeast Asia from 1961 on. But President Kennedy resisted the proposals for intervention in both Laos and South Vietnam that reached him, largely because of broader strategic and political questions that the bureaucracy and his cabinet seemed to ignore. The Kennedy administration did dramatically increase American involvement in South Vietnam, raising the American military presence from about 600 personnel in 1960 to 17,500 in 1963. That increase, however, which took the form of a larger advisory presence and the introduction of helicopter, tactical air, and other forms of combat support, represented a compromise between the President, who sincerely wanted to help the South Vietnamese government cope with the Viet Cong but rejected war as a way to do so, and his bureaucracy and cabinet members, who wanted the United States to intervene directly in 1961.

As Kennedy repeatedly explained, he doubted—rightly as it turned out—that American intervention in Southeast Asia would enjoy much support from the nation's most important allies, or from Congress, or from the American people. Again and again he questioned whether Indochina was an appropriate place for the United States to fight. While keenly interested in the problem of Communist insurgency, he believed that threatened nations themselves bore the principal responsibility for combating it, and he wanted to assist them by means other than direct American military intervention. And Kennedy also looked for ways to improve relations with the Soviet Union and America's image in the Third World—efforts which were slowly succeeding by the end of his last year in office, but which rapidly came to a halt thereafter as the United States began the war in Vietnam. We shall never know what Kennedy would have done with respect to Vietnam had he lived to serve a second term, but it is clear that the Vietnam War would have begun three or four years earlier than it did had he taken his subordinates' advice to send troops.

This book also deals fully, for the first time, with the Kennedy administration's relationship to the government of Ngo Dinh Diem and to its overthrow. The administration's attempts to help the South Vietnamese government cope with the emerging Viet Cong failed, largely because neither Saigon nor the American military knew how to deal with a guerrilla war. Nor, it is clear, was Diem an effective leader unwisely abandoned by his American patrons. A bipartisan consensus had adopted Diem as the preferred South Vietnamese leader under the Eisenhower administration, but he lacked the skills necessary to unite non-Communist South Vietnamese, and his support had already declined significantly by 1961. This book shows, with the help of extensive new documentation, that the counterinsurgency effort in South Vietnam was failing even before the Buddhist crisis of 1963, and that Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu had themselves to blame for their overthrow. It also shows how Robert McNamara and the Pentagon helped hide the true situation from the President, the rest of the government, and the American people, thereby putting off the need to reevaluate American policy. Kennedy died believing, mistakenly, that the war was still going well.

When in the months after Kennedy's death it became clear that the situation within South Vietnam was deteriorating, the Pentagon re-

newed proposals for a conventional war against North Vietnam. President Johnson, unlike President Kennedy, never really questioned his subordinates' proposals, and agreed in principle by March 1964 to take action against North Vietnam. But Johnson also wanted to avoid an obvious change in policy or a major war until after his reelection, and his administration marked time for most of 1964, with the exception of the Gulf of Tonkin incident in early August and the retaliatory strike and congressional resolution that followed. After the election, the bureaucracy immediately prepared, and the President approved, a plan for an open-ended war against North Vietnam designed to create an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam. These plans took very little account of the insurgency in the South itself, and essentially ignored the questions of allied support and American public opinion that had dissuaded Kennedy from such moves. The Joint Chiefs of Staff attempted to get the government to commit itself in advance to the use of nuclear weapons if necessary, but this question was left open. In an effort to avoid disturbing his legislative agenda, Johnson concealed even the existence of these war plans for as long as possible. Meanwhile, the Johnson administration essentially lost interest in other critical aspects of foreign policy such as Soviet-American relations.

The American war in South Vietnam—including both bombing and ground forces—began in late February and early March 1965. And although Johnson's deceptive presentation of his decisions fooled both the American people at the time and many subsequent historians, this book shows clearly that he was implementing one basic decision for a major war that had been reached in December of 1964. Knowing that it was embarking upon a much longer and larger conflict than the American people seemed ready to support, the administration decided disastrously to conceal its probable scope and duration for as long as possible, while pretending that negotiations might bring the conflict to an end at any moment. The strategy worked only too well. The initial bombing and troop commitments did not disturb Johnson's legislative agenda, but when the scale of the commitment and the failure to achieve American aims became apparent during the next three years, support for the war began to evaporate rapidly.

Other myths must also be laid to rest. The Johnson administration did not decide upon the war out of fear of a right-wing backlash, or because of a belief that Congress or the American public demanded it, or

as a means of saving the Great Society. The strength of the American political right had fallen to an all-time low in early 1965, and an important segment of the right—conservative Southern Democrats—had no real interest in the Vietnam War. While both the Congress and the public could be expected generally to *support* military action against Communism, neither had shown the slightest *enthusiasm* for such a course, and both would have been delighted to have been spared this rather dubious venture. Instead, as newly released taped telephone conversations show beyond doubt, Johnson, Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy undertook the war and overrode the well-founded doubts of some important subordinates simply because they believed it had to be done and had confidence in the nation's ability to do it. They did so even though America's leading allies, the world's leading neutrals, and the Secretary General of the United Nations all tried to discourage them from escalating the war.

Nor did the American failure in the war stem from the civilians' failure to follow military advice to escalate more rapidly. The build-up of 1965–1966 closely followed the recommendations of General William Westmoreland, the commander in the field. It began slowly and gradually mainly because the primitive logistics of South Vietnam could not support more rapid deployments. Meanwhile, General Westmoreland opposed the immediate all-out bombing of North Vietnam because he wanted to secure his position in South Vietnam first. The general, who became the key architect of American strategy, also seems to have accepted the idea that the war could be won conventionally. The loss of the war stemmed not from a failure in civil-military relations but from a failure of either the civilian or the military leadership to understand the nature of the conflict and to define realistic American objectives and strategies.

This book is the first to explore an enormous amount of published and unpublished documentation on the years 1961–1965 that has become available during the last seven years, including seven thick volumes of *Foreign Relations of the United States* devoted to Vietnam itself, thousands of unpublished documents in the Kennedy and Johnson Libraries, many more volumes on other aspects of Kennedy administration foreign policy, the papers of General Westmoreland, numerous Pentagon documents declassified at my request, tapes of several critical meetings during the Kennedy administration, and tapes of President

Johnson's telephone conversations showing his state of mind during the first nine months of his presidency. Although some key documents remain classified, and although the CIA apparently has no intention of ever releasing some important documentation about its relations with the Diem regime, the documentary record of American policy is now relatively complete.

This book is also the first to make a thorough attempt to place the issues of Vietnam and Laos within a broader international and domestic context. Nothing seems more significant, in this respect, than the relative priorities given to Vietnam by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Under Kennedy, other issues—Berlin, Cuba, the Congo, relations with leading neutrals, and above all relations with the Soviet Union—generally took up far more of the President's time and attention than Vietnam. Under Johnson, Vietnam within six months emerged as by far the most important issue in foreign affairs, and Johnson undertook the war without giving much consideration to the damage it would do to other aspects of American foreign policy. The importance of Vietnam could only be evaluated within a broad and sophisticated international perspective, something which Johnson did not possess.

While I have provided by far the most thorough and best-documented account yet of the American decision to go to war and added a great deal to our understanding of the South Vietnamese role in the war and of Viet Cong tactics, I have had to rely upon others to understand the role of North Vietnam. Even William Duiker, the foremost authority on the North, who graciously provided me with an unpublished chapter of his new biography of Ho Chi Minh, would agree that our knowledge of Hanoi's policy and strategy in the early 1960s is quite limited. I look forward to the day when Vietnamese and American historians fill this gap. In this war, as in so many others, the secrets of the loser have come to light far more rapidly than those of the winner. The story of Hanoi's policy and strategy will be fascinating and important, but it may well add relatively little to our understanding of American policy, since American leaders knew so little about what their enemy was thinking or doing. Nor, in this case, are researches in the archives of America's major allies likely to help much, since none of them collaborated with the United States in the design of its policy.

My understanding of the war, meanwhile, has been greatly enhanced

by the work of William Strauss and Neil Howe, the authors of a provocative new theory of generations and eras of American history.³ One need not delineate the entire theory in order to understand its relevance to the war in Vietnam.

To a truly remarkable degree, the Vietnam War was the work of a particular generation of Americans—those born in roughly the first quarter of the twentieth century—who came to power for the first time under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, and included nearly all their senior civilian and military leaders. Whether or not these leaders were the “best and the brightest” of their contemporaries, as David Halberstam argued, they certainly embodied the dominant characteristics of what Strauss and Howe named the “GI generation.” Their strengths included an exemplary willingness to tackle difficult and costly tasks, a faith in the institutions of the government of the United States, a great capacity for teamwork and consensus, and a relentless optimism. Their weaknesses, alas, included an unwillingness to question basic assumptions, or to even admit the possibility of failure, or to understand that the rest of the American population was less inclined to favor struggle and sacrifice for their own sake. In sharp contrast to Americans born before 1901 and after 1924, the GI generation that led the nation into the war contained almost no doubters about the wisdom or the success of the enterprise. This, as much as anything else, probably accounted for the decision not only to enter the war but also to persevere for eight fruitless years.

No generational archetype, however, is utterly hegemonic. That John F. Kennedy, the first President of the GI generation, was the most skeptical senior official of his administration regarding the wisdom of war in Southeast Asia gives the war its particularly tragic character. During his short presidency, Kennedy’s cautious approach to the use of American power and his interest in accommodation with America’s adversaries distinguished him from most of his senior subordinates. Kennedy’s attempts to inspire his countrymen showed an understanding that Americans needed new kinds of challenges, and his eventual choice of the space race, civil rights legislation, and the nuclear test ban and détente suggest that he wanted to move in new and less threatening directions. Lyndon B. Johnson, on the other hand, despite some serious misgivings about the war in Vietnam, saw no alternative to fighting it. He accepted it as one challenge among many, and declared publicly