

What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina?

The Politics of Misperception

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Events so momentous in their consequences that they seem after the fact to have been the result of unalterable historical forces sometimes prove to have roots in decisions that appear to have been far from inevitable at the time they were made. A case in point is the transformation of the United States advisory role in Vietnam to a full-scale military intervention in the 1960s. On July 28, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced what in effect was an open-ended commitment to use American military force to defend South Vietnam. He justified his actions in terms that implied that he had little choice but to act as he had, stating that "three Presidents—President Eisenhower, President Kennedy and your present President—over eleven years have committed themselves and promised to defend this small and valiant nation." Yet Johnson's announcement came after six months in which he had authorized a series of incremental increases in the American military presence in Vietnam, doing so in a context in which there was nothing approaching consensus on the part of his advisers or of others in public life about what, if anything, the United States should do to keep South Vietnam from falling to the Communists.¹

If American leaders were undecided about Vietnam in 1965, they were even more

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¹ "The President's News Conference of July 28, 1965," *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon Johnson, 1965* (Washington, 1966), 795. In his memoir, Lyndon B. Johnson similarly justified his behavior; see Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York, 1971), 42, 152. Accounts of the sequence of decisions and events in 1965 through which the American advisory presence in Vietnam was transformed into a full-scale military intervention include Larry Berman, *The Making of a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York, 1982); John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein in collaboration with Larry Burke and Richard H. Immerman, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York, 1989); William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part III: 1961–1964* (Princeton, 1989); George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York, 1986); Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1991).

so before then, in spite of Johnson's attempt to portray agreement on the part of his predecessors. The lack of such a consensus became painfully evident to Johnson and his associates shortly after his July 28 announcement when one of the presidents who had ostensibly pledged the United States to defend South Vietnam, Dwight D. Eisenhower, denied that he had done so.² The discrepancy between Johnson's impression of what Eisenhower had obligated the United States to do and Eisenhower's own view of the matter produced a minor political storm in 1965, which might be of little interest today were it not that it has implications for a variety of larger issues bearing on the nature of political communication, the organization of national security decision making, the methodology of historical inquiry, and the perennial question of whether and to what extent the Vietnam War was a necessary consequence of the political convictions of American decision makers and the real or perceived circumstances they faced.

In what follows we explore Eisenhower's stance on American military intervention in Southeast Asia in the period before the Johnson administration transformed the United States advisory presence in Vietnam into a military intervention. We do so with particular attention to a fascinating episode in which Eisenhower, on the last day of his presidency, met with his Democratic successor and several of his own and John F. Kennedy's advisers in a Rashomonesque meeting from which participants emerged with diametrically opposed interpretations of what Eisenhower had said. We frame our account with a summary of the controversy in the summer of 1965 about whether President Eisenhower had committed the United States to defend South Vietnam, and then we discuss the meeting in question and the reasons for its blind-men-and-the-elephant character. We conclude by reflecting on the larger implications of the episode, particularly those that bear on the question of whether the convictions of American decision makers in the period before the United States became a party to the war in Vietnam made American intervention inevitable.

The 1965 Controversy about Eisenhower's Commitment

Eisenhower's denial that he had committed the United States to defend South Vietnam came in a news conference on August 17, 1965. The still-popular former president, who commanded particular respect on national security matters, declared that while he agreed with Johnson's objectives, he had *not* guaranteed American military support to Vietnam. Under the current circumstances, he acknowledged that "the Communists must be stopped in Vietnam," but in the 1950s we "were not talking about military programs but foreign aid. There was no commitment given in a military context except as part of SEATO" (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization).³

The Johnson administration moved rapidly to control any damage that Eisen-

² Max Frankel, "Military Pledge to Saigon Is Denied by Eisenhower," *New York Times*, Aug. 18, 1965, pp. 1, 3, cited in *Facts on File Yearbook 1965* (New York, 1966), 290.

³ *Ibid.*

hower's remarks might have caused. The next day White House press secretary Bill Moyers stated that Johnson did "not feel that there is any difference with General Eisenhower." The president, Moyers explained further, "thinks the purposes of the Johnson Administration are the same as those of the Eisenhower Administration — to preserve peace and in doing it, present to the world the face of unity, a policy of harmony." On August 19, Eisenhower called another news conference, declaring his support of the president and pointing to "how different the circumstances are today from a decade ago." At that time he had hoped that North Vietnam would refrain from military aggression and that economic assistance to the Saigon government would be sufficient. That hope, he lamented, had not been realized.⁴

Notwithstanding the statements by Moyers and Eisenhower, the controversy lingered. On August 23 the White House issued a pamphlet, "Why Vietnam?" But before distributing it, Johnson, using Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster as liaison, asked Eisenhower to review the pamphlet's history of the evolution of the United States commitment to South Vietnam. Eisenhower saw nothing in it to take issue with. The House Republican Committee on Planning and Research nonetheless published a "white paper" assailing Johnson's actions in Vietnam by distinguishing them from Eisenhower's.⁵

The White House initiated a spate of actions designed to substantiate the claim that Johnson was continuing the policy of his predecessors. Some of this effort went into canvassing the record for official guarantees made by Eisenhower to South Vietnam. The nearest thing to a guarantee, however, was Eisenhower's October 1954 letter to Premier Ngo Dinh Diem stating that the United States would assist South Vietnam in "developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means." But this pledge of assistance contained important qualifications: South Vietnam was indeed only being offered foreign aid, and even that was contingent on "performance on the part of the government of Vietnam in undertaking needed reforms."⁶

Taking another tack, Johnson's staff searched for documentary evidence of what had transpired at a meeting in which they had reason to believe Eisenhower had stated his conviction that the United States should use military force to prevent a Communist victory in Indochina. Johnson's assistant for national security, McGeorge Bundy, conducted the search. The meeting in question, which took place on January 19, 1961, the final day of Eisenhower's presidency, was between Eisenhower, his successor, John F. Kennedy, and the president-elect's top national security aides.

⁴ John W. Finney, "Johnson Denies Eisenhower Rift," *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 1965, pp. 1, 2, cited in *Facts on File Yearbook 1965*, 290; David S. Broder, "Eisenhower Backs Stand on Vietnam," *New York Times*, Aug. 20, 1965, pp. 1, 2, cited *ibid.*, 297. The yearbook provides a convenient review of the episode.

⁵ Andrew J. Goodpaster memorandum for the record, Aug. 20, 1965, "Eisenhower, Dwight D., General," Name File, National Security File, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson (Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Tex.); McGeorge Bundy memorandum to the president, Aug. 24, 1965, 8:00 P.M., and attached Notes on the Republican White Paper on Viet-Nam, "Memos to the President — McGeorge Bundy, Volume 13," Administration Aides File, National Security File, Johnson Papers; Bundy to Johnson, [Aug. 24, 1965], 8:10 P.M., *ibid.*

⁶ "Letter to the President of the Council of Ministers of Viet-Nam Regarding Assistance to that Country," Oct. 25, 1954, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington, 1955), 948–49.



President Dwight D. Eisenhower and President-Elect John F. Kennedy at their January 19, 1961, meeting. This photograph, which appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*, accompanied a story about preparations for Kennedy's inauguration.

Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos.

High on the agenda was the situation in Indochina, particularly in Laos, the Indochinese state that at the time appeared to be most threatened with an imminent Communist takeover.

Johnson's secretary of state, Dean Rusk, who had attended the meeting as Kennedy's secretary of state-designate, recollected that Eisenhower had advised Kennedy to take unilateral military action in Laos if that were the only alternative to losing that nation to the Communists. The logical inference was that while Eisenhower might not have made any formal commitments, he clearly had viewed it to be in the national interest to defend Indochinese states that seemed about to succumb to the Communists. This, of course, would apply to the Indochinese state in danger of falling to the Communists in 1965—Vietnam.⁷

Rusk's recollection of the meeting in question jibes with what historians have long held Eisenhower's advice to have been. The prime sources of this under-

⁷ In 1990, Dean Rusk still recollected that Eisenhower's advice had been that John F. Kennedy should intervene in Laos if necessary: Dean Rusk to Fred I. Greenstein, Nov. 14, 1990 (in Fred I. Greenstein's possession); and Dean Rusk as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), 428.

standing were the two "court histories" of the Kennedy presidency that were published shortly after Kennedy's death—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *A Thousand Days* and Theodore C. Sorensen's *Kennedy*, both of which were published in 1965. The first in fact had been serialized in *Life* magazine in the weeks just before Johnson's aides sought to establish what advice Eisenhower had given Kennedy about Indochina.⁸ According to Schlesinger, Eisenhower told Kennedy that Laos was "the key to all Southeast Asia," and that he hoped that SEATO would take action to prevent a Communist takeover. He doubted, however, that the French and the British would permit this to occur. Schlesinger reports that Eisenhower went on to say that a Communist victory in Laos would place "unbelievable pressure" on Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam, adding "with solemnity" that Laos "was so important that, if it reached the point where we could not persuade others to act with us, then he would be willing, 'as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally.'" Sorensen quotes Eisenhower to the same effect, asserting that the outgoing president described Laos as "the most immediately dangerous 'mess' he was passing on" and warned that "'You might have to go in there and fight it out.'"⁹

The failure of Johnson and his associates to make public the results of their investigation suggests that their quest for convincing evidence was to no avail. To see why this was so, we need to consider the evidence they did turn up and how they responded to it. That evidence proves to be part of a much larger and fascinatingly contradictory documentary record on the January 1961 Eisenhower-Kennedy

⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965); Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965). The passage in Schlesinger's book discussing Eisenhower's advice to Kennedy had appeared in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "A Thousand Days," *Life*, July 16, 1965, p. 70. Similar accounts of Eisenhower's advice to Kennedy appear in most of the authoritative histories of the escalating military involvement of the United States in Vietnam, many of which view Eisenhower's advice to have contributed to the mind-set that led the decision makers of the 1960s to view it as essential that South Vietnam be kept from falling to the Communists. See George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–75* (New York, 1986), 71–72; Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, 1979), 69; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 247–48; Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, Part III, 8–9; Kahin, *Intervention*, 127; David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–61* (New York, 1991), 195–96; William S. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960–63* (New York, 1985), 30; John M. Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York, 1992), 9.

⁹ Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 163–64; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 640. As Schlesinger himself recognized, the reports of Eisenhower's advice were puzzling; several years later, he wrote, "It is hard to believe that the canny Eisenhower would himself ever have gone it alone with American troops in Laos"; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston, 1978), 702. Schlesinger's perplexity is understandable. Such advice is inconsistent with the extreme wariness about American intervention in Indochina that Eisenhower demonstrated in the 1954 Dien Bien Phu episode. What is more, the entire New Look strategy of the Eisenhower presidency militated against the use of American troops in regional conflicts. Schlesinger to Fred I. Greenstein, Sept. 10, 1990 (in Greenstein's possession). On Eisenhower's behavior during the Dien Bien Phu crisis, see George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History*, 71 (Sept. 1984), 343–63; Richard H. Immerman, "Between the Unattainable and the Unacceptable: Eisenhower and Dienbienphu," in *Reevaluating Eisenhower: American Foreign Policy in the 1950s*, ed. Richard A. Melanson and David Mayers (Urbana, 1987), 120–54; Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York, 1988); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu, 1941–1954* (New York, 1988), 148–247; Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 28–115; and Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 17–39. On Eisenhower's New Look, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York, 1982), 127–97; Richard H. Immerman, "Confessions of an Eisenhower Revisionist: An Agonizing Reappraisal," *Diplomatic History*, 14 (Summer 1990), 319–42.

meeting, a record that has been declassified in recent years at the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidential libraries.

The Documentary Record

The January 19, 1961, meeting was convened to discuss a number of pending political issues, the most pressing of which was the situation in Laos. Eisenhower and Kennedy were accompanied by Secretary of State Christian A. Herter, Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates, Jr., Secretary of the Treasury Robert B. Anderson, and their counterparts for the incoming Kennedy administration—Dean Rusk, Robert S. McNamara, and C. Douglas Dillon. Each of the principals also brought a staff aide to the meeting: White House chief of staff Gen. Wilton B. Persons, in Eisenhower's case, and Washington attorney Clark M. Clifford, in Kennedy's.

Four of the participants prepared records of what had transpired. That of Clark Clifford, the president-elect's liaison with Eisenhower for the transition, proves to have been Schlesinger's source. Until recently Clifford's account, which takes the form of a memorandum for the record, was thought to be the only written report by a participant in the meeting. Clifford's memorandum confirms Schlesinger's and Sorensen's reports and is consistent with Secretary of State Rusk's recollection of the meeting.¹⁰

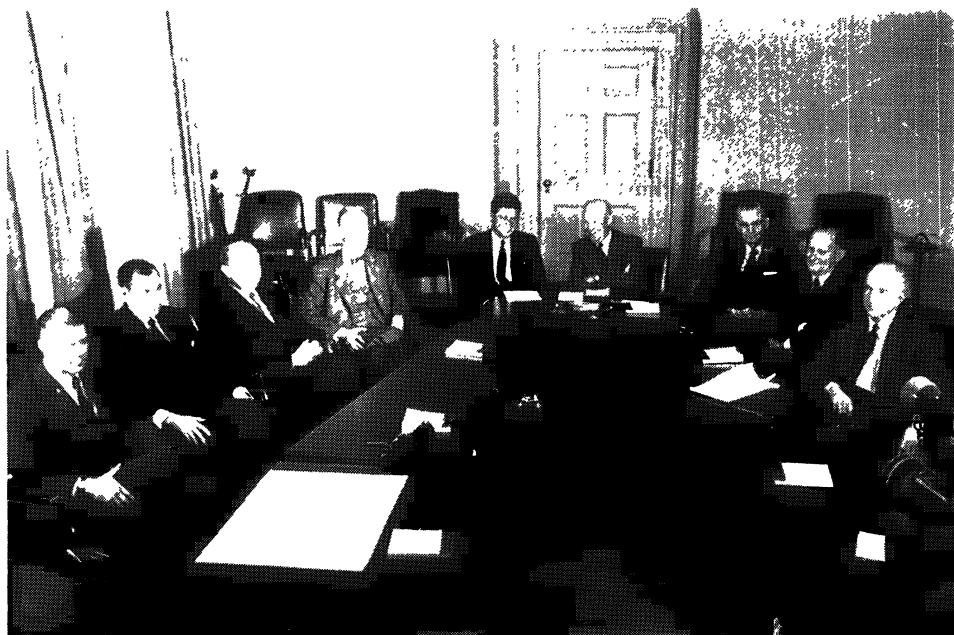
The portion of Clifford's memorandum from which Schlesinger quoted reads:

President Eisenhower stated that Laos is the present key to the entire area of South East Asia. If Laos were lost to the Communists, it would bring an unbelievable pressure to bear on Thailand, Cambodia and South Vietnam. President Eisenhower stated that he considered Laos of such importance that if it reached the stage where we could not persuade others to act with us, then he would be willing, "*as a last desperate hope, to intervene unilaterally.*"¹¹

¹⁰ The assertion that Clifford took the only known notes on the meeting appears in Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York, 1984), 80. Schlesinger, whose *Thousand Days* is without source notes, reported that he relied on Clifford's memorandum: Schlesinger to Greenstein, Sept. 10, 1990. Sorensen reported that his source was Kennedy himself: Theodore C. Sorensen to Greenstein, Sept. 17, 1990 (in Greenstein's possession). In his memoir, Clifford highlights Eisenhower's putative advice to Kennedy, referring to it as an "important, and unfortunate, contribution to the development of American policy toward Indo-China": Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York, 1991), 342–44.

¹¹ Clark Clifford to President Kennedy, Memorandum on Conference between President Eisenhower and President-elect Kennedy and their Chief Advisers on Jan. 19, 1961, Jan. 24, 1961, "Eisenhower, Dwight D., January 17–December 9, 1961," President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Papers (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass.), emphasis in the original. Adding further twists to this Rashomonian history, a second, differently worded Clifford memorandum, dated September 29, 1967, which is often cited by historians, appeared in the *Pentagon Papers*, thereby contributing to the perception that Clifford's notes were tantamount to an official record. Clifford also reported on the meeting in a 1969 article in *Foreign Affairs* and in his 1991 memoirs. All four of Clifford's texts present ostensible quotations from his notes that differ in certain of their details. In general, the successive texts strengthen the implication that Eisenhower sought to bind his successor to defend Indochina. The authors are indebted to William Conrad Gibbons for insight into the various Clifford reports and to David Humphrey and Maura Porter for finding relevant documents.

For the memorandum in *The Pentagon Papers*, see Clark Clifford to the President, "Memorandum of Conference on January 19, 1961 between President Eisenhower and President-Elect Kennedy on the Subject of Laos," September 29, 1967, in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, the Senator Gravel Ed. (4 vols., Boston, 1971), II, 635–37. Clifford's 1967 memorandum is available



Eisenhower, Kennedy, and their chief associates meeting the day before Kennedy took office. From left to right, Secretary of Defense-designate Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates, Jr., Secretary of State-designate Dean Rusk, Secretary of State Christian Herter, Kennedy, Eisenhower, Secretary of the Treasury Robert B. Anderson, Secretary of the Treasury-designate C. Douglas Dillon, and Eisenhower staff aide Wilton B. Persons. Not shown is the individual whose notes were long thought to be the only record of the meeting—Clark M. Clifford.

Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos.

If the only evidence found by the Johnson administration of Eisenhower's advice had been the Clifford report and Rusk's recollection, no doubt this would have been made public, or at least brought to Eisenhower's attention. But other evidence was found. It turned out that Kennedy's secretary of defense-designate (and in 1965 Johnson's secretary of defense), Robert S. McNamara, had independently taken his own set of notes. These, as McGeorge Bundy put it in an August 24, 1965, memorandum to Johnson, did "not correspond . . . to Dean Rusk's recollections" and did

in the original in "Past Presidential Statements on USG Commitment in SEA," National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Papers. Clifford's published discussions are Clark M. Clifford, "A Vietnam Reappraisal: A Personal History of One Man's View and How it Evolved," *Foreign Affairs*, 47 (July 1969), 603-5; and Clifford with Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, 342-44. What seem to be the actual notes Clifford took during the January 19 meeting can be found in his papers in the Kennedy Library. They are extremely sketchy. The following passages apply to the possibility of American intervention in Laos: "If present gov't of Laos applies to SEATO, Herter believes we are all bound." "If a political settlement cannot be arranged then we must intervene (Herter)." "Unilateral intervention is last desperate hope. (Ike) Laos is key to entire area." The last note includes a reference to an appendix, which is not present in Clifford's papers. Folder: Eisenhower-Kennedy Meeting of January 19, 1961, Microfilm Roll #3, Papers of Clark Clifford (Kennedy Library).

“not give a clear signal that Herter and Eisenhower were in favor of ground troops in Laos, if necessary.” Bundy’s summary understated the contradiction. McNamara’s notes read: “President Eisenhower advised *against* unilateral action by the United States in connection with Laos.”¹²

In recent years, two other records made by participants in the January 1961 Eisenhower-Kennedy meeting have emerged. One is an aide-mémoire by Kennedy himself, who had met officially with Eisenhower the previous month but learned from the journalist Roscoe Drummond that the president was prepared to see him again. “I was anxious to see E. for two reasons,” Kennedy wrote. He explained why:

First because it would serve a specific purpose in reassuring the public as to the harmony of the transition. Therefore strengthening our hands.

Secondly because I was anxious to get some commitment from the outgoing administration as to how they would deal with Laos which they were handing to us. I thought particularly it would be helpful to have some idea as to how prepared they were for military intervention.¹³

Kennedy’s aide-mémoire, which he evidently dictated for the record, focused single-mindedly on Laos, making no reference to other issues (ranging from Berlin to the current balance-of-payments crisis) that were discussed at the meeting:

I asked the Secretary as to whether in his opinion we should intervene if the SETO [*sic*] was invoked by the government. He said very directly that he felt we should. It was the cork in the bottle. If Laos fell, then Thailand, the Philippines, and of course Chiang Kai Shek [*sic*] would go. I turned to the President. He stated also that he felt we should intervene. When I asked him whether he felt that the communists could intervene with greater force he said it was a question as to whether they would be willing to see the war spread. I asked Mr. Gates whether he felt the United States would have sufficient military power and he said he felt they could; that they had conducted a survey and while we might not be able to

¹² Robert McNamara memorandum to the President, Jan. 24, 1961, enclosed with McGeorge Bundy memorandum for the President, Aug. 26, 1965, “Memos to the President—McGeorge Bundy, Volume 13,” Administration Aides File, National Security File, Johnson Papers; emphasis supplied. Bundy pointed out that McNamara’s evidence likewise did not square with a report by Rowland Evans that, at a lunch with Kennedy following the January 19, 1961, meeting, Kennedy had told him that “both [Christian] Herter and Eisenhower had said that if troops were needed for Laos, they should certainly be sent.” Evans had informed McGeorge Bundy of his intention to use this conversation in a column, but upon receipt of McNamara’s memorandum, Bundy advised him against it. Bundy to Johnson, [Aug. 24, 1965], 8:10 P.M., *ibid.*

¹³ Dictated to me, Evelyn Lincoln, by President-elect Kennedy, January 19, 1961, “Eisenhower, Dwight D., January 17–December 9, 1961,” President’s Office Files, Kennedy Papers. Kennedy and Eisenhower had met on December 6, 1960, to discuss the transition and many of the problems Kennedy would face. The meeting included the same participants except for C. Douglas Dillon, McNamara, and Dean Rusk, none of whom Kennedy had yet selected for his cabinet. Eisenhower’s transition team proposed an agenda divided between “Questions for discussion” and “Questions to be mentioned (further discussion if and as desired).” It included Laos under the latter heading. The Kennedy agenda excluded Laos altogether, and the subject arose only briefly at the meeting. Eisenhower’s advisers did prepare a one-paragraph briefing paper on Laos, which referred to the risks inherent in United States policy but did not directly address the issue of intervention. Wilton B. Persons, memorandum for the record, Dec. 6, 1960, “Memos—Staff Re Change of Administration (2),” Presidential Transition Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers as President, 1953–1961 [Ann Whitman File] (Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.); Persons, memorandum for the record, Dec. 5, 1960, “Memos—Staff Re: Change of Administration (6),” *ibid.*; “Topics for discussion with President-elect Kennedy,” n.d., “Memos—Staff Re: Change of Administration (1),” *ibid.*; “Agenda items suggested by Senator Kennedy,” n.d., *ibid.*; “Laos,” n.d., *ibid.*

handle two fronts, they could handle one. He also said that with the use of certain aircraft it would be possible to cut down the time from 17 days to 12 days to move 12,000 men and supplies for these men in the Pacific and the Marines from Okinawa.

I came away from that meeting feeling that the Eisenhower administration would support intervention—they felt it was preferable to a communist success in Laos.¹⁴

It was standard staff procedure in the Eisenhower White House to keep notes of meetings, and the January 19, 1961, meeting was no exception. Persons's notes (which include Secretary of State Herter's account of his portion of the briefing) report a *caveat* by Eisenhower about the costs of intervention that is not referred to in the Kennedy and Clifford summaries. Persons's account does contain the references to unilateral American intervention as a "last desperate act" and to Laos as the "cork in the bottle," but it does not show that Eisenhower connected the dots and recommended intervention. Persons's notes require a close reading:

Senator Kennedy stated that he would like to have discussed the basic uncompleted decisions with respect to Laos and get the advice of the outgoing Administration on them. The President stated that unilateral action on the part of the United States would be very bad for our relations in that part of the world and would cause us to be "tagged" as interventionists. . . .

Senator Kennedy asked the President which he would prefer: coalition with the Communists to form a government in Laos or intervening through SEATO. The President replied that it would be far better to intervene through SEATO and referred to the example of the coalition with the Communists which was set up in China at the time General Marshall was sent there. The President pointed out that unilateral intervention on the part of the United States would be a last desperate effort to save Laos, stating that the loss of Laos would be the loss of the "cork in the bottle" and the beginning of the loss of most of the Far East.

Senator Kennedy asked what could be done to keep the Chinese Communists out of the situation in Laos. The President replied that he did not think that the Chinese Communists wished to provoke a major war and that it comes down to a question of who will take steps to do this. The President further stated that it is like playing poker with tough stakes and that there is no easy solution. He mentioned the Communist influence on Chinese troops, pointing out their ability to get much higher morale among the under-developed peoples than seemed to be the case of the Western Allies.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dictated to me, Evelyn Lincoln, by President-elect Kennedy, January 19, 1961.

¹⁵ Persons, memorandum for the record, Jan. 19, 1961, "Kennedy, John F., 1960-1961 (2)," Dwight D. Eisenhower Post-Presidential Papers, 1961-68 (Eisenhower Library). See also Christian A. Herter, memorandum for the record, Jan. 19, 1961, *ibid.* Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose uses Persons's notes to describe the January 19, 1961, meeting. Interpreting the meeting from Persons's notes alone, Ambrose infers that Kennedy must have been "confused" by the contradiction between Eisenhower's insistence on the importance of Laos and his failure to recommend intervention: Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York, 1984), 614-15. Kahin also cites the Persons notes but sees no conflict between them and Clifford's notes. His book appeared before McNamara's notes were declassified. Kahin, *Intervention*, 127.

What *Did* Eisenhower Say?

No absolute answer is possible to the question of what Eisenhower told Kennedy, and, above all, what he meant. As we will see, Eisenhower was deeply ambivalent about the situation in Laos. Still, a reconstruction of his probable intention and state of mind is possible. This calls for examining the exchange closely, with attention to the probable preconceptions and interests the various participants brought to the meeting, and for considering other evidence of Eisenhower's thinking about Laos in particular and about intervention in "peripheral" parts of the world in general. All of this needs to be seen in the context of what is now known about how Eisenhower comported himself in deliberations.

Each of the four note takers and Rusk would have entered the meeting with his own preconceptions and expectations. Kennedy's mental set is implied by his aide-mémoire. He was looking for evidence of whether Eisenhower would back him if an intervention became necessary. The wish for Eisenhower's backing may have fathered Kennedy's conclusion that Eisenhower favored intervention. Rusk and Clifford, both veterans of the Truman administration, would have remembered how that administration was pilloried by Republicans for its policies on Korea. They would have been acutely aware of the importance of bipartisan support for an American intervention in Asia in order to avoid Harry S. Truman's grief on that score. This may have contributed to selective perception on their part of the portions of Eisenhower's comments that implied that he would back intervention in Laos by Kennedy and his associates, and it may have made them inattentive to the possibility that Eisenhower was examining the pros and cons of possible courses of action in a complex situation that presented no simple answers. McNamara, the apolitical statistician–automobile executive, would have been less sensitive to the question of political support and probably more coldly analytical in assessing the net import of a complicated policy analysis. Persons, a political technician who had been an Eisenhower staff aide for more than a decade, would have been more accustomed than the others to Eisenhower's ways of expressing his thinking and therefore least likely to make unwarranted inferences. By this calculus, the split in interpretations is most persuasively resolved by concluding that, at a minimum, Eisenhower had not made an unambiguous recommendation to intervene.

A more complicated interpretation of Eisenhower's comments is suggested by the other available evidence of Eisenhower's thinking at the time. Three weeks before his January meeting with Kennedy, Eisenhower met with a group of his top foreign policy advisers for a discussion of Laos. The notes were kept by another aide who knew the president's habitual ways of expressing himself—his son, John S. D. Eisenhower. The transcript is heavily sanitized and contains deletions in passages in which President Eisenhower advanced his views about what to do about the rising Communist tide in Laos. Still, the general tenor of the meeting is evident, and some of the deleted assertions were revealed in 1965 by Eisenhower himself in the second volume of his memoirs. The notes demonstrate the intensity of Eisenhower's concern about the possible fall of Laos and his willingness to discuss the *contingency* of inter-

vention, as was evident in the remarks with which he closed the meeting: "We cannot let Laos fall to the Communists even if we have to fight—with our allies or without them."¹⁶

Eisenhower expressed similar sentiments several times during the meeting, which began with a briefing on the situation in Southeast Asia by the deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Gen. Charles P. Cabell, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer. Eisenhower immediately entered the discussion. He raised the possibility of covertly cutting the roads used by the Pathet Lao forces moving from North Vietnam. "We need more information before we can take overt action," Eisenhower continued, but "we cannot stand by and allow Laos to fall to the Communists. The time may soon come when we should employ the Seventh Fleet, with its force of marines."

Eisenhower's forceful remarks notwithstanding, the overall tone of the discussion was not that of a crisis decision-making team contemplating an imminent military incursion. Rather, it was of a group assessing the available intelligence and spelling out possible contingencies. Cabell reported that the CIA was seeking to establish whether the Pathet Lao was only attempting to establish its control in northern Laos or trying to capture the entire country. American intelligence also was seeking to establish the nature of the Communist intervention and whether it included North Vietnamese and Chinese, as well as Laotian, Communists.

Eisenhower reviewed the forces that were being readied for possible military action. Most of the discussion, nevertheless, focused on political and diplomatic measures. At one point Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, Eisenhower's White House military aide, pointed out that the two "more extreme courses of action" open to the United States were "sending in U.S. forces as in Lebanon" and "putting on an air blockade." Eisenhower acknowledged that "these courses of action are available, but," the memorandum reads, "emphasized caution in that we are almost alone in recognizing [Prince] Boun Oum," who had recently announced his intention to establish a government to rival the "neutralist" one of Prince Souvanna Phouma. Explaining that "at this state of the game . . . we are not in war," Eisenhower proposed a series of political steps designed "to legitimize Boun Oum and solidify our allies on our side." These steps included efforts to persuade Boun Oum to ask the National Assembly to approve his government, to alert the British and the French, as well as the SEATO Council, about the seriousness of the situation, to press the Soviet Union to cease supplying the Pathet Lao by air, and to induce Souvanna Phouma to resign as prime minister.¹⁷

There is a *déjà vu* quality to Eisenhower's exchanges with his associates in this

¹⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: The White House Years, 1956–1961* (Garden City, 1965), 610. Memorandum of a conference with the president, Dec. 31, 1960, "Staff Notes—December 1960," Eisenhower Diary Series, Whitman File (Eisenhower Library). The memorandum reads, "we must not allow Laos to fall to the Communists, even if it involves war." The remainder of this sentence is sanitized. Our account of the conference is drawn from both sources.

¹⁷ The last suggestion is sanitized in the document but reported in Eisenhower's memoir. At one point, Eisenhower also suggested "half-humorously" that an American airborne alert might be a way to signal to the Soviet Union the seriousness of the United States view of the situation.

twilight episode of his presidency. His deliberations about whether to intervene in Indochina at the time of the French defeat in 1954 revealed a remarkably similar complexity and ambiguity. Time and time again in the half year between the first discussion of the encirclement of the French forces at Dien Bien Phu in a National Security Council meeting on January 8, 1954, and the conclusions at the Geneva Conference on July 22 of that year, Eisenhower made impassioned statements to his associates about the importance of not losing Indochina. His language in public was equally vivid, including the statement in which he introduced the metaphor of falling dominoes to political discourse.¹⁸

Yet with equal frequency Eisenhower weighed the costs and benefits of intervention against other possibilities, stipulated preconditions that he would insist on before acting, and otherwise hedged his bets. Sometimes he weighed in on both sides of the equation in a single meeting. Thus, early in the January 8 meeting, he declared his opposition to land intervention, asserting that the jungles of Indochina “would absorb our troops by divisions,” but later in the meeting he flirted with the possibility of a covert air attack on the Viet Minh forces surrounding Dien Bien Phu, even speculating on the kind of equipment American troops might need if they fought on the ground.¹⁹

Still, throughout the half year of deliberations on Indochina in 1954, Eisenhower was reserved and cautious on the occasions when he was pressed by his more hawkish aides for direct military action. At one point he went so far as to describe Indochina as “the tail of the snake,” saying (evidently for rhetorical purposes) that before he struck it he would assemble his wisest advisers and ask them if the United States should attack the snake’s head (presumably Moscow). Indeed, once it became clear that his administration was not going to intervene, Eisenhower even redefined the domino metaphor, speaking of the need to strengthen the countries of Southeast Asia “so they can stand the fall of one, if necessary.”²⁰

Eisenhower’s pattern of deliberation in the 1954 Indochina debate and in other episodes was one of thinking out loud in the presence of his associates when a decision was in the discussion stage but acting with caution and deliberation. This practice is well described by an associate who observed him in action for his full eight years in office—Richard M. Nixon:

He was very bold, imaginative, and uninhibited in suggesting and discussing new and completely unconventional approaches to problems. Yet he probably was one of the most deliberate and careful Presidents this country has ever had where action was concerned. Because of his military experience, he was always thinking

¹⁸ “The President’s News Conference of April 7, 1954,” *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954*, 382–84.

¹⁹ Memorandum of discussion at the 179th meeting of the NSC, Jan. 8, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954* (16 vols., Washington, 1981–1989), XIII, 947–55.

²⁰ Memorandum of discussion at the 194th meeting of the NSC, April 29, 1954, *ibid.*, 1439–42. These summary minutes do not quote Eisenhower’s “head of the snake” metaphor. It appears, however, in his memoir, although in the book the head is Communist China. See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: The White House Years, 1953–1956* (Garden City, 1963), 354. Eisenhower redefined the domino metaphor shortly after the fall of Dien Bien Phu: “The President’s News Conference of May 12, 1954,” *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954*, 473.

about alternatives, action and counteraction, attack and counterattack. . . . He could be very enthusiastic about half-baked ideas in the discussion stage, but when it came to making a final decision, he was the coldest, most unemotional and analytical man in the world.²¹

Nixon's portrait is of a leader whose style in deliberations could easily have led a Kennedy, a Clifford, or a Rusk to misperceive reflections about contingencies as recommendations, especially when he was expressing himself forcefully on a matter about which his own views were intense, but ambivalent.

Eisenhower's extreme caution at the decision stage in previous episodes, however, is not consistent with advising his successor categorically to take a particular military action, even if the president-elect had asked him outright for such advice. In fact, Kennedy never did ask for it, probably because he was probing for clues to whether Eisenhower would back him up if he chose to intervene, but he also wanted to keep the option of nonintervention open. A further reason is suggested by Clifford's account of his report to Kennedy of a conversation he had with Eisenhower's chief of staff after the meeting of Eisenhower and Kennedy the previous month. Clifford told Kennedy that Eisenhower, who previously had considered his successor a "young whippersnapper," had been "overwhelmed" by the president-elect's "understanding of world problems, the depth of his questions, the grasp of the issues, and the keenness of his mind." Kennedy replied that while "he had been struck by the strength of Eisenhower's personality," he "had not been similarly impressed" by Eisenhower's performance in the meeting. Lacking a favorable view of Eisenhower's ability, Kennedy was not likely to have paid much attention to the substance of his advice.²²

The notion that Kennedy (and Clifford and Rusk) selectively perceived and therefore misunderstood Eisenhower's message is strengthened by the limited available evidence about Eisenhower's thinking about Indochina in the early 1960s and by the assessments that two of his former associates (one of them a participant in the meeting with Kennedy) have made of the documents available now.

The first volume of Eisenhower's presidential memoirs—*Mandate for Change*—was published in 1963, by which time Kennedy had already increased the level of the American advisory contingent in Vietnam severalfold over the level at the time Eisenhower left office. One indication of Eisenhower's thinking about the use of American troops in Vietnam is the drafts of the chapter in *Mandate for Change* on the 1954 Indochina decisions. In the final prepublication draft of 1962 (which is edited in his own hand), he continued to invoke his New Look strategic policy as a rationale against intervention in 1954 and to declare his opposition to the use of American troops in that part of the world:

²¹ Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York, 1962), 158–59.

²² Clifford with Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, 342. For corroborating evidence of Kennedy's low opinion of Eisenhower, see Schlesinger's report that Kennedy criticized his predecessor for his attachments to business executives and his choice of them over his former military associates as friends and golf cronies. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 18.



President Eisenhower greeting President-Elect John F. Kennedy at their meeting of December 6, 1960.
Courtesy Dwight D. Eisenhower Library/National Park Service.

The jungles of Indochina would have swallowed up division after division of U.S. troops, who, being unaccustomed to this kind of warfare, would have sustained heavy casualties until they learned to live in a new environment. Furthermore, the presence of ever more numbers of white men in uniform would have probably aggravated rather than assuaged the resentments held by Asiatics. Thus, even had all of Indochina been physically occupied by U.S. troops, their eventual removal would have resulted only in a reversion to the situation which had existed before.²³

Eisenhower deleted this explanation for his behavior from the published version. It seems likely that the former president, who reverted to the lifetime rank of general

²³ Eisenhower draft, "Drafts and Other Matters Pertaining to the Writing of DDE Memoirs, *The White House Years*," Eisenhower Post-Presidential Papers. Compare Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, 373. Eisenhower's view that the stakes of the West in Indochina were vital but that Western military intervention was unlikely to be effective went back at least to his tenure as supreme commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In 1951 he noted in his diary that a Communist victory in Indochina would open up the possibility that "the entire Southeast Asia and Indonesia will go, followed by India," but he added that he was "convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater. Even if Indochina were completely cleared of Communists, right across the border is China with inexhaustible manpower." Entry for March 17, 1951, in Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York, 1981), 190.

of the army after leaving office, would have felt obligated to back the incumbent and would therefore have withdrawn passages that might have implied criticism of his commander in chief. Further evidence of Eisenhower's views in that period is available in the recollection of John McCone, the regular CIA briefer of the ex-president during the Kennedy years, that Eisenhower was "very, very disturbed" by Kennedy's troop increases. He "felt that the situation could escalate very rapidly and was very much opposed to it unless we were determined to use our total resources and win."²⁴

The former Eisenhower associates who commented on the four sets of notes on the January 19, 1961, meeting are Andrew J. Goodpaster, who was not at this particular meeting but who was the coordinator and note taker at most of Eisenhower's informal meetings on national security from late 1954 to the end of Eisenhower's presidency, and C. Douglas Dillon, who had been under secretary of state during Eisenhower's second term and attended the meeting as Kennedy's secretary of the treasury-designate. Goodpaster observed that it would have been in character for Eisenhower to speak with passion about the dangers of the loss of Laos and to refer to the "desperate" contingency of unilateral intervention without actually deciding that intervention would be an appropriate course of action. Goodpaster stresses that Eisenhower was deeply devoted to planning and contingency analysis; his view, nevertheless, was that actual situations unfolded in unique ways and could rarely, if ever, be acted on in preconceived ways.²⁵

Dillon's interpretation deserves particular attention not only because he was present at the meeting in question but also because he had first hand acquaintance with both Eisenhower and Kennedy. As second-in-command to secretaries of state John Foster Dulles and Christian Herter, Dillon often dealt directly with Eisenhower and therefore had intimate and personal knowledge of how he handled foreign and military matters. As a member of both Kennedy's cabinet and his social circle, Dillon also had regular access to Eisenhower's successor.²⁶

I recall very well the meeting of January 19, 1961 since I found it a rather embarrassing situation as far as I was concerned. I do not recall the details of the discus-

²⁴ John McCone interview by Thomas F. Soapes, July 26, 1976, Eisenhower Library Oral History Program (Eisenhower Library). For evidence of Eisenhower's unwillingness to disagree in public with his successor's actions in the sphere of national security, see Clare Booth Luce's report that Eisenhower was scathingly critical of Kennedy's performance in the Bay of Pigs episode but insisted that it would have been inappropriate for him to make his disagreement public. Clare Booth Luce Interview by John Luter, Jan. 11, 1968, Columbia Oral History Project (Columbia University, New York, N.Y.). Eisenhower *was* prepared to attack the Kennedy administration politically on partisan grounds. At a September 16, 1961, testimonial dinner for Senate Minority Leader Everett McKinley Dirksen, he criticized the Kennedy administration for its "lavish" domestic programs and its "seeming indecision and uncertainty" in its policy on Laos and Cuba, but he did not criticize the substance of administration policy. *Facts on File Yearbook 1961* (New York, 1962), 388-89.

²⁵ Andrew J. Goodpaster, telephone conversation with Fred I. Greenstein, July 16, 1990 (summary notes in Greenstein's possession).

²⁶ Oral History of C. Douglas Dillon, April 24, 1990, Program in Leadership Studies, Woodrow Wilson School (Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.). Notwithstanding Dillon's close relationship with Kennedy and experience as the number two official in the Eisenhower State Department, Kennedy never discussed foreign policy with him until appointing him to the EXCOM during the Cuban missile crisis. C. Douglas Dillon to Fred I. Greenstein, August 15, 1991 (in Greenstein's possession).

sion but do recall very well the point of the meeting. It was for Kennedy and his three top cabinet officers to obtain a brief description from Eisenhower and our opposite numbers of the major problems facing the United States in the foreign area. It definitely was not a request for advice on how to proceed and none was offered.

As to subject matter the major thrust was on the problems of Southeast Asia, in particular Laos. While I do not recall details I would completely support the McNamara memo written only five days after the meeting. Unilateral intervention was completely contrary to Eisenhower's philosophy and Schlesinger's statement is directly contradicted by the first point in the McNamara memo.

My overall recollection is that Eisenhower and Herter both got a certain inner satisfaction from laying a potentially intractable problem in Kennedy's lap. In effect they were shedding a responsibility for what appeared to be a very difficult situation. It is clear from the McNamara memo that Herter felt we would be obligated to use military force in Laos under the SEATO treaty if requested by the Royal Laotian Government. Eisenhower might well have agreed (he was not asked) provided that the other members of SEATO all pitched in, but I doubt very much that he would have felt obligated to attempt to carry out the treaty obligations on a unilateral basis.²⁷

Implications

The January 1961 Eisenhower-Kennedy meeting provides unusually vivid evidence of the ubiquity of misperception and miscommunication in human affairs, even among experienced, sophisticated leaders.²⁸ At another level, it provides support for doctrines of administration that stress the importance of carefully organizing advisory and decision-making deliberations, insuring so far as possible that participants are talking to the same point and can therefore leave meetings with agreed-upon understandings of what transpired.²⁹ At still another level, the different interpretations of Eisenhower's advice provide an obvious cautionary note to historians about the inappropriateness of presenting unqualified accounts of what occurred in the past on the basis of single sources. Even when multiple documents are not available on events, historians would be advised to interpret documents in terms of the likely biases of the individuals who created them and to acknowledge the limitations of the available evidence.

The Eisenhower-Kennedy meeting also prompts speculation about whether and to what extent the war in Vietnam was inevitable, given its historical context.³⁰

²⁷ Dillon to Greenstein, August 2, 1990 (in Greenstein's possession). The authors supplied Dillon with McNamara's notes as well as the other documents on the meeting.

²⁸ The classic work is Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, 1976).

²⁹ Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, 1980).

³⁰ Writers of widely varying political persuasions and analytic perspectives have argued (in contrast to the view we are about to advance) that the United States participation in the Vietnam War resulted largely from impersonal forces that were not dependent upon the choices of particular individuals who happened to be in key positions at particular times. See, for example, Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York, 1972), 41-141; Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*; Herring, *America's Longest War*; Kahin, *Intervention*; Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were*

Eisenhower's ambivalence about what to do about Communist advances in the former French Associated States is only one illustration of the uncertainty of American policy makers throughout the 1950s and 1960s over what the United States could and should do about the situation in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina. If Eisenhower did not advise Kennedy to fight in Laos, he was far from indifferent to the prospect of a Communist victory there or elsewhere in the region. As a strategist who held that planning was important but that actual decisions were contingent on the circumstances in which they presented themselves, he was neither a hawk nor a dove. Especially when faced with equally complex and problematic alternatives, he could go either way. Thus, in March 1961 when Kennedy announced that his administration was prepared to cooperate in forming a neutral Laos, Eisenhower backed him up. Yet in May, when Kennedy's advisers were divided over whether to order troop movements in the area of Laos as a warning to China that it might face military action if it did not accept neutralization, Eisenhower let Kennedy know that he favored "a very strong move, if necessary putting American troops into Laos itself."³¹

Eisenhower was not unique in his capacity to support or oppose American military intervention in Indochina depending on the circumstances. Like him, the great majority of American leaders were of more than one mind on what to do about the intractable problems posed by Southeast Asia. They believed that the United States had a strategic stake in that area and in maintaining the nation's credibility as a bulwark against communism, and they also believed that the falling-domino principle was plausible. Yet it was not clear that the United States could prevent particular dominoes from falling, at least not without paying unacceptable costs. The tangled history of the Korean War was a reminder of the dangers of fighting wrong wars in wrong places at wrong times.

The events that culminated in United States military intervention in Vietnam were marked by continuing disagreement and ambivalence on the part of American policy makers, who sought to arrive at outcomes falling between what Eisenhower at one point described as the "unattainable" and the "unacceptable."³² During the 1954 deliberations on Indochina, Eisenhower appeared to equivocate, first considering the use of American air power, then ruling it out; Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was consistently cautious, as was another respected Eisenhower advisor, Secretary of the Treasury George M. Humphrey; the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Arthur W. Radford, aggressively pushed for an American air strike to relieve the French at Dien Bien Phu; and Vice President Richard M. Nixon and foreign aid administrator Harold Stassen were similarly hawkish. After the Geneva

in Vietnam (New York, 1982); Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York, 1984); and Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991).

³¹ On Eisenhower's support for Kennedy's statement about neutralization, see *Facts on File Yearbook 1961*, 140. On his report to Kennedy's emissaries, see Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York, 1967), 144–45.

³² "The President's News Conference of April 29, 1954," *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954*, 427–28.

settlement, the Eisenhower administration was divided and uncertain about the extent to which it should support the government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Indeed, not until Diem defeated the sects and consolidated his control in South Vietnam in 1955 was a consensus achieved.³³

In 1965, when President Johnson ordered a series of actions that transformed the mission of the American forces in South Vietnam from an advisory to a combat role, there was, if anything, even more diversity and uncertainty, as a brief review of who stood where at the various stages of that transformation reveals. In January 1965 there were 21,000 officially designated American advisers in Vietnam. In February Johnson ordered a retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam in response to a Viet Cong attack on an American air base, and before the month was out he authorized a shift to sustained bombing of the North. Early in March he permitted two marine combat battalions to land in Vietnam to defend American bases. Before the end of the month, the marines were in direct ground combat with the Communists. Reinforcements were dispatched in the form of a series of troop shipments, which brought the force level up to 75,000 at the time Johnson made his July 28 announcement.³⁴

In January, Dean Rusk disagreed with McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara, both of whom let Johnson know their view that the United States should either take military action to deny a Communist victory (a course of action they leaned toward) or negotiate with the Communists, "salvaging what little can be preserved."³⁵ Early in February, at the meeting in which Johnson ordered the first retaliatory bombing against North Vietnam, Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (who had leaned toward intervention in the 1950s) opposed retaliation. Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon spoke up from the hawkish side, saying that he favored retaliation, but only if it was accompanied by enough force to produce a decisive defeat of the Communists. During roughly the same period, Under Secretary of State George Ball and Vice President Hubert Humphrey wrote memoranda to Johnson arguing for a negotiated solution in Vietnam, and Central Intelligence Agency Director John McCone called for a stronger and more decisive intervention.

In March, when marines were landed, there were no advocates for the ground combat that quickly ensued; it was an unplanned consequence of using ground forces to defend American bases. (The contingency plans that Johnson drew on in initiating air strikes said nothing about the use of troops.) The successive troop commitments had a voluble opponent in the person of the ambassador to Vietnam, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who warned that South Vietnam would leave the war to the

³³ Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 343-63; Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 28-115; George C. Herring, Gary R. Hess, and Richard H. Immerman, "Passage of Empire: The U.S., France, and South Vietnam, 1954-55," in *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955*, ed. Lawrence Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark Rubin (Lanham, 1990), 171-95.

³⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the following account is taken from Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 118-173.

³⁵ Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the President, Jan. 27, 1965, "Memos to the President—McGeorge Bundy, Volume 8," Administration Aides File, National Security File, Johnson Papers.

Americans. This war of "white faces against brown faces," Taylor predicted, would lead the United States to a fate similar to that of France.³⁶

Eisenhower's own advice to Johnson in 1965 and thereafter is instructive. Johnson did not consult him until February 17, by which point the president had initiated air strikes against the North. Referring to his advice to President Truman, who had consulted him after intervening in Korea, Eisenhower declared that once the United States had committed itself to the war, it should use "whatever force needed," noting that if that called for ground troops, he favored moving to whatever troop level the military deemed necessary for victory. Thereafter, Johnson regularly saw that Eisenhower was briefed and arranged to get his advice, usually via Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, the former Eisenhower White House aide who had gone on to become the assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In general, Eisenhower's advice was that the United States prosecute the war more vigorously than Johnson (who feared Chinese intervention) was prepared to do.³⁷

Eisenhower was not alone in his capacity to change positions as circumstances changed. Dean Rusk, who missed the meeting in which the first air strike against North Vietnam was called because of illness, supported further expansion of the war when he returned to duty. Hubert Humphrey, after a period of being denied access to the meetings in which Johnson decided on military policy, became an articulate supporter of the war. Maxwell Taylor tabled his doubts and became a Johnson adviser at the end of his tour of duty in Vietnam.³⁸ Johnson's Senate mentor, the influential Richard Russell, is a particularly interesting case in point. In January, Russell gave an interview to *Time* in which he expressed his hope that the United States would find a way to cut free of its commitment in Vietnam; in June, when Johnson invited him to a meeting in which a request for a troop increase by the field commander in Vietnam was being debated, Russell declared that the die was cast and said that the request should be granted.³⁹

The capacity of so many experienced leaders to change so substantially might be assumed to be evidence of either hypocrisy or opportunism. In most cases it was neither. If policy makers were often divided from one another on what to do about the intractable situation in Vietnam, many of them (like Eisenhower) also were divided in their own minds and therefore capable of supporting varied courses of action. In evenly balanced situations, even when the stakes are perceived to be high, the specific circumstances in which decisions are made and the particular individuals who are in place at particular times can be decisive. The often-debated question

³⁶ Taylor to Secretary of State, cables 2052 and 2055-58, Jan. 6, 1965, "Deployment of Forces," National Security Council Histories, National Security File, Johnson Papers.

³⁷ On the February 17, 1965, meeting of Johnson with Eisenhower, see Memorandum of Meeting with the President, Feb. 17, 1965, "Meeting with President Eisenhower, February 17, 1965," Meeting Notes File, Johnson Papers. On their continuing meetings, see William Henry Brands, Jr., "Johnson and Eisenhower: the President, the Former President, and the War in Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 15 (Summer 1985), 589-601. The authors have profited from their conversations with Andrew J. Goodpaster on Eisenhower's continuing advice to Johnson.

³⁸ Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 284-85.

³⁹ "Foreign Relations: The New Isolationism," *Time*, Jan. 8, 1965, p. 14. On Russell's change of heart, see Burke and Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 200-201.



President Lyndon B. Johnson confers with Dwight D. Eisenhower, October 5, 1965.
Photograph by Y. R. Okamoto. *Courtesy Lyndon Baines Johnson Library/
National Park Service.*

of whether Kennedy would have intervened may be unanswerable, but even if he had intervened it is unlikely that he would have taken precisely the same steps and pursued precisely the same strategies as Johnson had in responding to Communist advances in Southeast Asia.

Given the extraordinary consequences that followed from American participation in the Vietnam War, it is almost reassuring to hold that intervention "had" to occur and therefore was not determined by particular individuals with particular strengths and weaknesses. In fact the road to intervention had many forks. The ones taken were by no means inevitable. They were taken by fallible, flesh-and-blood human beings who faced real choices and who cannot be dismissed as mere chips on the tide of history.