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**PREFACE BY SENATOR J. W. FULBRIGHT, CHAIRMAN,  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS**

In 1968 the Department of Defense completed an eighteen month study of "U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967," popularly known as the "Pentagon Papers." The existence of this classified 47 volume study became known to the public through newspaper reports in June 1971. In September the Defense Department declassified large portions of the first 43 volumes. The other four volumes remained classified on the grounds that disclosure of the materials they cover—the history of negotiations—would be detrimental to the national interest.

In September 1971 the Committee on Foreign Relations began a detailed study of the Pentagon history and related materials. The study was initiated under the authority of S. Res. 140, agreed to July 24, 1971, for the purpose of inquiring into the origins and evolution of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, with particular reference to lessons for U.S. foreign policy making that might be drawn from the Pentagon history. Three staff researchers, Robert E. Biles, Robert M. Blum, and Ann L. Hollick, have been engaged in a careful review of the 7,000 pages of documents and analysis included in "U.S.-Vietnam Relations." They have had at their disposal both the classified and unclassified versions of the Pentagon Papers. In addition, they have drawn upon corroborative printed materials and interviews with individuals involved in the events under study.

"Vietnam Commitments, 1961" by Ann L. Hollick is the first of the staff studies to be released. It deals with those policies and decisions of the first year of the Kennedy Administration which significantly deepened the U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam war. From April to November of 1961, the United States Government engaged in serious discussions with the South Vietnamese Government regarding the possibility of a bilateral defense treaty and the possible dispatch of U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. On April 29 President Kennedy authorized an increase in the size of the U.S. military assistance effort, bringing the total American force in Vietnam to a level exceeding the ceiling specified in the Geneva Convention of 1954. In November of 1961 the Administration sent Presidential Advisor, General Maxwell D. Taylor, and White House aide, Walt W. Rostow, on a mission to Vietnam to consider the military and political feasibility of sending U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. The decision of April 29 to increase American forces in Vietnam, as well as the purpose of the Taylor-Rostow Mission, were not disclosed to the public at the time.

Studies to be completed in the near future will deal with the early post World War II period of American involvement in Vietnam and, subject to de-classification, with the four volumes of the Pentagon Papers relating to negotiations.

Further studies in this series are now in preparation.

The material which appears in this study does not necessarily reflect the views of the Committee or any member thereof.

J. W. FULBRIGHT.

## VIETNAM COMMITMENTS, 1961

### I. ESCALATION OF THE U.S.-VIETNAM INVOLVEMENT

Policies discussed and decisions taken from April to November of 1961 significantly deepened U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam struggle. For the major part of the year, the United States Government engaged in serious discussions with the South Vietnamese Government regarding a bilateral defense treaty and the sending of U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. It was United States officials who first broached the subject of a bilateral treaty and United States officials who pressed for a direct U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Although news of the Administration's consideration of combat troops did reach the public by means of leaks to the press, neither Congress nor the public was made aware of the intergovernmental discussions regarding a bilateral treaty.

#### APRIL-MAY REVIEW OF VIETNAM POLICY

During the Spring of 1961 Vietnam was not the overriding issue in Southeast Asia. Laos was the country of primary concern, and it was Laos that largely determined U.S. policies in Vietnam. Because the Kennedy Administration had adopted a course of political compromise and military cease-fire in Laos, it was under pressure to show strength in Vietnam to reassure America's Asian allies. Policy setbacks in other areas of the world added further pressure for a show of strength. On April 20, the day after the collapse of the Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy ordered a review of the situation in Vietnam. A Vietnam Task Force, under the direction of Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, and Major General E. G. Lansdale, was established to appraise the Vietcong drive in South Vietnam and to recommend a course of action to prevent a communist take over of South Vietnam.

The Task Force issued a report on April 26 and an annex to that report two days later. The April 26 report recommended a modest increase in the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam, but no increase in the size of the South Vietnamese Army beyond the 20,000 man addition that had previously been authorized.<sup>1</sup> The April 28 "Laos Annex," however, went much further. It proposed an additional two-division increase in the Vietnamese Army and the deployment of 3,600 U.S. troops to South Vietnam. The 3,600 man figure included two 1,600 man combat units to set up training centers for the Vietnamese in the highlands and 400 Special Forces troops to hasten counter-insurgency training of the Vietnamese Army.<sup>2</sup> The avowed

<sup>1</sup> U.S., Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense Task Force, Vietnam, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), IV B.1., "The Kennedy Commitments and Programs, 1961," pp. 25-28, and V.B. 4., Book I, "Internal Documents, The Kennedy Administration: January 1961-November 1963," pp. 42-56.

<sup>2</sup> U.S.-Vietnam Relations, IV.B.1., pp. 31-32 and V.B.4., pp. 58-61.

purpose of the increases proposed in the Annex to the Task Force Report was to guard against a conventional invasion of South Vietnam. From the time of the Laos Annex the issue of sending U.S. combat troops to Vietnam was under serious consideration within the U.S. Government.

On April 29 President Kennedy approved the limited military proposals of the Task Force Report but did not act on the recommendations of the Laos Annex. The President authorized a 100 man increase in the size of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, bringing the total to 785 men. Despite the fact that this exceeded the 685 man ceiling imposed by the Geneva settlement of 1954, the increase was deemed necessary to train the already authorized 20,000 man addition to the 150,000 man Vietnamese Army. The President also approved 1) an increase in the responsibilities of the Military Assistance Advisory Group to include support and advice for the 40,000 man Self Defense Corps and 2) an expansion of the Military Assistance Program to include support for the 68,000 man Civil Guard (an addition of support for 36,000 men) and training of South Vietnam's Junk Force.

Of the April 29 decisions, the most significant was that increasing the size and responsibilities of the Military Assistance Advisory Group. As the Pentagon history points out, it "signalled a willingness to go beyond the 685 man limit on the size of the U.S. military mission in Saigon, which, if it were done openly, would be the first formal breach of the Geneva Agreements."<sup>3</sup> The decision was not taken openly.

The April 26 Task Force Report and the Laos Annex were revised on May 1, May 3 and May 6. The May 1 revision by the Defense Department continued to stress the importance of making clear U.S. determination to intervene unilaterally, if necessary, to prevent a communist takeover in South Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> It also retained a reference to the SEATO Treaty, which the Pentagon analyst says "makes it sound as if such a commitment, in fact, already existed."<sup>5</sup>

The May 3 version of the Task Force Report introduced a proposal for a bilateral defense treaty between the United States and South Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> Drawn up in the State Department under the direction of George Ball, Under Secretary of State, the May 3 draft constituted a drastic revision of the earlier Task Force drafts. Generally the State Department draft tried to tone down the commitments to Vietnam proposed in the Defense Department draft. The May 3 draft replaced the Defense recommendation that the U.S. make clear its determination to intervene unilaterally to save South Vietnam with a proposal for exploring with the Vietnamese Government a "new bilateral arrangement." The State Department draft was not explicit as to whether the "bilateral arrangement" would call for U.S. intervention against the guerrillas or would apply only to an overt North Vietnamese invasion. What is clear is that the bilateral arrangement was proposed by the State Department as "a substitute for the Defense proposed unlimited unilateral commitment."<sup>7</sup> In justifying such an undertaking, the State Department argued that

<sup>3</sup> IV.B.1., p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32-35.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35-39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The inhibitions imposed on such action by certain parts of the Geneva Accords, which have been violated with impunity by the Communists, should not prevent our action. We should consider joining with the Vietnamese in a clear-cut defensive alliance which might include stationing of U.S. forces on Vietnamese soil.<sup>8</sup>

The final version of the Vietnam Task Force Report<sup>9</sup> was drafted on May 6 for consideration at a National Security Council meeting on May 11. The recommendations of that draft were endorsed by President Kennedy and were embodied in National Security Action Memorandum (NASM) 52. They included Presidential approval for the deployment of 400 Special Forces troops, for the initiation of a covert-warfare campaign against North Vietnam, and for Ambassador Nolting "to begin negotiations looking toward a new bilateral agreement with Vietnam." Nolting was instructed that "no firm commitment will be made to such an arrangement without further review by the President."<sup>10</sup>

The military decisions undertaken in the NSAM did not, according to the Pentagon analyst, seem to have significantly deepened the U.S. commitment in Vietnam.\* Because the Special Forces were "supported by the CIA rather than the regular military aid program, it was possible to handle these troops covertly."<sup>11</sup> Their deployment, therefore, was not subsequently cited as a precedent for additional overt commitments to Vietnam.

What did eventually increase U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese conflict were the items that President Kennedy approved for discussion with the South Vietnamese Government—the sending of combat troops and the negotiation of a bilateral treaty. In the minds of U.S. policy makers the two issues were directly related. Each constituted a means of reassuring the South Vietnamese Government of U.S. support, and in light of U.S. policy in Laos, that reassurance was deemed particularly necessary. Moreover, it was hoped that a strong display of U.S. confidence in Diem would encourage him to cooperate to undertake political and administrative reforms that would increase popular support for, and the military effectiveness of, his government.

#### MAY-SEPTEMBER: THE JOHNSON VISIT AND AFTERMATH

In mid-May Vice President Johnson spent a week touring Asia to reassure Asian leaders that U.S. policy in Laos did not foreshadow a U.S. withdrawal from the area. While in South Vietnam from May 11 to 13, the Vice President delivered a letter from President Kennedy to South Vietnamese President Diem. Dated May 8, the letter did not go much beyond the proposals of the April 26 Task Force Report. It mentioned neither U.S. combat troops nor a bilateral treaty.<sup>12</sup> In private conversations with Diem, the Vice President did raise the possibility of sending U.S. troops to Vietnam and of a bilateral defense treaty. What Johnson was authorized to say had Diem responded

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> V.B.4., pp. 69-130.

<sup>10</sup> IV.B.1., p. 44 and V.B.4., pp. 136-54.

\* The view that covert activity does not affect the depth of commitment is of course open to dispute. Although the public may not be aware of these activities, policy-makers are and may therefore be subject to pressures for increased commitment.

<sup>11</sup> IV.B.1., p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> IV.B.1., p. 41 and V.B.4., pp. 132-35.

affirmatively is not known. What is known from Ambassador Nolting's cabled account is that Diem indicated that he did not want U.S. troops except in the event of an invasion by North Vietnam and that he showed no interest in a treaty.<sup>13</sup>

During his stay in Vietnam, Johnson, on behalf of the President, invited Diem to draw up a list of South Vietnamese military needs for consideration by Washington. Diem responded to this invitation in a letter dated June 9. In that letter Diem proposed a virtual doubling of the Vietnamese Armed Forces from 150,000 to 270,000 men. This substantial increase would necessitate a greatly intensified training program and therefore a further expansion of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. According to Diem

such an expansion, in the form of selected elements of the American Armed Forces to establish training centers for the Vietnamese Armed Forces, would serve the dual purpose of providing an expression of the United States' determination to halt the tide of communist aggression and of preparing our forces in the minimum of time.<sup>14</sup>

Diem requested neither U.S. combat troops nor a treaty in his June letter. Diem's reluctance to do so is understandable in light of Vietnamese nationalism and of the history of colonial rule in Indochina. June, however, was a month of relative stability in Vietnam. In September when the number of Vietcong attacks tripled to 450, Diem was confronted with the need to restore security and public morale.

The two alternatives that had been offered Diem were U.S. combat troops and a bilateral treaty. A possible disadvantage of allowing U.S. troops in Vietnam, in addition to the affront to Vietnamese nationalism, was the increased leverage this would have given the Americans over the Vietnamese Government. And even worse, from Diem's viewpoint, might have been the danger that with U.S. troops in Vietnam the Americans would be tempted to encourage a coup if Diem were not cooperative. Moreover, the Vietcong were still estimated at less than 20,000, while the regular and auxiliary forces of South Vietnam numbered around a quarter of a million. In light of these considerations mentioned in the Pentagon account, a bilateral treaty with the United States was the more appealing alternative. As the Pentagon history points out, what Diem

probably wanted was an unambiguous public commitment that the Americans would not let Diem fall. For this would meet his immediate concern about confidence in his regime, perhaps even more effectively than the dispatch of American troops, and without the disadvantages that would come with accepting American troops. For Diem, a clear-cut treaty probably seemed the best possible combination of maximizing the American commitment while minimizing American leverage.<sup>15</sup>

#### DIEM'S REQUEST AND THE U.S. RESPONSE

On the evening of September 29, at a meeting with Admiral Harry Felt and Ambassador Frederick Nolting, Diem asked the United States for a bilateral defense treaty. According to Nolting's cabled account, "Diem pointed the question" in the course of a long discussion. "This rather large and unexpected request seems to have been dragged in by the heels at the end of a far-ranging discussion, but we discovered upon questioning that it was seriously intended."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> IV. B. 1., p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> IV. B. 1., p. 60 and V. B. 4., pp. 167-173.

<sup>15</sup> IV. B. 1., pp. 69-70.

<sup>16</sup> Cable from Ambassador Nolting to Washington, Saigon, October 1, 1961, *ibid.*, p. 52.