EXPLORATIONS IN DECISION-MAKING: TWO EPISODES ON THE VIETNAM WAR

MANUEL A. CAOILI *

This paper examines two important episodes on the Vietnam War to gain some insights into the decision-making process that took place within the Executive Branch of the US Government. How and why certain decisions were made in the light of available policy alternatives will be presented. In the analysis of these two events, an attempt will be made to determine what type of decision-making model had been followed.

The Overthrow of Diem: May-November 1963

The Pentagon's secret study of the Vietnam War reveals that President John F. Kennedy knew and approved of plans for the military coup d' etat that overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.[1] Given the fact that Kennedy had chosen to continue US support for the Diem regime, several questions may be raised regarding this decision. First, what events precipitated the decision to approve Diem's overthrow? Second, what were the available policy alternatives? Who were their proponents and what arguments did they adduce to support their proposals? Third, how was the final decision arrived at? Whose proposals finally prevailed? Before these questions can be answered, a brief background of Kennedy's Vietnam policy is necessary.

President Kennedy inherited the problem of US involvement ("limited") in South Vietnam from his predecessors. The rationale for this involvement was part of the Cold War politics, i.e. "to contain Chinese Communist expansion in Southeast Asia". In his first year of office, Kennedy sent several of his advisers to assess the situation in South Vietnam and recommend what might be done with the problem. An interesting finding was the heavy dependence of the US Government on the Diem regime for basic information about the Vietnam situation. During his fact-finding visit with Walt Rostow in 1961, General Maxwell Taylor was struck by official

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*Associate Professor, College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines.

ignorance in Saigon about the basic facts of provincial life. For example, what kind of people are the Vietnamese? What is their cultural background? What is the state of the economy? Taylor realized that the Americans were badly-misled.[2]

This absence of reliable basic information on Vietnam was similarly noted by John T. McAlister, Jr., who served as an ensign in the US Navy in the Mekong Delta in 1959. A Yale graduate on Vietnamese language and related studies, McAlister wrote that for nearly two years, he was the only officer in the US Military Mission who knew Vietnamese. While there were many able political analysts in the US Embassy, some of whom knew Vietnamese, virtually none was trained in Vietnamese culture or prepared to participate in a program of political action. Because the available expertise and cadre activists were military, the response was inevitably a military one.[3]

Where there was available information, Kennedy's advisers seemed to have ignored these as basis for their recommendations on the problem. For example, the US Government had known for some time of the growing unpopularity of the Diem-Nhu regime. The Pentagon study recalls that Vietnamese military officers had twice attempted to kill President Diem, in November 1960 and again in February 1962. Periodic intelligence reports told of the widening gap in political communications between the regime and the peasantry. A study made on the political dimension of the conflict by McAlister in 1960 was blocked from wide circulation within US Government circles because it reflected poorly on the Diem regime. Nevertheless, it was substantive enough to be used as basis for designing the first military counter-insurgency program in South Vietnam.[4] Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, after his visit to South Vietnam in May 1961, privately reported to Kennedy that Diem struck him as being "remote from the people".[5]

Despite these information, most of Kennedy's advisers publicly recommended continued support for Diem. Johnson advocated better management of the military assistance program; Taylor argued for more aid, especially commitment of American ground troops; Rostow favored air strikes against the North; and Brig. Gen. Edward G. Landsdale recommended an intelligent program of counter insurgency. It was only Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith who predicted the failure of US policy in Vietnam if Diem remained in power.[6]

Kennedy chose to ignore Galbraith's recommendation and supported Johnson's view of the Vietnam situation. He also substan-

tially accepted the recommendations presented by the Taylor-Rostow team.[7] Thus, unknown to the public, American military involvement in South Vietnam deepened. By April 1963, there was growing optimism in Washington over South Vietnam as a result of increasing reports and statistics on successful counter insurgency efforts and the strategic hamlet program. It was felt that the war would be won within a year.

Assured by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that this optimism was justified, Kennedy concentrated on more pressing problems such as civil rights, test ban negotiations and others. He paid little attention to the increasing skepticism about Vietnam. For example, Averell Harriman, Undersecretary of State, felt the US was emphasizing the military aspect of the conflict and neglecting the civil action side; Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, feared the US was "over-Americanizing" the War effort and Michael Forrestal of McGeorge Bundy's White House staff began to doubt Diem's "ability to stay the course". Nevertheless, Kennedy was disturbed by the gloomy accounts of the *New York Times.* These were in sharp contrast to the glowing reports coming from the American Embassy in Saigon and the Military (MAAC V).[8]

The South Vietnamese political crisis which triggered Washington's decision to overthrow Diem was sparked by the Buddhist incident at Hue on 8 May 1963. Government troops had fired into a crowd of Buddhists displaying religious banners in defiance of a government decree. In the outburst of violence 9 persons were killed and 14 injured. The regime blamed the Vietcong for the incident while the Buddhists insisted the government was the guilty party and should pay indemnities to the families of the victims.

Diem refused to accede to these demands despite the US Embassy's persistent advice that he negotiate with the Buddhists. As a result of his intransigence, violent confrontations increased. Buddhist protests in the form of mass demonstrations and the immolation of monks continued. These were met by repressive measures—police truncheons and mass arrests. Moreover, Mrs. Nhu, wife of Diem's powerful brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, added fuel to the growing opposition of the regime by ridiculing the Buddhist suicides as "barbecues".

News of these events shocked the American public and brought to task the Kennedy administration for its policy of supporting the Diem regime. Widespread dissatisfaction with the South Vietnamese government finally became public knowledge. Kennedy felt he had to act on the situation. His advisers were divided on their recommen-

dations. The Harriman group argued sharply that it was time the US Government dissociated itself from Diem as he stood for repressive government. Johnson, Dean Rusk and Taylor opposed dumping Diem unless the President was sure he had a better replacement. Taylor thought that Harriman's recommendation was an example of "complete irresponsibility".[9]

The President made no immediate decisions. In June, he opted for a tactical decision by replacing Ambassador to South Vietnam Frederick E. Nolting who had been on vacation when the crisis erupted. Kennedy hoped that Diem would get the message from this decision—that the US was ready to change its seven-year old policy of support for his regime unless he stopped persecuting the Buddhists and started instituting some long overdue reforms. He planned to appoint Edmund Gullion, a foreign service officer, as Ambassador but Rusk recommended instead Henry Cabot Lodge, Nixon's vice presidential running mate in the 1960 election. Anticipating some major political decisions in the next few months, Kennedy followed Rusk's advise and thus brought in a major Republican into the Vietnam policy circle. Interestingly, this was one of the rare occasions when Kennedy accepted Rusk's advice.[10] Lodge was unable to leave for Saigon until late August.

In the meantime, Kennedy continued to meet with his staff to discuss possible alternatives to the Vietnam situation. Early in July, Nolting returned to Washington to explain Diem's case. He spoke of Vietcong infiltration of Buddhist organizations and argued that Diem was trying to strike at them when he ordered his troops to attack the pagodas. Nolting stressed that the Buddhists were not merely a religious group but a political force in South Vietnam. They resented Diem's leadership not only because he was a Catholic but because his anti-communism was too virulent for their taste. They had learned that demonstrations were means to attract American attention and hoped that they would convince Washington to cut its support for Diem. Nolting's explanation confirmed Harriman and Hilsman's belief that Diem was no longer capable of objective assessment of Vietnamese politics.

Rusk advised Nolting to return to South Vietnam as quickly as possible. Arriving in Saigon on 11 July, Nolting made a quick check at the Embassy and the Presidential Palace. He noted that the Palace had reasons to suspect the Embassy of plotting a coup with certain anti-Diem generals. While he was on vacation, his deputy, William C. Truehart, took a tougher line and had warned Diem on 12 June that unless the Buddhist crisis was solved the US would be forced to dis-

sociate itself from him. In his report to the State Department, Nolting predicted that such a policy would only force Diem to greater repressions. He also argued that it was impossible to get rid of Nhu without also dumping Diem.

In mid-July, President Kennedy sought to appease Diem by stressing at a news conference that the US goal remained a "stable government" and assured South Vietnam of continuing US support in its struggle to maintain its national independence. The President's words failed to ease Diem's doubt about the firmness of American support and about American understanding of Vietnamese politics. Diem saw that the political challenge from the Buddhists was interpreted in the United States as the outcry of a persecuted religious majority. To ease his growing difficulties with Washington, Diem tried without much conviction to negotiate a political compromise with the Buddhists. The Buddhist militants, however, wanted Diem's ouster and were not interested in a compromise. They were aware that they could arouse more sympathy among Americans with more spectacular demonstrations.

Nevertheless, Diem promised Nolting on the eve of his departure on 14 August from Saigon that he would never again attack the Buddhist pagodas. On 15 August Diem gave a press interview asserting that conciliation had always been his policy towards the Buddhists. He also stated, contrary to Mrs. Nhu's earlier criticism, that his family was pleased with Lodge's appointment.

Six days later, Vietnamese Special Forces ransacked Buddhist pagodas throughout the country. The midnight raids resulted in the arrest of some 1,400 people, mostly monks. Many of them were beaten. Diem claimed that many were Vietcong activists or sympathizers. These raids stunned the US Embassy, CIA, MAAC V and Washington. It was not the first time that American officials had been unaware of Diem's moves. The Vietnamese Special Forces, largely financed by the CIA for covert war operations had become in effect the private army of Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nhu had cut telephone lines to the US Embassy to keep American officials ignorant and had fooled them into believing that the Army had carried out the crackdown. Actually, he had by-passed the regular army chain of command and had ordered the raids personally.

American officials in Saigon deeply resented the incident and their subsequent cables strengthened the anti-Diem position in Washington. White House officials believed that Diem and Nhu had timed their assaults on the pagodas for Lodge's arrival in Saigon. Both in Washington and Saigon, the US denounced the raids and dis-

sociated itself from Diem's repression. Diem's foreign minister Vu Van Mau resigned, shaving his head in sympathy with the Buddhist monks. The Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington, who happened to be Mrs. Nhu's father, also resigned. Nguyen Din Thuan, Diem's defense minister, urged the US not to acquiesce in what the Ngos had done.

A group of generals, headed by Maj. Gen. Tran Van Don, acting chief of staff of the armed forces and Maj. Gen. Le Van Kim, quietly sent a message to Lodge asking what his attitude would be if they moved against Diem. Lodge cabled the State Department about the coup feelers and requested for instructions. He also cautioned Washington that the most vital commanders around Saigon were still loyal to the Ngo brothers.

Lodge's message reached Washington on Saturday morning, 24 August, and triggered off what became one of the most controversial actions in the Kennedy administration. Many of Washington's leaders were out of town that day. CIA Director John McCone was in California; Defense Secretary McNamara was on vacation; Secretary of State Rusk was watching the Yankees in New York and President Kennedy was at Hyannis Port for the weekend. The controversial cable in response to Lodge's was drafted by Harriman and Hilsman with some help from Forrestal at the White House. It read in part:

> . . .We wish give Diem reasonable opportunity to remove Nhus, but if he remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism.[11]

With so many senior officials away, it was difficult to get the cable cleared. But Harriman, Hilsman and Forrestal were in a hurry to send the cable to Saigon. They found George Ball, the Acting Secretary of State, playing golf at the Chevy Chase Club. After reading the cable he knew it would have to be cleared with the President. They drove to Ball's home where they made some minor changes in the language of the cable. Afterwards, Ball called up the President. Interrupting his pre-dinner shower, the President heard the summary of the cable on the telephone and approved it. However, it is not clear whether he was aware that not one of his Cabinet-level advisers had seen the cable.

The cable also needed Pentagon clearance. Forrestal called Vice Admiral Herbert D. Riley, Director of the Joint Staff of the JCS, and

read the cable to him. Riley felt that the cable was of critical importance and suggested that it be cleared by Gen. Victor Krulak, the Pentagon's specialist on Vietnamese affairs. Krulak was also at the Chevy Chase Club. He refused to clear the cable without reading it very carefully. He drove to the White House where he read it. Because of its explosive nature, Krulak thought that it needed clearance from Roswell Gilpatrick, the Acting Secretary of Defense. Gilpatrick was at his farm outside Washington. He hesitated to clear the cable and wondered why there was any rush. However, with Forrestal's assurance that the cable had the President's approval, Gilpatrick cleared it. Richard Helms, Deputy Director of CIA, had his own doubts but also cleared the cable after hearing it had presidential approval. The cable was finally dispatched to Saigon late that Saturday evening. It marked the end of US patience with the Diem regime and paved the way for the generals to move against him. As one correspondent noted: " 'Rocking the boat' was no longer a US taboo."[12]

The next day, Hilsman briefed Stewart Hensley, UPI correspondent, that official impatience with Diem was now so great that the Vietnamese leader had become expendable. Subsequently, Hensley's news dispatch was picked up by the Voice of America. It blamed Ngo Dinh Nhu for the attack on the pagodas. Hilsman was evidently following through the secret cable of 24 August by indulging in some fancy news management. Apparently, his purpose was to signal the Vietnamese generals that the US considered them innocent of the Buddhist raids and expected them to increase pressure on Diem.[13]

On Monday, 26 August, most top officials returned to work and were astonished to find out what had happened. General Taylor was furious; McNamara shared his feelings; McCone was appalled and Johnson warned his friends at the State Department that the US had opened a Pandora's box in Saigon. President Kennedy was upset. He felt he had been pushed into a possibly unwise decision. He discussed the problem with his brother Robert, Attorney General, who in turn consulted with McNamara and Taylor. Both told Robert Kennedy that they disagreed with the Harriman-Hilsman-Forrestal action. Nobody had any idea what was going to happen next. As one analyst later said: "President Kennedy was badly served on the issue of Vietnam. Feelings ran so high between the Diem-must-go school and the Diem-must stay school that the process of reason could not function."[14]

On 25 August, Lodge cabled his reply to Washington. He stated in part:

> Believe that chances of Diem's meeting our demands are virtually nil. At same time, by making them we give Nhu chance to forestall or block action by military. Risk we believe is not worth taking, with Nhu in control combat forces Saigon.
>
> Therefore, propose we go straight to Generals with our demands, without informing Diem. Would tell them we prepared (sic) have Diem without Nhus but it is in effect up to them whether to keep him. Would also insist Generals take steps to release Buddhist leaders and carry out June 16 agreement.[15]

On 28 August, the President called a meeting of the National Security Council to discuss Vietnam. Former Ambassador Nolting was invited. He reasoned for keeping Diem and cautioned that the US should not jump unless it knew where it was going to land. Other meetings and cables followed.

The CIA in Saigon had cabled Washington about meetings with General Paul D. Harkins, Truehart, Mecklin and Lodge. Lodge had made the decision that American hand should not show in the coup and these were to be conveyed to the Vietnamese generals.[16] Washington asked Saigon for more details about the plot and to assess the effect of delaying the coup. Lodge reported that the coup prospects were favorable and argued that "chances of success would be diminished by delay". Harkins sent a separate message that he saw no clear cut advantage for the coup plotters and no reason for giving crash approval of the coup. Evidently, there was a growing rift between Lodge and Harkins. The CIA chief in Saigon backed Lodge's assessments of the coup prospects but warned "there maybe widespread fighting in Saigon and serious loss of life," as "the Ngo family have dug in for last ditch battle."[17]

The Americans in Saigon were much ahead of the policy makers in Washington. The debates there had become so heated that Kennedy personally cabled Lodge and Harkins for their independent judgement. Lodge's cable strongly supported the coup saying "there is no turning back because there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration. . ."[18] Harkins maintained his position that there was still time to approach Diem with an ultimatum to drop Nhu without endangering the plotters.

The situation in Washington was confused and was aggravated by the tension in Saigon. Despite the series of meetings and cables,

Kennedy still refused to make a firm decision. His vacillation added to official perplexity in Washington and Diem's increasing suspicions of American policy. Kennedy's silence was interpreted by anti-Diem forces in Saigon and Washington as a sign that he was sympathetic to their position despite his annoyance over the 24 August cable.

On 29 August, the National Security Council held a meeting. A state Department message to Saigon that night tended to show that President Kennedy relied more on Lodge's than Harkins' advice. It stated the meeting "reaffirmed basic course" and authorized Lodge "to announce suspension of aid through Diem government at a time and under conditions of your choice . . . you should consider importance of timing and managing announcement so as to minimize appearance of collusion with Generals. . ."[19] A second cable sent the same day instructed Lodge that if possible Diem should be pressured to dump his brother.[20] Evidently, there were still some doubts in Washington about the efficacy of a coup. Lodge's response emphasized the need for a coup. He argued that getting rid of Nhu "surely cannot be done by working through Diem. . .The best chance of doing it is by the Generals taking over the government lock, stock and barrel".[21]

On 31 August, Harkins cabled from Saigon to General Taylor that the plotting of a coup had ended because of confusion in the organization with everyone suspicious of everyone else.[22] Lodge confirmed the collapse of the conspiracy saying "there was neither the will nor the organization among the generals to accomplish." Lodge also reported hearing that Nhu was secretly dealing with Hanoi through the French delegate who visited Saigon and the Polish member of the ICC.[23]

News about the failure of the anti-Diem forces in Saigon placed Washington in a great dilemma. The US found itself at the end of August 1963 without a policy. The National Security Council held a meeting on 31 August (without the President) to assess the situation. The Pentagon narrative notes that the session was revealing in view of the participants' "'rambling inability to focus on the problem'—the sense of an administration adrift".[24]

The trend of the discussion seemed to favor reluctantly going back to some workable relationship with Diem since there seemed to be no alternative. Rusk said it was unrealistic to insist that Nhu must go. McNamara proposed the reopening of high level communications with the Presidential Palace in Saigon. Hilsman opposed Rusk's and

McNamara's arguments and reminded the group of the impact on American image and policy elsewhere of Washington's support to a strong Nhu-dominated regime.

Paul M. Kattenburg, a diplomat who headed the Vietnam Interdepartmental Working Group proposed disengagement. He argued that if the US tried to live with the Diem regime, it would be thrown out of the country within six months. In the next six months to a year, he predicted the war effort would steadily deteriorate such that the Vietnamese people will gradually go to the other side and the US will be obliged to leave. Kattenburg became the first official on record in a high level Vietnam policy meeting to predict that the war effort was irretrievable, either with or without President Diem. His analysis was dismissed by Johnson, Rusk and McNamara. Rusk insisted that American Policy was based on two points– "we will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won, and that we will not run a coup".

The Kennedy Administration passed through the next five weeks without any real policy but with three general notions in mind: (1) the compulsion to send special missions to reassess the situation in Vietnam; (2) the attempt to coerce the Diem regime into moderation through economic and propaganda pressures; and (3) Ambassador Lodge's efforts to persuade the Nhus to leave the country while giving the cold shoulder to Diem.[25]

Kennedy expressed his views on the Diem regime and the Vietnam War in a series of television interviews on 2 and 9 September with the CBS evening news and the Huntley-Brinkley Report. He wanted Diem to reform his government, to bring back popular support otherwise the war would be lost. He did not believe in reducing US aid to South Vietnam since it would only bring about the collapse of the regime as what happened in China at the end of World War II. He believed in the domino theory, that if South Vietnam was lost it would pave the way for eventual control of Southeast Asia by Communist China. The interviews revealed that he thought little about the Vietnamese Communists, North or South. China was the major enemy; Vietnam was just a battleground. He overlooked the fact that not a single Chinese soldier was fighting in Vietnam and the historical fact that the Vietnamese have always been hostile to Chinese domination.[26]

Despite the options provided by his advisers, Kennedy failed to make any decision. None of these satisfied him so he rejected them all and decided in effect to muddle through. Early in September he

sent Krulak, the Pentagon's expert on Vietnam, and Joseph Mendenhall, former political counsellor in the Saigon Embassy, on a fact-finding tour of South Vietnam. After four days they returned to Washington and reported their diametrically opposed findings to a special session of the National Security Council. Krulak said the war was going well and the people were rallying to Diem's support. Mendenhall reported the war was being lost and the people were becoming more disenchanted with Diem everyday. This prompted Kennedy to ask the two whether they visited the same country!

Dissatisfied with the reports, Kennedy decided after a few days to send McNamara and Taylor on another inspection tour. Like so many presidents before him, he had learned to trust certain of his advisers more than others. On the issue of Vietnam, he leaned on McNamara and Taylor.[27] They submitted their report to Washington on 2 October. Their military assessment was generally optimistic and even proposed the withdrawal of 1,000 Americans by the end of 1963. They reported continuing political discontent with the Diem-Nhu regime but discounted the possibility of an early coup. They recommended a series of economic pressures such as aid cut-off. It is not clear whether they remembered that this was the "go" signal that the Saigon generals had previously requested in plotting the coup.[28]

In October, Colonel Lucien Conein and other CIA agents renewed their contacts with the coup plotters. After another monk burned himself on 5 October, Kennedy decided to apply major economic sanctions against the Diem regime. Diem accused Washington of sabotaging the war effort. Washington cabled Lodge further instructions using CIA channels for tight security. It stated that no initiative should be taken to give any active encouragement to a coup but that Lodge was to adopt a posture of "surveillance and readiness". The message stressed Washington's desire for "plausibility of denial" of US involvement.[29]

On 6 October, the CIA relayed new White House instructions. It said that while Washington did not wish to "stimulate" a coup, it also did not want "to leave the impression that the US would thwart a change of government". Nor could it withhold aid from a new regime.[30] Lodge interpreted this as signalling a desire for a change of regime but Harkins disputed him vigorously on this point. The bitter disagreements between the two in interpreting the Vietnam situation caused anxieties in the White House about the success of a coup. Lodge's views eventually prevailed.

By mid October, the coup plans were well advanced. At the

same time, the administration was hearing disturbing intelligence estimates on the war—increasing Vietcong attacks and more government troops missing in action. In a report on 22 October, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research concluded that since July the Diem government would have been in trouble even without the Buddhist crisis. Against this background, the planned coup hit another snag. On 23 October, General Don told Conein that the coup scheduled for 26 October had been called off because Harkins had discouraged it.

Lodge informed Washington that same day that he had talked with Harkins who said he had misunderstood Washington's policy guidance. On 24 October, Harkins cabled Taylor disputing Lodge's version of the events. He denied having violated Washington's policy guidance, saying he merely rebuffed Don's suggestion that they meet again to discuss coup plans. The incident underscored the differences in views and total lack of coordination between Lodge and Harkins. It deepened the Vietnamese generals' suspicion of Harkins because of his closeness to Diem. As a result, they consistently refused to show any American their detailed plans despite repeated promises to do so. This worried Washington. Conein's reassurances, however, emboldened them to pass the word to Lodge on 24 October that the coup take place before 2 November.

In Washington, Harkins' reports revived doubts about the coup and Lodge became defensive. CIA director McCone and McGeorge Bundy cabled Lodge expressing fears that Don might be a double agent from the Diem-Nhu regime trying to entrap the US. Lodge cabled Bundy on 25 October allaying their fears about Don and Conein. He also opposed any attempt to "pour cold water" on the coup plot as "it was the only way people in Vietnam could possibly have a change of government".[31] The White House replied on the same day endorsing Lodge's view that the US should not thwart a coup. However, the White House was also

> concerned about hazard that an unsuccessful coup, however carefully we avoid disengagement, will be laid at our door by public opinion almost everywhere. Therefore,. . . we would like to have option of judging and warning on any plan with poor prospects of success. . .[32]

Unknown to the Ambassador or the White House, the coup plotters were even then "manipulating the balance of military forces around Saigon in their favor, double-dealing with Nhu and outwitting

him". The maneuvering was so intense that it was practically impossible to keep track of all the plots against the regime. On 27 October, Diem met with Lodge and inquired about the suspension of aid. The Ambassador reported it as a "fruitless, frustrating" exchange, with Diem only offering excuses and complaints when asked about the release of Buddhists and student demonstrators.

On 28 October, Lodge talked with Don who insisted the coup must be thoroughly Vietnamese and the US must not interfere. He urged Lodge not to change his previously announced plans to leave for Washington on 31 October so as not to arouse Palace suspicions. The following day Lodge communicated to Washington that he felt the US was clearly committed to the coup and it was too late to back out.

In Washington, McNamara and the JCS were still hesitant because of the continuing differences between Lodge and Harkins. They discussed their doubts at the meeting of the NSC meeting on 29 October. The White House then instructed Lodge to show Harkins, who had been away in Bangkok, the relevant messages to be sure that he would be fully aware of the coup arrangements. Moreover, it stated that if Lodge were to take his scheduled trip home, Harkins should be left in charge of the American mission rather than Lodge's deputy.

When Harkins was apprised of continuing Don-Conein contacts and Lodge's latest recommendations to Washington, he was furious. He sent three cables to Taylor on 30 October protesting that Lodge had kept him in the dark about coup arrangements and disputed the Ambassador's gloomy assessments of the war.[33] He accused Don of being a double agent and stressed that there seemed to be no Vietnamese general who was qualified enough to take over Diem's position. He argued for the retention of Diem that

> . . .rightly or wrongly, we have backed Diem for eight long hard years. To me it seems incongruous now to get him down, kick him around and get rid of him. The US has been his mother superior and father confessor since he's been in office and he has leaned on us heavily.[34]

Harkins' cables greatly disturbed Washington. The White House expressed apprehensions to Lodge regarding the prospect of a successful coup. It urged that the Vietnamese generals should be discouraged from proceeding since "a miscalculation could result in jeopardizing the US position in Southeast Asia."[35]

Lodge replied that the Americans did not "have the power to delay or discourage a coup". He was convinced the coup would succeed since the best generals were involved. He suggested they might need "funds at the last moment with which to buy off potential opposition. To the extent that these funds can be passed discreetly, I believe we should furnish them." Lodge also objected vigorously to Washington's plans to put Harkins in charge of the American mission if he left Saigon.[36]

The final White House message to Lodge that same night rejected his contention that the US was powerless to stop a coup without betraying it to the Diem regime. It emphasized that if "you should conclude that there is not clearly a high prospect of success, you should communicate this doubt to generals in a way calculated to persuade them to desist at least until chances are better". As in the past, however, Washington gave Lodge discretion to make final judgement on the coup's success and added that once a coup started "it is in the interest of the US government that it should succeed".[37]

Lodge cancelled his trip to Washington on 31 October and on 1 November, the coup took place. President Diem called up Lodge during the siege of the Palace to inquire about US position on the coup. Lodge replied the US possibly could not have any view as it was then 4:30 AM in Washington. Lodge asked Diem if there was anything he could do for the latter's personal safety. Diem merely replied that he was trying to establish order. Later that day Diem and Nhu were killed by the Vietnamese armored units. The Kennedy administration was reportedly shocked about the murder of the brothers but had been reluctant to intervene on their behalf for fear of appearing to support them or reneging on its promise of non-interference to the Vietnamese generals.

The Consensus to Bomb the North: August 1964-February 1965

The decision-making that led to the consensus to bomb North Vietnam in 1965 proceeded in much the same fashion as during the Kennedy administration. Soon after the overthrow of Diem, the war situation deteriorated thus exposing the false optimism that previous military reports showed. The military government in Saigon was weak and shaky. Confronted with those facts after the death of Kennedy, Johnson said: "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be President who saw Vietnam go the way China went." As one analyst notes, he had made a serious "decision by reflex".[38] Without much deliberation, Johnson had ruled out other alternative

solutions to the Vietnam problem.

Johnson retained in his administration virtually the same policy advisers that Kennedy had. Most agreed with Johnson that the US must not lose Vietnam. Johnson disliked criticisms and those who held different views either resigned or were eased out of office, as what happened to Hilsman, Harriman or Forrestal.[39]

The Saigon government continued to be plagued with a succession of military coup. The Vietcong seemed to be winning the war. There was a consensus in Washington that military action would have to be taken against the North to prop up the Saigon government and forestall a collapse of national morale. Because of the presidential campaign, however, in which Johnson took a dovish position vis-a-vis Barry Goldwater, such a move could not be made without provocation from the North. By mid-July William Bundy had tinkered with a draft resolution to be sent to Congress when the occasion arose. The Tonkin gulf incident on 2 August provided Johnson the reason to ask for congressional support behind the war. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was approved on 7 August by Congress with near unanimity.[40] Johnson still did not authorize bombing of the North as the election campaign was in full swing. He merely ordered limited reprisals. In his campaign speeches he stressed that he would not widen the war, would not send American boys to fight Asian wars, would not bomb North Vietnam and would not fight China. White House advisers, however, continued to plan a provocation strategy, i.e. limited coastal raids on the North, air strikes on Laos infiltration routes, etc. By 7 September 1964, a consensus had been reached that air attacks would have to be launched early in 1965 against the North.[41] All through September to October, Taylor and William Westmoreland argued for immediate air strikes but McNamara consistently objected. On 2 November, the day before the US elections, the Vietcong staged a surprise attack against the US air base at Bien Hoa in which five Americans were killed, 76 wounded and six bombers destroyed. Ambassador Taylor recommended immediate bombing of the North but McNamara rejected the recommendation for obvious political reasons.

Johnson won a landslide victory against Goldwater. He opened a major policy review, urging his advisers to come up with new proposals to solve the Vietnam problem. However, he stressed that he was not going to lose Vietnam. The possibility of early disengagement was therefore ruled out and the policy review became an academic exercise. George Ball presented a case for a "neutralist" settle-

ment in South Vietnam along the lines of the Laos agreement. This was rejected by other advisers. Three options were finally presented to the President:

> Option A—reprisal air strikes, covert pressure intensified.
>
> Option B—bomb North Vietnam "at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption" till all US demands met; US to define negotiating position "in a way which makes Communist acceptance unlikely" if US pressed to negotiate "before a Communist agreement to comply."
>
> Option C—graduated air war, possible deployment of ground troops.[42]

Policy discussions continued for several weeks without any major decision by the President. On 24 December, a Vietcong attack against a GI barracks in Saigon prompted Taylor to again press for air attacks. McNamara rejected this as it was Christmas eve. Late in December, George Ball flew to Paris to argue Johnson's case for escalation of the war before President Charles de Gaulle. Just as de Gaulle argued against Kennedy's policy, he suggested that Johnson press for a cease-fire and negotiations leading to a political solution. This was unacceptable to Johnson.[43]

By mid-January 1965, McNamara outlined three basic options before the President: first, a political solution based on the Laos agreement; second, limited air war against the North and more US advisers in the South; and third, massive increase of American troops in the South. The President still made no important decision though he tended toward the second option which McNamara presented. During all this time, military preparations for an air campaign against the North had been going on in South Vietnam. It was only after the Vietcong attack on the US military advisers' compound at Pleiku on 7 February 1965 that the President approved the bombing of the North. Thus Operation Rolling Thunder—sustained air war, was under way. All the time, Washington insisted these were merely reprisal attacks and kept denying any intention to send combat forces in Saigon. Thus American involvement in Vietnam deepened, contrary to public expectation. The public deception was to continue for several years, supported by glowing reports coming from social scientists at the Rand Corporation, led by Leon Goure, that US bombing and deployment of US forces had altered the combat situation. The Vietcong morale had gone down and the war would soon be won with more military power. Such reports were carefully pre-

pared, contrary to accepted research standards, to suit the military's justification of the war. Other reports made earlier by J.C. Donnell, G.J. Pauker and J.J. Zasloff picturing high morale and determination to win by the Vietcong had been suppressed.[44]

Conclusion

The two episodes in decision-making discussed in this paper do not seem to clearly fit into any of the conceptual models presented by G.T. Allison, J. Steinbrunner and M. Moore.[45] They tend to confirm rather C.E. Lindblom's concept of decision-making as the "science of 'muddling through' ".[46] In both episodes, there was an absence of an overall rational evaluation of policy objectives of US involvement in Vietnam. There was also a lack of objective assessment of alternative means of solving the problem in terms of potential costs and benefits to be derived.

The above observations by no means imply that other decision-making models are entirely useless for policy analysis in the episodes presented. Each of the models helps to explain further various aspects of each policy decision by viewing the decision-making process from different perspectives. Model I, for example, i.e. the Rational Policy Paradigm,[47] can account for the policy choices made in the Vietnam war as stemming from the US Government's conception of its national interests and security in the context of Cold War politics in international relations.

The US viewed Chinese communist expansion in Southeast Asia as a threat to its national interests, e.g. prestige and influence, not only in that area but in world politics as a whole. The national goal was, therefore, to check communist aggression in Southeast Asia. Within this policy framework, the decision to strengthen a friendly South Vietnamese government was a logical or rational choice. Implicit in the decision was that the cost of involvement in Vietnam would be much less than the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism. This rational policy paradigm is quite evident in all the discussions preceding each decision and was openly expressed by President Kennedy in his television interviews with the CBS.

The specific decisions to get rid of Ngo Dinh Diem and to bomb North Vietnam were thus means to achieve the broader policy goals and objectives of the US. What is striking in these decision-making episodes, from the perspective of rationality, was the lack of contingency planning when it came to selecting the various means to

achieve the perceived ends in Vietnam. There was no provision for alternative plans in the event of a failure of strategy. This can be seen in the aborted coup plot of the first episode and in the series of Vietnamese military squabbles and coups that followed Diem's overthrow. In these instances, the Americans were "left out on a limb", having failed to provide themselves with an alternative plan. As a British diplomat commented: "The trouble with you people is that you always think only of Plan A, and if it does not work, you never seem to have any Plan B or Plan C in mind."[48]

From the perspective of Model II, i.e. Organization Process Paradigm,[49] the specific decisions in the Vietnam war can be viewed as outputs of several interrelated organizations rather than decisions by a monolithic government. These organizations are the Department of Defense, the Pentagon, the State Department, the CIA and the President's White House Staff. Each of these organizations had its own parochial priorities, perceptions and positions on the issues. For example, the Pentagon naturally viewed military action and counter-insurgency measures of primary importance in the war effort. Thus, it tended to emphasize information on military gains, enemy losses and demoralization, in the National Security Council meetings. In contrast, the state Department considered the political solution to the war—e.g. helping the South Vietnamese regime achieve political stability, winning over popular support, etc.—high on its priority list. These organizational perceptions and positions were very obvious, for example, in the Mendenhall-Krulak fact-finding mission sent to Vietnam by Kennedy. Mendenhall of the State Department roamed the countryside and reported the war was being lost and that people were becoming more disenchanted with the Diem regime. Krulak of the Pentagon checked on the military situation and said the war was going well and that the people were rallying to Diem's support.

The complexity of the Vietnam problem necessitated the close coordination and control of the activities of these various organizations. The President relied heavily on them for information and advice in making decisions on specific situations. The limited, often conflicting, information supplied by these organizations served as constraints on the President's decisions. Moreover, actions which had been previously taken by past Presidents also tended to circumscribe available choices for the incumbent. For instance, Kennedy had inherited limited US involvement in Indochina from President Eisenhower. The latter had especially emphasized to the former the strategic importance of Laos. To a certain extent, this accounts for Kennedy's initial lack of attention to the Vietnam situa-

tion. President Johnson in turn took over an administration which had become deeply committed to increase military aid for the defense of South Vietnam. Given these circumstances, it was unlikely that Kennedy's and Johnson's decisions could radically depart from those of their predecessors without greatly upsetting established organizational programs and procedures.

The same organizational contraints on Presidential decision-making also created problems in the execution of policies. In the implementation of operational plans in both episodes of the Vietnam war, there was often a lack of coordination between the military and Embassy staff in Saigon. Basic differences in their interpretations of Washington's policy initiatives and instructions often resulted in their sending of conflicting information to justify their respective positions on issues. This can be seen, for example, in the Lodge-Harkins disputes over the coup planning to overthrow Diem. Thus, Washington's review of past decisions and response to new situations were greatly undermined by the conflicting reports. Often these led to vacillation and indecision by the President at critical times.

Both episodes also illustrate that rational decision-making among these organizations was hampered by the US government's lack of basic information on the various aspects of the Vietnam problem. This was admitted by General Taylor in his first trip to Vietnam. The US had relied greatly on the Diem regime for necessary political and economic information. These were often slanted to make the regime appear to be doing well. The administration lacked Vietnam and China experts whose objective assessments of historical, social and political factors were badly needed in the decision-making process.

The Vietnam decisions can also be explained as political outcomes viewed within the framework of Allison's Model III—Bureaucratic Politics.[50] These were the result of bargaining among individuals and groups within the government. In the first episode, for example, there were two groups representing alternative policies—the Diem-must-go school and the Diem-must-stay school. The success of the first group can be analyzed in terms of its members' ability to maneuver the decision process by taking advantage of their position in the organizational hierarchy, available information, influence and the logic of the situation. This is well illustrated by the circumstances which enabled Harriman, Hilsman and Forrestal to send the controversial cable to Lodge hinting at US disenchantment with the Diem regime and approval of a military coup. By their adroit action, they were able to set the direction of subsequent deli-

berations and decision-making in favor of their stand on the issue. Bureaucratic politics is also evident in Lodge's ability to convince the President of the necessity of supporting the planned overthrow of Diem and Nhu by the Saigon generals despite the strong objections of Harkins and others and the general misgivings in Washington.

Information management tended to play a key role in shaping the outcome of bureaucratic bargaining on the Vietnam War. Where there was available information on the war situation, there seemed to be a lack of analysis of these among advisers and decision-makers. What was even worse was the tendency of both Kennedy and Johnson to disregard information which did not support their personal views of the problem. They tended to rely more on certain advisers, hence, the failure to evaluate other alternatives. Moreover, this was aggravated by the practice of some advisers, especially the military, to suppress negative reports and present deliberately biased information. This explains the popularity of Goure's Rand Reports among the supporters of greater military action, including the bombing of North Vietnam. There was little operations analysis conducted in the field or in Washington. As has been observed:

> The problem was not over-management of the war from Washinton; it was under-management. The problem was not much analysis; it was too little. The President and his key advisers sought candid assessments of the war, but they would not pay the political costs in terms of friction with the military to get them. . . .[51]

Steinbrunner's "Model Four and the MLF" can shed more light on the thinking process and inference mechanisms that shaped the decisions in the Vietnam War. Psychological factors tended to color the participants' perception of the overall problem in Vietnam. Most of the decision-makers and policy advisers had been blinded by the simplistic views of the world painted by Cold War politics as well as by their socialization and personal experiences during the Second World War. Thus belief in the "domino theory" impelled both Kennedy, Johnson and their advisers to increase the military commitment of the US in Vietnam and to reject an early political solution despite the recommendations of de Gaulle, Chester Bowles, Galbraith and others. Withdrawal from South Vietnam tended to be perceived as a defeat for the US, an unacceptable prospect especially for Johnson who wanted to be remembered as a great President. It

appears that feelings rather than rational considerations often prevailed in decision-making.

Mark Moore's Model V helps to focus attention to the irregular and occasionally influential participants in the political process. In the two episodes discussed, these non-governmental actors, from the point of view of the US government, included the Diem-Nhu regime, the militant Buddhist organizations and the South Vietnamese generals.

These groups acted in various ways to influence US policy towards Vietnam favorable to their respective interests. The US had no direct control over them and could not, therefore, predict their moves. Their actions and behavior were sources of instability and uncertainty in Washington's decision-making process. Examples of such behavior were the Buddhist demonstrations and self-immolation by monks; Nhu's midnight raids on the pagodas; and the successive military coups after Diem's overthrow. US policy advisers were oftentimes embarrassed and caught unprepared to deal with these new developments.

The two episodes illustrate the complex nature of decision-making in the field of foreign affairs. Decision-making in this area calls for a thorough analysis of the problem, the costs and stakes involved in any available option. As has been shown in this paper, reliance on any one of the conceptual models would show only a particular aspect of the problem. For a more systematic and comprehensive analysis, the situation should be subjected to scrutiny from various perspectives using all five decision models. Such an exercise would enable analysts and decision-makers to understand the problem better, to arrive at available options and to predict likely outcomes. Only in this way could a complete assessment of various alternatives in policy making be achieved and more realistic decisions made.

NOTES

1. *The Pentagon Papers,* as published by the *New York Times,* written by Neil Sheehan *et al.* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971).

2. As Maxwell Taylor admitted in an interview later:

"We had no experts on Vietnam, and Diem, up to that point had resisted letting these foreigners run around the provinces and stick their noses into his business. If Washington asked for a complex report on the Vietnamese economy, let's say, our Embassy people had to walk across the street to the Government

and ask for the information. And usually one of the two situations existed: One, the Vietnamese didn't have the information, and they were ashamed to say so, they made it up; or two, they had the information but it made them look bad so they changed it." Quoted in Marion Kalb and Elie Abel, *Roots of Involvement: The US in Asia, 1784-1971* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971), p. 130.

3. J.T. McAlister, Jr., *Viet Nam; The Origins of Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1969), p. x.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. ix-x.
5. Kalb and Abel, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-133.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Document No. 35 in *The Pentagon Papers, op. cit.*, p. 194.
12. Quoted in Kalb and Abel, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
15. Doc. No. 36, *The Pentagon Papers, op. cit.*, p. 195.
16. Doc. No. 37, *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.
17. Doc. No. 38, *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197.
18. Doc. No. 39, *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198.
19. Doc. No. 40, *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199.
20. Doc. No. 41, *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.
21. Doc. No. 42, *Ibid.*, p. 201.
22. Doc. No. 43, *Ibid.*, p. 202.
23. The talks followed General de Gaulle's statement implying that peace between the North and South was possible and that a neutral Vietnam would receive France's help. It seems that Nhu at first thought this would bring the Americans back to line but as the situation deteriorated, he began to believe that he might make a deal. Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), p. 197.
24. Doc. No. 44, *The Pentagon Papers, op. cit.*, pp. 202-205.
25. Doc. No. 45, *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.
26. Kalb and Abel, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-145.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
28. Doc. No. 47, *The Pentagon Papers, op. cit.*, pp. 210-213.
29. Doc. No. 50, *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.
30. Doc. No. 51, *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.
31. Doc. No. 52, *Ibid.*, pp. 217-219.
32. Doc. No. 53, *Ibid.*, p. 219.
33. Doc. No. 55, *Ibid.*, pp. 221-224.
34. Doc. No. 54, *Ibid.*, pp. 219-221.

35. Doc. No. 56, *Ibid.*, pp. 224-226.
36. Doc. No. 57, *Ibid.*, pp. 226-229.
37. Doc. No. 58, *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.
38. Kalb and Abel, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-169.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.
41. *The Pentagon Papers, op. cit.*, ch. 6.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 324-332; Doc. Nos. 85-86, pp. 365-370.
43. Kalb and Abel, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-179.
44. "The Rand Papers," *Ramparts,* Vol. 11, No. 5 (November 1972), pp. 25-42; 56-62.
45. Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American Political Science Review,* Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (September 1969), pp. 689-718; John Steinbrunner, "Model Four and the MLF," (Typescript); and Mark Moore, "Outline of Model V," 5 October 1970, (Typescript).
46. C.E. Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through'," *Public Administration Review,* Vol. 19 (Spring 1959), pp. 79-88.
47. Allison, *op. cit.*, pp. 692-695.
48. Shaplen, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
49. Allison, *op. cit.*, pp. 698-703.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 710.
51. Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much is Enough?; Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1971), p. 307.