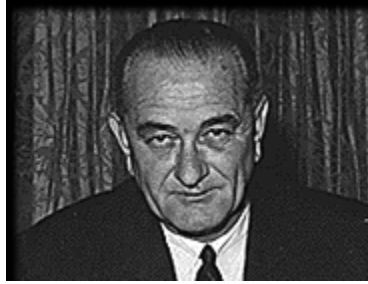


The Vietnam War



America Commits 1961 - 1964

1961

January 1961 - Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev pledges support for "wars of national liberation" throughout the world. His statement greatly encourages Communists in North Vietnam to escalate their armed struggle to unify Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh.

January 20, 1961- John Fitzgerald Kennedy is inaugurated as the 35th U.S. President and declares "...we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to insure the survival and the success of liberty." Privately, outgoing President Eisenhower tells him "I think you're going to have to send troops..." to Southeast Asia.

The youthful Kennedy administration is inexperienced in matters regarding Southeast Asia. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, 44-year-old Robert McNamara, along with civilian planners recruited from the academic community, will play a crucial role in deciding White House strategy for Vietnam over the next several years. Under their leadership, the United States will wage a limited war to force a political settlement.

However, the U.S. will be opposed by an enemy dedicated to total military victory "...whatever the sacrifices, however long the struggle...until Vietnam is fully independent and reunified," as stated by Ho Chi Minh.

May 1961 - Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson visits President Diem in South Vietnam and hails the embattled leader as the 'Winston Churchill of Asia.'

May 1961 - President Kennedy sends 400 American Green Beret 'Special Advisors' to South Vietnam to train South Vietnamese soldiers in methods of 'counter-insurgency' in the fight against Viet Cong guerrillas.

The role of the Green Berets soon expands to include the establishment of Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) made up of fierce mountain men known as the Montagnards. These

groups establish a series of fortified camps strung out along the mountains to thwart infiltration by North Vietnamese.

Fall - The conflict widens as 26,000 Viet Cong launch several successful attacks on South Vietnamese troops. Diem then requests more military aid from the Kennedy administration.

October 1961 - To get a first-hand look at the deteriorating military situation, top Kennedy aides, Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow, visit Vietnam. "If Vietnam goes, it will be exceedingly difficult to hold Southeast Asia," Taylor reports to the President and advises Kennedy to expand the number of U.S. military advisors and to send 8000 combat soldiers.

Defense Secretary McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend instead a massive show of force by sending six divisions (200,000 men) to Vietnam. However, the President decides against sending any combat troops.

October 24, 1961 - On the sixth anniversary of the Republic of South Vietnam, President Kennedy sends a letter to President Diem and pledges "the United States is determined to help Vietnam preserve its independence..."

President Kennedy then sends additional military advisors along with American helicopter units to transport and direct South Vietnamese troops in battle, thus involving Americans in combat operations. Kennedy justifies the expanding U.S. military role as a means "...to prevent a Communist takeover of Vietnam which is in accordance with a policy our government has followed since 1954." The number of military advisors sent by Kennedy will eventually surpass 16,000.

December 1961 - Viet Cong guerrillas now control much of the countryside in South Vietnam and frequently ambush South Vietnamese troops. The cost to America of maintaining South Vietnam's sagging 200,000 man army and managing the overall conflict in Vietnam rises to a million dollars per day.

1962

January 11, 1962 - During his State of the Union address, President Kennedy states, "Few generations in all of history have been granted the role of being the great defender of freedom in its maximum hour of danger. This is our good fortune..."

January 15, 1962 - During a press conference, President Kennedy is asked if any Americans in Vietnam are engaged in the fighting. "No," the President responds without further comment.

February 6, 1962 - MACV, the U.S. Military Assistance Command for Vietnam, is formed. It replaces MAAG-Vietnam, the Military Assistance Advisory Group which had been established in 1950.

February 27, 1962 - The presidential palace in Saigon is bombed by two renegade South Vietnamese pilots flying American-made World War II era fighter planes. President Diem and his brother Nhu escape unharmed. Diem attributes his survival to "divine protection."

March 1962 - Operation Sunrise begins the Strategic Hamlet resettlement program in which scattered rural populations in South Vietnam are uprooted from their ancestral farmlands and resettled into fortified villages defended by local militias. However, over 50 of the hamlets are soon infiltrated and easily taken over by Viet Cong who kill or intimidate village leaders.

As a result, Diem orders bombing raids against suspected Viet Cong-controlled hamlets. The air strikes by the South Vietnamese Air Force are supported by U.S. pilots, who also conduct some of the bombings. Civilian casualties erode popular support for Diem and result in growing peasant hostility toward America, which is largely blamed for the unpopular resettlement program as well as the bombings.

May 1962 - Viet Cong organize themselves into battalion-sized units operating in central Vietnam.

May 1962 - Defense Secretary McNamara visits South Vietnam and reports "we are winning the war."

July 23, 1962 - The Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos signed in Geneva by the U.S. and 13 other nations, prohibits U.S. invasion of portions of the Ho Chi Minh trail inside eastern Laos.

August 1, 1962 - President Kennedy signs the Foreign Assistance Act of 1962 which provides "...military assistance to countries which are on the rim of the Communist world and under direct attack."

August 1962 - A U.S. Special Forces camp is set up at Khe Sanh to monitor North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh trail.

1963

January 3, 1963 - A Viet Cong victory in the Battle of Ap Bac makes front page news in America as 350 Viet Cong fighters defeat a large force of American-equipped South Vietnamese troops attempting to seize a radio transmitter. Three American helicopter crew members are killed.

The South Vietnamese Army is run by officers personally chosen by President Diem, not for their competence, but for their loyalty to him. Diem has instructed his officers to avoid casualties. Their primary mission, he has told them, is to protect him from any coups in Saigon.

May 1963 - Buddhists riot in South Vietnam after they are denied the right to display religious flags during their celebration of Buddha's birthday. In Hue, South Vietnamese police and army troops shoot at Buddhist demonstrators, resulting in the deaths of one woman and eight children.

Political pressure now mounts on the Kennedy administration to disassociate itself from Diem's repressive, family-run government. "You are responsible for the present trouble because you back Diem and his government of ignoramuses," a leading Buddhist tells U.S. officials in Saigon.

June-August - Buddhist demonstrations spread. Several Buddhist monks publicly burn themselves to death as an act of protest. The immolations are captured on film by news photographers and shock the American public as well as President Kennedy.

Diem responds to the deepening unrest by imposing martial law. South Vietnamese special forces, originally trained by the U.S. and now controlled by Diem's younger brother Nhu wage violent crackdowns against Buddhist sanctuaries in Saigon, Hue and other cities.

Nhu's crackdowns spark widespread anti-Diem demonstrations. Meanwhile, during an American TV interview, Nhu's wife, the flamboyant Madame Nhu, coldly refers to the Buddhist immolations as a 'barbecue.' As the overall situation worsens, high level talks at the White House focus on the need to force Diem to reform.

July 4, 1963 - South Vietnamese General Tran Van Don, a Buddhist, contacts the CIA in Saigon about the possibility of staging a coup against Diem.

August 22, 1963 - The new U.S. ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge arrives in South Vietnam.

August 24, 1963 - A U.S. State Department message sent to Ambassador Lodge is interpreted by Lodge to indicate he should encourage the military coup against President Diem.

August 26, 1963 - Ambassador Lodge meets President Diem for the first time. Under instructions from President Kennedy, Lodge tells Diem to fire his brother, the much-hated Nhu, and to reform his government. But Diem arrogantly refuses even to discuss such matters with Lodge.

August 26, 1963 - President Kennedy and top aides begin three days of heated discussions over whether the U.S. should in fact support the military coup against Diem.

August 29, 1963 - Lodge sends a message to Washington stating "...there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration." President Kennedy then gives Lodge a free hand to manage the unfolding events in Saigon. However, the coup against Diem fizzles due to mistrust and suspicion within the ranks of the military conspirators.

September 2, 1963 - During a TV news interview with Walter Cronkite, President Kennedy describes Diem as "out of touch with the people" and adds that South Vietnam's government might regain popular support "with changes in policy and perhaps in personnel."

Also during the interview, Kennedy comments on America's commitment to Vietnam "If we withdrew from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya, would go..."

October 2, 1963 - President Kennedy sends Ambassador Lodge a mixed message that "no initiative should now be taken to give any encouragement to a coup" but that Lodge should "identify and build contacts with possible leadership as and when it appears."

October 5, 1963 - Lodge informs President Kennedy that the coup against Diem appears to be on again.

The rebel generals, led by Duong Van "Big" Minh, first ask for assurances that U.S. aid to South Vietnam will continue after Diem's removal and that the U.S. will not interfere with the actual coup. This scenario suits the White House well, in that the generals will appear to be acting on their own without any direct U.S. involvement. President Kennedy gives his approval. The CIA in Saigon then signals the conspirators that the United States will not interfere with the overthrow of President Diem.

October 25, 1963 - Prompted by concerns over public relations fallout if the coup fails, a worried White House seeks reassurances from Ambassador Lodge that the coup will succeed.

October 28, 1963 - Ambassador Lodge reports a coup is "imminent."

October 29, 1963 - An increasingly nervous White House now instructs Lodge to postpone the coup. Lodge responds it can only be stopped by betraying the conspirators to Diem.

November 1, 1963 - Lodge has a routine meeting with Diem from 10 a.m. until noon at the presidential palace, then departs. At 1:30 p.m., during the traditional siesta time, the coup begins as mutinous troops roar into Saigon, surround the presidential palace, and also seize police headquarters. Diem and his brother Nhu are trapped inside the palace and reject all appeals to surrender. Diem telephones the rebel generals and attempts, but fails, to talk them out of the coup. Diem then calls Lodge and asks "...what is the attitude of the United States?" Lodge responds "...it is four thirty a.m. in Washington, and the U.S. government cannot possibly have a view." Lodge then expresses concern for Diem's safety, to which Diem responds "I am trying to restore order."

At 8 p.m., Diem and Nhu slip out of the presidential palace unnoticed and go to a safe house in the suburbs that belongs to a wealthy Chinese merchant.

November 2, 1963 - At 3 a.m., one of Diem's aides betrays his location to the generals. The hunt for Diem and Nhu now begins. At 6 a.m., Diem telephones the generals. Realizing the situation is hopeless, Diem and Nhu offer to surrender from inside a Catholic church. Diem and Nhu are then taken into custody by rebel officers and placed in the back of an armored personnel carrier. While traveling to Saigon, the vehicle stops and Diem and Nhu are assassinated.

At the White House, a meeting is interrupted with the news of Diem's death. According to witnesses, President Kennedy's face turns a ghostly shade of white and he immediately leaves the room. Later, the President records in his private diary, "I feel that we must bear a good deal of responsibility for it."

Saigon celebrates the downfall of Diem's regime. But the coup results in a power vacuum in which a series of military and civilian governments seize control of South Vietnam, a country that becomes totally dependent on the United States for its existence. Viet Cong use the unstable political situation to increase their hold over the rural population of South Vietnam to nearly 40 percent.

November 22, 1963 - President John F. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas. Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn in as the 36th U.S. President. He is the fourth President coping with Vietnam and will oversee massive escalation of the war while utilizing many of the same policy advisors who served Kennedy.

November 24, 1963 - President Johnson declares he will not "lose Vietnam" during a meeting with Ambassador Lodge in Washington.

By year's end, there are 16,300 American military advisors in South Vietnam which received \$500 million in U.S. aid during 1963.

1964

January 30, 1964 - General Minh is ousted from power in a bloodless coup led by General Nguyen Khanh who becomes the new leader of South Vietnam.

March 1964 - Secret U.S.-backed bombing raids begin against the Ho Chi Minh trail inside Laos, conducted by mercenaries flying old American fighter planes.

March 6, 1964 - Defense Secretary McNamara visits South Vietnam and states that Gen. Khanh "has our admiration, our respect and our complete support..." and adds that, "We'll stay for as long as it takes. We shall provide whatever help is required to win the battle against the Communist insurgents."

Following his visit, McNamara advises President Johnson to increase military aid to shore up the sagging South Vietnamese army. McNamara and other Johnson policy makers now become focused on the need to prevent a Communist victory in South Vietnam, believing it would damage the credibility of the U.S. globally. The war in Vietnam thus becomes a test of U.S. resolve in fighting Communism with America's prestige and President Johnson's reputation on the line.

The cost to America of maintaining South Vietnam's army and managing the overall conflict in Vietnam now rises to two million dollars per day.

March 17, 1964 - The U.S. National Security Council recommends the bombing of North Vietnam. President Johnson approves only the planning phase by the Pentagon.

May - President Johnson's aides begin work on a Congressional resolution supporting the President's war policy in Vietnam. The resolution is shelved temporarily due to lack of support in the Senate, but will later be used as the basis of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution.

Summer - As 56,000 Viet Cong spread their successful guerrilla war throughout South Vietnam, they are reinforced by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars pouring in via the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Responding to this escalation, President Johnson approves Operation Plan 34A, CIA-run covert operations using South Vietnamese commandos in speed boats to harass radar sites along the coastline of North Vietnam. The raids are supported by U.S. Navy warships in the Gulf of Tonkin including the destroyer *U.S.S. Maddox* which conducts electronic surveillance to pinpoint the radar locations.

July 1, 1964 - General Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is appointed by President Johnson as the new U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam. During his one year tenure, Taylor will have to deal with five successive governments in politically unstable South Vietnam.

President Johnson also appoints Lt. Gen William C. Westmoreland to be the new U.S. military commander in Vietnam. Westmoreland is a West Point graduate and a highly decorated veteran of World War II and Korea.

July 16-17 - Senator Barry Goldwater is chosen as the Republican nominee for president at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco. During his acceptance speech Goldwater declares, "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

Goldwater is an arch conservative and virulent anti-Communist whose campaign rhetoric will impact coming White House decisions concerning Vietnam. Above all, Johnson's aides do not want the President to appear to be 'soft on Communism' and thus risk losing the November presidential election. But at the same time, they also want the President to avoid being labeled a 'war monger' concerning Vietnam.

July 31, 1964 - In the Gulf of Tonkin, as part of Operation Plan 34A, South Vietnamese commandos in unmarked speed boats raid two North Vietnamese military bases located on islands just off the coast. In the vicinity is the destroyer *U.S.S. Maddox*.

August 2, 1964 - Three North Vietnamese patrol boats attack the American destroyer *U.S.S. Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin ten miles off the coast of North Vietnam. They fire three torpedoes and machine-guns, but only a single machine-gun round actually strikes the *Maddox* with no casualties. U.S. Navy fighters from the carrier *Ticonderoga*, led by Commander James Stockdale, attack the patrol boats, sinking one and damaging the other two.

At the White House, it is Sunday morning (twelve hours behind Vietnam time). President Johnson, reacting cautiously to reports of the incident, decides against retaliation. Instead, he sends a diplomatic message to Hanoi warning of "grave consequences" from any further "unprovoked" attacks. Johnson then orders the *Maddox* to resume operations in the Gulf of Tonkin in the same vicinity where the attack had occurred. Meanwhile, the Joints Chiefs of Staff put U.S. combat troops on alert and also select targets in North Vietnam for a possible bombing raid, should the need arise.

August 3, 1964 - The *Maddox*, joined by a second destroyer *U.S.S. C. Turner Joy* begin a series of vigorous zigzags in the Gulf of Tonkin sailing to within eight miles of North Vietnam's coast, while at the same time, South Vietnamese commandos in speed boats harass North Vietnamese defenses along the coastline. By nightfall, thunderstorms roll in, affecting the accuracy of electronic instruments on the destroyers. Crew members reading their instruments believe they have come under torpedo attack from North Vietnamese patrol boats. Both destroyers open fire on numerous apparent targets but there are no actual sightings of any attacking boats.

August 4, 1964 - Although immediate doubts arise concerning the validity of the second attack, the Joint Chiefs of Staff strongly recommend a retaliatory bombing raid against North Vietnam.

Press reports in America greatly embellish the second attack with spectacular eyewitness accounts although no journalists had been on board the destroyers.

At the White House, President Johnson decides to retaliate. Thus, the first bombing of North Vietnam by the United States occurs as oil facilities and naval targets are attacked without warning by 64 U.S. Navy fighter bombers. "Our response for the present will be limited and fitting," President Johnson Americans during a midnight TV appearance, an hour after the attack began. "We Americans know, although others appear to forget, the risk of spreading conflict. We still seek no wider war."

Two Navy jets are shot down during the bombing raids, resulting in the first American prisoner of war, Lt. Everett Alvarez of San Jose, California, who is taken to an internment center in Hanoi, later dubbed the "Hanoi Hilton" by the nearly six hundred American airmen who become POWs.

August 5, 1964 - Opinion polls indicate 85 percent of Americans support President Johnson's bombing decision. Numerous newspaper editorials also come out in support of the President.

Johnson's aides, including Defense Secretary McNamara, now lobby Congress to pass a White House resolution that will give the President a free hand in Vietnam.

August 6, 1964 - During a meeting in the Senate, McNamara is confronted by Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon who had been tipped off by someone in the Pentagon that the *Maddox* had in fact been involved in the South Vietnamese commando raids against North Vietnam and thus was not the victim of an "unprovoked" attack. McNamara responds that the U.S. Navy "...played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, was not aware of, any South Vietnamese actions, if there were any..."

August 7, 1964 - In response to the two incidents involving the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*, the U.S. Congress, at the behest of President Johnson, overwhelmingly passes the of Tonkin Resolution put forward by the White House allowing the President "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force" to prevent further attacks against U.S. forces. The Resolution, passed unanimously in the House and 98-2 in the Senate, grants enormous power to President Johnson to wage an undeclared war in Vietnam from the White House.

The only Senators voting against the Resolution are Wayne Morse, and Ernest Gruening of Alaska who said "all Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy."

August 21, 1964 - In Saigon, students and Buddhist militants begin a series of escalating protests against General Khanh's military regime. As a result, Khanh resigns as sole leader in favor of a triumvirate that includes himself, Gen. Minh and Gen. Khiem. The streets of Saigon soon disintegrate into chaos and mob violence amid the government's gross instability.

August 26, 1964 - President Johnson is nominated at the Democratic National Convention.

During his campaign he declares "We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

September 7, 1964 - President Johnson assembles his top aides at the White House to ponder the future course of action in Vietnam.

September 13, 1964 - Two disgruntled South Vietnamese generals stage an unsuccessful coup in Saigon.

October 14, 1964 - Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev is ousted from power, replaced by Leonid Brezhnev as leader of the U.S.S.R.

October 16, 1964 - China tests its first Atomic Bomb. China, by this time, has also massed troops along its border with Vietnam, responding to U.S. escalation.

November 1, 1964 - The first attack by Viet Cong against Americans in Vietnam occurs at Bien Hoa air base, 12 miles north of Saigon. A pre-dawn mortar assault kills five Americans, two South Vietnamese, and wounds nearly a hundred others. President Johnson dismisses all recommendations for a retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam.

November 3, 1964 - With 61 percent of the popular vote, Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson is re-elected as President of the United States in a land-slide victory, the biggest to date in U.S. history, defeating Republican Barry Goldwater by 16 million votes. The Democrats also achieve big majorities in both the U.S. House and Senate.

December 1964 - 10,000 NVA soldiers arrive in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh trail, carrying sophisticated weapons provided by China and the Soviet Union. They shore up Viet Cong battalions with the weapons and also provide experienced soldiers as leaders.

December 1, 1964 - At the White House, President Johnson's top aides, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, and Defense Secretary McNamara, recommend a policy of gradual escalation of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

December 20, 1964 - Another military coup occurs in Saigon by the South Vietnamese army. This time Gen. Khanh and young officers, led by Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu, oust older generals including Gen. Minh from the government and seize control.

December 21, 1964 - An angry Ambassador Taylor summons the young officers to the U.S. embassy then scolds them like schoolboys over the continuing instability and endless intrigues plaguing South Vietnam's government. Americans, he had already warned them, are "tired of coups."

Taylor's behavior greatly offends the young officers. Gen. Khanh retaliates by lashing out in the press against Taylor and the U.S., stating that America is reverting to "colonialism" in its treatment of South Vietnam.

December 24, 1964 - Viet Cong terrorists set off a car bomb explosion at the Brinks Hotel, an American officers' residence in downtown Saigon. The bomb is timed to detonate at 5:45 p.m., during 'happy hour' in the bar. Two Americans are killed and 58 wounded. President Johnson dismisses all recommendations for a retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam.

By year's end, the number of American military advisors in South Vietnam is 23,000. There are now an estimated 170,000 Viet Cong/NVA fighters in the 'People's Revolutionary Army' which has begun waging coordinated battalion-sized attacks against South Vietnamese troops in villages around Saigon.