



talking points

Number 3

FACT SHEET ON VIETNAM AND LAOS

I. The Beginning - 1954

The Geneva agreements, signed July 20 and 21, 1954 divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel into North and South Vietnam, and in the process formalized the Communists' conquest of the northern half of French Indochina. The agreements were not signed by the United States; instead, the U. S. position was expressed in a "unilateral declaration" on July 21, 1954.

This position was based on three points: (1) "primary responsibility for the settlement in Indochina rested with those nations which participated in the fighting", (2) the traditional position of the U. S. that "peoples are entitled to determine their own future, and that it (the United States) will not join in an arrangement which would hinder this", (3) the U. S. desired freedom to pursue "rapid organization of a collective defense in Southeast Asia in order to prevent further direct or indirect Communist aggression in that general area."

The United States recognizing the probability of further Communist aggression, moved for security outside of the terms of the Geneva agreements. On September 8, 1954, a treaty was signed at Manila which established the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Laos and South Vietnam were not signatories, but both states were included in the treaty's guarantees against attack or subversion. On October 24th President Eisenhower wrote President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam that U. S. assistance would be henceforth rendered directly to the South Vietnamese government. On January 1, 1955, this assistance was begun, and on February 12th, U. S. military advisors assumed the task of training the South Vietnamese army. On March 7th, the U. S. and South Vietnam signed an economic agreement, supplementing an agreement of September, 1951.

II. 1955 - 1960

The above steps were the beginnings of a vigorous effort by the Eisenhower administration to strengthen the South Vietnamese government. The aid program was based on both economic and military assistance. The success of these efforts has been repeatedly affirmed by the Democrats' own authorities on Southeast Asia. In October 1955, Senator Mike Mansfield reported to the Senate:

The tide of totalitarian Communism in Viet Nam has slackened. A year ago it was on the verge of over-running the entire country and much of the rest of southeast Asia. The threat has now been reduced. There is today a reasonable chance of the survival and development of a free Vietnam.

In February of 1960, Senator Mansfield's Subcommittee reported to the Senate:

By any measure, Vietnam has made great progress under President Ngo Dinh Diem in the improvement of internal security, in the creation of the forms and institutions of popularly responsible government where before few existed, and in the advancement of the welfare of the people of Vietnam.

Finally, a major policy paper issued by the State Department in December 1961, stated flatly that "The years 1956 to 1960 produced something close to an economic miracle in South Vietnam...It is a report of progress over a few brief years equalled by few young countries."

III. 1961 to the Present

LAOS - During the summer and fall of 1960 Communist guerilla activity in South Vietnam steadily increased. But the most ominous developments took place in Laos, a country whose southern portion constitutes a lengthy common border with South Vietnam. Laos was of extreme importance to the U. S. position in South Vietnam because Laos could serve as a place of refuge and resupply for the Viet Cong (Communist guerillas operating in South Vietnam.)

Although at the beginning of 1961 the pro-Western government of Prince Boun Oum held power in Laos, during the first three months of that year the Pathet Lao (Communist guerillas operating in Laos) extended their control into southern Laos. This action placed in jeopardy the southeastern panhandle area of Laos, which borders on Cambodia and South Vietnam.

The situation became so serious that President Kennedy, in his News Conference of March 23, undertook a major policy declaration on Laos and Southeast Asia. The President stated flatly that, "The security of all of southeast Asia will be endangered if Laos loses its neutral independence." Then he spelled out United States policy:

...there must be a cessation of the present armed attacks by externally supported Communists. If these attacks do not stop, those who support a genuinely neutral Laos must consider their response. The shape of this necessary response will of course be carefully considered not only here in Washington but in the SEATO Conference with our allies...

No one should doubt our resolution on this point. We are faced with a clear threat of a change in the internationally agreed position of Laos...This threat...is posed...by the military operations of internal dissident elements directed from outside the country. This is what must end if peace is to be kept in southeast Asia.

But the President also said, "we are earnestly in favor of constructive negotiation...which can help Laos back to the pathway of independence and genuine neutrality." In the end the United States would rely entirely on negotiation. The SEATO meeting during the last days of March accomplished nothing. Divisions of opinion among SEATO members resulted in the passage of a resolution stating that if efforts at negotiation fail, and if "there continues to be an active military attempt to obtain control of Laos," SEATO would take "whatever action may be

appropriate in the circumstances."

1962 Geneva Settlement

A second Geneva conference met on May 16, 1961, with the United States as a full party to the negotiations. Prior to the conference a "verified" cease fire in Laos had been negotiated. It soon became clear that the cease fire was regarded by the Pathet Lao as nothing more than a screen behind which to advance their power in Laos. Pathet Lao activity increased and culminated in a full scale military attack on May 7, 1962, which routed the Royal Vietnamese Army and drove this pro-Western force in complete disarray across the border into Thailand.

Little had been accomplished at Geneva because the two pro-Western Laotian leaders, Boun Oum and Phoumi Nosavan, refused to enter a coalition with the Communists. In early 1962, the United States brought pressure against these two leaders by with-drawing aid to the Royal Laotian Army. In May, 1962, a coalition government was finally formed by representatives from the "neutralist", Communist and anti-Communist elements in Laos. This coalition was strikingly similar to those used by the Soviet Union to subvert several Eastern European governments. The formation of the Laotian coalition led to an agreement at Geneva on July 23, 1962. Signatories included Communist China, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, the Soviet Union and the United States. The aim of the agreement was to exclude foreign U. S. influence from Laos, and to substitute the authority of an International Control Commission (ICC). The agreement also withdrew SEATO's protection from Laos. The practical effect has been to exclude efforts to control the activities of the Pathet Lao: The ICC has been thoroughly ineffective, and the United States could not, or would not counter Communist activity in Laos which has been supported by North Vietnam and Communist China. This activity has seriously undermined the United States' efforts to assist South Vietnam.

SOUTH VIETNAM - In South Vietnam the anti-Communist position has deteriorated since the Viet Cong launched a new and intense offensive in the summer of 1960. U. S. military personnel in South Vietnam now number some 15,500, compared with a reported 327 on July 5, 1960. For fiscal years 1954 - 1963, U. S. aid to Vietnam has totaled \$2,548,400,000. Aid to Laos during that same period adds up to \$353.2 million, and the total to those 2 small countries is over \$2.9 billion since 1954. Between January 1, 1961, and March 16, 1964, 201 Americans had died in South Vietnam. 119 were combat fatalities. In spite of this massive effort, Secretary Defense McNamara had to testify on January 27, 1964, that the situation in Vietnam "continues grave." He stated that "In terms of Western interests, the position in Laos, as it has developed over the past year, can only be characterized as precarious."

GENERAL U. S. POLICY - In broad outline, U. S. policy towards Vietnam and Laos, and the effects of that policy, can be summarized as follows: (1) An effort to "neutralize" Laos, and Communist power in that country, through a political agreement with the states concerned. This agreement was finally reached at Geneva in July, 1962, but it had its first origins in President Kennedy's meeting with Premier Khrushchev in Vienna, in early 1961. Former Under Secretary of State, Roger Hilsman outlined the administration's policy thus:

By 1961 strong military pressure from the Pathet Lao, backed up by the North Vietnamese Communists, threatened to upset the balance and bring the flames of war to Southeast Asia. The U. S. had three choices: (1) to leave Laos to its fate, (2) to commit American troops to the defense of Laos, or (3) to seek a political settlement...

In June of 1961, President Kennedy met with Premier Khrushchev in Vienna. The only point on which agreement was reached at this meeting was that there should be a neutral and independent Laos. This agreement was tantamount to changing the struggle for Laos from a primarily political matter to a political and psychological struggle.

But this policy has been fatally undercut because the Communist Pathet Lao have unceasingly conducted both military and political activity in Laos. The Pathet Lao have used the coalition government, into which they were put by the United States, as a means of proscribing effective action by the anti-Communist elements within Laos. The United States' strict observance of the Geneva agreements has meant that the Pathet Lao have remained free from external pressure. In consequence the Pathet Lao have moved at will within Laos, as the State Department admitted on February 28, 1964, and Laos has served as a sanctuary and source of supply for the Communist guerillas in South Vietnam.

(2) The second element in U. S. policy has been the firm belief that internal stability in South Vietnam is the key to crushing the Communist insurgents. This belief led to the overthrow, in November, 1963, of the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem, who had led his country against the Communists since 1955. Internal opposition to the Diem had been especially evident during 1963 with the opposition centered in South Vietnam's Buddhist population. The Buddhists resorted to self-immolation, and foreign opinion, especially in the United States, was led by the press to believe that the Diem government was guilty of widespread religious persecution. A United Nations Fact Finding Mission which visited South Vietnam in October and November of 1963 found no evidence that the Diem regime had persecuted the Buddhists on religious grounds. Indeed, many competent authorities now agree that the conflicts between Diem and the Buddhists were political and not religious. For example, Pulitzer prize winner Marguerite Higgins has reported: "Diem's repression was not directed against a religion. It was aimed at overt political opposition."

By all accounts United States officials believed the stories of religious persecution. They believed that this internal turmoil made Diem an ineffective leader against the Viet Cong, and they connived in the coup which led to his overthrow and murder.

RECENT U. S. POLICY - On Friday, November 1, 1963, a military coup overthrew the Diem government. Official United States pronouncements greeted the new military government with optimism. Secretary Rusk stated:

I think...the principle problem that developed with respect to the previous (Diem) regime was the alienation of apparently very large sections of the population. We believe that the present regime has moved promptly to consolidate public effort... and that there will be a possibility that the people of that country will move in greater unity on behalf of the total effort. We are encouraged about the possibilities.

And Secretary of Defense McNamara, following a visit to South Vietnam on December 19th and 20th, asserted:

We reviewed in great detail the plans of the South Vietnamese and the plans of our own military advisors for operations during 1964. We have every reason to believe they will be successful.

Secretary McNamara's brave words have not been borne out however. Indeed, in the face of consistent deterioration in South Vietnam the statements of the Administration have become confused and contradictory. On January 27th, Secretary McNamara was forced to outline this dismal situation:

Last September we had hoped to bring sufficient pressure to bear on the Diem government to persuade it to abandon its oppressive measures against the Vietnamese people and get on with the task of winning the war against the Viet Cong...

Unfortunately, the Diem government did not choose to follow the advice we offered. In November that government was overthrown... Viet Cong activities were already increasing in September and continued to increase at an accelerated pace in October and November, particularly in the Delta area. And I must report that they have made considerable progress since the coup. (emphasis added)

These remarks caused considerable comment, so the following day (January 28) Secretary McNamara called a news conference to "clarify" the above statement; he said:

The Viet Cong attacks have increased in intensity and number and the number of government successes have increased... The situation in the delta remains grave, but I am encouraged by the progress of the last two weeks. (emphasis added)

The very next day, January 29, according to the New York Times, "The Defense Department reported today that the Communist forces in South Vietnam increased their activity during the week ended January 22". And on January 30, the military government which had overthrown President Diem was itself deposed in a coup, led by Maj. General Khanh. This regime has not reversed the adverse tide in South Vietnam, although it has received the usual support from the United States. For example, at his news conference of February 7, 1964, Secretary Rusk said:

I think the resources and the capabilities are there (in Vietnam) to get this job done... We do know that the leadership is determined to prosecute this war with full vigor.

Recent news dispatches have indicated, however, that "vigor" would not be enough. On February 15th, the Washington Post reported, under a Saigon dateline, that "U. S. military authorities say Communist guerilla activities reached the highest peak last week since the confused mid-November period after President Ngo Dinh Diem was killed." In the New York Times of March 2, Peter Grose reported from Saigon that "Close Vietnamese and American advisors to the new military Premier acknowledge that they have not yet achieved one military success."

President Johnson's statements on Vietnam have been, with one exception, so vague as to defy analysis. That one exception was a remark which the President made in the course of his television commentary on his first 100 days in office. He said:

We have problems in Viet-Nam as we have had for 10 years... I was reading a letter only today that General Eisenhower

wrote the late President Diem ten years ago, and it is a letter that I could have well written to President Khanh...

Such an attempt to equate conditions in Vietnam now with conditions 10 years ago is refuted by the written record. The President might have been reminded that 10 years ago South Vietnam had just been created; it emerged from chaos, and toward the end of the Eisenhower years, great progress had been made. This fact has been acknowledged by Senator Mansfield and the State Department in the statements quoted above. The late President Kennedy also praised the progress which was made in the first 5 years of the Diem regime. In his book Strategy of Peace, Mr. Kennedy said:

...in what everyone thought was the hour of total Communist triumph, we saw a near miracle take place. ..Today that brave little state (South Vietnam) is working in free and friendly association with the United States, whose economic and military aid has, in conditions of independence, proved effective.

Contradiction and Confusion - The latest contradictions in U. S. policy statements can be tabulated as follows:

Withdrawal of U. S. Troops

Answering this question by Rep. Stratton: "Wouldn't you say that in the event things do not go as well as you hope...that unquestionably we can't continue to withdraw any more of our forces?", Secretary McNamara said: "No, sir; I would not." (House Hearings, January 27, 1964).

On March 17, the White House issued a statement which said in part: "It will remain the policy of the United States to furnish assistance and support to South Vietnam for as long as it is required."

Extension of the War to North Vietnam

Speaking in Los Angeles on February 21, President Johnson said: "Those engaged in external direction and supply (in Vietnam) would do well to remember that this type of aggression is a deeply dangerous game." Note - This speech had been billed by the White House as a major foreign policy statement. White House aides had taken pains to draw attention to the words "dangerous game" as highly significant.

At his news conference of February 27, Secretary of State Rusk said: "the central problem...is in South Viet-Nam even though supported from the north. In other words, whatever happens in the north, there is a large problem in South Vietnam...no miracle in the north is going to suddenly transform or eliminate the problem in South Vietnam."

Neutralization

At his February 1st news conference, President Johnson said: "If we could have neutralization of both North Vietnam and South Vietnam, I am sure that would be considered sympathetically."

Secretary McNamara, in a major policy speech on Vietnam, March 27th, said: "Under the shadow of Communist power, "Neutralization" would in reality be an interim device to permit Communist consolidation and eventual takeover."

Today the anticommunist position in South Vietnam is deteriorating and precarious, and the most harmful stage of that deterioration has occurred since the coup which overthrew President Diem. The United States actively connived in that coup.