

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #33B

When John F. Kennedy became president, he inherited President Dwight Eisenhower's commitment in Vietnam. In Southeast Asia events were moving toward what would become within a decade the greatest American foreign policy calamity of the twentieth century. During Kennedy's "thousand days" in office, the turmoil in Indochina never preoccupied the American public mind for any extended period. But it dominated international diplomatic debates from the time Kennedy entered the White House.

The landlocked kingdom of Laos, along with neighboring Cambodia, had been declared neutral in the Geneva Accords of 1954. But they had fallen into a complex struggle for power between the Communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Laotian Army. When Eisenhower left office, he told Kennedy, "You might have to go in there and fight it out." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Lyman Lemnitzer, argued in favor of a stand against the Pathet Lao, even at the cost of direct intervention.

After a lengthy consideration of alternatives, Kennedy decided to favor a neutralist coalition that would preclude American military involvement in Laos, yet prevent a Pathet Lao victory. The Soviets, who were extending aid to the Pathet Lao, indicated a readiness to negotiate. In 1961 talks began in Geneva, Switzerland. After more than a year of tangled negotiations, all factions in Laos agreed to a neutral coalition. American and Russian aid to the opposing parties was supposed to end, but both countries continued covert operations. In the meantime, North Vietnam kept open the Ho Chi Minh Trail through eastern Laos over which it supplied its Vietcong allies in South Vietnam.

Kennedy saw Vietnam in Cold War terms. But rather than practicing brinkmanship – threatening nuclear war to stop Communism – he sought what, at the time, seemed a more intelligent and realistic approach. He increased the amount of aid sent to the South Vietnamese military and dramatically expanded the role of U.S. Special Forces ("Green Berets") in training the South Vietnamese army in unconventional, small-group warfare tactics.

The situation in South Vietnam, however, worsened under the leadership of the Catholic premier Ngo Dinh Diem, despite encouraging reports from the military commander of American advisors in that nation. At the time the problem was less about the scattered Communist guerrilla attacks than Diem's failure to deliver social and economic reforms as well as his inability to rally popular support. Propped up by Eisenhower since 1954, his corrupt regime was losing ground in spite of American aid. Diem's repressive tactics, directed not only against Communists but also against the Buddhist majority and other critics, played into the hands of his enemies.

In 1961 White House assistant Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor became the first in a long line of presidential emissaries to Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. Focusing on the military situation, they proposed a major increase in the American military presence. President Kennedy refused, but continued to dispatch more “advisors” in the hope of stabilizing matters in that nation. When Kennedy took office in 1961, the United States had 2,000 “advisors” in South Vietnam. By the end of 1963, there were 16,000 of them – none of whom had been officially committed to battle.

By 1961, Diem’s opponents, with the backing of North Vietnam, had formed a revolutionary movement known as the National Liberation Front (NLF). NLF guerrilla forces – the Vietcong – found loyalty among peasants alienated by Diem’s “strategic hamlet” program, which had uprooted entire villages and moved villagers into barbed-wire compounds. Buddhists charged Diem, a Catholic, with religious persecution. Starting in May, 1963, militant Buddhists staged dramatic demonstrations, including self-immolations recorded by American television news crews covering the activities of the U.S. military personnel then in Vietnam.

The Buddhist self-immolations, brought by television to an uneasy global audience, powerfully illustrated the dilemmas embedded in American policy in Vietnam. In order to ensure a stable government in the South and to prevent victory for Ho Chi Minh and the North, the United States had to support Diem’s authoritarian regime. But the political repression used by his government to quell massive opposition to Diem’s rule simply made the regime more unpopular. Whether one supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam or not, the basic paradox remained unchanged. In its efforts to win, the United States brought defeat ever closer.

Nothing proved that paradox more than events that occurred in 1963. By that year sharply divergent reports were coming in from the South Vietnamese countryside. Military advisors, focusing on the inflated “kill ratios” reported by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), drew optimistic conclusions. On-site political reporters, watching the reactions of the Vietnamese people, foresaw continued deterioration without the promised political and economic reforms. By midyear growing Buddhist demonstrations made the discontent in South Vietnam more plainly visible. The spectacle of Buddhist monks immolating themselves in protest brought from Diem’s sister-in-law only sarcasm about “barbecued monks.”

By the autumn of 1963 President Kennedy seemed to be facing up to the intractability of the situation in Vietnam. Assessing the South Vietnamese in September, he declared: "In the final analysis it's their war. They're the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them as advisors, but they have to win it." During the following month, he announced his administration's intention to withdraw American forces from South Vietnam by the end of 1965. The Kennedy administration had decided that the autocratic Diem government was a lost cause. Having run out of patience with Diem, President Kennedy let it be known in Saigon that the United States would support a military *coup*. When dissident generals proposed a *coup d'état*, the American ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., assured them that the U.S. would not stand in the way. Kennedy hoped that, if the dictatorial Diem, now reviled throughout the South, could be replaced by a popular general or other military leader, a stable government – one strong enough to repel the NLF – would emerge. But, when Diem was overthrown on November 1st, the generals went further than the Kennedy administration had anticipated. The generals, led by Tran Van Don, assassinated both Diem and his powerful younger brother and advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, on November 2nd – without explicit American approval. This made the *coup* appear to be less like an organic uprising and more like an American plot.

The generals provided no more stability than earlier regimes. South Vietnam fell into a period of chaos marked by a series of *coups* and defined by the increasing ungovernability of both the cities and the countryside. The small nation was spinning from one military leader to another.

What Kennedy would have done has remained a matter of endless controversy among historians. It is an unanswerable question because on November 22, 1963, while visiting Dallas, Texas, President Kennedy himself was shot in the neck and head, ostensibly by Lee Harvey Oswald. Kennedy did not live to see the grim results of Diem's murder – American engagement in a long and costly civil conflict in Vietnam for the purpose of fighting communism.