

Publisher's Note

Defining Documents in American History series, produced by Salem Press, consists of a collection of essays on important historical documents by a diverse range of writers on a broad range of subjects in American history. *Defining Documents in American History: The Vietnam War* surveys key documents produced from 1956-75, organized under five broad categories:

- Kennedy's War
- Johnson's War
- The Antiwar Movement
- Nixon's War
- Aftermath

Historical documents provide a compelling view of this unique period of American history. Designed for high school and college students, the aim of the series is to advance historical document studies as an important activity in learning about history.

Essay Format

The Vietnam War contains 44 primary source documents – many in their entirety. Each document is supported by a critical essay, written by historians and teachers, that includes a Summary Overview, Defining Moment, Author Biography, Document Analysis, and Essential Themes. Readers will appreciate the diversity of the collected texts, including journals, letters, speeches, political sermons, laws, government reports, and court cases, among other genres. An important feature of each essays is a close reading of the primary source that develops evidence of broader

themes, such as the author's rhetorical purpose, social or class position, point of view, and other relevant issues. In addition, essays are organized by section themes, listed above, highlighting major issues of the period, many of which extend across eras and continue to shape American life. Each section begins with a brief introduction that defines questions and problems underlying the subjects in the historical documents. A brief glossary included at the end of each document highlights keywords important in the study of the primary source. Each essay also includes a Bibliography and Additional Reading section for further research.

Appendixes

- **Chronological List** arranges all documents by year.
- **Web Resources** is an annotated list of web sites that offer valuable supplemental resources.
- **Bibliography** lists helpful articles and books for further study.

Contributors

Salem Press would like to extend its appreciation to all involved in the development and production of this work. The essays have been written and signed by scholars of history, humanities, and other disciplines related to the essay's topics. Without these expert contributions, a project of this nature would not be possible. A full list of contributor's names and affiliations appears in the front matter of this volume.

Editor's Introduction

The Vietnam War loomed large for decades in the American consciousness. Only recently, in the wake of new military ventures abroad, has it taken on the character of a distant war from a different era. Yet there are still millions who remember the war or who have family members or relatives who fought in it or protested against it. As with all such events, it inevitably went from being a living thing to being a subject in history books. With the passage of time, the lessons the war provided about the dangers of entering a foreign conflict on tenuous grounds, without deep knowledge of one's opponent and without the full commitment of the American people—these lessons seem in many ways to have been forgotten. Now, however, that history has partially repeated itself with US military involvement in Iraq (and, to a lesser extent, in Afghanistan), the Vietnam War is once again being examined for the cautionary tales it contains.

Early Years and Expansion of the War

Before there was any US involvement in Vietnam—before there was a Vietnam War—there was the First Indochina War (1946-1954). That conflict pitted French colonial forces who had long governed the territory against Vietnamese anti-imperialist forces who sought to expel the Europeans and establish Vietnam as a self-governing nation. The result, after nearly a decade of bloodshed and hundreds of thousands of deaths, was an agreement, signed in Geneva, whereby the French would withdraw and Vietnam would be divided into northern and southern districts. Communist interests aligned under Ho Chi Minh were concentrated in the north, and non-communist interests aligned under Emperor Bao Dai and his regime, as supported by the United States, were concentrated in the south. A section in the agreement specified that a general election was to be held in 1956, the idea being that through this process a unified national government would be created. Yet neither South Vietnam nor the United States signed onto the election, largely out of fear that they would not prevail, and so it never took place. Meanwhile, Bao Dai's chosen prime minister in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, manipulated the power structure in order to eject the emperor and make himself head of state. In consequence, communist cadres (Viet Minh) already present in South Vietnam were activated, and southern-based anti-Diem guerilla forces and

military units making up the National Liberation Front (NLF), or Viet Cong, also went into action. North Vietnam began supplying these groups with armaments and information.

This was the situation when a new American president, John F. Kennedy, took office in early 1961. Kennedy had stood up for Diem as a member of the US Senate and had earned a reputation as a committed anticommunist. His predecessor in the White House, Dwight D. Eisenhower, had spoken of the “domino”-like effect that could happen if a small country like Vietnam were to succumb to a communist advance in a region like Southeast Asia. Kennedy took that message to heart. He was not inclined to “lose” Vietnam to communism, as China had been “lost” in 1949 and Korea had been partly lost in 1955. American military advisors were sent to Vietnam under Eisenhower, and Kennedy acted to increase their number significantly, authorizing as many as 16,000 by 1963. Yet, even while Kennedy publicly supported the Diem regime, as corrupt and inept as it proved to be, privately he and his advisors harbored doubts—to the point of contemplating a manufactured coup d'état. In the end, a generals' coup took place under its own accord, albeit with CIA support, in early November 1963. Diem and his brother were killed in the affair and replaced in government by an unstable regime, and another one after that, and so on over a period of years. Kennedy, though, never came to know the extent of the problem, having falling victim to an assassin's bullet only three weeks after Diem's demise.

If the Kennedy years were the beginning of the quagmire in Vietnam, the Johnson years were when the quagmire widened and started to swallow up Vietnam—along with Johnson's own presidency. Most of Kennedy's advisers remained with the Johnson administration, and most continued to press for greater US involvement in the conflict and stronger measures in the fight against communism. In August 1964, Johnson used the excuse of a North Vietnamese patrol-boat attack on an American destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin to release the full force of the US military on Viet Cong strongholds in South Vietnam. He would eventually authorize a variety of devastating war measures, including the dropping of napalm bombs on villages suspected of harboring Viet Cong (resulting in high civilian casualties); the removal of village residents to so-called “stra-

tegic hamlets” (relocation centers) and the bulldozing of entire villages; the use of massive B-52 bombing raids against targets in the south, on a scale comparable to those used in World War II; the spraying of toxic herbicides and defoliants such as Agent Orange over extensive areas of South Vietnam (to destroy enemy crops and clear vegetation); and the use of often inhumane prison environments together with enhanced interrogation methods, or torture, in the handling of prisoners. Notice, too, that this was all taking place *in the south*, before any large-scale US incursion into North Vietnam. Critics would later point out that for every destructive act against ordinary Vietnamese citizens, dozens of angry, anti-American Viet Cong recruits were created. Johnson increased American troop levels from 180,000 to 550,000 between 1965 and 1968. Bombing raids into North Vietnam also were begun.

As Defense Secretary Robert McNamara put it, there seemed to be “no attractive course of action” for the Americans. As long as the US government refused to pull out of Vietnam over fear that doing so would allow communism to spread and ruin the reputation of the United States, policymakers could only hope that heightened military pressure would eventually win the day. And yet as long as military escalation failed to achieve the administration’s aims, and as long as US troops continued to come home in body bags, the deeper became the hole that the United States seemed to be digging itself into. Johnson had cannily started down a path of “victory without conquest” in 1965—meaning that, short of either side’s total conquest of the other, a peace settlement would suffice. Yet, even as he spoke, he and his generals were pressing for a military advantage and engaging in punishing attacks against the enemy. This proved to be a losing strategy, as evidenced by the Tet Offensive of early 1968. In that series of strikes by Viet Cong guerrillas against cities and towns throughout South Vietnam, the ancient capital of Hue was seized and Saigon itself was subject to unsettling attacks. Although the Viet Cong, with 40,000 dead during Tet, were eventually driven off, their morale severely damaged, the United States suffered a moral defeat, as well. It became obvious to everyone that there was no light at the end of the tunnel, as the generals had proclaimed. The quagmire seemed only to be getting murkier.

Protest and Prevarication

The antiwar movement that became one of the most prominent features of 1960s America emerged slowly, only as the prevailing anticommunist sentiment in the country began wane. Some of the first to protest were religious and pacifist groups along with members of the Old Left—socialists, progressives, and radicals. By the mid-1960s opposition had spread to many college campuses, spurred by resistance to the draft and by the increasing visibility of the war on television: news reports graphically depicted what was happening on the ground. In early 1966 Senator J. William Fulbright, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, held televised hearings regarding the war, revealing ambiguities in military policy and raising questions in the mind of the viewing public. Although a majority of Americans still supported the war effort, dissent both on campus and off spread rapidly. Protesters held marches, vigils, teach-ins, sit-ins, draft card burnings, and other forms of rebellion and agitation. The growing unpopularity of the war, and the no-win situation that it seemed to present, lay behind President Johnson’s decision not to run for a second term in late March 1968. (At that point, the public had yet to learn of another debacle: the shooting, around this same time, of hundreds of unarmed civilians by a US Army patrol operating near My Lai.) One consequence of Johnson’s withdrawal was the rise of prominent antiwar candidates on the Democratic side, including senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy. Although Kennedy was killed before the party’s August convention in Chicago, the event became a great showdown between antiwar and mainstream political and cultural forces. Protesters shouted “The whole world’s watching!” as Chicago police, at Mayor Richard Daley behest, employed heavy-handed tactics to clear the scene. Johnson’s vice president and, now, presidential contender, Hubert Humphrey, narrowly won the Democratic ticket over McCarthy but went on to lose the general election to the Republican nominee, Richard M. Nixon. It became clear that America was divided as it had not been divided since the time of the Civil War.

Nixon had run on a campaign message of “peace with honor,” indicating that he would end the war and uphold the United States’ good reputation abroad. He pledged in his victory speech to bring the divided nation together. And yet few politicians have been more polarizing than Nixon. He and his vice president, Spiro Agnew, denigrated antiwar protesters and members

of the hippie counterculture, and he played on black-white tensions to win political support in the south and elsewhere. He argued that he sought an end to the war even as he widened it to Cambodia (where North Vietnamese supply lines ran) and as he resumed, on an even grander scale, the bombing of North Vietnam. He reduced American troops in the region under a policy of “Vietnamization,” or the assignment of greater responsibility for the war to South Vietnam, and yet the war was still raging when he was elected to a second term in November 1972. In both prosecuting the war and undertaking peace negotiations, Nixon hoped to plant an image of himself as ruthless and unpredictable; he called it his “madman theory,” expecting that the enemy would cave out of fear of this volatile president with his finger on the nuclear button.

The Cambodia operations served to stir widespread student protests, including on the campus of Kent State University, where on May 4, 1970, the National Guard shot and killed four students (not all of them protestors). War opposition generally increased as a result, coming to encompass, even, returning military veterans. Then, in June 1971, a secret Department of Defense history of US involvement in Vietnam was leaked to the press, creating an uproar. Known as the Pentagon Papers, the report revealed military operations that were unknown not only to the public but also to Congress. Even though the period covered in the document concerned years in which other administrations had held power, the Nixon administration did not welcome the revelations. Indeed, Nixon himself targeted the person who leaked the papers, former defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg, for retribution. A covert White House burglary team was sent to Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office seeking information, but nothing damaging was found. A subsequent break-in at the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters in the Watergate Hotel was botched and led to the constitutional crisis known as Watergate. President Nixon found himself threatened with impeachment for high crimes and misdemeanors, but he decided to resign instead, on August 9, 1974. Fortunately for him, the Vietnam War—or, at least, America’s participation in it—had already come to an end in the form of a peace accord signed in Paris in early 1973. Nixon’s supporters could thus claim that

the president had delivered on his promise and was responsible for disengaging from Vietnam in an honorable manner. His critics, on the other hand, continued to blame him for prolonging the war and engaging in the same kind of deception and dissimulation that had taken place during the Johnson years—compounded, in this case, by the disaster of Watergate. When, in April 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell to the communists, the collapse seemed to epitomize the bright shining mess that was the Vietnam War. The war had been profoundly controversial through most of its existence, and it remained so well after it ended. Indeed, even the attempt to memorialize the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who fought in it by erecting a monument on the National Mall, eight years after the American pullout, proved a difficult exercise. The abstract design chosen, created by Maya Lin, upset observers who expected a more traditional war memorial. Only after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was erected in 1983 and visited by millions did it become an enduring icon of American culture and history. The 58,300 names it contains reflect US dead and missing; in Vietnam, the comparable figure would exceed 3 million.

Michael Shally-Jensen, PhD

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■ Letter from JFK to Diem

Date: December 14, 1961

Author: John F. Kennedy

Genre: letter

Summary Overview

Having been president for less than a year, John F. Kennedy received an appeal from the leader of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, for military support to help prop up Diem's failing regime. The North Vietnamese and anti-government South Vietnamese forces had been gaining ground for most of the year. President Kennedy faced the decision of allowing what seemed to be the inevitable fall of South Vietnam, or taking steps to strengthen the military and government of that nation. In this letter, he communicates that he has decided to assist the South Vietnamese government with increased military aid. While Vietnam had been divided into two countries, North and South Vietnam, for seven years, this was the first time Kennedy faced a request for major military aid. His decision to grant this aid can be seen as a significant step toward full-scale war in Vietnam, in which the United States would soon become embroiled.

Defining Moment

John Kennedy had been an advocate of the containment of communism throughout his political career. As president, one of the areas in which an American ally confronted communist forces was Vietnam. When the French gave Vietnam its independence in 1954, the Geneva Accords divided the nation into two parts, with communist leadership in the North and capitalist in the South. The agreement also mandated an election in 1956 to unify the nation, an election that the communist leaders would most probably have won. Thus, President Diem of South Vietnam, with the support of the United States, refused to allow the vote. Ever since that time, the leaders of North Vietnam had sought unification at any cost, including a military struggle. They kept increasing the level of armed conflict until, by 1961, they were gaining the upper hand throughout most areas of South Vietnam. Diem realized that to have any chance of staying in power, he needed more assistance

from the United States. While American leaders had continually asked Diem to take steps to improve the standard of living for the citizens in the South, he did very little. Diem knew that the Americans feared the further expansion of communism and believed that this would be enough for him to get the necessary support.

Fortunately for Diem, Kennedy had previously sent his own advisors to South Vietnam to assess the situation, and they had recommended actions similar to those Diem requested. Thus, while Kennedy wanted changes in the way average South Vietnamese citizens were treated, he did not seem to have any choice if the communist forces were to be contained. The decision, communicated in this letter, was the first step toward the major deployment of American advisers in Vietnam. Rather than just hundreds, as was the case prior to the letter, they numbered in the thousands within months, in addition to major grants of military equipment to the South Vietnamese armed forces. While no one could know at that time, this major deployment of military advisers to South Vietnam was the last major step creating a foundation for President Johnson sending hundreds of thousands of US military forces to South Vietnam.

Author Biography

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917–1963) was the second youngest president in US history at the time of his inauguration and the first Catholic president. A graduate of Harvard, and having served with distinction in the Navy during World War II, Kennedy spent six years in the House and eight years in the Senate prior to becoming president. He married to Jacqueline Bouvier in 1953. He was a Cold War politician, which meant a strong anticommunist stance. Born into a wealthy Boston family, Kennedy saw public service as a calling and approached it from a politically liberal perspective. He was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, as well as a politician. He used his family's wealth to aid

in his political career, as well as employing many innovative campaign techniques. He was assassinated on November, 21, 1963, a traumatic event for the nation. Although scholars debate the quality of his political

achievements as president, most in the nation saw his brief time in office reflected in the term often applied to it, "Camelot."

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Dear Mr. President:

I have received your recent letter in which you described so cogently the dangerous conditions caused by North Vietnam's effort to take over your country. The situation in your embattled country is well known to me and to the American people. We have been deeply disturbed by the assault on your country. Our indignation has mounted as the deliberate savagery of the Communist programs of assassination, kidnapping, and wanton violence became clear.

Your letter underlines what our own information has convincingly shown—that the campaign of force and terror now being waged against your people and your Government is supported and directed from outside by the authorities at Hanoi. They have thus violated the provisions of the Geneva Accords designed to ensure peace in Vietnam and to which they bound themselves in 1954.

At that time, the United States, although not a party to the Accords, declared that it "would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the Agreements with

grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security." We continue to maintain that view.

In accordance with that declaration, and in response to your request, we are prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence. We shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense effort as well as help relieve the destruction of the floods which you describe. I have already given the orders to get these programs underway.

The United States, like the Republic of Vietnam, remains devoted to the cause of peace and our primary purpose is to help your people maintain their independence. If the Communist authorities in North Vietnam will stop their campaign to destroy the Republic of Vietnam, the measures we are taking to assist your defense efforts will no longer be necessary. We shall seek to persuade the Communists to give up their attempts to force and subversion. In any case, we are confident that the Vietnamese people will preserve their independence and gain the peace and prosperity for which they have sought so hard and so long.

GLOSSARY

Geneva Accords: the agreement ending Vietnam's rebellion against France.

Hanoi: the capital of North Vietnam.

North Vietnam: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, communist and the ultimate victor in the Vietnam War.

Republic of Vietnam: South Vietnam.

Document Analysis

Communications between two friendly heads of state tend to use generalities, rather than specifics. This letter of assurance, from President Kennedy to President Diem, follows this pattern. Most of it is a litany of grievances caused by North Vietnamese leaders, with only a brief affirmation of support for Diem. Kennedy

communicates to Diem that his support was only due to the immediate need to confront the communists, a reminder that Kennedy expected Diem to change some of his policies if he was going to continue receiving support from the United States.

Beginning with the grievances that Diem lodged against the North Vietnamese leaders, Kennedy

summarizes them as “deliberate savagery.” He then refers to the report he received from the team he had sent to Vietnam in October, 1961. Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow were the leaders of that mission. They stated that Vietnam was the key to keeping communism from spreading in Southeast Asia. Their advice was to send more advisers and a limited number of combat troops. This was the information that Kennedy had prior to Diem’s request for further assistance. The US mission had verified to its satisfaction what Kennedy repeated in the letter, that the North Vietnamese leaders were directing attacks against the South Vietnamese government and people. The Geneva Accords, to which Kennedy refers, were the documents that had divided Vietnam into two countries with the promise of peace between the two factions. The fact that the North was directing attacks was a direct violation of these accords; that was clear. However, Kennedy conveniently forgets that the accords also called for an election in 1956 to unify the nation and that that election had not been held by Diem, in line with US preferences. Thus, it could be said that both sides were in violation of the accords, not just the North.

When it was convenient, the United States had argued that it was not its responsibility to enforce the accords, since it had not been part of the group that had negotiated that treaty. However, now that America’s ally was under attack, America’s leaders wanted to enforce part of the agreement. This violation was seen as a threat to “international peace and security.” Based on this argument, Kennedy agrees to send more advisers to South Vietnam, as well as military hardware. The unrelated matter of the floods that were devastating parts of South Vietnam is mentioned not just for the humanitarian relief being offered, but because Kennedy’s advisers had recommended that some of the American troops sent to Vietnam should be presented as having been deployed to help with flood relief. While Diem did not request American combat troops, and Kennedy did not wish to send them, mentioning the relief effort in the letter leaves open the possibility of sending in combat troops masquerading as relief workers, if they were needed in the future.

Kennedy’s closing paragraph represents a not very subtle warning to Diem that American assistance was not unconditional. By mentioning that the military aid was for fighting communists, Kennedy is giving an indirect warning to Diem about the need to rein in his brother, who had been using units of the South Viet-

namese army to oppress factions within the country. The hope of “peace and prosperity” for the people of South Vietnam would occur, it is noted, only if North Vietnamese forces would cease their attacks and if Diem’s government were less brutal in its suppression of domestic political opponents.

Essential Themes

During the early years of Diem’s presidency, political opposition (including communist) was not highly organized. However, things started to change, and, by 1960, the anti-Diem forces in South Vietnam had organized and were supported by North Vietnam. Thus, in 1961, the push by these groups, and more directly by North Vietnamese agents, started to pay off for them. A large area of rural South Vietnam was no longer under the control of the government. Diem was forced to request greater assistance from the United States. For Kennedy, the Bay of Pigs disaster in Cuba and the construction of the Berlin Wall in Germany, were setbacks in trying to defeat communism. This made Vietnam a key location in which to try to turn the tide against communism. When the request for more assistance came from President Diem, President Kennedy was willing to respond with people, equipment, and funds.

While the immediate increase in American troops was not large in absolute terms (from about 900 in December 1960 to over 3,000 at the end of December 1961), the decision that Vietnam represented a key battleground with communism set the stage for the future commitment of hundreds of thousands of troop and staggering amounts of money. With Kennedy’s commitment, documented in this letter, the United States was spending, by the end of December, about one million dollars a day to support the South Vietnamese regime. Many would see this investment of American resources as the beginning of what was to become almost unconditional support for successive South Vietnamese governments for the next decade. While there have been numerous debates regarding what might have been Kennedy’s plans for Vietnam if he had not been assassinated, this decision in December 1961 led to his eventual deployment of 16,000 advisers in Vietnam. Whether he would have expanded it into the war that eventually occurred can never be known, but it was clear that in December 1961, he was setting the stage for this possibility.

—Donald A. Watt, PhD

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