

THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT AND  
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

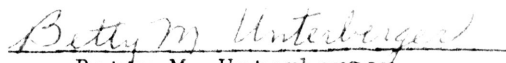
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In February of 1950, the newly established People's Republic of China signed a treaty of military and economic alliance with the U.S.S.R. The Western world perceived this treaty as the beginning of an intimate ideological relationship that came to be regarded as a monolithic communist bloc. However, from its conception the alliance was not as cohesive as Westerners believed. For China it had been politically expedient at a time when it desperately needed financial and technical aid and when American animosity had made the U.S.S.R. the only viable source for such assistance. Neither Russia nor China could afford an aggressive neighbor in 1950; they shared both a common ideology and a common enemy - the United States- and so the alliance had been joined.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, as China grew less dependent on Soviet aid, it became increasingly resentful of its secondary status within the communist world. This trend was evident as early as June 1950 when war broke out in Korea and the United States sent troops, under United Nations' auspices, to meet this threat. Although Soviet Union had provoked the North Korean aggression, China felt increasingly threatened as MacArthur successfully moved his troops northward toward its border. War was the last thing Peking wanted in 1950; yet it felt compelled to stop the advancing United Nations' forces in North Korea for security purposes.

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<sup>1</sup>Alfred E. Low, The Sino-Soviet Dispute, (London: Associated Presses, 1976), pp. 56-60.

Citations in this thesis will follow the style and format in the American Historical Review.

Serious Sino-Soviet tension arose from the Chinese involvement in Korea for two reasons. First, the war effort cost China enormously not only in men and money but also in terms of its greatest political objectives. The Chinese Communist Party had to forego its efforts to consolidate control over its country; and to incorporate Taiwan into its regime while jeopardizing whatever chances it had of winning United Nations' recognition. Mao Tse-tung would not forget that these sacrifices were the result of an aggressive effort encouraged by their Russian ally and then abandoned. Despite their great handicaps in fighting the war, however, the Chinese were able to stalemate the United Nations in Korea successfully. Peking felt that this success had greatly increased its international status but Russia still insisted on Chinese subordination within the communist bloc. The power struggle which consequently developed became a constant source of Sino-Soviet tension.<sup>2</sup>

The Korean War was an early indication that differences in national interest would be a divisive force within the communist bloc. As the years passed, such conflicts of interest - over issues as diverse as nuclear development, financial aid, and boundary settlements - occurred with increasing frequency until the strain put on the alliance became too great to be overcome by ideology alone. In fact, even the Marxist

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<sup>2</sup>Adam B. Ulam. The Rivals: America and Russia Since World War II, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 167-185.

theory soon became a basis for Sino-Soviet discord. Khrushchev fired the first shot on the ideological front in 1956 when he made his famous "Secret Speech" in which he denounced Stalin and his reign of terror and launched a program of liberalization and reform within the Soviet bloc. In so doing, he had struck a major blow at the Chinese political organization which was patterned after the Stalinist regime while challenging Mao Tse-tung's claim to be the heir of the Lenin-Stalin tradition. From this time forward Russia and China struggled for ideological supremacy.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese, in one instance, established the People's Communes and initiated "The Great Leap Forward" in 1958 indicating that these programs of agricultural and industrial advancement would bring them to the final stage of pure communism. Since the Soviet Union claimed to be only at the intermediate, socialist stage of Marxist development, this was obviously a claim, by Peking, to be in the revolutionary vanguard of the communist world. The U.S.S.R. naturally denounced this effort and although the project ultimately failed and was dropped, the dispute continued on in various other forms.<sup>4</sup>

The ideological and national rivalries between Russia and China were centrifugal forces within the alliance; they re-emphasized and exacerbated differences of race, culture, etc. which had, until 1950, generated centuries of Sino-Soviet conflict. Thus the unity of the communist world gradually dissolved as its two giants became ever more jealous and fearful of each other's power. There is no precise time or

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<sup>3</sup>Klaus Mehnert, Moscow and Peking, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 328.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 371-372.

event which meant the termination of their alliance; rather, the Sino-Soviet Split was the culmination of a long series of national, ideological, and historical conflicts. By June of 1960, however, the split was real enough for Khrushchev and a Chinese diplomat to resort to mutual insults and recriminations before a conference of eighty-one Communist parties in Bucharest.<sup>5</sup> Then, at the 22nd Congress of the Russian Communist Party, in October of 1961, came an even grander display as Khrushchev violently attacked China's protégé, Albania, accusing it of Stalinism and atrocities against the pro-Soviet faction there. When Chou En-lai, who was there representing Peking, responded by reprimanding Khrushchev, laying a wreath on Stalin's grave, and departing, it was clear that the age of Sino-Soviet hegemony and cooperation was past.<sup>6</sup>

The Sino-Soviet split had tremendous implications for the United States. Not only had it shattered the unity of purpose which had once been one of the communist world's greatest strengths, it had also disproved the exaggerated conception of monolithic communism which for years had provided the intellectual rationale for much of America's foreign policy. The United States, however, could only benefit from the split to the extent that it was able to recognize and correctly interpret it. If there were errors in the American perception of the split, there would be parallel errors in its policy-making. A case in point would be the decisions made about Vietnam; for the American commitment to that small and obscure country cannot be viewed in isolation but only

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<sup>5</sup>Ulam, The Rivals, p. 312.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 323.

as a reflection of prevalent American assumptions about the communist world.

In order to trace the change in American attitudes effected by the split it is first necessary to explore early American perceptions of Russia and China. Until 1950 when the mutual assistance pact was signed by Moscow and Peking, the United States had a benevolent and paternal view of China; thereafter, the United States became fearful and mistrusting. Crucial to the American change in perception was its former alliance with Chiang Kai-shek in fighting the Japanese during World War II. The long war effort, as well as the propaganda and rhetoric necessary to sustain it, had resulted in a conceptual error: the United States was no longer fighting a war for simple political objectives but a battle against the forces of evil. Nor was American cooperation with the Nationalist leader viewed realistically- as a necessity of war. Instead Chiang became "our noble and democratic" friend and was elevated to near - heroic status. The importance of Chiang and the Nationalist cause was, thus, blown so out of proportion that their defeat by Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Communists in 1949 and the subsequent establishment of the People's Republic of China was interpreted as "our loss of China."<sup>7</sup>

Of equal importance was the state of post-war Soviet-American relations. The apparent cooperative spirit of World War II had long

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<sup>7</sup> John Stoessinger, Nations in Darkness: China, Russia, and America, (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 28-42; John King Fairbank, Chinese-American Interactions, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1975), p. 74.

been buried by 1949; in its place were the sentiments of inflexible fear, mistrust, and suspicion generated by the Cold War. When the communist regime in China in 1950 received both Soviet aid and recognition, a false perception of Sino-Soviet affairs developed. If China had been lost it must have been the result not of Chiang's unpopularity and ineptitude but of some insidious Soviet scheme (perhaps with some support from subversives within the American State Department) to bring communism to Asia.<sup>8</sup> Mao was believed to have been Moscow's tool in this; now that the Nationalists had been routed, it followed that all of China was in the hands of Russia and conspired with it to incite world revolution. When the war broke out in Korea in June 1950, the shock of facing Red Chinese troops in that country seemed to confirm this interpretation. By the war's end, it had become political gospel and the American position had hardened irrevocably: the United States would neither recognize nor negotiate with China and the containment of communism - whether in Korea or Southeast Asia - would be a cornerstone in its foreign policy.<sup>9</sup>

One of the assumptions behind the conspiracy theory and, accordingly, the policy of containment was that communist revolution was never indigenous but was always the work of Russian or Russian-sponsored agitators. Thus, there was no diversity attributed to the communist

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<sup>8</sup> John King Fairbank, The United States and China, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Draper, The Abuse of Power, (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 41; Akira, Iriye. Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American-East Asian Relations, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc.), pp. 291-292.

world - only one monolithic threat which must be combatted uniformly whenever it appeared.<sup>10</sup> As applied to Southeast Asia, however, this premise could not have been less accurate.

Nationalism had flourished in Indochina since the nineteenth century when that region first fell under French rule. Shortly after World War I there was a new flurry of activity as various revolutionary independence groups began forming in Vietnam as well as Burma and Indonesia. Some of these revolutionaries looked to Japan for leadership while others had close ties with Chiang Kai-shek in China; a third group, however, adopted Marxism as the means to achieve their nationalist objectives because it described with some accuracy the plight of their people under French, colonial rule and also provided a pre-developed revolutionary method on which they could act.<sup>11</sup> The spread of Marxism was, thus, the work of Asian revolutionaries who embraced the doctrine for their own purposes, rather than that of Soviet agents or conspirators. One of the first exponents of Marxist techniques in Vietnam was Ho Chi Minh. He had joined the French Socialist Party sometime after the signing of the Versailles Treaty and had subsequently

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<sup>10</sup>The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam, The Senator Gavel ed., 4 vols., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 1: 81-85.

<sup>11</sup>Oliver E. Clubb, The United States and the Sino-Soviet Bloc in Southeast Asia, (Washington: The Brookings Institute, 1962), pp. 8-10; J. Kennedy, Asian Nationalism in the Twentieth Century, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), pp. 54-56.



sided with a faction that broke off to form the French Communist Party. Later, he studied revolutionary methods in Moscow and had served as a Comintern agent in Southeast Asia; in 1931 the Indochinese Communist Party, organized by Ho, affiliated with that organization. That he was a communist, then, is clear but he had agitated for Indochinese independence long before he joined the French Socialist Party and the fanaticism of Ho and his followers was "not so much because of their political faith as because of their nationalism."<sup>12</sup>

During World War II, the invasion of Indochina prompted Ho to organize, in the south of China, the Viet Minh a communist led coalition of nationalists, and to lead them into northern Vietnam where they fought the Japanese. The Nationalist Government in China, which was eager to deter the post-war re-establishment of French authority in Vietnam, cooperated with the Vietminh and as a part of the Allied Resistance Movement, they received arms and munitions from Allied forces in East China. In 1945, the Japanese surrendered to the Chinese; then with Chiang's full consent, Ho Chi Minh established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Although this government was communist-led, it soon received wide support from many, diverse nationalist groups.

Ho was doubtful of American interest in his small and remote republic but he maintained hopes of assistance from the United States, nevertheless. In 1946, he told an O.S.S. officer in Hanoi that:

the United States was probably in the best position to aid Vietnam in the post-war years. . .He dwelled at some length on the disposition of Americans as a people to be

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<sup>12</sup>Clubb, The United States and the Sino-Soviet Bloc, pp. 14-16.

sympathetic to the self determination of nations and generous in making contributions to less fortunate states. But here again he doubted that the United States Government would not find more urgent things to do. . . something to the effect that, after all, Vietnam is a small country and far away. Vietnam could not be expected to loom large in<sup>13</sup> the preoccupation of the United States.

The United States never answered the Vietnamese appeals for aid; nor did it protest the French attempt to restore colonial rule to Indochina which led to a full scale war with Ho in December 1946.

Before this outbreak of hostilities, the Viet Minh had been relatively moderate, friendly to the West, and willing to experiment with democracy. When they were put under French military pressures without aid or relief from the United States, however, the Viet Minh's former moderation gave way to totalitarianism, hostility to the West, and complete communist control. In late 1949 they turned to the Communist Chinese for assistance.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese were sympathetic to the Vietminh, in 1950; they allowed their frontier to become a secure line of supply and communication for the Vietnamese and they did extend diplomatic recognition to the Republic of Vietnam. Nevertheless, they could neither intervene on behalf of the Viet Minh, nor give them any great amount of aid. China had been wrecked by the long war years and most of its limited

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<sup>13</sup>J.W. Fulbright, The Crippled Grant: American Foreign Policy and its Domestic Consequences, (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 61-62.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Shaplen, "The Enigma of the Ho Chi Minh," Vietnam: The Anatomy of a Conflict, Wesley R. Fishel, ed., (Itasca, Illinois: F.E. Peacock, Pub., 1964), pp. 292-310; Clubb, The United States and the Sino-Soviet Bloc, p. 15.

resources were devoted to its Korean involvement. The Chinese, furthermore, were hardly making policy in a vacuum: they were greatly dependent on Russia for arms, technical assistance and financial aid. Although the Soviet Union had followed Peking's lead by recognizing Ho's government, it was much more concerned with Korea than Vietnam and was very anxious not to endanger the electoral possibilities of the French Communist Party by openly supporting the Viet Minh. Russia's influence, thus, provided a second restraint on Chinese generosity so that they could only agree to the most limited, indirect aid for the Viet Minh.<sup>15</sup>

The first aggression in Korea occurred on June 25, 1950. Two days later, President Truman announced a new global policy- one that would fix the American course in Asia for the next 20 years. Truman believed that all of his problems in the Far East stemmed from one cause: the expansive nature of the Communist bloc. This monster would have to be held in check at every point- in Taiwan, Korea, and Indochina - by every reasonable means. The military would be rebuilt, more troops would be sent to the Philippines, negotiations with Japan would be accelerated, and aid would be sent to the French for their fight against the Viet Minh.<sup>16</sup>

The original American involvement in Vietnam was, therefore, a

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<sup>15</sup>C. P. Fitzgerald, The United States and Southeast Asia since 1945. (Camberwell, Australia: Longman Australia Limited, 1973) pp.12-13.

<sup>16</sup>Claude Albert Buss, Southeast Asia and the Sino-Soviet Bloc, World., (Princeton N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1958), p. 75.

response to Sino-Soviet recognition of the Republic of Vietnam and to the outbreak of hostilities in Korea. In Vietnam, itself, the situation had changed little since 1946 when the French began their efforts to reconquer Indochina. However, the American perception of the Vietnamese conflict had changed considerably as a result of events elsewhere. Whereas, in January 1948, The Christian Science Monitor was able to state that "Ho Chi Minh's government is mixed and does not give the impression of being communist dominated,"<sup>17</sup> the Soviet acknowledgment of Ho's regime, according to Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, had removed, "any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina."<sup>18</sup> Events in Korea took this view one step further. Not only was Ho the enemy of freedom but it was commonly recognized by 1952 that "the struggle in which the forces of French Union and the Associated States are engaged against the forces of Communist aggression in Indochina is an integral part of the worldwide resistance by the Free Nations to Communist attempts or conquest and subversion."<sup>19</sup> From June of 1950 until May 1954 the United States

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<sup>17</sup>Stoessinger, Nations in Darkness, 64.

<sup>18</sup>Dean Acheson, State Department Bulletin, February 13, 1950. p. 244.

<sup>19</sup>Stoessinger, Nations in Darkness, 64.

provided \$2.6 billion in military and economic aid - approximately 80% of the total cost of the war effort - to France.<sup>20</sup>

As the fighting between the French and the Viet Minh came to a climax in the spring of 1954, American perceptions had reached the ultimate in distortion. According to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the plan of the communists was:

to whip up the spirit of nationalism until it became violent. That is done by professionally trained agitators. Then the violence is enlarged by Communist military and technical leadership and by the provision of military supplies. And in these ways international Communism gets a stranglehold on the people and it uses that power eventually to 'amalgamate' them into the Soviet orbit... And it is this 'amalgamation' which is being attempted in Indo-China.<sup>21</sup>

Then the French fell at Dienbienphu in May, 1954 and the conflict was presented to an international conference in Geneva for arbitration. John Foster Dulles, in a bizarre fit of anti-communism, found himself unable to negotiate with the Soviet and Chinese delegates to the conference; consequently, he left Geneva before the conflict was even discussed. In July, the Geneva accords were announced: Vietnam would be temporarily divided along the Seventeenth Parallel until elections for

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<sup>20</sup>Draper, The Abuse of Power, 26.

<sup>21</sup>F. M. Kail, What Washington Said: Administration Rhetoric and the Vietnam War: 1944-1969, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), p. 18.

national reunification could be held in 1956. These provisions were simply too lenient to accommodate the Eisenhower Administration's strident anti-communism; therefore, they were neither signed nor approved by the American delegates remaining in Geneva. It was announced, however, that the United States would "refrain from any threat or the use of force" to disturb the agreements.<sup>22</sup>

By this time the theory of falling dominoes implying that the loss of Vietnam to Communism would mean the loss of Southeast Asia and then the world - had come into vogue and the Eisenhower Administration had even toyed with the idea of direct intervention. What emerged in 1954 was a compromise between intervention and abstention: Ngo Dinh Diem would be supported in the expectation that, as a democratic leader, he would continue the fight against communism.<sup>23</sup> From the beginning, Diem let it be known that, despite the Geneva provisions, no elections would be held in the South and that the communists remaining there would be treated roughly. At first his government thrived, but in his fight against the communists Diem became too successful for his own good. Well on the way to creating a police state he indiscriminately exiled, imprisoned, or executed all of his rivals while communists comprised only a small number of those caught up in this dragnet. The communists were, consequently, able to pick up allies as quickly as Diem was making enemies and by 1957 his popularity had begun to decline seriously.

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<sup>22</sup>Foster Rhea Dulles, American Foreign Policy Toward Communist China 1949-1969, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1972), pp. 144-5.

<sup>23</sup>Draper, The Abuse of Power, p. 11.

Belligerent statements began coming out of North Vietnam in May of 1959; in December of 1960, the organization of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was announced by Hanoi. This sudden eruption of insurgency efforts is theorized to have come about when the communists who had been persecuted for years, felt that they had to take up arms to prevent their own demise. It is not clear at all, for instance, that the original signal for armed resistance came from the North; more probably, the southern guerillas were so hard-pressed that they had to act regardless of Hanoi. Jean Lacouture, for one, says that the NLF was actually organized in March 1960 by a number of old southern resistance fighters who issued a proclamation of intent which later forced the North to assume responsibility for their group. These resistance fighters, no doubt, also wanted to take advantage of the growing unpopularity of the Diem regime for the NFL was a typical united front operation. It was organized and controlled by communists but it was supported by a number of non-communist, nationalist elements as well. When a military attempt to overthrow Diem failed by the narrowest of margins in November 1960, these opponents of the Diem regime had good reason to believe that the time was ripe to topple him from power and they intensified their revolutionary activities accordingly.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, when John Kennedy took office, in January 1961, the American

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 45-50.- See also Bernard Fall, The Two Vietnams, A Political and Military Analysis, (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1963), pp. 271-2.

commitment to anti-communism in South Vietnam was threatened by a growing insurgency faction and a drastically weakened government. Vietnam, nevertheless, remained little more than a peripheral issue for the next several months and problems there were dealt with only intermittently by the new administration.<sup>25</sup> From Washington's point of view, in fact, the situation in Vietnam was inconsequential compared to its problems of dealing with an increasingly aggressive and confident Soviet Union. Heavy Soviet pressure was being put on the United States in the UN, the Congo, Berlin and elsewhere; the immediacy of such crises necessarily preoccupied the Kennedy administration and postponed its consideration of the Vietnam dilemma.

More pressing, also, was the situation which Kennedy had inherited in Laos. The Eisenhower Administration had given strong support to a pro-American faction in that country but in so doing it had promoted an alliance of neutralist and communist Laotians. This coalition, recognized and aided by the Soviet Union, became so effective that only if an American army had been put into Laos could the pro-Westerners have been kept in power. As the American position in Laos continued to deteriorate in 1961, it became unlikely that even a neutralist-led coalition could be salvaged there, moreover, Kennedy felt that even that would create problems for other Southeast Asia countries. He believed that there would be doubts about the strength of the American commitment to that part of the world and since it was obvious that the

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<sup>25</sup>The Pentagon Papers 2:18.



communists would be left in de facto control of eastern Laos such a settlement would directly threaten both Thailand and Vietnam. These problems would accompany the most favorable outcome possible in Laos. If, however, the communists chose simply to overrun Laos, the consequences would be much worse.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, Kennedy felt that the loss in American prestige and credibility in Laos compelled him to demonstrate, in some way, that he did not intend to withdraw from Southeast Asia.

At first, the Kennedy Administration was distracted from dealing with Vietnam by its greater troubles with Russia and Laos. In time, however, the extent to which these troubles were perceived as various aspects of an overall communist challenge would have a tremendous impact on American decisions about Vietnam. The seed of this perception had been planted even before the inauguration, when Khrushchev on January 6, considered "one of the most important speeches in recent decades." After distinguishing between dangers of world and local wars and the expediency of popular uprisings and wars of national liberation, he had referred specifically to the conflict in Vietnam and said "It is a sacred war." This speech, according to presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger, "made a conspicuous impression on the new President, who took it as an authoritative exposition of Soviet intentions, discussed it with his staff and read excerpts from it to the National Security Council."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, John F. Kennedy in the White House, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), p. 302.

The bellicose confidence implicit in this speech, especially the declared faith in victory through rebellion and guerilla warfare, alarmed Kennedy, and he felt challenged to demonstrate American resolve in the face of such threats.<sup>28</sup> Soon after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, Kennedy expanded on this challenge:

It is clearer than ever that we face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe that goes far beyond the clash of armies, or even nuclear armaments. The armies are there but they serve primarily as the shield behind which subversion, infiltration, and a host of other tactics steadily advance.... We do not dare fail to grasp the new concepts, the new tools, the new sense of urgency. We will need to combat it - whether in Cuba or South Vietnam.<sup>29</sup>

The disastrous meeting of Krushchev and Kennedy in Vienna seems to have confirmed this view even further, for it was immediately afterwards that the president told James Reston that

If he thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him. So we have to act.... now we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place."<sup>30</sup>

With each succeeding crisis, then, the United States felt that the Russians had raised the stakes in the Cold War, accordingly, Kennedy

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<sup>28</sup>Testimony of Arthur Schlesinger. Causes, Origins and Lessons of the Vietnam War: Hearings before the Foreign Relations Committee, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 68.

<sup>29</sup>John F. Kennedy to the Association of Newspaper Editors, 20 April 1961, The Pentagon Papers, pp. 33-34.

<sup>30</sup>David Halberstam, The Best and The Brightest. (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 76-77.

became increasingly eager to confront them and to demonstrate his anti-communist resolve. The administration was also inclined to believe that unconventional warfare would be very important in meeting this new challenge of communist-inspired wars of liberation. Vietnam happened to be the only place where such a war was actually in progress. It was the only country in which a pro-American government, was threatened by a well-developed, externally-aided, pro-communist insurgency.<sup>31</sup> Vietnam thus became a test case, a battle to determine:

whether or not the free world can defend itself against the subversion and guerilla warfare which make up the "war of national liberation" tactics... All of the underdeveloped nations are watching the event. If South Vietnam fails, their will to resist will be weakened and the whole fabric of free world strength and determination will be damaged thereby.<sup>32</sup>

The fate of Vietnam became crucial to American policy not because of any great change in the situation there, but because of policy pressures elsewhere. As these intensified and the Diem regime continued to deteriorate, a sense of crisis developed in the fall of 1961. Kennedy, at this time, still had two options: he could stand back and let nature take its course or he could increase the American commitment to Saigon in the hope of stabilizing the government there. The same dilemma had confronted Truman and Eisenhower and

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<sup>31</sup>The Pentagon Papers, 2: 103.

<sup>32</sup>J. C. Heavner, "The Vietnam Situation," State Dept. Bulletin, September 9, 1963, p. 398

in December of 1961, Kennedy's decision was the same as theirs: the United States would support anyone willing to contain communism in Vietnam.<sup>33</sup> There was, in fact, no real debate within the administration: it was assumed that everything reasonable should be done to demonstrate the American commitment to a free Southeast Asia and to prevent Vietnam from becoming another Laos.<sup>34</sup> This led logically from advising and trying to prop up Ngo Dinh Diem's Regime to the takeover of more and more of that government's functions on the part of the United States. Consequently, the President raised the number of American advisers in South Vietnam from 600 to 14,000 within the next three years.

Kennedy had made the same decision as had his predecessors: yet, the context of that decision - the world political climate - could not have been more different. Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy all based their Vietnam policy on a belief in a united and intransigent, communist bloc which endeavored on every front to dominate the world. Although, this belief had been somewhat plausible in the fifties, the Sino-Soviet split had made it absolutely untenable by 1961; the conflict in Vietnam was, more obviously than ever, an indigenous, civil war - neither initiated nor supported by a monolithic, Sino-Soviet bloc.

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<sup>33</sup>Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Role of the U.S. in Indochina," The Role of External Powers in the Indochina Crises, Gene T. Hsaio, ed., (Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, 1973), p. 11.

<sup>34</sup>The Pentagon Papers, p. 2: 100.

Eisenhower's policies, nevertheless, were carried on without question - almost as if by inertia. One member of Kennedy's staff, General Maxwell Taylor, learned this lesson all too well when, in his search for policy guidance, he could find nothing better than a National Security Action Memorandum which outlined "a determination to prevent communist domination of South Vietnam (and) to create a viable and increasingly democratic society." That this - an action rather than a policy memorandum- could provide the intellectual foundation for decision-making suggests that the American interests in Vietnam was simply taken for granted.<sup>35</sup>

The commitment to Vietnam was never re-evaluated because the validity of basic Cold War assumption was never questioned. Peking remained beyond the pale of American diplomacy; when someone would mention that the administration's policies vis a vis China were absurd and self defeating, Kennedy might agree but would say that any changes would have to wait until the situation could be better appraised. The State Department was even less amenable to policy review. Secretary Dean Rusk was very much of the same persuasion as John Foster Dulles in his belief that the Chinese Communist's were the willing instruments of the international Communist conspiracy, directed from Moscow. He, moreover, interpreted the conflict between communism and the free world as one of fundamental moral principle: no compromise should be made with the forces of evil.<sup>36</sup> Members of the Department's Policy

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<sup>35</sup>Kenneth P. Landon, "United States Policy Toward Indochina," The Role of External Powers, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup>Dulles, American Policy Towards Communist China, p. 192.

Planning Committee, consequently, were called in, at the beginning of the administration, and told by their director that there would be no new ideas on China. The one man to dissent and to press consistently for a major policy review, Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, was soon dismissed by the Administration. It seems that, even in the most confidential of circumstances, China was not to be discussed.<sup>37</sup>

Since the monolithic myth had originated with the communization of China, the rigidity of the Kennedy Administration's line toward that country meant a corresponding inflexibility in their conception of communism in general. More specifically, it allowed the conflict in Vietnam to be perceived in the same, old terms of a struggle against a Sino-Soviet conspiracy which aspired to world dominion. It was not atypical, therefore, for a task force on Viet Nam to report, in April 1961, that the 1960 uprising against Diem, the situation in Laos, and the activities of the Viet Cong had together created a turmoil which provided, "an ideal environment for the communist 'master plan' to take over all of Southeast Asia."<sup>38</sup> In fact, only one 1961 staff paper in the available record treats Hanoi, Moscow, and Peking in terms of their separate national interests rather than primarily in terms of an overall communist strategy with Hanoi acting as agent.<sup>39</sup> All other analyses concurred with the Staley Mission which concluded, after a series of

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<sup>37</sup> Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, pp. 102-103.

<sup>38</sup> The Pentagon Papers, 2: 35-37.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 2: 107-108.

economic and military negotiations with Diem in mid-1961 that:

The government of South Vietnam is today under an attack which involves its survival as a free nation. Its enemy, the Viet Cong, is ruthless, resourceful, and elusive. This enemy is supplied, reinforced, and centrally directed by an international apparatus operating through Hanoi.<sup>40</sup>

A few administration numbers now claim that they had a more sophisticated, and non-ideological view of the Vietnam war but the preponderance of staff work similar to the Staley Report suggests otherwise. Nor do the administration's public statements bear these claims out. Even the independent Chester Bowles seems to have subscribed to "the master plan" concept for in November, 1961 he stated before a Foreign Policy Briefing Conference that "every thoughtful man knows that an international communist conspiracy exists and that threatens every nation on earth, including the United States."<sup>41</sup>

Some modification of this view, however, developed the following year. James C. Thomson Jr., of the Bureau for Far Eastern Affairs, recalls a meeting in January 1962:

at which all the powers of State appeared to focus for the first time on the reality of a permanent Sino-Soviet split. The impact in the minds around the table that morning was dramatic; and you could hear the ice of twelve years begin to snap and crackle as an intellectual thaw set in. I kept careful notes on that meeting, regard it as a turning point. One

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 2: 63.

<sup>41</sup> American Foreign Policy, p. 48.

after another of State's operators toyed with the new world of possibilities that non-monolithic communism might offer to U.S. policies.<sup>42</sup>

Thomson's recollections are misleading, however, to the degree that they give the impression of some kind of wholesale recognition and acceptance of the split in January, 1962. To the contrary, it seems that the administration tried hard to ignore the split for its first year and a half until it loomed so large that it had to be faced. Furthermore, Roger Hilsman, the Director of Intelligence and Research for the State Department has stated that it was only pressure from the press which made the State Department's policy of ignoring the Sino-Soviet dispute increasingly embarrassing and finally drove it to face the issue.<sup>43</sup> This pressure became particularly intense in the weeks following the Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962, for after gambling with the military installations in Cuba, Khrushchev had infuriated the Chinese by withdrawing those same missiles when faced with Kennedy's ultimatum; the incipient flood of Chinese verbal abuse of this surrender to the imperialistic "paper tiger" of the United States proved impossible for the United States to ignore. Inescapable, also, was the almost simultaneous Chinese attack on her Indian border which produced the strange spectacle of Soviet assistance to the government of India rather than to her "ally", China.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 344-5.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 344-5.

<sup>44</sup>U. S., Congress, Senate, statement by Senator McGovern, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 16 September 1963, Congressional Record 109:17052.



Although the administration could no longer ignore these signs of discord, they were not fully understood. As Hilsman told the Foreign Affairs Council in November 1962:

For us in the West both ends of the Sino-Soviet debate challenge our understanding. Winston Churchill aptly described the mysteries of Kremlin politics in terms of a riddle wrapped in an enigma. At the other end of the Moscow-Peiping crisis the Chinese public has been surrounded by a great wall of isolation and censorship.<sup>45</sup>

Confusion then contributed to a very cautious interpretation of events. The dispute was termed "a slow-moving but great historical crisis" or "the slow fragmentation of the Communist bloc" and it was often cautioned that the depth of the split should neither be exaggerated nor underestimated. There was also much puzzlement over the exact consequences of the split for American foreign affairs. It was, thus, felt that any enunciation of a public policy toward the dispute would be an exceptionally delicate matter, and apparently Secretary Rusk was quite reluctant to see this ever attempted.

The compromise was a decision to comment 'factually' on the dispute as a first step - that is, to describe what had actually taken place - second, to analyze the causes of the dispute as we saw it at that time, and finally, to offer our views of the probable future course of Sino-Soviet relations, but to avoid speculation about the consequences for the United States, or a full statement of policy.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Roger Hilsman, Address before the Foreign Affairs Council, 8 November 1962, American Foreign Policy 1962, Current Documents, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1967, p. 675.

<sup>46</sup>Hilsman, To Move a Nation, p. 346.

Hilsman's speech before the Foreign Affairs Council was couched in these terms and it became a prototype for many that were to follow

The last weeks have shown that far from operating as a finely designed machine, the Sino-Soviet alliance has its trouble. But in expressing doubt about the perfect harmony and coordination in the Communist world, I do not want to endorse the opposition extreme of speculation which foresees a sudden dramatic end to the Sino-Soviet Alliance... We must remember that the Communist ideology with its goal of world revolution, still provides an overall basis of unity between Peiping and Moscow. So long as both partners see the United States as the greatest obstacle to the attainment of this goal, they will try to patch over differences and unite against the common enemy.<sup>47</sup>

In his memoirs, Hilsman admits that the public recognition given the split by this key speech was a far cry from the basic policy review so desperately needed but "at least it was an indication that the government was doing some thinking about the subject."<sup>48</sup> Apparently, however, not enough thinking was being done in late 1962 about the sweeping ramifications of the split because policy making in Vietnam continued on in the same vein. For example, a research memorandum sent to the Secretary of State in December simply reiterated the same, tired clichés and false assumptions:

The DRV is the implementing agency for Communist activity in South Vietnam. It exercises close control over the Viet Cong and over the "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam," the political instrument of the Viet Cong. However,

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<sup>47</sup> Hilsman, Address before the Foreign Affairs Council, American Foreign Policy 1962, p. 675.

<sup>48</sup> Hilsman, To Move a Nation p. 346.

while Hanoi is probably allowed considerable freedom of action, Moscow and Peking probably would have overriding influence over any major decision critically affecting the situation in SVN. . . In any event, important Communist policies are probably coordinated with Moscow and Peking and the latter scrutinized developments in South Vietnam carefully with an eye to their own interests. There are no apparent major policy differences between Hanoi and Moscow and Peiping regarding SVN.<sup>49</sup>

Once again inertia had triumphed; Vietnam policy remained static in a rapidly changing world. The Washington establishment did not interpret the passing of Communist hegemony as proof that the threat had also passed: it merely existed in altered form. Thus, Averell Harriman, in July 1963, warned not to "make any mistake about a division between them in terms of repudiating each other or breaking - if there is major trouble - breaking [sic] the front."<sup>50</sup> Rusk cautioned that Americans "should not draw too much comfort from that quarrel, for it is over methods not objectives. Both sides are intent on destroying us; both are determined to impose their system on all the people of the earth."<sup>51</sup> Kennedy, in his 1963 State of the Union Address, also advised that optimism should be "tempered with caution. For the Sino-Soviet disagreement is over means, not ends. A dispute over how to bury the West is not grounds for Western rejoicing."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Memorandum from the Bureau of Intelligence & Research to the Secretary of State, 3 December 1962, The Pentagon Papers, p. 693.

<sup>50</sup>Averell Marrison, Remarks before the National Press Club, 31 July 1963, The State Department Bulletin, August 19, 1963, p. 281.

<sup>51</sup>Dean Rusk Address to a Regional Foreign Policy Conference, Los Angeles, 13 February 1963, American Foreign Policy 1963, p. 18.

It is evident, then, that the American understanding of the split was severely limited. The prevailing interpretation stressed differences in "methods not objectives" which resulted from a clash either of communist theories or personalities. Therefore, it was believed that the dispute was likely to be settled when the theories were realigned or when new leaders came to power.<sup>53</sup> More mundane but also more enduring considerations - such as racial biases, border disputes, and differences in national interests - were ignored. By interpreting the split in this way, Washington discounted both its permanence and its impact on policies which had, originally, been created in response to monolithic communism. There seemed to be "no reason to relax our guard." Consequently, the Kennedy Administration would "continue resolutely on the path we have chosen,"<sup>54</sup> especially in Vietnam which, by 1963, had been elevated to a testing ground for American strength and resolve against communist expansion.

One cannot help but wonder how an Administration staffed by the most rational men, the "best and the brightest" could have so blundered. Why did it cling so tenaciously to the myths of monolithic communism and Sino-Soviet conspiracy in Vietnam when these were so obviously incorrect?

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<sup>53</sup>U. S., Congress, Senate, Senator Mike Mansfield speaking on the Sino-Soviet split, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 23 September 1963, Congressional Record, 109:17767.

<sup>54</sup>Dean Rusk, "Red China and the U.S.S.R." State Department Bulletin, February 25, 1963, p. 283.

A partial answer can be found in the experiences of those very men: many of the democratic-liberals in and around the administration had built their careers around the domestic issues of the New Deal and post-New Deal era; when foreign policy questions reached the top of the national agenda in the late fifties they were on quite unfamiliar ground. Accustomed, nevertheless, to dealing authoritatively with domestic problems they tackled the complex and unfamiliar issues of foreign policy with the same vitality.<sup>55</sup> In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in fact one member of the administration concluded

that stupidity is a more helpful factor in interpreting our policy than conspiracy.<sup>56</sup> I think decisions were taken in an atmosphere of invincible ignorance compounded by the fact that the State Department had been purged by those people who at least knew China very well. . . As I say, I think the intellectual presumption involved in our Vietnam intervention, and our ignorance was invincible and inexcusable.<sup>57</sup>

In truth, there was little knowledge and much orthodoxy applied to decisions on Vietnam. The Far East desk comprised the most conservative branch of the State Department. More than any other bureau it had known the devastation of McCarthyism: the men who might have served well there- John P. Davies, John S. Service, Edmund Clubb - had all been destroyed by the McCarthy investigation. Their

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<sup>55</sup> Chester Bowles, Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life 1941-1969, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p. 344.

<sup>56</sup> Testimony of Arthur Schlesinger, Causes, Origins, & Lessons of the Vietnam War, p. 103.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

successors had been those willing to serve under the most rigid, anti-communist dictates of John Foster Dulles wherein opinion and rhetoric often had little relation to reality. The Bureau's preference of loyalty to intelligence meant that its analyses were often outdated and imprecise. Moreover, the top men at the Bureau had a discouraging inclination to gather together, decide on the wisest, safest course of action, and then tailor their reports accordingly. Appeasement of the conservatives in Congress and in the electorate had cost the integrity of the China desk and the Asian Bureau.<sup>58</sup>

Kennedy's liberal appointees, too, had been touched by McCarthyism. Having been charged with "woolyheadedness" and "softness on communism" during previous administrations, they felt it necessary to demonstrate that they were "tough characters." Their judgement was thus distorted by their determination to establish themselves as "realists."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, Kennedy felt that policy problems at home came primarily from the political right and center, while the left, which was weak and had nowhere else to go, could be easily handled. This perception meant that the president began to covet establishment support as a means of protection thereby encouraging some of his administration's harder line activities, while limiting any inclinations to reappraise the validity of China policy or to look for any diversity in the communist world.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, pp. 188-189.

<sup>59</sup> Bowles, Promises to Keep, p. 344.

<sup>60</sup> Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, p. 151.

Thus, it seems that the spectre of McCarthyism still haunted the United States Government. The Administration, evidently believed that the public would not accept anything less than a rigid, Dullesian, anti-Communist stance. To be "soft on communism", to lose another East Asian nation to communism would have been political suicide.<sup>61</sup>

Instead of fully facing the policy problems presented by China, Russia, and Vietnam, there was a tendency, common to many administrations to play it safe and decide as little as possible at any given time. Policy evolved in a series of tentative and easily reversible steps both because of the impossibility of analyzing the many alternatives and consequences rationally and because of the political necessity of consensus-building. This incremental approach meant that the administration would bounce from crisis to crisis and that there was a discontinuity of policy development- with gaps in both analysis and output. Hence, the Sino-Soviet split was allowed to develop without investigation and once it was discovered that the communist world was not monolithic, policy based on that assumption continued through the sheer inertia of the political process, itself.<sup>62</sup>

That foreign policy can fall prey to ignorance, political expediency, and incrementalism is hardly surprising; less often recognized is the potential influence- subtle, but obdurate- of the human psyche on decision making. Schlesinger explains: "Every generation is the prisoner of its own experience, and for this administration the

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<sup>61</sup>John K. Fairbank, Chinese-American Interactions, p. 52.

<sup>62</sup>Hilsman, To Move a Nation, p. 548.

critical international experience was the defense of the peace system against one or another aggressive power. Peace it was said was indivisible; aggression everywhere, if unchecked and unpunished, would threaten the independence of nations everywhere.<sup>63</sup> There was, further, a notion that America was the specially appointed guardian of peace-willing, in John Kennedy's words, "to pay any price, bear any burden; meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty."<sup>64</sup>

In the fifties, such Messianic ideas became embodied in a number of government agencies such as the State Department, the C.I.A., and the Department of Defense. As the Cold War conferred power, money, and influence upon these institutions they developed a vested interest in the theory of a militantly, expansionist communist bloc, consequently, their concern for the care and feeding of the Cold War lasted long after the ideas behind it had become obsolete.<sup>65</sup>

The Cold War concepts of communist conspiracy and aggression were not only institutionalized, they were deeply rooted in the consciousness of the nation. They had provided the frame of reference for world events for so long that even men like Chester Bowles, who had few vested interests in their continuation - found them difficult to throw off. By the end of 1963, however, it seems that the Kennedy Administration

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<sup>63</sup> Testimony of Arthur Schlesinger, Causes, Origins, & Lessons of the Vietnam War, p. 60.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-5.



had begun to break loose from the perceptual shackles of the Cold War. At least the Sino-Soviet split had been recognized in some form. This had not come easily, however, and the federal bureaucracy was not really prepared for any radical alternation in its orientation. There were also doubts about the public acceptance of any such change. Consequently, changes in the administration's perception of monolithic communism, due to the split, were not translated into political action. For instance, the American commitment to Vietnam, which was originally intended to contain Sino-Soviet expansion, was continued and escalated without review.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps, Kennedy would have initiated a major review of anti-communist policies after the 1964 elections. His assassination ended any such hope. Lyndon Johnson later told reporters that, when he assumed the reins of government, he was full of doubts.

I wasn't sure how successful I would be in pulling the divergent factions in the country together and trying to unify them and trying to unite them in order to get the confidence of the people and secure the rest of the world.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, with the words, "Let us continue," he assumed Kennedy's policies. Universally operative in the new administration was the desire to avoid change of any kind during the interregnum period. No major review of containment policies was made and there was an institutional freeze on the direction and momentum of Vietnam Policy.<sup>68</sup> Whatever doubts

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<sup>66</sup> Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, p. 293.

<sup>67</sup> Marvin Kalb, Roots of Involvement, the U.S. in Asia, 1784-1971, (New York: Morton Co., 1971), p. 155.

<sup>68</sup> The Pentagon Papers, 2:190.

Kennedy may have developed about American policy in Southeast Asia because of the Sino-Soviet split, then became meaningless. Johnson had only the fallen president's statements and decisions - all supportive of the importance and significance of Vietnam - on which to act.

Less than forty-eight hours after his succession to the presidency, Johnson made the infamous promise "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."<sup>69</sup> But the war would be lost- precisely because it was still conceived in such terms; in spite of the Sino-Soviet split, the war's basic premise - the monolithic character of world communism - had hardly altered. This failure to recognize the rise of polycentrism caused the United States to misconceive the character of the local, nationalist conflict in Vietnam, to misrepresent, and thus inflate, the American interest in the outcome, and to continue the war with a tenacity far out of proportion to its actual consequences.

Vietnam is not a region of major military or industrial importance. It is difficult to believe that, under normal circumstances, the world situation could be decisively affected by developments there. If it had not been for the great investment of American prestige in Southeast Asia, even a South Vietnam controlled by the Viet Cong would not present dangers great enough to justify a direct military involvement by the United States.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Fulbright, The Crippled Giant, p. 63.

<sup>70</sup>Testimony of George F. Kennan before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., 26 January 1966. Congressional Record Appendix, 112:A710-11.

Neither Diem nor his many autocratic successors ever enjoyed the support of their people; while even in the fifties it was estimated by Eisenhower, himself, that if general elections had been held in 1956 the communists would have won an 80% plurality. Whatever influence that Peking and Moscow were able to exert on Hanoi and Vietnam was, furthermore, not the automatic result of their common ideology but of a convergence of national interests. Many of the Vietnamese communists had been nationalists before they became marxists and it was partly in response to the indifference or hostility of the West that they embraced relations with Russia and China as their only alternative. They were not agents of the Sino-Soviet bloc; rather, their source of strength and their aims were indigenous and in light of the Sino-Soviet split there was every reason to believe that a communist regime in South Vietnam would follow a fairly independent course. It was unlikely that such a government would find it either necessary or desirable to function as the puppet of Moscow or Peking.<sup>71</sup>

By committing itself so heavily to South Vietnam, however, the United States created a situation in which neither Russia nor China could afford to leave North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front. Peking developed a direct national interest in preserving an independent, communist Vietnam so that America would not be able to acquire that area as a land base in any war against China, while the split made it increasingly necessary for her to support the Vietnamese to offset

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<sup>71</sup> Morgenthau, "The Role of the U.S. in Indochina," The Role of External Powers, p. 13.

the growth of Soviet influence. Vietnam was, intrinsically, less important to the Soviet Union than to China but here again the Russians could not afford to allow the United States to destroy a fellow communist nation or to crush a strong communist movement. As long as the United States continued to fight a losing war, therefore, the Soviets would remain deeply committed to Vietnam.<sup>72</sup>

Loyalty to an obsolescent concept of united, Sino-Soviet aggression, thus, dragged the United States farther and farther into a war that was not only futile but relatively inconsequential. When Kennedy's greatest decisions about Vietnam were being made, the United States had not yet perceived the Sino-Soviet split. A general ignorance of world affairs contributed to this delay of recognition: many of Kennedy's appointees were inexperienced in foreign affairs; the State Department valued loyalty rather than expertise in its members and most of the men who would have known better had been purged during the McCarthy era. Crucial, also, were the Cold War experiences of an entire generation. The men in the Kennedy administration had seen the Soviet Union ally with China. They had faced Chinese Communist troops in Korea. From these experiences, they had concluded that the communist world was monolithic and inexorably expansionist in nature. With each successive crisis this concept had become further embedded in their consciousness. So imprisoned had they become by this perception that, even after the split was in full public view, they were unable to come to terms with the idea of a divided communist world.

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<sup>72</sup>Fitzgerald, The United States and Southeast Asia, pp. 21-22.

Only after Sino-Soviet hostility became glaringly evident in 1962 and public pressure on the administration, simultaneously, intensified, did the United States accept the possibility of communist polycentrism. Even then, however, government officials characterized the split as a disagreement of means rather than ends that should not be the basis of a new American policy. The persistence of references in the confidential record to the war in Vietnam as the cooperative effort of Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi suggests that, even as late as 1963, the administration could not fully relinquish the concept of a monolithic Sino-Soviet bloc. It is probable that this inability to change was enhanced by political realities. Kennedy feared antagonizing the right by initiating any major changes in his anti-communist policies, and various government bureaucracies seemed to have developed a vested interest in the maintenance of the Cold War. The politically safe practice of incremental policy development meant, furthermore, that there was little real investigation of either the split or its implications. In this light there was no reason for the administration to question its perception of a communist world united by the objective of world revolution. It tended more to interpret the split as a temporary, ideological dispute which required no re-examination of basic anti-communist policies in Vietnam or elsewhere. The United States would, thus continue "resolutely" on its path of destruction.

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