

## Part II: America's Deepening Commitment—1954-64

The Geneva Conference of 1954 produced a solution to the military conflict in Indochina, but did not resolve the political status of Vietnam. Hostilities halted and French forces regrouped below the 17th parallel. Within two years, they withdrew completely from Vietnam. Above the 17th parallel, in what would become known as North Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh held undisputed power. Below the 17th parallel, the Republic of Vietnam, the former French protectorate, was led by Ngo Dinh Diem, an anti-communist Roman Catholic. Bao Dai appointed him prime minister in June 1954.

The accords signed at Geneva also called for Vietnam-wide elections to be held within two years for the purpose of achieving political unification. While the United States was clearly displeased with the apparent partial communist victory and refused to sign any formal declaration after the conference, Washington did pledge to respect the settlement and “view with grave concern any renewal of aggression in the area.” As the French withdrew from South Vietnam, their presence was replaced by the arrival of U.S. economic aid and military advisers.

### ***Why was Diem viewed favorably in Washington?***

Washington viewed Ngo Dinh Diem as the only alternative to communist control over all of Vietnam. With strong anti-communist and anti-French credentials, Diem also had the backing of the small but powerful Roman Catholic minority in South Vietnam. Many of these Catholics had fled from the north after the settlement and fiercely opposed any accommodation with the communists.

With the backing of his American advisers, Diem rejected in July 1955 the provisions of the Geneva Accords that called for Vietnam-wide elections within two years. Washington believed that the popularity of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh would guarantee a commu-

nist victory. Shortly thereafter, Diem defeated Bao Dai in a South Vietnamese referendum, receiving 98 percent of the vote. Diem's refusal to participate in Vietnam-wide elections by the June 1956 deadline brought no protests from either the Soviet Union or China. In fact, the Soviets proposed in 1957 that both Vietnams be admitted to the United Nations. Although it rejected this proposal, the United States continued to implement its plan to transform South Vietnam into a strong, independent, anti-communist nation which would block any further communist expansion into Southeast Asia.

### ***How did the United States support Diem's regime?***

By early 1960, the United States had sent more than \$1 billion in economic and military aid to support Diem's regime. In addition to the aid, nearly one thousand U.S. military personnel were stationed in Vietnam to serve as advisers to the Diem government and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Diem's increasingly dictatorial governing style triggered several failed coup attempts and heightened violence in the countryside. By the late 1950s, remnants of Vietminh units (now called Vietcong) in South Vietnam had begun to attack local government officials. The Vietcong campaign was supported by the National Liberation Front, a collection of groups formed in December 1960 with North Vietnam's encouragement to oppose Diem's rule. During 1961, more than four thousand government officials, mostly lower ranking village chiefs, were assassinated.

Ironically, the first Asian crisis to confront President John F. Kennedy when he took office in January 1961 was not in Vietnam, but in neighboring Laos, where a complicated civil war was raging. Britain and the Soviet Union, the co-sponsors of the 1954 Geneva Conference, organized another conference in Geneva in 1961 to resolve the Laotian situation. The negotiations resulted in an agreement to re-

spect Laos' neutrality. In contrast to the U.S. position in 1954, the Kennedy administration supported the outcome of the conference in 1961. At the same time, Kennedy had no intention of backing down from the U.S. commitment to an independent, anti-communist South Vietnam. In fact, a high-level U.S. mission headed by General Maxwell Taylor, soon to be appointed Kennedy's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Walt Rostow, a top State Department official, went to Vietnam in October 1961 to evaluate the situation and to make recommendations for stemming the communist advance.

**“...The question was how to change a losing game and begin to win, not how to call it off.”**

—General Maxwell Taylor

The Taylor-Rostow report reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. “If Vietnam goes,” the report argued, “it will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible to hold Southeast Asia.” General Taylor recommended the introduction of eight thousand U.S. combat troops initially. To avoid drawing too much attention to the move, he proposed that the stated purpose of their mission be flood relief. Taylor also dismissed concerns about North Vietnam's response to this action.

**“North Vietnam is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing.... There is no case for fearing a mass onslaught of Communist manpower into South Vietnam and its neighboring states, particularly if our air power is allowed a free hand against logistical targets.”**

—General Maxwell Taylor

In addition, Taylor recommended increased logistical support for the ARVN, the introduction of U.S. helicopters, and increased covert operations in Laos and North Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Pentagon military planners saw Taylor's pro-

posal as inadequate. Instead they advocated the deployment of up to two hundred thousand U.S. combat troops.

**“The fall of South Vietnam to Communism would lead to the fairly rapid extension of Communist control, or complete accommodation to Communism, in the rest of mainland Southeast Asia and in Indonesia. The strategic implications worldwide, particularly in the Orient, would be extremely serious.... The introduction of a U.S. force of the magnitude of an initial 8,000 men in a flood relief context will be of great help to Diem. However, it will not convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow, Peiping [Beijing], or Hanoi) that we mean business. Moreover, it probably will not tip the scales decisively. We would be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle. The other side can be convinced we mean business only if we accompany the initial force introduction by a clear commitment.... We can assume that the maximum U.S. forces required on the ground in Southeast Asia will not exceed six divisions, or about 205,000 men.”**

—Department of Defense Report,  
November 1961

#### **What was Kennedy's compromise approach?**

President Kennedy compromised and adopted an approach that fell between Taylor's and the Defense Department's recommendations. The United States sent helicopters, beefed up the aid package, and dramatically increased the number of U.S. military advisers in South Vietnam. From the end of 1961 to the end of 1962, the number of U.S. personnel rose from more than three thousand to more than eleven thousand. These advisers, who accompanied ARVN units into battle, soon began to suffer casualties. In 1961, eleven were killed

in combat; in 1962 thirty-one were killed; and in 1963 seventy-eight Americans died in the Vietnam War. The president made no strong public commitment to the war to the American people, and the Pentagon's estimate that as many as 200,000 troops would be needed was kept secret.

On the battlefield, the performance of the ARVN, guided by U.S. advisers and armed with new equipment, was mixed. Moreover, the Pentagon's "strategic hamlet program," which was designed to prevent the Vietcong from circulating freely among peasants in the countryside, was not generally successful. Nonetheless, the United States issued optimistic statements in mid-1963. "Victory in three years," predicted one. "There is a new feeling of confidence that victory is possible," said another. Kennedy himself declared, "We don't see the end of the tunnel, but I must say I don't think it is darker than it was a year ago, and in some ways [it is] lighter."

Not all U.S. decision-makers agreed with Kennedy's assessment. Mike Mansfield, the majority leader in the Senate, toured Southeast Asia in late 1962 and advised Kennedy that the United States should re-evaluate its commitment and involvement in South Vietnam.

***“It is their country, their future that is at stake, not ours. To ignore that reality will not only be immensely costly in terms of American lives and resources, but it may also draw us inexorably into some variation of the unenviable position in Vietnam that was formerly occupied by the French.”***

—Senator Mike Mansfield

Mansfield and other critics of the war effort worried particularly about growing political opposition to Diem's rule in South Vietnam. During the spring of 1963, for example, thousands of Buddhists led by militant monks in the northern city of Hue began protesting what they perceived as discrimination practiced against them by Diem and his predominantly Roman Catholic government.

In response, government troops fired at the peaceful demonstrators, killing nine people. The Diem government ignored U.S. advice to seek reconciliation and instead insisted that the Vietcong were manipulating the Buddhists. In June 1963, the Buddhist protest hit the front pages of American newspapers when an elderly monk drenched himself with gasoline in a busy Saigon intersection and, with the assistance of other monks and nuns, burned himself to death. A written message the monk left behind requested that the Diem government respect all religions and show charity and compassion in its dealings with the Buddhists. Again the Diem government blamed the incident on the Vietcong, and more fiery suicides followed.

### ***Why did President Kennedy appoint Henry Cabot Lodge as the new ambassador to Vietnam?***

The frustration of the Kennedy administration with Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who headed the regime's secret police, led to the appointment in June 1963 of Henry Cabot Lodge as the new U.S. ambassador to Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. Lodge, a Republican from Massachusetts, was Kennedy's choice to direct the tough new American line in Saigon. No longer would the United States "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem," as American observers had remarked. Instead, Diem would be told to reform his government and build popular support for the war against the communists—or else.

The choice of a prominent Republican for the sensitive post revealed Kennedy's desire to maintain bipartisan support for U.S. involvement. By the time Ambassador Lodge arrived in Saigon in August 1963, the situation seemed beyond hope. U.S. officials were talking about the need to replace Diem and his clique. Lodge was instructed to tell ARVN generals dissatisfied with Diem that the United States would condone a coup against the government, so long as the anti-communist struggle continued. On November 2, 1963, Diem and his brother were overthrown in a military coup and assassinated. President Ken-



Karl Hubenthal in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner

nedly himself would be dead from the bullets of an assassin within three weeks.

***Why did President Johnson find himself drawn deeply into the problems in Vietnam?***

Before Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, Lyndon Johnson had not played a major role as vice president in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. Although he went to South Vietnam in May 1961 and hailed Diem as “the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia,” Johnson had not been part of the inner circle of decision-makers who had shaped the growing U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

Rather, Johnson was a master of domestic politics. Majority leader of the Senate for many years, Johnson as president wished to focus his efforts on an ambitious agenda to create a “Great Society” at home. His idol was Franklin D. Roosevelt, the domestic reformer, not Franklin D. Roosevelt, the world leader. Inheriting most of Kennedy’s foreign policy advisers, including Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Assistant

Secretary of State William Bundy, and top State Department planner Walt Rostow, Johnson quickly found himself drawn deeply into the worsening crisis in Vietnam.

The fact that a military government replaced Diem in Saigon did not bring the anticipated turnaround in the war effort. A series of power struggles within the South Vietnamese military leadership to determine who would exercise real power in the government complicated the situation.

Meanwhile, the number of U.S. military advisers grew to more than sixteen thousand by the end of 1963 and would surpass twenty-three thousand by the end of the next year. Frustrated by the hit-and-run tactics of the Vietcong in South Vietnam, many American military leaders were convinced that only heavy bombing of North Vietnam could stop the communists. Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay argued that “we are swatting flies when we should be going after the manure pile!”

For his part, Johnson was most concerned about winning election in the fall of 1964 to a full four-year term as president. As he reportedly told his military advisers at a White House Christmas party in December 1963, “just let me get elected, and then you can have your war.”

But Johnson was unable to turn his attention away from Vietnam for long. North Vietnam continued its support for the insurgency in the south, and matched the gradual escalation of U.S. involvement. During 1964, an estimated ten thousand North Vietnamese troops infiltrated the south. Although the communist forces in the south were still overwhelmingly South Vietnamese, these regular units from the north and the supplies that they brought gave the insurgents increased capability for large-scale actions. At the same time, the United States was spending more than \$2 million a day in Vietnam and several Americans a week on average were being killed in battle. In March 1964, Secretary of Defense McNamara, returning from his second trip to Vietnam in four months, reported that:

***“The situation has unquestionably been growing worse, at least since September [1963].... In terms of government control of the countryside about 40 percent of the territory is now under Viet Cong control or predominant influence.... Large groups of the population are now showing signs of apathy and indifference.... The ARVN and paramilitary desertion rates, and particularly the latter, are high and increasing.”***

—Robert S. McNamara

As had become the pattern, leaders recommended increased aid in the form of more military equipment. In addition, U.S. leaders told the Saigon government that “we are prepared to furnish assistance and support to South Vietnam for as long as it takes to bring the insurgency under control.”

## The Tonkin Gulf Resolution

The U.S. Constitution divides the war-making power of the United States between the executive and the legislative branches. Article II designates the president as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, while Article I grants Congress the power to declare war. In addition, Congress has the authority to appropriate money. This so-called “power of the purse” ensures that Congress will play a significant role in determining defense spending in wartime. The last time that Congress was asked to formally declare war was December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Since World War II, presidents have repeatedly ordered military action without requesting a formal declaration of war. Even the Korean War, which cost more than 53,000 American lives, was technically a “police action” conducted under the authority of the United Nations. Almost without exception, large majorities of both Houses have strongly supported presidential decisions to send military forces abroad, at least initially. This reading explores how the administration of President Johnson obtained congressional authority for the expansion of U.S. involvement in Vietnam in 1964.

### The Plan

As the 1964 presidential elections approached, President Johnson saw the need for a congressional resolution that would endorse the growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Such a resolution would strengthen the president’s credibility abroad and give him increased flexibility. Johnson was also worried about Barry Goldwater, the Republican nominee for president, who had taken a tough stance in dealing with communism. Johnson hoped that lining up solid majorities of both Republicans and Democrats in Congress behind his Vietnam policies would take the sting out of Goldwater’s criticisms. Accordingly, presidential aides William Bundy and Walt Rostow drafted the following resolution in June 1964:

*“...Whereas the Communist regime in North Viet Nam, with the aid and support of the Communist regime in China, has systematically flouted its obligations under these [1954 Geneva] accords and has engaged in aggression against the independence and territorial integrity of South Vietnam by carrying out a systematic plan for the subversion of the Government of South Viet Nam...*

*“Whereas the United States has no territorial, military or political ambitions in*

*Southeast Asia, but desires only that the peoples of South Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia should be left in peace by their neighbors to work out their own destinies in their own way...*

*“Whereas it is essential that the world fully understand that the American people are united in their determination to take all steps that may be necessary to assist the peoples of South Viet Nam and Laos to maintain their independence and political independence.... Be it resolved...*

*“That the United States regards the preservation of the independence and integrity of the nations of South Viet Nam and Laos as vital to its national interest and to world peace.... To this end, if the President determines the necessity thereof, the United States is prepared, upon the request of the Government of South Viet Nam or the Government of Laos, to use all measures, including the commitment of armed forces to assist that government in the defense of its independence and territorial integrity against aggression or subversion supported, controlled or directed from any Communist country...”*

Johnson did not want to appear rash. During the presidential campaign, he sought to

portray Goldwater as trigger-happy and reckless. For that reason, the president decided to wait for further North Vietnamese provocation before sending his request to Congress. In the meantime, he instructed the Pentagon to prepare detailed plans for bombing North Vietnam.

## The Incident

During the summer of 1964 the United States directed two ongoing naval operations in the Gulf of Tonkin, north of the 17th parallel off the coast of Vietnam. One operation involved South Vietnamese commandos, trained by the C.I.A., who would launch hit-and-run strikes on North Vietnamese coastal sites using very fast patrol boats. The other operation would send U.S. warships, equipped with sensitive electronic gear, to cruise to within eight miles of the North Vietnamese coast in order to trigger the operation of North Vietnamese radar installations. The ships would then take measurements of the radar's locations and frequencies. The U.S. destroyer *Maddox* was engaged in such a mission off the North Vietnamese coast on August 1. The day before, several South Vietnamese patrol boats had raided North Vietnamese coastal positions in the same area.

On the morning of August 2, several North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the *Maddox*. Several torpedoes missed their target, but machine gun fire hit the U.S. warship. There were no casualties. The *Maddox* had begun firing as soon as the patrol boats approached, sinking one patrol boat and damaging two others. Planes from the nearby U.S. aircraft carrier *Ticonderoga* assisted by strafing the enemy boats. When Johnson received word of the incident, he sent a stern warning to North Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi. He also informed Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that, while he did not wish to widen the war, the United States would not tolerate attacks by the North Vietnamese on U.S. warships in international

### Questions for class discussion:

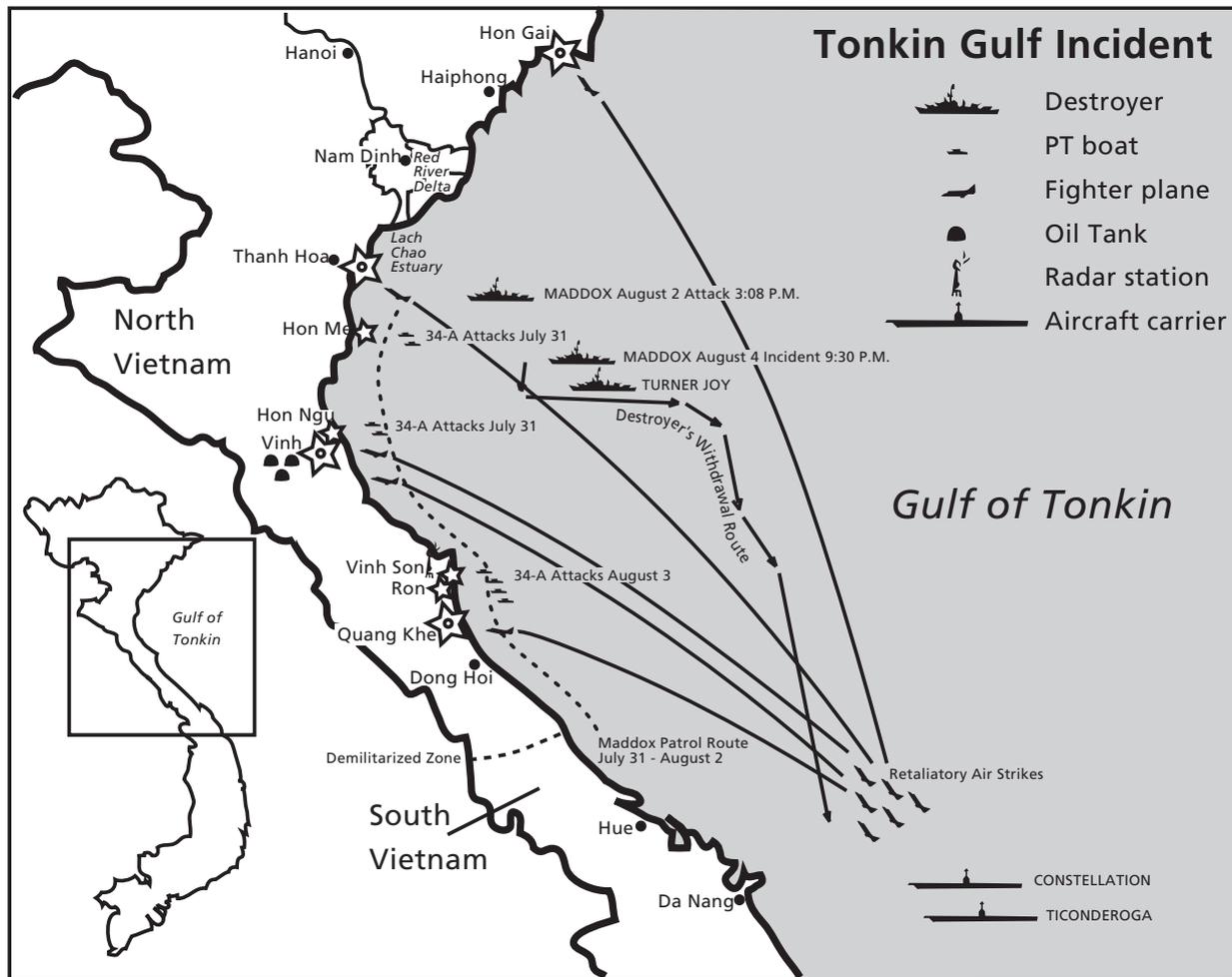
1. Why did Johnson believe that bipartisan congressional support for his policies in Vietnam was so important?
2. Does the government of a democracy have to operate under a different set of rules from those of a dictatorship when formulating foreign policy?

waters. No acts of reprisal were ordered at the time.

To underscore American determination, the *Maddox*, joined by a second destroyer, the *C. Turner Joy*, were ordered back into the same area the next day. Several South Vietnamese patrol boats also staged another hit-and-run mission in the area. During that evening, radar and sonar readings taken by the crews of the destroyers seemed to indicate that both U.S. destroyers were under attack. No enemy boats were actually seen and no hostile gunfire was heard. Nevertheless, both destroyers fired for several hours at the unseen attackers. Heavy rain that evening in the Tonkin Gulf contributed to the confusion. When Johnson learned of the situation, he decided to order retaliation, and to ask Congress immediately for a resolution of support. Several days later, analysis of the incident raised doubts that the two destroyers had actually come under attack. Johnson himself remarked to an aide, "Hell, those dumb stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish."

### Questions for class discussion:

1. Some have argued that the North Vietnamese were to blame for the incident, while others have maintained the United States was at fault. Discuss the case that both sides might make.
2. Why do you think that President Johnson went to Congress and the American people immediately, rather than waiting for a full investigation of the second "attack"?



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## The Request

On the evening of August 4, the day of the controversial second “attack” on U.S. naval vessels in the Tonkin Gulf, President Johnson went on national television to announce that he had ordered reprisal bombing of North Vietnamese naval facilities and to declare that “repeated acts of violence against the armed forces of the United States must be met not only with alert defense, but with positive reply.” The next day Congress began consideration of the following resolution:

*“Whereas the naval units of the Communist regime in Vietnam, in violation of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of international law, have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters*

*and have thereby created a serious threat to international peace;*

*“Whereas these attacks are part of a deliberate and systematic campaign of aggression that the communist regime in North Vietnam has been waging against its neighbors and the nations joined with them in the collective defense of their freedom;*

*“Whereas the United States is assisting the peoples of southeast Asia to protect their freedom and has no territorial, military or political ambitions in that area, but desires only that these peoples should be left in peace to work out their own destinies in their own way. Now therefore, be it*

*“Resolved by the Senate and House of*

*Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled that the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.*

*“Sec. 2 The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of the international peace and security in southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state [South Vietnam] of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.*

*“Sec. 3 This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.”*

### Questions for class discussion:

1. How do the changes in wording from the June draft (page 28) change the President’s ability to direct U.S. policy in Vietnam? Explain by comparing specific phrases from the two documents.
2. Sometime later, Johnson remarked to aides that this resolution was “like grandma’s night-shirt—it covered everything.” What did he mean by this?

## The Action

After two days of debate, both Houses of Congress, with only Senators Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening dissenting, passed the Tonkin Gulf resolution. The administration would cite this congressional action as the necessary and sufficient legal authority for its actions in Vietnam during the next several years. Congress regularly approved subsequent annual requests for funds to continue the war. Even congresspeople who opposed the war were reluctant to deny the funds and resources necessary to support the U.S. effort. The Sen-

ate repealed the Tonkin Gulf resolution in June 1970. U.S. involvement in the war continued until January 1973, although no president ever requested a formal declaration of war.

### Question for class discussion:

If the administration had foreseen how long and costly the war would be, do you think that it would have chosen the same means to obtain congressional support and legal authority?

### Extra Challenge

One of the major reasons for studying history is to discover connections and recurring patterns. Several previous incidents in U.S. history are worth comparing to the passage of the Tonkin Gulf resolution, including the incident which sparked the declaration of war against Mexico in 1846 and Congressman Lincoln’s “spot resolutions,” the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor in 1898 and the subsequent war with Spain, the attack on the destroyer *Greer* by a German submarine in September 1941, when the United States was still a neutral, as well as the controversy surrounding weapons of mass destruction and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

## Summer 1965: The Moment of Decision

The military situation in South Vietnam worsened rapidly during the first six months of 1965. The United States initiated a campaign of limited bombing against selected targets in North Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder) in February, but there was no indication that it diminished either Hanoi's determination or the flow of supplies to the Vietcong in the south. The ARVN continued to lose territory to Vietcong control and the Saigon government appeared to have little support among the South Vietnamese in the countryside. The military dispatched U.S. combat units in March for the specific purpose of defending U.S. installations in South Vietnam. Despite the deployment of more U.S. military personnel, large amounts of economic aid, and American logistical support, the Vietcong, in the opinion of some experts, controlled as much as 50 percent of the South Vietnamese countryside by the summer of 1965 and would soon possess the capability to cut the country in half.

As the situation in Vietnam deteriorated, Johnson administration officials recognized the need for a thorough re-examination of American policy, tactics, and strategy in Southeast Asia. The basic questions raised were: What was the nature of the conflict in Southeast Asia? What U.S. interests were at stake? What should be the chief objectives of the United States in Vietnam? What steps should the United States take to achieve these objectives?

Look carefully at the cartoons below.



"We've got to operate, and fast!"



1. Who are the three doctors in the cartoon on the left? Who is the patient?
2. In portraying the American leaders as doctors, what is the cartoonist suggesting about the ability of the United States to diagnose and cure the problems of South Vietnam and other countries?
3. What does this cartoon imply about the seriousness of the situation?
4. In contrast, what does the cartoon on the right suggest about the situation in Vietnam and the ability of U.S. leaders to understand and resolve the problem?

Frank Interlandi in The Los Angeles Times. Copyright © 1965. Reprinted with permission.