

**Constructing the Labyrinth:  
An Assessment of Early United States Policy in Vietnam**

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In 1947, Secretary of State Dean Acheson declared that the United States was in for a “long, long pull...determining that we cannot maintain a counter-balance to the communist powers without strengthening all those parts of the world which belong in the system with us.”<sup>1</sup> Subsequent U.S. policies of containment, confrontation, and intervention reflected the notion that national security was threatened if more countries fell under Communist control. A major destination in this long, Cold War journey described by Acheson was the region of Southeast Asia. The path on which the U.S. embarked was not a clear, open thoroughfare; rather, this nation entered a labyrinth, which ironically, was its own creation. Each policy added to the walls of the maze, and the complexity of the region and world environs simply added more turns and dead ends. Ultimately, the U.S. found itself hopelessly lost in this puzzle of Vietnam, but because this enterprise was inexorably linked to its national credibility as a major world power, it could not easily conclude its seemingly endless, hapless wanderings. This paper focuses on the early stages of the construction of this labyrinth.

The formative years from 1945 to 1954 for U.S. policy development in Vietnam are indeed the critical ones, because thereafter, the basic structures and premises changed very little. While the volume of the rhetoric at home and abroad increased in the subsequent years, the themes remained the same. After the French departed in 1954, the U.S. continued its engagement, and the decision to intervene directly was the only fundamental shift in policy in the ensuing years. These early policies created a mindset that remained in place for the next twenty years. With no new critical reassessment of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), 5.

policy objectives and realities, the U.S. entered the labyrinth compelled to wander the dark, perplexing passages of its own creation.

Following its victory over the Axis powers in 1945, the U.S. initially accommodated Soviet Union policy in Europe. However, as chilling events unfolded, the romance of this uneasy union quickly faded. George Kennan, the American *charge d'affaires* in Moscow, was one of the first to urge the U.S. to take a firmer stance in its dealings with the Soviet Union. In his "long telegram" to Secretary of State James Byrnes in 1946, Kennan expressed concern over the present attitude of accommodation. He argued that current internal politics, domestic conditions, and an abiding suspicion of Western designs were driving the Soviet's foreign policy. Emphasizing its Marxist doctrine that socialism would ultimately triumph over the capitalist nations, he concluded the Soviet policy would be to apply pressure wherever possible and create an atmosphere of antagonism in its foreign relations.<sup>2</sup> As a leading expert on the Soviet Union, Kennan's recommendation for a firmer policy gained the attention of many within the Truman Administration. In a follow-up paper originally prepared for the President later published in *Foreign Affairs* in May 1947, Kennan made the first public announcement of the birth of his new policy of containment.<sup>3</sup>

Kennan was the quintessential proponent of *realpolitik*. He maintained that the primary foreign policy objective of any state should be to promote survival and growth of

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, Telegram from the *Charges d'affaires* in Moscow (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, February 22, 1946, in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1946 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), VI, 696-709. Hereinafter cited as *FRUS* with date and volume number.

<sup>3</sup> David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford Press, 1988), 113.

its national interests.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, he conceded that while a nation's ideology was a consideration in its policymaking, a nation's bold ideological pronouncement should be reviewed in the context of its real objectives and vital interests. Under his rules of international engagement, a state should first determine its real goals and national interests and then use ideology merely as a means to justify the end.

Kennan used Stalin as the best example of his analysis. Ideology did not control Stalin's policies, since Marxism could mean whatever he said it should mean. This pragmatic man of steel would have given Marx fits, because he placed Russia's national interests ahead of ideology and the priority of promoting world revolution.<sup>5</sup> According to Kennan, even if the Soviet Union were a fascist regime, given the motivations of its leadership, its policies would have remained the same. He believed that at the core of Soviet foreign policy was an abiding, long-standing fear of a hostile world that surrounded it. In addition, given the current nature of Soviet politics and the need to maintain control, Stalin had to create an internal atmosphere of suspicion and fear to justify his policies. Consequently, Soviet policy had everything to do with these factors and little to do with Marxist ideology or proletarian world revolution. Although he focused on the Soviet Union, other Marxist leaders, including Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, would have fit Kennan's model. Therefore, in reviewing the potential policy of an opponent, Kennan maintained that the form of government or political rhetoric was a secondary consideration. Rather, the U.S. policymakers must constantly examine each nation's national interests, objectives, political motivations, and needs, as well as their

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<sup>4</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford Press, 1982), 27 and George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 (July, 1947): 568. Hereafter cited as *Foreign Affairs*.

<sup>5</sup> George F. Kennan, *Foreign Affairs*, 576.

own. Secondly, the U.S. must continue to ask whether this nation is operating within those interests and considerations.<sup>6</sup>

An important corollary to Kennan's principles was the idea that means and capabilities of a nation are finite. A nation cannot bear all burdens everywhere at all times; hence, it must establish fixed priorities within its means, based on its vital interests. Later, Kennan elaborated by adding, "to make clear that the 'containment' of which I was speaking was not something that I thought we could, necessarily, do everywhere successfully, or even needed to do everywhere successfully, in order to serve the purpose I had in mind.... I distinguished clearly in my mind between areas I thought vital to our security and ones that did not seem to fall into this category."<sup>7</sup> Kennan's philosophy was significant, because the U.S. was determined to stop the spread of Marxist ideology during the early stages of policy development in Vietnam.

In terms of setting priorities within U.S. capabilities, Kennan considered the security of Europe more important than Southeast Asia to American interests, arguing that the Soviet threat was greater in the West than anywhere else in the world. In a report on February 24, 1948, he noted that within the Asian context, "Japan and the Philippines will be found to be the cornerstones of such a Pacific security system and that if we can contrive to retain effective control over these areas there can be no serious threat to our security from the East within our time."<sup>8</sup> In his *Memoirs*, Kennan acknowledged that the Soviet Union was interested in Vietnam just as it was in many areas; however, he did not think the Soviets considered this region critical to its national interests or security. He added that, with few exceptions, the Soviet Union rarely projected its power far from its

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 568-569.

<sup>7</sup> George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 359.

borders. Therefore, it was highly unlikely the Soviet Union would employ military force so far away in light of the logistical problems involved in supporting such a policy. He concluded that his principles of containment in Europe and Asia “should enable us, if our policies are wise and unprovocative, to contain them both militarily and politically for a long time to come.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1949, the Truman Administration began implementing many of Kennan’s ideas as his terminology made its way into the lexicon of policymakers. The codification of Kennan’s ideas, along with some significant changes, came in 1950 in an important policy paper known as NSC-68. Its premise was that “The Soviet Union...is animated by a new faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.”<sup>10</sup> It solidified the belief that the Soviet Union and other Communist powers seek “... the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure in the countries of the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subject to and controlled from the Kremlin. To that end, the Soviet efforts are now directed toward the domination of the Eurasian landmass.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Soviet Union is seeking “...total power over all Communist Parties and all states under Soviet domination.”<sup>12</sup> In language that could have been written by Kennan, NSC-68 identified the practical problem of implementation when it added, “The problem is to create such political and economic conditions in the free world, backed by force

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<sup>8</sup> Report by the Policy Planning Staff, February 24, 1948, *FRUS*, 1948, I, pt. 2, 510-518, 525.

<sup>9</sup> Kennan, *Memoirs*, 304.

<sup>10</sup> A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary (Lay), NSC-68, April 14, 1950, I, 238. Hereinafter cited as NSC-68.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 238.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 240.

sufficient to inhibit Soviet attack, that the Kremlin will accommodate itself to these conditions, gradually withdraw, and eventually change its policies.”<sup>13</sup>

NSC-68 added one more critical policy aspect, and it was to become one of the darkest, most inextricable passages of the labyrinth. It required the U.S. to shoulder the full responsibility for the free world for implementing this new policy. In absolute terms, it linked policy success to national credibility. Hence, U.S. failure to carry out its policy objectives in one part of the world would suddenly call into question its resolve elsewhere. NSC-68 said, “...a more rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength and thereby of confidence in the free world than is now contemplated is the only course...”<sup>14</sup> It continued, “...our position as the center of power in the free world places a heavy responsibility on the United States for leadership...and without such a cooperative effort by the United States, we will have to make gradual withdrawal under pressure until we discover one day that we have sacrificed positions of vital interest.”<sup>15</sup> NSC-68 had drawn a line throughout the world, which no Communist power could cross. Unfortunately, when applied to the enigma of Vietnam, this linkage in such absolute terms merely added to the complexity of the emerging maze.

While NSC-68 was a general policy statement, specific supplements for various troubled areas were prepared also. On December 8, 1950, the National Security Council issued annexes in NSC-68/3, which contained specific references to Indochina.<sup>16</sup> It concluded, “...this country (Indochina) is the key to the control of its mainland of Southeast Asia. Its loss would represent a major strategic reversal for the United

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 290.

States.”<sup>17</sup> Acknowledging the essential components to this emerging policy, it added, “The military program will fail unless the political and economic programs are a success and vice versa.” It stated, “...even if this is achieved (the successful installation of a friendly regime), communist inspired guerilla operations will continue until a successful military program has been completed.”<sup>18</sup> Implicit in this statement was the notion that where there is ongoing-armed conflict, the Communist movements must be defeated on the battlefield before a political policy is successful. While this general statement is similar to Kennan’s principles, as developments would show, the focus shifted so that military success became the first priority when frustration set in on the political front. This was a significant variation in Kennan’s theme.

After their ouster by the Japanese during World War II, the French returned to Indochina with the sole purpose of restoring their former colony. However, conditions within the region, which included Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, had changed dramatically since their departure. Nationalism was on the rise throughout Asia after World War II. In Vietnam, the nationalist movement had gained immense strength during the French hiatus; consequently, restoring control would be problematic.<sup>19</sup> The core of these nationalist aspirations was Ho Chi Minh and his Indochinese Communist Party, known as the Vietminh. Just as Mao Zedong had done in China during World War II, Ho Chi Minh and his Communist Party had enjoyed tremendous political and military growth in North Vietnam as they moved through the country promolgating Ho’s ideas

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<sup>16</sup> Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary (Lay), Annexes to NSC-68/3, December 8, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, I, 432-450.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 440.

<sup>19</sup> George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 5.

and fighting the Japanese. Having gained valuable military and political organizational skills during this struggle, they were well prepared to resist French control.<sup>20</sup>

In 1945 from his power base in the north, Ho Chi Minh established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Upon their return in 1946, the French initially recognized the strength of the nascent DRV and were willing to discuss the formation of a confederation with limited autonomy to the Vietnamese. However, Ho Chi Minh's fundamental goal was full independence, so when the French became frustrated with this demand, they began moving troops into North Vietnam to assert control. Fighting soon broke out, and the first phase of a thirty-year Vietnam War had begun.<sup>21</sup>

The source of French difficulties in Indochina was their inability to appreciate or accept new political realities in the region. They failed to understand that conditions in Asia were radically different after the Second World War, and the old European empires were no longer viable. While they understood that Ho Chi Minh was a force with which they would have to reckon, they were determined to restore control over their old colony and refused to grant any kind of autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Given the irreconcilability of their respective positions, the only alternative for the French was to continue to pursue the military option and bolster the native regime they installed in South Vietnam.

Unfortunately, both policies were ineffective and counterproductive, and according to U.S. Vice Consul James O'Sullivan's assessment in 1947, the aggressive French military action was alienating the populace. Furthermore, the native government in the south was

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<sup>20</sup> Robert M. Blum, *Drawing the Line: The Origin of the Containment Policy in East Asia* (New York: Norton and Company, 1982), 104 and Donald S. Zagoria, *Vietnam Triangle: Moscow, Peking, Hanoi* (New York: Pegasus, 1967), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Francois Godement, *The Asian Renaissance: From Colonialism to the Post-Cold War*, translated by Elizabeth Parcell (New York: Routledge, 1997), 97.

<sup>22</sup> Telegram from the Ambassador in China (Stuart) to the Secretary of State, May 15, 1947, *FRUS*, 1947, VI, 98.

corrupt, inept, and had become a laughing stock. In his opinion, without a drastic change in policy, there was no hope for the French to gain any popular support.<sup>23</sup>

From the late 1940s to early 1950s, U.S. policy moved from flexibility and a willingness to compromise to rigidity and absolutism. Initially, George Marshall wanted a workable, political arrangement with the formation of a nonaligned, independent Vietnamese government with Ho Chi Minh as its leader. Marshall recognized Ho Chi Minh's Communist beliefs, but like Kennan, he was willing to accept a political solution, if it was in the interests of the U.S. to do so. Acknowledging the power of nationalist movements as a political reality in Asia, he felt this weighed heavily in any long-term solution.<sup>24</sup> Recognizing that Ho Chi Minh was clearly the strongest, most capable leader in the region, Marshall urged the French to work with the Vietminh leadership to achieve that solution. Perhaps sensing U.S. flexibility and reminding the U.S. of its own struggle for independence, Ho Chi Minh delivered a heart-rending letter to Secretary of State Dean Acheson seeking U.S. assistance. After setting forth his objectives, which included autonomy, a referendum, and a willingness to remain in the French Union, Ho requested the U.S. help mediate a cease-fire and the renewal of negotiations.<sup>25</sup> Marshall's suggestion and Ho Chi Minh's appeal were incompatible with French designs, and the U.S. was unwilling to apply the necessary pressure on their ally to force them to the negotiating table. Consequently, an early opportunity for resolution was lost.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Telegram from the Vice Consul at Hanoi (O'Sullivan) to the Secretary of State, July 19, 1947, *FRUS*, 1947, VI, 120-121.

<sup>24</sup> Telegram from the Vice Consul at Hanoi (O'Sullivan) to the Secretary of State, January 11, 1947, *FRUS*, VI, 61-62 and Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Embassy in France, May 13, 1947, *FRUS*, 1947, VI, 95-97.

<sup>25</sup> Telegram from the Vice Consul at Hanoi (O'Sullivan) to the Secretary of State, January 11, 1947, *FRUS*, 1947, VI, 61-62.

<sup>26</sup> Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Perennial, 1991), 21.

On July 11, 1947, Charles Reed, U.S. Consul in Saigon, bolstered Marshall's recommendations to the French. Reed's lengthy letter to the Secretary of State provided a grave assessment of the political and military situation in Vietnam. He emphasized Ho Chi Minh's strength and Vietnamese popular support for independence. In addition, he advised that the French were losing the war and becoming increasingly frustrated. Consequently, they resorted to harsher methods, which further alienated the populace. More importantly, Reed showed concern that the longer the conflict continued, the closer Ho Chi Minh might move toward Russia and China to gain necessary support.<sup>27</sup> In a follow-up telegram on July 19, 1947, he added, "If the French terms are on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, then settlement will be indefinitely deferred with Vietminh turning more and more to Communists for support."<sup>28</sup>

Reed's dispatches had struck at the crux of the U.S. dilemma. There were irreconcilable differences between the participants, an ineffective native government in South Vietnam, growing political and military strength within the Vietminh, a deteriorating military situation for the French, and the unenviable predicament of supporting the restoration of colonialism. On the other side, there was the need to sustain a valuable ally, the perceived threat of growing Communist influence, the loss of China, the emerging conflict in Korea, and the new Soviet nuclear capability. In addition, domestic political pressure for an aggressive anti-Communist policy was mounting and was "driving normally rational U.S. officials to excessive lengths to prove their devotion

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<sup>27</sup> Telegram from the Consul at Saigon (Reed) to the Secretary of State, July 11, 1947, *FRUS*, 1947, VI, 110-116.

<sup>28</sup> Telegram from the Consul at Saigon (Reed) to the Secretary of State, July 19, 1947, *FRUS*, 1947, VI, 119-120.

to the defeat of the 'Red Menace.'"<sup>29</sup> The irony of Reed's assessment is that indeed our support of the French would probably drive Ho Chi Minh closer to China and the Soviets, which was the U.S.'s greatest fear.

Dean Acheson, Secretary of State during these critical years, recognized the immense complexity that faced U.S. policymakers. Characterizing the situation as a "muddled hodgepodge," he noted that the U.S. was helping the French without serious demands to move quickly toward a peaceful solution; yet, the U.S. was not providing decisive assistance to insure its objectives. His subsequent assessment was that the U.S. was merely aggravating the situation by not guaranteeing a French victory and further alienating Ho Chi Minh without insuring his defeat.<sup>30</sup>

The Truman Administration continued to maintain that the defeat of the Communist-led Vietminh was crucial to U.S. interests with the belief that "If it (French government) fails, it will almost certainly be succeeded by a government committed to settlement on terms dangerous to security of the U.S. and the Free World.... Under present circumstances any negotiated settlement would mean the eventual loss to Communism not only of Indochina but the whole of Southeast Asia."<sup>31</sup> While the U.S. became increasingly frustrated with the ineffective French war effort, it had little choice but to support its traditional ally, if it continued the same assumptions and policy. In addition, the French continued to threaten not to support the European Defense Community and the rearmament of Germany, leveraging U.S. fears in Europe to extract

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<sup>29</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 185.

<sup>30</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton and Co., 1969), 673.

<sup>31</sup> Department of Defense, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense* (Washington, D.C.: 1971), Book 9, 129.

support of its war effort in Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, the military option was the only alternative. With an initial aid package approved by Congress in 1950, the U.S. supplied eight C-47 aircraft and \$15 million to the French. During the next four years, the U.S. would spend an additional \$3 billion to support the French phase of the war.<sup>33</sup>

When Eisenhower became President in 1952, the U.S. was carrying one third of the financial burden of the war, and it could easily increase to one half in the next few months. On the eve of his inauguration, President Eisenhower wrote in his diary that “if Indochina falls to the Communies”, all of Southeast Asia would follow. With no new critical reassessment of policy or national interests, Eisenhower followed Truman’s plan for a military solution.<sup>34</sup>

Kennan was upset that later policymakers misinterpreted his ideas. He considered containment a set of principles which, when applied primarily in the political realm, would minimize the need for military solutions. In his *Memoirs*, he wrote that it “was the failure to make clear that what I was talking about when I mentioned containment of Soviet power was not the containment by military means of a military threat, but the political containment of a political threat.”<sup>35</sup> He felt that U.S. policymakers reversed his priorities by concentrating on military solutions rather than political ones. In the late 1960s, he wrote, “There is no such thing as ‘communism’ in the sense that there was in 1947; there are only a number of national regimes which cloak themselves in the verbal trappings of radical Marxism and follow domestic policies influenced to one degree or

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<sup>32</sup> *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, The Presidency: The Middle Way*, Louis Galambos and Daun Van Ee, editors (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), vol. 15, 893.

<sup>33</sup> Karnow, 192.

<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, editor, *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: Norton and Company, 1981), 190.

<sup>35</sup> Kennan, *Memoirs*, 358.

another by Marxist conception.”<sup>36</sup> Kennan argued that the political landscape within the self-proclaimed Marxist powers and the global environment had changed since he first articulated his ideas twenty years ago, and he continued to minimize their ideological rhetoric.

Kennan’s principles of containment came full circle when he again tried to influence U.S. policy at a critical juncture. On February 10, 1966, the midwife of U. S. Cold War foreign policy appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was examining its policy in Vietnam. Kennan said:

...if we were not already involved as we are in Vietnam, I would know of no reason why we should wish to become so involved.... Vietnam is not a region of major military, industrial importance. It is difficult to believe that any decisive developments in the world situation would be determined in normal circumstances by what happens on that territory. If it were not for considerations of prestige that arise precisely out of our present involvement, even a situation in which South Vietnam was controlled exclusively by the Viet Cong...would not, in my opinion, present dangers enough to justify our direct military intervention... There is no reason to suspect that such a regime would find it either necessary or desirable in present circumstances to function as a passive puppet and instrument of Chinese power.<sup>37</sup>

U.S. policy in Vietnam evolved over five administrations, but early decisions set the course for the entire journey. When the first combat units went ashore in 1965, the world was a different place than it was in 1945, but Kennan’s principles still applied. In both misinterpreting and then failing to apply his teachings, the U.S. continued to pursue a military solution to what was primarily a political problem. By shouldering the full responsibility for halting the spread of Communism, failing to define its vital interests clearly, staking its prestige on its success, and limiting its military options in the war, the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>37</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Supplemental Foreign Assistance, Fiscal Year 1966, Vietnam Hearings*, 89<sup>th</sup> Con., 2d sess., February 10, 1966.

U.S. created a puzzle for which there was no acceptable solution. In these early years, leaders were making difficult choices in seemingly impossible situations. Once casualties began to mount, national pride and self-respect soon vested completely. Now the courage required to change those policies was greater than that demanded of those they sent to the battlefield.

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