

### OPTION 3

## LIMIT OUR INVOLVEMENT AND NEGOTIATE A WITHDRAWAL

The potential risks of increasing U.S. military involvement in Vietnam now clearly outweigh any likely benefits of our presence. The military situation has deteriorated to the point that even massive American troop reinforcements cannot guarantee victory. The present government in Saigon is an unstable military dictatorship that has little popular support. South Vietnam is not essential to the national security of the United States. Moreover, the fall of South Vietnam to the communists would not inevitably mean that the rest of Southeast Asia would follow, like a row of mindless dominos. Each nation in this region has a unique political, economic, and strategic position. Many will continue to remain strong U.S. allies regardless of the fate of Vietnam. Our most important global interests, which lie in Western Europe and the Western Hemisphere, will be threatened if our economic and military resources are committed to a costly, and probably hopeless, land war in Asia. The longer that we are in Vietnam and the larger our involvement, the greater the stakes become and the more difficult it will be to withdraw. U.S. prestige and credibility would be seriously damaged by such an outcome.

History warns us of the difficulty of fighting a successful war against insurgents in the jungles and rice paddies of Asia. Even though the French had overwhelming military superiority, they were unable to suppress the revolt of the Vietminh, and eventually were forced by pressures at home to retreat in a humiliating manner. Experts on guerrilla warfare maintain that defeating an insurgency requires a 10 to 1 advantage in troops. For the United States, that means a commitment of more than 500,000 soldiers in South Vietnam for many years. In 1954, U.S. army commanders and congressional leaders argued convincingly against sending in American forces to stave off the French defeat in Indochina. Their arguments hold true today. Even the proponents of increased American military involvement offer no prospect of a quick victory. The steady decline of public support during the Korean War demonstrates that the American people are unlikely to tolerate a long, costly, indecisive war for limited objectives in Asia again. Finally, the Strategic Bombing Survey done by the U.S. Army in Germany after World War II showed that even massive bombing by itself does not destroy the will to fight in a determined opponent. North Vietnam, which is less industrialized than Germany was, is less likely to bend before such an air campaign. In fact, bombing might heighten the country's resolve. Pentagon studies have estimated that U.S. bombing missions cost the United States \$10 for \$1 worth of damage to North Vietnam.

No additional American forces beyond those already promised should be sent to Vietnam. The bombing campaign against North Vietnam should be reduced, as should be the scope of U.S. military operations in the south. Meanwhile, we should seek a negotiated settlement that would enable us to gradually reduce our presence in South Vietnam. We must cut our losses, but not at the cost of seriously damaging American honor and credibility.

Since the initial U.S. commitment to South Vietnam in the mid-1950s was clearly linked to the development of a free, democratic Vietnam, the American people will understand that the present military dictatorship in Saigon no longer can justly claim that commitment. How can American soldiers be expected to die for a government that the South Vietnamese people themselves are reluctant to fight for? The United States has done all that could reasonably be expected. Gradually withdrawing now represents not a retreat, but a realistic reappraisal of a situation that has changed drastically since our commitments in 1956-1961.



Scott Long in the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*. Reprinted with permission.

---

## FROM THE RECORD

*Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 26, 1954:*

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff desire to point out their belief that, from the point of view of the United States, with reference to the Far East as a whole, Indochina is

devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces in Indochina would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities."

*Letter by President Dwight Eisenhower to South Vietnamese President Diem, October 1, 1954:*

"I am accordingly instructing the American Ambassador to Vietnam to examine with you in your capacity as Chief of Government, how an intelligent program of American aid given directly to your government can

serve to assist Vietnam in its present hour of trial, provided that your Government is prepared to give assurances as to the standards of performance it would be able to maintain."

*Campaign speech by President Lyndon Johnson, fall 1964:*

"We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian

boys ought to be doing for themselves."

*Memorandum by C.I.A. Director John McCone, April 2, 1965:*

"I feel that the latter decision [to increase U.S. ground forces in the South] is correct only if our air strikes against the North are sufficiently heavy and damaging really to hurt the North Vietnamese....The strikes to date have not caused a change in the North Vietnamese policy of directing Viet Cong insurgency, infiltrating cadres and supplying material. If anything, the strikes to date have hardened their attitude....On the other hand,

we must look with care to our position under a program of slowly ascending tempo of air strikes. With the passage of each day and each week, we can expect increasing pressure to stop the bombing. This will come from various elements of the American public, from the press, the United Nations and world opinion. Therefore time will run against us in this operation and I think the North Vietnamese are counting on this."

*Memorandum by Under Secretary of State George Ball, July 1, 1965:*

"The South Vietnamese are losing the war to the Viet Cong. No one can assure you [President Johnson] that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force them to the conference table on our terms, no matter how many hundred thousand white, foreign (U.S.) troops we deploy. No one has demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war — which is at the same time a civil war between Asians — in jungle terrain in the midst of a population that refuses cooperation to the white forces (and the South Vietnamese) and thus provides a great intelligence advantage to the other side....Should we limit our liabilities in South Vietnam and try to find a way out with minimal long-term costs? The alternative — no matter what we

may wish it to be — is almost certainly a protracted war involving an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces, mounting U.S. casualties, no assurance of a satisfactory outcome, and a serious danger of escalation at the end of the road....Once large numbers of U.S. troops are committed to direct combat, they will begin to take heavy casualties in a war they are ill-equipped to fight in a non-cooperative if not downright hostile countryside. Once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot — without national humiliation — stop short of achieving our complete objectives. Of the two possibilities I think humiliation would be more likely than the achievement

of our objectives — even after we have paid terrible costs....We [should] seek a compromise settlement which achieves less than our stated objectives and thus cut our losses while we still have freedom of maneuver to do so...

"I strongly urge the following program....complete all deployments already announced...but decide not to go beyond a total of 72,000 men represented by this figure. Restrict the combat role of the American forces....Continue bombing in the North but avoid the Hanoi-Haiphong area and any targets nearer to the Chinese border than those already struck....In any political approaches so far, we have been the prisoners of whatever South Vietnamese government that was momentarily in power. If we are ever to move toward a settlement, it will probably be because the South Vietnamese government pulls the rug out from under us and makes its own deal or because we go forward quietly without advance prearrangement with Saigon. So far we have not given the other side a reason to believe there is any flexibility in our negotiating approach. And the other side has been unwilling to accept what in their

terms is complete capitulation. Now is the time to start some serious diplomatic feelers looking towards a solution based upon some application of a self determination principle...that would permit the Viet Cong some hope of achieving some of their political objectives through local elections or some other device....Before moving to any formal conference we should be prepared to agree once the conference is started: the U.S. will stand down its bombing of the North, the South Vietnamese will initiate no offensive operations in the South, and the DRV [North Vietnam] will stop terrorism and other aggressive action against the South....On balance, I believe we would more seriously undermine the effectiveness of our world leadership by continuing the war and deepening our involvement than by pursuing a carefully plotted course towards a compromise solution....We have not persuaded either our friends or allies that our further involvement is essential to the defense of freedom in the cold war. Moreover, the [more] men we deploy in the jungles of South Vietnam, the more we contribute to a growing world anxiety and mistrust."

*Summary of private remarks by Clark Clifford, unofficial presidential advisor and friend to President Johnson, July 25, 1965:*

"We must not create an impression that we have decided to replace the South Vietnamese and win a ground war in Vietnam....What happened in Vietnam is no one person's fault. The bombing might have worked, but it hasn't....A failure to engage in an all-out war will not lower our international prestige. This is not the last inning in the struggle against communism. We must pick those spots where the stakes are highest for us and we have the greatest ability to prevail...[I] don't believe we can win in South Vietnam. If we send

in 100,000 more, the North Vietnamese will meet us. If the North Vietnamese run out of men the Chinese will send in volunteers. Russia and China don't intend for us to win this war. If we don't win [then], it is a catastrophe. If we lose 50,000 men it will ruin us. Five years, billions of dollars, 50,000 men, it is not for us. At the end of the monsoon [season], quietly probe and search out with the other countries — by moderating our position — to allow us to get out. [I] can't see anything but catastrophe for my country."

*Testimony by George Kennan, architect of the "containment" policy toward the Soviet Union, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 1966, in which he repeats the criticisms that he had voiced the previous year:*

"If it were not for the considerations of prestige that arise precisely out of our present involvement, even a situation in which South Vietnam was controlled exclusively by the Vietcong, while regrettable, and no doubt morally unwarranted, would not, in my opinion, present dangers great enough to justify our direct military involvement....I think it should be our government's aim to liquidate this involvement just as

soon as this can be done without inordinate damage to our own prestige or to the stability of conditions in that area....I have a fear that our thinking about this whole problem is still affected by some sort of illusions about invincibility on our part, that there is no problem in the world which we, if we wanted to devote enough of our resources to it, could not solve."

---

## **THE UNITED STATES SHOULD TAKE THE FOLLOWING STEPS:**

1. Halt any further buildup of American forces in Vietnam beyond those already promised.
2. Reduce the bombing against North Vietnam and the scope of American military operations in South Vietnam.
3. Seek a negotiated settlement with Hanoi that would permit U.S. forces to gradually turn over their duties to the South Vietnamese.
4. Distance itself from the present Saigon government.
5. Assure the American people that our original commitment to a democratic South Vietnam has been fulfilled and, given the nature of the present military dictatorship in Saigon, is no longer binding.

## **LESSONS FROM HISTORY**

- The disastrous French experience in Indochina showed the difficulty of a non-Asian army defeating a native guerrilla force with popular backing.
- The French Indochina War also illustrated the domestic political unrest that such a war can generate in a democratic society.
- Successful anti-guerrilla campaigns require substantial troop commitments and a long-term effort.
- The Korean War demonstrated that the American people will not support a drawn-out, costly, inconclusive war for limited objectives.

## **ARGUMENTS FOR OPTION 3**

- The loss of American lives and the expenditure of American resources will be halted if we disengage.
- Even with massive American military involvement, the war in South Vietnam is likely to be unwinnable.
- U.S. strategic interests elsewhere are endangered by an overcommitment of American resources in a country which is not essential to our security.
- U.S. interests in East Asia can be protected even if South Vietnam falls under communist control.
- Continued involvement in Vietnam will raise the stakes and make disengagement in the future far more difficult and costly.