

Moral Words, Immoral Deeds: The Ethical Aspect of American Decision Making in Vietnam

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In June of 1967, one of the men most involved in the American war in Vietnam was coming to terms with the realities of the war. On the 17th of June, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara commissioned an investigation into the nature of American involvement in Indochina. The resulting study--officially entitled the "History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy," but which would be better known as the "Pentagon Papers"--was supposed to remain highly secretive, used only by the Secretary of Defense and his successors to inform their decision making regarding Vietnam. That secrecy was short-lived. In June of 1971 *The New York Times* began to publish articles based on leaked versions of the study. After a short but hotly contested legal battle, the Supreme Court ruled that the *Times* and *The Washington Post* could continue their series on the study. The study revealed to a wide audience a decision making process that was at times confused, inconsistent, and based on faulty assumptions and data. More worryingly for many Americans, however, was the revelation that the explanations and justifications for the war presented to the American people over the past decade were sharply different from those that were presented during the decision-making process. It became clear that key actors in the United States government, including President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy had intentionally misled the American people over the nature and reasoning for American involvement in Vietnam.¹

Three of these actors: McNamara, Rusk, and Bundy (as well as a somewhat ancillary actor, William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and brother to McGeorge) will feature prominently throughout. These three--and their various

¹ Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers: As Published by the New York Times: Based on Investigative Reporting by Neil Sheehan* (New York, NY: Racehorse Publishing, 2017), xi-xviii.

subordinates--wielded an incredible degree of power over American decision making on Vietnam. By studying their specific decisions and thoughts, one is able to gain a deep understanding of the wider discussion surrounding the war.

Chronologically, this study shall primarily be concerned with the period of decision making from February of 1964 to March of 1965. February of 1964 was the beginning of serious discussion in the Johnson administration of large-scale American military intervention in Vietnam. While the prospect of widening the war was not new in February of 1964, it was limited primarily to the military, and was not well received by the civilian decision makers of the time. General Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed a widening of the war in a memo to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara the month prior, January of 1964..² However, McNamara's response was to largely disregard the recommendations, at least for the time. It was not until February that the civilian decision makers at the Pentagon and the National Security Council began to discuss these types of proposals.

March of 1965 is a much easier date to justify as the endpoint. The first American combat troops arrived in Vietnam in March of 1965. After this point it becomes somewhat nonsensical to study the process behind Americanization, as the war was fundamentally Americanized. It was not until the move towards Vietnamization under President Richard Nixon that large scale American military commitment was widely questioned as a method by which the United States would intervene in Vietnam.

Questioning the motivations that led to American military involvement in Vietnam is hardly a new field, nor a narrow one. One of the lesser-studied aspects of the decision making process, however, is that which can be described as "moral," although this is a term which requires some explanation. A useful place to begin is a negative definition, by excluding the

² Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 284-5.

aspects of decision making which are not being considered “moral.” To do this, we can turn to a draft memorandum of March, 1965 by Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, in which he outlined to Secretary McNamara the American aims in Vietnam. This memo provides perhaps the clearest enumeration of the various American aims were, and lists them as follows:

70%--To avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).

20%--To keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.

10%--To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.

ALSO--To emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used.

NOT--To "help a friend," although it would be hard to stay in if asked out.³

The first two aims--avoiding a humiliating defeat and keeping territory out of Chinese hands--are not explicitly couched in moral terms. That is not to say, however, that they were not implicitly moral. Indeed, the question of the moral status of the Cold War in general is hardly a settled question. Consider, for instance, Michael Hunt's *Lyndon Johnson's War*, in which he not only describes the Cold War as a crusade, but also contextualizes the Vietnam War specifically through Lederer and Burdick's apocalyptic portrayal of communism as detailed in their bestseller *The Ugly American*.⁴ While it is an interesting question, and certainly bears some relation to the specific question at hand, to assess the moral weight of the wider Cold War is slightly too grandiose a task. The fourth point, emerging without unacceptable taint, has more to do with the methods employed rather than the reasons for being involved in the first place. The methods and the reasons are not wholly unrelated. Indeed, the American methods, namely the shift from advising to bombing to fighting, evolved as the perceived mission in Vietnam changed.

However, the changes in methods were results of the changes in reasoning for intervention. The

³ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 442.

⁴ Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945 - 1968 ; A Critical Issue* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1996), 4-6.

decision was not made to transition from advising to bombing and then justify that methodological shift with a post-hoc shift in reasoning. The fifth point suggests the negation of moral motivations--the United States was not interested in helping a friend. Rather, we should focus on the third aim, the 10% McNamara identifies as permitting the people to enjoy a free life. This point is not concerned with geopolitics or Cold War tensions, and its object is people, not governments or economic systems. It is in this aim that we can find what we are calling "moral" reasons for intervening in Vietnam--attempting to improve the life of the people of Vietnam, and viewing that attempt as an end in and of itself (rather than, say, improving the lives of people in Vietnam so they serve American interests in some way).

However, simply understanding that there were some moral concerns regarding Vietnam is hardly an interesting question. Indeed, were that the only question, there would be little else to say beyond: this moral aspect was obviously a part of American decision making, albeit a fairly small one. Instead, the main question worth investigating is that raised by the leaking of the Pentagon papers: the disjunct between actual decision making (usually done in private) and the public portrayal of that decision making. To that end, we must determine how significant the moral aspect was in the decision making process, then compare that to how frequently the moral aspect appeared in public discussions of the decision making process. Put simply, was the decision to Americanize the war in Vietnam misrepresented and inaccurately portrayed as being more motivated by morals than it actually was? Furthermore, if it was misrepresented, who was responsible for that and why did they misrepresent something so important to the American people?

It needs little motivation that the United States involvement in the Vietnam War remains central both to popular and academic study. In his paradigmatic survey of the war, George Herring speaks of the “millions of pages of documents” which have resulted in “thousands of books and articles.”⁵ These have covered an incredible range of topics, from biographies of virtually all key actors to military histories of battles great and small to intersectional studies of race and gender. To ask and answer new questions--or at least, to approach old questions in new ways--is a daunting task. Yet one need not undermine the entire canon to add something of value, and indeed I am far too aware of my stature to take aim at any particular scholar in this field. Instead, it is my hope to simply shed new light on a very well trod history: the moral aspect of the decision-making process which ultimately resulted in the direct commitment of American military forces to a lengthy, costly, and ultimately unsuccessful war in Vietnam.

The literature on this point is unfortunately rather sparse. Moral concerns were such a small part of the overall American decision to Americanize the Vietnam War that they have been largely neglected. Frederick Logevall’s 1999 study *Choosing War* covers a similar time period--what he calls the “Long 1964” from August 1963 to the end of February 1965--but is primarily focused on the question of credibility. It takes a more international approach, interrogating whether foreign leaders (including allies from Canada to France as well as the oppositional powers of the Soviet Union and China) accepted the American position that Vietnam was the test case for American credibility in protecting its allies.⁶ Mark Moyar, in his 2009 work *Triumph Forsaken*, explicitly ties himself to the revisionist interpretation, in direct contrast to the orthodoxy of Logevall. To that end, he actually contests some of the evidence to be used in this study, as much of it is key evidence for the orthodox tradition--a fact which might

⁵ George Herring, *America's Longest War*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), ix.

⁶ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2001).

be somewhat revealing about which school this particular study is more in line with.

Nevertheless, Moyars primary contention with this evidence, however, does not bear significant relation to the question of the importance of moral motivations. Instead, it is that the evidence overstates the importance of credibility to American decision making, and understates the value of “the distribution of power within Southeast Asia.”⁷ Andrew Preston takes a slightly different approach, although closer to Logevall than Moyar, in his 2006 *The War Council*. This work is primarily a history of the American decision to go to war, but is told in an almost biographical method focusing on National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. Preston suggests that the social and ideological cohesion (which turned to ideological rigidity) of the American foreign policy apparatus imparted on it the axiomatic understanding that American and global interests were the same. From this, he suggests that this understanding formed the basis of the primary motivation for American involvement in Vietnam: a threat to any country's national security was a threat to American national security, and America was forced to respond to a threat to its national security.⁸ While this explanation does not fit neatly into the category of “credibility,” it is certainly adjacent, and more importantly distant from any explanation involving morality.

As mentioned, there is incredibly extensive scholarship on the Vietnam war, and this hardly accounts for even an iota of it. That being said, these three works were chosen to impart a sense of the main issue dividing the orthodox from the revisionist. The orthodox (as exemplified by Logevall but containing a large majority of scholars, including but not limited to Young, Mark Bradely, and Nick Turse) tends to view the war as unjust, so prefers credibility as an explanation due to its spurious nature. The revisionists (as exemplified by Moyar, but also including Tuong

⁷ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 290.

⁸ Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Vu, Gary Kulik, and Gerard DeGroot) tend to view the war as abstractly just but poorly executed, so favor explanations more based on territorial integrity, an explanation which one has to admit is more 'just' than abstract notions of credibility. Finally, as with most historical questions, there is a nearly limitless spectrum of interpretations between the two, so it is impractical to attempt to provide any sort of commentary on the spectrum as a whole.

In order to determine the moral aspect of both the public and the private spheres, the two shall be analyzed separately, with different key primary sources categorized into either public or private. Before that can happen, however, the distinction between the two must be made clear. It is no secret in the study of the Vietnam War that the American people were, to a greater or lesser extent, misled by the government about the nature and the extent of American involvement in Vietnam. To slightly misuse a phrase from the time, this credibility gap between what the American government was doing and what it was saying is of interest here. To understand what exactly the gap was, there shall be two narrative accounts offered. The first shall be of the private decision making on Vietnam of the President and his advisers, and the second shall be of the public discussion of Vietnam by the President and his advisers. Through these two different accounts of what is nominally the same action (that is, American intervention in Vietnam), the disjunct between the moral claims the government made and the moral realities of their decision making.

The story of private decision making begins with Secretary McNamara's memorandum of March 16, 1964 entitled "South Vietnam." Having just returned from a visit to South Vietnam, McNamara was deeply troubled by the apparent lack of success the South Vietnamese were having. Ngo Dinh Diem--the leader of South Vietnam that the United States had reluctantly supported--had been deposed and murdered that past November, and Generals were jockeying for

power in Saigon amidst a worsening military situation. To that end, McNamara drafted a memo to President Johnson detailing the American objectives in Vietnam, which were “an independent non-Communist South Vietnam,” which would “accept outside assistance” of various forms to the ends of maintaining its independence. The only given reason for this goal is threefold: preventing Southeast Asia from either becoming dominated by Communism, accommodating Communism to the detriment of American interests, or becoming dominated by forces which were not Communist but were likely to become Communist. McNamara proceeds to list a variety of countries that would be threatened--from India to Japan to New Zealand--and ends with the evaluation that South Vietnam would become a “test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation meet a Communist ‘War of Liberation.’”⁹

Accepting that the United States would likely need to intervene to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam, the administration devoted significant attention over the next few months to creating a plan for military intervention. The plan that was ultimately enacted can be summarized generally as gradual escalation involving the commitment of naval and air power¹⁰, although it would be reconsidered and scaled down in June once an American plane was destroyed¹¹. Plans would ultimately have to be reconsidered again following an altercation on August 2nd that has been known since as the Gulf of Tonkin incident.¹²

⁹ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 286.

¹⁰ For a more thorough discussion of the different plans considered, Francis Bator’s *No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection* in *Diplomatic History* provides a detailed account of the options available, as well as explanation as to why President Johnson ultimately decided on the plan that was enacted. He also offers an argument as to domestic moral considerations involving President Johnson’s plan for a Great Society, a theme running somewhat parallel to this paper, and the subject of an H-Diplo Roundtable.

¹¹ Marolda, Edward J. 2014. “Grand Delusion: U.S. Strategy and the Tonkin Gulf Incident.” *Naval History* 28 (4): 24–31.

¹² Weighing in heavily on the veracity of events during the Gulf of Tonkin incident is a spurious prospect; Secretary McNamara himself has argued in sources ranging from the documentary *The Fog of War* to his memoir *In Retrospect* that the true events of August 2nd, 1964 are unknown and perhaps unknowable.

The immediate aftermath of an apparent attack on American forces was a significant reimagining of American involvement in the region. A key example of this is an August 18, 1964 Cable from the United States Mission in Saigon to the State Department. When describing the problems facing the United States in South Vietnam, the only purpose for American involvement that the mission presents relates not to South Vietnam itself, but to possible confrontations with North Vietnam and China. The cable in fact makes quite clear that the primary interest of the United States was not to help South Vietnam reunify with the North through conquest, but rather to prevent the South from being reunified with the North through conquest.¹³

Receiving such worrying communications from Saigon, Washington was also at work attempting to articulate a response. Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton produced to that end a September 3, 1964 memo entitled “Plan of Action for South Vietnam.” In this memo, McNaughton details the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, citing the ever-shrinking territory under meaningful government control, as well as the war weariness of the population and their unwillingness to inform government authorities about Viet Cong activities. After noting these developments with concern, McNaughton outlines the American objective as being “to reverse the present downward trend,” that is, to help the South Vietnamese government. However, McNaughton also notes that in the event of failure, there was an alternative objective which he described as being able to “emerge from the situation with as good an image as possible in U.S., allied, and enemy eyes.”¹⁴

The growth of American presence in Vietnam in response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident was not unchecked. On November 1, 1964, the Viet Cong attacked the American air base at Biên Hòa, killing and wounding American servicemen and destroying or damaging around 30 aircraft.

¹³ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 358-359.

¹⁴ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 364-365.

The attack came as a devastating blow to both American and South Vietnamese morale. David Garr, who at the time was serving as a translator for the Marine Corp in South Vietnam recalls General William Westmoreland--the commander of MACV--describing it as a “little Pearl Harbor.” Mere weeks beforehand, on August 17th, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp Jr., in a memo to the Joint Chiefs, expressed that an attack on American air bases in Vietnam would be a “serious psychological defeat,” regardless of the military outcomes.¹⁵

In response to these attacks, William Bundy drafted a document on November 5, 1964 entitled “Conditions for Action and Key Actions Surrounding Any Decision.” As the name suggests, in it Bundy details the various factors that might influence American decision making, in particular the role of international allies. Most of the draft is dedicated to who should be consulted (both people and countries) and when they should be consulted; he rather amusingly notes that the Philippines--a key member of SEATO and an important ally in Vietnam--should be consulted “not necessarily before we have made up our minds.” Specifically regarding American aims though, Bundy writes that President Johnson was thinking of using the aims stated in the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to justify a course of military action that would “show toughness and hold the line.”¹⁶

Concurrently, John McNaughton drafted a paper “Action for South Vietnam,” a paper which ultimately would form the basis of the memo referenced earlier. Similarly to previous documents McNaughton detailed the dire situation in Vietnam, and speculated that within a very short time-frame, the Viet Cong would gain de facto control of South Vietnam and the government would cease to exercise meaningful authority. He outlined the American aims in Vietnam as following:

¹⁵ David G. Marr, “Early US Marine Operations in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 15, no. 2 (May 2020): pp. 87-151, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2020.15.2.87>.

¹⁶ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 372-373.

- a) To protect U.S. Reputation as a counter-subversion guarantor.
- b) To avoid domino effect especially in Southeast Asia.
- c) To keep South Vietnamese territory from Red hands.
- d) To emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods.¹⁷

In an almost painfully allegorical way, this paper presented multiple options for how to achieve these aims, but the sections in which the different methods were to be analyzed was left blank, with the promise that analysis was to be provided at a later point.

The various drafts and memos were ultimately synthesized into a document circulated on November 29, 1964, the so-called “Final Draft Position Paper.” The paper notes that American objectives in Vietnam were largely unchanged by the developments of Biên Hòa, and reiterates these unchanged objectives. It cites an interest in ending Viet Cong operations in the South, as well as establishing an “independent and secure South Vietnam” that was free to accept American assistance. Interestingly, it also asserts that the United States had an interest in preserving other non-Communist states in Southeast, specifically Laos in accordance with the 1962 Geneva Accord. This is a slight departure from much of the earlier planning, which focused primarily on South Vietnam.¹⁸

The next few months in Vietnam saw a significant increase in American air presence, primarily in the form of bombing. President Johnson authorized Operation Barrel Roll, which began a series of bombing on the 14th of December, and attempted to halt movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos, in flagrant violation of the 1962 Geneva Accord referenced in the Final Draft Position Paper¹⁹. In January of 1965, the South Vietnamese army suffered a

¹⁷ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 374-375.

¹⁸ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 382-383.

¹⁹ Operation Barrel Roll was therefore a closely kept secret for the duration of the war. Despite this, there were press reports that used the term “Barrel Roll” in January of 1965 following the loss of two American planes over Laos. For more on this secret air war, William P. Head’s “Dirty Little Secret in the Land of a Million Elephants,” in *Air Power History* provides a thorough account.

humiliating defeat at Binh Gia, and in February the Viet Cong attacked the American military advisers compound in Pleiku. The attack on Pleiku marked a significant shift in American policy, and ultimately triggered what the Pentagon Papers referred to as a “swift, though long contemplated Presidential decision to give an ‘appropriate and fitting response.’”²⁰ On March 8th, 1965, the first American Marines landed at Da Nang, beginning American combat operations in Vietnam.

The mere presence of American combat troops, however, does not mean that American policy was entirely decided. Indeed, a few weeks later, John McNaughton sent McNamara a draft memo entitled “Plan of Action for South Vietnam.” As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, this document is perhaps the most clear enumeration of American aims in Vietnam, as it lists them explicitly and provides them relative weighting against each other. To recapitulate, McNaughton outlined the American aims in Vietnam as “70%--To avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor). 20%--To keep SVN (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands. 10%--To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.”²¹ As was said prior, McNaughton makes it clear that helping the people of South Vietnam is *a* goal of the United States, but to call it *the* goal stretches credulity to the point of breaking.

There is one new aspect of McNaughton’s plan that is relevant here, that being the so-called ‘good doctor’ theory. The basic premise of the good doctor theory is that war in Vietnam had very little chance to actually succeed, so the United States was primarily concerned with keeping up the appearance of a ‘good doctor,’ who had “kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly” in an attempt to save the patient--South Vietnam--who despite America’s best efforts was ultimately doomed. McNaughton further goes

²⁰ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 317

²¹ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 442

on to elaborate that being a good doctor was not specifically aimed at helping Vietnam. It is true that the South Vietnamese were one of the beneficiaries (he writes that their “morale must be buoyed”), but there were three others: the Communists who must feel pressure, American allies who must trust the U.S. to protect them, and the American public whose consent was necessary to expend American resources in distant wars.²²

One final important step is when McGeorge Bundy sent a memo to President Johnson regarding the President’s potential decision on using force in Vietnam. Of his various suggestions to the President, one stands out sharply: he suggested to the President that the “decision to use force, backed by resolute and extensive deployment...gives us the best present chance of avoiding the actual use of such force.”²³ The argument that the deployment of military forces to prevent the use of military forces seems somewhat at odds with the previous documents that seem to suggest military force would almost have to be used to preserve the image of the United States, who could not rightly claim to have defended South Vietnam without taking a few casualties. However, this document does serve an important purpose later in an argument concerning appeasement as both a concept and a historical lesson.

The overarching aims expressed in private documentation is in large part in line with McNaughton’s March memo--protecting America’s reputation as a guarantor (to both allies and enemies), while preventing the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. Absent in any significant way is the idea of helping the the people of South Vietnam lead better, freer lives. A telling example of this is the ways in which the United States planned for failure in Vietnam--this is not to say that the intention was to lose the war, but rather there was simply awareness that the war could very easily go awry. McNaughton’s plan of March, 1965, for instance, introduces the

²² Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 448.

²³ Johnson Library, National Security File, Aides File, McGeorge Bundy, Luncheon with the President, Vol 1, Part 1.

‘good doctor’ theory which is premised on probably defeat in Vietnam. This elaboration expands on his September, 1964 memo in which he argues that it is important for the United States to be able to extract themselves from Vietnam without irreparable damage to their reputation.

Furthermore, McNaughton’s repeated emphasis on “taint,” the damage that might be done to American reputation through methods used in Vietnam makes it clear that the main beneficiary of an American war in Vietnam would be America. This lack of concern for South Vietnam in and of itself is further crystalized in the Cable from the US Mission in Saigon, which explicitly affirmed that the United States had no interest in helping reunify Vietnam, and was merely concerned with staving off the disaster that would be a wholly unified and Communist Vietnam.

Also present throughout are the ‘classic’ Cold War themes. These include evocations of domino theory--the belief that one country falling to Communism might lead to its neighboring countries also falling to Communism, ultimately threatening key American allies in the region--as well as the specific fear of ‘Red China’ expanding its influence.

The story of the public portrayal of decision making begins slightly earlier, before Secretary McNamara had gone to visit Vietnam. Diem has still been deposed months earlier, Saigon is in chaos, and the war against the Viet Cong is going poorly.

On February 6th, 1964, Secretary McNamara--before he left for Vietnam--submitted a report to the Senate concerning defense appropriations for the 1965 fiscal year. He begins by detailing the various regions around the world in which the United States was engaged, including Southeast Asia. After making observations as to how Southeast Asia in general is torn “between their desire to be and independent and their fear of being overrun by the Chinese horde,” and that as such American policy in Southeast Asia “is simply to maintain the integrity and independence of the non-Communist nations.” Speaking of Vietnam in particular, he writes that “our help is

clearly wanted and we are deeply engaged in supporting the Vietnamese government and people in their war against the Communist Viet Cong.”²⁴

Later that month, on the 25th, President Johnson met with Secretary McNamara to prepare the latter’s speech for a congressional reception at the White House. In the wake of Congress authorizing significant new military expenditure--including purchasing a significant new quantity of bomber aircraft--President Johnson advises McNamara that were he giving the speech, he would say “that we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. Now, we could pull out of there, the dominoes would fall, and that part of the world would go to the Communists.” This is a fairly standard assertion of domino theory, and is in line with much of the private discussion surrounding Vietnam. That being said, Johnson does express reservations about getting tied down in a “in a third world war or another Korean action,” and suggests that American soldiers in Vietnam should only serve an advisory role, with an emphasis on training South Vietnamese soldiers and guarding American installations. To that end, Johnson explicitly stated that stopping the spread of communism in Vietnam was not achieved through “dropping bombs,” but through training the South Vietnamese, a statement which rings somewhat hollow in the context of the massive military expenditure he and McNamara were discussing. Johnson concluded their discussion of American aims by asserting that they “have a commitment to help the Vietnamese defend themselves.”²⁵ While that strand of argument--that the aim of the United States in Vietnam was not to fight, but to help the Vietnamese fight for themselves--may seem odd in the context of massively increasing military expenditure, it is a strand that continued to be repeated in public settings.

²⁴ United States Department Of Defense. *Statement of Secretary of Defense ... before the House Armed Services Committee on the ... Defense budget and ... program*. Washington, For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off. Periodical. <https://www.loc.gov/item/73642814/>.

²⁵ “Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara on 25 February 1964,” Tape WH6402.21, Citation #2191, Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Toward the Great Society, vol. 4, ed. Robert David Johnson and Kent B. Germany] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9040237>

Consider, for example, a memo of March 13, 1964 by National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. In it, he wrote to President Johnson advising him on the content of TV and Radio interviews concerning the situation in Vietnam. He stresses to Johnson that his comments ought to make clear the belief that “The right of people to choose their own course is exactly what we are supporting, and if foreign interference and subversion should end, the need for our help will end.”²⁶ This memo was sent a mere three days before McNamara wrote to President Johnson about his trip to Vietnam, wherein he described American aims as being primarily concerned with preventing Communist interference in Southeast Asia, rather than foreign interference in general.

On March 15th of that year, President Johnson was interviewed by CBS journalist Eric Sevareid about the situation in Vietnam. When asked if he shared his late predecessors views on the Domino Theory, Johnson agreed, but went further, arguing that intervening in South Vietnam was also about specifically helping the South Vietnamese, and that it was the “responsibility” of the United States to stay and help them.²⁷

Strikingly, the next key step in the story of the public portrayal of decision making is a draft resolution for Congress, rather than advice concerning speeches or interviews. On May 25, 1964, a draft of a resolution concerning American action in Southeast Asia. In this draft, there are laid out several reasons for which the United States was going to intervene in Vietnam. First, they cite the North Vietnamese violation of the “independence and territorial integrity of South Viet Nam,” as well as similar violations in Laos and Cambodia. Secondly, they assert that the United States “has no territorial, military, or political ambitions in Southeast Asia,” and only

²⁶ John P. Glennon, Edward C. Keefer, and Charles S. Sampson, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968* (Washington, D.C., DC: U.S. G.P.O., 1992), 139-140.

²⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, Volume 3, pp. 712.

want the countries therein to be “left in peace by their neighbors to work out their own destinies in their own way.”²⁸

A few days later, May 27th 1964, McGeorge Bundy met with President Johnson to discuss the recent diplomatic mission to Hanoi, the Seaborn Mission. During the discussion, President Johnson expressed his fears that the committing of American soldiers to Vietnam would lead to another war akin to the one in Korea. During their conversation, when the topic of sending more soldiers was raised, Bundy advised President Johnson to “make the threat without having made [his] own internal decision that [he] would actually carry it through.”²⁹ While this does not specifically relate to the purpose for getting involved in Vietnam, it is a striking example of McGeorge Bundy, one of the President’s most influential advisors on Vietnam, explicitly suggesting to the President that he should intentionally mislead others about his decision making process.

After the Gulf of Tonkin incident, President Johnson addressed the nation on television. After detailing the foggy details of the attack, President Johnson spends much of the speech discussing how “aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Vietnam” created a duty towards the government and people of South Vietnam for the Americans, and that the attack on American ships merely redoubled this duty and commitment, suggesting that the initial American purpose in Vietnam was to “support freedom and defend peace” for the Vietnamese people. He concludes by saying that “firmness in the right,” that is, the use of American military power towards their noble goal, was not just acceptable, but indispensable.³⁰

²⁸ Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 294-5.

²⁹ Glennon et al., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*.

³⁰ “August 4, 1964: Report on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident,” Miller Center, May 3, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/august-4-1964-report-gulf-tonkin-incident>.

This public argument of self-sufficiency for South Vietnam carried on into the new year, despite the beginning of the Barrel Roll (American bombing of Laos to prevent movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail) and the South Vietnamese defeat at Binh Gia. On January 3rd, 1965, Secretary of State Dean Rusk went on television to talk about the state of South Vietnam. While he did express frustration with the apparent lack of progress, he asserted that America widening the war in Vietnam would lead to the deaths of many Vietnamese, and expose the people and country of Vietnam to devastation “the end of which no one in any country could possibly see with assurance.” To that end, he suggested that the American goal in Vietnam was to assist the South Vietnamese in attaining the “unity” necessary to defeat the Viet Cong. He does suggest that one of the ways to preserve this unity is through preventing Communist infiltration from North Vietnam, and to that end the United States had already been bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail for 3 weeks.³¹ That bombing, however, was a closely held secret, despite accounts of the bombing being circulated in the media on January 14th.³²

The public-facing portrayal of American decision making here is significantly different than the private portrayal. We see many of the same themes--fear of the growing influence of Communist China, domino theory, territorial preservation of South Vietnam--but there are several new dimensions which were not present in much of the private discourse. Self determination appears as a relevant theme, the idea that the people of South Vietnam ought to be free to choose their own path (including, surely by coincidence, the freedom to ally with the United States). The resolution put before Congress to authorize further use of military force in Southeast Asia, often called the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, relied heavily on the notion that South Vietnam (and the rest of Indochina) ought to be free from external influence. This

³¹ Fishel, Wesley R. "Vietnam: The Broadening War." *Asian Survey* 6, no. 1 (1966): 49-58. doi:10.2307/2642260.

³² Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers*, 348.

certainly seems in line with McNaughton's third aim, of enabling the Vietnamese to live a freer life.

There was a slightly different way that this notion of self-determination was ultimately expressed, that being as the ability for South Vietnam to defend itself. Johnson, in his conversation with McNamara, made it clear that--at the time--the primary purpose of the American presence was to help the South Vietnamese do the fighting on their own.

Now it is clear that a moral concern for the people of Vietnam was primarily an argument for the public and had little bearing on the actual decision making process. In a sense, there are two different and mutually incompatible worlds: one in which the motivations for intervention in Vietnam were largely moral, based on the principles of helping the Vietnamese people lead peaceful and prosperous lives, the other in which the decision was based on a variety of theories of foreign policy and Cold War predilections. The question thus remains as to which of these worlds is the 'real' world? It is obvious that in one portrayal or the other people were not being transparent about their true beliefs on the situation, so some investigation into the actual beliefs of these actors is necessary, as well as a brief overview of the prevailing intellectual culture of the time--these men were intellectuals, with Ivy League pedigrees as both students and professors, and who both helped shape and were in turn shaped by the prevailing intellectual climate of the time.

In his 2004 work *Mandarins of the Future*, Nils Gilman describes the evolution of a peculiar strain of modernization theory that took root in the United States during the Cold War. He explicitly links modernization theory to foreign policy through the discussion of the MIT Center for International Studies (CIS), which featured as one of its founders Walt Rostow, a key figure in the decision to Americanize the war in Vietnam. Gilman identifies from the CIS a

specific theory of global economic development which suggested that countries undergoing a process of modernization might find themselves attracted to Communist ideology due to its organizational palatability. The ultimate solution that the CIS would ‘discover’ was that the economic and social development of underdeveloped areas was of the utmost importance in ensuring that Communism not take root. Indeed, Rostow went so far as to muse that in order to “win the guerilla war [in Vietnam], one must create at forced-draft the bone structure of a modern nation.” Furthermore, this strand of modernization theory collated the American social structure (with allegedly strong social and familial institutions) with the inability of Communism to take root, yet conversely also found the transition to a modern social structure to create the psychological stress necessary for Communist sympathies to take root.³³

The policy response of this intellectual strand is clear. If one believes that a society must achieve a certain level of social and economic development to be resistant to Communist influence, but also that the transition to such a level of development posed risks, one would be incentivized to have that transition occur as completely and as quickly as possible. In the case of South Vietnam, this would involve helping Vietnamese society develop into one reminiscent of American society--if one thinks back to McNaughton’s memo of March, 1965, one could phrase this goal as helping them enjoy a better, freer way of life.

Rostow helped design this school of thought, but he was not the sole person in contact with it. Indeed, the very purpose of the CIS was explicitly laid out by Princeton President Harold W. Dodds as being to work with the Department of State and other governmental agencies to create informed policy.³⁴ While the major actors--the Bundy’s, McNamara, Johnson,

³³ Gilman, Nils. *Mandarins of the Future : Modernization Theory in Cold War America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. ProQuest Ebook Central, 155-169.

³⁴ Stanley Levey, “Six of Faculty Leaving Yale for Princeton in Policy Split,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1951, pp. 1-18.

McNaughton, among others--did not work at the CIS, many government officials had. Roger Hillsman, for example, served as the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (the position William Bundy would occupy after him) after working at CIS.³⁵ While Hillsman left public service for a job at Columbia, his impact on Vietnam policy was pronounced--he had been one of the chief architects of Cable 243, the cable which gave tacit approval for Vietnamese generals to overthrow and ultimately murder Ngo Dinh Diem. Through shady bureaucratic practices, such as sending drafts when higher ranking officials were out of town and misleading officials about who had approved the cable, these lower ranking officials (including W. Averell Harriman and Michael Forrestal) were able to enact policy that almost certainly would not have been agreed to by the Department of Defense, who still valued Diem for his capacity to fight.³⁶ However, the cable was sent, with Hillsman believing that deposing Diem was necessary to create a more stable civil society in Vietnam (a stable civil society being necessary to prevent communism from taking root). While Moyar's thesis that this was a turning point which ruined American chances for success in Vietnam is slightly beyond the scope here, it is undeniable that the deposing of Diem ultimately led to a worsening situation in Vietnam (which was already deteriorating following crucial failures at Ap Bac and with the Strategic Hamlet Program) and a subsequent increase in American involvement.³⁷ The real world effects of this intellectual movement are clear.

The ways in which the holders of various offices viewed their offices also bears some weight. Both McNamara and Bundy significantly reformed the ways in which their respective offices interacted with the rest of the government, largely to increase the power of their positions

³⁵ Marquis Who's Who, *Who's Who in America, 1984-1985*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Marquis Who's Who, 1984), 1501.

³⁶ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, 238-243

³⁷ David W.P. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2006), 188-193.

and ensure their personal involvement in the decision making process. James Roherty, in a thorough analysis of the position of Secretary of Defense, outlines two key phases that the position went through. Under President Truman, the Secretaries of Defense Forrestal, Lovett, and Gates were so-called “generalists,” believing it was the duty of the Secretary of Defense to help create policy while balancing the different aspects (scientific, logistic, political, etc.) of the military. They worked closely with President Truman to design and implement policy, and worked hard against a somewhat belligerent Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to ensure civilian control of the military.³⁸ Under President Eisenhower, the Secretaries of Defense Wilson and McElroy took on a more “functionalist” approach. They believed--or were made to believe by President Eisenhower, a military man himself--that the Secretary of Defense existed to implement policy, and the role was largely managerial. They spent their tenure solving administrative problems and attempting to ensure the Department of Defense functioned efficiently.³⁹ McNamara had a different approach which attempted to combine the two--that is, he wanted to both create and implement policy. However, Roherty faults McNamara for allowing policy to become too managerial. The managerial reforms that McNamara brought to the Department of Defense resulted in its ‘manager,’ the Secretary of Defense, having near total control of the policy. Therefore a deficiency in the manager would be amplified as a deficiency in the policy.⁴⁰ McGeorge Bundy was to have a similar effect on the position of National Security Adviser. Under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, the Adviser served as a facilitator of policy. President Kennedy, however, wanted more from Bundy. He wanted a contributor who helped create policy and was equal to a full cabinet member, rather than someone who was subordinate to the

³⁸ James Michael Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara: A Study of the Role of the Secretary of Defense* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 62.

³⁹ Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara*, 47.

⁴⁰ Roherty, *Decisions of Robert S. McNamara*, 66.

cabinet.⁴¹ Bundy was able to take this power and cement it further under President Johnson, ensuring that the National Security Adviser was rivaled only by the Secretary of Defense in creating policy. This consolidation of power was so pronounced, that after November of 1963 (When President Johnson assumed the office) “fewer people actually conducted U.S. foreign policy...and those who did were concentrated at the highest levels,” demonstrated by the National Security Council becoming far less important than the National Security Adviser.⁴² This discussion of the consolidation and primacy of the Secretary of Defense and National Security Adviser serves two purposes: first, it provides a justification for the upcoming biographical focus on McNamara and Bundy, and second, it helps further the point that these two men had such significant power over both the creation and implementation of policy that their personal beliefs and values would be heavily reflected in the national policy.

Despite their wildly different circumstances in life (Bundy being a child of one of the most established and wealthy families in Boston and McNamara being so poor that he coasted his car dangerously down hills to save money on gas), there are many key similarities in their lives. Perhaps the most important similarity though was a shared desire for conformity. Both McNamara and Bundy had formative experiences in their life which required them to suppress their personal beliefs and adopt a facade in order to be accepted. For example, when McNamara was on the faculty at Harvard Business School a straw poll was conducted about the 1940 presidential election. Only three of the faculty voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt, as his New Deal was seen as antithetical to the values of business. McNamara was one of the three who voted for FDR, and it is a vote he said he made out of conscience. He did not reveal this fact until being interviewed in the 1990’s, over 50 years later.⁴³ Similarly, while working at Ford, McNamara was

⁴¹ Preston, *The War Council*, 36.

⁴² Preston, *The War Council*, 37.

⁴³Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: the Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 27.

forced to hide his political views from the rest of the company. There was a longstanding tradition at Ford to donate to Republican candidates and even a dedicated employee to facilitate it! He recalls it being an implicit contract with Ford--so long as he continued to serve the company well, they would not ask questions about his political beliefs⁴⁴. In another incident, his wife had written a very stern letter to Ford concerning their unsafe testing practices. While McNamara was proud of his wife, and was himself a staunch advocate for safety (campaigning to include seatbelts and other safety features in all Ford models), he did not admit to the company that it was his wife who had written the letter.⁴⁵ Deborah Shapley, who interviewed McNamara in the 1990's, put it more simply: McNamara lies. She noted that during their interviews, he would lie reflexively, sometimes for no discernable purpose. Other times, his lies would undermine other stories he had told during the interview or in memoirs and speeches. During the waning years of McNamara's term in the Pentagon, there was common wisdom in the State Department and press: "don't believe a word McNamara says."⁴⁶

Bundy was a man similarly disposed to not present his true feelings on a situation. While at Yale, he and his brother, William, were both active members of the political scene on campus, with both identifying as liberals, or even socialists at different points in their life. Yet despite holding views that were not in the center of the political spectrum, McGeorge and William both consistently cast themselves as being non-ideological. They would write polemics criticising harshly both right and left wing politics. William Kunstler, their contemporary at Yale, noted that the Bundy's personified the "ideal Yale student" in that they were able to fit into the aggressively apolitical environment at Yale.⁴⁷ This emphasis on conformity was not new. While a student at

⁴⁴ Robert Strange McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: the Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1996), 12.

⁴⁵ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, 51-60.

⁴⁶ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, xi.

⁴⁷ Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2000), 62-64.

Groton, McGeorge was in an environment where Joe Alsop, a classmate, recalled that “independence, in almost any form, was punished,” and conformity was one of the foremost values that was taught.⁴⁸

Both McNamara and Bundy also believed strongly in lofty ideals. McNamara was raised in a strict Protestant environment where giving money to charitable causes was important, despite their poverty, and service to a higher cause was a noble vocation.⁴⁹ These ideals were reinforced during his time in the Army Air Force in the Second World War, where he became convinced that the United States had an “obligation” to protect the weaker nations of the world.⁵⁰ Bundy’s ideals were instilled partly through his time at Groton, where liberal Christian ethics were the norm, but also through his family. His father, Harvey Bundy, was close friends with Henry Stimson, and worked with him during the Hoover administration. Stimson became a family friend, and interacted frequently with the Bundy’s. The children, including McGeorge, were immersed in the world of Stimson, where aggressive American intervention around the world to unilaterally impose peace was understood to be a good thing.⁵¹ From the headmaster at Groton, Endicott Peabody, McGeorge was taught a version of Christian morals that encouraged its followers to help the poor and needy while being condescending and arrogant towards them.⁵²

We now have very similar pictures of McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara. Both were strongly persuaded that the United States had an obligation to protect weaker nations through the use of military force. This goal seems much more in line with the public portrayal of decision making, which emphasized the American interest in protecting the people of South Vietnam and enabling them to live in peace. This is a somewhat striking revelation. What this

⁴⁸ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 52.

⁴⁹ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, 11.

⁵⁰ Shapley, *Promise and Power*, 35.

⁵¹ Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 38-41.

⁵² Bird, *The Color of Truth*, 48.

might suggest is not that McNamara and Bundy misled the American people, but that they possibly misled each other (and to the other various subordinates and decision makers). This revelation, while striking, has a credible basis in this examination of their own lives. Both McNamara and Bundy found themselves in situations where they needed to conceal their true beliefs to advance: McNamara to advance professionally in Republican-dominated academia and corporations, Bundy to advance socially in the aggressively apolitical environment of Yale. Furthermore, both were raised to value concealing emotion, and prized mathematics (which they both studied extensively) as a better way to communicate.

With this in mind, it perhaps makes sense that cabinet meetings and memos--situations where they would be judged by their professional peers and professional superiors--Bundy and McNamara both attempted to come across as entirely rational and technical, designing their policy for Vietnam in a manner largely devoid of such 'weaknesses' as sympathy for the people of South Vietnam. This reasoning may also be applicable to both Bundy and McNamara's eventual resignation. In November of 1967, McNamara presented to President Johnson for the first time a paper in which he explicitly stated that he did not believe military action by the United States could achieve victory. He called to massively lower troop levels, and refused to grant the Joint Chiefs as many new soldiers as they requested.⁵³ Johnson refused McNamara's suggestions, and he resigned within the month. Bundy's doubts began earlier. As early as March, 1965, Bundy had received evidence from the CIA that American airstrikes--Bundy's pet policy--were not performing as well as expected. His confidence in the war never returned (although his belief in the war's nobility never left). Over the next year he would propose a series of 'soft hawk' alternatives, still believing in the cause of Vietnamese independence but deeply skeptical of the more popular methods to achieve it. As his methods began being rejected more

⁵³ Glennon et al., *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968*.

and more (as well as his personal relationship with the President deteriorating to the point of near enmity), Bundy resigned in February of 1966.⁵⁴ For both men, a significant factor in their decision to leave was that their personal beliefs about the war became so pronounced that they could no longer put on a facade of rationality to go along with the inertia that moved the war.

While McNamara and Bundy could be discussed together due to the many similarities and overlaps in their lives, one would be remiss to discuss decision makers of the Vietnam War in the Johnson era without discussing Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Rusk's biographic arc mirrors McNamara's far more than Bundy's. Born to poor cotton farmers in Georgia, he was educated in large part by his father, a learned minister who could not practice due to poor health. From his father, he inherited a firm sense of duty and Christian morality. Yet it was not only from his father that he learned these things. Rusk was influenced to a significant degree by Woodrow Wilsonian, and his Wilsonian ideals which were thrust into prominence while Rusk was still a child. These ideals included "a commitment to help the oppressed," the view that war was "an abhorrent means for solving disputes," and the implicit understanding that "morality must undergird foreign policy."⁵⁵ However, this idealism should not be mistaken for naivité. Even before the travesty of appeasement, Rusk was convinced that military force was often necessary to uphold moral ideals--throughout his life Rusk would have a high view of the military, going so far as to be enrolled in ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) during his years in high school and University and serving as an infantry officer in the Army Reserves. Indeed, during his interview to receive the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship, he was asked to explain this apparent contradiction, and responded that "armed force and world peace are two sides of the same

⁵⁴ Preston, *The War Council*, 208-237.

⁵⁵ Thomas W. Zeiler, *Dean Rusk: Defending the American Mission Abroad* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 5.

coin.”⁵⁶ Once the failure of appeasement in Asia and Europe became clear, Rusk redoubled his belief that collective security could come only from force or the credible threat thereof.

Rusk’s ideals were to be put to the test very soon after. While serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, he was the first senior official to learn of the North Korean attack on the South. For the duration of America’s involvement with the conflict, Rusk remained one of the closest advisers to President Truman, and he used this position to advocate for continued American military presence in the conflict. This was largely informed by the belief that the North Korean (and subsequent Chinese) motivations were not their own, but that they were being controlled by the Soviet Union. From this, Rusk arrived at the conclusion that the goal in Korea was to ensure that the Korean people were not “subjected to Communist reign of terror and be absorbed by force into the new colonialism of a Soviet Communist Empire,” despite the United States having no binding treaties with South Korea to protect them.⁵⁷

Similar to Bundy and McNamara, Rusk had his own views on the office he was to inhabit, views which formed long before the possibility of his appointment was ever raised. Rusk was content to stay out of the spotlight. While President of the Rockefeller foundation, he cemented his ability to influence foreign policy from the background (in part through his strong personal connections to the liberal foreign policy elite, such as Adlai Stevenson and Dean Acheson), and this propensity continued even after his appointment as Secretary of State. Indeed, part of the appeal behind Rusk’s appointment was a 1960 article he wrote for *Foreign Policy* in which he advocated that the President should be the arbiter of American foreign policy, with the Secretary of State serving merely an advisory role.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Zeiler, *Dean Rusk*, 7.

⁵⁷ Zeiler, *Dean Rusk*, 28.

⁵⁸ Dean Rusk, “The President,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1960-10-01/president>.

Perhaps most telling about Rusk, though, was the way in which he understood the role of emotions and morals in politics. Despite having deeply held convictions himself, it had been impressed upon him by key mentors that policy was the realm of thinking, not feeling. This lesson was perhaps most forcefully imposed by George Marshall, whom Rusk idolized, and who was largely responsible for Rusk joining the Department of State after the Second World War rather than staying in the Army.⁵⁹ While Rusk did try to have “ice water in [his] veins” (a common saying of Marshall’s) during his tenure as Secretary of State, he was successful primarily in the process of *making* a decision. After the decision was made, Rusk had a tendency to commit to it with an almost evangelical zeal. Once, when some reporters asked pointed questions after the disasters of the Tet Offensive, the stoic and composed Rusk yelled at them, challenging the loyalty of anyone who would question the policies of the President.⁶⁰ This rigid loyalty defined Rusk’s tenure as Secretary of State; although privately skeptical of the conflict, he became one of its most vocal supporters, and saw traitors in those who changed their views to no longer align with the President.

With this understanding of Rusk, the trifecta of him, Bundy, and McNamara can finally be understood in their dynamics. All three men had deeply held moral beliefs about the nature of war in general and the war in Vietnam in particular. More specifically, they all believed that there was an American obligation to protect weaker nations of the world (such as South Vietnam) from aggressors, a lesson which was driven home not only through their respective upbringings, but through a series of conflicts in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite being instilled with these moral values, they were all ill-inclined to reveal their values, preferring instead to keep their beliefs private when in professional contexts, such as the foreign policy decision-making

⁵⁹John B. Henry and William Espinosa, “The Tragedy of Dean Rusk,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 8 (1972): p. 175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1147824>.

⁶⁰Henry and Espinosa, “The Tragedy of Dean Rusk,” 166.

contexts in which they interacted with each other and the President. In their public facing comments, these men were not specifically involved in the making of policy (a rational, technical process) so could be more open about their personal beliefs which underpinned the abstract debate over intervention in Vietnam.

It is also worth noting that all three men were deeply shaped by the arguments surrounding appeasement, and the impact this had on them cannot be understated. Both McNamara and Rusk were active duty members of the military during the Second World War (both, certainly not coincidentally, served in Asia. Rusk was even responsible for some of the earliest American aid to Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh movement). While Bundy was not actively involved in the war, having earned a Harvard fellowship in 1940, he was an avid proponent of American intervention. Appeasement in this context specifically refers to the process between 1935 and 1939 in which French and British leaders repeatedly failed to take action against Adolf Hitler's Germany (and to a lesser extent, Italy and Japan) when it undertook significant aggressive action, such as remilitarizing the Rhineland or demanding the annexation of parts of Czechoslovakia. Jeffrey Record of the Army War College, in his 2005 *Appeasement Reconsidered: Investigating the Mythology of the 1930's*, suggests that this led to the creation of a 'mythology' of appeasement that infatuates American foreign policy decision-makers to this day. He details a common strand of argument that took root almost immediately after the end of the Second World War, being applied as early as the Korean War a few years later. This lesson can be summarized as: "capitulating to the demands of territorially aggressive dictatorships simply makes inevitable a later and larger war on less favorable terms."⁶¹ This strand of thought was certainly present during the Vietnam era. President Johnson and Secretary McNamara

⁶¹ Jeffrey Record, *Appeasement Reconsidered: Investigating the Mythology of the 1930s* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2005), 1.

frequently discussed and agreed that it was necessary to stand up to North Vietnam (and implicitly China) to prevent further conflict in the region.⁶² Bundy, as mentioned, was a noted advocate against appeasement. When one recalls his May 25, 1964 memo to the President, Bundy suggested to the President that military force could be deployed without ever intending to use it, and in fact its deployment would negate the need for its use. This argument is almost a direct restatement of one of the key arguments concerning appeasement of Hitler. In 1946, Winston Churchill mused of the Second World War that “it could have been prevented without the firing of a single shot, but no one would listen.”⁶³ Indeed, the very premise of the appeasement argument is that through small action now, one can prevent significant action later. The deployment of a token force in May of 1964 could very easily have been seen as ‘standing up’ to North Vietnam.

It is clear that the shadow of appeasement weighed heavily on these men, the question remains whether appeasement carries a moral aspect to it? When looking at the sources from which the arguments about appeasement first stemmed, the answer is yes. The subtitle of Winston Churchill’s *The Gathering Storm*--the first book in his series on the war--is “How the English-speaking peoples, through their unwisdom, carelessness and good nature, allowed the wicked to rearm.” The subtitle for the final book in the series, *Triumph and Tragedy*, is “How the great democracies triumphed, and so were able to resume the follies which had so nearly cost them their life.”⁶⁴ To Churchill, at least, appeasement was very clearly a moral failing. He viewed appeasement as good people failing to stand up to bad people, evoking Edmund Burke’s famous adage that ‘the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’

⁶² Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 252.

⁶³ Quoted in J. Snell, ed., *The Outbreak of the Second World War: Design or Blunder?* London: D. C. Heath, 1962, p. vii

⁶⁴ Petersen, Clarence. “The Second World War, by Winston S. Churchill.” *chicagotribune.com*, September 4, 2018. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-05-11-8602030051-story.html>.

Furthermore, he views the “follies” of failing to stand up to the Soviet Union after the war as a similar moral failure. By not resisting Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe, he saw in 1946 the same failures of 1938--cowardice. This argument can be easily applied to ‘appeasement’ in Vietnam. As has been shown, McNamara, Rusk, and Bundy all were exposed to a significant Christian moral upbringing, and instilled with values that persisted in them throughout their life. It hardly stretches credulity to suggest that avoiding being the morally weak good men that Burke and Churchill deride for failing to act was in the minds of these men who had previously expressed a similar disdain for appeasement themselves. They considered standing up to ‘bullies,’ for lack of a better word, both necessary to prevent future conflict (a moral good) and also a moral good in and of itself, by requiring one to demonstrate virtues such as bravery and concern for the weak.

One other possibility to consider is that the confidential decision making regarding Vietnam in this time period was devoid of this moral aspect because it did not need to be said. Given that these men all shared similar views about American moral duty--and the morality of conflict in general--it is possible that they simply did not feel the need to explicitly include it. However, this explanation falls slightly flat when one merely considers that the moral aspect was included, and was more so undersold rather than omitted. Furthermore, the explicit and public evocations of this moral aspect suggest that America’s moral duty to South Vietnam was at least disputable enough to be worth mentioning. Had it truly been so ingrained in the minds of these decision makers that America had a responsibility to intervene in South Vietnam that they did not think to write it down, it stretches credulity to think they would frequently evoke it in their communication with the rest of the world.

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