

VIEWPOINT 36A

U.S. Actions in Vietnam Are Justified (1965)

Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973)

When Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson became president of the United States upon the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, he inherited the conflict in Vietnam, which remained a dominant issue throughout the five years and two months of his presidency.

Vietnam was an Asian nation that had been under French colonial rule. In 1954 Vietnamese rebel forces led by Ho Chi Minh, a longtime nationalist leader, defeated the French and established a communist government in what became North Vietnam. Determined not to let all of Vietnam become communist, the United States under President Dwight Eisenhower supported a noncommunist regime in what became South Vietnam. Eisenhower pledged to support and defend South Vietnam and sent several hundred military advisers and millions of dollars in economic aid to that country. John F. Kennedy increased the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam to sixteen thousand during his brief presidency. Under Johnson the United States began extensive bombing campaigns against North Vietnam in early 1965 and increased the number of U.S. troops deployed there to 267,000 by 1966, and eventually to a peak of 543,000 in 1969.

As U.S. involvement escalated, the war became an increasingly divisive issue within the nation. In the following viewpoint, taken from an April 7, 1965, speech delivered at Johns Hopkins University, Johnson defends his actions, arguing that communists in Vietnam are being supported by the communist regime in China, and that American involvement is necessary to fight communism in that area of the world.

What American goals and ideals are at stake, according to Johnson? What objectives of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War does he state? What policies other than war does he propose to help the Vietnamese people?

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change.

This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of

Viet-Nam.

Viet-Nam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives on Viet-Nam's steaming soil.

Why must we take this painful road?

Why must this Nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away?

Why We Fight

We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.

This kind of world will never be built by bombs or bullets. Yet the infirmities of man are such that force must often precede reason, and the waste of war, the works of peace.

We wish that this were not so. But we must deal with the world as it is, if it is ever to be as we wish.

The world as it is in Asia is not a serene or peaceful place.

The first reality is that North Viet-Nam has attacked the independent nation of South Viet-Nam. Its object is total conquest.

Of course, some of the people of South Viet-Nam are participating in attack on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from north to south. This support is the heartbeat of the war.

And it is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks. Large-scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities.

The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy.

The Threat of China

Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi [the capital of North Vietnam] are urged on by Peking [Beijing, the capital of China]. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Viet-Nam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in South Viet-Nam?

We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Viet-Nam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Viet-Nam defend its independence.

And I intend to keep that promise.

To dishonor that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong.

We're also there to strengthen world order. Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Viet-Nam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

Important Stakes

We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance. Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Viet-Nam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. We must say in southeast Asia—as we did in Europe—in the words of the Bible: “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.”

There are those who say that all our effort there will be futile—that China's power is such that it is bound to dominate all southeast Asia. But there is no end to that argument until all of the nations of Asia are swallowed up.

There are those who wonder why we have a responsibility there. Well, we have it there for the same reason that we have a responsibility for the defense of Europe. World War II was fought in both Europe and Asia, and when it ended we found ourselves with continued responsibility for the defense of freedom.

Our objective is the independence of South Viet-Nam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.

We will do everything necessary to reach that objective. And we will do only what is absolutely necessary.

In recent months attacks on South Viet-Nam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary for us to increase our response and to make attacks by air. This is not a change of purpose. It is a change in what we believe that purpose requires.

We do this in order to slow down an aggression.

We do this to increase the confidence of the brave people of South Viet-Nam who have bravely borne this brutal battle for so many years with so many casualties.

We Will Not Lose

And we do this to convince the leaders of North Viet-Nam—and all who seek to share their conquest—of a very simple fact:

We will not be defeated.

We will not grow tired.

We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement.

We know that air attacks alone will not accomplish all of these purposes. But it is our best and prayerful judgment that they are a necessary part of the surest road to peace. . . .

Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending.

Once this is clear, then it should also be clear that the only path for reasonable men is the path of peaceful settlement.

Such peace demands an independent South Viet-Nam—securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others—free from outside interference—tied to no alliance—a military base for no other country.

These are the essentials of any final settlement.

We will never be second in the search for such a peaceful settlement in Viet-Nam.

There may be many ways to this kind of peace: in discussion or negotiation with the governments concerned; in large groups or in small ones; in the reaffirmation of old agreements or the strengthening with new ones.

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We have stated this position over and over again, fifty times and more, to friend and foe alike. And we remain ready, with this purpose, for unconditional discussions. . . .

These countries of southeast Asia are homes for millions of impoverished people. Each day these people rise at dawn and struggle through until the

night to wrestle existence from the soil. They are often wracked by disease, plagued by hunger, and death comes at the early age of 40.

Stability and peace do not come easily in such a land. Neither independence nor human dignity will ever be won, though, by arms alone. It also requires the work of peace. The American people have helped generously in times past in these works. Now there must be a much more massive effort to improve the life of man in that conflict-torn corner of our world.

Economic Development

The first step is for the countries of southeast Asia to associate themselves in a greatly expanded cooperative effort for development. We would hope that North Viet-Nam would take its place in the common effort just as soon as peaceful cooperation is possible.

The United Nations is already actively engaged in development in this area. As far back as 1961 I conferred with our authorities in Viet-Nam in connection with their work there. And I would hope tonight that the Secretary General of the United Nations could use the prestige of his great office, and his deep knowledge of Asia, to initiate, as soon as possible, with the countries of that area, a plan for cooperation in increased development.

For our part I will ask the Congress to join in a billion-dollar American investment in this effort as soon as it is under way.

And I would hope that all other industrialized countries, including the Soviet Union, will join in this effort to replace despair with hope, and terror with progress. . . .

I also intend to expand and speed up a program to make available our farm surpluses to assist in feeding and clothing the needy in Asia. We should not allow people to go hungry and wear rags while our own warehouses overflow with an abundance of wheat and corn, rice and cotton.

So I will very shortly name a special team of outstanding, patriotic, distinguished Americans to inaugurate our participation in these programs. This team will be headed by Mr. Eugene Black, the very able former President of the World Bank.

In areas that are still ripped by conflict, of course, development will not be easy. Peace will be necessary for final success. But we cannot and must not wait for peace to begin this job. . . .

We often say how impressive power is. But I do not find it impressive at all. The guns and the bombs, the rockets and the warships, are all symbols of human failure. They are necessary symbols. They protect what we cherish. But they are witness to human folly.

A dam built across a great river is impressive.

In the countryside where I was born, and where I live, I have seen the night illuminated, and the kitchens warmed, and the homes heated, where once the cheerless night and the ceaseless cold held sway. And all this happened because electricity came to our area along the humming wires of the REA Electrification of the countryside—yes, that, too, is impressive. . . .

Every night before I turn out the lights to sleep I ask myself this question: Have I done everything that I can do to unite this country? Have I done everything I can to help unite the world, to try to bring peace and hope to all the peoples of the world? Have I done enough?

Ask yourselves that question in your homes—and in this hall tonight. Have we, each of us, all done all we could? Have we done enough?

We Must Choose

We may well be living in the time foretold many years ago when it was said: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

This generation of the world must choose: destroy or build, kill or aid, hate or understand.

We can do all these things on a scale never dreamed of before.

Well, we will choose life. In so doing we will prevail over the enemies within man, and over the natural enemies of all mankind.

VIEWPOINT 36B

U.S. Actions in Vietnam Are Not Justified (1968)

Young Hum Kim (b. 1920)

Between 1950 and 1975 the conflict in Vietnam cost the United States more than 58,000 lives and \$150 billion. As military intervention sharply escalated in the 1960s, peace demonstrations and debates swept the United States. The Vietnam War, like the Korean War of the 1950s, was fought as part of America's Cold War containment policy of opposing the spread of communism (and the influence of communist China and the Soviet Union) throughout the world. Defenders of the Vietnam War justified sending U.S. forces to help prevent South Vietnam from becoming communist, arguing that if such a development were to happen other nations in the

area would become communist as well.

Many opponents of the Vietnam conflict began to question this reasoning and other basic assumptions and goals of the Cold War. In the following analysis, Young Hum Kim argues that the reasoning behind U.S. involvement in Vietnam is seriously flawed. Kim states that communism is not a monolithic force that threatens to occupy all of Asia. He further asserts that the North Vietnamese and Vietcong that the American soldiers were fighting were motivated not so much by communism as by nationalistic desires to drive foreigners from their land. Kim advocates that the United States withdraw from Vietnam and open up diplomatic channels with China. Kim is a professor of history and international relations at United States International University in San Diego, California, and the author of several books, including *Twenty Years of Crises: The Cold War Era* and *The War of No Return*.

How does Young Hum Kim's image of China differ from that of President Lyndon B. Johnson (see viewpoint 36A)? What five fallacies lie behind U.S. involvement in Vietnam, according to Kim? What limits does he see for the policy of containment?

In recent decades the American image of China has changed to one of a monstrous society of human insects, destined to take over the world under the banner of Communism. The American obsessive and groundless fear that the Chinese will devastate the earth with their nuclear bombs and that the surviving Chinese will emerge from atomic ashes like the phoenix to inherit this troubled world is driving the United States to the brink of war with the Chinese through escalation of the war in Vietnam. . . .

Is the United States really on a collision course with the People's Republic of China? If so, how can the United States avoid it? What course of action or policy should the United States take or formulate to rectify the present unhealthy state of affairs?

Some of the guidelines, if not answers, to these crucial questions may be found in the pages of history. A realistic and sober reexamination and reevaluation of some of the fundamental issues and attitudes in United States–Chinese relations in the past two decades may provide helpful clues and insights into the immediate problems confronting the two countries. In formulating a foreign policy, a nation should look back upon the road it has trodden in order to chart a new route for the future.

America and the World After World War II

The end of World War II left the United States in a position to assume unilaterally a stance of “free world leadership.” In Europe, Britain, France and

Italy were exhausted. Russia was no longer in that “free world.” And Germany, having been put through the wringer of “unconditional surrender,” was again supposed not to “come back” within the predictable future. And however that might turn out, Germany was partly under the “joint occupation” of non-“free world” Russia.

So, Washington underwrote the economic and political recovery of Western Europe through the Marshall Plan. Designed to be a military bulwark to contain an imaginary threat of Soviet expansion, the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization followed the Marshall Plan. The extension of power and influence of the United States in Europe was only blocked by the power of the USSR at the direct line of contact.

In the Near East, effectuation of the Truman Doctrine is said to have thwarted Communist subversion and infiltration. In the Middle East, Soviet occupation of part of Iran was abandoned through a combination of factors.

In the Far East, the United States did not encounter much difficulty in filling the military power vacuum left by the fall of the Japanese Empire. The only major obstacle lay in China—a huge land mass of Asia larger in area than the United States with a population of over 600 million, more than three times that of the United States.

Unfortunately, China was torn by a titanic civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, a situation which presented the United States with four possible alternatives: (1) complete withdrawal from China; (2) military intervention on a major scale to aid the Nationalists to destroy the Communists; (3) efforts to avoid a [continuing] civil war by working for a compromise between the two sides; and (4) wholehearted acceptance of the new Communist China. . . .

At first the United States understandably attempted to influence the course of events in favor of the Nationalists. Later, as the fortunes of war were turning in the Communists' favor, Washington endeavored to establish a Nationalist-Communist coalition government. Failing in this, the United States' dream of a friendly and unified capitalistic China as the basis for Far Eastern stability—and a place for profitable private corporate operations—was shattered.

By the summer of 1949, the Chinese Communists had swept the country and achieved victory. Americans were astounded; it was a frustrating reality for them to admit defeat. Critics called the United States' China policy “a tragic failure” and a “crime.” . . .

Vietnam

In Vietnam the United States again faced the problem of making a fateful choice from available alter-

natives. The domestic situation in South Vietnam in the 1960s was somewhat comparable to that of China in the years immediately following World War II. The [Ngo Dinh] Diem regime, like Chiang Kai-shek's, was autocratic, undemocratic, and oppressive. It did not have a foundation of popular support and had been unable to destroy or check the rising influence and prestige of the Vietcong [communists rebels in South Vietnam].

After the fall of the Diem government, the successive military coups further destroyed all vestiges of political stability in South Vietnam. On the other hand, like the Chinese Communists, the Vietcong steadily increased their power and ultimately controlled two-thirds of the area. They were inspired to the point of fanaticism by the revolutionary zeal of national independence and of liberation from colonial rule. To them, the presence of foreign troops, friendly or otherwise, on their soil symbolized the return of imperialism in the form of "neo colonialism." Against this background the United States determined to pursue the second alternative course—*military intervention on a major scale to assist the Saigon [capital of South Vietnam] government and to destroy the Vietcong and their supporters.*

The United States' choice of this alternative seems to have been based upon five possible fallacies which should be carefully scrutinized.

The first was the misapplication of the containment policy to Southeast Asia. The United States had made the halting of Communist expansion, regardless of time, place, character, methods, and tactics, the supreme goal of its foreign policy. In the words of Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

What we are seeking to achieve in South Vietnam is part of a process that has continued for a long time—a process of preventing the expansion and extension of Communist domination by the use of force against the weaker nations on the perimeter of Communist power.

With sweeping generalizations the United States extended the policy of so-called containment, erroneously considered successful in Europe, to Southeast Asia where Communist influence has direct appeal in these underdeveloped societies. To be sure, with the inauguration of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization [SEATO] in 1954 as a military countermeasure to balance political settlements at Geneva, and the formation of the Baghdad Pact (which later became the Central Treaty Organization), the United States had created a superficial wall of containment of Communism, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific through Western Europe and the Middle East. But, it was destined to be ineffective.

The second fallacy was the underestimation of Vietcong and North Vietnamese strength, on several

accounts: namely, their military capability to carry on the protracted war, their sense of dedication to what they believe to be a sacred cause, the potent force of their nationalism, their pride and stamina, and the cohesive strength of national unity. Believing that its industrial, technological, and military power was insurmountable, the United States naively expected the Communists to fall to their knees as soon as its power was introduced in the struggle. . . .

America's Crusade Against Communism

The third oversight was the failure to recognize the changing character of Communism. As the cold war crystallized in the wake of World War II, both the United States and the Soviet Union abandoned the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding and sought to promote their respective interests, while assuming that a gain by one was ipso facto a loss to the other.

With the outbreak of the Korean War and through the subsequent years, United States leadership hardened in its conviction that Communism, as a monolithic and invincible force spearheaded in Asia by Communist China, was bent on a conquest of the entire world. A number of Americans failed to exercise reason and came to look upon any settlement, compromise, or ordinary diplomatic dealings with Communist nations as "evil" and "immoral."

The United States poured money, manpower, and military hardware into the poor and unstable countries of the world so long as they professed to be anti-Communist. It justified alignment with any dictatorial, totalitarian, antidemocratic—even corrupt—regime of dubious color so long as it was not Red. Taking the attitude that "if you are not with us, you are against us," the United States neither tolerated neutralism nor recognized nationalistic anticolonialism, thus alienating many Jeffersonian nationalists in Asia and Africa. It talked so much of great crusades against Communism that it mesmerized itself into recklessly undertaking what were considered to be "messianic missions."

The United States should recognize that Communism comes in many shades and colors. There is no monolithic Communist world any more than there is a unified "free world." Yugoslavia, Albania, and Rumania are definitely defiant of the Soviet Union; North Korea has taken a neutral stance; Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia have gained greater freedom of action than most Central American republics. The Sino-Soviet rift is so obvious and well known that it requires no elaboration. . . .

The Reliability Gap

The fourth error was the attempt to bridge what may be called the "reliability gap." One of the prin-

principal arguments of the United States in justifying its presence in Vietnam is the contention that if Washington fails to honor its commitments, most Asian allies will lose confidence in the United States and will give second thoughts to their alignment with it. The truth is that, throughout the cold war period, the United States has created an immense "reliability gap" in its relations with those nations which have been placed under its protective assistance treaties. In the course of remaking these nations in its own image, and with anxiety and impatience, the United States has unilaterally assumed a leadership which was paternalistic and meddlesome as well as indifferent to the initiative of indigenous leaders and to the needs of the people. The United States has demanded their absolute loyalty and mistaken their self-assertion for anti-American posture. It fostered a sense of doubt and suspicion instead of one of trust and confidence in the minds of the leaders. To them, the American attitude has been frequently arrogant and domineering, but they dare not express their feelings overtly lest they incur American displeasure and anger.

The Pattern of U.S. Diplomacy

When the Korean War broke out, the United States took up arms to repel the alleged aggressors. This action was based on the assumption that if the open aggression was unchecked and if South Korea's pleas for help went unanswered, the United States would demonstrate to the world that it was indeed a "paper tiger" unconcerned with the safety of its allies. Thus the United States returned to rescue the country which it had recently left unprotected. The pattern of United States diplomacy in its worst aspect may therefore be categorized as follows: (1) empty promises and slogans; (2) indecision and vacillation; and (3) impulsive reaction to the positive action taken by its adversaries.

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The "reliability gap" was further widened after America's alliance partners witnessed the performance, or sometimes the nonperformance, of the United States with respect to such crucial issues as the East European uprisings in 1953, the Geneva Accords of 1954, the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the

Laotian conflict of 1960, the Congo crisis, the handling of the U-2 incident, the Bay of Pigs, and the Dominican intervention, to name a few. From the standpoint of many Afro-Asian peoples, the "reliability gap" is so great that a single stroke of military operation in Vietnam will not be able to bridge it. On the contrary, it may have an adverse effect because they believe that rather than righting the wrongs committed in the 1950s, the American military campaign in Vietnam serves only to double the wrong. The United States must not entertain the illusion that military power is a panacea for all the political, social, and economic ills of a nation. Power demonstrated without humility is arrogance; power used without prudence is affront; and power mobilized without discretion is aggression. . . .

Pitfalls of Hostility Toward China

Fifth, and finally, the concept of Communist China as the ultimate enemy has certain pitfalls. In clarifying the purpose of America's involvement in Vietnam, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara stated: "The choice is not simply whether to continue our efforts to keep South Vietnam free and independent, but rather, whether to continue our struggle to halt Communist expansion in Asia." He did not say that we *will* have a war with Communist China, but the implication is clear that the United States is determined to carry on the struggle, so long as Communism exists in Asia. . . .

No sane leader would contemplate sending millions of American troops to fight on the mainland of China. President Eisenhower expressed his conviction that there could be "no greater tragedy than for the United States to become involved in an all-out war in Indochina," let alone in China. General MacArthur advised President Kennedy not to send American soldiers to the Asian mainland to combat the Chinese. China has proved to be Asia's "quicksand" for foreign invaders, for no nation or people has ever really conquered China. . . .

Should the United States get itself entangled in hostilities with China, which is no longer a "paper tiger," but a "baby dragon with thermonuclear teeth," the tragic consequences are too horrendous to contemplate.

In view of these analyses, the United States' China policy should be reformulated on the basis of certain immediate essentials, including (1) de-escalation of the war in Vietnam, and (2) a normalization of Sino-American relations.

Peace in Vietnam

The first recommendation to be considered is de-escalation. As pointed out, since one of the most important features of escalation in the Vietnam war

has been the process of eliminating the proxies, the first step toward de-escalation lies in reversing that process. Through a positive and imaginative diplomacy, means can be found to disengage the United States and North Vietnam forces from combat. A cessation of United States bombing of North Vietnam may be a beginning toward that goal, followed by gradual reduction or withdrawal of both forces from South Vietnam. The parties involved must come to believe that what they have failed to achieve on the battlefield can be achieved at the conference table. . . .

The Virtues of Flexibility

The United States should cast off the old habits of thought and rhetoric, and should introduce the virtues of flexibility and sophistication into the conduct of its foreign policy, especially with respect to the Communist world. It should realize that the independence and security of a nation do not always require Washington's protection or intervention. . . .

The United States must come to the realization that competitive coexistence with China is no more difficult than with the Soviet Union. Recognizing China's great power status, the United States should allow China to participate in major international parleys, and at the opportune moment, extend to it de jure recognition, admit its representatives to United Nations organs and processes, lift its embargo, and institute an exchange of personnel.

Practicing the Blessings of Liberty

In conclusion, in this age of multirevolutions, the United States—"a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"—should preach *and practice* the blessings of that liberty at home and abroad, and should respect and honor the principle of "sovereign equality," that all nations are equal.

For Further Reading

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