ESCALATING IN A QUAGMIRE

Daniel Ellsberg
Center of International Studies
M. I. T.

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THE QUAGMIRE IMAGE

"In South Vietnam, the U.S. had stumbled into a bog. It would be mired down there a long time." So Nikita Krushchev remarked, in July, 1962, to an American official who reported in a cable, soon forgotten in the hurly-burly of rescuing Krushchev from miring down in Cuba.

The image was more frequently encountered, with the same tinge of schadenfreude, from our other opponents of that period, the French. Thus the title of Lucien Bodard's quasi-prophetic account of the French experience in Indochina in 1946-50: L'Enlisement ("The Bogging Down") or in its American version, The Quicksand War.[1] George Ball, one of the few U.S. officials who could imagine that American experience could be like French, was warned by de Gaulle that Vietnam was "pays pourri", "rotten ground", not suitable for tanks or Western politics, not, it was hinted delicately, white man's country.

But the metaphor began, about the same time, to be heard from some Americans. In early 1962, writing to the President to argue against sending American combat units to Vietnam or otherwise deepening our involvement, J.K. Galbraith spoke of his fears that the bright hopes of the New Frontier would be sunk in the ricepaddies of Southeast Asia. (This did not fail to happen, though the hopes had come to be renamed Great Society). By late '64 and early '65, David Halberstam could find no better title for his memoir than the somewhat awkward: The Making of a Quagmire. ("Many people thought the title was too harsh, more pessimistic than was warranted," he recalls).

Making a quagmire is one thing; becoming emired ("l'enlisement"), the interaction of quicksand and victims, another. Just what is the "quicksand process"? What makes quicksand; how does it work? And how does the analogy fit the evolution of U.S. intervention in the Vietnamese conflict? Does it really apply, or does it mainly mislead?

More than image, more than attitude, the "quicksand/quagmire/bog" metaphor is, in fact, a specific and potentially precise interpretation of the political pressures

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[1] The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam (Boston, 1967); this combines, somewhat abridged, translations of L'Enlisement (Paris, 1863) and its sequel, L'Humiliation (Paris, 1965).

*For this title, and much else, I am indebted to Patricia Marx Ellsberg.

and the executive decision-making that have yielded our involvement, in its varying forms over time. Elaborated, it amounts to a theory, or a model of a dynamic decision process, offering an overall answer to the, by now, agonized question: "How did 'Vietnam' happen to us? How did we get so deeply into this war?" It offers more specific answers to such questions as: What did our Presidents think they were doing? What was aimed at, what was hoped, what were they told to expect? What was the role of inattention, surprise, over-optimism, disappointment? How did aims change over time, and later choices emerge from earlier ones?

The character of the answers proposed appears when we elaborate the image itself in a straightforward fashion.

> A traveller starts out across unfamiliar, but unthreatening, terrain, toward a goal that may seem important, or not, but certainly poses stakes less than life-or-death. His map and advisers, as he sets his course, warn of no special obstacles or dangers; if they did, he would take a different path, give up his limited objective, or at the least, be specially attentive. Instead, his mind on more important things, he fails to notice the ground sucking at his feet till he is well into the bog.
>
> To go forward, he finally becomes aware, is taking more effort than he expected; but to go back is certainly difficult; and now the goal seems near. A few more steps, and the going is harder. But now authoritative signs appear that assure solid ground just ahead. A succession of these revive his hopes, repeatedly, leading him further into regions where his weight tells increasingly against him. (Asked recently his associations to the "quagmire" in his title, Halberstam replied: "The heavier you are, the deeper you sink.")
>
> More and more, the traveller's original goal is overshadowed by a desire to extricate himself; but to retrace his steps now seems too risky. Still he remains confident; siren voices in the calm tones of systems analysts and planners persuade him that a firm purchase, a platform promising both safety and success, is assured if he goes just a little further and even a little deeper. He follows the voices. Soon he is making little headway, then none; he sinks.
>
> Increasingly concerned, but still hopeful, he rests, then undertakes new efforts, violent motions that drive him deeper. At some point he will tire and panic, and intermittently, begin to flail....

To many readers, surely, no more than this evocation is needed to prove the case. So many of the gross, observable features of our involvement are encompassed: the gradualness; the public, sometimes clearly genuine optimism; evidently surprising setbacks followed by new commitments. And it accords with the major, almost universal presumption that the outcome--"that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia," as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has called it[2]--must have been as unforeseen even as a strong possibility by those who made the decisions leading toward it; or they would have drawn back, or warned the public of the demands ahead.

This attenuation of Presidential responsibility for longer-run consequences in this case corresponds to one of the most salient features of the "model": The lack of awareness or foresight, earlier, on the risks and temptations ahead, followed by prolonged, nearly unbroken optimism about short-run prospects (fed partly by a human tendency to wishfulness, as the difficulties of retreating clearly increased). The explanation is obviously convenient to apologists--outside the Law, ignorance is an excuse--yet scarcely less credible, or indeed, widely-believed, for that. Whether they attribute the unawareness of impending costs or later requirements to ignorance, faulty theory and understanding, bad advice, inattention, wishfulness, exclusively short-run focus, or bureaucratic maneuvering, few observers either sympathetic or harsh have doubted that such unawareness was a persistent characteristic of the process of increasing involvement, a critical determinant of the Presidential decisions that progressively enlarged our commitment.

In short, one does not have to be an apologist for the Executive Branch to take for granted that this war is, as Schlesinger says, "a war which no President, including President Johnson, desired or intended," in which "we", Presidents and all, "find ourselves entrapped".[3] Thus quicksand.

THE SCHLESINGER MODEL

This process-model is applied succinctly in the Vietnam context by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in two much-quoted passages, the first referring to the increases in the level of military advisers in Vietnam under President Kennedy:

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[2]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Bitter Heritage (New York, 1966, 1968), p. 47.

[3]Ibid.

> "This was the policy of 'one more step'--each new step always promising the success which the previous last step had also promised but had unaccountably failed to deliver."[4]

> "And so the policy of 'one more step' lured the United States deeper and deeper into the morass. In retrospect, Vietnam is a triumph of the politics of inadvertence. We have achieved our present entanglement, not after due and deliberate consideration, but through a series of small decisions. It is not only idle but unfair to seek out guilty men. President Eisenhower, after rejecting American military intervention in 1954, set in motion the policy of support for Saigon which resulted, two Presidents later, in American military intervention in 1965. Each step in the deepening of the American commitment was reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary. Yet, in retrospect, each step led only to the next, until we find ourselves entrapped in that nightmare of American strategists..."[5]

With this dynamic model, "step by step, each one promising success", Schlesinger purports to explain the whole process that led from Eisenhower's support to Diem in 1954 to American military intervention in 1965. The model can as well be measured against the longer period from our first direct military grants to the French in 1950 under Truman (Schlesinger curiously neglects these Democratic roots) to the present. Many would find it equally persuasive, compellingly so, for the whole period.

It is an unusually satisfying abstraction. It is simple, even elegant. It sums up a long series of decisions coherently to explain a baffling outcome. It is unquestionably plausible: almost surely more so than any simple alternative drawing upon publicly available evidence. Sophisticated, appropriately cynical (with hindsight), critical but balanced, it is at the same time comfortable, reassuring about our leadership ("unfair to seek out guilty men"): not an unwelcome function in these times. It will be accepted by most opponents and most supporters of American policy or of a particular Administration during the period.

As a generalized account of the important decisions, and the considerations that led to them, increasing American involvement in Indochina, it is marred only by being totally wrong for each one of those decisions over the last twenty years.

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[4]*Op. cit.*, p. 39.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 47

This is not to deny that there were months and years in those two decades when ill-founded optimism--which was asserted almost continuously by officials to the American public--actually ruled the minds of most insiders including the President. For example, most of 1962.[6] Likewise, parts of 1967, 1953, 1957. But none of these were years in which significant new commitments were determined or begun.

To be sure, our involvement in dollars, rhetoric, manpower continued to increase, and cumulated, during these optimistic periods, and chances were, of course, passed by to cut looses and lessen our involvement. But all this happened every year, whether the mood was up or down. Evidence is slight (it will be argued here) that the cumulation of effort during optimistic periods was the determining factor for subsequent decisions; if that were so, internal argumentation should show a trend with strong differences between, say, 1965 and 1950, and that just does not appear.

The specific years in which new involvements, new programs, were chosen and begun were without exception periods of crisis and pessimism, generally far blacker and more widespread than ever admitted to the public. Ignorance abounded throughout the generation, yet in retrospect the gap between estimates and reality--concerning both the situation and the prospects of particular options --was surprisingly small in the actual years of decision: so small that it is hard to argue, in face of these estimates, that either more realism or more pessimism would likely have changed the decision.

The periods and decisions in question include:
(a) 1950, when the first $10 million in credits were granted by the Truman administration to the French and Vietnamese efforts against the Viet Minn (in May, a month before the Korean invasion)
(b) 1954-1954-1955, during which the Eisenhower commitment to the support of Diem gradually hardened;
(c) late-1961, with Kennedy's decision to break openly through the Geneva ceiling on U.S. personnel, starting the climb from 1,000 to over 15,000 at the time of his death;
(d) the Kennedy decision to encourage the overthrow of Diem;
(e) 1965, the Johnson decisions to bomb North Vietnam, then to deploy U.S. troops in limited numbers to

[6] See Schlesinger's accurate description--quoted below --of the exuberant mood in that year, going into 1963: op. cit., pp. 41-42.

South Vietnam (and release U.S. air support), then, after mid-July, to accept open-ended ground force commitment.

Not one of these decision points, in fact, fits Schlesinger's generalization to the slightest degree; for not one of them, viewed from the inside,[7] is it anything but radically misleading.

KENNEDY AND THE TAYLOR-ROSTOW RECOMMENDATIONS

Let us focus upon the decisions Schlesinger first characterizes as "the policy of 'one more step'": Kennedy's decisions following the Taylor-Rostow mission and report of November, 1961. This particular episode deserves our close attention for a number of reasons:

(a) Schlesinger, along with most others, presents it as the prototype of the "quicksand process" at work;

(b) it comprised an important set of decisions, significantly increasing our commitment and involvement;

(c) the revelations of the "Kennedy historians" have exposed enough of the inside decision-making process to make valid tests of various hypotheses possible on the basis of public accounts;

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[7]The assertions and speculations on U.S. decision-making reflect the writer's experience as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA), August 1964 to August 1965; member of General Lansdale's Senior Liaison Office in Vietnam, August 1965 to December, 1966; Special Assistant to the Deputy Ambassador, Saigon, December, 1966 to June 1967; and research since that time, in part, as a consultant, with official access. All of these functions posed the responsibility and opportunity to learn data on earlier decision-making. Unsatisfactory as it is to present generalizations and assertions without specific citation, it seems less so than either to rely entirely on the public record or to pretend to do so, to forego generalizations or to subscribe to wrong ones.

In the 1961 case, published histories have made enough previously-concealed data available to permit a valid test of some generalizations; that is why this paper focusses upon it, though similar points could be made as strongly for other periods. Until more materials are made public, the conclusions here (and in other "inside" accounts) must be regarded as hypotheses, whose implications can at least be analyzed, and which can be tested against the honest judgments of others who have had access to official sources.

(d) from the inside, the complex of concerns, estimates, recommendations and choices does turn out to present certain puzzles and patterns that seem protopycial for the set of important decision points over the two decades, although the patterns are markedly different from those suggested by the quicksand model.

Schlesinger's own account of the decision presents the central challenge to his characterization of "the policy of 'one more step'," which follows on the very same page:

> "The situation in South Vietnam grew worse over the summer; and in October 1961 Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor and Walt W. Rostow, then (and in 1966 again) a White House aide, on a mission to Saigon. The Taylor-Rostow report recommended an enlargement of the American role, essentially through the penetration of the South Vietnamese army and government by American 'advisers', attached to Vietnamese military units or government offices and designed to improve the level of local performance. Taylor and Rostow <u>also</u> recommended that an American military task force--perhaps 10,000 men--go to Vietnam, commissioned to conduct combat operations for self-defense and perimeter security and, if the Vietnamese army were hard pressed, to act as an emergency reserve. The report concluded by saying that <u>this</u> program would work <u>only</u> if infiltration from the north were stopped and that, therefore, should this infiltration continue, the United States should consider a contingency policy of retailiation against the north, graduated to match the intensity of Hanoi's aid to the Viet Cong."
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> "Kennedy <u>rejected both the northern strategy and the use of combat soldiers.</u> ...he increased the number of military advisers."[8]

This account raises questions immediately about the description just two sentences later: "This was the policy of 'one more step'--each new step always <u>promising the success</u> which the previous last step had <u>also promised</u> but had unaccountably failed to deliver."[9] No promises whatever are reported for the programs Kennedy actually adopted: these omitted the two important elements mentioned.

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[8] Schlesinger, <u>The Bitter Heritage</u>, p. 39 (italics added).

[9] <u>Ibid</u>., (italics added).

Or were these proposals presented merely as desirable frills, that could be discarded without affecting essentially the prospects of an otherwise-adequate strategy? Schlesinger's comment that Taylor and Rostow "also" recommended a task force of combat units hints at this.[10]

Yet as Roger Hilsman comments, the other sorts of recommendations in the Taylor report--the proposals that the President accepted--"were merely more of the same kind of assistance that had been given in the past," whereas the proposed introduction of regular American ground combat units, accepting the possibility that a number of divisions might eventually be required, recommended "a qualitative change in the nature of the United States commitment."[11] Be that as it may, the key question for our purposes is whether General Taylor presented this proposal as crucial to success or not.

The answer is that he described it to the President at the time as "essential" if we were to reverse the present downward trend of events. In fact, he reported, "I do not believe that our program to save South Vietnam will succeed without it." Elsewhere his view is recorded that it was very doubtful that the remainder of the program, less the proposed U.S. Task Force, would even avoid a further deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam.

As Sorenson reports, "many believed that American troops were needed less for their numerical strength than for the morale and will they could provide to Diem's forces and for the warning they could provide to the Communists."[12] But if these were, as Sorenson describes them, "speculative psychological reasons", Taylor and Rostow did not put them forward lightly. The immediate problem they found in Vietnam was "a double crisis of confidence: doubt that

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[10] Similarly, the adverb in A Thousand Days: Taylor "even envisaged" sending an American military task force (p. 504). The implication in both cases is that this proposal appeared as an extreme, dispensable--at any rate, non-vital--item in a shopping list. The words "also" and "even" not only underplay the central importance assigned to these proposals by Taylor and Rostow, (see below) but downplay the fact that Schlesinger was making a significant disclosure here, since the recommendation had been officially denied in the past, and rarely guessed at.

[11] Roger Hilsman, To Move a Nation, (New York, 1967), pp. 422-23.

[12] Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy, (New York, 1965), p. 653.

the United States was really determined to save Southeast Asia; doubt that Diem's methods could really defeat the Viet Cong."[13] No alternative action, Taylor maintained, could be so convincing of U.S. seriousness of purpose and hence so reassuring to the people and government of South Vietnam and to other allies as the introduction of U.S. forces. The Vietnamese and Southeast Asians would undoubtedly draw definitive conclusions, Taylor and Rostow believed, in the coming weeks and months concerning the probable outcome and would adjust their behavior accordingly; what the U.S. did or failed to do (i.e. in that period) would be decisive to the end result.

A force large enough to have the psychological effects required, Taylor suggested, must be more than a bare token, and must be capable of performing tasks of significant value, including (in Schlesinger's paraphrase), "conducting combat operations for self-defense and perimeter security and, if the Vietnamese Army were hard pressed, of providing an emergency reserve."[14]

Taylor underlined the urgency by making explicit his recognition of an impressive list of disadvantages of the proposed move, including weakness of the U.S. strategic reserve; increased engagement of U.S. prestige; difficulty of resisting pressure to reinforce the first contingent if it were not enough (with no limit to the possible commitment, unless we attacked the source in Hanoi, if we sought ultimately to cleanup the insurgents); and the risk of escalation into a major war in Asia. It was in the face of all these possible drawbacks that he made his recommendation to introduce a Task Force without delay: made it on the grounds that a U.S. program to save South Vietnam simply would not succeed without it.

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[13] Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 504. This is an accurate paraphrase of the report, except that the latter speaks of doubts that Diem's methods could "frustrate and defeat" the Communists. The distinction between "frustrating" and "defeating" in this context is not mere bureaucratese, as Schlesinger may have thought; most staff papers of the period were more explicit than the historians cited here in distinguishing between the short-run goal of halting or reversing a current downward trend or spiral of deterioration, and the long-run, ultimate goal of eliminating the Communist threat. Proposals were evaluated separately in the light of these two aims.

Another issue was when measures addressed to the long-run should be instituted to be effective; thus, some thought that certain measures of political reform were essential to the long-run aim, yet could be too risky to stability in the short run if implemented too soon.

[14] Ibid.

Would the initial Task Force be sufficient, as well as necessary? Certainly not in case of invasion, which it might possibly provoke; in that case, it was made clear, the initial 8-10,000 troops would be no more than an advance guard. But even short of that contingency, the report emphasized that continued infiltration--which was more likely than not--would require larger U.S. forces. In Schlesinger's words:

> "Taylor and Rostow hoped that this program (i.e. includiig the Task Force) would suffice to win the civil war--and were sure it would if only the infiltration from the north could be stopped. But if it continued, then they could see no end to the war. They therefore raised the question of how long Saigon and the United States could be expected to play by the existing ground rules, which permitted North Vietnam to train and supply guerrillas from across the border and denied South Vietnam (sic) the right to strike back at the source of aggression.[15] Rostow argued so forcibly for a contingency policy of retaliation against the north, graduated to match the intensity of Hanoi's support of the Viet Cong, that "Rostow Plan 6" became jocularly established in the contingency planning somewhere after SEATO plan 5."[16]

To summarize Taylor's views at this time:
(a) the program recommended, including the Task Force, was sufficient to avoid a further deterioration of the situation, if executed promptly;
(b) the Task Force was a necessary element, even to this short-run goal; there was no convincing substitute for it;

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[15]In the spring of 1961, for an audience at the Fort Bragg Special Forces School, Rostow described the "sending of men and arms across international boundaries and the direction of guerrilla war from outside a sovereign nation" as a new form of aggression, calling for unilateral retaliation in the absence of international action (Hilsman, To Move a Nation, (New York, 1967), p. 422. Apparently the major lesson Rostow and Taylor learned from the Bay of Pigs operation, which took place about the same time, was that Castro should have the right to bomb Florida, or Washington.

[16]A Thousand Days, p. 505.

(c) but the whole program was only an important first step in the direction of the longer-run goal, eventually to contain and eliminate the threat to the independence of South Vietnam;
(d) how many more troops would be needed would depend to a great extent on the settlement in Laos and the subsequent behavior of the authorities in North Vietnam;
(e) for final victory the U.S. might have to strike the source of the aggression (though this decision could be deferred).

These were the views of President Kennedy's most trusted military advisor, whom he had brought out of retirement and later named Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The (unannounced) purpose of Taylor's Presidential mission to Vietnam had been precisely to evaluate which, if any, of several proposed schemes of U.S. combat deployment to Vietnam would be appropriate, in addition to the increased advisors and logistic support programs which were regarded, by October 1961, almost as foregone conclusions. Taylor made the trip, came back and told the President his answer: the situation was "serious but not hopeless," i.e., not hopeless if and only if the President promptly dispatched sizeable U.S. combat units--an initial installment neither the smallest nor the largest of the forces proposed earlier--with the understanding that more troops and bombing of the North would probably be required as later steps.

This program was presented as adequate for the short-run; probably inadequate for the longer-run, requiring major additional measures; almost surely inadequate for both long and short-run aims without the vital element of the Task Force. Kennedy bought the program minus the Task Force.

Nor was this because Taylor and Rostow were alone in their advocacy or emphasis upon the Task Force. As Sorenson, reveals, the JCS had advocated a commitment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam (and/or Laos) as early as May, 1961.[17] After Taylor's return, they reiterated this recommendation and subscribed to Taylor's emphasis upon its urgency and, among the whole shopping list of proposals, its critical role.[18]

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[17] Sorenson, op. cit., p. 652.

[18] It must be underlined that there was no haziness in internal discussion about the distinction between U.S. ground combat units, on the one hand, and the mixed bag of advisors, logistics, and combat support troops, including intelligence, communications and helicopter personnel, on the other. Those two categories were regarded by all as posing very different risks and benefits.

Neither were civilian proponents lacking. According to Sorenson,

> "the pressures upon the President to make that commitment (of American combat troops) were at a peak. <u>All</u> his principal advisors on Vietnam favored it calling it the "touchstone" of our good faith, a symbol of our determination."[19]

This may be an exaggeration. There seem to have been a number of skeptics in the State Department, possibly including, at this moment in history, Dean Rusk. The final joint "recommendation" presented formally to the President by Rusk and McNamara--apparently reflectling high-level interaction including the President--rejected, for the present, the sending of a Task Force, though it called for preparations for sending combat forces if necessary.

But only a few days earlier, Secretary of Defense McNamara had reported to the President his conclusion, shared by Deputy Secretary Gilpatric and the JCS, that the chances were against, probably sharply against, preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism by any measures short of the introduction of U.S. forces on a substantial scale. McNamara explicitly judged, in agreement with General Taylor, that the various other measures proposed by Taylor short of this (i.e., the set of measures eventually accepted by the President) would not by themselves do the job of restoring confidence and setting Diem on the way to winning his fight.

Indeed, though of great help to Diem, even the initial U.S. task force of about 8,000 men, would not convince the other side that we meant business, unless we accompanied the introduction of the initial force with a clear commitment to the full objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and warned Hanoi through some channel that continued support of the VC would lead to punitive retaliation against North Vietnam. Lacking this commitment and warning, the initial force by itself (let alone, the program without this force) would probably not tip the scales decisively; we would be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle.

If the proposed commitment and force deployment were undertaken, the President was warned of the possibility that Hanoi and Peiping might intervene openly, in which case as many as, but (given logistic difficulties of the other side) not more than six U.S. divisions,[20] or about 205,000 men would be required.

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[19] Sorenson, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 652.

[20] Hilsman, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 423.

Even so, success would depend on many factors not under our control, including the conduct of Diem and events in Laos. The domestic political implications of the decision were also grave, though the feeling was expressed that the country would respond better to a firm initial position than to courses of action that led us in only gradually and that in the meantime involved casualties. In sum, forces should not be introduced without the clear commitment, but it was recommended that both be undertaken, with the Taylor task force and other programs as first steps.

Neither here nor in any other document of the time is there a hint that later years could find us with over 500,000 men engaged in a struggle in South Vietnam that must still be described as "inconclusive", and this without overt invasion by either China or North Vietnam. (No estimate or analysis seems to have imagined the contingency of large-scale covert infiltration of regular units, impossible to interdict by airpower.)

Nevertheless, though the assumed ceiling on U.S. force involvement in case of full overt invasion by both North Vietnam and Communist China appears, with hindsight, strikingly low, it can be assumed to have been a shocker at the time, sufficiently sobering to acquit the recommendation, even in retrospect, of undue or seriously misleading optimism.

In short, as in Taylor's discussion, it was asserted by the top officials in the Pentagon that without the task force, and soon, nothing else had much chance of working; and even with it, more would almost surely be needed.

"But the President in effect voted 'no'--and only his vote counted."[21]

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[21]Sorenson, op. cit., p. 653. As noted above, a few days after his recommendation by the Secretary of Defense, the President received a new recommendation by McNamara and Rusk jointly, leaning toward views of the State Department but almost surely incorporating guidance from the President himself, omitting the proposal of immediate deployment of combat troops. As with the effort (see below) to conceal the fact of General Taylor's recommendation, this apparent turnaround by the Secretary of Defense clearly represented a standard high-level bureaucratic device to prevent leaks that would burden the President with responsibility for rejecting certain proposals, or suggest that the measures actually adopted were regarded by some advisers as inadequate. The White House once revealed a later embodiment of this practice by explaining, a propos of the

That the President "voted" against advisers in the Defense Department and White House is not, by itself, either paradoxical or surprising, nor is it a clear sign that his decision process was faulty or his decision mistaken. It is merely, given the substance of the advice, in flat contradiction to the Schlesinger model.

Scant basis here for describing the President as taking a small step because he was promised success, a step "reasonably regarded as the last that would be necessary." On the contrary, President Kennedy adopted a limited but sizeable, costly and committing set of programs not because he was assured of success, reasonably or not, but despite being assured (reasonably or not) that the programs he chose would not, by themselves, be successful: certainly not in the long run, probably not even for the short run, the measures he rejected being essential to both.

Given the expectation prior to the Taylor-Rostow Mission that at least the advisory buildup and other measures short of troops would be approved, and the recommendations he actually received, it seems likely that the President himself and his high-level advisers regarded as his most, perhaps only significant decision of the period, his rejection of the proposal to send combat units immediately.[22]

The question here is not whether this was reasonable for the President to do. The point is simply that it characterizes what he did do. As such it defines--in terms quite different from Schlesinger's-what-is-to-be-explained in a valid analysis of the actual decision-making process.

The same characterization is reinforced if we look at advice of the period from outside the Pentagon. Each agency had its own candidate for "essential" programs.

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assertion that all of General Westmorelands force requirements had been met, that MACV/JCS force requests or proposals became "requirements" only when, and to the extent that they were approved by the President.

[22] As discussed below, this central decision as such, was concealed from the public, remaining hidden till the publication of the Schlesinger, Sorenson and Hilsman histories. Thus the relation of the programs actually revealed to the Taylor-Rostow recommendations, to other estimates and to the President's expectations, were seen by the public in considerably distorting perspective, a false light favoring the quicksand hypothesis in later years.

The State Department, at the moment, pressed political reforms as "essential"; without these, even the full military commitment recommended by the Pentagon would probably fail. The MAAG in Saigon emphasized administrative and command changes as "essential". (All of these, however, were addressed more to the long-run problem of victory, and some bureaucratic opponents regarded them as "counter-productive" in the short-run).

Both of these sorts of "reforms", in contrast to the Task Force, were included in the programs accepted by Kennedy in November and were presented to President Diem. Both were, for practical purposes, abandoned by December or January in face of Diem's intrasigence (doubtless reinforced by his disappointment in getting none of the commitments--treaty or troops--for which he had been hoping). Thus, the Presidential program for Vietnam maintained its abstract character of omitting every feature emphasized by any agency as "essential" in the longer run (along with some features regarded strongly as essential for getting through the immediate crisis).[23]

The President, of course, had his reasons. Many of them were good enough reasons, even in retrospect. But they had little to do with optimism, or inattention.

According to Sorenson, the key to his "vote" against troops lay his own observation and interpretation of the French experience in 1954:

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[23]The last point suggests that Leslie Gelb's characterization (in his excellent paper for this panel) of the typical Presidential choice as the "minimally necessary decision" (to keep South Vietnam out of the Communist hands) is not quite precise enough and can be misleading. Presidents several times, as in this case, accepted even less than what some important advisors told him was minimally necessary for the long-run aim.

On the other hand, Presidents could be "generous" along dimensions that were less politically sensitive (e.g. financial and material support, and the scale of the air effort in both South and North Vietnam, including defoliation and B-52's).

The formula is acceptable if one is clear that: (a) "necessary" applies mainly to the short-run, and (b) refers to the President's own judgment, not necessarily his advisors'; (c) it is only certain "sensitive" resources and actions that are "minimized", and inhibitions about these can be so strong that some risks may be accepted, even for the short run, in using them less or later than may be described as "necessary". Related decision rules are implicit in the hypothesis discussed at length below.

"He had watched the French, with a courageous well-equipped army numbering hundreds of thousands, suffer a humiliating defeat and more than ninety thousand casualties. Now the choice was his. If the United States took over the conduct of the war on the ground, he asked, would that not make it easier for the Communists to say we were the neo-colonialist successors of the French? Would we be better able to win support of the villagers and farmers so essential to guerrilla warfare--than Vietnamese troops of the same color and culture? No one knew whether the South Vietnamese officers would be encouraged or resentful, or whether massive troop landings would provoke a massive Communist invasion--an invasion inevitably leading either to nuclear war, Western retreat or an endless and exhausting battle on the worst battleground he could choose."[24]

Moreover, by November 1961 President Kennedy--"his skepticism deepened by the Bay of Pigs experience and the holes in the Laos report"[25]--had bureaucratic lessons of his own to draw upon. Both bodies of experience pointed to the same moral: the threat of quicksand, or, in a pithy remark to Schlesinger relating to the Taylor request, of addiction:

"They want a force of American troops...They say it's necessary in order to restore confidence and maintain morale. But it will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you take another." 26

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[24] Op. cit., p. 654. Like George Ball, Kennedy, who had first visited Indochina in 1951 and had criticized the French effort and U.S. intervention in the Senate, was one of the few Americans who saw the French debacle as a warning. Nevertheless....

[25] Ibid., p. 652.

[26] The Bitter Heritage, p. 39. The analogy, a recent one at the time, occurred to others. On November 2, the eve of the President's decision, Tran Van Chuong, Diem's Ambassador to the U.S., was reported in the New York Times to believe that a "token force" of U.S. troops should be sent to South Vietnam to demonstrate U.S. willingness to fight and to prevent a Communist miscalculation leading to a big war. He said he "personally thought--and had told U.S. officials --that it was just as important to show U.S. determination to resist the Communist drive in Southeast Asia as it was in Berlin, where the token U.S. garrison had been reinforced."

"Yet"--the sympathetic historian is forced to record--" he felt obliged to offer a small drink himself, and he increased the number of advisors."

> "More drinks were still to come. At the end of 1961, there were 1,364 American military personnel in South Vietnam; and the end of 1962, 9,865; at the time of Kennedy's death in November 1963, about 15,500. This was the policy of 'one more step'--each new step always promising the success which the previous last step had also promised but had unaccountably failed to deliver."[27]

By now, no new comment is needed on that last remark, the text for this sermon. Yet the question remains: Why? Why that "small drink"? Properly cautious about the seductive, commiting aspects of the Task Force proposal he rejected, was Kennedy simply naive in ignoring the same quicksand/flypaper/tarbaby properties of the advisor build-up he accepted? Appropriately skeptical about the effectiveness of U.S. combat units in winning the war, was he wishfully optimistic about the "counterinsurgency effort" he set out to support?

What is to be explained, not only in this but in all the major decisions on Vietnam, includes omitting program elements described by major advisors as essential to success; but not getting out entirely, either, cutting losses or reducing the effort. If the President was not willing to do more than he did, why did he not do less? In face of estimates that "more" might just barely succeed, to do less than that would seem to court both commitment and costly failure. In this part of the decision pattern there is, after all, an element of paradox.

This paradox applies virtually across-the-board to major Presidential initiatives on Vietnam. <u>No more than in 1961</u> were the measures of increased involvement we <u>actually</u> adopted in 1950 or in 1954-55, or in early 1965, promised or expected to be adequate, or "last steps", or indeed, anything but <u>long shots</u> so far as ultimate success was concerned.

The same applies to the initial military steps proposed by some, but finally rejected by Eisenhower, to rescue the situation at the time of Dienbienphu and immediately after. At that time, Schlesinger reports:

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[27] Ibid., p. 39.

> "Churchill thus summed up the American proposal: 'What we are being asked to do is to assist in misleading the Congress into approving a military operation which would be in itself ineffective, and might well bring the world to the verge of a major war."[28]

But except for the immediate threat of major war, which was not posed again till 1965 and after, this comment would have applied--even in the eyes of most Administration discussants--to virtually all of the new measures of military involvement actually adopted from 1950-1968.

The perceived inadequacy, the low expectation of success, of measures actually adopted is not always demonstrated, as in 1961, by rejected recommendations for much stronger measures regarded as essential to success. Rather, it emerges directly in intelligence estimates of the time, or the very analyses by proponents of the measures, which are cautious and pessimistic, characteristically stating conditions (e.g., major changes in allied policies) for even minimal success that were admittedly highly unlikely.

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[28] The Bitter Heritage, p. 26, italics added. Equally pertinent is Ridgeway's comment, also cited by Schlesinger: "In Korea we had learned that inadequate ground forces cannot win one either. It was incredible to me that we had forgotten that bitter lesson so soon--that we were on the verge of making that same tragic error."

In fact, perhaps the most striking discovery to be made by someone surveying the internal documentation for the first time (probably approaching it with something like the quicksand model in mind) is the persistent pessimism about non-Communist prospects and about proposals for improving them, almost unrelieved, often stark--and in retrospect, creditably realistic, frank, cogent--that runs through the intelligence estimates and analyses from 1950 through 1961.

As for policy analyses and proposals, as distinct from estimates, one peculiar format for major recommendations on policy is so generally characteristic that it might be called the Proposal Pattern, or more suggestively (since these recommendations came close to adoption, or were chosen only in crisis periods) the Desperate Proposal Pattern. This takes the form, not (as the quicksand model suggests) "Do this, because it will work, or, work better, cheaper, faster, or with less risk," but "Do this--because it might work--the alternatives are certain to fail--and failure would be "unacceptable", intolerable."

Yet though these data are adequate decisively to reject the Schlesinger hypothesis, they do not easily suggest an alternative. One is, indeed, struck by the sameness of the bureaucratic debate, both in substance, tone and agency position, at decision points throughout the twenty-year period, suggesting that a single, perhaps complex, hypothesis should cover the whole set of decisions.[29] But what one? Certain recurrent sub-patterns, like the Desperate Proposal Pattern (DPP) noted above, can be identified, yet are not easily fitted together or "rationalized" in terms of other premises on motivations; they are themselves data to be explained, rather than serving obviously as parts of larger explanations. Thus, how could decision-making proceed on the basis of proposals that omitted any mention of the probable total scale or costs of the recommended program,[30] or, even roughly, its probability

[29] Though not necessarily the intervening periods between decisions to escalate involvement: see discussion below of the optimistic "Phase B" intervals.

[30] The DOD and Taylor-Rostow recommendations on troops are in some ways unusual exceptions to the DPP, since they mention the probability that failure of initial steps will lead to pressure to commit more troops, and go on to mention a "worst-case" total (in the DOD estimate, 205,000 troops, in case of a Chinese Communist and North Vietnamese invasion). Perhaps this is one reason why the proposal was rejected! The prior analyses for the program actually adopted--the advisor and support buildup--did have the character of

of success, or the consequences of failure? (It is the essence of the DPP that the limited, positive assertion cited above is all there is to it; these other elements, logically included among decision premises, are not to be found).

Thus, to come close to the fine grain of official choices on Vietnam is to be confronted with puzzles, barricades of doubts, to be mired, indeed, in uncertainties. What seemed clear as one listened to speeches, or observed official actions, or compared the two, is less so when files are opened, and unnoticed actions, official estimates and internal arguments emerge. Under the magnifying lens, previously evident overall patterns--like the quicksand hypothesis--dissolve like the canals on Mars.

Almost regardless of his attitudes on the war, a reader is likely to rise from such a survey of internal evidence baffled and troubled, with the question on his mind: "How could they?" How could four Presidents--Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson--in the face of estimates and program analyses and recommendations like these, so persistently have chosen what were almost always presented (at the time of decision) as long-shots, probably inadequate, potentially costly and risky, in favor either of more effective measures or of lesser involvement?

Documentary evidence on the internal decision-making process is far from adequate to answer the critical question of what considerations were actually salient to the President at a given moment. The President--having no formal need to persuade a superior, coordinate a proposal or justify a decision internally--puts much less down on paper than other participants in the bureaucratic process. Because of his overlapping roles, he conceals or dissembles his own views even more than other participants, except (selectively) to his closest associates; who in turn guard them closely, for reasons of loyalty, their own access, and politics, even when they come to write "history". (It is noteworthy, for example, that the highly significant Kennedy views and intentions on Vietnam, revealed recently --as discussed below--by Kenneth O'Donnell, which would have been unknown to Schlesinger or Sorenson, are not hinted at in their accounts published five years earlier.)

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the DPP, as did decisions to support the French, to support Diem, to encourage the overthrow Diem, and to start the bombing of the North and the troop buildup (along with proposals that were rejected, like air support for the French at the time of Dienbienphu, or frequent JCS proposals from 1964-69 to operate in Laos and Cambodia).

In fact, certain general considerations--which caution the analyst/historian not to take the mosaic of bureaucratic inputs to Presidential decision as a close or highly reliable guide to the President's own view of a matter, his private expectations and aims[31]--go some way toward blunting the paradox raised above, the apparent discrepancy between estimates and Presidential action.

First, the President may, to some degree, simply disbelieve the estimate. He may believe a pessimistic tone reflects a bias, or a bureaucratic hedge. (In actual fact, the intelligence analyses of the '50's and to a somewhat lesser extent the '60's, look realistic in their pessimism, not vague or excessive; they would read well in such estimates, rarely keep score-cards or call for retrospective checks on accuracy.) As for claims that measures he has decided to reject are "essential", he may feel (with justice, in many cases) that this language is largely a bureaucratic ploy, an attempt to tie his hands or to make a record as a future hedge.

Most Presidents probably acquire, fairly quickly, skepticism about assertions that they "must" act immediately, or adopt a proposal in full or on a vast scale, if they are to avoid disaster or have any likelihood of success. They are likely to be drawn--even if no one else suggests it, even if they are told that it is infeasible or dangerous --to converting a program into a sequential decision, "buying time, awaiting information, keeping options open." They can also claim to be doing this, as a way of rejecting a proposal without foreclosing its proponents' hopes.[32] All this results from on-the-job training: which is not to say that such habits are always prudent, or even that they may not build a catastrophe.

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[31] Such written inputs, coordinated and open to multiple bureaucratic audiences, are not even a thoroughly reliable guide to what the President was hearing informally from the signers of the same memos. For example, when the President showed great reluctance to send combat forces, it is not unlikely--as Richard Goodwin has conjectured to me--that McNamara attenuated greatly in private, his previously written judgment, concurring with Taylor and the JCS, that the job could not be done without an immediate commitment of ground troops. In other words, Kennedy might not have felt, by late November, quite so isolated from the mood of his principal advisers as the written record would suggest.

[32] This is what Hilsman claims Kennedy did with the proposal to send combat forces in 1961. "In an interesting example of one type of gambit in the politics of Washington policy-making, the President avoided a direct 'no' to the proposal for introducing troops" (op. cit. p. 424.) Such a tactic could account for the effective secrecy surrounding the Taylor/JCS recommendations to send troops. The hope of still persuading the President would discourage leaks among the proponents of the measure.

Moreover, as Richard Moorsteen has pointed out to me, many Presidents, as successful politicans, are likely to exhibit these same traits for temperamental reasons as well. A strong focus on the short-run, a hopeful attitude toward one's future, a tendency to put off painful decisions in hopes, and some confidence, that "something will turn up" (to make the decision either unnecessary, or easier): all these are part of the typical make-up of a politican. A President, as Moorsteen puts it, will have attained that office only by winning a long succession of long-shots; by the time he gets there he is likely to have a strong belief in his lucky star, a confidence that he can get away with what looks like chance-taking where others might not, confidence that something will always turn up for him. A Bay of Pigs experience, then, comes as a special shock; yet even that will probably not erase the traits.

These are speculations that almost surely have some truth, and deserve closer investigation. Considering where we have been brought as a nation, such habits and traits, of course, so far as they are influential, are no more reassuring than any other explanation. They go some part of the way to restoring something like a quicksand model; though not in a form welcome to Presidential apologists, since the burden is put on the President himself, and his tendency to disbelieve warnings rather than to be denied them.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely, in the actual context of each of these major crisis decisions, that such considerations worked more than a marginal difference in degree in the President's thinking from the views of his advisers. There is no evidence that he differed radically from their formal appreciation of the odds and the possibilities: which is to say that he must still have seen the programs he was choosing as long shots in terms of long-run success, and probably inadequate even in the mid-term.

Thus, when all this is said, the stumbling-into-quicksand image cannot be revived when one looks at the internal record. Instead one sees repeatedly, a leader striding with his eyes open into what he sees as quicksand, renewing efforts and carrying his followers deeper in, knowingly, at various threshholds of difficulty: why? Presumably, because he sees no alternative, and hopes to find a way through, or the alternatives seem even more threatening, worse in the short run. But what is it exactly, that the DPP describes as "intolerable; what is the failure so ominous that it must be postponed at such costs?

Looking only at the set of critical decision points, one sees, not an unwary traveller miring down imperceptibly, but a different image: Eliza, fleeing across the broken ice of the river, leaping (babe in arms) from block to block as each begins to slip.... And the question becomes: What whips threaten, whose are the hounds that bay on the departed shore?

In one period, at least, 1949-50, the identity of the pursuers was in no doubt. A close look at that decision point--when lack of prior involvement screens out several of the hypotheses competing for attention later--suggests answers to many of the questions raised so far.

1950: THE EDGE OF THE BOG

At the time an American President first left solid ground behind to step into the Indochina War, the main pursuers to his rear had known faces and names, and their accents were American: in fact, 100% American. The names, and voices in full-throated cry, included those such Republican Senators as William Knowland, Styles Bridges, Kenneth Wherry and Pat McCarran, who denounced the China White Paper issued by the State Department on August 5, 1949, as "a 1054-page whitewash of a wishful, do-nothing policy which has succeeded only in placing Asia in danger of Soviet conquest."[32] And Arthur Vandenberg: "I think we virtually 'sold China down the river' at Yalta and Posdam and in our subsequent official demands for coalition with the armed Chinese Communists."[33] And Richard Nixon, whose "able, discerning, and persistent" questioning[34] of Alger Hiss had broken down the Hiss defense and whose efforts were more responsible than any others in bringing an indictment against Hiss (and bringing himself to national attention, that helped him defeat Helen Douglas for the Senate in the fall of 1950 and two years later earned him nomination as Vice President).[35]

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[32]Norman Graebner, The New Isolationism (New York, 1956), p. 45.

[33]Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr., ed., The Private Papers of Senator Vandenberg (Boston, 1952) p. 536; cited in Alan D. Harper, The Politics of Loyalty (Westport, 1969), p. 116.

[34]Robert K. Carr, The House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1945-50 (New York, 1952), pp. 230-33; cited in Harper, op.cit., p. 119.

[35]It is pertinent to the discussion below to recall that then--Representative Nixon's successful campaign, in the most closely-watched race in the fall of the year we are considering, was won on the theme that Mrs. Douglas

And above all, Senator Joe McCarthy, whose sensational charges of Communist infiltration of the State Department began 18 days after Hiss was convicted in a second trial --or two weeks after Secretary of State Acheson announced, "I will not turn my back on Alger Hiss"--with his speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950.

"How can we account for our present situation," McCarthy was to ask later,

> "unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man."[36]

Or more specifically:

> "It was not Chinese democracy under Mao that conquered China, as Acheson, Lattimore, Jessup and Hanson contend. Soviet Russia conquered China and an important ally of the conquerors was this small left-wing element in our Department of State."[37]

Thus McCarthy, in a Senate speech on March 30, 1950. In less than nine months, criticism of "our loss of China" had moved from condemnation of our "wishful, do-nothing" policy to discern a more sinister meaning in what had seemed passivity. As Graebner paraphrased the attack:

> "United States policy failed, in short, because it had pursued the goals, not of this nation, but of the Soviet Union."[38]

Meanwhile, in December, 1949, Chinese Communist troops had reached the borders of Indochina. At that point, granted sanctuary, supplies and expert advisers, it became virtually

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had showed a "soft attitude toward Communism." (Harper, op.cit., p. 171). Two years later, when the Republicans chose him as the Vice Presidential nominee, Senator Nixon was, as Alan Harper puts it, "as exclusively identified in the public mind with the Communist issue--albeit on a different level--as Senator McCarthy." (Ibid., p. 227). Nixon himself in My Six Crises, chooses to recall that,

> "General Eisenhower introduced me as his running mate to the Republican National Convention as a man who has a special talent and an ability to ferret out any kind of subversive influence wherever it may be found, and the strength and persistence to get rid of it."

(New York, 1962, 1968, p. 74).

[36] Graebner, op. cit., p. 28.

[37] Harper, op. cit., p. 133.

[38] Graebner, op. cit., p. 45.

impossible for the Communist-led nationalist forces of the Viet Minh to lose to the French. But for the same reason, given the domestic environment in the U.S. described above, it had become "intolerable" to the Truman Administration that they should <u>win</u>.

Acheson's White Paper had argued that the defeat of Chiang in China had resulted from "internal Chinese forces, forces which this country tried to influence but could not."[39] That argument had not gained the credibility it would seem to deserve in the case of China, where opposing forces were immense, no American troops were engaged, and there was no real U.S. support for their involvement. Instead, growing numbers of the U.S. public found it possible to believe that the outcome had resulted from forces internal to the U.S. Government: forces of treason.

In this atmosphere there was no rush in the State Department to commence the drafting of an Indochina White Paper. In Indochina the battle against Communist-led guerrillas, whose ultimate direction--here Acheson agreed with his attackers--came from "the Kremlin", was being carried by Western troops unquestionably able and willing to utilize U.S. material effectively. No U.S. troops were needed, or desired: at least, to avert defeat, to bring about a stalemate. And the need was urgent; official estimates at the end of 1949 gave French forces in Tonkin only 6 to 9 more months, lacking U.S. aid.

In the fall of 1948, when the fall of Chiang seemed inevitable even <u>with</u> U.S. aid, some had argued within the government for cutting off further aid to the Nationalists. Secretary Marshall had opposed this on the grounds that this would only "administer the final <u>coup de grace</u> to Chiang's government, and this, he felt, we could not do."[40] In February, 1949, at the apparent initiative of the new Secretary of State, Acheson, the NSC recommended withholding supplies already earmarked for China. Senator Vandenberg argued successfully against the move, even though he admitted that Communist victory seemed inevitable; "I decline to be responsible for the <u>last push</u> which makes it possible."[41] The aid continued; yet even this did little to protect the Administration from its critics.

A year later, the position of a proponent within the State Department for withholding military aid from

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[39] Harper, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 116.

[40] Harper, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 110.

[41] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 114.

our NATO ally, France, thereby accepting full responsibility for its prompt defeat by the forces of the Kremlin, would have been an isolated one. And this despite the fact that estimates at the time held out scant hope that France would accept the political strategies that alone might give a significant chance of ultimate victory.

No matter how slim the probability of "winning", there was little debate within the government as to whether the open-ended direct aid policy we commenced in May, 1950, with a first installment of $10 million, was worthwhile. It could (and did) buy a stalemate; and the alternative was to add the fall of Indochina to the fall of China. That was enough to know. To postpone the loss of Tonkin beyond the tenure of the Truman Administration would almost surely have seemed worth--in the eyes of the incumbents, and their Party--far more than the several billion dollars (and one must add, the French and Vietnamese lives) that it cost.

What leads one to what would otherwise seem a harsh and cynical interpretation is, besides the fact of timing, the great difficulty otherwise of explaining a decision directly to involve ourselves in this struggle, given the extreme pessimism--in retrospect, realistic and insightful --of official estimates concerning French prospects in the long run, even with our aid. No more in this first instance than in later ones did the premise of the quicksand model apply: "one small step promising success".

Moreover, other hypotheses on possible motives for accepting a long-shot, plausible in later periods, cannot apply here. In 1950, it could not be said that we had to carry out prior commitments or promises; or that our prestige rested on earlier involvement; or that, our own forces having been engaged, we could not afford our own "military defeat".

The relevant events, determining our response, had taken place outside Indochina. They were the fall of China (and earlier disappointments in Eastern Europe, the Czech coup, and in general, the Cold War); and the response of Republican leadership to these events and to the stunning frustration of their 1948 electoral defeat (in particular, Taft's decision to back McCarthy). After these developments, no factor above was needed to define "a Communist victory in Asia that the U.S. might have prevented" as a defeat for the U.S., a culpable failure by the Administration, a basis, even for charges of conscious treachery.

The facts that involvement posed the likelihood of greater costs in future, risks, even, of major war with China or Russia if the Chinese Communists should enter, all uncompensated by significant promise of eventual success: none of this outweighed the credible promise of intervention to "buy time", i.e., to postpone defeat, and to avert the political and personal consequences of charges of "softness on Communism".

That this was the primary conscious or latent motive underlying Administration policy toward Indochina cannot be proved. Internal bureaucratic argumentation does not reveal explicitly any such basis, nor could it be expected to. Rather, publicly and privately, the stakes are described, as later, in international, strategic terms: the consequences of Communist victory elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Asia, Latin America, Europe. All the elements of Eisenhower's "domino" formula were here, in full detail and emphasis, except for the label.

To repeat: the main reason for doubting the true primacy of this overt goal--preventing the strategic consequences of a Communist takeover in Vietnam--is that official estimates gave such small hopes of averting these consequences indefinitely by the means contemplated or indeed, by any means. What would reasonably be expected on the basis of these estimates, and what was achieved, was postponement. Yet little effort was made in internal analyses to justify the costs and risks of the policy in terms of the national strategic value merely of postponing these consequences. That might have been hard to do convincingly. Nor was the public burdened with discouraging words, frank excerpts from intelligence estimates that would have warned of the low probability of success to be expected from our investment. Nor, finally, was there serious consideration of raising the scale of that investment to levels that might promise effectiveness; despite the alleged grave importance of the stakes, it was clear that every effort was to be made to avoid the need to use U.S. troops.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, followed rapidly by public disenchantment (and charges that Acheson had even invited it, and the message of Republican victories in the fall, all the earlier motives were sharpened for "buying time" in Indochina.[42] But still not, "at any price";

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[42] In Leslie Gelb's paper for this conference--otherwise generally in close accord with the arguments in this paper--his treatment of Korea as a major turning-point for U.S. policy toward Indochina is puzzling, and seems mistaken. Whereas the Korean attack came as a surprise, the policy of

despite the renewed judgment that the strategic stakes in Southeast Asia were of the highest order, there was even less interest than before in committing U.S. ground troops to Indochina. The "Never Again Club" in the Pentagon was in the process of consolidating. And controversy over General MacArthur's dismissal in April, 1951, both mobilized critics of Administration policy and publicized a premise already present earlier in the attacks by the "Asia-first" Republicans. This was a belief that "victory" was not only, as MacArthur emphasized, indispensable, but that it could be had by a patriotic and resolute Administration _on the cheap_: by a combination of commitment to victory, unrestrained use of airpower, and strong support of Asian allies.[43] To have to employ U.S. ground troops against Asians showed a probable invitation to attack, weak strategy, incompetence, irresolution or neglect of potential Asian allied troops; to lose an area to Communism marked either culpable negligence or treason.

> "It has to be doubted, nevertheless, that the Senators (who attacked the China White Paper in 1949) would have advocated a truly forward policy, in any physical sense, for the United States in the Far East. The Republicans had been attacking the Democrats as a 'war party", while anti-administration leaders generally insisted on budget-cutting. The expenditure of men and money would have been required to save the Chinese Nationalists would have betrayed their only secure base of popular support. And, it should be remembered, the Chinese issue was widely agitated only _after_ Chiang Kai-shek had been conclusively defeated."[44]

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active encouragement and direct support of the French and Bao Dai efforts had clearly begun building in 1948-49 as the fall of China impended, and emerged formally in the grants of May, 1950, a month before Korea. To highlight the buildup in aid after the Korean Emergency made more resources available (as the opening of a new period in U.S. policy), seems seriously misleading as to the underlying domestic motives for the new policy.

[43] See Harper, _op. cit._, Chapters 5 and 9; Graebner, _op. cit._, Chapters 3 and 5.

[44] Harper, _op. cit._, pp. 86-87

Or as Norman Graebner described the "neo-isolationist"[45] program:

> "China must be made safe for America through support of the Nationalist cause, but that safety must be obtained at minimum cost and without American responsibility or involvement."[46]

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[45] His term for pre-World War II isolationists--actually, foes only of European entanglements--who emerged in the late-'40's and early-'50's as "Asia-first" interventionists, still exhibiting classic isolationist tendencies: "a concern for the domestic economy, the overestimation of United States power, the underestimation of the enemy, a belief in the nation's moral superiority, and unilateralism in diplomacy". (_op.cit._, p. 23.)

[46] Graebner, _op. cit._, p. 27. Graebner's account of the fully-developed philosophy deserves quoting at length.

> "McCarthy believed that a sturdy administration could upset the Red regime with no application of power at all. 'We can bring the enemy to their knees,' he said in late 1953, 'without firing a single shot.'
>
> These limitless expectations for United States policy toward Red China carried General MacArthur's presumptions of 1951 to their ultimate formula for successful action. Neo-isolationist demands for a strong course rested on the century-old tradition that the West could act tough in Asia with impunity because that continent had limited military power. This concept in 1953 and 1954 continued to reinforce the Asia-first tendencies of American opinion, allowing many citizens who were isolationist toward Europe to demand all-out war against the Chinese. And it permitted all those who advocated war against the Peiping regime to promise an easy victory.
>
> The concept that the United States could have its way in Asia had a corrupting effect on American thought. It continued to deny all revolutionary change in Asia; it reassured the American people that Korea-type wars were unnecessary--that in the air was the source of overwhelming power that would reinstate the weapon superiority which the West had enjoyed in the early days of colonial rule. Such reliance on military strength permitted air power to become a substitute for understanding, compromise, and friends, ((and of course, for U.S. ground troops on high war budgets)) in the Orient." (_Op. cit._, p. 126)

The Graebner and Harper books have been cited extensively here precisely because their accounts of the domestic impact of the fall of China and the rise of McCarthyism seem powerfully and directly relevant to an understanding of all subsequent decision-making on Indochina. That judgment, by one who has both participated in and studied U.S. policy-making on Indochina from inside the government, is offered as datum.

Anyone who has witnessed internal decision-making in such a period as, say, the "black autumn" of 1964 (perhaps the nadir of U.S. hopes regarding South Vietnam in the last decade) will almost surely feel on reading accounts of the 1948-54 period that he is learning, at last, the genesis of many bureaucratic-political premises of the later debate. Such books describe the events that scratched the minds of a generation of bureaucrats and politicans.

With the development of Eisenhower's budget-cutting "New Look" strategy in 1953-54 emphasizing nuclear weapons, the doctrinal role of airpower was further enhanced. The doctrine of "massive retaliation" was unveiled by Dulles in his speech before the Council on Foreign Relations in January, 1954, precisely with reference to the conflict in Indochina, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to deter further Communist pressure in Tonkin. The siege of Dienbienphu began soon afterward. Whether Dulles or Radford actually proposed the possible use of nuclear weapons to the French to rescue Dienbienphu (as Bidault asserts) is still disputed and unclear (though their proposal of a conventional air operation is not).

Nixon has echoed recently in reference to his campaign pledge to win a just peace in Vietnam, Eisenhower's assertion that he settled the Korean War by implying that he would use nuclear weapons if a truce were not signed. (See citation of Nixon's remarks to Southern delegates at the Miami Convention, 1968, and comment: Chester, Hodgson and Page, An American Melodrama, New York, 1969, p. 518. The passage is not unambiguous, but this paraphrase seems fair.)

Earlier, in a speech to the Executive Club of Chicago on March 17, 1955, (cited by Richard Barnet, address to BEM meeting, May 20, 1970), Vice President Nixon was a spokesman for spelling out the Administration concept of the role of nuclear weapons in the Pacific:

> "It is foolish to talk about the possibility that the weapons which might be used in the event war breaks out in the Pacific would be limited to the conventional Korean and World War II types of explosives. Our forces could not fight an effective war in the Pacific with those types of explosives if they wanted to. Tactical atomic explosives are now conventional and will be used against the military targets of any agressive force."

Patterns evident today that become immediately explicable from this history, in career and party terms, include powerful inhibitions against:

(1) proposing "coalition" with Communists, or regarding local accomodation as less than tantamount to Communist victory;
(2) pressuring an Asian ally toward "reforms", to the point of risking the charge of weakening his confidence or political base or military capability;
(3) regarding Communist adversaries as anything but terrorists and aggressors (though blessed with "organizational skills");
(4) dismissing, indefinitely, military proposals for "victory through airpower";
(5) "doing nothing"[47] in face of a possible "loss to Communism" (whether or not an action of any promise of effectiveness is at hand); or regarding such a possible loss as anything but "intolerable";[48]
(6) strongly questioning the assurance, speed, or impact on U.S. interests Asian "accomodation" to the Communists after Communist victory in South Vietnam (the "domino theory").

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[47] An argument made for commencing the bombing of North Vietnam in early 1965 by some who did not hold out high hopes for its effect on the North Vietnamese efforts was that "even if it failed, it would have been worthwhile; it would have demonstrated our willingness to risk, to bloody our opponent, to go the last mile for an ally..." Demonstrate to whom? Allegedly, to foreigners: opponents and allies. Yet the confident assurance (mocked by events) that such benefits would outweigh costs and risks seemed peculiar, even at the time; unless one noted that "doing something" to hurt Communist opponents, no matter how costly and unpromising, is strong protection against domestic charges of criminal underestimation of a Communist threat, if not--fantastic as these would have seemed before 1950--of literal treason.

[48] This last evaluation--<u>unchallengable bureaucratically</u>, by prudent rules of the game since 1950--leads directly to the logic of the Desperate Proposal Pattern. To avoid an "intolerable" (infinitely negative) outcome, any measure with <u>some</u> chance of success is justified, no matter how low its probability of success, or how high its costs and risks. Hence no need to report or even calculate the latter characteristics; enough to say that, unlike current policy, the one proposed is <u>not certain</u> to fail.

Such constraints on bureaucratic communication are not merely widely-accepted "conventions", as Morton Halperin has suggested (in a recent manuscript on bureaucratic behavior); they have a "sacred" quality, recognized by all, which enforces their conventional role in internal discourse and preserves them from explicit questioning. In any period there may, indeed, be heretics who do to some extent break sacred rules like those above; but the sanctions they risk[49] are far greater than loss of internal credibility (as in some of the less-emotional conventions cited by Halperin). The sanctions are enforced from outside the bureaucracy, they affect alike politicians, political appointees and career bureaucrats, and they extend beyond dismissal to total destruction of reputation and criminal charges of treason, as shown by the specific examples of John Paton Davies, John Stewart Service, John Carter Vincent, and the consultant Owen Lattimore (see accounts in Graebner, Harper, and Latham, ops. cit.).

1950-70: THE "INVESTMENT/TRAP" MODEL

In the case of 1950, then, the fears and pressures can be identified that hounded a Democratic Administration, spending considerable sums to avert a Communist victory in Vietnam during its term in office, despite lack of hope of accomplishing much more than that. Might it be that the same basic considerations and aims have dominated U.S. choices in crisis situations ever since?

Rare scraps of private Presidential views hint immediately at this parallel. Returning to the Kennedy era, Schlesinger reports a luncheon with the President in March, 1961:

> "Laos was much on his mind. He remarked a little dourly that the United States was over-committed in Southeast Asia but that he had to deal with facts as they were. It was indispensable to prevent 'an immediate Communist takeover.'... 'We cannot and will not accept any visible humiliation over Laos.'"[50]

And Sorenson's explanation for Kennedy's care not to make "a final negative decision on troops" in the fall of 1961 is suggestive as to concerns that may have influenced his positive commitments:

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[49]The potential risks are reflected in the devices to hedge a tolerated heretic against backlash, like George Ball's protective, "official" title of "Devil's Advocate".

[50]Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 310.

"In typical Kennedy fashion, he made it difficult for any of the prointervention advocates to charge him privately with weakness. He ordered the departments to be prepared for the introduction of combat troops, should they prove necessary."[51]

However to stress the "1950 model" in explanation of later decisions (as will be done below), is to contradict another form of the quicksand hypothesis. Rather than focussing (as our earlier discussion) upon inadequate foresight and unfounded hopes as the salient features of the quicksand analogy, one might equally stress the growing difficulty of extricating, as a victim gets deeper in the bog.

The notion of a "trapping mechanism" is as important to the quicksand image as the factor of expectations. It depends on reversing, quite plausibly, two standard dictums of economists, warning that in political life, "bygones are never bygone," and "sunk costs do matter". In other words, as investment, involvement, commitment all rise, the freedom to reverse course, cut losses and get out diminishes: eventually, almost to zero.

Schlesinger expresses this widely-held interpretation --which is not to be refuted as easily or definitively as the earlier version--in a number of passages:

"President Eisenhower, after rejecting American military intervention in 1954, set in motion the policy of support for Saigon which resulted, two Presidents later, in American military intervention in 1965."[52]

"the Eisenhower letter and, to a lesser degree, the special protocol to the SEATO treaty, did draw a line across Southeast Asia. Though these documents did not in any legal way compel American military intervention in South Vietnam, they did in a political way involve the United States in holding that line. That line could have been drawn elsewhere--along the Mekong River, for example, and the northern border of Thailand. No vital strategic interest required that it be drawn where it was. But it _was_ drawn in South Vietnam, for better or worse; a vital American interest was thus created where none had existed before; and a series of decisions followed in train which ended by carrying the United States into the fourth largest war of its history."

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[51] Sorenson, _op. cit._, p. 654 (italics added).

[52] _The Bitter Heritage_, p. 47

"Whether we were right in 1954 to undertake this commitment will long be a matter of interest to historians, but it had ceased by 1961 to be of interest to policy-makers. Whether we had vital interests in South Vietnam before 1954, the Eisenhower letter created those interests. Whether we should have drawn the line where we did, once it was drawn we became every succeeding year more imprisoned by it. Whether the domino theory was valid in 1954, it had acquired validity seven years later, after neighboring governments had staked their own security on the ability of the United States to liveup to its pledges to Saigon. Kennedy himself, who had watched western policy in Vietnam in the early fifties with the greatest skepticism and who as President used to mutter from time to time about our 'overcommitment' in Southeast Asia, had no choice now but to work within the situation he had inherited. Ironically, the collapse of the Dulles policy in Laos had created the possibility of a neutralist solution there; but the survival of that policy in South Vietnam, where the government was stronger and the army more willing to fight, left us in 1961 no alternative but to continue the effort of 1954.[53]

All this is plausible; and familiar. (Dean Rusk, for example, should have no quarrel with it). But one senses special pleading, when the full weight of historic inevitability seems to bear only on the years 1961-63, freedom of action--and with it, responsibility--being reserved for the immediately preceding President. "That line could have been drawn elsewhere..."; in other words, Eisenhower had a freedom his successors lacked?. And where is the Truman/Acheson commitment to support the French struggle in this account? And for that matter, the Republican involvement of 1953-54?

"By 1961 choices had already fatally narrowed...."[54] The implication is that whether "we were right" in 1961 to make new commitments is not of interest even to historians, since prior events had left Kennedy "no choice". If that were true in 1961, when 800 U.S. troops were in Vietnam, what choices were left to Lyndon Johnson, inheriting a deployment of 15,000?[55]

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[53]A Thousand Days, 496-97; underlining added. See also the opening paragraph of The Bitter Heritage, p. 21.

[54]Ibid., p. 910.

[55]Lest I be misunderstood here, it is my judgment that Johnson did have significant freedom of action in 1965, about the same as his predecessors had, and that he used this freedom the same way they did.

This form of the quicksand interpretation has the clear implication that the obstacles or disincentives at any point to retreating vary closely with the cumulative investment, or with the most recent costs. Thus, after each of several threshholds of involvement are passed, the subsequent difficulty of extrication should rise markedly. Of course, to some degree this is surely realistic.

Yet this is one more case where a clearly-defined, plausible pattern, consistent with most public statements and evidence, tends to dissolve when one compares it in detail to internal argumentation. For the sharp differences it suggests should appear between the urgency and the considerations brought to bear upon policy in 1965 and, say, in 1950 or 1961, simply do not emerge. As noted earlier, one is most impressed by the <u>sameness</u> of the bureaucratic debate in these various years; neither in tone nor in substance does one easily perceive either a trend or the effect of a threshhold.

Because this impression derives as much from what is not said, or what is most repeated, as it does from distinctive features in the discussion, it would be hard to substiantiate it without very extensive quotation. But a few points can be cited.

For example, for all the mention of the Eisenhower letter and the SEATO treaty in official public rhetoric (as in Schlesinger's comments above), there is virtually no mention of these or other formal commitments in internal arguments for or against greater intervention in 1958, or 1961, or 1965. In this there is little difference from similar discussions in 1950-54, before these "commitments" were undertaken.

Nor does the intensity of the debate, the agency positions, or the nature of the arguments, differ markedly between the years 1965, 1961 or <u>1950</u>, despite enormous differences in prior investment and current combat involvement.

Thus, in the analyses in 1964 and early 1965, there is scarcely more mention of the considerably increased involvement in preceding years 1962-63 than there had been in 1961 for the years 1954-61.

After 1965, on the other hand, it can be taken for granted that presence and overt combat involvement worked a qualitative change in the considerations brought to bear on policy, even though the internal discussion does not show the change as explicitly as might be expected. U.S. combat deaths, for example, became a new and inescapably

weighty factor of "investment" to be justified. However, though U.S. standards of an acceptable outcome were probably higher in 1966 and after than in 1964, reflecting the new combat intervention, even this is not unequivocally clear: so little did we spell out internally what those standards were in 1964 and early-65, and so little were we willing even in that earlier period to accept what we already thought of as "military defeat" and "humiliation".

In fact, nothing so powerfully undermines the credibility of this "prior investment" theory as to discover how very familiar in the terms of the '60's is the internal decision-making in 1950 and immediately following years.[56] After that finding, one feels that a satisfactory model must apply as well to an initial decision-point preceded by no prior commitment or direct involvement of any kind as to a decision at the end of a long sequence of escalations.

Doubtless all elements of the quicksand model, including both inadvertence and trapping, do operate to some degree. But they cannot account for a first, knowing step into the bog; and they may not be necessary to explain later steps that knowingly carried us deeper.

What is conjectured here is that those reasons to avoid short-term loss in Vietnam that applied in 1950 before any prior commitment or involvement also applied throughout the next two decades; and that they were at all times sufficient by themselves for each President to do what he did, or even to justify (in his eyes) doing much more if necessary. (There might have been limits on what a given President would do for these reasons alone, without considering the factor of recent involvement; but these limits were probably much higher than what he felt he had to do, at least through 1965).

This might be summarized by the political slogan: "This year is a bad time for this Administration to lose South Vietnam to Communism". Along with some rules on constraints (see discussion in the following Appendix; this yields a recursive formula for calculating Presidential decisions on Vietnam realistically, given inputs on alternatives, starting anytime from 1950 on.

This overall conjecture would include these hypotheses:

(1) JFK did not stay and escalate in late 1961 because of events and promises concerning Vietnam during 1954-1960, but because events elsewhere in 1961

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[56] An operational test of this "sameness", remarked earlier, would be to confront an informed layman with key parts of analyses and estimates of U.S. stakes and prospects from widely-different periods, and challenge him to identify the year. It would be easy to find passages that would confound even an expert (or, say, the Secretary of State).

(Laos, the Vienna meeting, The Berlin Wall, the resumption of testing, the Bay of Pigs) made that, even more than unusually "a bad time for him to lose South Vietnam to Communism". (This was true whether there had been a prior commitment or not). He decided to stay on in 1963, though encouraging the overthrow of Diem, for similar reasons.

(2) LBJ did not stay and escalate in 1965 because of events in 1961-64; he was no more ready earlier, in April, 1961, to "throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and a 'Fortress America' concept", or to "say to the world in this case that we don't live up to our treaties and don't stand by our friends."[58]

(3) Despite the passage of time and events, LBJ felt no more and no less "trapped" in 1964-65 than had Truman, Eisenhower, and JFK.

(4) Nixon's slowness in extricating from Vietnam (if total extrication is what he does intend) does not reflect the buildup in commitment over the past 5 or 10 years; it would have been no faster earlier.[59]

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[58] Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 501.

[59] Just as LBJ had established a prior position on Vietnam as Vice President before becoming Commander-in-Chief, so had Nixon. Touring Indochina in late 1953, Vice President Nixon had told the French:

> "It is impossible to lay down arms until victory is completely won...If your country (Indochina) is to be independent and free, it is first necessary to defeat the representatives of Communist imperialism on your soil...Those who advocate (removal of the French troops from Indochina) must know that if such a course is adopted it will mean not independence but complete domination by a foreign power." (Cited in Graebner, op. cit., p. 159).

On April 16, having earlier told newsmen that the fall of Dienbienphu would be catastrophic, Nixon told the American Society of Newspaper Editors:

> "If, to a avoid further Communist expansion in Asia and Indochina we must take the risk now by putting our boys in, I think the Executive has to take the politically unpopular decision and do it." (Ibid., p. 164)

This heresy left little doubt as to Nixon's evaluation of the stakes, though Republican editors in the audience were disturbed, and Dulles was forced to issue disclaimers on the likelihood of sending troops.

A major conjecture here is that an appropriate abstraction of elements of the 1950 Truman decision to intervene (despite lack of prior commitment) will fit the 1961 decision to escalate very well, and in fact, all major escalations from 1950-68. Such a model will be presented and analysed in the following section.

Meanwhile, if more evidence is needed to suggest the the explanatory power of the "1950 model" for later decisions, two last examples from the Kennedy era should provide it.

Speaking of 1961, Schlesinger defines the challenge of Vietnam to Kennedy in terms of the Eisenhower-Dulles policy of 1954-60 he had inherited; yet he does so in words that could not be more reminiscent of the situation confronting Truman and Acheson in 1950:

> "Ironically, the collapse of the Dulles policy in Laos had created the possibility of a neutralist solution there; but the survival of that policy in South Vietnam, where the government was stronger and the army more willing to fight, left us in 1961 no alternative but to continue the effort of 1954"[60]

For "Dulles policy in Laos" and "neutralist" read "Marshall policy in China" and "Communist", for "South Vietnam" read "Vietnam" (or Tonkin), and we are back in 1950. In just such a resigned spirit had the Democratic Administration in 1950 recognized that it had "no alternative" but to support the Bao Dai Government and French Expeditionary Force. And this, just because these were (at that moment though without great promise for the future) stronger and more willing than the Nationalist Chinese regime, whose efforts, on the mainland, it had recently been possible to abandon as hopeless. And, of course, all the more obligatory to support the regime still standing--whatever its objective prospects--to still the doubts charges arising from the recent abandonment of the other. As in 1950, so as in 1961, "pledges to Saigon" by other Presidents [illegible]

For the second, close-to-definitive illustration, we have as yet only the account of Kenneth O'Donnell, seconded by Senator Mansfield; the earlier Kennedy historians are silent on the crucial Presidential views reported recently by these two. In O'Donnell's account,[61] Kennedy had been disturbed in late 1962 to find himself agreeing with :

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[60]Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 497.

[61]"LBJ and the Kennedys", Life Magazine, August 7, 1970. Mansfield was subsequently quoted in interviews as confirming in substance.

an unexpected argument by Mansfield that he should stop sending more military reinforcements to South Vietnam and then, withdraw all U.S. forces from that country's civil war.

> "A continued steady increase of American military advisers in South Vietnam, the senator argued, would lead to sending still more forces to beef up those that were there, and soon the Americans would be dominating the combat in a civil war that was not our war. Taking over the military leadership and the fighting in the Vietnam war, Mansfield warned, would hurt American prestige in Asia and would not help the South Vietnamese to stand on their own two feet, either."

Impressed, Kennedy still did not change his _public_ position on the need for U.S. support of Diem. But when Mansfield renewed the argument in the spring of 1963, the President called him in privately, and O'Donnell (a witness) reports:

> "The President told Mansfield that he had been having serious second thoughts about Mansfield's argument and that he now agreed with the senator's thinking on the need for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam."
>
> "But I can't do it until 1965--after I'm reelected", Kennedy told Mansfield.
>
> "President Kennedy felt, and Mansfield agreed with him, that if he announced a total withdrawal of American military personnel from Vietnam before the 1964 election, there would be a wild conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term.
>
> "After Mansfield left the office, the President told me that he had made up his mind that after his reelection he would take the risk of unpopularity and make a complete withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. 'In 1965, I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now, we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected. So we had better make damned sure that I _am_ reelected'."

To the extent that this account can be accepted,[62] it comes close to proving, for Kennedy at least, several of the propositions advanced earlier. There is no way, starting from this understanding of his views to attribute either (1) the continued buildup of advisors throughout most of 1963, or (2) the encouragement of the Diem coup, or (3) the continued avowals of the domino credo[63] and our unswerving commitment, either to (a) inattention or inadvertence, or (b) confidence in subordinates's optimistic promises, or (c) perception of "no alternative", due to the involvement or pledges of predecessors..

In light of O'Donnell's revelations of the President's pessimism and intentions, there seems no way to read these measures increasing or confirming national involvement in and commitment to the war in Vietnam, except as reflections of John Kennedy's judgment that 1963 was a worse time than 1965 for him and his Administration to lose a war to Communists, so he would just have to keep it going till then.[64]

As quoted by O'Donnell, Kennedy does not even claim that he might avoid or reduce the "McCarthy red scare" by postponing it--"In 1965, I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser"--but merely that he can prevent it from interfering with his re-election; by accepting two more years of U.S. involvement, with its evident risks --<u>all realized</u>--of escalation, U.S. combat involvement, vastly-increased American and Vietnamese deaths, and domestic disaster.

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[62] There is some, inconclusive, corroborating evidence on plans to withdraw the advisory force by 1965. I know of no serious contrary evidence; the fact that the President continued to make contradictory public statements of the sort he did is of <u>no</u> weight in opposing this account.

[63] As cited by Leslie Gleb: "We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Viet-Nam, but of Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there." (News Conference on July 17, 1963). "But I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake." (TV interview on September 2, 1963). To repeat: the fact that these public statements flatly contradict his private views and intentions as expressed to O'Donnell and Mansfield (and no doubt others) in no way impinges on the credibility of the latter.

[64] There is no intent whatever to be sarcastic in this paraphrase. The subject is not humorous. It seems important to make clear that this appears to be the literal implication of O'Donnell's assertions. Somewhat different readings are also possible--e.g. "to risk losing a war", or, "to end an unnecessary, or counterproductive, U.S. involvement"-- but these do not markedly change the tone.

Sorenson's final comments in *Kennedy* (published in 1965) on his Chief's Vietnam policy are not unduly upbeat, but they need interproting:

> "He could show little gain in that situation to pass on to his successor, either in the military outlook or the progress toward reform."

In this, of course, Kennedy does not suffer by comparison with his two predecessors or his successor. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. spans his account of the Kennedy term in *The Bitter Heritage* with the sentences: "In January 1961 the Vietnam mess fell to a new American president...(in 1963) a new President inherited the trouble." From the President's perspective of 1961, was this failure, or reasonable success? Just the same, after all, could be said for the milestones 1953, 1969...and in no case was this assessment worse than had been predicted earlier, internally--though not revealed to the public--at the moment the preceding President had chosen to sustain and deepen the nation's involvement. Had *any* of them honestly expected more (except for intermittent periods)? What does this tell us, then, about the pressures driving these four Presidents, about their aims and motives, about differences among them?

To go on with Sorenson:[65]

> "His own errors had not helped. But if asked why he had increased this nation's commitment, he might have summed up his stand with the words used by William Pitt when asked in the House of Commons in 1805 what was gained by the war against France: *'We have gained everything that we would have lost if we had not fought this war.' In the case of Vietnam, that was a lot.*"

Specifically, that was--as John F. Kennedy had hoped[66] --a Democratic victory in 1964.

It does not seem enough.

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[65] Sorenson, *op. cit.*, p. 661, (italics added)

[66] According to his White House Chief of Staff, O'Donnell.

Why is the quagmire model, after all, flawed as it is, so plausible to the public eye? Why do the President's decisions look to so many like part of a quicksand process?

First answer. The public is lied to: about what the President's decision is, what advice he rejects, what he was told to expect, what he forosees and intends for the future. When he decides to go slow and small (November, 1961), the fact that much more was considered and recommended is suppressed (lest doubts be raised on the adequacy of the program). When he decides to go in big, the schedule and total commitment are concealed, with increments (actually programmed in advance) being announced as if based on a sequence of ad hoc decisions on "small steps".[67] (lest fears be roused on the costs of the program, and the ultimate risks and commitment).

Second answer. Real optimism regularly develops, for complex causal reasons, among insiders after the policy choice to escalate is made and implemented. The optimism is as ill-founded and treacherous as in the quicksand metaphor, but it is, in effect, caused by the escalation, not a cause of it.[68] These escalation-induced "highs" that official expectations undergo, publicly observed, give rise to false inferences on the premises underlying policy at the earlier moment of decision.

To understand, in turn, why these two misleading phenomena recur as facets of the policy process is to gain considerable insight into the coherence of that process. Let us examine them successively, in a specific context: once again, the Taylor-Rostow mission and its aftermath.

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[67] This was the nature of the "public information" program associated with the buildup of troop levels to 75,000 in the spring of 1965, the early bombing campaign against North Vietnam, and the open-ended buildup of troops to 175,000 and beyond, determined in July, 1965 (the latter, after a decision to announce mobilization had been tentatively decided upon and drafted, then abandoned).

[68] The subsequent optimism does lead to actions in-between crises that strengthen what needs little strengthening, the tendency to escalate in the next crisis. As a "quicksand factor", then, institutional reaction generating "true false hopes" is not without some marginal impact on the process of escalation.

News-management: the quicksand treatment

The day that General Taylor and his mission left Washington for South Vietnam, the New York Times headlined a story by Lloyd Garrison: "Taylor Cautious on GI's for Asia"; "Departs for South Vietnam--Hints U.S. Reluctance to Commit Troops."[69]

The story noted:

> "Before he departed aboard a military jet airliner, General Taylor, who is the President's special military adviser, was asked to comment on reports that President Kennedy was becoming increasingly reluctant to commit United States forces to a fighting role in South Vietnam...
>
> General Taylor declined to speak for the President, but declared: "Any American would be reluctant to use troops unless absolutely necessary."
>
> His remarks appeared to reflect a tendency on the part of high Administration sources to pull back from earlier warnings of the possible use of Unites States troops in the fighting."

James Reston, in a column from Washington dated October 19, declared that reports roused by the Taylor mission that "the United States is about to plunge into the guerrilla warfare of Southeast Asia...should be taken with considerable skepticism, at least for the time being."

> "General Taylor is not only a soldier but a philosopher with a soldier's respect for power and geography, and a philolopher's sense of perspective. Accordingly he is not likely to favor plunging blithely into a jungle war 7,000 miles from home where the landscape and the logistics favor the enemy.
>
> ...President Kennedy is not eager to add to his problems in Germany by mounting an adventure in Southeast Asia, and while additional troops may be sent there to help train and direct the defenders, General Taylor has certainly not gone there to organize an invasion." (Underlining added)

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[69] New York Times, October 16, 1961 (story datelined Oct. 15): Underlining added. All newspaper stories cited in this section are from the New York Times; dates are dates of publication stories (generally datelined a day earlier).

On November 3, General Taylor returned to Washington, spoke to reporters at the airport, then saw President Kennedy for two hours at the White House. The lead story in the New York Times on November 4, by E.W. Kenworthy reported:

> "On his return from a three-week mission to Southeast Asia, General Taylor said that President Ngo Dinh Diem had the 'assets' available to prevail against the Communist threat.
>
> The general declined to comment directly on whether he would recommend sending United States combat troops to stiffen the Vietnamese forces in their fight against the Viet Cong (Communist) guerrillas.
>
> However, when General Taylor was reminded at the airport that his remarks before leaving Saigon had been interpreted as meaning that President Ngo Dinh Diem's problem was not manpower, the general replied: 'That is correct. It is a populous country'.
>
> Officials said it was correct to infer from this that General Taylor did not look favorably on the sending of United States combat troops at this time.
>
> ...Although some officials in the White House and the State and Defense Departments are known to favor the dispatch of American forces, there would be considerable surprise here if General Taylor recommended such a move.[70]
>
> "Furthermore, the President is known to be opposed to sending troops except as a last resort.
>
> ...While opposing the sending of American combat forces, General Taylor is understood to favor the dispatch of necessary military technicians and to propose intensified training of South Vietnamese elite troops in anti-guerrilla warfare by United States Rangers." (underlining added).

Though General Taylor must have sensed the wind blowing in the wrong direction when he read this account of his own views, he might have been encouraged by Jack Raymond's piece the next day to believe that his central recommendation was still alive:

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[70] He had, of course, recommended it formally by cable, two days earlier, to no one's very great surprise.

"The tendency in Washington is to rule out the use of United States combat forces for South Vietnam, a move considered here a few weeks ago as a means of suppressing Communist attacks upon the regime in Saigon.

At the same time it appears that Army engineers, perhaps in unusually large numbers may be sent to help in flood control work and other civic projects, and to fight if necessary." (underlining added)

(Taylor had personally favored sending the "essential" U.S. combat forces immediately under the cover--or as he insisted on putting it, with the "dual mission"--of this short-run humanitarian task of flood relief).

Even in this quasi-clandestine form, however, the notion of U.S. combat units did not surface again in the New York Times. In the process of its becoming, in bureaucratic jargon, a "non-proposal", the leak in Raymond's column was the last grin of the Cheshire cat. Instead, attention soon turned to the "small drink" Kennedy offered in its place.

On Nov. 16, Kenworthy reported:

President Kennedy has decided on the measures that the United States is prepared to take to strengthen South Vietnam against attack by Communists.

The measures, in which received final approval yesterday at a meeting of the National Security Council, closely follow the recommendations made by General Maxwell D. Taylor, the President's military adviser...

The United States' plans do not include the dispatching of combat units at this time. ...

Officials emphasized that President Kennedy and the National Security Council had not foreclosed the possibility of sending ground and air combat units if the situation deteriorated drastically. The President, it was said, does not wish to bind himself to a "never-position".

However, the President and General Taylor are agreed, according to reliable informats here, that the South Vietnamese Government is capable of meeting and turning back the Communists's threat provided it speeds the training of its regular forces, solves the problem of mobility, develops a reliable intelligence system and adopts reforms in its military staff structure to free it from political interference."

From this series of articles, based on "reliable, official" sources, uncontradicted by any official, readers of the New York Times could only conclude that Taylor and Rostow, sent over to Vietnam to evaluate the need for combat units, had recommended against sending such forces and had assured the President that the programs he had accepted, which encompassed their recommendations, were adequate to meet U.S. objectives.

This was the opposite of the truth.

Reston's remark at the outset of the mission that Taylor was not a man who would "blithely" recommend committing U.S. combat units to a jungle war was surely right; likewise Taylor's own comment that "any American" would be reluctant to do so "unless absolutely necessary". Nevertheless, that is what he did recommend. The fact that he did so, therefore, carried an important message about the seriousness of the situation; the presumed inadequacy of the lesser measures that were actually adopted. To suppress the fact of this recommendation, as the President (within his rights, of course) chose to do, was to conceal this information; and for officials to lie to reporters about Taylor's views (which were shared by the JCS and initially at least by McNamara and Gilpatric) was to convey the opposite, untrue impression.[71]

One pertinent effect of this information policy was that it considerably distorted the public view, then and later, of what the President thought he was getting us into, what he thought of the chances and the relevant goals, and just what was in the inner pages of the contracts Congress and the public were being asked, implicitly, to sign. It has given the impression that the Kennedy decisions in the fall of 1961, often regarded (questionably) as the seeds of our later combat involvement, are archtypal examples of the "politics of inadvertence", an inattentive stumbling into a treacherous bog; when actually they are dramatic counterexamples (like all the other major decisions).

From such a mistaken understanding of this and the other choices, bad predictions and prescriptions follow.

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[71] To my knowledge, no other paper challenged the Times, or the Administration, on these versions of Taylor's advice, nor did any different version appear until the appearence in 1965 of the Schlesinger and Sorenson histories. (These accounts were low-key, and neither drew attention to the fact that they directly contradicted all newspaper accounts of the time).

So much for the belief, widely held in some circles and encouraged by the Government, that "everything comes out in the New York Times...there are no real secrets," and that the Times is an adequate basis for understanding an ongoing or past decision-making process within the Executive branch.

It leads to wrong questions and wrong inferences about Presidential motives and about what changes in his calculations and the pressures upon him might influence his choices. It could lead to the inference that "the only thing we have to fear is (Presidential) hope": when, in truth, unrealistic hopes were not a prominent factor in the major decisions to press onward.

But why this particular manipulation of the public's notions about this decision? Let us pull together the conjectures in preceding sections, and draw some implications about the pressures that made the decision what it was.

THE ESCALATION MACHINE

A decade before what Schlesinger calls Kennedy's "low-level crisis" in South Vietnam, a particular wing of the Republican Party had tattooed on the skins of politicians and bureaucrats some vivid impressions of what could happen to a "liberal" Administration that chanced to be in office the day a red flag rose over Saigon.

Starting in late-1949, it has been conjectured here, the first Administration to receive this message began to undertake significant effort and expense--as in a game of Old Maid--to pass that contingency on to its successor. And each Administration since has found itself caught in the same game.

But the rules of the game do not end with Rule 1: "Do not lose South Vietnam to Communist control this year, or before the next election." There is also Rule 2, which starts out: "Do not commit U.S. ground combat troops to a land war in Asia, either."

Breaking Rule 2 (which has some further clauses) will not expose one to the charge of treason, but otherwise the political sanctions are about the same. And the very same pursuers who would be howling and pointing at the scent of a violation of the first Rule would be among the pack chasing a President who proposed to ignore the second.

For (as indicated in the earlier exposition of the views of the "Asia-first, neo-isolationists") an attitude of intense appreciation of U.S. stakes in a non-Communist Southeast Asia does not go with a willingness politically to support costly or risky or domestically unpopular measures to protect those stakes. On the contrary, it is coupled precisely with a determination to oppose and punish

many such measures (in company with those who do not believe the stakes are that important) because it is typically part of a philosophy asserting them to be unnecessary (to a patriotic and resolute Administration willing to rely on Asian allies and the threat or use of U.S. airpower), and dangerous to the budget.

Suppose an Administration fears attack by or needs support of this particular faction (which is suspected of being able to mobilize a much larger following on these issues in a crisis). What if the President is informed that he cannot avoid enraging that faction by losing part of Southeast Asia in the near future to Communist control, except by antagonizing other major groups (and perhaps it as well) by committing troops, or mobilizing reserves, or taking over full responsibility for an Asian government or war, or risking war with the Soviet Union or China?[72] In that case, the President is in a bind. The Indochina bind.

One of the sacred beliefs, inherited from the late '40's, that any U.S. official must appear to share (and probably does share) is that toleration of an overt Communist Party in a less-developed country, or a provisional or coalition government including Communists, must inevitably lead to total Communist domination. Any prospects of these, then, are proscribed under Rule 1.

But that means that acceptable U.S. long-run aims for South Vietnam must be quite ambitious: the exclusion, suppression, and eventual elimination of the Communist Party; the assurance indefinitely of a totally non-Communist regime.[73]

U.S. intelligence analyses have generally recognized that this goal could not be achieved (in the face of the strength of the Communist Party of Vietnam), without major U.S. involvement indefinitely, by the sort of narrow, conservative, foreign-oriented, anti-Communist, authoritarian regime (supported mainly by Catholics, the Army, and the rich) that alone among Vietnamese political elements was willing to pursue such an aim. Hence, for the long-run goal of an acceptable outcome (even one less ambitious than the above) at an acceptable cost to the U.S., internal civilian analysts have regularly stressed "reform" and "broadening" of the Saigon regime.

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[72]These all come under Rule 2 (extended). (See Appendix).

[73]These were internally-stated U.S. goals until at least 1969; lest they appear too ambitious or interventionist, they were rarely spelled out publicly, and the public position was ambiguous. It is not clear yet (and appears doubtful) whether recent changes in public formulae correspond to genuine operational changes in the outcomes perceived as acceptable.

But this runs into another sort of bind. For even propents of these political changes admit that such a "broadened" government, or even U.S. pressures to achieve it or to reduce the influence of the Army, would increase to some degree the risk in the short-run of "instability", coups, chaos, military weakening, governmental paralysis, and thus quick Communist takeover. Thus there is direct conflict between any such measures--U.S. "leverage", political strategies, genuinely "revolutionary" solica/political approaches, broad-based regimes--or in sum, between the long-run aims that may require them, and Rule 1. Rule 1 must win.

It follows that in those periods when major U.S. policy innovations have actually been determined, long-run success (at acceptable cost) has been perceived to depend either upon U.S. military measures involving high political risks (unless they were sure to be quickly successful, which could not be guaranteed and Presidents tend to doubt) or upon political strategies in Vietnam that posed the equally-high domestic political risks of short-run failure in Vietnam.

The standard resolution at such moments has been simply to turn away from long-run aims and the measures associated with them, to concentrate almost exclusively upon the aim of minimizing the short-run risk of non-Communist collapse or Communist takeovers. To this end the policy relies heavily upon means that do not raise domestic apprehension and opposition, but includes those types of instruments "restricted" under "Rule 2"[74] judged by the President minimally necessary to this short-run aim.

Thus, many of the paradoxical features of U.S. escalating decisions as seen from the inside--the "discrepancies" noted earlier between chosen policies, on the one hand, and internal predictions, recommendations and long-run aims on the other--can be seen to reflect conflict between a domestic political requirements on outcomes and domestic political constraints on means, in the light of bureaucratic perceptions--some realistic, some ignorant, some conventional or "sacred"--of alternatives and consequences.

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[74]Strong inhibitions against initiating such measures--which include, beyond those mentioned, incursions into Cambodia or Laos, unrestricted bombing of North Vietnamese cities, invasion of North Vietnam, and use of nuclear weapons--are reflected in the prolonged unwillingness of any Administration to introduce any of them "merely" to achieve long-run aims, or for any reason but to prevent imminent defeat in Vietnam when the President himself is persuaded they are essential

These patterns observed (and explained, by this hypothesis) include:

(a) Apparent near-total orientation of policy to short-run considerations and risks; along with this,

(b) Chosen policies predicted to be inadequate--or at best, long shots--in the long-run, either to "win" or even to avert defeat; in some cases they are claimed (though probably not believed by the President) to be inadequate even for averting short-run failure; and

(c) Policies emphasizing predominatly military--rather than political--means, aims, considerations, and executive responsibility, despite recognized long-run limitations or disadvantages; and

(d) U.S. support (intervening as necessary to instate or maintain it) for a regime that is obviously unpromising in terms of long-run aims, and even unsavory, (this, like (c) above, in order to minimize short-run risk of non-Communist defeat), foregoing pressure upon it to "broaden" or "reform".

These patterns are in any case--it is asserted in this paper--facts of policy, data to be explained in any satisfactory explanation of the policy process.[75] (For a somewhat more systematic formulation of a model--a preliminary sketch of an "Escalation Machine"--summarizing the discussion above, see the Appendix to this paper).

Yet another paradoxical phenomenon not mentioned earlier, has been the notable weakness of U.S. influence upon the policies, either political or military, of its principal ally, first the French and then the GVN, despite near-total dependence of the latter upon U.S. support to pursue the war. The absence of real U.S. bargaining leverage on the "dependent" partner follows directly from the U.S. political imperatives. Rules 1 and 2 together. led us from 1950 to 1965, to accept the role continuously of advisor and supporter to another government carrying the responsibility for administration and fighting: even when our limited role seemed to risk imminent defeat of the non-Communist efforts.

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that purpose (usually long after this use has first been urged by others). Thus, most of these measures have never yet been used, though most have been considered or recommended at various times.

[75]To repeat once more: none would be predicted by, or even compatible with, the Schlesinger model of "politics of inadvertence". That holds as well for those mentioned below.

From time to time in those 15 years, Administration leaders would point out publicly of the ally we were supporting: "It is, after all, their fight." But these officials', private preceptions would have been better expressed: "In view of our strategic (and domestic political) interests, it is our fight, all right, but they have got to fight it for us; because if they don't, we might have to, and that would be nearly as bad as losing."

Given the domestic political constraints embodied in Rule 1, U.S. leaders saw the avoidance of Communist takeover of all of Vietnam as of considerable importance not only to the U.S., strategically,[76] but to their own careers or reelection, their party's future, their legislative program, their ability to govern, their reputations, their place in history and in some cases, their own self-respect.[77] Yet for the reasons reflected in Rule 2 they had to hope urgently they could induce others to do the fighting, take the responsibility for failures and the casualties, leaving us only with the burden of dollars, materiel and advice.

This "bargain"--first with the French, then with the GVN--has seemed always in danger of breaking down, facing the current Administration with the loss of South Vietnam (and of prior investment) or with a necessity to take over the combat ourselves. Hence, our officials rarely felt they could afford to strain the bargain by pressuring our ally into fighting better or differently, or into taking political measures to which it was, in fact, adamantly opposed, even when we suspected that such changes were critical to success. In effect, they had no leverage to use for these intermediate ends, and had to forego them: despite the intelligence perception that the military-political challenge of the Communist-led forces would almost surely grow, and the ability of the ally (French, then the GVN/RVNAF) to meet it would decline, unless these changes did occur.

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[76] Little has been said here of actual perceptions of this strategic interest. It could be, however, that one reason the classic statement of the "domino theory" is so little analyzed or reexamined empirically in the U.S. Government is that it is so convenient as a proxy for all the political and personal considerations that, by convention and prudence, may not be referred to. That may be its main bureaucratic function.

[77] It is important to be clear that all these matters, and more, are implied in this discussion when we speak, for example, of the President's "political" concerns; by no means does this refer only to an interest in the next election, which may not be an issue at all.

Meanwhile, as an essential part of the bargain with our ally (serving to keep it in power, fighting), these officials provided verbal and symbolic encouragement and evidence of U.S. concern and commitment: not unlimted, but not small. This came "cheap" in terms of current demands on the U.S. public. But it was making ever more certain the provision of U.S. combat forces _if_ that became essential to holding Vietnam.

To convince the GVN (and its Vietnamese critics and rivals)--_in lieu of_ sending U.S. troops immediately--that we would do "whatever necessary" to support them, the Administration had to say so publicly, and to assert that major U.S. interests were at stake. Likewise, to warn the opponents and _deter_ them from pressure.

On the other hand, to get sizeable enough sums of money out of Congress, the same officials had to say, again, that major U.S. interests were at stake, but at the same time imply that there was very little likelihood these programs _would lead_ to U.S. combat involvement. The only way these requirements could be harmonized _was to profess, at any given time, great optimism_ for the results of the GVN's performance _if_ the U.S. aid were sent (combined with pessimism, and the prospects of major losses for the U.S., if it were not).

Here, then, is the explanation for the news-management recounted earlier. Deceptive games with Congress and public are played for serious stakes. In this case as in others, the President's resolution of the conflicting demands and constraints upon him called for suppressing any indications of possible _inadequacy_ of the programs he proposed. The penalty for frankness could be to ally against his programs those who might conclude these were not then, worth attempting at all, and those who would condemn him for not doing much more. (The latter could be trusted to oppose him if he _did_ ask and do much more, unless he won quickly, which _he_ did not expect; and the former would desert him if he took _their_ advice, and lost Vietnam. Honesty, it might have appeared, would only earn him opposition whatever he did, and sooner than otherwise.)

But in this case as in the others, internal analyses, estimates, reports, planning recommendations, all indicated that in a whole variety of ways these programs _were_ inadequate. So all these documents and opinions had to be concealed, misleading or lying as necessary.

All very rational, this. But, it turns out, this posture of secrecy and deception toward the public, maintained over time, takes its toll internally. For a number of reasons, as the chosen policy begins to be implemented, internal operational reporting, program analyses and high-level expectations gradually drift in the direction of the public optimism expressed constantly from the outset.[78]

So, real hopes--ill-founded hopes--do follow hard upon the crisis choices, eventually replacing phony and invalid optimism with genuine invalid optimism. Here we come to the second reason for the mistaken public impression that such hopes had been critical earlier in determining the choices. But the significance of this dynamic pattern is far greater than that. Let us watch it in detail.

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[78]The "irrational"--or, operational--component in this shift will sometimes be measurable against current intelligence analyses, which may show these effects much less. However, Washington staffs and high officials tend to give much closer attention to day-to-day operational reporting and to the opinions of "commanders on the scene" (however inexperienced) than to bookish and infrequent intelligence analyses. As an escalated involvement swells the volume of operational traffic, the voice of the intelligence analyst, no matter how expert or right in the past, is increasingly lost in the noise.

Escalation, Phase B: the Quagmire Machine

Again, the aftermath of the November, 1961 decisions is classic.

Schlesinger reports it well. As the newly-increased American presence and new policies took hold, early in 1962:

> "Morale rose in Saigon. Viet Cong activity declined in the countryside. No more provincial capitals were attacked. 'Every quantitative measurement we have', Robert McNamara said on his first visit to Vietnam in 1962, 'shows we're winning this war'. Maxwell Taylor, when he returned for a fresh look a year after his first visit, thought he detected 'a great national movement' rising to destroy the Viet Cong. No one could doubt[79] a widespread and substantial improvement in the military situation. In Washington, the President, who had other matters on his mind, accepted the cheerful reports from men in whom he had great confidence. His 1963 State of the Union message summed up the mood at the turn of the year: 'The spearhead of aggression has been blunted in South Vietnam.'"[80]

> "The optimism continued well into 1963. In March the Secretary of State said that the war was 'turning an important corner...Government forces clearly have the initiative in most areas of the country.'...In May the Defense Department announced, 'The corner has definitely been turned toward victory in Vietnam.' General Harkins predicted that the war would be won 'within a year'. 'South Vietnam', said Ambassador Nolting in June, 'is on its way to victory over Communist guerrillas.' 'I can safely say,' General Harkins unsafely said in October, 'the end of the war is in sight'".[81]

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[79] In reproducing this passage in The Bitter Heritage, a year later, the author changed this phrase to, "it was hard to doubt...." (p. 41).

[80] A Thousand Days, p. 508

[81] The Bitter Heritage, p. 42.

Here is quicksand country, sure enough. Only: these were not months (except the last)[82] in which significant policy decisions were taken, new departures or commitments determined. They saw merely the working out, on an expanding scale, of decisions made earlier, in a very different mood.

It was natural for the public to read the official mood as satisfaction that earlier expectations were being vindicated. What was happening was just the opposite. The public was witnessing real elation that gloomy internal predictions (with which the public mind had not been burdened) foretelling inadequacy and failure in the absence of stronger measures, were proving unsound.

A U.S. troop commitment, it was turning out, had not been "essential" after all. (If the President had, in fact, suspected or hoped that, he was the only one who seemed vindicated). No recriminations blossomed in this atmosphere; only mutual congratulations that the long shot was paying off.

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[82] In October, 1961, anti-Nhu coup plotting Washington had promoted in late-August began to come to flower, and Kennedy renewed the decision made in August to encourage it. In some ways, this fateful decision comes closest to the quicksand model of any, because it did grow out of a prevailing mood of optimism about the war in the countryside, reflected in the character of policy debate (during which no one proposed cutting our commitment in the face of Diem's provocations). Moreover, some proponents, at least, of the coup seem really to have believed that this "small step" would set things right and restore a victory trend.

But Schlesinger is prevented from claiming this supporting case for his model, because he refuses to acknowledge it as an American decision at all; his account (A Thousand Days, p. 908) of U.S. foreknowledge and involvement, actual and potential, is, for whatever motives, dishonest.

In any case, Kenneth O'Donnell's recent account (op. cit.) of Kennedy's aims and expectations in Vietnam from early 1962 indicate that for him this last decision on Vietnam was no more inadvertent or optimistic than the rest.

Roger Hilsman reports a meeting in Honolulu in April, 1963, at which,

> "General Harkins gave us all the facts and figures--the number of strategic hamlets established, number of Viet Cong killed, operations initiated by government forces, and so on. He could not, of course, he said, give any guarantees, but he thought he could say that by Christmas it would be all over. The Secretary of Defense[83] was elated. He reminded me that I had attended one of the very first of these meetings, when it had all looked so black--and that had been only a year and a half ago."[84]

Why the fast turn-around? For several reasons, none peculiar to this case. First, the new programs had been accompanied by new officials directed to carry them to success. Ignorant of past estimates and current realities in Vietnam, they had no strong reason to assume that the tasks they had been given were infeasible with the means at hand. And they quickly learned that Washington tended to rely upon reporting up through the chain of operational command; which is to say, their own performance in their jobs would be evaluated by their own reports of "progress" in their respective fields.[85]

If this did not always lead to conscious dishonesty at the higher levels in Saigon, it inevitably created a bias toward accepting and reporting favorable information from subordinates and Vietnamese, neither of whom failed to notice.

Thus, it was more mechanism than coincidence that in 1962 and early 1963,

> "the strategy of unconditional support of Diem combined with the military adviser system seemed to be working--or so at least the senior American officials in Saigon assured the President."[86]

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[83]Who had agreed with Taylor and the Chiefs in November, 1961 that it was unlikely that the programs actually adopted, lacking U.S. combat forces, would even stop the current deterioration (although that opinion was attenuated a few days later in his joint memo with Rusk).

[84]Hilsman, op. cit., pp. 466-67.

[85]As an American division commander told one of his district advisors, who insisted on reporting the presence of unpacified VC hamlets in his area: "Son, you're writing our own report card in this country. Why are you failing us?"

[86]The Bitter Heritage, p. 40.

Such assurances said nothing more nor less than that the two officials themselves were "working", succeeding, in the precise two programs they had been sent by Kennedy to respectively to manage.

> "Ngo Dinh Nhu made the strategic hamlet program his personal project and published glowing reports of spectacular success. One might have wondered whether Nhu was just the man to mobilize the idealism of the villages; but Ambassador Nolting and General Harkins listened uncritically to his claims and passed them back to Washington as facts, where they were read with elation."[87]

One might also have wondered--but no one ever seemed to --whether Nhu was just the man uniquely to report upon "his personal project"; or whether Nolting was just the man to report the effects and value of reassuring Diem and Nhu, or Harkins the success of the military adviser system, their own respective personal projects.

But to emphasize exclusively subordinate bureaucratic influences in this process of internal self-deception would be greatly to underrate the impact of the President himself, and his high-level appointees. They, too, like Nolting, Harkins or Nhu had their "personal projects", larger ones, on which they reported to those who controlled their budgets and their tenure, Congress and public. And they too, thanks to the security system and Executive privilege, "wrote their own report cards": with a little help from their subordinates.

Precisely as at lower levels, but with enormously broader impact, the need of the President, and the Secretaries of State and Defense, to use "information" to reassure Congress and public, had its effect on the internal flow of information to the President. Reports and analyses that supported the Administration's public position, and could be released or leaked to that end, were "helpful" and welcome, while "pessimism" was at best painful, less "useful", if not even dangerous to have down on paper. Executive values like these (vastly sharpened in 1966-68, when skeptics and critics were louder and had to be refuted) translate into powerful incentives at lower levels to give the Chief what he so obviously wants.

Moreover, at the highest levels, simple wishfulness probably had greater impact than at any other. Repeatedly, we have seen that the President felt compelled to promote

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[87] Op. cit., p. 41

policies that his chief advisors or official estimates told him were inadequate, while he told the public otherwise. Humanly, he could only hope that these best-informed perceptions would prove wrong, and that what he had telling the public would turn out, for the good of all, to have been correct. Hoping, one finds indications that support one's hopes.

At other levels, the same. In periods like 1962 when the policy "seemed to be working" despite its neglect of factors that had been considered, by some experts, critical to success, it was easy for all to doubt and forget such warnings. Pessimism regarding an ongoing policy is a fragile, unstable phenomenon within the government.

Finally, the VC and the GVN (earlier, the Viet Minh and French) played their role, too, in providing such indicators: intervals when things "seemed to be working". In 1951, 1956, 1962, 1967, bureaucratic pressures toward optimism were catalyzed by actual effects of the new programs on allies and opponents in the desired direction. But these proved very temporary, while our reading of them did not. As Kennedy had predicted, the effects of a "small drink" on friend and foe faded quickly. What he may not fully have foreseen was the far more lasting afterglow in our own system.

In each case, the aftermath of escalation was an alteration of mood from pessimism to great optimism, and increased emphasis on military factors. Thus, when U.S. combat units flooded into Vietnam from 1965 on, the pessimism of later 1964 gave way increasingly to buoyant hopes, by 1967, of an essentially military victory. But this had had its counterpart as early as 1951, after U.S. materiel and American liaison teams had made their way to Tonkin to join a failing French effort.[88]

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[88] In 1954, Senator John F. Kennedy, on the Senate floor,

> "recapitulated the Washington litany about Indochina--Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1952 ("the military situation appears to be developing favorably"), Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East Walter Robertson in 1953 ("in Indochina we believe the tide is now turning"), Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson (French victory is "both possible and probable") and Admiral Radford ("the French are going to win") in 1954--and contrasted the gush of official optimism with the grim actuality." (The Bitter Heritage, p. 27).

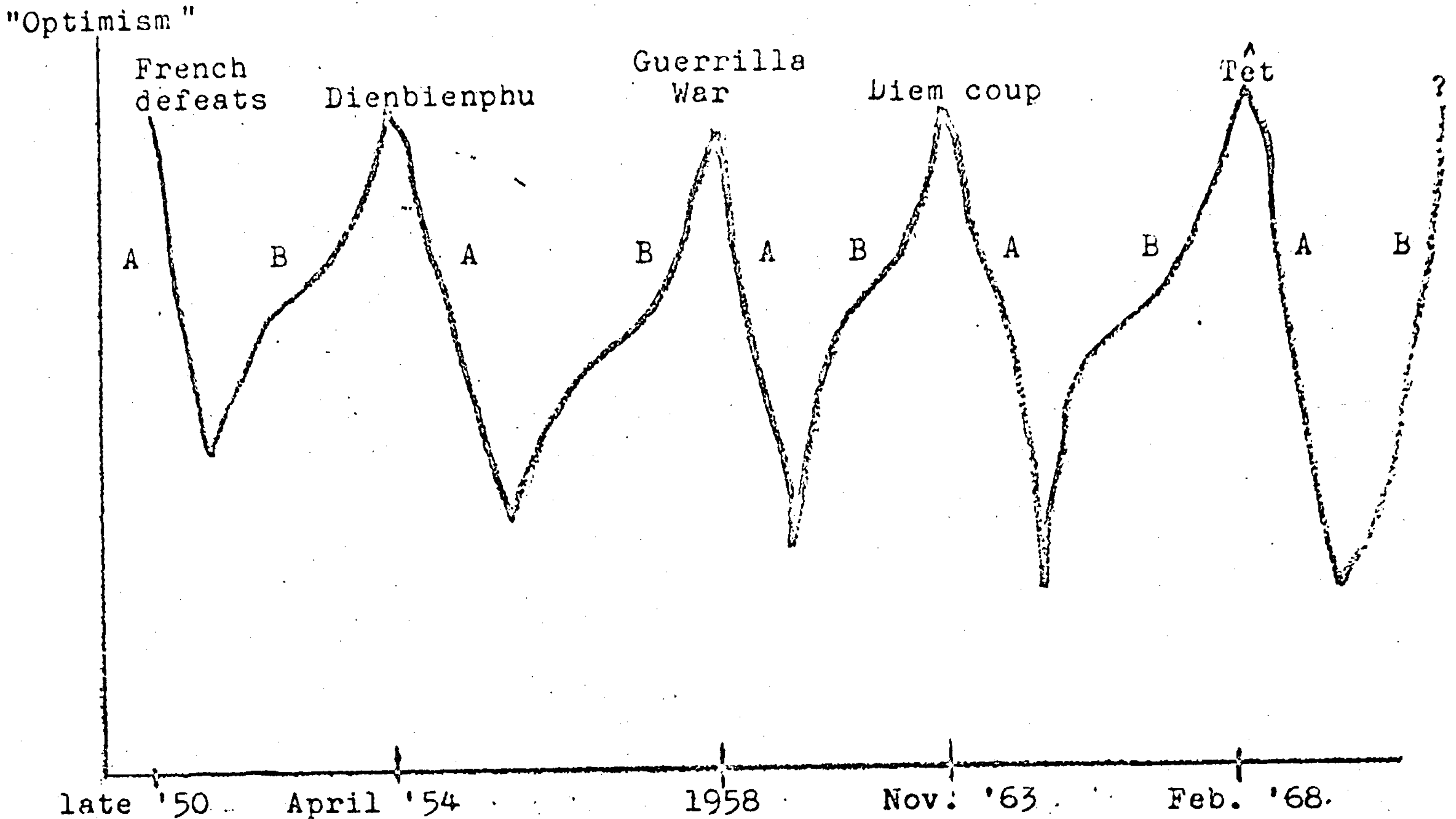
Meanwhile, the Viet Minh, and later the VC, had a characteristic response to a new U.S./GVN strategy or a scaling up of our involvement that further encouraged our switch to unbounded optimism. After suffering initial setbacks, it has been their practice to lie low for an extended period, gather data, analyze experience, develop and test new adapted strategies, then plan and prepare carefully before launching them. (Nothing, our Vietnam experience tells us, could be more un-American).

Since so great a part of U.S. and GVN knowledge of enemy activities comes from operational contacts, there seems to be an irresistable tendency for U.S. operators to believe that data concerning contacts reveals enemy capabilities, i.e., that lessened VC operations indicate lessened capability. Another mechanism, then: U.S. optimism grows during VC inactivity (i.e., periods when VC activities are of a sort we do not observe), reaching a peak, ironically, when extreme VC quiescence is due to intense preparations for an explosion.

Crisis periods, then, are typically preceded by high-points in U.S. official expectations. Thus, peaks of U.S. optimism occurred in late-53 (just before Dienbienphu), 1958 (when guerrilla warfare was about to recommence), early-1963 (the VC had been studying the vulnerabilities of the strategic hamlet program, and meanwhile infiltrating massively), and late-1967 (during last-minute recruiting and preparations for the Tet Offensive, including feints at the borders).

If a fever chart of U.S. expectations--say, anticipations of success--could be drawn meaningfully for the last 20 years, it would have a recurrent saw-tooth shape: an accelerating rise of optimism just before an abrupt decline. (Figure 1 is a conceptual sketch of such a graph.) Our experience in Vietnam can be regarded as a sequence of two-phase cycles, in which Phase B--optimism--evolves causally in large part from factors in Phase A, the crisis period of pessimism (and decision).

(The B-phases in Figure 1 have been drawn with a reverse S-shape, signifying three sub-phases: an initial period in which the VC suffer real reverses and the GVN stabilizes on the basis of new programs; then a period in which, in reality, the VC have adapted and the GVN is declining, but U.S. expectations remain at a plateau rather than being reduced; finally, the VC begin quietly preparing for a major offensive, causing U.S. hopes to soar.)



Figurel

If major escalating decisions qualitatively increasing our involvement, were all made in Phase B's, that would be the quicksand model. It has never been the case.

However, during the B-phases, though no new major policies or commitments are introduced, U.S. aims may change significantly in the atmosphere of optimism, especially in the last stage, going beyond the avoidance of defeat (the dominant aim in Phase A and the early Phase B stage) to achieving a victory. At the same time, real optimism leads officials to be much less cautious in public aims and predictions, to give commanders more leeway, monitor operations less closely, indulge in operations that are costly (in many terms) and of low effectiveness but may speed the coming win. All of these responses lead to rising costs, and hence to a feeling, when a new crisis (confirming old predictions) brings the return of Phase A, that the stakes, the investment, the commitment have become still higher than before, the need to avoid "defeat" being now even greater.

Nevertheless, as has been argued above (pp. 35-36), this "quagmire phase" of the cycle seems to play no essential role in the escalation process. It simply reinforces the Presidential tendency to escalate if and as necessary to avoid a short-run "defeat" in South Vietnam, or "loss of all Vietnam to Communists". Political motives underlying that tendency were already strong enough in 1950 to induce the initial U.S. commitment without any prior or current period of American optimism. And they almost surely were felt strongly enough in subsequent years to have induced much greater escalation than occurred (even to the level of 1965) if that had appeared both necessary and effective in the short-run.

Consciously oriented as they actually were, when initiated, to the defensive aim of averting short-run Communist takeover, each of the escalating decisions of the past two decades can be said to have achieved its initial,[89] internal aim. Whether efforts of these increasing magnitudes could easily have been justified to various parts of the electorate in terms of these limited successes is another question.

Public references by the Administration to more ambitious, longer-run aims, (privately little-expected to be achieved by these programs, at the time of decision), either more idealistic or more strategically decisive, suggest doubts that the voters would evaluate the mere postponement of a possible Communist takeover beyond the date of the next election as highly, or as worthy of national (and Vietnamese) sacrifice and risk, as do high Administration officials. (To expect the voters to "punish" a President, an Administration, and a Party for, say, "losing Vietnam" by voting against them or condemning them, is not to believe that the voters would pay very much, or anything, to avert that contingency).

The disadvantage of publicizing more commanding goals to win support for increased involvement is the likelihood of suffering an appearance of recurrent failure of programs to attain their announced objectives, and failure of Administration predictions or "hopes" to be confirmed. This, too, however embarrassing politically, each Administration

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[89] An analogy that brings out the relevance of this condition is to observe that U.S. efforts in the Korean War succeeded with respect to their initial purposes--to repel Communist attackers and restore the status quo ante--though not with respect to more ambitious aims that temporarily supplanted these in a subsequent euphoric mood in November, 1950.

since 1950 has preferred, either to risking frankness on aims and prospects or to accepting, ever, outright defeat or failure in Vietnam during or soon after this term in office.

To say this is to say that Presidents choose to foster to a misleading degree impressions that their Vietnam decision-making is subject to a "quicksand-process", despite a number of unfavorable implications: "inadvertence"; "inattention"; lack of Presidential control; lack of realistic planning; lack of expertise; over-ambitious aims for means used; over-optimistic expectations. They choose this because either a different substantive policy or a more accurate public understanding of their actual policy seems to them to pose even greater disadvantages: higher costs and risks both in strategic, diplomatic and--most saliently--domestic political terms.

In these respects, too, their policies "worked"; up until 1968, at least, each President avoided the kinds of political costs related to Vietnam that his tactics were meant to avert. In fact, up to the present, no president has had to face penalty for losing South Vietnam; not even LBJ will be blamed in history for that, though he is blamed for other things.

In fact, these Presidential policies and tactics had the effect of holding South Vietnam out of Communist hands "cheaply"--i.e., without sizeable numbers of U.S. combat troops--for 15 years, from 1950 to 1965.[90] But at a long-run price. They actively sustained and enhanced over that

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[90] Despite sharp challenges to Rule 2 in 1954 and 1961, it was not breached. U.S. troops became essential in the short-run, to prevent the loss of South Vietnam, just about when intelligence analyses of 10 and even 15 years earlier had implied they would be.

Given U.S. aid, French efforts were not likely, analyses of 1950-52 roughly implied, to collapse much before 1954, or much after. Given U.S. willingness to see the northern half of Vietnam fall to Communist control in 1954 without committing U.S. troops or air, no Communist challenge in the South was expected in official estimates so long as hopes survived in Hanoi that the Geneva agreement on national elections might be honored, i.e., till mid-1956. But given Diem's and U.S. policy on that, Communist guerrilla pressure was expected, as of 1954, '55, '56, to be renewed along with infiltration within a few years after 1956:

period a high estimate of U.S. stakes in the conflict within the U.S. Executive branch and military, the Congress, and the public; and they failed (as was very likely, in the light of earlier internal estimates) either to strengthen adequately non-Communist Vietnamese efforts to modify Communist aims, or to deter or prevent an increase in Communist capabilities.

Thus these Presidential policies and tactics locked together with the emerging Governmental and public view of U.S. stakes and with the (realistically) foreseen performance of the GVN/ARVN and the DRV/VC to produce, from the perspective of most of that 15-year period, a high probability that U.S. troops would end up fighting in South Vietnam (and U.S. planes bombing South and North, and Laos): i.e., that they would be sent if necessary; and that they would be necessary.

This is the future three U.S. Presidents knowingly cooperated with and prepared:[91] determining the reality the next two accepted and sustained. That is a generation of presidents: all the presidents within the lifetime of a recent college graduate.

Will the tradition end with the current one? How many more could it encompass?

Another generation, it could be: so far as the conceptual argument in this paper indicates.

That is not a prediction. It merely observes that nothing in the generalizations we have abstracted in this paper from experience of the last two decades gives any

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unless Diem fell before that, or after, from opposition. (Diem's survival of his non-Communist opposition was somewhat surprising, by 1956, and gave rise to a Phase B-type spurt of euphoria in 1957-58, despite the fact that earlier estimates had predicted Communist pressure about that time if still needed to achieve the results hoped-for at Geneva).

Assuring U.S. aid short of troops, it would not have been expected as of, say, 1955, or 1960, that U.S. troops would be essential to avert an imminent Communist military victory till much before, or much after, 1965.

[91] Not, of course, that any President liked, wanted, or hoped for the darker developments that actually evolved: the deaths, the costs, the disruption: only that they preferred the risk of these, or later the certainty, to certain other prospects they saw as alternatives.

hint of a definite breaking-point, or a foreseeable change in basic motives and values for either the Communists or the U.S. Government. On its face, that is simply a limitation of the analysis, a characteristic--perhaps a defect--of the "models" suggested.

Or perhaps it is a property of reality.

If so, it is a human and political reality, and humans can, in principle, change it. But change should not be easy. Rule 1 has deep roots in politicians' fears and motives (and public responses) that have been powerfully influential for twenty years, through some hard times and challenges, and there is little indication yet that it will not speak commandingly to presidents after this one. (Of its authority for the present one, there can be no real doubt).[92]

Improved Presidential foresight--even the awareness they might attain from this symposium--would not probably supersede Rule 1. If anything, it might have relaxed, in the past or(future), the constraining influence of Rule 2.

In the spring of 1965 President Johnson is said to have received calls almost daily from one of his closest advisors outside the government, telling him (what no one had to tell him): "Don't be the first American President to lose a war." Johnson succeeded in carrying out that advice.

(That these feared prospects were in most cases defined saliently by their various domestic political aspects cannot be proved, but is conjectured here; it follows directly from Kenneth O'Donnell's account for the case of Kennedy from early-1963 to his death).

[92]Our discussion has gone only through 1968; no attempt is made here to apply the conjectures and generalizations of this paper to the statements and actions of the current Administration. That is left as an exercise to the reader.

Nothing in the past attitudes and history of the current President, or any of his public statements or official actions so far in office, suggests in any way that these generalizations should be less applicable; so this extrapolation should be a fair test. One might, for example, address the question: Which year between now and 1977 might Richard Milhous Nixon consider an acceptable one for him and his Party in which to lose South Vietnam to Communist control?

It is true that such advisors omitted warnings of other fatal errors. They neglected to caution him: "Don't, over more than one or two years, lie, mislead and bypass Congress; or draft and spend and kill and suffer casualties at the rate your military will propose, or abort negotiations; or, ever, allow your generals to describe the enemy as defeated on the eve of their major offensive..."[93]

But if they had, and he had seen the cogency of their warning: Would he then have decided to lose the war? Or would he, mindful of the time constraints, acted to win it within them?

The same question applies to earlier presidents; and later.

The Faces of the Quagmire

Looking at where their policies and tactics have brought us, so far, it is easy to understand why the past four Presidents would, before and after, conceal and deprecate their own foreknowledge and intentions.[94] And it is no harder to guess why--perhaps unconsciously--participant-observers of one of these Administrations or another have promoted the same interpretation of foresight and purpose, values and priorities, influence and responsibility, respecting their past colleagues within and outside government. Indeed, they make no secret of the conclusion they wish to convey--by the quagmire metaphor and model--concerning the responsibility of individuals and groups.

Thus, Richard Goodwin ending one of the earliest attacks by a former Democratic official on the practice and prospects of escalation under Johnson:

> "...not long ago an important politician, intimate with the processes of power, told me he thought that if large-scale war ever comes, it will

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[93] No advisor is perfect. There are things Presidents have to learn for themselves. One supposes no one told President Nixon, before the event: "Don't condone the shooting of white students by National Guardsmen just after crossing a national border with troops without consulting Congress, the public or the country invaded."

[94] Neither of these, of course, was certainly reliable. No event, no Presidential decision, occurred because it "had" to, in any sense of certainty, or absolute determinism. What does? On the other hand, in every major case, from the perspective of existing, inside knowledge and opinion years' earlier, what actually occurred in the way of Presidential decision and developments in Vietnam had seemed the way to bet.

come not in a burst of Strangelove madness or a Fail-Safe accident but through a long series of acts and decisions, each seemingly reasonable, that will slowly place the great powers in a situation in which they will find it impossible to back down. It will be no one's fault."95

The effect of his last line on some readers, Goodwin reported, was "confusing", so he explained in republishing the article that what he meant was there would be no single guilty individual or small group of responsible individuals; rather, the fault would be that of "hundreds" of people in different walks of life in many countries, who had failed to warn or act.

Townsend Hoopes, no less critical of the policies under Johnson and earlier presidents, extends what Richard Falk has called "the circle of responsibility" still further, in explicit purpose to relieve the burden of those seemingly at its center. Traumatized by a lunch with two reporters from the Village Voice who suggested that he himself, as Assistant Secretary of the Air Force under Johnson, might have been guilty of war crimes (their subsequent article was titled: "The War Criminals Hedge Their Bets"), Hoopes has published several rejoinders and discussions of the problem of responsibility. In the first of these, after describing his chief concern in the disturbing luncheon conversation as having been

"The broad question of how the entire nation had stumbled down the long slippery slope of self-delusion into the engulfing morass,"

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[95] Richard N. Goodwin, Triumph or Tragedy (New York, 1966) p. 64. (underlining added). That last line is the end of an article originally appearing in the New Yorker. After a long critique of LBJ's escalation, the preceding paragraph begins: "In the South, we have no choice but to continue the war. We are under attack, and withdrawal is impossible, and unwise. Here we must commit the forces needed to hold our positions, erode the enemy ranks, and clear guerrillas from the countryside. The objective, however, should be not to crush the Vietcong in pursuit of an unlikely surrender but slowly to retake key areas of the country, mile by painful mile".

It goes on: "the President might well tell the American people that the outcome is uncertain--that we may turn a sudden corner and find victory but that it is far more likely that we will see only a long, bloody, inconclusive war of attrition, until returning sanity brings a political settlement."

Hoopes concludes:

> "The tragic story of Vietnam is not, in truth, a tale of malevolent men bent upon conquest for personal gain or imperial glory. It is the story of an entire generation of leaders (and an entire generation of followers) ....((Johnson's)) principal advisers were, almost uniformly, those considered when they took office to be among the ablest, the best, the most humane and liberal men that could be found for public trust. No one doubted their honest, high-minded pursuit of the best interests of their country, and indeed of the whole non-communist world, as they perceived those interests."[96]

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., less generous in his appreciation of some Johnson lieutenants, is no less reluctant to single them or their Chief out as "guilty" in any special way for their role in our vast national undertaking . In the "quicksand" passage (literally, "morass") so often cited in this paper, he asserts:

> "It is not only idle but unfair to seek out guilty men. ...we find ourselves entrapped today in...a war which no President, including President Johnson, desired or intended. The Vietnam story is a tragedy without villains. No thoughtful American can withhold sympathy as President Johnson ponders the gloomy choices which lie ahead."[97].

Charitably, one can read some of these passages not as mere apologias but as reflections of the sentiment Hoopes expresses: "What the country needs is not retribution, but therapy...."[98] He completes the sentence, plausibly,

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[96] Townsend Hoopes, "The Nuremberg Suggestion", Washington Monthly, December, 1969; reprinted, with reply, in "The Hoopes Defense", by Judith Coburn and Geoffrey Cowan (authors of the original article cited above, December 4, 1969, Village Voice) Village Voice, January 29, 1970. See also the cogent comment by lawyer Péter Weiss (with reply by Hoopes) in the Washington Monthly, June, 1970, pp. 4-8.

In none of his comments (including a later Foreign Affairs article) does Hoopes dissent from the general evaluation of the aims and values of the Johnson advisors. he describes, though it would seem fair to reexamine these on the basis of their official performance as it becomes increasingly known.

[97] The Bitter Heritage, pp.47-48

[98] Op. cit.

"therapy in the form of deeper understanding of our problems and of each other"; but in all of these passages and the larger arguments in which they are embedded, one senses that the drive for sympathetic therapy is setting back the cause of understanding.

The purpose of this paper is neither retribution nor therapy,[99] but historical and political analysis. Both the substance of its tentative conclusions, and the experience of the heuristic process that gradually pointed toward them, warns that a deeper analytical understanding of these well-guarded data, controverted events, will not likely be reached by a searcher committed and determined, however scientifically, or patriotically and empathetically, to see the conflict and our part in it as "a tragedy without villains": <u>war crimes without criminals, lies without liars, a process of immaculate deception</u>.

The urge in these former officials cited to defend American institutions and legitimate authority (and surely some former Administration leaders and colleagues, if not themselves) from the most extreme charges and sanctions, ("Lyndon Johnson, though disturbingly volatile," Hoopes remarks, "was not in his worst moments an <u>evil</u> man <u>in the Hitlerian sense</u>") leads them as analysts to espouse and promulgate a view of process, roles and motives that is not only grossly mistaken--as should be known to them from their own experience and access as officials--but which underwrites deceits that have served importantly a succession of Presidents to maintain support for their substantive policies of intervention in Vietnam.

Of course, to promulgate a view is not to have it accepted. But this one has a powerful appeal. Earlier we asked, "Why is the quicksand model accepted by so many?" and offered some <u>cognitive</u> answers. But when an image is presented regularly in the broad strokes of political cartoons in mass-circulation newspapers, we can suspect that it speaks to deeper, emotional concerns. That is what happened on the nation's editorial pages during the Cambodian invasion.

That week, while photographs on the front pages showed tanks in formation driving across fields trailing plumes of dust (at last, tankers had found terrain in Southeast Asia that was not "<u>pays pourri</u>") and locust swarms of American

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[99] It is just possible that <u>both</u> are needed, at this point, in the interests of our nation.

armed helicopters moving across new borders, while reporters offered verbal pictures of the Cambodian village Snoul destroyed and looted, the drawings on the editorial pages were of Uncle Sams and GI Joes engulfed, bemused, floundering from a swamp marked "Vietnam" to one marked "Cambodia". Images, curiously, of impotence, passivity: ironically contrasting both with the news and photographs and with the President's announced intent to expunge notions of America as a "pitiful, helpless giant."

One, reproduced in Time, left the quagmire symbol to show the U.S. citizen in tatters on a raft, confronting three enormous, wide-mouthed whales, labelled: "Vietnam", "Cambodia", and "Laos".

Whales?

The imagery, pressed too far, reveals its key. The scale, and the menace, have simply been reversed. The actual role of American and Americans in and toward Indochina is reassuringly distorted, to a staggering degree, in the very process of suggesting that it be reconsidered.

Looking back to the quicksand cartoons, one sees their self-pity, their preoccupation with Uncle Sam's predicament, and suddenly asks: Where are the Asians? Where are the Cambodians, the Lao, the Vietnamese in these drawings?

Presumably--there is no other sign--they are the particles of the bog, bits of the porridgey quagmire that seizes GI Joe and will not free him....

Hoopes, Schlesinger and Goodwin reveal one truth: it is not only Presidents and Cabinet members that have a powerful need and reason to deny their responsibility for this war. And who succeed at it. Just as Presidents and their partisans find comfort and political safety in the quicksand image of the President-as-victim; so Americans at large are reassured in sudden moments of doubt by the same image drawn large, America-as-victim. It is no more real than the first, and neither national understanding nor extrication truly lie that way.

To understand the process as it emerges in the documents behind public statements, the concerns never written that moved decisions, the history scratched on the minds of bureaucrats; to translate that understanding into images

that can guide actions close-related to reality,. Americans can begin by seeing that it is <u>their</u> leaders, and themselves, that build the bog, the trap not only for Americans but, much more, for other victims: <u>their</u> policies, their politics the quagmire in which Indochina drowns.

Appendix

THE ESCALATION MACHINE

The following imputed Presidential decision guidelines will, under crisis conditions of the Vietnam conflict as perceived by Washington decision-makers, lead to policy choices and Executive performance conforming in some detail to those actually obtaining at major escalation points between 1950-65. (Presidential choices significantly escalating U.S. involvement have occurred, in fact, only in crisis situations of impending failure.)

Together with decisions between major escalations, institutional consequences (including consequences for expectations) and external factors operating over time, these rules will generate an evolution of policy, involvement and conflict very close to that observed over that period.

A. Presidential Decision Rules in Crisis

1. Do not lose South Vietnam[1] to Communist control within the next 6 months.

2. Subject to (1), do not:

   (a) Bomb North Vietnam;

   (b) Commit U.S. combat troops to Vietnam;

   (c) Mobilize reserves;

   (d) Commit U.S. combat troops to Laos;

   (e) Destroy major cities in North Vietnam;

   (f) Institute wartime domestic controls;

   (g) Take major risks of war with Soviet China or Communist China:

   (h) Invade North Vietnam:

   (i) Use nuclear weapons

3. Choose actions that will:

   (a) minimize the risk of loss within the next six months, subject to constraints in (2);

   (b) (if this risk is significant without certain "prohibited actions") break constraints[2] to use the types of actions minimally necessary (as judged by President) to reduce it to a very low level;

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[1] From 1950 till June, 1954, this read "Vietnam" (especially Tonkin).

[2] Roughly in order shown under (2): though any adjacent pair may be reversed, depending on judgment and circumstances.

(c) (subject to (a), and using fully any action no longer prohibited) maximize the probability of an eventual "win", in the sense of eliminating the Communist party in South Vietnam and assuring indefinitely a non-Communist regime.

(d) (subject to (a)) do not take actions that might appear to preclude or indefinitely forego an eventual "win".

Consequences for Policy[3]

1. Viewed from inside, resultant policies reflecting the above rules show certain, otherwise paradoxical "discrepancies" when compared to internal predictions, recommendations, and stated aims (as well as to public statements):

   (a) policies appear almost exclusively oriented to short-run considerations, evidently ignoring or trading-off very large differences in predicted long-run costs, risks, benefits and probability of success in pursuit of small reductions in short-run risk (i.e., risk of "losing" South Vietnam in the next six months, or prior to the next important election).

   (b) programs chosen are predicted to be inadequate --or at best, "long-shots"--in the long-run either to "win" or even to avert defeat, and in some cases possibly inadequate even to avert short-run failure (in contrast to public statements, and to some recommended but rejected policies).

   (c) actual policies emphasize predominatly military-- rather than political--means, aims, considerations, and executive responsibility.

2. To compensate for avoidance of "constrained instruments", (Rule 2) the chosen policy relies heavily upon:

   (a) allied ground forces;

   (b) commitments and assurances to allies, warnings and threats to opponents;

   (c) clandestine activities;

   (d) other non-prohibited instruments (including economic and military aid; advisors; combat, logistic, mobility and air support.

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[3] See discussion above for "reasons" linking these policy charact ristics causally to the application of the three decision rules above.

3. U.S. supports (intervening as necessary to instate or maintain) a narrow-based, right-wing, anti-Communist, "pro-American", authoritarian (since 1963, essentially military) regime in Saigon; foregoing pressure for either "broadening" or "reform", and accepting a condition of weak U.S. influence toward these "aims" or upon most other GVN policies or execution. (Between 1950-54, exactly corresponding weakness of U.S. influence upon the colonial or military policies of its French ally, with the U.S. likewise foregoing any use of "leverage" despite correspondingly important support.)

4. In communications to Congress and the public, the Administration:

   (a) expresses optimism (exceeding internal estimates at the time of decision) on both the short- and the long-term prospects of actual programs.

   (b) conceals (if necessary, misleading or lying about) indications of possible inadequacy of current programs, including:

      (1) pessimistic estimates or appraisals;

      (2) internal recommendations for more extreme actions;

      (3) planning activity for much greater effort or more extreme actions;

   (c) conceals or obscures the definite internal long-run aim of "win" as defined in rule 3.

   (d) describes the strategic stakes for the U.S. in maintaining a non-Communist South Vietnam in the most impressive and grave terms, relying upon extended "domino" premises (whether or not currently affirmed by intelligence analyses).

   (e) conceals (lying or misleading as necessary) the full extent of programs actually decided upon (as well as of follow-on programs expected to be approved), instead giving the impression that fully-scheduled build-ups are resulting from sequential, marginal, contingent ad hoc decisions.[4]

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[4] This characterizes, for example, the "public information policy" concerning the build-up of U.S. personnel in South Vietnam from late 1961-1963, the build-up to 75,000 in the spring of 1965, the open-ended build-up to 175,000 and beyond decided in July, 1965, and the expansion of the bombing campaing against North Vietnam.

C. Institutional Consequences of Escalation

These include:

(1) Internal operational reporting, program analyses, and high-level expectations (though not necessarily intelligence estimates) gradually move, as the chosen policy begins to be implemented, in the direction of the public optimism expressed earlier; typical VC and GVN responses to the escalation reinforce this trend, to bring about a stage of genuine internal "euphoria" subsequent to--and caused by--the crisis-escalation.

(2) During the "euphoric aftermath" of the escalation,[5] more ambitious goals are adopted within the Administration (more weight is given to the long-run "win"); these do not lead to qualitative escalations but to expanded effort, toleration of rapidly-rising costs, and increasingly-optimistic predictions. All this increases the political stakes for a given Administration, and reinforces its tendencies to obey the Decision Rules above when a Communist resurgence or GVN collapse returns conditions of crisis.

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[5] "Phase B" of the escalation cycle, discussed above.