

## “Editorial”

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History is littered with examples of powerful nations inflicting upon themselves wounds ranging from the damaging to the catastrophic. For example, Chancellor Adolf Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 for the purpose of completing Nazi Germany's conquest of the continent of Europe. His action reassured Japan that it would not face war with the Soviet Union, contributing to its disastrous decision to launch the surprise attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 that resulted in the United States entering World War II. And so, the Axis itself had created the U.S.-Soviet military alliance that would guarantee its ultimate destruction. Such self-inflicted wounds are not uncommon for strong nations because their superior power blinds their leaders to limits on their ability to reshape world affairs to their advantage. After World War II, the United States has provided regular examples of this pattern of behavior. For example, in April 1961, President John F. Kennedy authorized the thoroughly unnecessary Bay of Pigs invasion because he believed that the Cuban people desperately wanted to overthrow Fidel Castro's regime. Instead, there was no popular uprising and Castro's forces crushed the invaders. Similar disasters followed, demonstrating how U.S. leaders failed to learn the lesson to avoid self-inflicted wounds. Indeed, the worst example of this hubris came when President George W. Bush approved the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Bush and his advisors were confident that euphoric Iraqis would greet American forces as liberators. Instead, the U.S. invasion ignited a prolonged civil war that not only resulted in the deaths of 4,000 U.S. soldiers, but political instability and economic devastation not just in Iraq, but throughout the Mideast.

Surely the most serious wound that the United States has inflicted upon itself abroad was its postwar involvement in Vietnam. From 1945 to 1975, U.S. leaders made many ill-considered decisions that would cost the nation much blood and treasure in what was an unnecessary quest to prevent the imposition of a Communist regime on the entire nation. Among the most ruinous choices was the U.S. refusal to accept and allow implementation of the Geneva Accords of

July 1954. Instead, the Eisenhower administration provided economic and military aid to a separate non-Communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN) south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel to prevent reunification of the nation. It also arranged for the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization to provide legal justification for U.S. military action to block the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from extending its control over the entire country. The Johnson administration would take this fateful step after manufacturing the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 to provide a pretext for staging regular bombing raids of North Vietnam to halt its support for the insurgents in South Vietnam. Meanwhile, the first U.S. ground forces arrived in South Vietnam in March 1965 and soon began search and destroy missions. As the U.S. commitment of men and material grew over the next two years, so too did the anti-war movement. In yet another self-inflicted wound, the Johnson administration undertook in the fall of 1967 an extensive propaganda campaign to convince the American people that military victory in Vietnam was near. This transformed the Tet Offensive in January 1968 from a colossal military defeat for North Vietnam and especially the Viet Cong into a huge political victory. There were many other examples of self-inflicted U.S. wounds in the Vietnam War and the articles in this issue will describe three of them.

Chengzhi Yin, in the opening essay titled “China’s Military Assistance to North Vietnam Revisited,” presents a revisionist interpretation of the decision of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) not to provide military assistance to the DRV until 1962 in support of its efforts to force the United States to halt its involvement in South Vietnam. Prior historians have explained this policy reversal as a result of China’s desire to prevail in the Sino-Soviet split, domestic political disagreements in the PRC, or Mao Zedong’s ideological commitment to promoting Communist revolution. Yin argues conclusively, however, that a large increase in the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam during 1961 caused Beijing to provide “military assistance to Hanoi to secure China’s southern border,” overcoming its two other main goals of avoiding war with the United States and maintaining an “hospitable regional security environment.” This study traces changes in PRC Vietnam policy after 1958, “when North Vietnamese leaders first seriously considered using armed struggle to unify their country.” At first, Beijing opposed Hanoi’s pressure on the Vietnam Workers’ Party to initiate “armed struggle,” urging instead that the Vietnamese “remain patient, accumulate forces, and wait for ‘the right time.’” Nevertheless, the DRV initiated armed struggle in October 1960 and, in response, the United States sent more equipment and advisors to South Vietnam that Beijing saw as limited and not a threat to China. President John F. Kennedy dramatically altered this perception during 1961 when he increased greatly the number of U.S. advisors

and military assistance to expand South Vietnamese military forces, to include dispatch of warplanes and helicopters. Beijing viewed this as a threat to its national security and, in July 1962, for “the first time...delivered arms to Hanoi since the end of the First Indochina War.”

Kennedy’s decision to expand the U.S. military presence in South Vietnam therefore led ironically to an intensification of the Communist insurgency to oust the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. This self-inflicted wound was the result of Kennedy’s failed effort to find a solution to the fundamental U.S. dilemma in Vietnam at the outset of the 1960s. Kennedy, like his predecessors, viewed the DRV as an agent of the Soviet Union, supporting the Viet Cong as part of a sinister plan to achieve Communist global domination. At the same time, he understood that Diem’s survival depended on winning the support of the people of South Vietnam, pressing him to enact social and economic reforms, while terminating political repression and expanding democratic rights. And so, Kennedy followed a perilous middle course of increasing the number of U.S. advisors and the amount of military and economic assistance to the RVN, while privately and publicly urging Diem to adopt policies that held hope for expanding his domestic political support. But he strongly resisted the temptation to commit U.S. combat forces. For example, in November 1961, when Walt Rostow and Maxwell Taylor recommended deploying 8,000 ground troops in South Vietnam, Kennedy demurred. “It’s like taking a drink,” the president famously remarked. “The effect wears off, and you have to take another.” That Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam in a second term remains a matter of debate, but U.S. approval of the coup in November 1963 that removed Diem from power and resulted in his assassination would have made this extremely difficult. As Seth Offenbach explains in the second article of this issue titled “Mourning a Loss: Conservative Support for Ngo Dinh Diem,” U.S. rightwing politicians increasingly pointed to this as *the* self-inflicted wound that led to disaster in Vietnam.

Offenbach describes how American conservatives advocated U.S. involvement in South Vietnam prior to 1963 as part of their larger support for fighting communism worldwide. They considered the Kennedy administration’s assistance in Diem’s removal to be a “foolish mistake” because his strong leadership prevented initiation of the domino theory in Asia. Thereafter, until “Americanization of the Vietnam War beginning in early 1965,” he persuasively argues, “the U.S. conservative movement’s media elite turned the RVN’s president into the last great hope for South Vietnam—essentially arguing that the loss of Diem equaled the loss of a free Vietnam.” Offenbach begins with a description of the American conservative movement in 1960 as a diverse group of individuals who endorsed “smaller government, maximum individual

freedom, big business capitalism, traditional community values, and ardent anti-communism." Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater united conservatives into a powerful political movement from 1963 to 1965 that also advocated "a unilateralist, interventionist, pro-American, anti-Communist foreign policy." Consequently, the movement, especially Catholics, supported Diem regardless of his repressive policies because it believed he could defeat the Communists, although its "media elite said surprisingly little about Diem while he was alive." With his death, conservative media activists, Offenbach argues, "did not promote a more aggressive military strategy" because they thought "that victory without Diem was improbable." But "a steady loss of political stability" in the RVN convinced them that it was necessary "either to expand dramatically the U.S. military presence, persuade an Asian ally to take responsibility for the fighting, or withdraw and concede defeat." Conservative media, Offenbach shows, contributed to convincing the American people that "a living, fighting Diem would have been preferable for the defense of U.S. security."

Revisionist historians have supported the conclusion of conservative Americans that the Kennedy administration's decision to aid in the overthrow of Diem led to the subsequent U.S. military disaster in Vietnam. Other Vietnam War scholars, however, disagree, documenting how Diem policies hurt average citizens in South Vietnam, making it impossible to build widespread support for his government. Nevertheless, as Offenbach explains, racist assumptions allowed American conservatives to minimize Diem's failures because of the conviction that inferior East Asians not only needed, but benefited from authoritarian rule. Goldwater, for example, publicly favored the use of atomic bombs to end the Communist insurgency, demonstrating his belief that neither the land nor the people of Vietnam had much value. U.S. behavior in Vietnam after the death of Diem provided proof for many Vietnamese that the U.S. government, and in particular American soldiers, shared this disdain for them. To be sure, the United States made many efforts to improve the internal economic, political, and social conditions locally in the RVN. But these positive actions experienced no significant success because, in a central self-inflicted wound of the war, bombing in free fire zones, use of napalm and chemical defoliants, forced relocations of villagers, and indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians negated U.S. efforts to win "hearts and minds." The United States could have built greater support for the Saigon regime had it been less ethnocentric in understanding the needs of the South Vietnamese people and responding to them constructively. In the final article of this issue titled "To Do Nothing Would be to Dig Our Own Graves: Student Activism in the Republic of Vietnam," Heather Stur provides a telling example of this truth regarding one particularly influential sector of South Vietnam society.

Stur explains how South Vietnam's university students from 1964 to 1967 were vocal activists in advocating differing visions of the future of their nation, many being firmly opposed to Communist control. Despite disagreement on methods and leadership, the students "believed that a stable, civilian government and freedom from foreign intervention were the two keys to Vietnam's independence." Stur describes how student unions at public universities in Saigon, Hue, and Dalat were the vanguard of youth activism, especially the Saigon Student Union (SSU). "University students," she emphasizes, "tended to advocate for a moderate course of action and to urge restraint in vocalizing their message, while high school students were prone to public demonstrations and rioting." Continuing a tradition of student political activism, they protested Diem's authoritarian rule and his overthrow empowered their belief that they could change the political and social order. U.S. officials closely monitored student groups to understand their positions on national issues and find ways to build student support for the Saigon government, but considered their advocacy of peace and neutralism as a strategy to support the Communists. In fact, the Americans only had contempt for the protesters, advising the government to suppress demonstrations and draft student organizers. As a result, the Saigon regime's "repressive tactics for dealing with political protest drove away students who otherwise might have supported it." Ultimately, the tendency of U.S. officials "to conflate anti-government activism with Communist insurgency combined with students' sensitivity to anything that appeared to be foreign control," Stur concludes, "caused the United States to miss opportunities to cultivate a young, vibrant, educated political base in the cities to support a non-Communist government in Saigon."

Readers should be surprised that the three articles in this issue focused on U.S. policy during the Vietnam War. As previously announced, this publication was to be a theme issue titled "Influencing U.S. Foreign Policy in the 19th Century Pacific World." The editor-in-chief regrets that it has become necessary to cancel these plans. However, two of the articles for this projected issue will appear in the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* next year.