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INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War was America's longest and most controversial war. Often described as "Johnson's war," much of the historical debate to date has focused on his policies, especially those adopted during the first months of 1965. The most critical decisions of the war were made during this period when the Johnson administration escalated the war into North Vietnam. A neglected aspect of the period has been the impact of allied support on Johnson's policies. During these critical months, Johnson looked to Britain for moral and military support to give an international basis for its policy in South Vietnam. It was at this crucial juncture that Harold Wilson, Britain's first Labour prime minister in over thirteen years, took office.

The Labour Party had traditionally opposed U.S. intervention in South Vietnam. Wilson had been a vocal opponent of the American presence in 1954, when he considered the problems in Vietnam to be part of the revolution for self-determination. Ten years later, as head of State, Wilson continued his predecessor's policy of public support for the United States, despite his own personal desire for peace and opposition from members of his own parliamentary party. Although Wilson refused to send British troops or military hardware to South Vietnam, he did continue to publicly support the U.S. When the Americans extended the war into North Vietnam, they exceeded the parameters of support set out by the British. Nevertheless, Wilson continued the support. In doing so, he gave the impression of international support at a time when Johnson made the decision to escalate the war. Had Wilson withdrawn support during this critical period, Johnson's policies may have been different.

There are a number of reasons why the Wilson government continued to publicly support the United States policy in South Vietnam in 1965. Britain was dependent upon the United States in a number of ways. The British currency depended on American dollars for stability, and joint European and national defense projects such as the nuclear submarine, Polaris and NATO commitments, made a good Anglo-American relationship desirable. Britain was also involved in another area of Southeast Asia, Malaysia, where the U.S. had given financial aid. Support for U.S. policy, although not written into the "aid packages," was, to a certain extent expected and exploited by Johnson.

The British however, had a different assessment of the problem in South Vietnam. They did not see the situation in purely Cold War terms, rather as a civil war and a "no-win" situation for the United States. The British were dubious about the "domino theory," and thought that Vietnam would become communist eventually but did not feel that this would threaten the rest of Southeast Asia. The Wilson government sought to extricate the United States from what they projected would be a lengthy and costly war. During the first months of 1965, Wilson and his officials had several opportunities to express their different assessment of the situation and voice opposition to the policy of escalation. Wilson however, failed to tell Johnson in clear terms the British position for fear of damaging what he hoped would be a close Anglo-American relationship. For those who believe Johnson had options in 1965, this failure on the part of the British may have given the false impression of international support and contributed to the expansion of the war in July, 1965.

BACKGROUND

The struggle in Vietnam began decades before American intervention. Vietnam was colonized by the French in 1887, and became an important part of French Indochina. A Vietnamese resistance movement began almost immediately, and in 1919, Ho Chi Minh, a student and member of one such group, made a formal request for democratic reforms in Vietnam at the Versailles Conference.[1] None of the participants of the Paris Peace Conference took the request seriously, and Ho Chi Minh subsequently joined the French Communist Party. In 1924, he went to communist controlled Canton and formed the Association of Young Vietnamese Revolutionaries, the forerunner to the Indochinese Communist Party. Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam in 1942 during the German occupation of France in World War II. He developed the Vietminh, a guerilla army and took full advantage of the relative military weakness of the French to wage a long and successful colonial war against them. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh, in the presence of U.S. officials, declared Vietnamese independence from French rule.

Post-war France, however, was not willing to relinquish its former colonies in Indochina. Rearmed by the British, the French regained control of the territory from the Vietminh and for the next year the two sides unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a settlement. In November, 1946, a French cruiser shelled the northern port of Haiphong, killing 6,000 civilians. The French were ousted in 1954 but the ensuing war lasted almost thirty years.

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[1] The Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference after World War I between the Allied and Associated Powers and defeated Germany. (Versailles found Germany guilty of causing the war, imposing heavy war reparations and making German colonies "mandates" of the League of Nations.)

The political situation in France after World War II was extremely unstable. The war in Vietnam added to the instability. The French were war weary and Vietnam was costly in terms of French manpower and resources. Numerous political parties and factions vied for power in France as one government after another fell. The French Communist Party gained considerable popular support in the aftermath of the war. This posed a threat to the Cold War allies who feared Soviet expansion into Western Europe through France. The United States was particularly concerned about the potential for a Soviet controlled communist government in France. American military and civilian strategists perceived that World War II had left the Soviet Union as the most powerful nation in Europe and Asia. As eastern Europe was subjugated by Stalinist forces, the Truman administration, in the spring of 1947, formally committed itself to the containment of Soviet expansion in Europe, and France became a focus of U.S. attention.[2]

Initially in 1945-46, the United States supported the Vietminh cause against Imperial France. By 1947, however, in order to further American interests in Europe, a friendly government in France took precedence over self-determination for Vietnam. The Truman administration subsequently provided indirect financial and military aid to the French in Vietnam through the Marshall Plan, hardware and military advisors.[3] The Eisenhower administration increased U.S. financial support so that in 1953 alone, Washington appropriated $785 million in military assistance to

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[2] George Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 (New York: Mc-Graw Hill, 1996), 10-11. See also Ellen Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, 1945-1955 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), and Ronald E. Irving, The First Indochina War: French and American Policy, 1945-1954 (London: C. Helm, 1975).

[3] The Marshall Plan was officially called the European Recovery Program and was designed by George C. Marshall, Truman's Secretary of State, to provide economic aid to Europe after World War II. It came into effect in 1948.

defend French Indochina. By October of the same year, the national security council cited Indochina as an area of vital strategic importance to the United States and one which should be defended with military force if necessary. The Joint Chiefs of Staff disagreed. They argued that any U.S. commitment would have to be huge and would therefore entail a reduction in force and resource allocation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization which would create a security problem in Western Europe.[4]

While American officials debated further involvement in Vietnam, the Vietminh forces laid siege to a French garrison in a remote village on the Laotian border, Dienbienphu. The besieged French urgently requested air intervention from the Americans but Congress insisted on prior allied commitments, particularly from Britain before it would support a resolution authorizing the President to send U.S. troops. Britain however, opposed immediate intervention and proposed a Conference in Geneva to negotiate a settlement between the French and the Vietminh. Herring maintains that the British government did not believe that the loss of all or part of Indochina would bring about the fall of Southeast Asia to communism. This was solely an American fear. Furthermore, Churchill and his foreign secretary Anthony Eden, had no desire to engage British troops in a colonial war they were certain could not be won.[5]

On May 7, 1954, the French surrendered to the Vietminh forces of General Vo Nguyen Giap. The following day the Indochina phase of the Geneva Conference began, co-chaired by Britain and the USSR. Ho Chi Minh represented the Vietminh

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[4] Robert Buzzanco, "Prologue to tragedy: U.S. Military Opposition to Intervention in Vietnam, 1950-1954." Diplomatic History 17, no. 2 (1993) : 211-12.

[5] Herring, *Longest War*, 33-37.

and French delegates represented their puppet leader, Ngo Dinh Diem. Despite the military humiliation they had inflicted on the French, the Vietminh nonetheless agreed to an armistice, a regrouping of military forces, and a temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel until July 1956, when an internationally supervised general election would take place. Although the Vietminh enjoyed support from approximately eighty percent of the population, they appeared to make all the concessions and acknowledged the validity of the international agreement. The British were pleased with the outcome of the conference. Nevertheless, Eisenhower, and especially his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, refused to be directly associated with the agreements and simply issued a statement noting them and pledging not to use force to undermine them.[6]

POST-GENEVA

After the Geneva Accords, the United States moved against the advice of the British and French and took control of the situation in Saigon. In the Cold War climate, the U.S. was concerned that "free" elections could result in a communist victory and South Vietnam would "fall." Arthur Combs argues that the action of the United States government "reminded Europeans in an unpleasant way of the shifting center of power in the Western world." Although the British and Americans shared the same goal of checking the expansion of communism in Southeast Asia, the allies disagreed over the tactics to be used. They also differed in their approach to the enforcement of the Geneva Accords. When it became clear to the British government

[6] Herring, *Longest War*, 43-44.

that the United States had no intention of allowing free elections to take place in 1956, Anthony Eden, the architect of the Accords and now prime minister of Britain, felt betrayed.[7]

Many historians have considered that Britain's role and interest in post-Geneva Indochina basically ended when the Geneva Accords were signed. Combs maintains that the Foreign Office in London had "initially expected to play a role in the day-to-day formulation of Indochina policy with Paris and Washington." When it became clear that this was not the case, "London swept the matter under the rug, thus implying that post-Geneva Vietnam had never been an area of direct and vital British concern." In addition to the resentment felt by Eden at the American attitude toward the Geneva agreement, Britain was absorbed with its own problems in Southeast Asia and the rest of the crumbling Empire. Nevertheless, Combs believes that the British did retain an interest and had an alternative plan that might have resulted in a different scenario for all the participants.[8]

The British government believed that Geneva had spared the West from a clash with the Soviets and Chinese in Southeast Asia. It was therefore important that the West uphold the Geneva agreements even if Vietnam ultimately "fell" to communism after the 1956 elections. Vietnam was a small and possibly inevitable price to pay for the stability of the region and the protection of other Western interests in the area. The British government believed that a fight for Vietnam would certainly widen to include Cambodia and Laos, and possibly Thailand, as well as Malaya,

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[7] Arthur Combs, "The Path not Taken: The British Alternative to U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1954-1956." Diplomatic History 19 no. 1 (1995) : 35.

[8] Ibid., 34-37.

where British troops were already fighting Malay communist insurgents. A widened war could lead to a clash of major powers in which Britain, as a member of SEATO, would become embroiled.[9]

Anthony Eden felt personally betrayed by the American government, especially the secretary of state John Foster Dulles, whom he saw as having first embraced the Geneva agreements and then abandoned them and the idea of all-Vietnam elections. As foreign secretary and then as prime minister, Eden had to balance the scuttling of the Accords against Anglo-American relations as a whole. Britain had few solid interests in Indochina but did have an overwhelming need to preserve a good relationship with the American government. As a result, Britain maintained silence over the issue of the agreements and Eden was forced to temper his belief in the sanctity of the Accords and move British policy nearer to Washington's harder anti-Communist line.[10]

Eden's change of face did not go unnoticed by other members of Parliament and he received some bitter criticism. One vocal opponent was Labour Party member Harold Wilson. In 1954, he made his own position on Southeast Asia quite clear. Wilson maintained that the struggle in Vietnam, as in other parts of the world, was revolution. He believed that Britain should therefore "march on the side of the peoples in that revolution and not on the side of the oppressors." Wilson further argued that "not a man, not a gun, must be sent from this country," and Britain "must not join or in any way encourage an anti-Communist crusade in Asia under the

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[9] SEATO was the South East Asia Treaty Organization, analogous to NATO, formed in 1954 to protect Southeast Asia from possible communist aggression. The treaty was signed in Manila by Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Britain and the USA.

[10] Combs, *Path not Taken,* 36-37.

leadership of the Americans or anyone else." Ten years later, as leader of the first Labour government since 1951, Wilson's ideological stand was tempered with political reality. Britain was financially dependent on the United States and, just as Eden was forced to place a higher premium on a strong Anglo-American relationship, so Wilson subjugated his own ideological principles to those of political expediency.[11]

In 1954, Eden recognized Britain's economic dependence on the United States and as a consequence, tailored British foreign policy to fit the relationship. By 1964 the situation had changed little. Wilson inherited an unstable currency, a stagnant economy and a huge balance of payments deficit. More than ever the future of the British economy was tied to U.S. benevolence and the tacit agreement that Britain would support America's foreign policy. In terms of national survival Eden and Wilson had little choice but to maintain support for the U.S. presence in South Vietnam despite grave doubts as to the real value and morality of that presence.

THE WILSON GOVERNMENT OF 1964

Harold Wilson was elected leader of the Labour Party in 1963. On October 15, 1964, the Labour party returned from thirteen years in the political wilderness to assume responsibility for the governance of Britain. Wilson's government was not strong. He had a majority of four in the House of Commons which meant that any dissent in the party could cripple the government and even force a general election.

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[11] Harold Wilson, *Mayday Speech, 1954*, in Ken Coates, The Crisis of British Socialism (Nottingham: Partisan Press, 1971) 123. The speech was also reported in The Daily Worker May 5, 1954, and reprinted in The Week May 5, 1966.

Labour won on a platform of positive economic action and an independent nuclear deterrent. These campaign promises provided immediate problems for Wilson both at home and in the United States.

Domestically, Wilson faced an economic crisis. He inherited a huge balance of payments deficit and an unstable currency. Many leading economists at the time predicted an imminent devaluation of Sterling. To stabilize the pound, Wilson revived a deliberate policy of deflation: a temporary surcharge on all imports, a rise in interest rates and, loans from the United States and the International Monetary Fund.[12] Although these measures were deemed a necessary evil at home, Wilson's deflationary policies were unpopular in Washington. When Johnson and Wilson met in December, 1964, the President let it be known that Wilson's heavy handed manipulation of the bank rate had caused considerable trouble for the dollar. As a consequence, Johnson was forced to reduce his own domestic budget, which made it very difficult to carry out some of the domestic social programs he wanted.[13]

The second problem Wilson faced was the question of nuclear defense. Britain did not have an independent nuclear deterrent but had joint defense projects with the United States over which the U.S. retained control. In the early sixties, Britain, with

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[12] Between 1948 and 1964, Britain received $3,834.9 million dollars in economic aid from the U.S. Only $384.8 was repayable. In the same period, France received $3,190.3 million, while Germany was given $1,472.4. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1965, (86th edition.) Washington D.C., 1965). In addition, Britain received a total of $4923 million between 1949-1961 in military assistance from the U.S. of which only $384.8 million was repayable. (Source: Office of Planning and Budgeting, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants, July1, 1945-September 30, 1978, Washington D.C.,:The Office, 1978, 167).

[13] McGeorge Bundy, Memorandum for the Record, 7 Dec. 1964, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol XIII Western Europe Region (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1995) 134-139. Hereafter cited as FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII.

U.S. support, developed the Skybolt missile and later, Polaris.[14] During the elections in October, 1964, the Conservative government wanted an independent nuclear deterrent but the Americans feared that this would encourage Germany and France to pursue a nuclear policy. In an effort to maintain control of nuclear weapons in Europe, the United States proposed a Multilateral Force in Europe (MLF) with ships manned by sailors from all the European allies but with the nuclear weapons under ultimate control of the U.S. The Conservative government was reluctant to commit to the controversial MLF, just before the general election in 1964, because it compromised the objective to achieve a policy of independent nuclear defense.[15]

The issue of nuclear armaments divided the Labour party. To avoid a party split before the general election in 1964, Labour officially adopted a policy of an independent nuclear deterrent aimed at eventual unilateral nuclear disarmament. This position silenced the radical Left who were allied to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.[16] Although Wilson based much of his election campaign on Labour's pledge to get rid of Britain's nuclear deterrent, once in office, joint Anglo-American

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[14] In 1962, President Kennedy withdrew support for Skybolt as an independent nuclear deterrent for Britain, partly because the first tests failed and partly because it gave Britain preferential treatment in Europe. For a full discussion of the "Skybolt Crisis" see Sir Robin Renwick, Fighting With Allies: America and Britain in Peace and War, (New York: Times Books, 1996) 263-268. Polaris was a nuclear missile system developed in the U.S. to be used from a submarine launch. The actual warheads were also produced in Britain. On April 6, 1963, the Conservative Government signed a sales agreement with the U.S. to equip U.K. built submarines with the U.S. built missiles and launch apparatus. Britain would provide its own warheads. For the actual agreement, see U.S. Treaties and Other International Agreements, Vol. 14, 321-331, for details on the development of Polaris see Harvey M. Sapolsky, The Polaris System Development: Bureaucratic and Programmatic Success in Government (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), for details on the Polaris agreement between the U.S. and Britain, see Ian Clark, Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain's Deterrent and America, 1957-1962 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

[15] John Baylis, Anglo-American Defense Relations 1939-1984 (London: Macmillan, 1984) 140-141.

[16] The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was formed in 1958 and became a powerful lobby in the Labour Party in the early 1960's.

projects in progress, including the nuclear submarine Polaris, were deemed too costly to be abandoned. Wilson and his Minister of Defense, Dennis Healey successfully avoided party dissent over Polaris, however, the MLF debate proved more difficult. [17]

Ten days before Wilson's official Washington visit in December, 1964, the Conservatives, now in opposition, insisted that Wilson debate the controversial MLF subject in the Commons. Forced into a political corner, Wilson voiced skepticism about the MLF plan that would use Polaris as part of a European deterrent rather than an independent and British controlled deterrent. He argued in Parliament that MLF would create divisions in Europe and suggested an Atlantic Force along the same lines as the MLF but one in which every European country had a veto, not solely the U.S. More importantly, with the Atlantic Force proposal, Britain would retain control of its independent nuclear deterrent, Polaris.[18]

The statement was greeted well by both sides of the House of Commons but in Washington Wilson's speech was a problem. In a meeting prior to the Washington visit, George Ball told Wilson that the Americans were "frankly disturbed by the speech," especially his reference to the MLF as a "divisive force in Europe." Ball continued, "this was the kind of language that de Gaulle was using--not the kind of language we [the Americans] expected from the United Kingdom."[19] Wilson was embarrassed and tried to explain that he was forced to debate MLF by his political opponents before he consulted the Americans. Johnson continued to express his

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[17] Ben Pimlott, Harold Wilson (London: HarperCollins, 1992) 383.

[18] For a text of Wilson's speech to Parliament, November 23, 1964, see House of Commons, Parliamentary Debates, Fifth Series, vol. 702, cols. 930ff.

[19] Ball to U.S. Department of State, 2 Dec. 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, 128. The French President, Charles de Gaulle was an outspoken critic of U.S. interference in Europe and Vietnam. De Gaulle envisaged a united Europe under the leadership of France. He opposed Britain's entry into the EEC in part because he feared U.S. influence through the Anglo-American relationship.

disappointment in Washington. In a private meeting with Wilson he complained about the difficulties created for Johnson in the U.S. by his speech to the House of Commons. By that time, Johnson told McGeorge Bundy, "the Prime Minister was almost on the ropes," said "maybe" to MLF and apologized for the trouble he had caused. This was an inauspicious start to the relationship between the leaders.[20]

To facilitate a workable Anglo-American relationship, during the Washington visit, Wilson publicly expressed a determination to consolidate the alliance in areas of common responsibility, specifically nuclear deterrence. This was a far cry from the election platform and Wilson's Washington speech angered the unilateralists on the left of the party. Some other Party members interpreted Wilson's public statement as a return to a policy of joint nuclear defense. This alienated many members who refused to endorse any Anglo-American defense projects, including Vietnam.[21]

Disunity within the Labour Party was an especially difficult problem for the Wilson government in 1964 because of the slim majority in the House of Commons. In order to remain in power, Wilson was under considerable pressure both to appease the radicals in his own party and the opposition's demand for an independent nuclear deterrent. The decision to continue the Polaris project silenced both factions but compounded the economic problem. Polaris and defense spending in general concerned the electorate who were anxious to see a balanced budget, economic growth and to maintain the value of sterling.[22] On the other side of the Atlantic,

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[20] McGeorge Bundy, 7 Dec. 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, 137-139.

[21] Ian Aitken, "Off to a Good Start in Washington: Premier Talks Better Than Had Been Envisaged." Manchester Guardian 8 Dec. 1964, sec. A1.

[22] Harold Wilson, A Personal Record: The Labour Government 1964-1970 (Boston: Atlantic-Little, 1971), 79, and Anthony Shrimsley, The First Hundred Days of Harold Wilson (New York: Praeger, 1965), 2.

Johnson added to these domestic pressures when he expected Wilson to join an expensive MLF project and other military ventures. Ben Pimlott astutely describes the dilemmas of a nominally socialist government of a largely conservative nation during a heated period in the Cold War. He argues that:

> It was a perennial difficulty that Cold War international politics and defense needs pushed office-seeking or office-holding Labour leaders one way, while ideology and sentiment--anti-militarist, anti-capitalist, anti-American--pulled a large section of the movement another. The tension had been there in the calmest of times. It was heightened by the gradual transformation of cold into hot war...and dominated relations between the Johnson administration and the Wilson government, for as long as Labour remained in office.[23]

The first time Wilson and Johnson met in December 1964, the subject of economics and Cold War defense dominated the agenda but Vietnam was the issue that ultimately divided the two leaders and set in motion the demise of the "special" Anglo-American relationship.[24]

THE WASHINGTON TALKS, DECEMBER 1964

Wilson was aware that Johnson and his close advisors were preoccupied with Vietnam. In preparation for the official talks, Wilson was briefed on previous British policy in Vietnam and the current situation in Saigon by the Foreign Office. The British ambassador to South Vietnam, Gordon Etherington-Smith, gave his assessment of the growing political instability in South Vietnam. The Americans, in their "advisory" capacity, had been unable to determine the outcome of recent

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[23] Pimlott, *Wilson,* 384.

[24] David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, An Ocean Apart: The Relationship Between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), 247. Wilson had met Johnson as leader of the Opposition in 1963. The December 1964 meeting was the first official meeting for Wilson as head of State.

elections in Saigon, and the politician they backed had failed to get "elected." Etherington-Smith pointed out the "particularly disquieting failure" of the Americans to control the political developments and the consequent military advantages gained by the Vietcong at their expense. As a result, he maintained, the security in the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam was "approaching dangerpoint." In addition, a new political development had occurred. A Buddhist group headed by Tich Tri Quang favored "neutralism" and a negotiated settlement with the North. Because of the apparent failure of the Americans to get close enough to events or personalities to exert a "proper influence," Etherington-Smith concluded, they "might well find themselves confronted with a Vietnamese government … determined to end the war by negotiation." U.S. influence had clearly declined to the point where the Americans might be forced to withdraw in the face of an agreement between the North and South over which they had no influence.[25]

Foreign Office officials were concerned that the South Vietnamese government might negotiate with the North and concede terms adverse to the American cause. They planned to persuade the U.S. to call another conference similar to Geneva, with the British and the Soviets as co-chairs. In this way, Britain could secure face saving terms for the U.S. and maintain a degree of Western influence in the area, albeit for a limited time. American prestige would be maintained and the agreements would give a broader, international basis for blame when South Vietnam "fell." The problem for the British was how to present this to the American government. The Foreign Office understood that the Americans were reluctant to

[25] Etherington-Smith to Peck, 4 Nov. 1964, FO371/175477 J No. 19047 Dv 1015/214, Public Records Office, London (hereafter PRO).

contemplate the possibility of failure in South Vietnam which in this case was departure without clear victory. Although the British position favored U.S. withdrawal, they were reluctant, as Secretary Peck put it, "incur the odium of persuading them [Johnson and his advisors] to cut their losses." The delicate and unequal Anglo-American relationship could be irrevocably damaged without careful diplomatic wording over the issue of Vietnam. On the other hand, the Foreign Office was equally reluctant to give unqualified support for an aggressive U.S. policy that the British government might be unable to support to the bitter end.[26]

This was the dilemma that faced the British delegation when they met their American counterparts in December 1964. Wilson, as spokesman, had the current British assessment of the situation and the advice of the Foreign Office to continue a policy of public support while acting as a peace broker to extricate the U.S. from a "no win" situation. On the other side of the Atlantic however, Johnson and his advisors wanted Britain to increase commitment. At the first official meeting on 7 December, Johnson stressed the importance of Britain's worldwide role in an attempt to secure a token force of British combat troops in South Vietnam. He argued that even a few British soldiers "would have a great psychological and political significance." This type of concrete support would help justify U.S. actions in Vietnam to Congress and the American public. Politically, allied troops would indicate international support and empower Johnson to fight the war to win. In his reply, Wilson pointed out that Britain had already provided some aid in the form of medical personnel and police officers for Saigon. In addition, South Vietnamese soldiers were trained for "jungle warfare" at British military schools in Malaysia.

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[26] E.H. Peck to R.G.A. Etherington-Smith, 12 Nov. 1964. FO371/175503 18977 PRO.

Wilson offered to increase this type of support but refused to send combat troops. He maintained that the British role as co-chair of the Geneva Conference made it impossible for British troops to be in Vietnam. Johnson, on the other hand, justified the American presence in South Vietnam on the premise that North Vietnam had contravened the terms of the Geneva Accords by infiltrating the South. In his view, Britain, as co-chair, should openly oppose North Vietnamese aggression and actively support the U.S. to "defend" South Vietnam.[27]

Wilson was in a difficult position. The Geneva agreement had stipulated that neither the North nor the South could join an alliance with foreign powers. Technically, South Vietnam had contravened the agreement and the U.S. had reneged on the verbal promise not to use force to undermine the agreements. Although the U.S. had not actually signed the Accords in 1954, Britain had. If British troops fought in Vietnam, the United Kingdom would incur condemnation from the international community for disregarding the conditions of a conference it had co-chaired and lose respect in the eyes of other emerging third world nations. In addition, British military involvement would decrease the possibility of successful negotiations of a "Geneva type." If British troops were deployed in South Vietnam, Wilson would be unable to act as a dispassionate co-chairman of negotiations. The British government intended to maintain control of any future negotiations in order to protect other British interests in Southeast Asia, i.e. Malaysia, Borneo and Singapore. Therefore, despite the

[27] Washington talks, White House, 8 Dec. 1964, CAB133/266 J No. 19335, PRO.

pressure of Johnson's request and formidable personality, Wilson stood firm and refused to send troops.[28]

The American delegation steadfastly held the view that the North, not the South Vietnamese, had broken the agreement. During talks held the following day, Secretary of State Dean Rusk maintained that it was important that the "signatories of the Geneva agreements" should take a sharp view of the violations of the agreement in the form of massive North Vietnamese aggression. The British Foreign Secretary Gordon Walker asked for evidence of the "massive aggression." Rusk offered more detailed dossiers to the British delegation and went on to add that "co-chairmen should not be neutral in relation to aggression but should urge compliance with the Agreements." The British delegation privately felt that if Britain did use the position as co-chair to rebuke North Vietnamese aggression, by nature of the conditions of the agreements, Britain would come under considerable pressure from the Geneva powers to publicly reprimand the South Vietnamese government for its blatant breach of the Accords. This would expose the U.S. government's complicity and seriously hamper Anglo-American relations. Wilson chose a compromise position and backed a restrained and reasonable response to North Vietnamese aggression, and offered to reassume responsibility of an international conference.[29]

At this first meeting, the British delegation failed to express in clear terms its own assessment of the situation in South Vietnam and the likely outcome should

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[28] Ibid. For a brief synopsis of the Geneva Accords see John Patrick Diggins, The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace 1941-1960 (New York: Norton, 1988) 144. For a lengthy account of the Geneva Conference from a junior British Foreign Office official present see James Cable, The Geneva Conference of 1954 on Indochina (New York, 1986).

[29] Washington Talks, White House 8 Dec. 1964, CAB133/266 J No. 19335, PRO.

Johnson continue his present policy. As a result, the British alternative of gradual U.S. withdrawal accomplished under the auspices of an international conference was not voiced and Johnson continued to plan an expansion of the war. Although Wilson refused to send troops, he did not openly oppose the American presence in South Vietnam. Johnson was frustrated with Wilson's intransigence over military aid and unlike the MLF issue, he was unable to move Wilson on this subject at their first meeting.

Despite this particular failure, the Washington Talks were considered by Johnson's close advisors to be "the most productive and useful two days" in foreign affairs "since President Kennedy went to Berlin." During the talks however, Johnson strongly expressed doubts to McGeorge Bundy about the value of Wilson's visit. After the British delegation left, Bundy pointed out to Johnson the positive achievements and the "obvious negative fact" that there is "just no way in the world that a President of the United States can avoid reasonably regular visits from the Prime Minister of Great Britain," despite the "real inconvenience" of the meetings. [30]

The "inconvenience" continued for Johnson over the next six months as he continued to request a token fighting force from Wilson, to lend international and domestic validity to U.S. policy in South Vietnam. Johnson, like Bundy, realized the political value in regular meetings with the British in the hope that Wilson could be persuaded to send troops to Vietnam. Although Britain's economic and world power had declined drastically, symbolically British troops would persuade Congress and the American people that the war had international backing. At the same time, British

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[30] McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 10 Dec. 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, 158-160.

involvement could encourage other nations to participate and distribute the cost and the blame for whatever happened in Vietnam.

VIETNAM AND THE BRITISH PRESS, DECEMBER 1964

After the Washington talks, Vietnam increasingly featured in the British press. An article in the *Guardian* on December 23, 1964, revealed to the public the extent to which the U.S. had lost control of the political situation in South Vietnam.[31] A recent military coup, supported by General Nguyen Khanh but not the Americans, emphasized the rise of anti-American feeling in South Vietnam. Khanh openly criticized the U.S. government and the Embassy in Saigon. This, Richard Scott maintained, was particularly shocking to the Americans as they had supported Khanh fully when he was head of government. In an official statement issued by the State Department in response to Khanh's criticism, the basis of U.S. support for South Vietnam was reiterated.[32] The Johnson administration continued to support the war to establish "a duly constituted Government able to act without improper interference." Ironically, the "improper interference" in this case meant *South Vietnamese* political and military *opposition*. The title of the article, "U.S. Resents Interference in South Vietnam," underlined the opinion that the American government had already *Americanized* the war. Scott concluded that the future of a free, democratic South Vietnam was dependent on political stability but he maintained, "the U.S. is ever more palpably shown to be incapable of...influencing...the attainment of such political

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[31] Richard Scott, "US resents interference in South Vietnam." Manchester Guardian 23 Dec. 1964, sec. B9.

[32] Cited in Ibid.

stability." This assessment echoed the embassy's opinion that the American presence in South Vietnam was ineffective and that the United States should therefore leave the country to establish its own political destiny. In view of the rather negative assessment of the American position in South Vietnam, a British military presence would implicate the United Kingdom in the failure of U.S. policies.

By the end of 1964, the British government and the general public in Britain were aware that American influence in South Vietnam had deteriorated. Some prominent people even in the United States felt that the U.S. should seek a settlement and negotiate a withdrawal from Vietnam before the situation deteriorated still further. On December 28, the front page of the *Guardian* featured an article entitled "Vietnam withdrawal mooted in U.S.: Senate group restive over policy failure." Scott claimed that the "steady worsening in the situation in Vietnam has caused honorable men here to ponder over what, only months ago, would have been held to be dishonorable thoughts--withdrawal from Vietnam." He based his claim on an interview with Senator Frank Church, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, allegedly published in a left-wing American publication, *Ramparts*. The article quotes Church as having stated that if, despite American aid, the people of South Vietnam do not back the Saigon government in the war effort, then he "would hope that we [the U.S. government] would recognize that it is not our country and never has been." Although Church hoped that the United States would never be forced to withdraw, he and others like Senators Mansfield and Fulbright believed that Johnson must be prepared for that possibility. [33] Three days later, an article by Scott claimed that

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[33] Richard Scott, "Vietnam Withdrawal Mooted in US: Senate Group Restive Over Policy Failure." Manchester Guardian 28 Dec. 1964, sec. C9.

other senators held the same opinion as Church. Senator Richard Russell, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee for example, was also concerned with the United States policies and purposes in Vietnam. The author agreed with the dissenting senators and hoped for an early American withdrawal from Vietnam.[34]

Throughout January 1965, U.S. and British newspapers reported the deteriorating political and military situation in South Vietnam. Rioters attacked the United States Information Service Libraries in Saigon and Hue in protest over U.S. support for Prime Minister Huong. Militarily, the Vietcong were reported to have extended their control over parts of the South. A *Daily Telegraph* editorial summed up the situation on January 20:

> What the Americans have been trying to promote....is a government that would unite all political factions behind the military drive against the Vietcong guerillas. What has, instead, been taking place is a succession of coups, counter-coups, intrigues and demonstrations in which rival generals quarrel between themselves and with the civilians, while politically minded Buddhist monks stir the brew.
>
> This deplorable political background might not matter so much if military operations against the communists were nevertheless proceeding satisfactorily. They are not. For all the massive American commitment of arms, aircraft and technical support, the guerillas are gaining ground.[35]

The general impression in the British press was that the situation was desperate and that options for the United States had decreased.

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[34] Richard Scott, "US urged to think again on Congo and Vietnam." Manchester Guardian 31 Dec., 1964, sec. C9.

[35] Daily Telegraph editorial, 20 January 1965: "Vietnam Dangers."

JANUARY 1965--CRISIS IN MALAYSIA

Within a few days the British press and government were concerned with another crisis in Southeast Asia. The former British colony Malaya faced a hostile confrontation with the Republic of Indonesia. Malaya was the center of a newly formed federation of states in Southeast Asia, Malaysia, that had gained independence from Britain in 1957. Prior to independence, Malay and British troops had successfully fought an internal guerilla war against Chinese communist insurgents. After independence, the British government maintained a defense treaty with the new federation to guard against external threat. By 1963, Malaysia had attracted the enmity of President Sukarno of Indonesia who pursued an expansionist policy in an attempt to control the entire Malaysian peninsula. His tactics included the use of Chinese Communist guerillas who had previously fought in Malaya to infiltrate Malaysia. Although Sukarno's regime was not overtly communist, the use of these guerillas understandably raised concerns of a renewed anti-Communist war in Malaysia and consequently British troops were deployed to defend the region . By the end of 1964, the crisis in Malaysia had escalated.[36]

When the hostilities began in 1963, President Kennedy extended financial aid to the British to defend the area. President Johnson continued the support but expected the British government to return the favor and send troops to Vietnam. The proximity of the two areas of conflict and Wilson's public support of U.S. policy in Vietnam concerned some members of the British press who feared that the government could be pressured into sending British troops to Vietnam.

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[36] Harry Miller, Jungle War in Malaya: The Campaign against Communism 1948-60 London: Arthur Barker, 1972) 199-201.

An editorial in the *Guardian* on December 19, 1964, after the Washington talks, urged the British government to continue to resist pressure from Washington to send troops to Vietnam while strongly supporting the British presence in Malaysia. The editorial praised the British government for publicly maintaining the distinction between the conflicts in Malaysia and Vietnam. The editor believed that the fighting in Vietnam should not be linked to the war in Malaysia as the two were "quite different--one is a civil war, the other a war against external attack." By maintaining the distinction, the editor believed that the British government could resist pressure from the U.S. government to reciprocate in Vietnam the military aid given to the British in Malaysia.

By the end of 1964 the situation in Malaysia had deteriorated. Under the terms of the defense agreement, Wilson reluctantly sent more troops to the region. By January 1, 1965, there were over 50,000 British combat troops deployed in Malaysia and another 8,000 in Borneo. The defense of Malaysia entailed the commitment of the largest number of British combat troops overseas since World War II and incurred significant numbers of casualties. Public support for the Malaysian policy remained firm despite the casualties because the Malaysian crisis was perceived as not only a "just" cause but also a British responsibility. Vietnam however, was not a former colony and therefore not within the realm of British responsibility or interests. Even if Wilson had personally desired to commit troops to South Vietnam, it would have been difficult to convince the electorate to fight a war that was perceived by many to be neither "just" nor a British responsibility.

THE BRITISH EMBASSY, SAIGON

Not everyone considered Vietnam to be out of the realm of British responsibility. The British Ambassador in Saigon held the view that Vietnam was strategically important to British interests and therefore a responsibility. In a detailed and candid letter sent to Peck at the London Foreign Office on January 14, 1965, Etherington-Smith expressed his uneasiness at certain aspects of the British government's approach to the "Vietnamese problem." He believed that the "domino theory" propounded by the Americans was correct, and argued that if Vietnam "fell" to communism, Malaysia would not long survive. If Malaysia "fell," the strategic implications for Australia and New Zealand would be gravely prejudicial to British national interests. Etherington-Smith claimed that Britain's expressed determination to defend Malaysia against Indonesian confrontation implicitly supported the latter argument. What was less readily recognized by the British government, he continued, was the bearing that the outcome in Vietnam would have on Malaysia's capacity to survive even after the Indonesian threat was over. For this reason, the Ambassador urged the British government to substantially increase aid to South Vietnam as other nations of the "free world" were doing[37]

Although the Etherington-Smith's assessment of the political situation prior to the Washington talks had been grim, he did not believe that South Vietnam was irrevocably lost. He maintained that South Vietnam still retained considerable elements of strength that he listed as "a number of people in leading positions for

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[37] Etherington-Smith to Peck, 14 Jan. 1965, FO371/180558 31758, PRO. Etherington-Smith states in this letter that Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Korea, the Philippines, Japan, the Netherlands and Italy had all increased the number of medical and technical support personnel in recent months.

whom a communist victory would be disastrous, a general dislike of communism, both in theory and practice, the toughness and resilience of the Vietnamese people and the massive support of the United States." The Ambassador argued that the reason why the situation had deteriorated was because the U.S. and South Vietnamese armies had not yet organized themselves to fight the war successfully. Although he believed that it was possible that the Americans and South Vietnamese could learn from their mistakes, he urged the British government to send more aid and therefore retain influence in the strategic decisions of the war. Etherington-Smith claimed that the ability to "guide and help the Americans" had been severely limited "partly as the result of American resistance to advice and partly owing to the absence of the necessary liaison machinery." By "necessary liaison machinery," he meant concrete forms of British aid to the area. The Ambassador was concerned that the British government had prematurely written Vietnam off. Given the importance of Vietnam's survival to British and allied interests, the Ambassador urged that the British government do everything in its power to ensure Vietnam's survival as a part of the free world. The Ambassador believed that the time was now ripe to have a "more regular, full and frank exchange of views" on Vietnam since the Americans in South Vietnam had finally gained a realistic view of the problem, but were at a loss as to how to arrest the deteriorating situation. And they were now open to advice.[38]

Etherington-Smith believed that British advice in Vietnam was important to guide U.S. strategy and influence a positive outcome in the area. There was precedent for such a view. In 1960, the British had gained the first victory against communism

[38] Etherington-Smith, to Peck, 14 Jan. 1965. FO371/180558 31758, PRO.

in Malaysia and had advised the United States government prior to the Johnson administration.[39] President Kennedy and President Diem both relied on the expertise of the British Advisory Mission in Saigon that gave advice on "pacification" techniques used with success in Malaysia. R.G.K. Thompson, the head of the Mission, also personally advised President Kennedy. As early as 1963, he had suggested gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops, which the President was willing to implement. Kennedy's premature death however, prevented the withdrawal of U.S. troops and Johnson's advisors, many of whom had advised Kennedy, failed to argue the merits of Thompson's plan.[40]

Wilson greatly admired Kennedy and supported the idea of a peaceful settlement in South Vietnam. Additional allied troops would not aid the peace process but could seriously hamper negotiations. Ben Pimlott argues that Wilson was, by instinct, the most anti-war of all the post World War II British premiers, which shaped his attitude toward Vietnam. This view is validated by Wilson's later attempts to seek a peaceful settlement in Vietnam and his resolve not to increase the parameters of the war by British involvement. [41]

Ken Coates, a contemporary of Wilson and a left-wing member of the Labour Party, was less kind in his assessment of Wilson's reluctance to send troops to Vietnam. He cynically suggested that Wilson's foreign policy was predicated solely on economic considerations. Coates claimed, "the Conservative leadership [was] less

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[39] Miller, *Jungle War*, 197-198. On July 30 1960, the President of the Malay Federation formally repealed the twelve-year-old State of Emergency and British troops began to withdraw. The war in Malaysia was considered the first successful battle of the Cold War.

[40] Herring, *Longest War*, 95 and 104-5. Some historians and former Kennedy advisors argue that the President's interest and willingness to withdraw troops amounted to a desire to extricate the U.S. from the situation in South Vietnam. (See Herring's assessment of this argument, 104-5).

[41] Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, 384.

deafened by the clatter of dollars into the begging bowl [in] 1954 that Mr. Wilson's own team in 1964." He continued, "the clatter of dollars into the begging bowl," had taken on a "neurotic significance" for Wilson since his election. Coates concluded, "if not for a handful then at any rate for several planeloads of silver he (Wilson) left us." Britain's economic situation took precedence over party ideology for Wilson and his Vietnam policy alienated him from Labour's left wing. [42]

Wilson did not see his policy in those terms. He wanted to find a way to end the situation in Vietnam without damaging the Anglo-American relationship and without sending British troops. When Wilson met with members of his Cabinet on January 28, 1965, they agreed to informally ask the Johnson administration to allow Britain to act as an intermediary and begin negotiations. There was no mention of increased British aid and the Cabinet unanimously agreed that Wilson should take the lead to bring both sides to the conference table. The Cabinet agreed that the situation had changed since the Washington talks in December. The situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated further. There had been another coup d'etat in Saigon and there was evidence that certain sections of the American public were disillusioned by the failure of U.S. policy.[43]

The Foreign Office, however, correctly perceived that the Johnson administration was not yet disillusioned. It argued that the United States government was no more disposed to welcome an offer of mediation than it had been a month or so earlier. Furthermore, the Soviet government, which had co-chaired the 1954 Geneva Conference, was not interested in taking an initiative in new negotiations. In

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[42] Coates, *Crisis*, 123-124.
[43] Cabinet Minutes, 28 January 1965, CAB 128/39, PRO.

the final analysis, the Foreign Office believed that even to suggest negotiations would damage Anglo-American relations. On February 1, 1965 the views of the Foreign Office were presented to Stewart and Wilson, who made the decision not to approach Johnson with an offer to act as an intermediary in peace negotiations at that time. Wilson's desire to end the conflict peacefully, however, had the backing of the Cabinet and Foreign Office--once the prime minister deemed it appropriate to approach Johnson with the idea of negotiations. [44]

THE BRITISH PRESS

In January 1965, some influential members of the United States Congress became critical of Johnson's policy in Vietnam, mainly because of the apparent lack of success. The British immediately thought that the criticism might signal a change in U.S. policy. Lord Harlech talked to William P. Bundy, one of Johnson's close advisors regarding the outburst of congressional criticism and the amount of significance that should be attached to it. Bundy claimed that Congress, like the American people, was uneasy about the situation in Vietnam. The administration, however, was not concerned because no one had come up with suggestions on how to improve it. It was this failure by the critics to provide a new solution that Bundy believed would have a steadying effect in Congress and allow Johnson and his advisors to pursue their policy as no other alternative had been proposed. That policy, Bundy explained to Lord Harlech, would be a series of bombing attacks over the next ten days followed by a lull. Although there was a group of younger liberals formed

[44] Cable, FO, internal memo, 1 Feb. 1965. FO371/180539 31744, PRO.

under Senator Church who proposed putting the Vietnam question to the United Nations, Bundy claimed the group had little effective influence in Congress or with the general public. In any case, Johnson opposed any recourse to the UN.[45]

Bundy hit the nail on the head. It was precisely because no-one voiced an alternative plan that Johnson was able to pursue his policy of gradual escalation. It was at this point that the British could have voiced their opinion. Combined with the uneasiness expressed by the Congressional group, British opposition to an expansion of the conflict and desire for a peaceful settlement might have weakened Johnson's ability to escalate the war. The British did not speak out and as a consequence Congress *was* steadied and Johnson *did* pursue his policy.

At the time however, the *Guardian* picked up on the congressional criticism. On January 16, 1965, Richard Scott reported Senator McGovern's critical speech to the Senate on South Vietnam with the headline: "Some Harsh Words on Vietnam." Under the subheading "Not Winning," the report cited McGovern's introductory assertion that the United States' lack of success was due to support for a government in Saigon "that is incapable of winning a military struggle or governing its people." The U.S. was "fighting a determined army of guerillas that seems to enjoy the co-operation of the countryside and that grows stronger in the face of foreign intervention." McGovern concluded that victory was further away than it was ten years before. He did not, however, offer any alternative to the current policy.[46]

Later in January, the *Sunday Times*, traditionally a supporter of U.S. policy in

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[45] Stewart to Peck, Jan, 1965, FO371/180539 31744, PRO.

[46] Richard Scott, "Some Harsh Words on Vietnam," Manchester Guardian, Jan. 16 1965, sec. 9C.

Vietnam, reported on the deteriorating situation in Saigon. Washington correspondent Henry Brandon summed up the impact of the latest developments in South Vietnam on the Johnson administration who now appeared "like a ship with the rudder broken, the anchor chains torn away, the hull leaking and one mutiny after another on the bridge." Brandon claimed that the political uncertainties in Saigon constantly narrowed the freedom of choice for Johnson and his advisors and made it difficult to develop a winning policy. "As a consequence" Brandon concluded, "no one close to the top wants to assume taking the lead." Although Brandon infers that escalation is one option for Johnson, nonetheless the President was reluctant to move in this direction.[47]

In her Ph.D. dissertation Caroline Page argues convincingly that both British press supporters and critics of the U.S. policy in Vietnam agreed at the end of January 1965, that the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating; and that Johnson did not want to widen the conflict. They disagreed however, on the cause of the deterioration and on how to resolve the situation in Vietnam. Supporters of U.S. policy agreed with the Administration, who laid the blame for the deterioration on North Vietnamese infiltration. Critics held the view that the government in Saigon was inherently unstable. Page claims that it was at this point that the United States Information Service in London began to supply detailed information about North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam. In addition to drawing the conclusion that Hanoi supplied troops for the Vietcong, the U.S.I.S. maintained that the number of Southern

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[47] Henry Brandon, "U.S. Gives Up Planning A Vietnam Policy," The Sunday Times 31 Jan. 1965, in Caroline Page The Strategic Manipulation of American Propaganda During the Vietnam War 1965-1966 (Ph.D. diss. Reading University, 1994) 165.

guerillas trained in the North had decreased. Page asserts that this implied that there was no longer support in the South for the Vietcong and that the situation in the South was therefore invasion from the North.[48]

The "foreign invasion" thesis fed to the British press by the U.S.I.S. aided Wilson's Vietnam policy in one sense and threatened it in another. When United States reprisal raids into the North began in February, 1965, Wilson was able to claim that it was a response to an aggressive outside force. He was unprepared however, for the Parliamentary backlash that began with the raids and threatened his political career and the unity of the Labour party.

INCIDENT AT PLEIKU

A series of events precipitated Johnson's reprisal attacks on the North. Early in February, General Khanh overthrew the Huong government and assumed power and then publicly criticized American policies in South Vietnam. The Johnson administration quickly recognized that the task in Saigon was to restore Vietnamese confidence in the United States. In a cable from Saigon, Etherington-Smith reported on a meeting with U.S. ambassador, Alexis Johnson in Saigon. He claimed that the Americans thought that the only solution to the current problem was to adopt a more aggressive policy towards the North. He went on to stress the importance of British support for these actions because without them, U.S. action would be weakened. Peck, who was also present at the meeting, had reminded Alexis Johnson that Michael Stewart had warned in December that domestic and international pressure "in

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[48] Ibid., 165-169.

certain circumstances" would force Britain to call an international peace conference. By "certain circumstances" Peck meant increased bombing in North Vietnam. This was clear to Alexis Johnson who argued that "action against the north" was a prelude to eventual negotiations and he repeated that the Americans had no desire to threaten to overthrow the communist regime in North Vietnam, and would be ready to withdraw from South Vietnam as soon as communist aggression against the south was called off.[49]

The "aggression" however continued with specific U.S. targets. Five days after the meeting with Alexis Johnson, on February 6, nine Americans were killed and five aircraft destroyed when communist guerillas attacked a U.S. army barracks and nearby helicopter base at Pleiku. Within two hours, President Johnson decided to order previously planned reprisal strikes, code named "flaming dart." United States forces continued to bomb North Vietnamese targets for two days. The situation was complicated by the fact that Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin was in Hanoi at the time of the retaliatory strikes, thus the U.S. action might have provoked an international incident and widened the conflict to include the USSR.

The retaliatory raids and the proximity of the Soviet Premier raised alarm in the House of Commons. The British Parliament was less concerned with American losses from guerilla attacks than the prospect of a United States led extension of the fighting into the north that could lead to other superpower involvement. Privately Wilson believed the "revolt" was indigenous to the south. To attack North Vietnamese targets was then an aggressive act on the part of the American government and an embarrassment to Wilson, who had up to this point, supported a

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[49] Etherington-Smith to FO, telegram 1 Feb. 1965, FO371/180539 31744, PRO.

reasonable, restrained and limited U.S. policy. Wilson faced a decision to either stand by his threat to withdraw public support for what appeared to be unreasonable and unrestrained action, or to place greater importance on a good Anglo-American relationship. Wilson chose neither, compromising once again. When his Foreign Secretary faced questions in the House of Commons, Stewart was careful to respond in a way that did not seem critical of the United States in public. Privately Wilson voiced grave concern to the American Charge d'Affaires in London.[50]

Johnson was aware that Wilson's support was fragile. Indeed, before the retaliatory raids began, the White House considered how to deal with the inevitable international reaction. In public statements immediately after the Pleiku incident, U.S. officials were careful to stress that the North Vietnamese forces, backed by Chinese Communists, were behind the surprise attacks on the American bases in the South. They thus justified their retaliation into northern territory and hoped to reduce international recrimination. Despite the official version, some other American officials publicly questioned the United States' apparent state of readiness. Two hours was an incredibly short period of time to plan and launch the sustained attacks on the North. [51]

In Britain, the *London Times* also questioned the administration's version of Pleiku. A report on February 9, headlined "U.S. Decision on Vietnam Not a Hasty

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[50] Secretary of State to Stewart, 11 Feb. 1965 FO371/180594 31787, PRO.

[51] Hughes to Ball, 8 Feb. 1965, FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. II, Vietnam, Jan-June 1965, 199-201. (Hereafter cited as FRUS, Vietnam, Jan.-June, 1965). In a memo from the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hughes) to George Ball, varying estimates of the consequences of U.S. action in Vietnam were assessed, including world reaction. The report recommended that the U.S. stress Hanoi's increased aggression as the reason for the bombing of Northern targets. The report warned that if the reprisal strikes failed to reduce North Vietnamese aggression in the South, "the U.S. would probably find itself progressively isolated" from international support.

One," and sub-headlined: "Evidence of Preparations," cited the unusual presence of U.S. aircraft carriers in the Tonkin Gulf as evidence of planning. On the retaliatory air strikes the report suggested that the "decision was not made in the heat of the moment last Saturday night," but rather the "attacks on American cantonments were a long awaited provocation." Although the *Times* questioned the official version of events, in particular that the attacks were a surprise, the report did applaud the fact that the Americans were prepared for every contingency and did not simply react to events. It went on to say that "it is at least comforting to know that the President did not act hastily." The obvious implication was that the United States was simply waiting for a reason to attack the North and extend the war. Although the Times did not openly support an escalation of the war, it did support a President who had prepared for every contingency.[52]

The *Guardian* took a different view. Escalation of the war into North Vietnam, whether provoked or otherwise, was a cause for concern. An editorial on February 8, criticized the turn of events and suggested that Britain should try to reconvene the Geneva Conference despite the reluctance of the United States to attend. The editor argued that Michael Stewart should "make clear to Washington the defects--obvious almost everywhere outside the capital--in the present U.S. policy, and show how it is leading ever further from the goal it has set itself." The article alluded to public statements made by Johnson and other White House officials that claimed to be seeking a solution to the situation in South Vietnam. If the goal was peace, why were the Americans extending the war into the North?[53]

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[52] "U.S. Decision on Vietnam Not a Hasty One," London Times, 9 Feb. 1965, sec. A2.
[53] "Which Way if Not Geneva?" Manchester Guardian, 9 Feb. 1965, sec. A3.

Some members of the House of Commons expressed similar consternation. Wilson faced emergency questions from all sides of the House. Many Labour party members called for a British initiative toward negotiations. In addition, fifty Labour back-benchers signed a motion requesting a British dissociation from U.S. policy. Many were not among the usual supporters of left-wing *demarches*. The motion represented general alarm at the prospect of supporting a policy of U.S. aggression.[54]

The feeling in Parliament and the press was that the "retaliatory" attacks represented an escalation of the war into the North and a departure from Johnson's previous policy. When on 10, February, the insurgents hit another target with a larger number of American deaths and casualties, Wilson found himself in a difficult position. Both Wilson and Stewart believed it would be easier to carry British public opinion in favor of continued support for the United States as long as the Americans did not appear to be adopting an entirely new policy of aggression without the prospect of negotiations. British opinion was opposed to carrying the war into the North. In addition, the international community was becoming more vocal. Both India and France publicly called for negotiations, and the Soviets agreed to resume their position as co-chair of another Geneva conference.

Wilson was under considerable pressure. Uncertain of how to proceed, he tried to contact Johnson on "twilight," the direct line to the White House. McGeorge Bundy tried to defer the call until the following day but Wilson was insistent. The Prime Minister did not get through to Johnson until 3.15 in the morning on 11 February, London time. Tired and frustrated, he intended to tell Johnson personally that Britain would not support a more aggressive Vietnam policy and subsequent

[54] Shrimsley, *Hundred Days*, 2.

escalation of the war into the North. Wilson later remembered to his surprise, that Johnson "let fly in an outburst of Texan temper," refusing to listen to someone "willing to share advice but not responsibility." Incensed by Wilson's refusal to send British troops to Vietnam, Johnson refused to answer Wilson's questions or allow him to come to Washington for further discussion. Johnson cut short Wilson's arguments and countered that unless he sent British troops, Wilson should mind his own business. He added, "I won't tell you how to run Malaysia, and you don't tell us how to run Vietnam." Johnson made his position clear . Overwhelmed by the forcefulness of the American President, Wilson backed down and promised to continue public support for Johnson's policy, even a policy of escalation. [55]

Johnson was infuriated by Wilson's call. In his own version of the conversation he reminded Wilson that "he [Johnson] was with him all the way in Malaysia with men, money, marbles and chalk." This was the kind of support he wanted from Wilson in Vietnam. When the prime minister offered to come to Washington for further discussion, Johnson replied that he did not see "what was to be gained by flapping around the Atlantic with our coattails flying." asked Wilson if he thought it would be good for the President to "announce to the American press tomorrow that he [Johnson] was going over to London to try to stop the British in Malaysia?" If Wilson wanted to have a say in Vietnam he should send some troops.[56]

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[55] Record of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and President Johnson on 11 Feb.1965 at 3.15 a.m. PREM/692 31820, PRO, and Wilson, *Personal Record*, 80, and the same call as recorded in Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson, Feb. 10, 1965, 10:15 p.m., FRUS, Vietnam Jan.-June, 1965, 229-232.

David Dimbleby and David Reynolds maintain that Johnson was furious with Wilson's failure to send troops to Vietnam. They argue that "Johnson's conception of politics was intensely personal: loyalty was the highest virtue, betrayal the deadliest sin." Wilson's refusal to send British troops was seen as "a dereliction of duty."[57] In Johnson's own memoirs he remarked "I have no doubt....that the British government's general approach to the war...would have been considerably different if a brigade of Her Majesty's forces had been ...in Vietnam." The question of troops created a constant tension between the two leaders and continued to dominate their relationship. Wilson obstinately believed that he could influence Johnson by maintaining his "negative support," while the exact opposite was true. Johnson actively resisted any hint of advice from an ally in name only. [58]

THE SEARCH FOR PEACE

Although Wilson had agreed to continue public support in the early morning call to the White House, Johnson realized that Wilson's personal support would waver further without the possibility of a British led peace initiative. He was concerned about the political ramifications in the United States if the British discontinued their public support for his policy in Vietnam. Johnson was aware that continued support rested largely with British public opinion. That opinion opposed carrying the war into the north and supported the idea of a British led international conference. In order to

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[56] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson, 10 Feb. 1965, 10:15pm (Washington time), FRUS, Vietnam, Jan.-June, 1965. 229-232.

[57] Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, 252.

[58] Lyndon B. Johnson, The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971) 255.

secure the continued support he needed from Wilson, Johnson agreed to negotiations.[59]

Dimbleby and Reynolds maintain that Johnson and others in his administration never saw Wilson as a serious intermediary but rather "tolerated his involvement...somewhat skeptically." A memo from McGeoge Bundy to the President early in June substantiates the view that Wilson irritated Johnson. He was tolerated for his position as head of the British government and the value placed on British support. Bundy wrote:

> On a number of occasions you have showed your skepticism when one or other of us has remarked that the British have been very solid and helpful on Vietnam. And of course you have recollections, which the rest of us only have at second hand, of Harold Wilson's effort to telephone his way into a fancy trip to the White House at just the wrong moment....The support of the U.K. has been of real value internationally--and perhaps of even more value in limiting the howls of our own liberals. It is quite true, of course, that we would get this kind of backing more or less automatically from a Conservative government, but support from Labour is not only harder to get but somewhat more valuable in international terms.[60]

Wilson was useful to Johnson and his advisors but that usefulness was not indispensable. Britain's support did not depend on Wilson but as Bundy pointed out, the fact that Labour traditionally opposed the U.S. presence in Vietnam added value to Wilson's present support. Congressional criticism was silenced to a certain extent by British support, as was condemnation from certain parts of the international community.

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[59] Austemba Washington, to Foreign Office, 11 Feb. 1965, FO371/180594 31787, PRO. This telex is a record of a briefing regarding the U.S. retaliatory attacks and future policy, given to the Australian Embassy in London by McGeorge Bundy.

[60] Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, 252, and McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 3 June, 1965, FRUS, Vietnam Jan.-June, 1965, 716-717.

Wilson was unaware that his Vietnam policy served Johnson and his advisors so well. He thought that the policy would aid a close Anglo-American relationship and create an opportunity for Britain to broker peace in Vietnam. Dimbleby and Reynolds claim that many in Washington thought that Wilson's main aim was to win the Nobel Peace Prize. He never did win the coveted prize but he did attempt a number of peace initiatives once Johnson grudgingly gave him permission to do so.[61]

In the early morning February telephone call with Johnson, Wilson promised not to call a conference without American consent. He was however, anxious to take the initiative and call an international conference before the Soviets did. Wilson envisaged that Britain would resume its co-chair role with the Soviets yet take the credit for calling the Conference. Johnson didn't explicitly tell Wilson that the U.S. government would negotiate, but he agreed that it "might well reach that point." Explicit or not, Wilson took this as consent and began privately looking for ways to bring both sides to the conference table. [62]

Wilson was not the only one concerned about facilitating peace negotiations. In a cable to Stewart, the head of the United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations, Lord Caradon, stated that the Secretary-General of the UN, U Thant, had contacted Ho Chi Minh with the possibility of a UN sponsored peace initiative. Ho Chi Minh was favorable and ready to enter into discussions with the Americans.[63]

At this point, Wilson was still unsure of Johnson's plans, although he hoped they included negotiations with the North Vietnamese leader. To get a sense of

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[61] Dimbleby and Reynolds, *Ocean Apart*, 252.

[62] Record of a Telephone Conversation between Wilson and Johnson, 11 Feb.1965 at 3.15 a.m. PREM13/692 31820, PRO.

[63] Caradon, to Stewart, 13 Feb. 1965, FO371/180641 31820, PRO.

Johnson's immediate plans, Wilson met with David Bruce, the United States Ambassador on 16, February, just three days after Caradon's disclosure. Bruce summarized the American plan as three points. First, the U.S. intended to increase their presence in South Vietnam to assist with "pacification" there. Second, the U.S. forces would continue to bomb northern targets in a sustained program. The United States would report to the UN Security Council and stop the attacks when the aggression against South Vietnam stopped. Third, the American government would take up the question of negotiations with the Secretary General of the UN. Wilson was relieved at the third point. It now appeared clear that negotiations were a part of Johnson's plans.[64]

The following day, Bruce returned with further instructions from the U.S. State Department that appeared to contradict the plans of just twenty four hours earlier. The Navy and Airforce would continue to strike northern targets and step up the "pacification program" in the south by all possible means, including bombing Vietminh enclaves in the southern regions. Wilson immediately realized that there was no provision for a peace initiative. He commented that the United States government appeared to have changed its mind about negotiations. The plan now was to step up military action without a proposal for a political solution. This, for Wilson, was "the pill without the jam." He was disappointed and told Bruce that the new plan made it difficult for his government who was now committed to support the United States "without seeing any light at the end of the tunnel." Bruce sympathized and suggested that the change may have occurred as a result of South Vietnamese

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[64] Record of a Conversation between Wilson and Bruce, 10, Downing Street, 16 Feb. 1965. PREM13/692 31820, PRO.

objections to a political initiative at this time, or, alternatively, the U.S. might want to discuss a preliminary conference with the Secretary General of the UN before making a statement about future negotiations. In any case, Bruce assured the Prime Minister that he would convey to Johnson Wilson's unease at the idea of military action without a plan for a political solution.[65]

Wilson perceived that the U.S. had rejected the idea of a Geneva type conference to settle the Vietnam question. In this way Johnson bypassed one major British objection to troop involvement, its historical role as co-chair of the Geneva Conference of 1954. By advocating private discussions between the Secretary General and the American Ambassador to the UN, Johnson effectively retained the appearance of seeking a political solution to the situation. This effectively killed two political birds with one stone. Negotiations retained British support which in turn maintained Congressional support. In addition, Johnson and his administration engaged support from their domestic audience as official propaganda emphasized that communist China backed North Vietnamese aggression. In this way the situation in Vietnam was portrayed as a Cold War confrontation and U.S. involvement was legitimized in the eyes of the voters. The connection between North Vietnam and China strengthened the "domino theory," prevalent in the United States and made Johnson's policies appear desirable to prevent another "loss" like China. Johnson hoped that his proposed private talks with the UN Secretary would persuade Wilson to send troops to Vietnam. In addition, Johnson hoped he could prevent Wilson from

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[65] Record of a conversation between Wilson and Bruce, 10 Downing Street, 17 Feb. 1965. PREM13/692 31820, PRO.

pursuing a peace initiative that could result in a compromise for the U.S. and open his Administration up to the accusation of being "soft" on Communism.[66]

Wilson was frustrated that Johnson did not want him to resume the role of co-chair of an international conference and was concerned that an escalated attack on North Vietnam would be perceived in Britain and elsewhere as aggression rather than retaliation. This would make the United States the aggressor, damage its international reputation among the developing countries, and make it more difficult for Britain to justify support for U.S. policies in South Vietnam.

Despite the increased personal uneasiness Wilson felt about the strikes and the growing opposition in Parliament, he continued to openly support U.S. actions as a necessary precursor to a negotiated settlement. Behind the scenes, however, the British approached the Russians with regard to their possible future involvement in a peace conference. The British Ambassador in Moscow communicated to the Foreign Office that he believed the Soviets wanted to settle the problem in Vietnam as much as the British themselves did. The situation in Vietnam had, however, heightened tensions between the Chinese and the Soviets. The Chinese publicly condemned the Soviets for not fully supporting the North Vietnamese cause. This made it difficult for the Soviets to enter into open talks with the British, who openly supported the United States. As a result of Chinese criticism, the Soviet newspaper *Izvestya* criticized Wilson and his Foreign Secretary for not heeding the public opinion of their own country that clearly demanded an end to the "dirty war."[67] By refusing to listen to the

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[66] For an in depth discussion of U.S. propaganda during the Vietnam War see Caroline Page, *Official Propaganda*, 1-106.

[67] Trevelyan to FO, 9 March 1965, PREM13/693, PRO.

voice of the people, the report concluded, "British ruling circles are in fact playing into the hands of the American Imperialists." Soviet propaganda therefore depicted the Wilson government as an American lackey. Conversations between the Soviets and the British were therefore unofficial and secret. In addition, the Soviets began making overtures to the French, who openly opposed the American policy in Vietnam. They wanted to bring about a solution to the problem without publicly negotiating with America's ally, Britain. Thus Wilson's policy of nominal support for Johnson's policy in Vietnam inadvertently thwarted his own desire for another Geneva Conference with the original co-chairs. [68]

GROWING DISCONTENT

Wilson faced a barrage of questions from all political parties in the House of Commons after his March 9 statement of continued support for the United States Vietnam policy. He attempted to stave off the criticism that his government had not taken any initiative toward a peaceful settlement in Vietnam and countered these charges with the claim that his government was involved in "diplomatic consultations of a confidential nature." The emphasis of these confidential consultations was to ascertain a basis for future negotiations. It is the view of the British government, Wilson claimed, that talks could only be started when a cessation of hostilities occurred. The Prime Minister expressed the hope that there would be an opportunity

[68] Moscow to Trevelyan, 7 March 1965.

for further discussion with the Soviets during Mr. Gromyko's proposed visit the following week.[69]

Wilson then faced further questions from the House that dealt directly with the British support of U.S. action. Labour member of Parliament Konni Zilliacus, reminded Wilson that less than a year before he had urged the former Conservative Prime Minister not to support American action in North Vietnam. How then did Wilson explain the fact that he now openly supported the extension of the war into the north? Zilliacus went on to emphasize the fact that the majority report of the International Supervisory Commission found that American attacks on North Vietnam constituted a violation of the 1954 Accords, and the American agreement to do nothing by force to upset the Accords. How then, could Britain, as co-chair of the 1954 Conference, support the obvious violation by the United States?

Zillacus voiced Wilson's own personal dilemma. The prime minister had a choice. He could either maintain his personal integrity and withdraw support for U.S. policy and risk Johnson's displeasure, or, he could justify his present policy and risk a backbench revolt. Wilson gambled that Zillacus and his followers wanted to remain in office as much as he did and would not therefore force a direct confrontation over this issue. He insisted in his answer that the change in his personal position occurred as the result of new information. A year ago, Wilson maintained, the fighting in South Vietnam was generally perceived as a spontaneous nationalist uprising. There was now, however, no attempt on the part of the North Vietnamese to deny their

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[69] Wilson, draft text of a statement to House of Commons, 9 March, 1965, PREM13/639, 188, PRO. The file includes a copy of the questions and answers during the debate from House of Commons, *Parliamentary Debates*, 9 March, 1965.

responsibility in the war against South Vietnam. This, according to Wilson, made a big difference in the British analysis of the situation. Although he did not personally wish to see the fighting escalated, Wilson believed that the United States would withdraw when the North ceased their aggressive action on the South. With this answer, Wilson hoped to silence the critics in his party.[70]

The criticism and the debate however, continued. The main problem was the dramatic escalation of U.S. military operations in North Vietnam and the potential threat to world peace. Labour member, Philip Noel-Baker urged the Prime Minister to put pressure on the Americans to cease-fire. Noel-Baker claimed that the vast majority of British people agreed with the Secretary General of the UN that no settlement could come from further fighting. A cease-fire was then urgently required to facilitate peace. Wilson agreed that the situation could easily escalate, but he hesitated to join France, Canada and Russia in their open condemnation of American policy.[71] In fact, Wilson claimed he had every reason to believe that a political solution could be achieved before the conflict widened. In a private consultation with the President, Johnson had personally stated that American troops would be withdrawn in the event that the North Vietnamese withdrew from the South. Wilson assured the House that a political solution was possible and being actively sought. As Wilson himself later said, this statement worked to make his position more palatable to Parliament.[72]

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[70] Ibid., 189.
[71] Ibid., 189-190.
[72] Record of a Conversation Between Wilson and Bruce, 10 Downing Street, 12 March 1965, PREM13/693, PRO.

Within three days of the address to Parliament, Wilson was disturbed by reports from the *Times*' Washington correspondent that indicated a change in U.S. policy. The correspondent claimed that a cessation of North Vietnamese aggression was the prerequisite for negotiation. Wilson was upset at the apparent change in policy not only because it made his address to Parliament look insincere, but also because the Americans had not consulted or informed him. In a conversation with Ambassador Bruce, Wilson expressed his outrage in the strongest terms. He questioned the morality of the American position, claiming that the atmosphere at the United Nations had been "poisoned" by the whole Vietnamese question, and that the "moral authority" of the U.S. had "sharply declined." Furthermore, Wilson told the Ambassador, there was a danger that in the future the voice of the United States would not be heard by the emerging nations. If the Americans did not arrive at a reasonable basis for negotiations soon, there was a chance that they might become morally isolated. Wilson went on to add that if the U.S. continued to bombard the North without a readiness to negotiate, it could lead to the biggest difficulty between Britain and the United States since the Suez crisis. Ambassador Bruce promised to report back to his government.[73]

Wilson was indignant that Johnson had not consulted him about the change in U.S. policy as his meeting with Bruce demonstrated. Despite Johnson's reaction to his "advice" in the February telephone call, he felt that he had a personal relationship with the President and that his support for the United States warranted consultation. After all, Wilson faced considerable opposition to his support for Johnson's policies from within his own party and the House of Commons. Disunity in the Labour party

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[73] Ibid.

would seriously weaken his already precarious majority in Parliament and threaten his own position as leader of the party. In his memoirs, Wilson claims that Johnson did not understand the consequences of a small majority in the British parliamentary system. Unlike the American Presidential elections which kept an administration in office for four years, despite unpopular policies, the British Prime Minister held office only with the majority support of Parliament. Opposition to policies from within the Labour party would cripple Wilson's ability to initiate legislation. As a result, Wilson argued, "a serious parliamentary defeat might mean the end of the Government, or at least an immediate general election."[74] With a majority of three Labour members in the House of Commons, Wilson could not afford to alienate *any* members of his own party with an unpopular Vietnam policy. Any back bench revolt could cause the downfall of his government. The official Labour party policy supported a peaceful settlement and support for the United States as long as there was no extension of the war into the North.[75]

Wilson's political survival in terms of foreign policy relied on accurate information from the White House. It was essential to his own and his government's support of U.S. Vietnam policy that the war not escalate and that American action remained justifiable to the Labour party, Parliament and the general public. Unfortunately, Wilson appeared oblivious of the fact that his relationship with Johnson was far from close. Over the issue of Vietnam, Wilson did not heed the advice of Johnson's close advisor who, after the MLF affair, maintained that "a man

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[74] Wilson, *Personal Record*, 47-48, 66.

[75] National Executive Committee of the Labour Party Statement, 26 May 1965, in the Report of the 64th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Transport House, London, 1965.

in the Prime Minister's position would be extremely ill-advised" to run the risk of trying to" win a victory" over Johnson on any issue because, "the President has plenty of cards to play if this becomes a public contest." Within a few weeks, Vietnam did become a public contest and Wilson got a taste of Johnson's card playing technique.[76]

THE NAPALM AND GAS CONTROVERSY

Wilson continued to try to find a solution but the meeting with Soviet Foreign minister, Gromyko produced no progress on Vietnam. The Soviets rejected the British proposal of February 20, that the two nations issue a joint proposal to the Geneva powers to re-convene an international conference. In addition, reports demonstrated that neither Hanoi nor Peking was interested in negotiations. There were however, two other situations that caused embarrassment to both the Johnson administration and the British government, namely reports from the Associated Press on 23 March, that the U.S. was using non-lethal gas as a weapon in South Vietnam, and, a statement by the United States Ambassador in Saigon that the war would be extended without limit.

On February 26 the *Times's* Washington correspondent argued that if the Americans used their technological advantages extensively against the people of Vietnam, then "the talk of fighting for the minds and souls of the villagers would be

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[76] McGeorge Bundy to David Bruce, 9 Dec. 1964, FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. XIII, 156-158. In this memo, Bundy tells David Bruce to relay the message to Lord Harlech, the British Ambassador, so that he can warn Wilson not to publicly go against Johnson. The memo ends "I shall tell Lord Harlech that the President has shown great restraint in these last days because of his concern to avoid any appearance of running a power play against a weak opponent. But if his generosity is misunderstood, I doubt if it is likely to last."

utter cant."[77] The idea of democratic moral superiority was lost on a civilian population poisoned with gas and burned with napalm. According to Caroline Page, the *Guardian* reinforced this view in a later editorial that observed that although both sides in the war perpetrated "horrors and indignities," still, "technological superiority counts."[78] In other words, American superpower status and military might made any war against a developing country look hideously one-sided, and served to rally popular support for the Vietnamese people, communist or otherwise.

When the news of the use of non-lethal gas in South Vietnam broke, it produced a world-wide barrage of criticism. Although the tactical value of the use of gas was negligible, this apparent technological superiority increased the impression in the British Parliament that the United States was an aggressive "bully." Coupled with the statement by the American ambassador in Saigon, the war had clearly taken a different direction. In Britain, a number of Labour members of parliament urged the Prime Minister to condemn the use of gas and napalm and dissociate his government from U.S. policy. In a letter to Wilson, the petitioners argued that members of the Labour party and those sympathetic to the ideals of the Party simply:

> do not understand the Government's apparent determination to support the Americans in actions in conflict with accepted morality and its inflexible resolution not to say a single word in condemnation of anything the Americans do in this matter, no matter what its folly or what its peril.[79]

The authors claimed that Wilson's active support of U.S. policy placed a great strain on Party loyalty and could be disastrous for the future of the Party and to the present

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[77] "U.S. Turns Down Suggestion of Negotiations." The Times Feb. 26 1965, in Page, *diss.*, 181

[78] "The Long Agony of a People." Ed., The Guardian, 22 March 1965., in Page, *diss.*, 181.

[79] Patrick Noel-Baker et al., letter to Wilson, 22 March 1965, PREM13/693, PRO. See Appendix A for a complete text of the letter.

Government. They begged Wilson to speak out, whatever the difficulties, and condemn the action of the United States.[80]

Before making any public statements, Wilson sent a telegram to Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, who was in Washington at the time. Wilson instructed Stewart to emphasize the strength of feeling in Britain and elsewhere about the use of gas and napalm. Dean Rusk should be left in no doubt about the severity of the problem and the danger of widespread anti-Americanism as the U.S. lost its moral position. Wilson urged Stewart to press for an initiative to reach a peaceful and lasting settlement. The Prime Minister was aware of the fact that Britain was not in a position economically to force the United States to seek peace. However, Wilson felt he had the moral upper hand. He told Stewart:

> Should the President try to link this question with support for the pound I would regard this as most unfortunate and no doubt you will reply appropriately. If the financial weakness we inherited and are in the process of putting right is to be used as a means of forcing us to accept unpalatable policies or developments regardless of our thoughts this will raise very wide questions indeed about Anglo-American relationships.[81]

Wilson maintained his moral stand despite the pressure he felt because of American economic aid.

In Washington, Dean Rusk and Johnson both denied to Stewart that they knew about the use of gas but they agreed that the matter had been handled badly. Rusk told Stewart, however, that when sympathies were expressed for those who suffered from gas there should likewise be understanding for the sufferings of those tortured by the Vietcong. Stewart replied that mere Vietcong misbehavior did not justify United

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Wilson to Stewart, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO.

States action. The world, he added, expected a high standard from the Americans, and measures that could not be justified militarily would be misunderstood the world over.[82]

In a statement to the National Press Club in Washington on 23 March, 1965, Michael Stewart openly criticized the use of gas by the United States.[83] The statement infuriated Johnson who ordered Ambassador Bruce to draft a letter to Wilson,

> expressing the President's indignation over Michael Stewart having answered a question at the National Press Club by replying with a citation from the Declaration of Independence, coupling British objections to the use of gas with a quotation about the 'decent observance of the opinions of mankind.'"[84]

The rebuke was not sent but the episode continued to rankle Johnson long after the rest of his advisors had forgotten .[85]

The same day that Stewart voiced criticism, March 23, Robert McNamara briefed the press about the use of gas in Vietnam. He claimed that it had been "tear gas," similar to that used by the British in Cyprus in 1958. McNamara admitted that three types of gas were used in Vietnam, namely CN, DM, and the more potent CS. He added that Britain led the world in the development of these gases and that Britain had either sold or given CS to a large number of countries which he then listed, including Rhodesia, Sweden, Ghana, Belgium and Trinidad.[86]

Wilson was appalled! The moral advantage he hoped to gain in the situation

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[82] Stewart to Wilson, 23 March1965, PREM13/693, PRO.

[83] A summary of Stewart's remarks appeared in the Washington Post, 24 March, 1965, sec. A2, according to the Editorial Note, FRUS, Vietnam Jan.-June, 1965, 481-482. See also Page, *Official Propaganda*, 117-119 for a discussion of British press coverage.

[84] The incident is mentioned in the above Editorial Note, which cites, Department of State, *Bruce Diaries*: Lot 64 D 327, Jan.-March 1965.

[85] McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 3June, 1965, FRUS, Vietnam Jan.-June, 1965, 716-717.

[86] Stewart to FO, 24 March 1965, PREM13/693, PRO.

backfired badly. McNamara's statement created huge problems for the prime minister who was now placed on the defensive and forced to justify the British use of gas in Cyprus. In the House of Commons debate, the use of gas by the United States in Vietnam was overshadowed by the evidence that the U.K. has used it frequently in the Middle East. [87] The U.S. successfully deflected Parliament's attention from the gas issue and gained a momentary reprieve. It was however, short lived. Pressure to dissociate from U.S. policy in Vietnam continued to mount from the Left wing of the Labour party.

Johnson felt that the American response to the adverse criticism went "reasonably well." He was however, concerned that his administration spent most of its time defending its actions in Vietnam. The gas incident was a case in point. "How did this whole gas incident happen? Was it a Communist plot?" he asked members of the National Security Council. Indeed, the incident was a propaganda gift to the communists. Not only were the British and United States openly critical of each other, the North Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviets all deplored the use of "poison" gas and condemned the U.S. action to the world.[88]

In the midst of the controversy, President Johnson released a statement that declared the United States sought no wider war and would "never be second" in seeking a settlement in Vietnam. Johnson voiced what the British wanted to hear. A copy of the statement furnished by the United States Information Service reached Wilson's desk with a handwritten message from his Foreign Secretary: "Prime

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[87] Summary Notes of the 551st Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, 2 April 1965, FRUS, Vietnam, Jan.-June, 1965, 514-516.

[88] Ibid.

Minister, a pretty good statement." Johnson's words were enough to quiet the furor in Britain for awhile and Wilson took the President at his public word. He strengthened his own position in Parliament after the gas debacle with a public statement that Britain would continue to look for a settlement in Vietnam. By the end of March, plans for a British fact finding peace mission were in place.[89]

THE BRITISH PEACE INITIATIVES

The mission, led by Wilson's former Foreign Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker, was sent to South Vietnam as a special representative of the British government to assess the situation as a preliminary to peace. In his assessment, Walker claimed that morale in the South had improved with the increased bombing but the political situation in Saigon remained precarious. The present South Vietnamese government had, according to several sources, less than a fifty percent chance of survival. The North Vietnamese had a strong body of support in the South and controlled much of the country, especially at night. Walker saw no chance of a military victory for the United States; however, there was evidence of some divisions among the communist forces. These divisions, Walker claimed, might work to the advantage of those seeking a settlement. [90]

Walker recommended that Britain continue support for present American operations as their military effort was the only possible policy at the moment.

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[89] *Johnson's Statement on Vietnam,* USIA, in PREM 13/693, PRO. See Appendix B for a full text of Johnson's Statement.

[90] Patrick Gordon Walker, Report on Southeast Asia, 14 April-4 May1965, PREM13/694, PRO. Gordon-Walker was Labour Foreign Secretary from October, 1964-January, 1965. He was replaced by Michael Stewart.

However, Walker believed that the British should search for a policy that supported the U.S. but was clearly independent. He suggested that the Wilson government stress the differences between the British and American assessment of the situation, namely the division among the communist forces in Vietnam, and emphasize the fragility of the relationship between Peking and Hanoi. Walker urged the British government to indicate the ultimate settlement envisaged and word the policy with this in mind. Finally, Wilson should make clear British opposition to the bombing of Hanoi.[91]

In addition to the fact-finding mission, Wilson met with the French Premier and his ministers to discuss their attempts to establish the basis for peace talks with the Soviets. The French wanted to call a new Geneva conference without any preconditions outlined by the Americans, such as the withdrawal of the Vietcong from the South. President de Gaulle argued that U.S. actions would be unable to bring about anything except death to a lot more people. His fear was that the more the Americans appeared to be engaged against the whole of Asia, the more likely that Asia would combine against the West. De Gaulle hoped the Americans would agree to a new Geneva Conference that would, with the rest of the world, examine the issue of the "neutralization" of Communism in Southeast Asia. The French President claimed that U.S. policy would not change unless world opinion unanimously forced it to change. The only way to peace was to talk, an idea that the Americans resisted. [92]

Wilson's response marked a considerable change in the British position. For

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Record of a conversation between Wilson and De Gaulle, Elysee Palace France, 2 April 1965, PREM13/693, PRO.

the past few months he had advocated a Geneva conference chaired by the British and Soviets. The Americans however, did not support this idea and the Soviets had refused, less than two months ago, to take their former role as co-chair. Wilson now claimed that the 1954 Geneva Conference had raised excessive hopes for a peaceful settlement and should not therefore be pursued as a viable option. He argued that the South Vietnamese government was not particularly democratic and the North Vietnamese government was communist and desired to extend its control over neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Coupled with the fact that the Soviets had refused to take any initiative until the U.S. left Vietnam, and the Americans refused to leave unless North Vietnam ceased to support the guerillas in the South, a Geneva Conference seemed out of the question. Wilson described two present British initiatives designed to bring about a settlement in the area. The first was the Gordon Walker fact finding tour, the second a letter to those nations involved in the dispute to gain an idea of their views on the next step to be taken to restore peace to the area. Wilson maintained that Britain had no fixed views at this stage; whether the solution might be neutrality or a solution similar to that in Korea. As for the attitude of the United States, Wilson said that President Johnson had made it clear that America sought no wider war and had no desire to stay in Vietnam once active North Vietnamese support for the Vietcong ceased.[93]

Wilson hoped that Johnson did not wish to expand the war and that the U.S. would agree to reasonable conditions to begin negotiations. He desired peace in Vietnam for his own domestic political reasons and knew that if Johnson did extend the war, his own present policy and position as party leader would be under attack

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[93] Ibid.

from parliament and the left wing of the Labour party. In the course of the next few months, Wilson and his policy survived, much to the amazement of the Americans. McGeorge Bundy told Johnson, "every experienced observer from David Bruce on down has been astonished by the overall strength and skill of Wilson's defense of our policy in Vietnam and his mastery of his own left wing in the process."[94]

THE BALTIMORE SPEECH

Wilson's hope for peace seemed closer when President Johnson delivered a speech at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, on April 8, 1965, setting out the American policy that he felt would contribute toward peace in Vietnam.[95] The speech, designed to silence the critics and counter rumors that the U.S. intended to step up attacks on North Vietnamese targets, was successful. The British Press interpreted the speech as a positive change in the direction toward peace. A *Daily Telegraph* editorial welcomed Johnson's speech, stating that he had "thrown wide open the door to any sort of talks aimed at a peaceful settlement in Vietnam."[96] The *Financial Times* ran an editorial that referred to Johnson's decision to drop any conditions for peace talks on Vietnam. The editorial stated that the United States "has given its impatient allies proof of its genuine desire to put an end to the war. Mr. Harold Wilson, who lost no time in welcoming the President's initiative, will now be able to face his left-wingers with a clear conscience."[97]

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[94] McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 3 June 1965, FRUS, Vietnam Jan.-June, 1965, 716-717.
[95] See Appendix C for a full text of the speech.
[96] Daily Telegraph, Editorial, 9 April 1965, in Page, *diss.*, 221. See Appendix C for text of Baltimore Speech.
[97] Financial Times, Editorial, 9 March 1965, quoted in Page, *diss.*, 223.

The *Guardian* was more discriminating. Johnson, the editorial claimed, gave as his objective the independence of South Vietnam, thereby ruling out reunification. The editorial claimed that this was a change from earlier speeches in which Johnson invoked the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Perhaps, the editor sarcastically argued, Johnson has read them now. They specifically state that the seventeenth parallel "must not be taken as a political or territorial boundary." The editorial maintains that Johnson "cannot, by insisting that South Vietnam is an independent nation, beg one of the main questions and then claim to be imposing no conditions."[98]

The *Guardian* assessment of the speech was more accurate, for it recognized that Johnson claimed to be ready for unconditional *discussions* with no mention of peace *negotiations*. The difference between the meaning of the two words was essential to the future of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Wilson however, interpreted the speech as a genuine desire for peace talks. As a result, Wilson met with U Thant at the United Nations Secretariat on 14 April, to discuss his views as to a meaningful settlement in Southeast Asia. The Secretary General was also encouraged by the Baltimore speech and the apparent change in the US position. He proposed sending a UN representative to the area in order to explore the possibilities of further economic development as well as political possibilities. Meanwhile, U Thant claimed it was essential to clarify the real U.S. objectives in the area.[99]

The following day Wilson met with Johnson at the White House. George Ball told Johnson that Wilson wanted to talk about two subjects: the British economic

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[98] Guardian, Editorial, 9 March 1965.

[99] Record of a discussion between Wilson and U Thant in the United Nations Secretariat, 14 April 1965, PREM13/694, PRO.

situation and Vietnam. Ball suggested that the President "indicate appreciation for the support the Prime Minister has given us on Vietnam." He apparently did. Wilson described the luncheon meeting as "cordial" and expressed the transformation that had occurred in world and British opinion since the Baltimore speech. America, Wilson claimed, had regained her moral position in the world through the speech. Johnson expressed his gratitude for the position Britain had taken on Vietnam. After some further discussion, Wilson left with the distinct impression that Johnson approved of a "Korean type" settlement for Vietnam. With this in mind, Wilson returned to Britain confident that a solution could be found that would satisfy the major powers involved in the dispute. [100]

Notably absent from the discussions about a settlement in early April 1965 was recourse to public opinion in Vietnam itself. The views of the South were garnered by interested parties ostensibly from the bureaucrats and military leaders, neither of whom had united sufficiently to produce a semblance of political order or harmony. Both groups relied heavily on the American presence to retain power, and many individuals were openly corrupt. The ordinary villagers of the south, like the majority of people everywhere, wished simply to grow their crops and watch their children grow. In the north, the main political objective was to retain the integrity of the nation, north and south. The northern leaders were prepared to sacrifice

[100] Record of a conversation between Wilson and Johnson at the White House, 15 April 1965, PREM13/532, PRO. See also Wilson, *Personal Record*, 94-96, and Editorial Note, FRUS, Vietnam Jan.-June 1965, 557, for George Ball's comments.

everything to obtain this end.[101] With the possible exception of North Korea, this objective was underestimated by every country interested in establishing peace in Vietnam. A "Korean type" solution might sound feasible to the United Kingdom or the United States, but it had been precisely the division of the nation that had precipitated the war. In his desire for a negotiated solution, Wilson ignored the main issue, which was not Anglo-American relations, but rather an emerging nation, forced into an ideological impasse with the foremost superpower of the twentieth century.

HOPE FOR PEACE

The hope for peace in Vietnam emerged as plans to increase troop deployment were underway. Early in May, the United States decided to send a further 9,000 troops to South Vietnam. In addition, Australia prepared to send a battalion and New Zealand agreed to send a contingent of non-combat soldiers. As members of SEATO, Australian and New Zealand troops were already deployed in Malaysia, as were American troops. At a meeting in London with representatives from the three countries, the British foreign secretary faced the potential threat that the three nations would pull their troops out of Malaysia, leaving the British to shoulder most of the burden there. The Australian foreign minister saw the difficulties in Southeast Asia as one problem, however, Vietnam was the area of immediate concern to the Australian government. Malaysia was not less important, but Vietnam, according to the

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[101] The limited scope of this paper cannot do justice to real desires of the Vietnamese people or their revolutionary leaders. See Truong Nhu Tang , A Vietcong Memoir (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), also Tran Van Tra, "The War That Should Not Have Been," and Luu Doan Huynh, "The American War in Vietnamese Memory," TheVietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives Eds. J.S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, (Armonk New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

Australians was likely to be more acutely dangerous in the next few months. All those present agreed that talks should take place, but in order to negotiate a settlement from a strong position, the Australians believed that more force and military presence was needed in South Vietnam. The Australian government had been perturbed by the apparent differences in policy between Washington and London. According to Australian Foreign Minister, Paul Hasluck, Australia wanted to avoid was the need to choose sides between Britain and the United States. These anxieties, he explained, had been dispelled by the recent harmony of the policies.[102]

The pressure on the British government to send troops to Vietnam was further increased when George Ball expressed the American view that Malaysia and the entire Indonesian peninsula would fall to communism if Vietnam did. Conversely, a victory in Vietnam would ensure the safety of the other nations more directly aligned to British interests. The British were more dubious about the "domino theory." Nevertheless, Michael Stewart, the British Foreign Secretary, agreed that Malaysia and Vietnam were interrelated but maintained that Britain's priority was in Malaysia. He further argued that to abandon Malaysia in favor of Vietnam would place Australia and New Zealand at risk. It was essential to maintain a base there. Mr. Stewart once again reiterated Britain's position as co-chair of the Geneva conference and the usefulness of this position for the future discussions. Any overt military action on the part of Britain would jeopardize this role. Although Britain did not want the U.S. to withdraw from Vietnam, the British government had a number of

[102] Record of a dinner conversation at 1, Carlton Gardens, 2 May 1965, PREM13/694, PRO. Those present at the dinner included George Ball, David Bruce, Australian Foreign Minister Paul Hasluck, New Zealand Minister of Defense D.J. Eyre, Michael Stewart and Edward Peck of the Foreign Office.

misgivings about the future. For example, would military action on North Vietnam produce the necessary political result? The British were unsure that Vietcong activity was solely directed from the North. Would a bombardment of the North affect the organization of the Vietcong in the South? And finally, when the time came for discussions, what would be the future for South Vietnam?[103]

George Ball maintained that only twenty-four percent of the population was under Vietcong control, although the guerrillas moved freely in about three quarters of the South. After careful examination of the situation, the United States government had concluded that the Vietcong received their main control and thrust from the North. Washington was convinced that when Hanoi decided that the game was not worth it and ceased to support the guerrillas in the South, the military problem in South Vietnam would be quite manageable. Once weapons and infiltration from the North stopped, a suitable government could be established in South Vietnam. Ball added that the "former rebellion in Malaysia" had cleared itself up in time, which would also happen in Vietnam. Basically, the United States believed that the only way that communist expansion could be stopped would be to show Hanoi and Peking that it did not pay.[104]

The American position thus had not changed, despite Johnson's promises in the Baltimore speech. A settlement would be possible only when the communist forces of the North were pounded into submission and forced back behind the seventeenth parallel. Although the British government agreed that South Vietnam and the U.S. needed a strong position to negotiate from, they were still skeptical

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[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.

about the American assessment of the source of the revolt. If the revolt was indigenous to the South as well as the North, then the American tactics would not be effective. The simplistic view propounded by Ball did not take into account the possibility that this was a civil war that could not be settled by an external force.

A few weeks later, the Soviet premier announced full support for North Vietnam. Domestically, this was a propaganda coup for the Johnson administration. The British, however, saw the Soviet announcement as a propaganda move to stave off criticism from China, which maintained that the Soviets did not support their communist brothers. The Soviets, like the British, wanted a settlement in Vietnam to prevent a direct confrontation with the U.S. They also wanted to save face and counter the charge that the revisionists were "soft on imperialism." Ironically, the rationale behind Johnson's policies in Vietnam was similar though ideologically opposite. He did not want to appear "soft on communism." [105]

The new situation presented a problem for Wilson's ambition to attain a settlement through a Geneva type conference. The Soviets now explicitly supported the North Vietnamese and could not be an impartial co-chair. In addition, the events in Vietnam had a wide international following, especially in the emerging nations. British Commonwealth leaders were concerned that peace could not be adequately achieved in Vietnam by the "white-man's club." The conflict in Vietnam was exacerbated by foreign troops, especially those that represented the old world order. Wilson was under considerable pressure from these leaders to take a moral stand and oppose U.S. policy. Instead, Wilson proposed a Commonwealth Peace Mission,

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[105] Moscow telegram to FO, 9 May 1965, PREM 13/694, PRO. The telegram outlines the gist of a statement made by Brezhnev announcing Soviet support of the National Liberation Front.

comprised of a number of prime ministers and headed by himself, to undertake an initiative for peace.[106]

Johnson viewed the Commonwealth Mission as an "imaginative" proposal and he promised to read the resultant initiative. By imaginative Johnson meant that this new idea would silence his own domestic Liberals. The mission, headed by Wilson, was excellent propaganda for the Americans as it gave the appearance of a respectable move toward peace. At the same time, Johnson informed Wilson of the U.S. plans to step up air and ground bombardment and increase American troops to 100,000 in the next month following the increase in Vietcong activity in the South. The renewed bombing raids were planned for the following day.[107]

With the full knowledge of the United States intention to bomb the following day, Wilson proposed to McGeorge Bundy that he would interrupt Parliamentary debate with the news of the initiative. If the bombing had just taken place, it could, Wilson argued, be indicated to the press that the initiative had come to late too stop the bombing but it was an indication of the urgent need for some step to stop the fighting.[108]

One of the prime values of the Commonwealth Mission and perhaps the real motive behind Wilson's "imaginative proposal" was to alleviate pressures at the forthcoming Commonwealth Conference in June, and silence his domestic critics.[109] In Britain, June 30 had been designated "Vietnam Day" by the broad based British Council for Peace in Vietnam, headed by Lord Brockway. The Council planned to

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[106] Meeting with U Thant, 14 April 1965,PREM 13/532, PRO.
[107] McGeorge Bundy to Wilson, telegram, 16 June 1965, PREM 13/695, PRO.
[108] Wilson to McGeorge Bundy, 16 June 1965, PREM 13/695, PRO.

send a petition to the House of Commons on that day, organize a national lobby and teach-in, followed by a demonstration in the Central Hall.[110] There was a certain degree of optimism that the Commonwealth Mission could achieve something that Britain alone could not. Wilson argued that the "Commonwealth represented a tremendous variety of views on the Vietnam problem." In that respect it was "representative of world opinion," and this, for Wilson, was its source of strength.[111]

Unfortunately, its source of weakness was the presence of Wilson as the leader of the Mission. The North Vietnamese ambassador refused to see the Commonwealth Mission representatives precisely because Wilson was a member of it and had consistently supported the American position. The Ambassador added that the North Vietnamese people would not be able to regard as impartial a mission sponsored by the British government and headed by the British Prime Minister.[112] At the same time, the evidence in Washington suggested that the United States was not prepared to seek peace on any terms but its own. The objectives of the Americans and the North Vietnamese were diametrically opposed. The only chance of a settlement was for one side to back down completely. The North refused to stop fighting until the nation was unified, and the U.S. refused to leave until an independent South Vietnam was secured. In any case, the futility of the peace initiative became apparent a week later. Ironically, the communists once again aided the United States plan to

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[109] Richard Crossman, The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister. Volume one, Minister of Housing 1964-1966, (London: Hamish Hamilton & Jonathan Cape, 1975), in Page, *diss.*, 265.

[110] Brockway, to Wilson, 29 June 1965, PREM 13/468, PRO.

escalate the war to force North Vietnam to settle for peace on Johnson's terms when they rejected the peace mission.

The Commonwealth leaders made another attempt in mid July but with a similar result. As the month wore on American plans to escalate the war surfaced again. When Johnson made the official announcement that he would send an additional 50,000 troops to Vietnam and increase the draft on July 28, it came as no surprise. It did, however, heighten the differences in opinion and fuel the debate in Britain. Page argues that the Wilson government's strong support of United States policy meant that Britain appeared to support the escalation. At first, Wilson's peace initiatives were widely supported by the British public. This eased the domestic pressure on the government, but when the moves failed and escalation followed, Wilson faced more opposition to his support of Johnson's policy from within his own party and the domestic audience.[113]

CONCLUSION

Wilson's Labour government gained power in Britain at a crucial period when Johnson's plans to escalate the war into North Vietnam were in draft form only. The change from a Conservative to a Labour government in late 1964, came at a critical time and could have facilitated a change in British foreign policy. Instead, Wilson chose to continue his predecessor's policy and publicly support the U.S. in South Vietnam. The fact that Wilson and the Labour party had earlier opposed the war in

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[111] Record of a conversation between Wilson and Representatives of the United Arab Republic National Assembly, 10 Downing Street, 28 June 1965. PREM 13/695, PRO.

[112] Trevelyan to FO, 29 June 1965, PREM 13/695, PRO.

[113] Page, *diss*. 269.

Vietnam strengthened the appearance of the nominal support in 1965. It was at this critical juncture, before escalation, that a change in British policy could have impacted world opinion and Johnson's policy.

Wilson's failure to change the direction of British policy in 1965, was due in part to the fact that Vietnam embodied issues that involved not only the Anglo-American relationship, but also the Cold War, and Britain's new position on the world stage. Britain's new position was one of economic dependence on the United States. It was this dependency that directed Wilson's policy toward Vietnam and prevented Britain from pursuing an independent foreign policy. Ken Coates, a Labour party member and contemporary critic of the Wilson government, places the blame for Wilson's continued public support for United States actions in Vietnam on economics and the salvation of the pound. He claims Wilson was unable to follow his earlier ideological stand and oppose the U.S. presence and escalation of the war because he feared the loss of financial aid. [114] Ironically, this was the same criticism that had been leveled at the former Conservative government by Labour party critics. Vietnam and Wilson's support for Johnson's policy demonstrated not only that Labour's foreign policy was the same as their political opponents, but also that the new world order was one in which Britain could not pursue a foreign policy independent of the United States.

In an interview with Caroline Page in 1981, Wilson claimed that his "negative support" was an attempt to retain an influence over the situation. He claimed that the moment his government had withdrawn even this support, the British would "have

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[114] Coates, *Crisis*, 124.

had no influence whatsoever."[115] Wilson hoped to restrain Johnson and influence the United States toward a peaceful solution to the situation in Vietnam. Ironically, it was Wilson's Vietnam policy that thwarted any British peace initiatives and clearly illustrated the inability of Britain to exert any influence over United States policy in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese would not accept Wilson as a mediator because of his support for the United States, and Johnson would not listen to advice from the British who were unwilling to get involved militarily. As a result of Wilson's policy, the British government appeared to passively accept all U.S. actions and Britain's peace-maker role was discredited. Had Wilson publicly opposed Johnson's policy his peace initiatives may have succeeded.

Ironically, Wilson's peace initiatives aided Johnson's plans to escalate the war. They gave the impression that the United States was actively searching for peace. This distracted Congress and the world from what was really happening.

Wilson's public support of the United States policy in Vietnam did not bring about the peaceful settlement that he desired but it did influence Johnson's policy in an unintended way. To secure the support of Congress and the domestic audience, Johnson needed British support to give an international foundation to the war and silence critics at home. Wilson's policy of public support inadvertently did this despite the fact that it did not include concrete aid. Wilson threatened to withdraw this support if the United States extended the war into the North. Although the threat proved to be empty, in order to retain British support, Johnson was forced to proceed slowly with the build up of troops. In this sense, Wilson's policy covertly affected the U.S. policymakers and may have prevented the United States from a commitment of

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[115] Page, *Official Propaganda*, 109.

total war that many strategists believe could have "won" the war. More importantly however, is the fact that Wilson did publicly continue support for Johnson's policy at a critical period of the war. This gave the impression of international support and contributed to the expansion of the war in July, 1965.

Vietnam was a war for self determination that evolved into a potential superpower confrontation at the height of the Cold War. By publicly supporting the United States, Wilson contributed to the Cold War tensions in Southeast Asia. He also gave credence to the American view that every war of independence was a battle between monolithic communism and the "free world," a view that led to later U.S. intervention in Africa, Central and South America.

House of Commons,

London, S.W.1

22nd March 1965.

Appendix A

The Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson, M.P.
House of Commons,
Westminster, S. W.1.

Dear Harold,

A number of us have combined to send the following cablegram to Michael Stewart in Washington, with copies to U Thant and Lord Caradon:-

"That this House condemns the use of Napalm and of gas by United States forces in Vietnam; and, in view of the statement by the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon that there is no limit to the potential increase of the war in Vietnam, calls on H.M.G. to dissociate Great Britain from these actions and views, in order to be able more effectively to mediate in this conflict."

We regard the present situation, certainly as it has now developed, as appalling. There is little doubt, and many of us have direct and complete evidence of it, that the Party as a whole and many many people who are not members but who are in general sympathy with the Party simply do not understand the Government's apparent determination to support the Americans in actions in conflict with accepted morality and its inflexible resolution not to say a single word in condemnation of anything the Americans do in this matter, no matter what its folly or what its peril.

Many of us, and of them, are finding this acceptance of American policy and active encouragement of it in official statements a great strain on our loyalty to the Government and fear that the disillusionment with Labour Party ideas and ideals which is its inevitable consequence may be quite disastrous to the Party's future and to the Government now.

We therefore appeal to you to speak out. We are sure that you cannot approve the matters which we condemn in our cable. Whatever the difficulties, we beg you to make this clear.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Driberg
Sydney Silverman
John Mendelson
Michael Foot
Eric Heffer
Tom Pack

Appendix B

Friday, March 26, 1965.

file

UNITED STATES INFORMATION SERVICE. AMERICAN EMBASSY. LONDON

Prime Minister.

JOHNSON STATEMENT ON VIETNAM

A pretty good statement

Following is the text of a statement by President Johnson yesterday, released in Washington after a meeting with his Cabinet.

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1. It is important for us all to keep a cool and clear view of the situation in Vietnam.

2. The central cause of the danger there is aggression by Communists against a brave and independent people. There are other difficulties in Vietnam, of course, but if that aggression is stopped, the people and Government of South Vietnam will be free to settle their own future, and the need for supporting American military action there will end.

3. The people who are suffering from this Communist aggression are Vietnamese. This is no struggle of white men against Asians It is aggression by Communist totalitarians against their independent neighbours. The main burden of resistance has fallen on the people and soldiers of South Vietnam. We Americans have lost hundreds of our own men there, and we mourn them. But the free Vietnamese have lost tens of thousands, and the aggressors and their dupes have lost still more. These are the bloody costs of the conspiracy directed from the North. This is what has to be stopped.

4. The United States still seeks no wider war. We threaten no regime and covet no territory We have worked and will continue to work for a reduction of tensions, on the great stage of the world. But the aggression from the North must be stopped That is the road to peace in South-East Asia.

5. The United States looks forward to the day when the people and governments of all South-East Asia may be free from terror, subversion, and assassination -- when they will need not military support and assistance against aggression, but only economic and social co-operation for progress in peace. Even now, in Vietnam and elsewhere, there are major programmes of development which have the co-operation and support of the United States. Wider and bolder programmes can be expected in the future from Asian leaders and Asian councils -- and in such programmes we would want to help. This is the proper business of our future co-operation.

6 The United States will never be second in seeking a settlement in Vietnam that is based on an end of Communist aggression. As I have said in every part of the Union, I am ready to go anywhere at any time, and meet with anyone whenever there is promise of progress toward an honourable peace. We have said many times -- to all who are interested in our principles for honourable negotiation -- that we seek no more than a return to the essentials of the agreements of 1954 -- a reliable arrangement to guarantee the independence and security of all in South-East Asia At present the Communist aggressors have given no sign of any willingness to move in this direction, but as they recognise the costs of their present course, and their own true interest in peace, there may come a change -- if we all remain united.

7. Meanwhile, as I said last year and again last week, "it is and it will remain the policy of the United States to furnish assistance to support South Vietnam for as long as is required to bring Communist aggression and terrorism under control." The military actions of the United States will be such, and only such, as serve that purpose -- at the lowest possible cost in human life to our allies, to our own men, and to our adversaries, too.

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Appendix C

Text: President Johnson's Remarks at Johns Hopkins University Baltimore, April 1965.

My Fellow Americans:

Last week seventeen nations sent their views to some dozen countries having interest in South-East Asia. We are joining these seventeen countries by stating our American policy which we believe will contribute to peace in this area.

Tonight I want to review once again with my own people the views of your Government.

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

These are the principles for which our own ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight in the jungles of Vietnam.

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

Why must we take this painful road?

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

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

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

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

The nature of the conflict

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

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

Of course, some of the people of South Vietnam are participating in attacks on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from North to South.

This support is the heartbreak of war.

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

The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the face of an old enemy. It is an attack upon one country by another. And the object of that attack is a friend to which we are pledged.

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

Why we are in Vietnam

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in Vietnam?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our Objectives in Vietnam

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

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

In recent months, attacks on South Vietnam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary to increase our response and make attacks by air. this is not a change of

purpose. It is a change in what we believe that purpose requires. We do this in order to slow down aggression.

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

And we do this to convince the leaders of North Vietnam--and all who seek to share their conquest--of a simple fact.

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

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

We hope that peace will come swiftly. But that is in the hands of others beside ourselves. And we must be prepared for a long and continued conflict. It will require patience as well as bravery--the will to endure as well as the will to resist.

I wish it were possible to convince others with words of what we now find it necessary to say with guns and planes: armed hostility is futile--our resources are equal to any challenge--because we fight for values and a principle, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and determination are unending.

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

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

These are the essentials of any final settlement in Vietnam.

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

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

And until that bright and necessary day of peace we will try to keep conflict from spreading. We have no desire to see thousands die in battle--Asians or Americans. We have no desire to devastate that which the people of North Vietnam built with toil and sacrifice. We will use our power with restraint and with all the wisdom we can command. But we will use it.

This war, like most wars, is filled with terrible irony. For what do the people of north Vietnam want? They want what their neighbors also desire: food for their hunger--health for their bodies and a chance to learn--progress for their country, and an end to the bondage of material misery. And they would find all these things far more readily in peaceful association with others than in the endless course of battle.

These countries of South East Asia are homes for millions of impoverished people. each day these people rise at dawn and struggle through weary hours to wrestle existence from the soil. They are often wracked by disease, plagued by hunger, and death comes early at the age of 40.

Stability and peace do not come easily in such a land. Neither independence nor human dignity will be won by arms alone. It also requires the works of peace.

The American people have helped generously in these works.

Now there must be a much more massive effort to improve the life of man in the conflict-torn corner of the world.

A co-operative Effort for Development

The first step is for the countries of South East Asia to associate themselves in a greatly expanded co-operative effort for development. We would hope that North Vietnam will take its place in the common effort just as soon as peaceful co-operation is possible.

The United Nations is already actively engaged in development in this area. I would hope that the Secretary General of the UN could use the prestige of his great office--and his deep knowledge of Asia--to initiate, as soon as possible, with the countries of the area, a plan for co-operation in increased development.

For our part I will ask Congress to join in a billion dollar American investment in this effort when it is underway.

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

The task is nothing less than to enrich the hopes and existence of more than a hundred million people. And there is much to be done.

The vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA.

The wonders of modern medicine can be spread through villages where thousands die for lack of care.

Schools can be established to train people in the skills needed to manage the process of development.

And these objectives, and more, are within the reach of a co-operative and determined effort.

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

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

In areas still ripped by conflict, development will not be easy. Peace will be necessary for final success. But we cannot wait for peace to begin the job.

The dream of World Order

This will be a disorderly planet for a long time. In Asia, as elsewhere, The forces of the modern world are shaking old ways and uprooting ancient civilizations. There will be turbulence and struggle and even violence. Great social change--as we see in our own country-does not always come without conflict.

We must also expect that nations will on occasion be in dispute with us. It may be because we are rich, or powerful--or because we have made mistakes--or because they

honestly fear our intentions. However, no nation need ever fear that we desire their land, or to impose our will, or to dictate their institutions.

But we will always oppose the effort of one nation to conquer another. We will do this because our own security is at stake.

But there is more to it than that. For our generation has a dream. It is a very old dream. But we have the power and the opportunity to make it real.

For centuries nations have struggled among each other. But we dream of a world where disputes are settled by law and reason. And we will try to make it so.

For most of history men have hated and killed one another in battle. But we dream of an end to war. And we will try to make it so.

For all existence most men have lived in poverty, threatened by hunger. But we dream of a world where all are fed and charged with hope. And we will help make it so.

The ordinary men and women of North Vietnam and South Vietnam--of China and India--or Russia and America--are brave people. They are filled with the same proportions of hate and fear, of love and hope. Most of them want the same things for themselves and their families. Most of them do not want to see their sons die in battle, or see the homes of others destroyed.

This can be their world yet. Man now has the knowledge--always before denied--to make this planet serve the real needs of the people who live on it.

I know this will not be easy. I know how difficult it is for reason to guide passion and love to master hate. The complexities of this world do not bow easily to pure and consistent answers.

But the simple truths are there just the same. We must all try to follow them as best we can.

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

A dam built across a great river is impressive.

In the countryside where I was born, I have seen the night illuminated, the kitchens warmed and the homes heated, where once the cheerless night and the ceaseless cold held away. And all this happened because electricity came to our town along the humming wires of the rural electrification administration.

A rich harvest in a hungry land is impressive.

The sight of healthy children in a classroom is impressive.

These--not nightly arms--are the achievements which the American nation believes to be impressive.

And--if we are steadfast--the time may come when all other nations find it so.

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

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

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

We will choose life. And so doing will prevail over our enemies within man, and over the natural enemies of all mankind.

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