

# Kennedy and Vietnam: The September 1963 Interviews

Topic: Vietnam

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: US History after World War II

Time Required: 1 class period

## Goals/Rationale

During the spring and summer of 1963, Americans were seeing images on television and in the newspapers of Buddhists protesting the harsh treatment they were receiving under the Diem government of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government's actions made it more difficult for the Kennedy Administration to continue its strong support of President Diem. The Kennedy Administration was in a tenuous position, trying to contain communism in Southeast Asia, but supporting an anti-Communist government that was not popular with a large number of its citizens and was guilty of acts objectionable to the American public. In this lesson, students will consider the language a president might use in trying to create the right balance in tone for both American and foreign audiences when discussing US involvement in other parts of the world.

**Essential Question:** How might a president address both domestic and foreign audiences in discussing a difficult situation abroad?

## Objectives

Students will:

- analyze primary sources.
- evaluate the “domino theory” from the perspective of Americans living in 1963.
- consider how President Kennedy addressed multiple audiences, both foreign and domestic, when discussing the difficult situation in South Vietnam in September 1963.

## Historical Background and Context

After World War II, the French tried to re-establish their colonial control over Vietnam, the most strategic of the three states comprising the former Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos). Following the defeat of the French, Vietnam was partitioned by the Geneva Accord of 1954 into Communist North Vietnam and non-Communist South Vietnam, which was divided on religious and political lines. The United States supported a military government in the South and the decision of its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, to prevent free elections which might result in the unification of the country under the control of the Communists. In an effort to take over South Vietnam, the Communist North supported attacks by guerrilla forces on the South. The Geneva Accords quickly began to crumble.

American foreign policy after World War II had been based on the goal of containing Communism and the assumptions of the so-called “domino theory”—that if one country fell to

Communism, the surrounding countries would fall, like dominoes. The Eisenhower administration was concerned that if Vietnam fell under Communist control, other Southeast Asian and Pacific nations, including even the Philippines, would fall one by one. In response to that threat, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in 1955 to prevent Communist expansion. President Eisenhower sent some 700 military personnel as well military and economic aid to the government of South Vietnam. This effort was foundering when John F. Kennedy became president.

In May 1961, JFK authorized sending an additional 500 Special Forces troops and military advisors to assist the pro-Western government of South Vietnam. By the end of 1962, there were approximately 11,000 military advisors in South Vietnam.

Internal corruption, divisiveness, and mounting successes by the Vietcong (Vietnamese Communists) guerrillas weakened the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. In the spring of 1963, South Vietnamese forces suppressed Buddhist religious leaders and followers, which led to a political crisis for the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

The suppression of Buddhists in South Vietnam became known as the "Buddhist crisis." President Ngo Dinh Diem did little to ease the tensions, though he later promised reforms. Many people suspected that his brother and closest advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was the actual decision maker in the Saigon government and the person behind the Buddhist suppression.

The Buddhist demonstrations continued throughout the spring and summer. When a Buddhist monk publicly set himself on fire in June, the photograph of the event made news around the world.

President Kennedy tried to impress upon President Diem the need for major government reforms in Saigon, but Diem ignored the warnings. In August, Diem declared martial law and his forces raided the pagodas of the Buddhist group behind the protests. Soon after, South Vietnamese military officers contacted US government representatives and inquired about what a US response would be to a military coup in Saigon.

On August 24, 1963, Cable 243 was sent to the US Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. and set the course for US support for a military coup. The cable stated that Diem needed to remove his brother from power and if he did not, "then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism." After the cable was sent, President Kennedy and his advisors met several times to discuss the potential consequences of a coup in Vietnam and how the United States should react. The tape recorded meetings reveal President Kennedy's reservations about US support for a military coup in South Vietnam. A week after Cable 243 was sent, the South Vietnamese generals told Lodge that they were not ready to stage a coup.

In early September, President Kennedy granted two television interviews. On September 2nd, he was interviewed by Walter Cronkite on the CBS network and on September 9th he was interviewed by David Brinkley and Chet Huntley on the NBC network. In both of these interviews, he was asked about South Vietnam. President Kennedy's intended audience for his remarks was both US and foreign. The transcript of the Cronkite interview was sent to Ambassador Lodge with a note that it represented "the official US public position."

A few weeks later, President Kennedy sent Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor to South Vietnam to provide their assessment of the situation. In their public report, they noted progress on the military front but difficulties with the political situation. They commented that by the end of 1963, “the US program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 US military personnel assigned to South Viet-Nam can be withdrawn.”

On November 1, 1963, the South Vietnamese government was overthrown. President Diem, refusing an American offer of safety contingent upon his resignation, was assassinated. In the final weeks of his life, Kennedy wrestled with the need to decide the future of the United States’ commitment in Vietnam. There were approximately 16,000 military advisors in South Vietnam. Whether or not Kennedy would have increased military involvement in Vietnam or negotiated a withdrawal of military personnel still remains a hotly debated topic among historians and officials who served in the administrations of President Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson.

## Materials

- *Historical Briefings: JFK, the Cold War, and Vietnam*
- transcript excerpt of the September 2, 1963 interview with Walter Cronkite, CBS News
- transcript excerpt of the September 9, 1963 interview with David Brinkley and Chet Huntley, NBC News
- Note-taking handout

## Procedure

1. Have students read *Historical Briefings: JFK, the Cold War, and Vietnam* and answer the following questions:
  - What was the Cold War? When did it begin and what forms did it take?
  - How and when did the Korean War begin? What forces were fighting?
  - How did the conflict in Vietnam become part of the Cold War?
  - Why did Eisenhower send military personnel to South Vietnam beginning in 1955?
  - What was the Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam and how did the Kennedy Administration respond to it?
2. Provide students with excerpts from President Kennedy’s televised September 2, 1963 interview with Walter Cronkite (CBS) and his September 9, 1963 interview with David Brinkley and Chet Huntley (NBC) regarding South Vietnam.
3. Divide students into groups. Assign them the role of newspaper reporters writing an analysis of these TV interviews for their papers. They should consider the following questions, and they must support their analysis with specific quotes. Provide them with the Note-taking handout to help them take notes.
  - How might these interview be interpreted by:
    - a. the American public?
    - b. President Diem?
    - c. South Vietnamese generals?

- Based on these interpretations, what three main points would you make about US policy towards South Vietnam as of September 9, 1963?
  - What is your headline for your newspaper column? Why?
4. Once each group has finished, as a class have students compare their headlines and analyses.

### Assessment

For homework, have students write out their newspaper columns.

### Extension

Provide students with the State Department's *American Opinion Summary* dated September 10, 1963 which summarized opinions from various American newspapers on US policy in Vietnam. In what ways did news outlets react positively or negatively to JFK's interviews?

# Historical Briefings: JFK, the Cold War, and Vietnam

By the education staff at the Kennedy Library

## The Cold War Begins

After World War II, the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its satellite states began a decades-long struggle for supremacy known as the Cold War. Soldiers of the Soviet Union and the United States did not do battle directly during the Cold War. But the two superpowers continually antagonized each other through political maneuvering, military coalitions, espionage, propaganda, arms buildups, economic aid, and proxy wars between other nations.

The Soviet Union and the United States had fought as allies against Nazi Germany during World War II. But the alliance began to crumble as soon as the war in Europe ended in May 1945. Tensions were apparent in July during the Potsdam Conference, where the victorious Allies negotiated the joint occupation of Germany.

The Soviet Union was determined to have a buffer zone between its borders and Western Europe. It set up pro-communist regimes in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania, and eventually in East Germany.

As the Soviets tightened their grip on Eastern Europe, the United States embarked on a policy of containment to prevent the spread of Soviet and communist influence in Western European nations such as France, Italy, and Greece.

During the 1940s, the United States reversed its traditional reluctance to become involved in European affairs. The Truman Doctrine (1947) pledged aid to governments threatened by communist subversion. The Marshall Plan (1947) provided billions of dollars in economic assistance to eliminate the political instability that could open the way for communist takeovers of democratically elected governments.

France, England, and the United States administered sectors of the city of Berlin, deep inside communist East Germany. When the Soviets cut off all road and rail traffic to the city in 1948, the United States and Great Britain responded with a massive airlift that supplied the besieged city for 231 days until the blockade was lifted. In 1949, the United States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the first mutual security and military alliance in American history. The establishment of NATO also spurred the Soviet Union to create an alliance with the communist governments of Eastern Europe that was formalized in 1955 by the Warsaw Pact.

In Europe, the dividing line between East and West remained essentially frozen during the next decades. But conflict spread to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The struggle to overthrow colonial regimes frequently became entangled in Cold War tensions, and the superpowers competed to influence anti-colonial movements.

In 1949, the communists triumphed in the Chinese civil war, and the world's most populous nation joined the Soviet Union as a Cold War adversary. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, and the United Nations and the United States sent troops and military aid. Communist China intervened to support North Korea, and bloody campaigns stretched on for three years until a truce was signed in 1953.

Closer to home, the Cuban resistance movement led by Fidel Castro deposed the pro-American military dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Castro's Cuba quickly became militarily and economically dependent on the Soviet Union. The United States' main rival in the Cold War had established a foothold just ninety miles off the coast of Florida.

### JFK and the Cold War

The 1960 presidential campaign was dominated by Cold War rhetoric. John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon both pledged to strengthen US military forces and both promised a tough stance against the Soviet Union and international communism. Kennedy warned (inaccurately) of a missile gap with the Soviets and pledged to revitalize US nuclear forces. He also criticized the Eisenhower administration for permitting the establishment of a pro-Soviet government in Cuba.

John Kennedy was the first American president born in the 20th century and his entire political career had taken place in the context of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. His inaugural address stressed the contest between the free world and the communist world, and he pledged that the American people would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

During the period between his election and inauguration, JFK was briefed on a plan drafted during the Eisenhower administration to train Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland. The plan anticipated that support from the Cuban people and perhaps even from members of the Cuban military would lead to the overthrow of Castro and the establishment of a non-communist government friendly to the United States. Kennedy approved the operation and some 1,400 exiles landed at Cuba's Bay of Pigs on April 17. The entire force was either killed or captured. Kennedy took full responsibility for the failure of the operation.

In June 1961, Kennedy met with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, Austria. Khrushchev threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany, effectively cutting off Allied access to Berlin. Kennedy was surprised by Khrushchev's combative tone. At one point, when the Soviet leader identified the Lenin Peace Medals he was wearing, Kennedy retorted "I hope you keep them." In August, in order to stop the flood of East Germans fleeing to West Germany, Khrushchev ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall, a massive structure of concrete blocks dividing the two parts of Berlin.

As a result of these threatening developments, Kennedy ordered substantial increases in US intercontinental ballistic missile forces. He also added five new army divisions and increased the nation's air power and military reserves. The Soviets meanwhile resumed nuclear testing and President Kennedy responded by reluctantly reactivating American tests in early 1962.

In the summer of 1962, Khrushchev reached a secret agreement with the Cuban government to supply nuclear missiles capable of protecting the island against another American-sponsored invasion. In mid-October, American spy planes photographed the missile sites under construction. Kennedy responded by placing a naval blockade (which he referred to as a "quarantine") around Cuba while demanding the removal of the missiles and the destruction of the sites. Recognizing that the crisis could easily escalate into nuclear war, Khrushchev finally agreed to remove the missiles in return for an American pledge not to reinvade Cuba. But the end of Cuban Missile Crisis did little to ease the tensions of the Cold War. The Soviet leader decided to commit whatever resources were required for upgrading the Soviet nuclear strike force. His decision led to a major escalation of the nuclear arms race.

In June 1963, JFK spoke at the American University commencement in Washington, D.C. He urged Americans to critically reexamine Cold War stereotypes and myths and called for a strategy of peace which would make the world safe for diversity. In the final months of the Kennedy presidency Cold War tensions seemed to soften as the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was negotiated and signed. In addition, the "Hotline," a direct line of communication between Washington and Moscow, was established to help reduce the possibility of war by miscalculation.

## Vietnam

After World War II, the French tried to re-establish their colonial control over Vietnam, the most strategic of the three states comprising the former Indochina (Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos). Following the defeat of the French, Vietnam was partitioned by the Geneva Accord of 1954 into Communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam, which was non-Communist, but divided on religious and political lines. The United States supported a military government in the South and the decision of its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, to prevent free elections which might result in the unification of the country under the control of the Communists. In an effort to take over South Vietnam, the Communist North supported attacks by guerrilla forces on the South. The Geneva Accords quickly began to crumble.

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other Southeast Asian and Pacific nations, including even the Philippines, would fall one by one. In response to that threat, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in 1955 to prevent Communist expansion. President Eisenhower sent some 700 military personnel as well military and economic aid to the government of South Vietnam. This effort was foundering when John F. Kennedy became president.

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Internal corruption, divisiveness, and mounting successes by the Vietcong (Vietnamese Communists) guerrillas weakened the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem. On May 8, 1963, South Vietnamese forces killed Buddhists protesting religious discrimination, which led to a political crisis for Diem's government.

Buddhist demonstrations against the government continued throughout the spring and summer. On June 11, 1963, a Buddhist monk publicly burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon. The photograph of the event made news around the world.

The suppression of Buddhists in South Vietnam became known as the "Buddhist crisis." President Ngo Dinh Diem did little to ease the tensions, though he later promised reforms. Many people suspected that his brother and closest advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was the actual decision maker in the Saigon government and the person behind the Buddhist suppression.

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**Please answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper:**

- What was the Cold War? When did it begin and what forms did it take?
- How and when did the Korean War begin? What forces were fighting?
- How did the conflict in Vietnam become part of the Cold War?
- Why did Eisenhower send military personnel to South Vietnam beginning in 1955?
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So, in answer to your question, I believe that with the combination of the tax cut plus these other programs we can reduce that unemployment from the 5-1/2 percent.

Most importantly, we can prevent it from being increased and I think we can get it under five percent in the period of two years, 2-1/2 years, but we can't do it by just saying it will be done on its own. Too many people are coming into the labor market and too many machines are throwing people out.

MR. CRONKITE: Mr. President, speaking of Congress, the atom test ban treaty comes up to the Senate in the next few days and everybody is predicting as I believe you are, that it is going to pass by a very good majority, but as all of the argument about it, discussion about it and even suggestions from high places including former President Eisenhower, have a reservation on the treaty.

Do you think that this has hurt the spirit that prevailed in getting this treaty in the first place?

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: No, if the treaty is not substantial enough to stand discussion and debate, then, of course, it isn't a very good treaty. I think what would be most desirable is after all of this discussion and debate then to get a very strong vote in the Senate. I think a reservation would be a great mistake. I don't think President Eisenhower used the reservation in the formal sense that he wanted the Senate of the United States to put a reservation on the treaty because that would mean that the treaty would have to be renegotiated. He was concerned that we would make it very clear that we had the right to use nuclear weapons in time of war. Well, of course we do have that right. We have stated it. The committee report of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will restate it, so I think that that will deal with the problem that concerned him. Otherwise, I think a reservation which would require us to renegotiate the treaty with nearly a hundred countries, in my opinion it would be better to defeat the treaty.

MR. CRONKITE: Mr. President, the only hot war we've got running at the moment is of course the one in Vietnam, and we have our difficulties there, quite obviously.

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PRESIDENT KENNEDY: I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisors, but they have to win it, the people of Viet Nam, against the Communists.

We are prepared to continue to assist them, but I don't think that the war can be won unless the people support the effort and, in my opinion, in the last two months, the government has gotten out of touch with the people.

The repressions against the Buddhists, we felt, were very unwise. Now all we can do is to make it very clear that we don't think this is the way to win. It is my hope that this will become increasingly obvious to the government, that they will take steps to try to bring back popular support for this very essential struggle.

MR. CRONKITE: Do you think this Government has time to regain the support of the people?

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: I do. With changes in policy and perhaps with personnel I think it can. If it doesn't make those changes, I would think that the chances of winning it would not be very good.

MR. CRONKITE: Hasn't every indication from Saigon been that President Diem has no intention of changing his pattern?

PRESIDENT KENNEDY: If he does not change it, of course, that is his decision. He has been there ten years and, as I say, he has carried this burden when he has been counted out on a number of occasions.

Our best judgment is that he can't be successful on this basis. We hope that he comes to see that, but in the final analysis it is the people and the government itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear, but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. That would be a great mistake. I know people don't like Americans to be engaged in this kind of an effort. Forty-seven Americans have been killed in combat with the enemy, but this is a very important struggle even though it is far away.

We took all this--made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is quite secure. We also have to participate--we may not like it--in the defense of Asia.

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Office of the White House Press Secretary

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THE WHITE HOUSE

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT BY MR.  
DAVID BRINKLEY AND MR. CHET HUNTLEY  
FOR THE HUNTLEY-BRINKLEY REPORT,  
THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE, WASHINGTON,  
D.C., SEPTEMBER 9, 1963

THE PRESIDENT: On the whole, I think this country has done an outstanding job. A good many countries today are free that would not be free. Communism's gains since 1945 in spite of chaos and poverty have been limited, and I think the balance of power still rests with the West, and I think it can increase our strength if we make the right decisions this year, economically here at home and in the field of foreign policy. Two matters that we have been talking about are examples of that. One is the tax cut which effects our economic growth, which effects the whole movement of this country internally; the Test Ban Treaty which effects our security abroad and our leadership. That is why I think it is very important that the Senate pass it. You know the old story that who prepares for battle that the trumpet blows an uncertain sound. Well, I think that if the United States Senate rejected that treaty after the Government has committed itself to it, the sound from the United States around the world would be very uncertain.

MR. HUNTLEY: Mr. President, in respect to our difficulties in South Viet Nam, could it be that our government tends occasionally to get locked into a policy or an attitude and then finds it difficult to alter or shift that policy?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, that is true. I think in the case of South Viet Nam we have been dealing with a government which is in control, has been in control for 10 years. In addition, we have felt for the last two years that the struggle against the communists was going better. Since June, however, the difficulties with the Buddhists, we have been concerned about a deterioration, particularly in the Saigon area, which hasn't been felt greatly in the outlying areas but may spread. So we are faced with the problem of wanting to protect the area against the communists. On the other hand, we have to deal with the government there. That produces a kind of ambivalence in our efforts which exposes us to some criticism. We are using our influence to persuade the government there to take those steps which will win back support. That takes some time and we must be patient, we must persist.

MR. HUNTLEY: Are we likely to reduce our aid to South Viet Nam now?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think we think that would be helpful at this time. If you reduce your aid, it is possible you could have some effect upon the government structure there. On the other hand, you might have a situation which could bring about a collapse. Strongly in our mind is what happened in the case of China at the end of World War II, where China was lost, a weak government became increasingly unable to control events. We don't want that.

MR. BRINKLEY: Mr. President, have you had any reason to doubt this so-called "Domino Theory", that if South Viet Nam falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will go behind it?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Viet Nam went, it would not only give them an improved geo-

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graphic position for a guerilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the communists. So I believe it.

MR. BRINKLEY: In the last 48 hours there have been a great many conflicting reports from there about what the CIA was up to. Can you give us any enlightenment on it?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

MR. HUNTLEY: Does the CIA tend to make its own policy? That seems to be the debate here.

THE PRESIDENT: No, that is the frequent charge, but that isn't so. Mr. McCone, head of the CIA, sits in the National Security Council. We have had a number of meetings in the past few days about events in South Viet Nam. Mr. McCone participated in every one, and the CIA coordinates its efforts with the State Department and the Defense Department.

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MR. BRINKLEY: With so much of our prestige, money, so on, committed in South Viet Nam, why can't we exercise a little more influence there, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: We have some influence. We have some influence, and we are attempting to carry it out. I think we don't -- we can't expect these countries to do everything the way we want to do them. They have their own interest, their own personalities, their own tradition. We can't make everyone in our image, and there are a good many people who don't want to go in our image. In addition, we have ancient struggles between countries. In the case of India and Pakistan, we would like to have them settle Kashmir. That is our view of the best way to defend the subcontinent against communism. But that struggle between India and Pakistan is more important to a good many people in that area than the struggle against the communists. We would like to have Cambodia, Thailand and South Viet Nam all in harmony, but there are ancient differences there. We can't make the world over, but we can influence the world. The fact of the matter is that with the assistance of the United States, SEATO, Southeast Asia and indeed all of Asia has been maintained independent against a powerful force, the Chinese Communists. What I am concerned about is that Americans will get impatient and say because they don't like events in Southeast Asia or they don't like the government in Saigon, that we should withdraw. That only makes it easy for the communists. I think we should stay. We should use our influence in as effective a way as we can, but we should not withdraw.

MR. HUNTLEY: Someone called the Civil Rights issue in 1964, I think, the fear of the political unknown. Would you agree?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I think that what they are wondering is what effect this will have, whether the North, which has supported Civil Rights in the past, will continue to support it. I think they will. I think the bill we put in is a reasonable bill, and I think that my judgment is that we will not divide this country politically into Negroes and whites. That would be a fatal mistake for a society which should be as united as ours is. I think it should be divided, in other words, Republicans and Democrats, but not by race.

MR. HUNTLEY: But in the Congress, do you see the issue coming down to a full scale test of strength or do you see it ending in a compromise?

THE PRESIDENT: We don't start off with a compromise. I hope it is going to pass as close to the form in which we sent it up as possible.

MR. BRINKLEY: Do you plan to see President Tito this Fall, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know. It would depend in part, and there are other presidents who will be coming to the United Nations, and I would expect to see most of them.

MR. BRINKLEY: Mr. President, Harry Truman was out for his walk this morning and he said he did not think we should have a tax cut until we get the budget balanced, and the other day Senator Humphrey was saying in the Senate that what the American people think is true is very often more important than what actually is true. In view of all that, what do you think about cutting taxes while the budget is still in deficit?

THE PRESIDENT: The reason the government is in deficit is because you have more than four million people unemployed, and because the last

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# American Opinion Summary

Department of State

FOR U.S. GOVERNMENT USE

VIET-NAM

September 10, 1963

American policy is "in a box" insofar as South Viet-Nam is concerned, current opinion concludes. There is some disposition to draw a parallel with American policy in China of nearly 20 years ago, as President Kennedy did in his NBC-TV interview last evening. "As then, American policy is well meaning, but hesitant and confused. As then, we again support a military movement of an ally while simultaneously denouncing that ally as corruptly 'dictatorial'," said William S. White (also, Des Moines Register, Robert Hewett in Minneapolis Tribune).

A representative summing up of the problem, as observers see it, comes from the Denver Post: "If we continue to support the Diem government with money, technical and military assistance, we'll be damned for propping up a repressive regime; if we attempt to engineer its overthrow we will be damned for interfering in the domestic affairs of a sovereign nation; if we cut our economic aid we will be damned for weakening a nation that is seriously jeopardized by the Communists; if we just pull out altogether we will be damned for not living up to our promises, for leaving the Vietnamese at the mercy of Diem and Nhu and for leaving a vital part of the free world to be overrun by the Communists."

U.S. "Floundering" The impression conveyed by commentators at this time is that (1) American policymakers, having been "outmaneuvered" by the Diem government, are now "flailing about in search of a policy", and (2) the experiment in "diplomacy by TV" has been proven a "lamentable failure" (Time; similarly, Newsweek, New Republic, U.S. News & World Report, Frank Conniff in N.Y. Journal-American).

It is time for a return to traditional, quiet diplomacy, a number stress (Newsweek, Wall St. Journal, N.Y. News, N.Y. Herald Tribune, U.S. News & World Report, Arthur Krock). A number seem prepared to accept the fact that "we are in for a period of making the best of a bad situation" (Newark News).

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No Withdrawal Despite the widespread criticism which has been focused on U.S. policy and the actions of the Diem government, a large body of opinion agrees with President Kennedy that "we should not withdraw" from South Viet-Nam. "We must hang on," many contend. "The consequences of a collapse would be appalling. The war is not only a Vietnamese war but our war--a war from which we cannot retreat and dare not lose" (New York Times; also, Christian Science Monitor, Newark News, Memphis Commercial Appeal, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, Kenneth Crawford in Newsweek and others).

Alternatives There continues to be a division of opinion as to the next moves open to the U.S. in Viet-Nam. For the present, a large number of observers stress, we have no alternative but to "string along with the Diem regime" while using our influence as effectively as possible to achieve reforms (Kansas City Star, Detroit News, Hartford Courant, Oakland Tribune, Houston Post, New York Times, Miami Herald, Scripps-Howard press, Richard Starnes, Joseph Kraft). This suits Diem's supporters, who contend the stakes are too high for the U.S. to "pull the rug out from under Diem"--especially when the war is slowly but inevitably being won (Frank Conniff in Hearst press, N.Y. Mirror, Wash. Star, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, Maj. Gen. Thomas Lane in Cincinnati Enquirer). "We should forget about world opinion," said the Washington Star. "We are not engaged in a world popularity contest, but are trying to win a nasty, dirty war."

A sizable group, however, continues to hold that Diem "must go" (Portland Oregonian, Memphis Commercial Appeal, Louisville Courier-Journal, Commonweal). "The time has come for the U.S. to face the fact that the whole ruling family must go--Diem, his brother and all the rest," said the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "These people are not interested in Viet-Nam. They are engaged in a cynical effort to retain power at the expense of their country, to force the U.S. to pay the bill, and perhaps even to perpetuate themselves in office by letting the war drag on inconclusively." Igor Oganessoff reports from Saigon that "few Westerners nowadays retain any illusions about the motives of the Diem family. No profound sympathy with democratic ideals moves them against the Communists. This, to this autocratic family, is a power struggle, pure and simple" (in Wall St. Journal).

If the defense of Viet-Nam is militarily vital to us, the Detroit Free Press asserts, "we should win. If this means ousting the Ngo regime and setting up a military government, so be it. It might mean finding a puppet to take over civilian operations, or even putting the country under an American proconsul. We cannot

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go on the way we have been going." For the Chicago Sun-Times, the answer is to "concentrate only on the prosecution of the war and get completely out of South Viet-Nam politics, or be prepared to remove the present government and supervise the honest election of a popular government."

Cut Off Aid? President Kennedy's NBC-TV statements (9/9), expressing reluctance to reduce aid at this time, have been interpreted as "leaving room for future reduction of U.S. aid to South Viet-Nam" (Warren Unna in Wash. Post, Baltimore Sun).

Prior to these statements, some spokesmen in Congress and the press had argued that the situation can change only if President Kennedy is ready to back up an ultimatum to President Diem by cutting off economic and military aid. It is acknowledged that while this might jar the anti-Diem elements in the armed forces into action, it also might provide the vacuum into which the Communists seek to move. Here opinion splits, and the larger number at present share the President's view that the risks of cutting off aid are too great.

But the Christian Science Monitor argues that "if the repression drags on" in South Viet-Nam, Mr. Kennedy should adopt the next step-- "cutting U.S. aid to the Diem regime unless there is an improbable reform of the Ngo family. There is no acceptable alternative" (somewhat similarly, Denver Post, Balt. Sun). Some members of Congress also appear to be thinking along these lines (e.g., Sens. Church, D-Ida., Carlson, R-Kan.). Sen. Morse is more confident than his colleagues in predicting that "if the U.S. withdrew its support from Diem, the anti-Communist forces in South Viet-Nam would throw him out within 90 days, and hundreds of the anti-Communist Paris exiles would return to South Viet-Nam. Then there would be some chance of establishing a moderate regime," in his opinion.

Reunification? President de Gaulle's suggestion that the best solution for Viet-Nam might be a reunified and neutral country continues to prompt discussion, but little support. Those commenting have many misgivings about "another experiment in neutrality" along the lines of Laos, which is deemed a failure (Newsweek, Eric Sevareid, Richard Starnes in Scripps-Howard press). The proposal "is just plain silly," the Detroit Free Press stated.

The basic objection is that de Gaulle's proposal "overlaps the all-important intermediate stages to a united, independent Viet-Nam. These are: replacement of Diem, reestablishment of peace with a constructive program, free elections, possibly under the UN, and a joint meeting of north and south Viet-Nam to determine needs and step by step moves toward unity" (Joseph Barry in N.Y. Post).

## **JFK, Vietnam and the September 1963 TV Interviews**

### **Answer Key**

#### **Background Reading: *Historical Briefings: JFK, The Cold War and Vietnam***

What was the Cold War? When did it begin and what forms did it take?

*The Cold War was a decades-long struggle that began after World War II between the US and its allies and the Soviet Union and its satellite states for global supremacy. After World War II, the Soviet Union wanted a buffer zone between its borders and Western Europe, and the US was determined to stop the spread of Soviet and communist influence in Western Europe. Though the two superpowers did not battle each other directly, they antagonized each other through political maneuvering, military coalitions, espionage, propaganda, arms buildups, economic aid, and proxy wars between other nations.*

- How and when did the Korean War begin? What forces were fighting?

*The Korean War began in 1950 after North Korea invaded South Korea and the United Nations and the US sent in military forces. Communist China joined the fighting until a truce was signed in 1953.*

- How did the conflict in Vietnam become part of the Cold War?

*After World War II, the French unsuccessfully attempted to re-establish colonial control over Indochina. In the Geneva Accord of 1954, Vietnam was partitioned into Communist North Vietnam and non-Communist South Vietnam. The US wanted to contain Communism in Southeast Asia and supported South Vietnam while the Chinese and Soviets supported North Vietnam.*

- Why did Eisenhower send military personnel to South Vietnam beginning in 1955?

*Concerned that if South Vietnam fell to communism, the other countries in Southeast Asia would fall, Eisenhower sent about 700 military personnel as well as economic aid to the government of South Vietnam.*

- What was the Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam and how did the Kennedy Administration react to it

*South Vietnamese Buddhist began demonstrating in the spring of 1963 against religious discrimination by the Diem government. A Buddhist monk's self-immolation in June raised international awareness of the problems in that country. Additional violence against the Buddhists by the Diem government led the US to reconsider its support. In late August, the Kennedy Administration cabled the US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., telling him to let the South Vietnamese generals know that the US would support an interim government if they decided to overthrow Diem. A coup finally did take place on November 1, 1963.*

## Handout A

- **How might these interviews be interpreted by the American public?**

Answers will vary but may include:

- *The US is in a difficult position regarding South Vietnam.*
- *Kennedy wants Diem's government to make changes so they will regain support of the South Vietnamese people and hopes the US can influence those changes.*
- *Unless President Diem makes those changes, Kennedy doesn't think the war against the Communist insurgents in Vietnam will succeed.*
- *Though this war is in the hands of the South Vietnamese ("their war"), Kennedy is committed to providing US economic and military aid to ensure that the country does not fall under Communist control since he believes that if that country fell to Communism the other non-Communist countries in that region would all fall.*

- **How might these interviews be interpreted President Diem?**

Answers will vary but may include:

- *The US is committed to keeping South Vietnam non-Communist and they will continue their economic and military aid to my country to ensure that goal.*
- *Kennedy wants me to reform my practices, particularly regarding the Buddhist population. He acknowledges that I have been a strong leader of my country, but he is concerned that I am losing the support of the people.*
- *The US is ambivalent about helping me, but will continue to do so as long as the fight against the communist insurgents is successful.*

- **How might these interviews be interpreted by South Vietnamese generals interested in overthrowing President Diem?**

Answers will vary but may include:

- *The main interest of the US is keeping South Vietnam non-Communist.*
- *They are unhappy with the way President Diem is governing the country.*
- *They see that President Diem lacks the support of much of the country.*
- *They do not believe that President Diem will be able to win the battle against the Communists if he continues to rule as he has.*
- *The US will provide economic and military aid to the government that can ensure that the country remain non-Communist.*

- **Based on these interpretations, what three main points you would make about US policy towards South Vietnam as of September 9, 2013?**

Answers will vary but may include:

- *The US is ambivalent about President Diem. On the one hand, he has been a strong leader of his country for many years. On the other hand, he has been losing support of the people because of the repressive policies of his government.*

- *It is very important to the US that South Vietnam remain non-Communist and we are willing to provide economic support and military personnel to help the South Vietnamese attain that goal. We will not withdraw and allow the Communists to take over.*
- *We are using our influence to try to persuade the Diem regime to make changes, but we must be patient and persistent for that to happen. We cannot withdraw just because we are unhappy with the policies of the current leader.*

- **What is your headline for your newspaper column?**

Possible headlines might include:

- *US Faces Difficult Choices in South Vietnam*
- *Kennedy's Ambivalence Apparent in Discussions about South Vietnam*
- *Kennedy Vows to Contain Communism in Southeast Asia*
- *The War in South Vietnam is Theirs—and Ours*