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**The Imperial Imperative  
John F Kennedy and US Foreign Relations**

An exploration of how John F Kennedy was influenced by matters of imperialism and decolonisation and how these came to bear upon his thinking on issues of foreign affairs, with particular reference to Vietnam.

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**Notes to Chapters**

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## **Kennedy and Indochina**

In Hanoi on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945 Vietnamese nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh stood before a gathering of the indigenous population and issued a declaration of independence. The League for the Independence of Vietnam, more widely known as the Viet Minh, had, under Ho's leadership, played a part in driving out the Japanese invaders who had taken over the South East Asian peninsula from the ruling French. Ho had been equipped and assisted in this task by the United States. In making the declaration Ho drew from the second paragraph of the United States Declaration of Independence, 1776:

“All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Further into his speech, Ho invoked the United Nations charter:

“We are convinced that the Allied nations which at Tehran and San Francisco have acknowledged the principles of self-determination and equality of nations, will not refuse to acknowledge the independence of Vietnam.”<sup>10</sup>

Ho Chi Minh had been a founder member of the Communist movement in Vietnam and there was concern in the United States that power in his hands would draw upon support from Moscow (and later the PRC), making him and Vietnam a symbol of spreading Communism. Confusion was widespread throughout what was recognised as the country of Vietnam in September and October 1945 with various interests involved (US, Great Britain, France, Chinese Nationalists as well as the Vietminh), each pursuing different ends. Vietnam had been discussed at the Postdam Conference earlier in July but only as a minor

item when it was agreed that France could seek to regain its former colonial status in the region.

Kennedy was undoubtedly aware of these events as they unfolded in Vietnam during 1945 because he reported on the Postdam Conference for the *Journal American*. He must have known about Ho Chi Minh and his efforts to secure independence from the French and must also have been aware of how the colonial war developed and progressed. One must consider what he made of the fact that it was a Communist sympathiser who was drawing upon the UN Charter and the American Declaration of Independence for inspiration, rather than those factions in Indochina that the United States purportedly supported. He did not, though, choose to comment openly on the matter until after he had visited Indochina and witnessed the situation for himself in late 1951, just as he sought to gain higher office.

It was evident to many who knew Kennedy at the time that the Congressman would not remain in the House of Representatives for long<sup>11</sup> and in 1951 he engaged upon a campaign aimed at securing a Senate seat. To do so presented a challenge to Kennedy, especially as it required overcoming the incumbent Henry Cabot-Lodge, a scion of a well established Republican family with a high reputation in the State, having represented Massachusetts since 1937.

Election matters aside, in September 1951, while still a Congressman, Kennedy, together with brother Robert and sister Patricia, embarked upon a fact-finding tour that took the group to the Middle East, the Indian Sub-Continent and South East Asia. This important episode in the life of the future President is especially notable for the number of influential

people he was able to meet and with whom he discussed world affairs. In India, for example, he had an audience with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who, according to journalist Seymour Topping:

“...impressed (him) with a seminar on the dynamism and the irreversible nature of the anticolonial revolution in Asia.”<sup>12</sup>

The Kennedy caravan arrived in Saigon on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1951. At this time the US was heavily involved (as part of the UN forces) in fighting on the Korean peninsula. Since the end of 1950 the war had moved into a form of stalemate with most of the military action taking place around the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, a situation that would continue for a further eighteen months. Vietnam was also in conflict - with French troops engaged in operations to secure the country against the Viet Minh, which had retreated from the cities and was operating as a guerrilla force based in jungle and mountain encampments. US involvement in Vietnam was conditioned by the Mutual Defense Assistance Act, passed toward the end of 1949, which gave the President authority to extend military and other support to friendly nations engaged in combating the spread of Communism. Such support had been made available to assist France in its efforts to re-colonise Vietnam (and French Indochina generally) and, by the time Kennedy arrived in Saigon, was essential to the French in maintaining their position in the country.

For some in the American Legation in Saigon<sup>13</sup> it had become clear that the French endeavours to recover the position they held in the country prior to WWII were doomed. In particular, Ed Gullion, with whom Kennedy was already acquainted and Robert Blum, chief of the economic mission at the legation had, according to Topping, incurred the wrath of

both the French and their own superiors in the State Department for speaking too frankly about their views on the failings of the French operation in the country.<sup>14</sup>

Topping described Kennedy and his entourage stepping off the aeroplane in Saigon and being greeted warmly by Ed Gullion; he then moved across to Topping himself and asked to speak with him about the situation in Vietnam. Topping agreed and the next afternoon the Congressman appeared at his city centre apartment. Kennedy had by then already been briefed by Gullion, both on his views of the impossible prospects for the French prevailing and the shortcomings of the United States in failing to recognise this and supporting a flawed strategy. Gullion (and Blum) believed that the US should be much more assertive in supporting the claims of non-Communist nationalists for eventual independence of the country and should pass aid directly to the indigenous armed forces, something that the French high commissioner, General Bernard de Lattre de Tassigny vehemently opposed.<sup>15</sup>

Topping explained to Kennedy the situation as he viewed it at that time and as he believed it might evolve. He stated that when he had arrived in the city eighteen months previously Americans were the most popular of foreigners in Saigon. This he attributed to the fact that the United States had granted what was generally seen as a fair and supportive independence to the Philippines<sup>16</sup> and having a presence as a force in Vietnam may lead to the same there. But this changed as the months passed and the US was identified simply as a bulwark to French ambitions for the restoration of colonial rule; this pushed nationalist sentiment towards the Viet Minh, the very situation Washington was seeking to avoid.

Topping went on to explain to Kennedy that Ho Chi Minh had access to vast supplies of men, training and equipment as a result of the links he had established with the PRC and the porosity of the border in the north (due in part to the strategy of the French for holding towns and forts but having little presence in the villages and areas between).<sup>17</sup>

Topping stated that Kennedy ended the discussion by remarking:

“I’m going to talk about this when I get home. But it will give me trouble with some of my constituents.”<sup>18</sup>

Kennedy subsequently met and had dinner with Bao Dai,<sup>19</sup> the French appointed “Head of State”, and then spoke with de Lattre himself. This latter meeting was unsuccessful; the General was so upset by Kennedy’s questions and assertions on the situation that he wrote to US Saigon Ambassador Donald Heath and also to his supporters in Washington to complain about the Congressman’s “impertinence”.<sup>20</sup>

Following his time in Saigon Kennedy visited Hanoi and gained a first hand experience of the situation on the ground where the strength of the Viet Minh forces was at its most apparent. Topping refers to Kennedy’s previous comments on the failure of the United States to support Jiang Jieshi and the Kuomintang which had led to the “fall” of China; he writes:

“In a speech before the House of Representatives on January 25, 1949,<sup>21</sup> he accused the Truman administration of crippling Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government by delaying needed aid while pressuring it to enter a coalition with the Communists. It was a contention, as regards the supply of military aid, which defied the facts. His Asian tour, and especially his talk with Nehru, spurred him to a reappraisal of what was transpiring on the continent.”<sup>22</sup>

Kennedy's speech in Salem in 1949 had demonstrated his anger at the loss of China but was used by him to criticise the way the Cold War was being fought at the time by the Truman administration. After his visit to Vietnam in 1951 his views modified to reflect the fact that he had come to believe the problem was rooted in the population's aspirations for self-determination and freedom from colonial oversight – in whatever form. This alteration in his approach was reinforced by his meeting with Nehru at which the Indian Premier had reiterated the shortcomings of colonial oversight.

Edmund Gullion gave his own account of the time that the future President spent in Vietnam in 1951.<sup>23</sup> He mentioned the meeting with de Lattre and the subsequent "letter of complaint" that came to Ambassador Heath. Gullion also commented on the extent to which the experience of visiting Vietnam provided Kennedy with ideas and a point of view that seemed to cast him at odds with what was the accepted role of the United States at the time:

"Something about his method of operation was formed, I think, in Indochina, that not only illustrated his method, but, I think, that he learned something from that experience. On foreign policy, I think that a great many of the issues that were to preoccupy him have to do with the dilemma of the United States as the architect of the Atlantic Alliance and the principle defender of freedom, and the United States as a former colonial country and one which has always manifested a particular sympathy with the aspirations of new countries of emerging peoples.

I think that he came into contact with this in its early and very acute form in Indochina a long time before this became one of the very dominant crises, dilemma, if you will, of our foreign policy. Remember at that time just after the war, although India and the British possessions were going free, a great cascade of colonial authority had not occurred. And although President Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] had challenged, for example, at least in a somewhat offhand way, at least the French thought, the durability, continuity of French power in Southeast Asia, still I think that we did not really foresee that there would be this general sweeping away of colonial authority, nor did we challenge, really, the way in which our allies were doing things. This, in the Far East was particularly true when we came later

on to be involved in Korea, and of course I knew the President during this time, too. It looked as if we were bearing one burden in Korea, and that our European Allies would be bearing something of the same burden in Southeast Asia. Without going into that analogy very deeply, it was an extremely false and treacherous one. Our role in Southeast Asia, and Korea, is nothing like that of the French at that time in Southeast Asia. I think the French learned a tremendous amount from their Indochina experience, which they put to great profit in their administration, especially under de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle], with their later operations in Africa.

But at that time what the President was doing was in a way challenging the establishment. I don't like to use that word right now, but his stance on Indochina certainly went against the prevailing opinion. I don't think that the President really ever saw himself as a flaming radical, who was out to tear down walls in this sense. I believe he was, his method of political operation at least, was pragmatist. He had certainly long and real liberal goals, but I would never have thought that he would feel at home cast in the role as a destroyer of the existing order or even preconceptions. Yet his challenge here to what was thought and believed in Indochina was quite important."<sup>24</sup>

This explanation of Kennedy, his values and beliefs and his approach to the US role in South East Asia, is illuminating. It states (not suggests) that his foreign affairs thinking was conditioned by the United States' colonial past, that the war in Korea was one thing, but the issues of Vietnam and its neighbouring states were drawing the United States into situations that sat ill with its position in the world and the way decolonisation was changing that world. This position could not be sustained in the manner prevalent at the time and forces of nationalism, divesting of the shackles of empires, were a (perhaps, *the*) determinant for the future geopolitical structure of the world.

Kennedy's understanding and interpretation of these factors is demonstrated by the comments he made about his travels after returning to the United States. On 14<sup>th</sup> November 1951 he delivered a radio broadcast over The Mutual Broadcasting Network, from New York. He spoke extensively of the poverty and disparity that he had observed in the Middle East, of the attempts by India to take a course of non-alignment to the

Communist and capitalist creeds, of the unrest and uncertainty in Burma and Malaysia and, of course, of his time in Vietnam:

“In Indo-China we have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of a French regime to hang on to the remnants of empire. There is no broad, general support of the native Viet Nam Government among the people of that area and there will be none until the French give clear indications that, despite their gallantry, they are fighting not merely for themselves but for the sake of strengthening a non-Communist native government so that it can move safely toward independence. These Indo-Chinese states are puppet states, French principalities with great resources but as typical examples of empire and of colonialism as can be found anywhere. To check the southern drive of Communism makes sense but not only through reliance on the force of arms. The task is rather to build strong native non-Communist sentiment within these areas and rely on that as a spearhead of defense rather than upon the legions of General de Lattre, brilliant though he may be. And to do this apart from and in defiance of innately nationalistic aims spells foredoomed failure. To the rising drive of nationalism, we have unfortunately become a friend of its enemy and as such its enemy and not its friend.”<sup>25</sup>

On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1951 Kennedy was interviewed by a panel of journalists on the NBC television production, *Meet the Press*.<sup>26</sup> He was asked about his recent tour of the East and how the United States stood in the parts of the world that he visited. Kennedy stated that the United States could count upon some friends, Siam, Pakistan and Israel for example, but that there existed a neutrality or even latent hostility of views towards the US from other nations; he attributed this to the fact that the United States aligned itself with the former European imperialists. Kennedy was asked about some remarks he had made previously about American diplomats spending their time in these parts of the world “drinking cocktails and playing tennis”.<sup>27</sup> Kennedy drew back from this statement (without disavowing it) to explain that his concern was that the United States’ representatives were failing to become sufficiently acquainted with the nations that were growing out of the decline of the European empires. There was a failure to learn languages and customs, a lack of understanding of the ways and traditions of the peoples and, consequently, there was a

failure on the part of the United States in not getting the right people into the Foreign Service who could best represent the interests of the USA. When pressed on how the Foreign Service might improve upon its performance he suggested more effective propaganda<sup>28</sup> and more assistance for social and economic programmes.<sup>29</sup>

On Indochina specifically, Kennedy remarked that the United States was becoming associated with the French colonists and would not secure the support of the nations there until the French committed to their self-determination.

These examples show that the pattern of thinking that first appeared in Kennedy's written articles for the *Journal American* had crystallized into a more coherent philosophy. His central concern was a fear of the spread of Communism in the newly created nations brought about by a failure on the part of the United States to convince the people there that the ways and approaches of the United States (and, more broadly, benevolent capitalism as it was evolving in the post WWII era) would be greater to their advantage than would Communism. Further, the support that the US was extending to such areas was tainted by association with the previous colonial masters and was ill-directed for predominantly military purposes at the costs of social and economic programmes that would cut closer to the aspirations of the people and have a greater and more lasting effect in aligning them to US values and political systems.

This record provides an indicative body of evidence for supporting the proposition that Kennedy was concerned about issues in the nations that were emerging from colonialism, that he was concerned about the role and profile of the United States in responding to this

situation and that he was in disagreement with the ways in which US foreign policy had adapted to meet the challenges that the ending of WWII brought forth. Further, that while there was a role for the military in creating and maintaining a new nation's security, it could not of itself force the issue. Should the indigenous peoples of the rising states, for whatever reason, fail to accept the benefits of progressive capitalism and western ideals (and Kennedy suggested poorly directed propaganda may be such a reason for them not to do so) then military intervention to impose a particular form of government would, in fact, become counter-productive. This basis of what appears to be the Congressman's thinking was reinforced as events in Vietnam unfolded and he advanced his political career in 1952 by election to the Senate.

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The speech was initially made in the House of Representatives on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1949.

See: Burns, James MacGregor, *John Kennedy, A Political Profile* (Open Road, Integrated Media, New York, 1960), 15

- 6 “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 geographic position for a guerrilla 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.”

Transcript of Broadcast on NBC's "Huntley-Brinkley Report", September 9, 1963

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9397>

- 7 See, for example:  
Straw, Jack, *JFK: Cold Warrior: Debunking Oliver Stone's Mythology* (Fifth Estate # 339, Spring, 1992)

Also:

Goldzwig, Steven,(Marquette University), Bostdorff Denise, (Purdue University), *Idealism and pragmatism in American foreign policy rhetoric: The case of John F. Kennedy and Vietnam* (*Presidential Studies Quarterly*, New York, Summer 1994, Volume: 24 Issue: 3, Start Page: 515)

Bostdorff and Goldzwig argue that Kennedy viewed the world of his time as a conflict between free peoples and those denied freedom for being under the command or influence of Communism. Kennedy's idealism, therefore, meant facing down Communism and Vietnam provided a proving ground for the will and ability of the United States as a leader of the Free World.

- 8 Taken from: Edmund A. Gullion, recorded interview by Samuel E. Belk, III, July 17, 1964, (pages 1 - 2), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program

- 9 Ibid. Edmund A. Gullion, 2

- 10 Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works* Vol. 3 (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960–62), 17–21

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11 See, for example:

William O. Douglas, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, November 9, 1967, (4-6), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program

Also:

Shaw, John T, *JFK in the Senate: Pathway to the Presidency* (St Martin's Press, NY, 2013), 29

12 Topping, Seymour, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: An American Correspondent's Journal from the Chinese Civil War to the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2009), 150

Topping had reported on the civil war in China for the Associated Press (AP) and had moved to Saigon in the spring of 1951. Early into his assignment in Vietnam he uncovered a covert operation by CIA cover organisations to move arms and equipment through Saigon to a remnant army of the Kuomintang which had established a salient in the Yunnan Province, inside Communist China. The supply route for this army, which comprised about fifteen thousand men in arms, was fed through bases it had established in north east Burma, a factor that caused the government in Rangoon considerable distress for fear of a reaction from the Chinese or a Communist rising within the country. According to Topping this matter soured relations between Rangoon and Washington for many years, only being finally resolved during the Kennedy Administration. 148-150

13 President Truman announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with the government of Vietnam on February 17, 1950, when the Consulate General at Saigon was raised to Legation status with Edmund A. Gullion as Chargé d'Affaires *ad interim*. On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1952 the status of the Legation was raised to Embassy and Donald R Heath was appointed Ambassador.

14 Topping, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, 153

15 As matters had transpired, de Lattre had returned to Saigon after a three months absence, arriving about the same time as Kennedy. During his time away the General had been entreating the French Government to provide more in the way of troops, support and armaments, but had not met with any great success. He subsequently visited the White House where he received stronger assurances of assistance. It would not be surprising, therefore, that he was less than impressed by American diplomats suggesting ways forward that seemed at odds with the pronouncements of senior authorities in Washington. – Topping, 151

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- 16 See page 79
- 17 Topping, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, 154
- 18 Topping, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, 154
- 19 Bao Dai, the son of the former Emperor of Vietnam, Khai Dinh, a vassal of the French colonial regime. The appointment of Bao Dai was a clear indication from the French that there was no serious intention of transferring real power to the Vietnamese.
- 20 Topping, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, 154-155
- 21 See pp38-39
- 22 Topping, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War*, 155
- 23 Edmund A. Gullion, recorded interview by Samuel E. Belk, III, July 17, 1964, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program
- 24 Ibid. Edmund A. Gullion 4-5
- 25 Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Special Events Through the Years. Radio report on trip to Middle and Far East, 1951. Kennedy Library
- 26 Kennedy appeared on the popular current affairs programme on eight occasions, this being the first. Meet the Press was first broadcast as a radio programme in 1945, switching to television in 1947. It is still on air today and is the longest running television programme in the United States. It operates to the simple formula of placing prominent representatives of politics and other fields before a panel of journalists to respond to questions. It is not scripted, allowing questioners to seek clarification of answers. Sitting on the panel were: Ernest K. Lindley (Newsweek Magazine), May Craig (Guy Gannett Newspapers), James Renton (*New York Times*) and Lawrence Spivak, originator of the format and regular panel member. The session was moderated, as was usual at the time, by Martha Rountree. Source:
- <http://www.nbc.com/meet-the-press>
- 27 This remark was made by Lawrence Spivak in the course of the radio broadcast (see endnote 25 above), but no reference given of where or to whom the Congressman had made the comment. Kennedy did not deny referring to Foreign Service personnel in this way, but used the opportunity to expand upon and explain further what he meant – that the US

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representatives were remote from indigenous populations and were failing to understand their needs and aspirations. There is mention of the remark in: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 407, although this re-references to the cited broadcast.

- 28 In the course of Kennedy's first extended visit to Europe during the summer of 1937 he kept a diary in which he attributed the success of the Fascists in Italy and the Nazis in Germany to "their effective propaganda":

"There is no doubt about it that these dictators are more popular in the country than outside due to their effective propaganda."

Kennedy Library, Papers of John F. Kennedy. Personal Papers. Early Years, 1928-1940. Diary, European trip, 1937: 1 July-3 September (the pages of the diary are not numbered)

- 29 It is appropriate to mention, in this context, the early initiative of the New Frontier which established the Peace Corps. Following an impromptu speech by Kennedy at the University of Michigan on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1960, the new President signed an executive order founding the Peace Corps on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1961, just six weeks after the inauguration. By 1969, under Director R. Sargent Shriver, there were over 14,500 volunteers working in 55 countries around the world. The Peace Corps remains a legacy of John F. Kennedy to the present day.

<https://www.peacecorps.gov>

### Chapter Three

#### Kennedy and Foreign Affairs 1952 – 1960

- 1 Congressional Record, June 30, 1953, 7622

- 2 Ibid. Congressional Record

- 3 Ibid. Congressional Record

- 4 French President Auriol wrote in his diary for October 1950:

"At this moment, I notice a rather violent anti-American mood... What they give us for Indochina while they say that we are defending this country against Communism is limited aid so that it doesn't look as if they were abandoning us. But in reality, they do it to make us go along with their policy of total independence. They give us money, and we pay for it with a piece of independence: that is infamous."