

# COLD WAR - How and Why America got into Vietnam

## Source 2

Ho Chi Minh's tactics had been successful in persuading certain sections of French opinion of his position as a genuine nationalist leader. Not unnaturally, they were even more successful in other countries of Asia, where the Viet Minh was genuinely held to be a coalition of nationalist groups opposed to imperialism—comparable, for example, with the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (A.F.P.F.L.) in Burma—rather than a façade concealing the manoeuvres of a powerful Communist group which was rapidly eliminating all political rivals. It is not remarkable, therefore, to

More recent speeches by Ho have been in the same vein. In a speech in April, 1952 (Viet Minh broadcast, April 5, 1952), he referred to Comrades Stalin and Mao Tse-tung as "the most clear-sighted, the most worthy elder brothers, friends of mankind." In a speech on patriotic emulation in May, 1952, he stated that the peoples of the Soviet Union, China and "other friendly countries" had given the Viet Minh "experience in patriotic emulation," that the Viet Minh was intensifying its resistance to the French and Americans, and that by "annihilating the forces of French and American imperialists we are effectively contributing to the defence of world peace and democracy. This is the spirit of internationalism."

Since 1950 there have been signs of two new trends in Communist policy in Indo-China. The Viet Minh has turned its attention to the two non-Vietnamese States of Cambodia and Laos, and there has been an increased emphasis on the peasants.

The first sign of the new peasant policy was an article by Din in the Cominform journal, *For a Lasting Peace, for a People's Democracy!* on December 19, 1952 (the sixth anniversary of the war in Indo-China) in which he stated that "the most important prerequisite for the consolidation of the patriotic forces of Viet Nam is the carrying out of agrarian reform and the distribution of land to the peasants." This theme was also stressed by Ho Chi Minh in his anniversary message. At the fourth session of the Central Committee of the

Since the great majority of the people of Vietnam were peasants, and since they formed "the pillars of the resistance movement," it was necessary to "favour the peasants in every way."

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### CONCLUSION

From the foregoing it can be seen that within the many tactical subterfuges and complexities which have been necessary, Ho Chi Minh has pursued a consistent policy which reveals him as an orthodox Communist political activist who has devoted his career to gaining control of Indo-Chinese nationalism.

He is dedicated to converting this nationalism into a revolutionary movement in the Communist pattern, which, if successful, will draw Indo-China into the Communist *bloc* and substantially increase the future threat of Communism in adjacent Asian territories.

August, 1953.

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## Source 3

Q. Robert Richards, Copley Press: Mr. President, would you mind commenting on the strategic importance of Indochina to the free world? I think there has been, across the country, some lack of understanding on just what it means to us.

The President: You have, of course, both the specific and the general when you talk about such things. First of all, you have the specific value of a locality in its production of materials that the world needs.

Then you have the possibility that many human beings pass under a dictatorship that is inimical to the free world.

Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the "falling domino" principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.

Now, with respect to the first one, two of the items from this particular area that the world uses are tin and tungsten. They are very important. There are others, of course, the rubber plantations and so on.

Then with respect to more people passing under this domination, Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its peoples to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses.

But when we come to the possible sequence of events, the loss of Indochina, of Burma, of Thailand, of the Peninsula, and Indonesia following, now you begin to talk about areas that not only multiply the disadvantages that you would suffer through loss of materials, sources of materials, but now you are talking about millions and millions and millions of people.

Finally, the geographical position achieved thereby does many things. It turns the so-called island defensive chain of Japan, Formosa, of the Philippines and to the southward; it moves in to threaten Australia and New Zealand.

It takes away, in its economic aspects, that region that Japan must have as a trading area or Japan, in turn, will have only one place in the world to go that is, toward the Communist areas in order to live.

So, the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.

US President Eisenhower explaining the Domino Theory in 1954

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## Source 4

He had established that there was broad agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom on most of the major international issues of the day. As regards the particularly difficult problem of Vietnam, the United States spokesmen had made it clear that the measures which they had recently taken to attack targets in the northern half of the country were directed solely to arresting the progressive infiltration of South Vietnam by the Viet Cong forces and that the statement by General Maxwell-Taylor, the United States representative in Saigon, that there was no limit to the potential increase of the war, should not be interpreted as inconsistent with this policy. They regarded themselves as having no alternative to this course of action. They could not contemplate the evacuation of Vietnam, except at the unacceptable price of allowing Communist influence to extend progressively throughout South-East Asia. They regarded it as equally impracticable that they should remain in South

Discussions on US policy in Vietnam at a meeting of the British Cabinet in 1965



### SECRET

Vietnam but refrain from any counter-action to arrest the infiltration of the Viet Cong forces. In these circumstances the only course open to them was to strike at those forces in the area from which they came. They appeared fully to appreciate the risks inherent in this course, particularly the length of time which might elapse before the Government of North Vietnam were finally deterred from further aggression and the danger that, in this interval, the Government of South Vietnam might itself collapse. They regarded these risks, however, as outweighed by the imperative need to check the North Vietnamese advance. Nevertheless, they did not intend to attack North Vietnam with ground forces; and they had undertaken to inform us in advance if they contemplated any extension of their present policy of air attack.

So far there was no indication that the mounting United States pressure was causing the Government of North Vietnam to be more ready to contemplate negotiation as a means of ending the conflict. The United States Government were equally unwilling to contemplate negotiation unless infiltration by Viet Cong forces ceased and satisfactory evidence to this effect could be produced.

As regards the recent occasion on which United States troops had used gas against the Viet Cong forces, he had left the United States Administration in no doubt of the strength of public feeling on this point in the United Kingdom and the extent to which, in our view, the episode had damaged the international reputation of the United States. In fact, however, the United States Government themselves had not been consulted by the local Commander before the weapons in question were brought into use; and the gas in question had been only the non-lethal type, which had been used by many countries, including ourselves, for the control of civil disturbances.

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## Source 5

Why are we in South Viet-Nam?

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

And I intend to keep that promise.

To dishonour that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, 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 Viet-Nam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance. Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Viet-Nam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and 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 Southeast Asia as we did in Europe in the words of the Bible: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further."

A report from the Metropolitan Police Special Branch on a meeting of the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War, December 1959

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### Source 6

M: ... how close as Deputy Secretary of the Defense Department were you to Presidential decision-making on Viet Nam?

V: I would say I was quite close to Presidential decision-making. I of course did not participate in all meetings ... I did participate in a number...

...

M: When did it become apparent from the Defense Department's view that things were going to get much more serious in Viet Nam than they had been previously?

V: 1964 and 1965; really in late 1964 and early 1965. It was quite clear that the United States was faced with a major decision. The indications were that if the United States did not become more deeply involved even to the point of putting in ground forces that all of Viet Nam might be taken by what appeared to be a drive ... mounted by the North Vietnamese and NLF forces. So I think the really critical time came in the early 1965 period.

M: Before that ... the Tonkin retaliation had already occurred. You are listed as one of the first briefers of the President at the time of that affair. Why has it occasioned so much confusion and criticism?

V: Because the facts were fuzzy themselves at the outset. There are two Tonkin situations, and I think people tend to get the two confused

... in the first Tonkin Gulf engagement that United States vessels were indeed attacked by North Vietnamese patrol craft, and that they were fired upon. This of course was reported to the President; and nothing, as I recall it, was done in the first, but when they were attacked the second time then it was felt that it was necessary to take retaliatory action and retaliatory action was taken.

M: You were one of the first to reach him, I take it, or among the early--

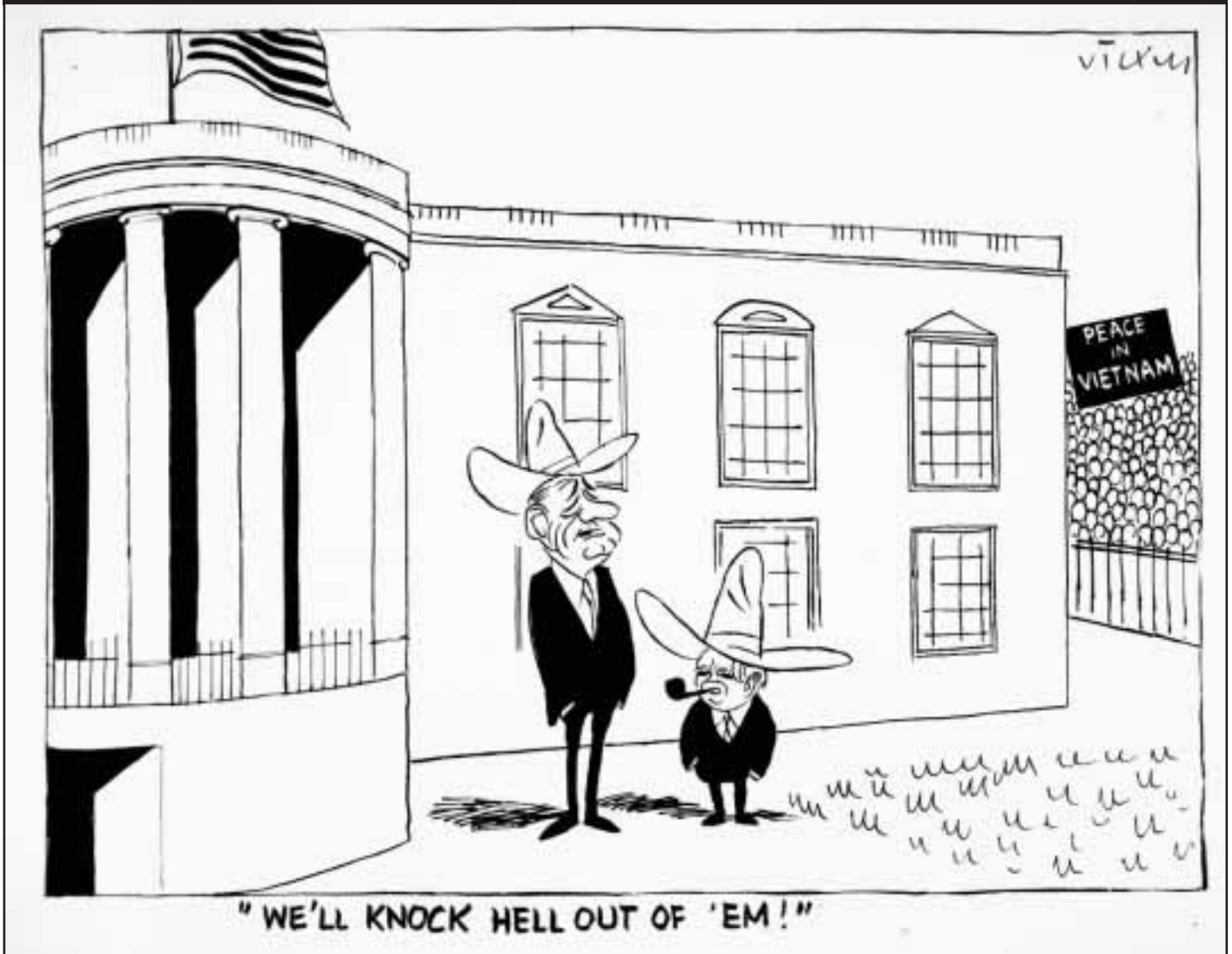
V: I don't remember.

M: Was his immediate inclination that we had to retaliate this time?

V: No. He never operated in a precipitous fashion. He was very careful; he wanted to know what all the facts were before acting, in my dealings with him. And he was not the kind of a person who would say, "Well, we've now got to react." His question would be, "Well, are you sure of your facts? What are the facts? Where are you getting the facts from? How do you evaluate them? How hard do you think they are?" Those kinds of questions.

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Source 8



British cartoon from the New Statesman Magazine April 1965 commenting on US entry into Vietnam War