

## The Limits of Influence in Vietnam: Britain, the United States and the Diem Regime, 1959-63

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines Great Britain's role in South Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Great Britain and the United States certainly did not enjoy a special relationship in South Vietnam, but it is also true that some British officials did manage to exert a real influence on the policy choices of the Kennedy administration. The most important obstacle to the development of effective policies in South Vietnam was not the limits of British influence on the US but the inability of both Britain and the US to influence the actions of the Diem regime in Saigon.

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Despite the ongoing efforts by scholars to internationalize the history of the Vietnam War, Britain's role in South Vietnam during the late 1950s and early 1960s has continued to receive very little scholarly attention. This is quite unfortunate because the British were actively involved in South Vietnam throughout the period 1959-63 and their analysis of the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem and the deepening American involvement in South Vietnam often provides a thoughtful and unique perspective on the origins of the conflict. Indeed, any student wishing to learn about the nature of the Diem regime and the origins of the Vietnam War would arguably learn as much from the reporting and analysis of the British Embassy as they would from the American Embassy. Given the wealth of declassified documentary materials that has been released over the past 15 years, it is surprising that the only comprehensive account of Britain's role in Vietnam remains Peter Busch's *All the Way with JFK?: Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War*. Busch's overall conclusion is that Britain did not play a particularly constructive role in South Vietnam during the Kennedy administration. In his meticulously researched book, Busch argues that:

...the British government did not counsel restraint and failed to show Kennedy more peaceful ways out of the potential quagmire in Vietnam. Put another way, it will become clear that Britain agreed with a military solution to the conflict and saw no reason to continue to play the role of the peacemaker in Indochina between 1961 and 1963.<sup>1</sup>

Busch's conclusions about Britain's role in Vietnam are certainly appropriate and consistent

with the evidence, but this article attempts to show that the story of British involvement in the late 1950s and early 1960s is far more complex. The British did not counsel either the Eisenhower or Kennedy administrations on how they should get out of Vietnam for the very simple reason that they themselves did not believe in the desirability of neutralization, a face-saving diplomatic solution, or an American withdrawal. While it is tempting to explain British policy in Vietnam as influenced by numerous other considerations, it is quite likely that the Macmillan government probably would not have advocated these policies even if it did not have to worry about the harmful impact such advocacy might have had on their 'special relationship' with the US. British officials believed that preventing the spread of communism to South Vietnam was a desirable objective that served their own interests.<sup>2</sup> While many British officials would not have phrased the issue so starkly, virtually all of them would have agreed with the assessment of Harry Hohler, the British Ambassador from 1960 to 1963, that 'any solution of the Viet Nam problem that does not crush and eradicate the Viet Cong will simply hand over South Viet Nam to the Communists'.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, it is somewhat misleading to suggest that the British were truly hawkish on Vietnam at any point during the late 1950s or 1960s. The British were not peacemakers in Vietnam during this period, but they were also not warmongers. British officials in both London and Saigon were agreed that the conflict in Vietnam should be resolved by measures that did not include the direct application of American military power. British efforts in South Vietnam's counterinsurgency campaign increased precisely when it became clear that the Kennedy administration was seriously considering sending ground troops in late 1961. In order to forestall the need for American troops, which they thought would be disastrous, British policymakers sought to guide both the South Vietnamese and the Americans towards more effective counterinsurgency concepts. Based largely on their counterinsurgency experience in Malaya, British policymakers truly believed that their knowledge could be helpful to both Diem and the Americans in their efforts to deal with the growing insurgency in South Vietnam.

The British may or may not have had good advice to offer Diem and the Americans, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that their actual influence in Vietnam was very limited. In the late 1950s the British believed that their advice and expertise was 'quite disproportionately valued' by Diem when viewed in relation to their very minor economic contributions to South Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, it is not easy to find any concrete examples in which Diem or Nhu seem to have responded to British views. Both brothers loved to talk for hours on end with British officials, but they do not seem to have had the same patience for listening to criticism, which in any event British officials rarely offered. Diem and Nhu rarely listened to their American sponsors and they were no more receptive with officials from the British Embassy in Saigon. Even in cases where Diem appeared to accept British tutelage, such as in his decision to support the formation of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) in 1961, it rapidly became apparent that Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu were only going to follow British counterinsurgency advice when it was compatible with their own agenda. As Phillip Carton has demonstrated, Diem and Nhu independently came up with the concept of strategic hamlets long before they were ever proposed by Robert Thompson.<sup>5</sup>

British influence over American policy in South Vietnam was more substantial, but it was also limited by a variety of factors. The most important reason for the lack of influence was simply that the Americans were rarely receptive to British advice and often even failed to inform their colleagues in advance about their most basic strategic decisions. As one Foreign

Office official noted, American policymakers had a seemingly Pavlovian instinct 'to act first and tell the British second'.<sup>6</sup> British officials accepted the fact that the great disparities in power and responsibility meant that they could only influence policy on the margins because 'the Americans are so much the stronger partner that they will never feel bound to accept advice that conflicts fundamentally with their own ideas and plans'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, British officials were generally very reluctant to take the initiative in expressing their concerns to their American counterparts about strategy and the deteriorating state of affairs in South Vietnam. In the view of Harry Hohler, the British Ambassador in Saigon between 1960 and 1963, 'criticism from the sidelines is rarely helpful and always irritating'.<sup>8</sup>

The result of this reluctance to openly and aggressively approach the Americans on strategic and political issues, however, meant that the British would rarely even try to influence the direction of Eisenhower's Vietnam policy. Concerned with the real possibility that America would become directly involved in fighting the war in South Vietnam after the Taylor-Rostow mission of 1961, Britain made much greater efforts to influence the US in the development of counterinsurgency policy. These efforts were much more successful, but their overall impact was also minimal because neither Britain nor the US could control the counterproductive policies of Diem and Nhu.

### **The British and Ngo Dinh Diem: A Foundation Built on Sand**

British assessments of Ngo Dinh Diem and his regime were not noticeably different from American assessments in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For both the British and the Americans, Diem's balance sheet had important entries on both sides of the ledger. On the positive side, Diem was seen as a staunch anticommunist who was both virtuous and incorruptible. On the negative side, Diem was seen as a stubborn leader who had little practical interest in democracy and relied much too heavily on his family, who were not seen as possessing either his virtues or his incorruptibility.<sup>9</sup> While it is perhaps too harsh to label him an apologist for the Diem regime, Roderick Parkes, the British Ambassador in Saigon between 1957 and 1960, consistently advanced the line that the Diem regime was about the best one could expect given Vietnam's history and current circumstances. In his annual report for 1958, Parkes rejected the idea that South Vietnam should be described as a 'police state' in any sense of the word despite the fact that he himself acknowledged that 'Such political life as exists in the country is thus coming to be conducted more than ever underground'.<sup>10</sup> Rather than viewing South Vietnam as a police state or an undemocratic dictatorship, Parkes argued that Diem's regime needed to be understood as a Confucian state whose characteristics only appeared strange or abnormal when viewed through the eyes of the West.<sup>11</sup>

Parkes was also very sympathetic to efforts by Diem and Nhu designed to provide the regime with an elaborate ideology to combat communist appeals from the North. In a September 1959 telegram, Parkes provided a lengthy and thoughtful analysis of the regime's efforts to develop the doctrine of personalism or 'Nhan-Vi'. Based largely on the ideas of the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, personalism placed its main emphasis on the need for both individual and collective development in South Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> Although dismissed by many Westerners and Vietnamese as 'a farrago of high falutin' nonsense', Parkes believed that the doctrine of personalism had something to offer both South Vietnam and other Asian nations. While personalism certainly would not appeal to everyone, Parkes thought that it provided cohesion to South Vietnam and that it admirably represented 'an attempt to tackle the

problems of venality, dishonesty, and shirking of responsibility which constitute such formidable obstacles to real progress in Asian countries'.<sup>13</sup>

Parkes was willing to minimize the less savory elements of the Diem regime because he believed that it was precisely these elements that were necessary to combat the threat from the North. For example, while acknowledging the sometimes pernicious influence of Nhu's secret *Can Lao* organization, Parkes was less worried about it than many non-communist Vietnamese were because he thought that 'it is arguable that at this stage of South Vietnam's development it is the inescapable price for an effective defence against communism'.<sup>14</sup>

Much like Diem himself, Parkes believed that the South Vietnamese people simply could not afford too much freedom and democracy given their history and current situation. While he was unsure about the commitment to democracy among some of Diem's closest advisors, Parkes had no doubt that Diem himself held the goal of eventually making South Vietnam a successful democracy.<sup>15</sup> However, immediate democracy was not what South Vietnam needed in the late 1950s and Parkes believed that Diem was providing the strong leadership that the times demanded, regardless of the fact that his harsh methods bothered some Western observers and South Vietnam's non-communist opposition: 'Discipline in fact is what the Vietnamese most need; and discipline of a stern and paternal kind is precisely what they are getting'.<sup>16</sup>

Not all British officials in the late 1950s shared Parkes's rather benign assessment of the Diem regime. While also rejecting the idea that South Vietnam was a police state, S.A. Priddle concluded after a visit to Saigon that the regime nevertheless 'does contain many elements of control of the national life incompatible with a democratic society'.<sup>17</sup> One Foreign Office official believed that it was 'dangerous that the South Vietnamese regime too often think that they can use the techniques of Communism, brainwashing, mass indoctrination etc., as an anti-Communist cause. The techniques can be used, but they result in a cure which is little improvement on the disease'.<sup>18</sup>

After a visit to the region in late 1959, B.R. Pearn of the Southeast Asia Department concluded presciently that the long-term situation in South Vietnam was potentially even more serious than the one in Laos. Rather than representing a new and dynamic type of Asian leader, Pearn found far too many similarities between Diem and the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-Shek. Whatever abstract merits the doctrine of personalism might contain were irrelevant to Pearn because he found that no one else outside the regime had any interest in the philosophy. While Pearn was unwilling to totally dismiss the argument that South Vietnam could not help but be somewhat illiberal given its current stage of development, he also noted that this sort of argument was exactly the same rationalization provided by communist states in order to excuse repressive measures. Even though he concluded that Diem's rule faced no immediate threat, Pearn left little doubt that the regime was not destined for better days: 'The Diem regime lacks mass support; its whole foundation is built on sand'.<sup>19</sup>

British assessments of the Diem regime were largely academic in nature during the late 1950s. Debate over the nature of the regime could only be meaningful if different courses of action flowed from the respective analyses, but neither supporters nor critics offered any policy relevant suggestions for the British government to adopt. British advice on how to deal with the Diem regime also does not appear to have been sought after by the Eisenhower administration. There are no indications that the American Ambassador, Elbridge Durbrow, ever approached Parkes for advice as he moved towards a much tougher stance on the flaws of the Diem regime in 1959-60.<sup>20</sup> In all likelihood, Parkes would not have been very supportive of Durbrow's efforts

to reform the Diem regime. Durbrow firmly believed by the beginning of 1960 that American efforts in South Vietnam would be in vain if Diem continued to restrict the political process to Nhu's secretive *Can Lao* organization. What Durbrow viewed as pathological tendencies in the regime that could and should be rapidly curtailed, however, Parkes continued to view as either desirable or unavoidable tendencies, even if he thought Diem and Nhu sometimes went too far. Parkes clearly did not have the same degree of foreboding about the future that Durbrow felt at the start of 1960. Indeed, as he departed Saigon in February 1960, it appears that the only real concern Parkes had about the future was the possibility that American economic aid would be reduced and that the Vietnamese would have to tighten their belts. In contrast to Durbrow, who increasingly thought liberal reform could only be brought about by coercive measures, Parkes left South Vietnam still somewhat optimistic that democratic change might come about naturally within the *Can Lao* organization itself.<sup>21</sup>

Parkes's departure from Saigon in February 1960 removed any possible ideological barriers to greater cooperation with the Americans that may have existed, but British-American cooperation did not noticeably increase over the last year of the Eisenhower administration. The new British Ambassador, Harry Hohler, increasingly shared Durbrow's perspective on the urgent need for reform in South Vietnam. Hohler also desired greater cooperation with the US, but neither Durbrow nor the Foreign Office were particularly eager to coordinate their policies." In May 1960, after a meeting with Durbrow and the French Ambassador, Hohler wrote the Foreign Office to request their views on whether the three governments should work together on concerting a new approach to Diem.<sup>23</sup> The Foreign Office was not sympathetic to the idea and neither were the Americans because of their fear that such an approach would involve the French and be perceived by Diem as an example of the Western powers 'ganging up' on him. On the eve of the first coup attempt against Diem in November 1960, Hohler told Durbrow directly that while he had previously avoided any interference with American policy in South Vietnam, he wondered whether 'the time had now come... if we and the French were to play a more active part'. However, while welcoming Hohler's individual intervention with Diem, Durbrow remained opposed to any French diplomatic involvement or collective reproach to the South Vietnamese government.<sup>24</sup> Hohler returned to the subject of higher level meetings on Vietnam after the failed coup, but while accepting the idea in principle, the Foreign Office was clearly in no rush to push the idea with the incoming Kennedy administration. Due to increasing disagreements over the situation in Laos, however, the Foreign Office believed that the State Department was 'not disposed to listen to anything we have to say about South East Asia'.<sup>25</sup>

Hohler's desire for high-level talks with the US in the aftermath of the November 1960 coup reflected his larger concern that it was now even more imperative for Diem to be prodded into making long overdue reforms. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Hohler hoped that the coup would lead to necessary reform because if it did not, 'I fear that we shall have further trouble and that we shall not get off as lightly next time'.<sup>26</sup> These hopes for a new course in South Vietnam were quickly dashed by Diem's stubbornness and rage at the US for what he believed to be its involvement in the coup. According to Hohler, Diem's unwillingness to undertake real reforms had contributed to a growing malaise in Saigon that was alienating both the army and the urban professional classes. As a substitute for real reforms, Diem and Nhu took refuge in waging a nasty press campaign against Durbrow and the US. While the urgent need for reform was obvious to all, Hohler noted that Diem still believed that anyone who urged reforms on him was uninformed about Vietnamese realities because the peasantry

was all that was important and they did not care about freedom of the press or the rights of opposition politicians.<sup>27</sup> When Diem finally announced his long-awaited reforms in February 1961, Hohler was far from impressed with the minor changes Diem was willing to adopt. Hohler believed that Diem's vague promises of reforms were 'something of a damp squib' and accompanied by new measures 'evidently designed to make the regime's control on the people even tighter'.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, Hohler's increasing emphasis on the need for political reform was out of sync with the incoming Kennedy administration. Durbrow had argued along these lines for much of 1960, but the failed coup essentially ended his influence on Vietnam policymaking. The new president's first introduction to the seriousness of the situation in Vietnam came from none other than Edward Lansdale, Durbrow's most serious bureaucratic antagonist. Lansdale was by no means oblivious to Diem's many faults, but he firmly rejected Durbrow's entire strategy of pressuring Diem into making reforms by threatening to withhold American economic and military aid. Where Durbrow and Hohler believed that the most important task was to get Diem moving in the direction of reform, Lansdale believed that the most important task facing the US was to regain Diem's trust and confidence. While Lansdale did not become the next American Ambassador to South Vietnam, Kennedy's Presidential Task Force on Vietnam developed an approach largely based on his premise that Diem needed a combination of 'positive inducements' and 'discreet pressure'. The final report of the task force, however, was not at all balanced between the two. New initiatives and programs were prominently featured, but the entire question of how to get Diem to do things that he had clearly shown he would not do was barely addressed.<sup>29</sup> The incoming American Ambassador, Fritz Nolting, summed up the essence of the Kennedy administration's approach when he told Hohler that 'one had to accept the kind of regime that President Diem was willing to establish and concentrate on working with it and making it more efficient'.<sup>30</sup>

British officials were clearly skeptical about the Kennedy administration's perspectives on South Vietnam. In general, the Americans were seen as far too optimistic about the situation in Vietnam and much too eager for immediate results. While Hohler saw Diem's reforms as a damp squib, the American Embassy and the State Department believed that they were more significant and encouraging than the British thought.<sup>31</sup> The British and the Americans also disagreed in early 1961 about whether the security situation was substantially deteriorating. Hohler clearly thought it was because the communists were now attacking in areas that had currently been free from attacks.<sup>32</sup> When Hohler raised these arguments directly with Durbrow, the American Ambassador was clearly upset and wondered why the British were so 'agitated' over a situation that he had been living with since 1959. What concerned the British was that American reasoning seemed to ignore the most basic principles of guerrilla warfare. For example, the Deputy Chief of the American Military and Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) seemed to be reassured by the fact that the Vietnamese Army was very capable of defeating any large-scale concentrations of communist forces. The British, not surprisingly, responded by noting that the communists were unlikely to mass their forces in a way that played to the strengths of the South Vietnamese army.<sup>33</sup> The Foreign Office drew two conclusions from this exchange, neither of which was very reassuring. Either the Americans in Saigon were unwilling to admit that their policies were failing or they wished to protect themselves against criticism from Washington.<sup>34</sup>

The Kennedy administration quickly decided in 1961 that there was no alternative to Diem, regardless of his known liabilities and his well demonstrated inability to change. The British,

who had long shared that assumption with the US, however, were no longer sure that Diem was the best option by the summer of 1961. Cosmo Stewart, a longtime observer of Diem's regime, reported in June 1961 that the possibilities of an army coup were growing with each passing day. Stewart himself did not believe that this was a particularly worrisome prospect and other British officials were even more welcoming of the prospect of an army coup.<sup>35</sup> Hamish McGhie of the Foreign Office believed that with a successful coup 'a healthier atmosphere would be produced and much of the unpleasantness (the Can Lao party, Republican Youth, etc) would melt away overnight'.<sup>36</sup> Gordon Etherington-Smith, who would later succeed Hohler as Ambassador in 1963, also tended to think that the 'political bankruptcy of the Diem regime had reached the point where an army coup 'might indeed be the one development which could still save the day in South Vietnam'.<sup>37</sup>

Ambassador Hohler's pessimism about both Diem's future and the American performance in South Vietnam also grew over the course of 1961-62. By March 1962, Hohler was inclined to believe that Diem was incapable of winning the war no matter how much he was helped by the US.<sup>38</sup> Hohler was also distressed by the overall performance of Nolting and the American Embassy in Saigon. Nolting was seen by Hohler as uninformed about important events and not fully in control of his team in Saigon. Due to what Hohler believed were political pressures from Washington to show quick results, the Americans in Saigon were all too prone to producing a steady stream of optimistic and unwarranted assessments about the military situation.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Hohler's assessment of the situation grew even more negative. By May 1962, Hohler wrote the Foreign Office that the situation in Vietnam had never been worse despite all of the increased activity.<sup>40</sup> While the war could still be won, Hohler left little doubt that the main impediment to victory continued to be the Diem regime. Unless there was what he called a 'showdown' between the US and Diem, Hohler indicated that he now had the 'gravest doubts' about winning the war.<sup>41</sup>

As the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate over the course of 1961, it was inevitable that the Kennedy administration would begin thinking about the possibility of direct American military involvement. Several of Kennedy's advisors were in favor of sending 8,000-10,000 American troops to South Vietnam under the cover of flood relief in the fall of 1961, although it is clear that the president himself was vehemently opposed to such a move.<sup>42</sup> British opposition to the sending of American troops to South Vietnam predated the Taylor-Rostow Mission of October 1961. Shortly after Vice-President Johnson's visit to Diem in May 1961, Hohler had a conversation with Ngo Dinh Luyen in which he was told that LBJ had offered limitless aid to South Vietnam including the sending of American troops. Hohler thought that this decision would be a mistake because 'it would mean that Vietnamese would be killed by the Americans and, even though they might be Communists, the reaction inside Viet Nam was bound to be unfavorable'.<sup>43</sup> When the rumors first began surfacing that Taylor was going to recommend the sending of American ground troops to South Vietnam, officials at the Foreign Office wholeheartedly agreed with French officials who argued that such a step would be a disaster.<sup>44</sup> While recognizing quite clearly that the situation could change in the future, British officials were relieved that the Americans had seemingly accepted 'our thesis' that the Vietnamese would have to win the war by their own efforts when Kennedy rejected the idea of sending American troops.<sup>45</sup>

By the end of Kennedy's first year in office it was clear that the British were faced with a very undesirable dilemma since they were skeptical that Diem could win the war by his own efforts, and they were adamantly opposed to direct American military involvement. Con-

ceivably, British policy could have moved in several different directions after 1961.

First, like the French, the British might have become more favorable to the idea of neutralizing South Vietnam through international agreements along the lines of the model of Laos. For a variety of reasons, however, the British government did not believe that the solution they advocated for Laos was at all applicable to South Vietnam.

A second course of action might have been to warn the Americans that their escalatory efforts in South Vietnam violated the Geneva Accords of 1954 and that Britain, as a member of the International Control Commission charged with supervising the arrangements, could not look the other way. The British, of course, did not choose this path and essentially did decide that they would turn a 'blind eye' as America took actions that arguably violated the accords.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the British might have decided that the safest and easiest course of action was simply to distance themselves from both Diem and American efforts in South Vietnam. Kenneth Blackwell, in a letter to Hohler written in August 1962, argued that the British should follow precisely that course because 'If by any chance things do not turn out in South Vietnam as we hope, the case for non-involvement would be even stronger'.<sup>47</sup> In many respects, the real puzzle of British policy during the Kennedy administration is determining why they did not choose Blackwell's option rather than the increased role they gradually assumed over the course of 1962-63 through their sponsorship of BRIAM.

A large part of the reason why the British did not distance themselves from Vietnam is simply that they believed that their own involvement could make a decisive difference in whether American efforts succeeded or failed. Standing aside as passive observers might be easier, but it also made defeat more likely. It is for this reason that Hohler believed that his government should not only continue to offer full support for the US, but potentially even increase their commitment to the struggle in South Vietnam. Drawing on an analogy to the stock-market, Hohler believed that shares in South Vietnam were currently very low and might sink further 'but it would be folly to sell out so long as there is any prospect of ultimately obtaining a good return for the investient'.<sup>48</sup> Once the British made it known that they were going to fully support the US, Hohler believed that the British would be in a much better position to influence American policy in the desired direction. What Hohler clearly feared about American policy in Vietnam was that it would tend to seek quick and dramatic results when slow and steady progress was what the situation demanded.<sup>49</sup> Despite his own doubts about the possibility of victory as long as Diem remained in power, Hohler still believed that Britain had 'a most important role to play behind the scenes in urging the Americans to avoid unnecessary provocation in an increasingly dangerous situation'.<sup>50</sup> For Hohler and many other British officials, the fate of South Vietnam would increasingly turn on the extent to which Diem and the Americans could be sold on British counterinsurgency concepts which both parties had ignored for far too long.

### **Great Britain and the Thompson Mission**

The British were only partly successful in their efforts to influence the course of the Vietnam conflict after 1961. While it is never easy to infer direct influence on complex decisions involving many actors, it is hard not to conclude that the British significantly influenced the way in which the Kennedy administration approached the art of counterinsurgency in the aftermath of the Taylor-Rostow mission. Kennedy and other major figures within the administration, such as Robert McNamara and Roger Hilsman, all acknowledged their



intellectual debt to Robert Thompson and the work of the BRIAM in Vietnam. British criticisms of American efforts in South Vietnam were far less frequent and far less consequential after the establishment of BRIAM. Hohler was not alone in believing that the Americans had finally accepted the reality that achieving victory in Vietnam would be a long and methodical process just like it was in Malaya. Winning over the Americans, however, turned out to be the relatively lesser component of developing a successful strategy to defeat the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Although they too often professed their appreciation for BRIAM and British counterinsurgency advice, Diem and Nhu were simply unwilling to adhere to British strategic guidance in several important respects. By the summer of 1963, it was becoming apparent to many British officials that Diem and Nhu had squandered whatever opportunity they may have had to defeat the communist insurgency.

British criticisms of America's military concepts and their application to South Vietnam began during the final years of the Eisenhower administration. Like Ambassador Durbrow, the British believed that the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was training the South Vietnamese for a war they would never fight and leaving them helpless against the actual insurgency they faced. Due to the unfortunate guidance of Lieutenant General Samuel Williams, Parkes and his Military Attache Colonel H.C.B. Cook believed that the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) was developing in a manner designed to produce 'a force capable of fighting an open war of movement on lines familiar in Korea and Europe but wholly unfitted for jungle operations of the kind required to control Vietcong guerrilla forces'.<sup>51</sup> While Cook recognized that MAAG had a very difficult job and could claim some real accomplishments in developing ARVN, he believed that the policy of creating no less than seven South Vietnamese divisions, and training ARVN officers in Western concepts of warfare at American military schools, was simply wrong and unsuited to reality.<sup>52</sup> As early as 1959 the British offered to train South Vietnamese officers at their Jungle Warfare School in Malaya, but their help was not fully exploited because the Vietnamese candidates who went to the school were not physically fit enough for the training. The following year was even less successful because the South Vietnamese claimed that they had no officers to send to Malaya as a result of sending too many officers to the US for training.<sup>53</sup> Based on his conversations with various ARVN officers, Cook was convinced that even South Vietnamese officers realized the flaws with the American approach but he believed they were unwilling to say so openly given their material dependence on the US.<sup>54</sup>

Durbrow and the British were in total agreement about the inadequate efforts of MAAG, but no substantial changes in American military practice in South Vietnam would take place before the Eisenhower administration left office. Kennedy was far more comfortable with concepts of counterinsurgency warfare than Eisenhower, but there was clearly no great urgency on the part of his administration to solicit British views. As Peter Busch has convincingly argued, the British government was far more eager to offer its assistance in 1961 than the Kennedy administration was to accept its help.<sup>55</sup> The attitude of MAAG also continued to be fairly hostile to accepting British assistance. Williams's replacement as MAAG chief, Lionel McGarr, was very dismissive about what exactly Thompson and other advisors from Malaya could teach the US or the South Vietnamese.<sup>56</sup> McGarr's objections were not enough to prevent the establishment of BRIAM in September 1961, however, because both the State Department and Diem himself were in favor of establishing a British advisory presence. Although Thompson quickly antagonized Ambassador Nolting in November 1961 by submitting plans directly to Diem, plans that Nolting believed were somewhat inconsistent with US objectives, there is no

doubt that the Americans and the British moved closer over the next few months in approaching the conflict in South Vietnam.<sup>57</sup> While still acknowledging the structural limits of the British-American partnership, by January 1962 Ambassador Hohler believed that while it was indeed wrong to speak of a generalized special relationship with the US 'a special relationship is in fact developing here between the Americans and ourselves'.<sup>58</sup>

The intellectual foundation for greater British-American cooperation in South Vietnam was provided by Thompson's Delta Plan, which he submitted to President Diem in late 1961.<sup>59</sup> The Delta Plan was a multifaceted counterinsurgency strategy which required for its success good intelligence and the close coordination of all military and civilian forces. Believing that the core of the problem in South Vietnam was eliminating the ability of the Viet Cong to gain the support of the village population, the Delta Plan's main goal was to progressively deny the Vietcong access to potential recruits, food and shelter, and lead them to fight from a position of weakness. A key component of the plan was the construction of strategic and defended hamlets that would consolidate and fortify disparate rural villages to protect their residents from communist guerrillas. In order to establish the necessary control over villages and cut off Vietcong supply lines, the government would have no choice but to institute strict curfews and declare certain areas off limits to the population. Once an area had been cleared of insurgents and could be declared 'white', the severity of measures designed for population control could be reduced. Victory over the insurgency in South Vietnam, just like the victory in Malaya, would only result from the slow and methodical expansion of white areas throughout the country. It is precisely for this reason that Thompson specifically recommended the populated but limited geographical region of the Mekong Delta to first implement his plan.

One can debate the extent to which Thompson's ideas were completely novel, but it seems hard to deny that the development of American counterinsurgency thinking was strongly influenced by his concepts. In February 1962, Fred Warner noted that he had been told that there were now many convinced 'Thompsonians' within the Kennedy administration.<sup>60</sup> The most important backer of Thompson's ideas was surely Roger Hilsman, the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department. Hilsman met with Thompson in Saigon in January 1961 and came away very impressed with the work of BRIAM. Not known for his modesty, Hilsman nevertheless credited Thompson directly for providing the basic concepts and ideas for the counterinsurgency plan that he presented to President Kennedy in February 1962.<sup>61</sup> According to Hilsman, Kennedy too 'was impressed with Thompson's ideas and agreed that this was the direction we should go in developing a strategic concept for Vietnam'.<sup>62</sup> Hilsman's analysis hit all of the themes that British officials had long emphasized: the war was political rather than military in nature, conventional military tactics were ineffective or counter-productive, and that the war needed to be won at the village level. British officials would have been particularly pleased that Hilsman forcefully pointed out that the infiltration of men and materiel from North Vietnam was of distinctly secondary importance in defeating the insurgency.

Of course, as many scholars have noted, the Kennedy administration did make some important modifications to Thompson's plans. Hilsman himself expanded the geographical scope of the Delta Plan by calling for an additional emphasis on the area around the city of Hue. In addition, Thompson was not in favor of the creation of the Civic Action teams proposed by Hilsman because he thought that they confused the chain of command and tended to bring too many foreigners into Vietnamese villages. Despite these criticisms of Hilsman's

strategic concept, Thompson recognized the strong common ground it shared with his own ideas and wrote the Foreign Office that he was generally 'in full agreement with the plan'.<sup>63</sup> More important than any differences between Thompson and Hilsman, however, was the undeniable reality that Thompson's counterinsurgency approach was generally much more acceptable to the civilian side of the Kennedy administration than it was to the military establishment. Always worried about too much British influence on strategic issues, the American military also had more substantive concerns about the greater priority that Thompson placed on police forces as opposed to ARVN, his focus on the Delta as opposed to other areas of Vietcong strength, as well as his call for greater centralization in the administration of the war.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, while obviously important, the differences in American and British counter-insurgency policy should not be overemphasized. If the Kennedy administration had truly rejected the core of British counterinsurgency advice, one would expect to see far more criticism of those policies from both Thompson and other British officials over the course of 1962-63. However, there is very little evidence to suggest that the British government thought the Americans were pursuing a fundamentally flawed strategy over this period. In Hohler's view, by September 1962 there was now very little difference in American and British assessments of the military situation 'and they seem to have moved rather towards us than we towards them'.<sup>65</sup>

The fundamental problem in implementing an effective counter-insurgency strategy, as the British recognized from the very beginning of 1962, was the unwillingness of Diem and Nhu to adhere to Thompson's concepts with any consistency. Diem and Nhu often expressed their appreciation of Thompson and BRIAM, but they also made it clear that they were not going to mechanically follow the Delta Plan or accept the lessons of the Malayan emergency. As Nhu told a British official in June 1962, the Delta Plan was useful but he had discarded all the elements of it that he did not find applicable to South Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> While British officials were well aware of the many differences between Malaya and South Vietnam, they thought that the basic concepts and policies that should be followed in defeating a communist insurgency were essentially the same. The Delta Plan was designed to be implemented as a tightly coordinated plan, but Diem and Nhu destroyed its balance by overemphasizing some parts and totally ignoring others. As early as March 1962, Colonel Lee was already noting that the tendency of Diem and Nhu to selectively choose or ignore elements of the strategy 'completely defeats the plan or ideas submitted'.<sup>67</sup>

Contrary to the advice of both the British and the Americans, Diem and Nhu essentially reduced the Delta Plan to a single element: the rapid creation of strategic hamlets. The primary purpose of strategic hamlets should have been to provide security for the villagers, but Diem and Nhu placed far more importance on the goal of using them to thoroughly transform South Vietnamese society. According to Nhu, 'With the strategic hamlets, we are founding a new civilization, the hierarchy of which is based on the degree of participation as pioneers in the fight against underdevelopment, division, Communist'.<sup>68</sup> Nhu's social revolution was based on the regime's personalist philosophy and he hoped that strategic hamlets would serve as the catalyst for indoctrinating the population in the ideology, thereby turning potentially sympathetic peasants away from communism. The British had been somewhat sympathetic to personalism in the late 1950s, but they were very concerned about the regime's evident determination to place social revolution above and before the provision of basic military security. Ambassador Hohler was particularly distressed by the regime's focus on social revolution because he believed that Nhu 'will achieve no more than the destruction of what

remains of the social fabric of South Viet Nam'.<sup>69</sup>

The emphasis placed by Diem and Nhu on social transformation might not have been so harmful had it not been combined with their desire to achieve rapid results from the construction of strategic hamlets. While some strategic hamlets were well-built, the British believed that far too many of them were shoddily constructed and appeared to serve no purpose other than show. Ignoring one of the central elements of the Delta Plan - a limited geographical focus - Diem and Nhu insisted on placing strategic hamlets in areas where they were highly vulnerable to the Vietcong insurgency. Although Thompson and other British officials emphasized numerous times the psychological importance of establishing a 'white area' in even one or two provinces in order to build confidence, Diem and Nhu clearly placed far more importance on building hamlets over a large geographical area, regardless of their chances of success. As late as March 1963, Thompson acknowledged that no white area had yet been declared in all of South Vietnam.<sup>70</sup>

The British were understandably reluctant to draw pessimistic conclusions about the situation in South Vietnam given their tendency to criticize others for a lack of patience. In August 1962, Warner declared that any real conclusions about the counterinsurgency campaign would have to wait until 1963.<sup>71</sup> Despite all of the problems they noted about Diem and Nhu's policies, the British were still hopeful that the tide had been turned in South Vietnam. Even Hohler, who was often very critical of Diem and Nhu, was generally enthusiastic about the progress of the strategic hamlet program, partly because far fewer hamlets than he expected had been successfully attacked by the Vietcong.<sup>72</sup> In a lengthy assessment of the program written in January 1963, Hohler suggested that many of the early problems had been overcome and that 'remarkable start' to the strategic hamlet program had occurred over the course of 1962.<sup>71</sup> Thompson was by far the most enthusiastic about the situation in South Vietnam in early 1963. While conscious of both the short- and long-term problems faced by the Diem regime, Thompson declared that all the members of BRIAM believed that the 'shooting war' was being won and that South Vietnam could be out of the 'danger zone' by the end of the year.<sup>74</sup> It was this glowing assessment to the situation in South Vietnam that Thompson delivered personally to President Kennedy and other top officials of his administration in April 1963.<sup>75</sup>

Thompson's assessment marked the high point of British optimism about the future of South Vietnam. Even before Thompson's visit to Washington, some British officials were questioning the basis for his optimism. While hopeful that Thompson was correct, Hohler argued that it was premature to claim that the military war was being won because of the 'steadily growing Viet Cong Order of battle'. Viewing the situation in South Vietnam from a wider perspective than the strategic hamlet program, Hohler was dismayed by the rising corruption, the artificially high standard of living and the decline of the rule of law. He also rejected Thompson's belief that the evidence showed that the South Vietnamese peasantry had already rejected communism.<sup>76</sup> The British Foreign Office was initially inclined to attribute the diverging assessments in South Vietnam to the different roles and responsibilities held by Hohler and Thompson. The clear disposition of the Foreign Office in March 1963 was to place more weight on Thompson's views because of the prevailing belief that it was better for the regime to do well in the provinces than it was among the people of Saigon.<sup>77</sup> Thompson's assessment of the situation in South Vietnam would remain relatively consistent throughout most of 1963, but in the aftermath of the Buddhist crisis his optimistic perspective increasingly fell out of favor.

The onset of the Buddhist Crisis in May 1963 transformed British policy toward the Diem regime. Diem's use of force against the Buddhists could have been seen as yet another foolish

act on his part that the British would simply ignore, but the Foreign Office resolved from the very beginning of the crisis that they would not turn a blind eye towards Diem's handling of the crisis. As Warner suggested in a letter to Hohler in June 1963, Diem and Nhu should be 'made to see that there are some acts of foolishness in which they will get no backing at all from their allies'.<sup>78</sup> While Warner's view suggested an active effort to influence Diem and Nhu, the distinguishing feature of British policy during the Buddhist crisis was its passiveness. E.H. Peck captured the British attitude well in a discussion of whether the British should ask the Americans about whether they were planning a *coup d'etat* against the regime. Peck concluded that it was best not to mention the issue at all because if the CIA were not thinking along those lines the British would not want to be seen as supportive of a coup.<sup>79</sup> The future of South Vietnam hung in the balance, but the British government was determined not to play any major role in how the crisis of the Diem regime was resolved. Warner summarized the policy quite accurately in September 1963: 'We should play a waiting game, keep our heads down, and express as few opinions as possible in public'.<sup>80</sup>

Privately, with one very significant exception, the British government had reached a consensus by late September 1963 that it would be preferable for Diem to be removed from power. Even before he replaced Hohler as Ambassador in the summer of 1963, Gordon Etherington-Smith had been more optimistic than many British officials about the possibility of Diem being succeeded by a better government. While it was theoretically possible for Diem to salvage the situation even at this late date, Etherington-Smith believed that history provided little support to think that Diem would be able to handle the situation. The Buddhist crisis had shown that Diem would not liberalize his regime and that 'so far from evolving towards a more democratic system, the regime is likely to become increasingly despotic'.<sup>81</sup> Etherington-Smith was not wildly optimistic about the potential alternatives to Diem, but he did think that it was possible that more effective leadership could be found. Having long benefited from the fact that the Western powers could not envision a better regime than his, Diem would now have to pay the price because many British and American officials could no longer envision anything worse than a continuation of his regime. Believing that Diem should go, however, did not mean that the British government should do much of anything to hasten his departure. As Warner noted, concluding that Diem should go 'does not mean that any initiative is required from us or that we should get mixed up in any plots. Our interest and influence are slight and there is no sense in our getting involved'.<sup>82</sup>

Thompson disagreed with this emerging consensus within the British government, but the Foreign Office clearly sided with Etherington-Smith. President Kennedy had requested an assessment from Thompson of the situation in September 1963, which he provided the following month. Thompson still believed that the war was going relatively well and that any change in regime would hurt the war effort.<sup>83</sup> Despite the fact that Kennedy himself had personally requested Thompson's views, the Foreign Office decided that they would not forward his report partly because they thought it had been overtaken by events but largely because they believed that he was wrong. The successful coup against Diem in October went a long way towards getting Thompson, the Saigon Embassy, and the Foreign Office back on the same page because Thompson himself was now pessimistic about the prospects for a successful resolution of the conflict in South Vietnam. As always, Thompson was aware of the potential factors that 'it might cut against his pessimistic analysis but even in the best case he believed that it may take perhaps to the end of the decade before real peace can be restored'.<sup>84</sup> Ironically, the Foreign Office believed that Thompson's views should not be transmitted to

Washington because his 'balanced pessimism' might either encourage the Johnson administration to commit ground forces to South Vietnam or become less resolute in seeking to preserve an anti-communist Vietnam.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

Historians are unlikely to reach a consensus any time soon concerning the nature of Britain's role in South Vietnam and its relationship with the US. How a historian will view the British role undoubtedly depends as much on their views of the Vietnam War, the virtues or liabilities of the postwar 'special relationship', or other political factors as it does of their reading of the documents. In a critical review of Peter Busch's book, Kevin Boyle says that it is incumbent for Busch, and by extension other historians, to address the question of whether British opposition might have prevented Kennedy's deepening involvement in Vietnam.<sup>86</sup> Boyle suggests that given Kennedy's well-known doubts about Vietnam it is possible that British opposition might have tipped the balance against a greater American commitment. However, it is more likely that a hypothetical British opposition to greater American involvement in Vietnam would not have made any difference at all. The real choice the Kennedy administration debated between 1961 and 1963 was between direct American military involvement and greater efforts to help Diem win the war himself. The British strongly supported the latter option and so did the vast majority of the Kennedy administration. The limited influence the British had with the US over Vietnam policy was rooted in a fairly solid agreement on both the means and ends. If there were strong elements within the American government who preferred to neutralize South Vietnam or to pursue negotiations and diplomacy, strong British opposition conceivably might have made a difference. Given the absence of any significant advocates for these courses within the Eisenhower or Kennedy administrations, British opposition would probably have been little more than an empty gesture. If nothing else, British policymakers were keenly and correctly aware of the real limits of their influence and very determined to avoid empty gestures and meaningless quibbling in their interactions with the US in South Vietnam.

Of course, Boyle's question itself is one that is quite divorced from the issues that one finds in the archival evidence. British policymakers did not ever debate the question of how they could prevent greater American involvement in South Vietnam between 1959 and 1963. What they debated frequently was how they could use their influence to make the Americans and Diem more effective in fighting the communist insurgency. Rather than seeking to end or prevent a war, British policymakers focused their intellectual efforts on the far narrower question of how a 'better war' could be fought in South Vietnam. Like the Americans themselves, British officials did not always agree on how to accomplish that objective or whether victory was even possible given the nature of the Diem regime. While it is certainly plausible to see the British as aiding and encouraging greater American involvement in South Vietnam, it should always be remembered that one of the primary purposes of British efforts was to head off a situation in which the Americans would feel compelled to resort to direct military force and the commitment of ground troops. While it is impossible to determine what American policy might have been in the absence of British influence, it is hard to deny that the Kennedy administration moved more towards the British position than the reverse. The British failure in South Vietnam was not due to their lack of influence over the US, but rather the unavoidable reality that Diem and Nhu proved to be highly resistant to virtually all Western influence.

## NOTES

1. Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US, and the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003) pp. 8-9. See also Antonio Varsori, 'Britain and US Involvement in the Vietnam War during the Kennedy Administration, 1961-63', *Cold War History* 3 (2003) pp. 83-112. For accounts of British diplomacy before and after the 1959-63 period, see Arthur Combs, 'The Path Not Taken: The British Alternative to U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1954-1956', *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995) pp. 33-57; and Rolf Steininger, '"The Americans are in a Hopeless Position": Great Britain and the War in Vietnam, 1964-65', *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 8 (1997) pp. 237-85.
2. Frederik Logevall suggests that Vietnam was of only minor concern to the Macmillan government because 'One finds hardly a reference in the large British internal record to the idea that preserving a noncommunist South Vietnam to be a strategic priority for the West'. We interpret the evidence somewhat differently than Logevall. We believe researchers will find far more documents in the internal record emphasizing the importance of preserving South Vietnam as a non-communist ally than ones that suggest indifference. See Frederik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press 1999) p. 18.
3. Letter from Ambassador Harry Hohler to Lord Home, 3 Jan. 1962, Public Records Office, Kew (hereafter PRO), Foreign Office (FO) 371/166698, DV 1015/6/G. The British official who most frequently departs from the prevailing Cold War consensus is Kenneth Blackwell, who headed the small British Consulate General in Hanoi.
4. Letter from Ambassador Roderick Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 7 Jan. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144387 DV 1011/1.
5. See Philip Calton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press 2002). The literature on Robert Thompson and British counterinsurgency efforts in South Vietnam is fairly extensive. See Peter Busch, 'Supporting the War: Britain's Decision to send the Thompson Mission to Vietnam, 1960-61', *Cold War History* 2 (2001) pp. 69-94; Ian F.W Beckett, 'Robert Thompson and the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, 1961-1965', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 8/3 (1997) pp. 41-63; and Geoffrey D.T. Shaw, 'Policemen versus Soldiers, the Debate Leading to MA.AG Objections and Washington Rejections of the Core of the British Counter-Insurgency Advice', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 12/2 (2001) pp. 51-78.
6. Letter from E.H. Peck to Ambassador Harry Hohler, 22 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166699, DV 1015/49/G.
7. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 16 Jan. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166717, DV 103145/14.
8. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 13 Dec. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152744, DV 1015/114.
9. For the most recent scholarly assessment of Diem, see Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham NC: Duke University Press 2004).
10. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 7 Jan. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144387, DV 1011/1.
11. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 23 Feb. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152738, DV1015/6.
12. For an excellent discussion of personalism in South Vietnam, see Calton, *Diem's Final Failure* (note 5) pp. 34-50.
13. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 23 Feb. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152738, DV1015/6. American policymakers were a little more skeptical of personalism, but they too thought it

- had some positive qualities in the context of South Vietnam. See Durbrow to the Department of State, 22 Dec. 1958, 'Notes and Comments on "Personalism" in Viet-Nam', *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), Vol. I, 1958-1960 (Washington DC: Government Publishing Office, 1986) pp. 109-13.
14. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 3 Sept. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144389 DV 1015/12.
  15. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 11 Sept. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144389 DV 1015/14.
  16. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 7 Jan. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144387, DV 1011/1.
  17. S.A. Priddle, 'Report on Visit to Saigon', Feb. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144461, DV 2181/1.
  18. Minute by Moss, 19 Sept. 1959, PRO, FO 371/144389, DV 1015/59G.
  19. Minute by B.R. Pearn, 21 Dec. 1959, PRO, FO 371/152738, DV 1015/1.
  20. For a good discussion of Durbrow's growing disenchantment with Diem and American policymaking during the latter stages of the Eisenhower administration, see David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press 1991) pp. 151-209.
  21. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 23 Feb. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152738, DV105/6.
  22. Letter from Hohler to F.A. Warner, 7 April 1960, PRO, FO 371/152739, DV 1015/29.
  23. Telegram from Hohler (No.129), 7 May 1960, PRO, FO 371/152739, DV 1015/35.; See also Draft Letter from Warner to Hohler, 8 May 1960, PRO, FO 371/152739, DV 1015/36.
  24. Telegram from Hohler (No.297), 2 Oct. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152741, DV 1015/59. Draft Letter from Warner to Hohler, 29 Dec. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152744. British-American disagreements over Laos would become somewhat less heated as Kennedy, unlike Eisenhower, was much closer to the British perspective on Laos. See Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000) pp. 293-304; and Nick White, 'Macmillan, Kennedy and the Key West Meeting: Its Significance for the Laotian Civil War and Anglo-American Relations', *Civil Wars* 2/2 (1999) pp. 35-55.
  25. Letter from Hohler to Warner, 19 Nov. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152744, DV 1015/105.
  26. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 13 Dec. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152744, DV 1015/114/G; see also Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 21 Jan. 1961, PRO, FO 371/160107, DV 1015/5.
  27. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 11 Feb. 1961, PRO, FO 371/160108, DV 1015/3.
  28. Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, 'A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam', 1 May 1961, *FRUS*, Vol.1, 1961-63, pp. 93-115.
  29. Telegram from Hohler, 31 July 1961, PRO, FO 371/160115, DV 1015/142. Hohler and Nolting had a good working relationship, but Hohler would remain critical of Nolting's lenient approach to the Diem regime. In his last dispatch from Saigon, Hohler bitterly noted that Nolting had been too lenient with Diem and Nhu and they 'responded by treating him with contempt and the Americans in general with ingratitude and hostility'. See Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 6 July 1963, PRO, FO 371/170091, DV 1015/42.
  30. British-American differences are summarized in a letter from John Denson to J.C. Petersen, 20 Feb. 1961, PRO, FO 371/160108, DV 1015/10.
  31. Telegram from Hohler (No.137), 19 March 1961, PRO, FO 371/160108, DV 1015/19/G.
  32. Telegram from Hohler (No.161), 1 April 1961, PRO, FO 371/160109, DV 1015/24/G.
  33. FO minute regarding Hohler telegram, 14 April 1961, PRO, FO 371/160109, DV 1015/24/G.
  34. Letter from Cosmo Stewart to Warner, 10 June 1961, PRO, FO 371/160112, DV 1015/100/G.
  35. Minute by McGhie, 19 June 1961, PRO, FO 371/160112, DV 1015/100/G. Ironically, both



- McGhie and Stewart's welcoming attitudes towards a coup were at least partly based on their very favorable opinion of the views of Lieut. Col. Phan Ngoc Thao. After reading Stewart's account of their conversation, McGhie wrote that 'it shows that given the right type of leader in the provinces in South Vietnam the situation might be transformed'. See McGhie minutes, June 1961, PRO, FO 371/160112, DV 1015/88. Unfortunately, as Truong Nhu Tang would later reveal, Thao was a North Vietnamese agent throughout the Diem era. See Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York: Random House 1986) pp. 42-62.
36. Letter from Gordon Etherington-Smith to E.H. Peck, 23 June 1961, PRO, FO 371/160113, DV 1015/116.
  37. Telegram from Hohler, 27 March 1962, PRO, FO 371/166702, DV 1015/87.
  38. Letter from Hohler to Peck, 29 March 1962, PRO, FO 371/166702, DV 1015/91/G.
  39. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 16 May 1962, PRO, FO 371/166704, DV 1015/129.
  40. Letter from Hohler to Peck, 19 July 1962, PRO, FO 371/166705, DV 1015/155/G.
  41. For Kennedy's opposition to sending ground forces to South Vietnam in late 1961, see David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press 2000) pp. 100-121.
  42. Letter from Hohler to Warner, 14 July 1961, PRO, FO 371/160114, DV1015/133.
  43. McGhie minutes, 19 Oct. 1961, PRO, FO 371/160116, DV1015/172; and 31 Oct. PRO, FO 371/160117, DV1015/194.
  44. British Talking Points for General de Gaulle's Visit, undated circa Nov. 1961, PRO, FO 371/160118, DV1015/235.
  45. The phrase 'blind eye' was used by E.H. Peck to describe the British approach to possible US violations of Geneva. The British wanted the US to be more discrete as it stepped up its involvement in 1962. See letter from Peck to Ledward, 9 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166718, DV 103145/34G.
  46. Letter from Blackwell to Hohler, 24 Aug. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166753, DV 1212/3.
  47. Letter from Hohler to Warner, 15 Aug. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166707, DV1015/176/G.
  48. Telegram from Hohler to Lord Home (No.14), 28 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166701, DV1015/64/G.
  49. Letter from Hohler to Peck, 15 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166700, DV 1015/49/G.
  50. Letter from Parkes to Selwyn Lloyd, 4 Feb. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152738, DV 1015/3.
  51. Col. H.C.B. Cook, 'Annual Report on the Army of South Vietnam', Aug. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152778, DV 1201/4G.

52. Letter from Parkes to Sir Denis Allen, 16 Feb. 1960, PRO, FO 371/152780, DV1011/21/60G.
53. Cook's views are reported in a letter from Stewart to Warner; 11 June 1960, PRO, F0371/152778, DV1201/2/G.
54. Peter Busch, 'Supporting the War' (note 5) pp. 79-83.
55. Telegram from McGarr to Lemnitzer; 7 June 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. I, 1961-1963, pp. 166-8.
56. Nolting to State Department, 30 Nov. 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. I, 1961-1963, pp. 698-700.
57. Letter Hohler to Lord Home, 16 Jan. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166717, DV103145/14.
58. An undated draft of Thompson's Delta Plan can be found in *FRUS*, Vol.11, 1961-1963, pp. 102-109. Thompson put forth his basic concepts of counterinsurgency warfare in *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger 1966).
59. Letter Warner to Burrows, 7 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371//166717, DV 103145/20.
60. Roger Hilsman, 'A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam', 2 Feb. 1962, *FR US*, 1962, pp. 73-90. In his memoirs, Hilsman continued to give Thompson the credit for his influence on his own thinking about Vietnam. See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York: Doubleday & Co. 1967) pp. 410-39.
61. Hillman, *To Move a Nation* (note 61) p. 438. Hilsman's meeting with Kennedy was apparently not drafted into a formal American memorandum, but there is an excellent account of the meeting provided by Hilsman to John Denson in the British archives. See John Denson to Reggie Burrows, 9 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166700/DV 1015/43/G.
62. Letter from Thompson to Denson, 26 Feb. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166700, DV1015/43/G.
63. For American critiques of Thompson's ideas, see Beckett, 'Robert Thompson and the British Advisory Mission' (note 5) pp. 48-50; and Shaw, 'Policemen and Soldiers' (note 5) pp. 51-78.
64. See letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 12 Sept. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166707, DV 1015/187/G.
65. Letter from Burrows to Warner, 12 June 1962, PRO, FO 371/166748, DV 1201/30.
66. Lee to C.I.V Jones, 29 March 1962, PRO, FO 371/166747, DV1201/7/G.
67. Excerpt from Mr Ngo Dinh Nhu's Address on Strategic Hamlets, Phan Thiet, 19 March 1962, PRO, FO 371/166702, DV 1015/88.
68. Letter from Hohler to Warner, 4 April 1962, PRO, FO 371/166702, DV 1015/100. Like earlier British critics of personalism, Hohler would emphasize its affinities with fascism as conceived by Diem and Nhu. See Hohler Telegram, 'The Military and Political Situation in South Vietnam as of September 12, 1962', PRO, FO 371/166707, DV1015/187/G.
69. Thompson Memorandum, 'The Situation in South Vietnam', 11 March 1963, PRO, FO 371/170100, DV 1017/17.
70. Letter from Warner to Hohler, 21 Aug. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166707, DV 1015/176G\_
71. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 4 Oct. 1962, PRO, FO 371/166751.
72. Letter from Hohler to Lord Home, 30 Jan. 1963, PRO, FO 371/170100, DV 1017/4.
73. Thompson Memorandum, 'The Situation in South Vietnam' (note 70).
74. See *FRUS*, 1961-63, Vol. III, pp. 198-206.
75. Letter from Hohler to Peck, 20 March 1963, PRO, FO 371/170100, DV 1017/17 (B).
76. A.J. Williams minutes, 'Mr Thompson's Memorandum on the Situation in South Vietnam

- in March 1963', 29 March 1963, PRO, FO 371/170100.
77. Letter from Warner to Hohle, 6 June 1963, PRO, FO 371/170142, DV 1781/7.
  78. Letter from Peck to Etherington-Smith, 4 Sept. 1963, PRO, FO 371/170092, DV 1015/68G.
  79. Letter from Warner to Etherington-Smith, 25 Sept. 1963, PRO, FO 371/170093, DV 1015/84.
  80. Telegram from Etherington-Smith to Foreign Office, 'Implications for Western Policy of the Present Situation in South Viet Nam', 26 Sept. 1963, PRO, FO 371/170093, DV1015/86/G.
  81. Minute by Warne, PRO, FO 371/70093, DV 1015/86/G.
  82. 'Summary of Differences between Mr R.G.K. Thompson and H.M. Ambassador, Saigon concerning the present situation in South Viet-Nam', 23 Oct. 1963, PRO, FO 371/170102, DV 1017/43/G.
  83. Letter from Thompson to Peck, 19 Dec. 1963, PRO, FO 371/170096, DV 1015/144/G.
  84. Letter from Peck to Trench, 24 Dec. 1963, FO 371/170096, DV 1015/144/G; and Minute by Everard, PRO, FO 371/170096, DV 1015/144/G.
  85. Kevin Boyle, 'With Friends Like These', *Diplomatic History* 29 (Jan. 2005) p. 217.