

Rhetoric and Reality – A History of the Formation of the ‘Domino Theory’

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Gaps between rhetoric and reality in U.S. foreign policy have often been large; indeed such gaps might be said to constitute a defining characteristic of this nation’s diplomacy.¹

When U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced the ‘domino theory’ at a news conference in 1954, he was not announcing a radical departure in Washington’s understanding of the emerging situation in Indochina. Rather, he was making public aspects of U.S. foreign policy that had been in the making since the end of World War II, which in turn interacted with older themes. This essay will first situate this ‘theory’ in the historiography of the Vietnam War in order to contextualise what follows. It will then map the formation of the domino theory from 1945 to 1954, and will briefly look at the broader implications of such an approach in foreign policy. This will be achieved by examining the secondary literature on the various historical events covered and reviewing the relevant primary sources. It is the contention of this essay that

¹ J. L. Gaddis, ‘Was the Truman doctrine a real turning point?’ in *Foreign affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Jan. 1974), p. 386.

the domino theory was shaped and influenced by a range of interrelated factors both domestic and foreign. These factors included the legacies of American attempts at Russian containment, the aftermath of World War II, the political policies of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, the 'loss' of China and the Korean War, and the emerging decolonisation movement. Underlining all these factors was America's quest for markets and resources in the post-war world.

In essence, the domino theory contends that if one country in a region 'falls' to communism, this will have a definite knock-on – or 'domino' – effect on the other states, and eventually the entire region will be 'lost'. Emphasis is placed on the inevitability of this outcome, and that any 'domino', no matter its size or regional importance, can start this chain reaction. This theory was the main justification given by the U.S. for their involvement and later intervention in Vietnam. As with Eisenhower, all U.S. presidents who oversaw the war (Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon) publicly invoked the domino theory as their central reason for intervention.² In

² Examples are the following public statements. President Kennedy, 2 Sept. 1963: 'If we withdrew from Vietnam, the Communists would control Vietnam. Pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya would go.' President Johnson, 2 Aug. 1965: 'If this little nation goes down the drain and can't maintain her independence, ask yourself, what's going to happen to all the other little nations?'. President Nixon, 22 Mar. 1971:

charting its formation, this essay will argue that much of the lofty rhetoric used to justify the theory – such as a need to protect the freedoms of those peoples or nations at stake – was at odds with the historical record of the U.S., and were merely empty promises aimed at concealing the Washington's true concerns – the loss of markets and the welfare of its client states in the region. As the above quote from Cold War historian Gaddis notes, the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality of U.S. foreign policy are not an aberration but a 'defining characteristic of this nation's diplomacy'.

U.S. interventions have provoked much debate among Cold War historians and the Vietnam War is no exception.³ In the historiography, the key question regarding the domino

'If the United States now were to throw in the towel and come home and the Communists took over South Vietnam, then all over Southeast Asia, all over the Pacific, in the Mideast, in Europe, in the world, the United States would suffer a blow.' *Vietnam: a television history*, season 1, episode 1, 'roots of a war: 1945-1953', (4 Oct. 1983), PBS.

³ A note on terms: In normal cold war historiography, 'orthodox' historians generally rationalize, if not outright defend, U.S. interventions, while the 'revisionist' school generally seeks to prove that said intervention and its justifications were illegitimate. Implicit in the name, the orthodox school generally reflects the official government line in essence. In the historiography of the Vietnam War, however, the terms are in a sense reversed. 'Orthodox' historians attack the war and the U.S. motives for intervening, while their 'revisionist' counterparts seek to defend at least the motives and rationale for the war. Ian Horwood, review of Gary Hess, *Vietnam: explaining America's lost war* (Massachusetts, 2008), at *Reviews in history*, 31 Dec. 2008, (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/711>) (14 Aug. 2012).

theory as applied to Indochina is whether American officials conducted a rational assessment of their own interests before intervention.⁴ In the 'necessary war' argument put forward by revisionists, they contended that if Vietnam 'fell' to communism then America's international stature would be damaged and that catastrophic regional and geopolitical consequences would follow.⁵ Thus, they argued, American policy makers were correct in tying the fate of Vietnam to U.S. national security.

Orthodox historians counter that Washington miscalculated with regards to Vietnam.⁶ Vietnam was not Korea, and it was certainly not China. For a small backwater agrarian country of 15 million people, Vietnam took on a significance of international proportions.⁷ Further, George C. Herring contends that the U.S. misread nationalism in Vietnam and was ignorant of Vietnamese history (such as its long animosity with China) and therefore that containment was misapplied in Vietnam.⁸ Others authors have taken an even

⁴ G. R. Hess, *Vietnam: explaining America's lost war* (Oxford, 2009) p. 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37; p. 25; p. 18.

⁷ R. B. Smith, *An international history of the Vietnam war*, Vol. 1, p. 261, cited in Hess, *Vietnam*, p. 29.

⁸ George Herring, *America's longest war*, p. xiv, quoted in Hess, *Vietnam*, p. 38. Stanley Karnow confirms this analysis in *Vietnam: a history* (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 153.

more critical view. John Pilger contends that despite conventional wisdom, the U.S. was *not* defeated in Vietnam, and instead gained an important, albeit partial, victory. As U.S. policy makers at the time and afterwards have stated, Pilger claimed that Washington was not solely concerned with Vietnam alone, but also the surrounding region. He maintained that the U.S. was concerned both with the short-term and long-term 'threat' that Vietnam posed. The short-term concerned a country unwilling to be a client state, while the long-term was that of other nations trying to emulate such an approach. Thus, the U.S. did not 'lose', for the devastating effects it rained down upon Vietnam meant that their example was not emulated, evidence being the alignment to Washington of almost every other nation in the region.⁹ Similarly, Noam Chomsky asserts that the real threat posed by Indochina was the 'threat of a good example'. Like on countless other occasions, the U.S. intervened in Vietnam not because their national security was directly on the line, but because the example of an independent Vietnam might be emulated by Indonesia, Thailand and others, and thus a large, resource-rich, region of potential client states would be 'lost'.¹⁰ America's quest for open markets and access to resources would be

⁹ John Pilger, *Heroes* (London, 1989), p. 274.

¹⁰ Noam Chomsky, *What uncle Sam really wants* (Arizona, 1992), pp 23-5.

impeded, and this was not a practical option for policy makers in Washington.

Nineteenth-century American ideals such as 'manifest destiny' and the 'open door policy' were to have an important impact on Washington's actions in Asia during the immediate post-war period.¹¹ U.S. foreign policy, from the 1890s onwards, had often been concerned with keeping China 'open'. All the major European powers, including Russia, had access to China, and the U.S. wanted its share. Russia, which shared a long natural border with China and many other Asian states, was in a unique position to assert dominance over the continent. Washington would view Soviet Russia's post-war dominance over Eastern Europe as a precursor to what could happen in Asia, and with the 1949 communist victory in China these fears were further intensified.

Following the conclusion of World War II, the U.S. spoke publicly of the vital importance of self-determination and democratic elections. This rhetoric was largely aimed at

¹¹ The terms 'manifest destiny' and 'open door policy' in the Cold War setting refer to a renewed quest for 'empire', albeit now an economic rather than territorial one. Revisionist historiography led by William Appleman Williams claims that that the U.S.'s participation in the two world wars and much of their cold war activities was primarily and principally to keep economic 'doors' open, and not out of any lofty notions of combating tyranny and preserving 'freedom'. For a concise analysis of Williams' views see: Steven Hurst, *Cold war US foreign policy: key perspectives* (Edinburgh, 2005), pp 30–41.

Soviet Russia, attacking their actions in Eastern Europe in and after the war. Yet these appeals ring false when one examines the historical record of the U.S. Firstly, like Russia, the U.S. had its own 'sphere of influence' – Latin America – which through the Monroe Doctrine had been closed off to the European powers since 1823. Further, the U.S.'s actions in Europe cast doubt on their commitment to real post-war democracy. In Italy, for example, U.S. intelligence believed that the 1948 election would result in the *democratic* election of the main Italian communist party. A range of tactics was used to prevent this undesirable outcome, from threatening to withhold aid and exclude Italy from the Marshall Plan, to covert CIA operations. As a last resort, direct military intervention was not ruled out.¹² Elsewhere, the U.S. sponsored and directed coups against democratically elected governments, such as Iran in 1953 and Guatemala in 1954.¹³

Both the state of the U.S. economy and that of other nations were of huge concern to Washington. At the end of the war the U.S. economy was in a potentially strong state,

¹² E. T. Smith, 'United States security and the integration of Italy into the western bloc, 1947 – 49' in F. H. Heller and J. R. Gillingham (eds), *NATO: the founding of the Atlantic alliance and the integration of Europe* (New York, 1992), pp 81–4.

¹³ See: Ervand Abrahamian, 'The 1953 coup in Iran' in *Science & society*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), pp 182–215; R. H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: the foreign policy of intervention* (Austin, 1982).

holding 'three-fourths of [the world's] invested capital' and was the largest exporter of goods.¹⁴ On the domestic front, the administration of Harry Truman was keen to move past the 'boom and bust' economic cycles haunting America, most evident in the Great Depression. Thus, it was essential to have a healthy global economy, with markets available for U.S. goods, and access to cheap resources. The main way to ensure this around the globe was to have strong healthy economies in countries aligned to the U.S. Europe was in a precarious situation following the war. The U.S. sought to rebuild Western Europe, to ensure that America's most vital trading partner could pay back her war debts, be a potential market for U.S. goods, and to act as a bulwark against the Soviets. The Eastern states, which would have normally provided the cheap resources necessary for a Western European economic recovery, had all signed trade agreements with the U.S.S.R. Simultaneously, Washington worried that the worsening situation on the European continent would drive populations to the communist parties, as happened in Italy, and who would subsequently align themselves with Russia.¹⁵ While Europe was of primary importance, Asia equally had to be kept free

¹⁴ M. P. Leffler, *The preponderance of power: national security, the Truman administration, and the cold war* (California, 1992), p. 2.

¹⁵ Leffler, *The preponderance of power*, p. 7.

from domination by a hostile power.¹⁶ Seeing the loss of Eastern Europe as the cost of allying with Russia in the defeat of Germany, the U.S. was determined not to have the same fate recur with the war in the Pacific. Atomic weapons lessened America's reliance on the Soviet war machine, and they were able to conclude the war against Japan on their own, thus avoiding a repeat of Europe. A cornerstone of the thinking behind the domino theory was that Stalin's foreign policy was akin to that of Hitler's - one of continuous expansion.¹⁷ Walter LaFeber claims that this was a perfect example of using historical analogies to simplify arguments and distort reality. For the two foreign policies were certainly not analogous.¹⁸

In the midst of Stalin's and Churchill's famous Cold War declarations, a third and profoundly more influential declaration was made. George Kennan, then a little-known U.S. diplomat in Moscow, sent his infamous 'long telegram' to Washington in February 1946. In it, Kennan portrayed the Soviet leadership as paranoid, secretive, dedicated to undermining the West and to promoting groups in other

¹⁶ J. L. Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of postwar American national security policy*, (New York, 1982), p. 33.

¹⁷ Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the cold war, 1945-1996* (New York, 1997), p. 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 37-8.

nations that would serve Moscow's interests.¹⁹ He warned that the Russians were inherently expansionist and the likelihood of the Soviet leadership continuing the wartime alliance with the West was remote.²⁰ His views moulded the policy of containment and set the course for the new path in foreign policy enshrined in the Truman Doctrine and NSC-68.²¹

The U.S. realised that it was the threat of internal economic collapse in Europe, rather than any danger posed by the Red Army, that was the immediate post-war concern.²² Thus there was a need for massive economic and military aid to these nations – a difficult package to sell to a war-weary Congress and public. Truman needed a catalyst to get Republicans and the public behind him, which arrived in early 1947 when London abandoned its role as 'caretaker' of Turkey and Greece.²³ Truman could now argue that if Greece should fall into the Soviet sphere of influence, the harsh conditions in neighbouring countries coupled Soviet expansionism would

¹⁹ Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ['long telegram'], 22 Feb. 1946. Harry S. Truman administration file, Elsey papers.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kennan himself would later say that his theory of containment was misunderstood or misapplied – and the Soviet Union should only be confronted at areas of strategic importance to the U.S.

²² Leffler, *The preponderance of power*, p. 16; LaFeber, *Cold war*, p. 44.

²³ D. R. McCoy, *The presidency of Harry S. Truman* (Kansas, 1987), p. 305.

lead to the fall of other states in the Near East, Europe, Africa and so forth. U.S. access to the oil-rich Middle East would be lost, and the strategically important Turkey would be encircled by hostile communist states.

Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson had found their 'ideological shield' behind which the U.S. could rebuild the west and fight the radical left. Acheson was adamant that the importance of the economic factors of the doctrine be minimised. To acquire support, they would have to focus instead on notions of national security and the defence of 'freedom'.²⁴ Thus, the doctrine was framed in such a way that it would overcome resistance from the public or Republicans to renewed U.S. military and economic intervention abroad.²⁵ In Truman's speech to Congress, he painted the world in black and white. Demanding military and economic aid for Greece and Turkey, he spoke with fiery rhetoric of 'this moment in world history [when] every nation must choose between alternative ways of life'. Truman emphasised that it was the moral duty of the U.S. to provide military and economic aid to these 'free peoples' fighting against 'totalitarianism', and that if the U.S. failed to do so the impact would reverberate far

²⁴ B. R. Kuniholm, 'U.S. policy in the near East' in M. J. Lacey (ed.), *The Truman presidency* (New York, 1991), p. 305

²⁵ R. A. Pollard, 'The national security state reconsidered' in Lacey (ed.), *The Truman presidency*, p. 214.

beyond the Mediterranean.²⁶ Behind this idealistic language was a new approach in American foreign policy. It was aimed principally at arranging the post-war balance of power in Washington's favour. The biggest obstacle to this goal was now the only other world superpower, the Soviet Union.

It is important to note the context in which the announcements of the Truman Doctrine and of the domino theory were made. Truman made his speech at a time when Russian actions had become much less aggressive. The Soviets were biding their time, reasoning that the economic crisis in Europe would lead communist parties to sweep to power.²⁷ Similarly in the immediate run-up to Eisenhower's April 1954 press conference, Russia was again less aggressive in the foreign arena. Stalin had died in March 1953, and the politburo was busy concentrating on internal issues, and was not pursuing an antagonistic foreign policy. Additionally, the civil war in Greece was largely an internal affair, while Vietnam was chiefly an independence struggle. Yet both conflicts were misinterpreted as countries under attack from outside forces.²⁸

²⁶ Address of the president to congress, 'recommending assistance to Greece and Turkey', 12 Mar. 1947. Harry S. Truman administration, Elsemy papers.

²⁷ LaFeber, *Cold War*, pp 49-50.

²⁸ J. M. Silverman, 'The domino theory: alternatives to a self-fulfilling prophecy' in *Asian survey*, Vol. 15, No. 11 (Nov. 1975), p. 916.

The era of the late 1940s and early 1950s was marked by the collapse of colonialism throughout Asia and Africa. Emerging nations were poor, unstable and resentful of Western domination. The U.S. was historically aligned with Western Europe – the third world's colonial masters – and thus was seen in a suspicious light by many nationalist movements. While Washington did desire independence for the colonies, the reasons for seeking this were due to matters of *realpolitik* and not any notions of 'self-determination' or 'democracy'. Firstly, in the U.S. quest for free trade, Washington sought to break the relationships between colonisers and colonies in order to have better access to markets and raw materials. Secondly, and more importantly, was that the procrastination of the European colonial powers in granting independence was infuriating the colonised peoples. These delays were seen to be driving independence movements towards the Soviets. Thus, Washington wished to speed up the process of independence in order to increase the likelihood of amicable governments coming to power in the former colonies. Vietnamese independence leader Ho Chi Minh's frustration with America's double-standards was such that in a 1950 interview he argued that American 'imperialists' were seeking to eject the French colonialists simply in order to colonise Indochina

themselves.²⁹ Indeed the gap between the aims of the U.S. and that of the emerging nations was alluded to by Eisenhower himself when he claimed in a press conference that, for reasons he could not understand, the emerging nations of the third world didn't seem to want to buy the kind of independence that the U.S. was selling.³⁰

The National Security Council document NSC-68 of 1950 was a natural evolution of the containment policy, and would shape America's response to the Cold War for the subsequent decades.³¹ It called for a trebling of the defence budget, the establishment of N.A.T.O. and the re-arming of West Germany. It stated that in its quest for hegemony, that the U.S.S.R. sought total control over Europe and Asia.³² As with the Truman Doctrine, without an immediate threat of communist expansion Congress would prevent the proposed recommendations from being put into action. And so attention

²⁹ Ho Chi Minh's interview with Voice of Vietnam, *Vietnam News Agency*, 16 July 1950, quoted in K. C. Chen, 'Hanoi's three decisions and the escalation of the Vietnam war' in *Political science quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (summer, 1975), p. 242.

³⁰ 'I can't say that the associated states want independence in the sense that the United States is independent. I do not know what they want'. The president's news conference of 7 Apr. 1954, public papers of the presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954, pp 381-90.

³¹ LaFeber, *Cold war*, p. 95.

³² NSC 68: United States objectives and programs for national security, Apr. 14, 1950, U.S. department of state, *foreign relations of the United States: 1950*, volume I. (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/nsc-68/nsc68-1.htm>) (14 Aug. 2012).

was focused on Korea, and the apparent threat that it posed. Civil war had broken out in Korea in 1950 between the Soviet-controlled North and the American-controlled South. The U.S. was quick to intervene, under the auspices of the U.N.³³ With the arrival of the U.N/U.S. forces, the advancing North Korean troops were quickly pushed back. Stalin pressured the Chinese to get involved, and Chairman Mao convinced his weary colleagues to intervene in order to keep the 'American aggressors' in check.³⁴ Acheson, a firm believer in the effectiveness of brinkmanship, claimed that whatever risks the U.S. faced by entering into North Korea, they would be minimal in comparison to the loss of prestige that would certainly result if the U.S. showed any 'hesitation and timidity' in their actions.³⁵ Yet when America pursued the same headstrong and face-saving approach in Vietnam as it had done in Korea, the outcome would prove disastrous.³⁶

³³ J. G. Hershberg and Chen Jian, 'Reading and warning the likely enemy: China's signals to the United States about Vietnam in 1965' in *The international history review*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Mar. 2005), p. 48.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁵ Acheson cited in Hershberg and Chen, 'Reading and warning the likely enemy', p. 51.

³⁶ Dennis Merrill, 'The Truman doctrine: containing communism and modernity' in *Presidential studies quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, presidential doctrines (Mar. 2006), p. 36.

Washington's approach to Vietnam was further influenced by the NSC document 124/2.³⁷ Written in the midst of the Korean War, it stated that the objective of the U.S. in relation to Southeast Asia must be to prevent countries in the region from 'falling' to communism. As the communist threat was deemed to be internal as well as external, the document not only recommended providing these countries with the means to fight communism - military and economic aid - but also the need to foster the will to fight communism, indicating perhaps that there was not much organic resistance. The NSC claimed that the 'loss' of all of Southeast Asia would have devastating effects on America's allies in the region - principally Japan - and that American security would be at risk with the loss of a major bloc like Asia. Further, they feared that while regions like Australasia might not become communist themselves, they would be forced to 'align' themselves to these communist countries. But where the document seems to exhibit irrationality is when it claims that the loss of any country in the region would quickly and invariably lead to all others following suit. Thus, in their

³⁷ NSC 124/2, 'United States objectives and courses of action with respect to southeast Asia', *The pentagon papers*, gravel edition, volume 1, document 20, US, national security council, 16 Jan. 1954, pp. 434-43. (<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc13.htm>) (14 Aug. 2012).

analysis, the fate of Vietnam contained the fate of the 'free world'.

Another major factor in the development of the Cold War was the 'New Look' policies of Eisenhower - president from 1953. It has been claimed that while the Cold War started under the Truman administration, it was Eisenhower who was to give shape to the U.S. response that would be continued for over three decades.³⁸ Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had advised Eisenhower that the Truman's approach to the Cold War was economically unfeasible and that a new strategy was needed - containment 'on the cheap'.³⁹ This strategy, named 'New Look', kept in line with older approaches and stressed the importance of stopping Soviet expansion and hostility. Drawing from his World War II experiences and successes, Eisenhower realised he would need to act in concert with allies - both to lessen the burden on the U.S. and to counter any appearances of unilateral imperialism. 'New Look' policy called for a shrinking of conventional troops, while increasing reliance on air force and the use of strategic weapons. Thus, Eisenhower sought to replace limited wars with the threat of more devastating ones. Leaving alone the gains already made

³⁸ R. R. Bowie and R. H. Immerman, *Waging peace: how Eisenhower shaped an enduring cold war strategy* (New York, 1998), p. 3.

³⁹ R. A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the cold war* (New York, 1981), p. 13.

by the U.S.S.R., he sought to deter the Soviets from making any further headway.⁴⁰

Eisenhower and Dulles sought to contain the revolutionaries in Vietnam, but the U.S. experience in Korea had left open war as an unattractive option. It had been a difficult war to fight – both on the ground and at home.⁴¹ Despite recent successes with CIA-backed coups in Iran and Guatemala, Eisenhower and Dulles were not convinced that these would have the same success in Vietnam. Thus, they sought a new approach to dealing with the ‘threat’ posed by Indochina.⁴² The first part of this new approach was the process of sending military advisors to train native troops, starting ‘Vietnamization’ a generation before Nixon.⁴³ The second was the search for allies in the fight against communism in Southeast Asia. The NSC had made clear that a ‘coalition of the willing’ with their European and Australasian allies would be needed. Yet this coalition was simply the preferred option, and unilateral action – in the case of a Chinese invasion of Indochina, for instance – was always left on the table.

⁴⁰ Divine, *Eisenhower*, p. 37.

⁴¹ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging peace*, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³ LaFeber, *Cold War*, p. 153.

The catalyst for this new approach was the French demonstrating their intentions to pull out of Indochina at the Geneva Conference of 1954. The French had been fighting the Vietminh since the end of World War II, but after the Dienbienphu crisis it was clear that they could no longer stay the course.⁴⁴ Thus Dulles, in keeping with Eisenhower’s views, the recommendations proposed by NSC-124/2, and the lessons of the Korean War, advocated ‘United Action’.

United Action proposed a collation of European, Asian and Australasian allies that would defend Indochina and the region from the threat of communism.⁴⁵ Dulles saw in United Action the threat of deterrence – that the very formation of such a coalition would be enough to alarm the communists and keep them in check.⁴⁶ Although Congress agreed in principle with Dulles and Eisenhower’s position, they were weary of another unilateral outing like Korea and thus insisted on a coalition, of which Britain would have to play a central role. But united action didn’t materialise, as London favoured a negotiated settlement and the French were against the

⁴⁴ G. C. Herring and R. H. Immerman, ‘Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: ‘The day we didn’t go to war’ revisited’ in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Sept. 1984), p. 345.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁴⁶ Herring and Immerman, ‘Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu’, p. 350.

internationalisation of the conflict. With military action now technically off the table, and with the partition of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference, Washington was left with one course of action. In order to stop the dominos falling it pledged diplomatic, economic and military support to the newly created puppet state of South Vietnam in its fight against communism. And so commenced Washington's two-decade long campaign of war and oppression against Vietnam, a campaign whose unimaginably devastating effects are still being felt long after the last U.S. troops left Saigon.

While the domino theory has been invoked before and after Vietnam, it is clear that its legacy within U.S. foreign policy is intrinsically linked to that intervention. The domino theory was shaped by the events of 1945-1954, and the various crises served to shape and reinforce the theory that was to be applied to Vietnam. The events in this time period bolstered policy makers' belief in the theory and, most importantly, the universality of its application. If Vietnam had achieved independence from France and had elected a communist government before the events of 1945-1954, the U.S., while no doubt viewing the situation with concern, would have been unlikely to tie the fate of the region and indeed U.S. national security to this globally insignificant nation. But through a process of viewing the Soviet Union as incessantly expansionist, misreading local conflicts as examples of that

expansionism, and of tying major policy changes to efforts to combat these local conflicts, U.S. policy makers succeeded in convincing themselves that, at the end of the day, the fates of Vietnam and U.S. national security were linked, and that impeding this nationalist independence movement would be a blow against tyranny. While this interpretation of how the U.S. got involved in Vietnam is essentially true, it does not, however, reveal the full picture. U.S. security was tied into Vietnam, but not merely for reasons of combating Soviet expansionism. It is clear from various examples - Italy (1948), Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954) - that the U.S. actively worked to prevent countries' democratic ambitions being realised if those ambitions did not fit into America's world view. The rhetoric of the domino theory was enshrined in a language that gave the impression of seeking to protect democracy in Southeast Asia. Yet, the reality was that the real 'threat' posed by Vietnam was that of the example it would set to other emerging nations in the region and around the globe. If communists came to power in Vietnam democratically - which the U.S. reasonably feared they would if elections were held - and not through violent revolution as was the case in Russia and China, it would be the first such event and would be a powerful precedent. This would mean that Vietnam would be avowedly outside of U.S. influence, while not necessarily being a satellite state of the Soviet Union either. If successful

in their independence struggle in the 1950s, the Vietnamese would have provided a model to Thailand, to Indonesia, to Malaysia, and beyond. Asia may indeed have been 'lost', but not in the way that policy makers articulated, and not in a way that could be promoted to either Congress or the public. This was a risk that the U.S. were not willing to take and the domino theory provided them with a simple, mostly believable and generally accessible justification for their actions.