

**Lesson  
24****Challenges to US Authority  
internationally, early 1960s****Aims**

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to:

- look at challenges to American power in the early 60s
- explore the legacy of crises over Berlin and relations with Khrushchev
- analyse the challenge of Castro's Cuba
- account for America's deepening involvement in Vietnam

**Context**

Before and after JFK's untimely death in 1963, the United States continued to face a number of major challenges in terms of international relations.



Please read Ch. 10 of Stacey alongside this lesson.



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## The legacy of crises over Berlin and relations with Khrushchev

As you know, Kennedy became President shortly after the disastrous U-2 mission. Relationships with Khrushchev therefore could have been fairly tense. Furthermore, in contrast to Eisenhower who wanted to end the Cold War, JFK wanted to fight it. He was quick to raise the defence budget. In his inauguration speech, he pronounced: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." Interestingly Kennedy's thesis at Harvard had been on the topic of Appeasement at the Munich Conference (1938) so he clearly had a deep-seated interest!

Khrushchev, however, sent a message to JFK to congratulate him on his election and the two men exchanged a few further messages. There was talk of a meeting and this happened in April 1961, in Vienna. This meeting has been seen as a disaster for Kennedy. He was inexperienced and weak. Khrushchev was able to talk over him and wear him down. Discussions about Berlin were quickly shot down by Khrushchev.

### Berlin: Part 3 – The Berlin Wall, 1961

You may like to refer back to earlier lessons on international relations to remind yourself of the situation in Berlin at this time.

In the summer of 1961, Khrushchev talked to the new American president John F. Kennedy about the Americans withdrawing from Berlin. JFK refused. By August 1961, the Berlin Wall was being put up – the Soviets were determined to stop people moving across to the West. "A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war," a defeated Kennedy admitted to aides.

### Significance

- Khrushchev felt that he had defeated Kennedy and the Americans by building the Berlin Wall.
- East Germans felt let down and betrayed by the Soviets (for building the wall) and by the West (for doing nothing to stop it).
- The thaw in the relations was over – the superpowers were at conflict once more.

**Activity 1**

Find out more about the Berlin Wall. Ask friends and family if they have memories of it. It was very traumatic for people of Berlin who suddenly found themselves cut off from relatives who lived on other sides of the city. Do some internet research, read the notes above and ask people and then answer these questions:



1. Why was the Berlin Wall built?
2. What impact did the Wall have on the lives of people in Berlin?
3. What impact did the Wall have on the Cold War?

## The Challenge of Castro's Cuba

### The Cuban Missile Crisis

It is thought that the closest the world has ever come to nuclear destruction was in October 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. America and the Soviet Union both had nuclear missiles aimed at each other and both were threatening to strike. How did this happen – and how was nuclear crisis averted?

### Cuba

Cuba is a small island 90 miles off the coast of Cuba. In the first half of the twentieth century it had very strong links with the US and Americans used it for trade, industry and vacations. The US, as the stronger power, took advantage of Cuba's weaker position and dominated most of Cuba's industry.

In 1959 Fidel Castro successfully overthrew the military dictator Batista. Castro had lots of support from many different parts of Cuban society and he quickly established his leadership.



Castro (left) stood for independent nationalism and as such he wanted to reduce Cuba's ties with America. He cut off diplomatic relations with the US and nationalised some of the US industries. When the US stopped trading arms with Cuba, he turned to the Soviet Union for support. The Soviet Union started buying Cuban sugar (which had previously been sold to the US) and starting supplying missiles and arms to Cuba. At the end of 1961 the Americans' worst fears were confirmed when Castro announced that he was a Communist.

### **The Bay of Pigs**

In April 1961 the CIA in the US helped about 1500 Cuban exiles in their attempts to storm Cuba and overthrow Castro. The rebels landed at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba with some military support and money from the US, but the attempt was a disaster. The rebels were quickly defeated and John F. Kennedy (who people knew had supported the rebels) was humiliated. The Americans had hoped that ordinary Cuban people would step forward and join the rebels but it seemed that many Cubans were happy with the new regime.

### **Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis**

In 1962, the world was on the brink of nuclear war. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1962, America flew spy planes over Cuba and they noticed that there were Soviet missiles on the island. Kennedy was gravely concerned that a Communist ally with nuclear weapons was now so close to America. He introduced an air and sea blockade on Cuba and insisted that the missiles be removed.



**Kennedy and Khrushchev, the year before the crisis in 1961**



This is a British map from 1962 which shows how close America is to Cuba and can thus be used to estimate the extent of damage which would be caused by nuclear weapons being dispatched from Cuba. The map showed that a number of American cities could be easily devastated if a missile was launched from Cuba.

**Activity 2**

Look carefully at the map. Can you find Cuba, Washington and New York? What would you do now if you were Kennedy?



## October 1962

Kennedy got a group of senior advisers together and they agonised over what to do. They decided not to invade, in the fear that that might spark a battle. This is what happened:

- 14<sup>th</sup> October - US spy planes spots missiles on Cuba
- 22<sup>nd</sup> October - Kennedy makes a television address explaining what has happened and explains that the US are introducing a naval blockade around Cuba (so no ships can get there). The blockade will not be removed until the missiles are.
- 26<sup>th</sup> October - Khrushchev writes to JFK explaining that he will remove the missiles *if* JFK removes the blockade.
- 27<sup>th</sup> October - Before JFK can respond to that letter he receives another one from Khrushchev. Now the Soviets are demanding that the US also remove *their* missiles from Turkey (which borders Soviet Union).
- 28<sup>th</sup> October - At the advice of his brother Robert, Kennedy ignores the second letter and writes to Khrushchev accepting the conditions of the first letter.

The Soviet Union removes their missiles from Cuba. The US is not forced to remove her missiles from Turkey (nor is she brought up on the fact that she had spy planes over Cuba!) Nuclear crisis is averted and JFK is presented as a hero.

Thus after thirteen days, Khrushchev backed down and agreed to remove the weapons. Although the incident was probably the closest the world came to nuclear war, it did actually improve relations in the Cold War. A direct phone line between the Kremlin and the White House was introduced subsequently to keep the countries talking, and the two sides signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty the following year.

In the week after Kennedy's death, his widow wrote to President Khrushchev of Russia to thank his for his condolences:

"Dear Mr Chairman-President,

I would like to thank you for sending Mr Milioyan as your representative to my husband's funeral...You and he were adversaries but you were allies in your determination not to

let the world be blown up...I read that she [Mrs Khrushchev] had tears in her eyes as she was coming out of the American Embassy in Moscow after signing the book of condolences. Please tell her 'thank you' for this."

## Deepening Involvement in Vietnam

### President JF Kennedy and Vietnam

As you will know from our earlier lessons, Kennedy inherited the problem of Vietnam from his predecessors. The U.S had maintained a presence in Vietnam for a number of years in an attempt to keep Communism out. Kennedy felt he could not be the president to lose Vietnam to the Communists, so he kept up the presence. Events, however, were escalating. In December 1961, there were only 3000 U.S 'advisors' (military personnel) in Vietnam. The following summer, there were 12,000. By 1963, some low-key protests against the war in Vietnam were beginning to take place in America. The real trouble, however, was yet to start.

Far from pursuing peace agreements in his Foreign Policy, Kennedy was determined to maintain the fight against what most Americans saw as the rising tide of communism in the world.



Some historians have speculated that President Kennedy would have withdrawn US troops from Vietnam if he had been re-elected as President in 1964. There is no significant evidence for this claim. In fact, all the indications from 1961-1963 are of a President strongly focused on US involvement in Vietnam. The main problems the Kennedy administration faced in Vietnam were twofold: there was the increasing success of the Vietcong guerrillas in the south, despite the deployment of extensive US military assistance to suppress them, as well as the growing unpopularity of the corrupt regime of President Diem in South Vietnam.

### Source A

Given his belief in the global struggle between east and west, his acceptance of the domino theory, his conviction that Vietnam was the testing ground for combating 'wars of national liberation,' his often zealous commitment to counterinsurgency, and his determination to never appear soft on communism, Jack might well have been compelled, as conditions worsened, to commit more American troops to Vietnam. It is clear that his harsh public rhetoric made disengagement more difficult. And his clumsy and unprincipled acquiescence in the coup tied the United States closely to the eight military governments that briefly succeeded Diem.

Thomas Reeves (JFK's Biographer) 1991

## Source B

### National Security Action Memorandum No. 12

Washington, February 6, 1961.

Source: Department of State. Presumably the memorandum is from the President.

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL LEMNITZER

Is it possible for us to distribute the available forces we now have in Vietnam more effectively in order to increase the effectiveness of anti-guerrilla activities? Are there troops stationed along the border who could be made available for this activity? It is my recollection that the Vietnam army now numbers 150,000, and that we are planning to add 20,000 more, making a total of 170,000. Reports are that the guerrillas number from 7,000 to 15,000. I would think that the redistribution of available forces immediately would make them more effective in this work and we would not have to wait for action during the training period of the new troops. Would you give me your judgment on this when next we meet?

### Activity 3

What does Source B suggest to you about a) President Kennedy's active involvement in directing the fighting in Vietnam and b) The military concerns about the increasing success of the Vietcong guerrillas?



## Diem's Corruption



President Diem's regime was widely known to be deeply corrupt, and this reputation was not helped by the number of influential positions Diem (left) gave to members of his own family. He was himself a devout Catholic in a country that was overwhelmingly Buddhist. He shared his religious beliefs with President Kennedy, but knew very well that his regime could only survive with US military and economic support. As the Viet Cong appeared to be flourishing in rural South Vietnam and was supported by many villagers, the US was happy to increase military assistance as well as aid economic development in the region. When it came to South Vietnam, the price of rice became as important as the number of US military advisers.



Despite public optimism on the part of some American officials, British, French and Canadian diplomats found American confidence in an early military victory and popular support for Diem misplaced. Despite its reservations, however, the Kennedy administration found the alternative of a communist victory intolerable.

Mitchell K. Hall, 2007

## Source C

### Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State


Washington, February 21, 1961

*Source: Department of State, Central Files, 751K.00/2-2161. Secret. A summary of the conversation was transmitted to Saigon in telegram.*

After stating that the nadir might have been passed during the last month or two, Mr. Wood spoke of the repeated suggestions which Ambassador Durbrow had made on the subject of liberalization, indicating that while the Vietnamese were well aware of our views, we would continue to keep this subject alive. However, there was some feeling that certain Western observers, especially newspapermen, tended to over-stress the question of liberalizing the regime. There were other illiberal regimes in Asia. While it was perhaps more important for President Diem to establish a better "dialogue" with his people, the main problem in Viet-Nam appeared to be the Communist threat. As to liberalization, we had noted some responsiveness on President Diem's part; the National Assembly was playing a somewhat greater role and the press occasionally gave voice to cautious criticism.

As to security, we had recently put forward to the Vietnamese Government a plan which had been carefully worked out by our various specialists and had been approved in Washington at a very high level. In general this plan called for certain changes in the Vietnamese Government which would increase its efficiency in dealing with the Communists and envisaged increasing the Vietnamese armed forces by 20,000 men. Certain parts of the plan had already been adopted, such as our training program for the Civil Guard. We had recently explained this plan to President Diem. In addition to requiring a great deal of cooperation on both sides, it would also cost the Vietnamese a good deal of their own money. We felt that their economy was capable of meeting these additional expenses. President Diem had not been sure of this when the plan was explained to him. For the present the plan was being studied by the Vietnamese Government. It did not seem profitable to go into detail on the plan until agreement had been reached with the Vietnamese.

*Chalmers B Wood, The State Department, Vietnamese Affairs, 1961*

<b>Activity 4</b>	<p>In Source C, Chalmers B. Wood acknowledges that Diem's regime has many failings. List the factors, in order of importance, that he gives for continuing to support Diem. Explain the reasons for your choices.</p>
	

## The 'Strategic Hamlets' Programme

The solution to the problem of increasing support for the Vietcong in the villages of South Vietnam proposed by the Kennedy administration was the 'Strategic Hamlets' programme. This was an attempt to isolate rural peasants from the contact and influence of the Vietcong. Forced population transfer was often involved, and many people moved to large fortified villages in remote rural areas. This programme built on an earlier scheme launched in 1959 which involved the building of 'agrovilles'. The plan was also based in part on a similar plan implemented by the British, designed to suppress communist insurgency in Malaya in 1948. By 1960, there were twenty-three of these agrovilles, and each was home to many thousands of people.

When it came to planning the Strategic Hamlets programme, it was decided that the agrovilles had been too large, and that smaller settlements were required. In 1961, at the urging of the US, the programme was launched. The idea was to channel US economic aid through these villages, and so win the population round and enlist their support in fighting off the Vietcong.

By September 1962, according to official US figures, over 4.3 million people were housed in 3,225 completed hamlets. By July 1963, these staggering numbers had doubled, according to the Vietnam press, to 8.5 million people and 7,205 hamlets. The Strategic Hamlets was a massive and expensive building programme. Each settlement was to be defended by the hamlet community and a national force, and was to have a radio link with the next town.

There were, however, significant problems with the programme. The very speed of the growth of the plan was itself a major factor. Although the hamlets were smaller than the agrovilles had been, the implementation of the plan still required forced population movement, which was deeply unpopular. Many villagers resented

being forced from their homes and given no choice but to be herded like cattle to new settlements. The hamlets themselves were often poorly defended, and were vulnerable to Vietcong infiltration after nightfall. It is estimated that only twenty percent of the hamlets in the Mekong Delta area were still under government control by the end of 1963. In the US, this was attributed to the growing unpopularity of the Diem regime and the unrealistic optimism of its government. In late 1963, the Strategic Hamlets programme collapsed with the assassination of President Diem.

### Source D

... strategic hamlets represented the basic elements in the war undertaken by our people against our three enemies: communism, discord, and underdevelopment. In this concept they also represent foundation of the Vietnamese society where values are reassessed according the personalist revolution where social, cultural, and economic reform will improve the living conditions of the large working class down to the remotest village.

President Diem, Speech April 1962

### Source E

It is dangerous in my village because the civil guard from the district headquarters cross the river to the village only in the daytime... leaving the village unprotected at night. The village people have no protection from the Vietcong (NLF) so they will not inform on them to the authorities.

Resident of Vinh-Long hamlet

### Activity 5

Study Sources D and E. Prepare an honest US assessment in 1963 of the Strategic Hamlets programme, giving credit to the thinking behind the plan, but being realistic about its shortcomings in practice.



## The Assassination of President Diem and President Kennedy

President Diem survived an attempted coup in 1960, but by mid-1963 it was increasingly clear to his US supporters that his regime was running out of time. Not only was it unpopular, it was also viewed as undemocratic and corrupt and was failing to stem the tide of communist insurgency sweeping from the north.

When Henry Cabot took over as new US ambassador in Saigon in August 1963, ARVN Generals gave him warning of their imminent coup against President Diem. On November 1<sup>st</sup>, the coup was launched. President Kennedy offered Diem a safe passage out of Vietnam. However, Diem was executed along with his brother Nhu the following day. The former Presidential Military Advisor General Duong Van Minh replaced him as Head of State.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1963, just 20 days after Diem's assassination, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. While these two Presidents were assassinated within a few weeks of each other, they have little in common and are regarded as purely coincidental. The impact of both deaths did however, have a significant impact on the course of the war in Vietnam.

The US government had known there would be a coup against President Diem in Vietnam before it had occurred. The US Ambassador there had been informed confidentially by General Minh of the planned action as early as August 1963. Lt Colonel **Lucien Conein** was the main CIA contact with ARVN (South Vietnamese Army). It has been said that he delivered \$42,000 to General Minh shortly before the coup, indicating that the US directly financed the coup which led to the assassination of President Diem.

Conein acted as the main liaison officer with the plotters of the coup, although it is unclear whether the US wanted the death of Diem or merely his removal. President Kennedy was said to be shocked when news of the violent deaths of Diem and his brother reached Washington. He had expected that Diem and his family would leave Vietnam in safety, but the US was clearly implicated in the coup, regardless of how much or how little Kennedy might have been personally involved.



For a while, **General Ho Chi Minh** (left) claimed that Diem had committed suicide in a church, but few believed this to be true, and when a photograph of the bloodied bodies of Diem and his brother Nhu in the back of an APC with their hands still tied behind their backs was published by *Time* magazine, the caption read almost as a rhetorical question; 'Suicide – with their hands tied'.



The body of Diem, executed on the way to military headquarters during the coup of 1963. This photograph was published in *Time* magazine and counteracted the official line given by General Minh that the leader had committed suicide.

### The Effects of Diem's Assassination

In the short-term, the consequences of Diem's violent death were centred upon the damage the event did to the international reputation of the US, which was certainly implicated in the murder. In the long-term, the most important effect of this assassination was the removal of President Diem's regime in Southern Vietnam. This ushered in a series of unstable and short-lived military successors, the weaknesses of whom led directly to further US involvement in Vietnam. More and more troops were poured into the country on the orders of Kennedy's successor, President Lyndon Johnson. It is likely that such US commitment would have been decided upon even if Diem had not been assassinated and had instead been allowed a peaceful exit from Vietnam.

### Conclusion – Kennedy and Vietnam

Kennedy's determination to fight communism wherever in the world it appeared, was never seriously questioned. In his inaugural speech in Washington, January 1961, he had pledged to 'pay any price' in the war against communism. Much impressed by the success of Britain in defeating a communist insurgency in Malaya in 1948, he adapted some of the tactics used there into the Strategic Hamlets programme, and the use of Special Forces.

Kennedy saw the US Green Berets as a key asset and was keen to use them. Thus the death and destruction in Vietnam continued long after his assassination.