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"Our equivalent of guerrilla warfare": Walt Rostow and the Bombing of North Vietnam, 1961–1968

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Abstract

This article examines the contribution that Walt Rostow made to the shaping of U.S. military strategy during the second Indochina War. It links Rostow's work as an economic historian with the advice that he dispensed in the field of strategic bombing. In 1964, Rostow explained to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that "Ho [Chi Minh] has an industrial complex to protect: he is no longer a guerrilla fighter with nothing to lose." Rostow's economic determinism led him to advocate the bombing of North Vietnam more forcefully than any of his civilian colleagues.

WALT W. Rostow was the most aggressive civilian member of the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations with respect to the most vexing foreign policy issue of the day: how to confront the Vietnamese Civil War. Rostow was the first civilian to advise President Kennedy to deploy U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam, and the first to provide a rationale for the U.S. bombing campaign that Lyndon Johnson later followed. Rather than serving primarily as a muscular advocate of Third World development, as his background as an economic historian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) seemed to portend, Rostow was one of the chief architects of America's worst-ever military defeat. He contributed profoundly to a conflict that tore gaping holes in America's societal fabric, undermined trust in the government, and prematurely ended a presidency. Former Undersecretary of the Air

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Force Townsend Hoopes later described Rostow as "a fanatic in sheep's clothing."[1]

The colorful intensity of Hoopes's description leads us to an obvious question: how could a world-renowned expert on development policy come to recommend the bombing of North Vietnam with such vigor and certainty? Ostensibly the answer "cold war exigency" is sufficient—and it is important to note that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were staffed almost wholly by "liberal," yet resolute, cold warriors—but the sources that informed Rostow's rationale require more nuanced attention. The central contention of this paper is that the determinism implicit in Rostow's theory of economic growth gave sustenance to his later belief that bombing North Vietnam could defeat the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. Here it is possible to trace continuity between Rostow's academic work, designed to facilitate economic development in the Third World, and the advice he dispensed in the field of strategic bombing.

It was in 1960, with the publication of *Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, that Rostow presented his response to the communist challenge in the Third World.[2] Rostow's magnum opus expressed certainty that all nations pass through five stages of economic growth and that communism was assuredly not the final stage, as Karl Marx contended, but merely a parasitic, if troublesome, infection. Rostow argued that America alone possessed the capacity to guide developing countries towards the liberal-capitalist endpoint that he described unromantically as the "age of mass consumption." But ironically, Rostow's "stages of economic growth" were little more than Marx's dynamic of historical materialism with a happier, capitalist ending. His was a model informed by economic determinism. Rostow envisaged what would happen theoretically (and, in his mind, inevitably) but failed to appreciate the circumstances particular to those countries that his model purported to address. Vietnam became the most significant case in point.

Rostow's illustrious European progenitors in the field of social development included Marx, Charles Darwin, and Max Weber. One can even trace his intellectual inspiration to the luminaries of the Scottish Enlightenment: to Adam Smith, in particular. It is in the specific universalistic tradition of *histoire raisonée*, however, that Rostow's analysis can be most accurately placed. The *histoire raisonée* movement of the

1. Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention: An Inside Account of How the Johnson Policy of Escalation in Vietnam Was Reversed* (New York: Davis McKay, 1969), 61.

2. Walt Rostow, *Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

nineteenth century aimed to discern a universal process of development through which humankind and history proceeded. Historian D. Michael Shafer describes the tradition as "a logical construct, deduced from a set of universal axioms abstracted from the realm of human and temporal contingencies."[3] In other words, the movement sought to impose a linear order on the course of human history. The basic problem, however, was that such an approach—and Rostow's *Stages* model in particular—explained what ought to happen, and failed to consider what might happen due to unforeseen circumstances. Nationalism and human agency play little part in Rostow's story of nations being driven through history by the unquenchable drive to industrialize.

Thus, central to Rostow's thesis was the presupposition that the leaders of nations hold the health of their economies as their overwhelming preoccupation in peace and war; without such reasoning, the engine of growth would inevitably stall. The driving force behind contemporary history is the aspiration of poorer countries to attain the levels of wealth enjoyed by those in the West. It follows that to threaten a nation's economy would constitute coercion of the highest order. As a modernization theorist, Rostow believed that to attack the nascent trappings of modernity, and the infrastructural means through which modernity could be achieved, would impose an unbearable burden on any leader. As Rostow would later explain to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, when justifying the use of U.S. airpower against North Vietnam, "Ho [Chi Minh] has an industrial complex to protect: he is no longer a guerrilla fighter with nothing to lose."[4]

Rostow's rationale assumed that the priorities of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh were the same as his own, namely that the pursuit of economic growth was the overwhelming consideration in peace and war. Rostow believed that the North Vietnamese leadership would cave in to American military pressure in order to save its fledgling industrial base. In ascribing such motives to North Vietnam, Rostow failed to appreciate the longevity and obduracy of an ideology—nationalism—not beholden to the economic sources that informed his own. Specific case studies, beyond the central emulative example of the British industrial revolution, were ignored. His overarching theory—and the assumption that valueless, rigorous scholarship sustained it—was, in the words of Emile Durkheim, "like a veil drawn between the thing and ourselves,

3. D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counter-Insurgency Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 95.

4. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 13 February 1964, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 1, *Vietnam, 1964* (Washington: GPO, 1992), 72–74. (Hereafter cited as *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964)*

concealing from us more successfully as we think it more transparent."[5]

Histories of the Vietnam War are legion, and this article's relationship to the existing literature requires some elaboration. In 1972 David Halberstam presented his critically and popularly acclaimed analysis of Kennedy's and Johnson's key foreign policy advisers. The *New York Times* journalist sardonically tagged this group *The Best and the Brightest*, who "for all their brilliance and hubris had been swept forward by anti-communism and by the sense of power and glory, omnipotence and omniscience of America in this century."[6] Halberstam's richly detailed book identifies why ostensibly brilliant men could dispense advice of such shortsightedness that it resulted in military defeat for the world's preeminent nation. For all their intellectual attributes, Halberstam argues that each man—Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Walt Rostow—was blindly beholden to Cold War dogma. None was intellectually equipped to question the axioms of superpower rivalry—to repulse communist advances wherever they arose—and so each urged the pursuit of that most formidable task: the creation of a sustainable South Vietnam. That same year, Frances Fitzgerald complemented Halberstam's analysis with *Fire in the Lake*, an eloquent explanation of how America's most-talented sons could so misread Southeast Asia. Fitzgerald argues powerfully that these individuals had no understanding of Vietnamese history—a history that virtually assured the triumph of the communist revolution.[7]

Halberstam's thesis has stood the test of time. Who now doubts that "clever" advisers can come a cropper when infused by undue confidence? Yet Halberstam's analysis of the Vietnam War discusses Rostow only intermittently, focusing most of his attention on the foreign policy trinity of Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Dean Rusk. Other eminent scholars of the Vietnam War have also followed the same path. George Herring's *America's Longest War,* Larry Berman's *Planning a Tragedy,* Brian Van De Mark's *Into the Quagmire,* and Robert Schulzinger's *A Time for War* all tend to underestimate the influence that Rostow exerted on U.S. policy toward the Vietnam War in the 1960s.[8] To some degree, it is understandable that Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara con-

5. Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 15.

6. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 655.

7. Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

8. See George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Random House, 1972); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1982); Brian Van De

tinue to dominate the historiography, since they held the three most significant foreign policy positions during Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1965. But Walt Rostow has been unduly neglected. This is a man, after all, who also held key positions under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson: first as McGeorge Bundy's deputy at the National Security Council (January-November 1961), second as Chairman of the Policy Planning Council at the State Department (November 1961–March 1966), and finally as President Johnson's National Security Adviser outright (April 1966–January 1969).

Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara were all present at the key escalatory discussions of the Vietnam War, and each put forward a forceful case for Americanizing the conflict. But these men were managers, not creators. From where did the ideas they put forth originate? It will be argued here that it was Walt Rostow who provided both a compelling rationale for escalating the Vietnam War, and the most influential blueprint for "victory." Historian John Prados writes that "McNamara mostly responded to proposals brought to him by others . . . it was civilian strategists such as Rostow, or military commanders such as [William C.] Westmoreland, who were the innovators and initiators. . . . There is responsibility enough for Vietnam that can be shared."[9] In that spirit, this study intends to share out the responsibility a bit more, not foist it all on Rostow's shoulders.

Delineating the vast historiography of the Vietnam War is an exacting process.[10] Fortunately, the literature pertinent to Walt Rostow's direct contribution takes less time to cover. John Prados's *Keeper of the Keys* analyzes Rostow's contribution to U.S. foreign policymaking in more depth than any other historical account of the events of the 1960s.[11] While the analysis is insightful, his treatment is necessarily limited. Prados's intention is to write a substantial history of the office of

Mark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991); and Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

9. John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 375.

10. The air war in Vietnam has received substantial attention in the historiography, although Rostow's role in shaping it has gone relatively unnoticed. The best single-volume account remains Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989); but also see James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); John Schlight, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia. The War in Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive, 1965–1968* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1988); and Donald J. Mrozek, *Air Power and the Ground War in Vietnam: Ideas and Actions* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1989).

11. John Prados, *The Keeper of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (Scranton, Pa.: William Morrow and Sons, 1991).

National Security Adviser, and in that, he succeeds. Yet Rostow spent much of his foreign policy career at the Policy Planning Council at the State Department. This significant chapter in Rostow's career is one that necessarily does not fit into Prados's analysis.

By contrast, David Kaiser's *American Tragedy* focuses impressively on Rostow's profound influence in 1961, but his account does not extend significantly beyond the Kennedy years.[12] John Lewis Gaddis's *Strategies of Containment* identifies Rostow as the intellectual force behind the creation of "flexible response," but then omits his contribution to America's war in Southeast Asia.[13] The significant literature pertaining to the Vietnam War fails to appreciate the extent of Rostow's contribution to its making. Most accounts of the Americanization of the Vietnam War discuss the Taylor-Rostow report of November 1961, which urged the deployment of U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam, and Rostow's predictable bellicosity following his appointment as National Security Adviser in April 1966. But no one has yet presented a comprehensive account of Rostow's foreign policy career as a whole—no one, in other words, has yet joined the dots.

During the pursuit of this task, it has become apparent that Rostow's contribution to the making of the Vietnam War was more significant than has hitherto been appreciated. Most histories of the Vietnam War concur with the thesis that Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk advised that the United States should resist communism in Southeast Asia for reasons of international credibility, that the reality of the domino theory—if one nation falls to communism, its neighbor will soon follow—was an accepted fact amongst America's foreign policy elite. Frederik Logevall's *Choosing War* has deftly shown that the issue of *domestic* credibility was in many respects an equally compelling source.[14] But Rostow provided a case for military escalation that was informed and justified by his celebrated exposition on the future course of world history—one that claimed to

12. David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

13. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

14. Frederik Logevall's *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) is the most impressive scholarly account of Johnson's decision to Americanize the Vietnam War. Logevall argues that U.S. policymakers opted to escalate the war to protect personal and domestic credibility, in addition to other more obvious factors. Logevall also makes the compelling case that Johnson's decision to escalate was far from inevitable. He criticizes the British government and Democratic leaders in the Senate for not offering a franker appraisal of the unfolding conflict and argues that *real choices* were available to the President. A multiarchival analysis of the highest order, Logevall's analysis nevertheless overestimates the influence that international actors might have exerted at the time.

foresee the likely direction of North Vietnamese decision making. Rusk, McNamara, and Bundy were hardly short on confidence, but they were not nearly so visionary as to be able to propose their military strategies with Rostow's certainty. McNamara, in particular, was a clever man who possessed far too much belief in the efficacy and transferability of systems analysis—but he was no ideologue. This essay will examine Rostow's contribution to the making of the air war in Vietnam and examine why his recommendations failed in their declared intention.

With overwhelming belief in their own abilities, and little specific knowledge of the areas to which they directed their energies, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy and his deputy, Walt Rostow, split the world between them in January 1961. Bundy assumed responsibility for Cuba, the Congo, and Berlin, while Rostow "took" Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, and "the developing world generally."[15] Broadly speaking, Bundy dealt with crises affecting those nations west of Suez and Rostow those to the east. Rostow was clearly the junior partner in this team—Bundy's *Deputy* Assistant for National Security Affairs—but the working relationship between the two men was one of rough equality, particularly with regard to unfiltered access to the President.

Like Rostow, McGeorge Bundy had enjoyed a glittering career at Yale before being appointed Dean of Harvard College at the unprecedentedly young age of thirty-four. "Mac" was a master of the tart memorandum, a consummate manager with a sharp mind. In many respects, the two men were intellectual opposites. While Bundy was direct, pragmatic, and hence suspicious of ideological constructs, Rostow was prolix, dogmatic, and seemingly wedded to theories he had himself created. In later years, after their relationship soured following disputes over Vietnam, Bundy described Rostow acidly as a man who had to decide on an issue "before he thought about it."[16] At the beginning of 1961, however, both men profoundly respected the others' achievements and strengths. According to Rostow, "Mac understood that the President would want me to report through him . . . [and so we] found a common law split which roughly matched our respective talents. . . . We would both have been uncomfortable, I think, if we had tried to make it work in a more conventional

15. Quoted in Walt Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 168.

16. See Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 31. For an outstanding recent examination of Bundy's career, see Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

way."[17] Amongst a broad brief, Rostow assumed primary White House responsibility for U.S. policy toward Vietnam. It turned out to be a significant watch.

In December 1960, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam or DRV) approved the establishment of a National Liberation Front (NLF) in the south. Its avowed aim was "to overthrow the dictatorial . . . [Ngo Dinh] Diem clique, lackey of the U.S. imperialists, to form a . . . coalition government in South Vietnam, to win national independence and . . . to achieve national reunification."[18] Edward G. Lansdale, a well-regarded expert in the field of counterinsurgency methods, had toured Vietnam the same month as the NLF was formed. He was deeply troubled by what he witnessed. Outside of the cities, the central government evoked neither warmth nor respect and, most worryingly, exerted little control. South Vietnamese President Diem seemed blissfully unaware of his unpopularity and steadfastly refused to implement U.S. demands for military, social, and political reform. While Lansdale was loath to criticize Diem directly, he spelt out the nature of the communist threat in unambiguous language. He produced a bleak assessment of the situation on the ground, "an extremely vivid and well-written account of a place that was going to hell in a hack," as Rostow recalled. On a crisp Washington morning on 26 January 1961, Rostow "came in to see the President with this [report] in my hand." He had identified the crisis area that was to consume American foreign policy for the next twelve years and destroy a presidency.[19]

Kennedy at first had little time for the report; he was a busy man and field analyses were low on his list of priority reading. Rostow persisted, however, and Kennedy eventually agreed to read it closely. "He then read every word," Rostow recalled, after which the President looked up and remarked, "This is the worst one we've got isn't it?"[20] Lansdale's warnings had struck a chord with an untested president keenly aware of the vitriol heaped on the Harry S. Truman administration following its "loss" of China. Indeed, Kennedy had joined the bandwagon himself by criticizing Truman's complacency. The President's anticommunism had to be steadfast lest he be deemed a hypocrite. Concerned that Ngo Dinh Diem might go the same way as Chiang Kai-shek, Kennedy ordered that Rostow "go deeply into the problem of Vietnam," an instruction that was eagerly acted upon.[21] Over the course of the year, Rostow unleashed a

17. Walt Rostow, Oral History, 43–44, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library (JFKL), Boston, Massachusetts.

18. Quoted in George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 187.

19. Rostow Oral History, 44, JFKL.

20. Ibid., 44.

21. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power,* 265.

succession of memoranda advocating a vigorous military response to communist violations of the 1954 Geneva Accords in Laos and Vietnam. The part he played in setting the pace was profound, although the President would never go so far as Rostow would have liked. According to David Kaiser, "Rostow's energetic pursuit of new solutions gave Vietnam a higher profile for the rest of the year."[22]

In taking the fight to the NLF in the south, Rostow was at first partial to the modish theories of counterinsurgency espoused by Lansdale. As he would stress to Kennedy, also a devotee, "We must somehow bring to bear our unexploited counter-guerrilla assets on the Vietnam problem. . . . In Knute Rockne's phrase, we are not saving them for the junior prom."[23] Rostow was convinced, however, that even the most sophisticated strategy of counterinsurgency in the south would be circumscribed by northern infiltration through Laos. To win hearts and minds in the south, its internal security first had to be guaranteed; counterinsurgency with an open frontier was an exercise in futility. As Rostow made clear in his speech "Guerrilla Warfare in Underdeveloped Areas" at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on 28 June 1961, "The sending of men across international boundaries and the direction of guerrilla war from outside a sovereign nation is aggression." Without some form of international action against such aggression, "those against whom aggression is mounted will be driven to seek out and engage the ultimate source of aggression they confront."[24] Thus, Rostow was the first official in the Kennedy administration to suggest that the United States might strike North Vietnam: the perceived "source" of aggression. What is significant, however, is that Rostow's rationale was predicated on a misplaced premise. In June 1961, northern infiltration in aid of the overwhelmingly indigenous insurgency was but a trickle. Even by August 1967, Hanoi would have a maximum of 55,000 North Vietnamese army troops in the south; the remaining 245,000 soldiers were indigenous.[25]

Rostow proposed to Kennedy three possible means through which the frontier with Laos, the infiltration hotspot, could be closed. The first was diplomacy, of which Rostow was skeptical; the second was to patrol the border through the deployment of ground forces and air attacks; but the third was a "direct attack on North Vietnam sufficiently costly to induce Hanoi to end its war against South Vietnam. I had in mind not only the possibility of air action but, after a suitable program of diplo-

22. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 69.

23. Walt Rostow to the President, 29 March 1961, Box 193, NSF, JFKL.

24. Walt Rostow, "Guerrilla Warfare in the Underdeveloped Areas," 28 June 1961, Time Inc. File, Rostow, Walt W., Box 74, C. D. Jackson Papers, Dwight D Eisenhower Library (DDEL), Abilene, Kansas.

25. Cited in Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power,* 130.

matic warning, moving forces into North Vietnam itself."[26] It is worth pausing here to reflect upon the bellicosity that informed this recommendation. Nobody else came close to advocating options as controversial as the bombing and invasion of North Vietnam in the summer in 1961. Indeed, it would be some years before such options were even discussed at the highest levels. Yet Rostow persisted in pushing a policy well out of kilter with prevailing orthodoxy.

On 13 July 1961, Rostow proposed to Secretary of State Rusk that the United States should aim to "impose" on Hanoi "about the same level of damage and inconvenience that the Viet Cong are imposing on the South . . . using American Air and Naval strength." If in response the North Vietnamese were to "cross their border substantially," Rostow suggested the United States should implement "a limited military operation in the north, e.g. capture and holding of the port of Haiphong."[27] It would seem that the word "limited" fails to convey the sheer scope and complexity of attempting to capture a city in enemy territory. Rostow was temperamentally inclined, however, to benignly address the most imposing of odds. His approach to problems was conceptual and thus he was disinclined to contemplate the death and destruction that his recommendations would wreak. As Nicholas Katzenbach—who served as Undersecretary of State—remarked despairingly to a colleague in November 1967, "I finally understand the difference between Walt and me. I was the navigator who was shot down and spent two years in a German prison camp, and Walt was the guy picking my targets."[28]

While Kennedy was not convinced that the situation on the ground merited the response advocated by Rostow, he did want further information at hand before any decision was made. To this end, on 13 October 1961, Kennedy announced that Rostow—and his special military adviser Maxwell D. Taylor—would travel to Saigon to seek appropriate means to deal with the insurgency. The Taylor-Rostow mission marked a break of sorts with the theory, championed by Edward Lansdale, that pacification in the south was the key to successful resolution of the conflict. Maxwell Taylor evinced no interest in the questions for which Lansdale sought answers, and Rostow all too readily concurred.[29] Instead, Rostow sought to discover for himself why communism held appeal in the south, and in a short time came up with a theory. Rostow described his captive NLF interviewees as "young men in a developing region who

26. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power,* 286.

27. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 13 July 1961, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. 1, *Vietnam, 1961* (Washington: GPO, 1988), 206. (Hereafter cited as *FRUS: Vietnam, 1961)*

28. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest,* 200.

29. Prados, *The Blood Road,* 38.

had been caught up for the first time—and found various degrees of satisfaction and disappointment—in a modern organizational structure reaching beyond the family, hamlet and village."[30] Rostow thus concluded that the NLF's appeal lay not in its espousal of nationalism or communism, but because it represented a large modern institution. Disparaging the ideological foundations of the southern insurgency flowed logically from the economic determinism implicit in his academic work—it was easier to think of the Vietnamese as malleable, naïve, and restive rather than angry, economically disadvantaged, and hence Marxist-Leninist inclined as well as nationalist. But this willful disregard for the sources that motivated the NLF encouraged Rostow to offer a familiar solution to what was a problem of some complexity.

Today, the Taylor-Rostow report is best remembered for its recommendation that 6,000 to 8,000 American combat troops in the guise of "flood-relief workers" be dispatched to South Vietnam.[31] Less well remembered is the Taylor-Rostow suggestion that the United States should consider liberating the north if the North Vietnamese maintained their aggression: that they "not only had something to gain—the South—but a base to risk—the North—if war should come."[32] This aggressive proposal was supplemented by Rostow's *idée fixe*: bombing the north. As Taylor and Rostow cabled Kennedy on 23 October 1961, "NVN [North Vietnam] is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing, a weakness which should be exploited diplomatically in convincing Hanoi to lay off SVN [South Vietnam]."[33] The report concluded by urging that all options be kept open with regard to coercing the north: "In our view, nothing is more calculated to sober the enemy and to discourage escalation in the face of limited initiatives proposed here than the knowledge that the United States has prepared itself soundly to deal with aggression at any level."[34] "At any level" was the operative phrase in this instance. This belief that the threat of impending force would constitute a sufficient deterrent formed the crux of what later became known as the "Rostow Thesis." Ho Chi Minh had a base to protect. North Vietnamese ideology was a secondary issue to that of economic growth. And bombing, even the threat of bombing, would prove sufficient to curb a southern insurgency instigated almost wholly by the north.

30. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power,* 273–74.

31. Taylor to the State Department, 25 October 1961, in *FRUS*: *Vietnam, 1961*, 430.

32. "Evaluations and Conclusions," Tab C, n/d, Countries: Vietnam, Taylor Report, 3 November 1961, NSF, JFKL.

33. *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, Senator Gravel ed., 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971–72), 2:92.

34. "Evaluations and Conclusions."

Kennedy, however, was not wholly receptive to such reasoning. He rejected the combat troop option out of hand, yet concurred with the report's conviction that the situation was critical and that action was required. As Rostow recalled, "the advisory structure the Taylor mission outlined was, essentially, approved; the number of American advisers expanded rapidly; and the support for the South Vietnamese in military hardware and other resources was substantially increased." This appraisal is correct. The Taylor-Rostow report substantially expanded the American commitment to South Vietnam in terms of both aid and "advisers." But the concept of bombing the north had also been rationalised, for use at a later time. At the conclusion of the cabinet meeting called to discuss the report, Kennedy commented, "If this doesn't work perhaps we'll have to try Walt's Plan Six."[35] This remark was made in jest—"Walt's Plan Six," hitting North Vietnam, was simply a pun on Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) Plan 5, the military contingency for protecting Laos—but was to prove prescient.

Doubts were forming in the President's mind about the equanimity with which Rostow contemplated war. Speaking to National Security Council (NSC) staff member Michael Forrestal, Kennedy remarked that "Walt is a fountain of ideas; perhaps one in ten of them is absolutely brilliant. Unfortunately six or seven are not merely unsound, but dangerously so. I admire his creativity, but it will be more comfortable to have him creating at some remove from the White House."[36] And so Rostow was moved on 29 November 1961 to serve as Chairman and Counselor of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department.

Prior to Rostow's departure to the State Department, Kennedy told him, "Over here at the White House . . . we are pretty much restricted to what comes out of the bureaucracy. I want you to go over [there] to State and catch hold of the process where it counts."[37] Kennedy's parting words were in all likelihood motivated by a desire to provide Rostow with some restorative cheer—he had referred to his shift ambivalently as leaving "his comfortable and cheerful parish church in Rome to become a bishop or something—in the provinces."[38] But Rostow continued his bombing crusade from State with unsullied fervour. In a stream of memoranda to Secretary of State Rusk, Rostow pressed his case that bombing was necessary to compel the north to cease infiltration.

While it is unnecessary to dwell too long on Rostow's career during 1962 and 1963—Rusk and Kennedy benignly neglected his memo-

35. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 278.

36. See Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, 21.

37. Cited in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 445.

38. Rostow to Kennedy, 29 November 1961, Box 65, President's Office Files (POF), Papers of President Kennedy, JFKL.

randa—some of his advice does warrant close analysis. Following the neutralization of Laos, brokered by Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs W. Averell Harriman on 6 July 1962, which Rostow deemed a craven sell-out, he furiously pressed the case that America respond militarily to communist violations of the agreement. To combat North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos, Rostow recommended "the launching, initially at a modest level of limited air attack on selected North Vietnamese targets." While this shift in strategy held incendiary potential, Rostow did not fear any expansion of the conflict, however, because "the whole lesson of the cold war, including the recent Cuban crisis, is that the communists do not escalate in response to our actions."[39]

With hindsight it is easy for the historian to take to task such complacency, but conflating the sources of the Cuban missile crisis and the Vietnamese Civil War was a serious misdiagnosis. True to form, Rostow denigrated the foundations of both the NLF insurgency and Ho Chi Minh's commitment, grounded in the most cohesive of forces, nationalism, to reunite the divided nation. Not content with simply sending Rusk this memo—entitled "Mikoyan, the Laos Agreement, and Continued Infiltration into South Vietnam"—Rostow forwarded the same paper to Averell Harriman on 2 February 1963, with an endearing preface that began "Before you decide your old and respectful friend has gone off his rocker . . . ."[40] Rostow put the same argument to Rusk again, with the additional consideration that "if we are to have a showdown with Ho (and implicitly Mao [Zedong]), we should bring it about before the Chinese communists blow a nuclear device."[41] Perhaps fearing that his argument was not being given due consideration—and in this case Rostow was correct—he made his final bombing recommendation of the Kennedy administration on 1 November 1963: the day President Diem was deposed and assassinated. Rostow wrote, "Assuming the Saigon coup succeeds . . . [we should] confront Hanoi with the choice of ceasing to operate the war or accepting retaliatory damage in the north." To make certain that Rusk got the point, he reattached his 28 November 1962 memorandum, and also sent it to the Director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Roger Hilsman; Undersecretary of State George W. Ball; and again to Harriman (a less receptive trio could hardly be imagined).[42] And with that, Rostow's bombing crusade under Kennedy ceased.

39. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 28 November 1962, National Security File (NSF), Box 13, Papers of Walt Rostow (Rostow Papers), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL), Austin, Texas.

40. Rostow to Averell Harriman, 2 February 1963, ibid.

41. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 4 July 1963, ibid.

42. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 1 November 1963, ibid.

From December 1961 through to Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Rostow was out of favour in the White House. His frustration at not convincing Kennedy of the necessity of military action is forcefully expressed in his memoir: "With hindsight . . . I would judge Kennedy's failure to move promptly and decisively to deal with the violation of the Laos accords the greatest single error in American foreign policy in the 1960s; for before too long he and his successor were confronted with 'the waning situation' a good many of us had feared might emerge in Vietnam."[43] To combat this bleak scenario, Rostow unleashed a series of strident memoranda—arguing a similar point each time—but to no avail. Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Dean Rusk all were unwilling to agree with the thesis that bombing the north was necessary for victory. But as the situation waned in the south, each, in time, would turn to bombing the "source." And, most importantly, Lyndon Johnson came to conclude that taking a military stand in Vietnam was unavoidable. Rostow's star would eventually rise.

Thanks to Rostow's prolific output and obstinate harrying, the "Rostow Thesis"—which held that the United States must deal with externally supported insurgencies through striking at their source—was well known to Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara as early as January 1962. Lyndon Johnson, however—who as Vice President was some way removed from the Vietnam planning debate—was first presented with the thesis, according to *The Pentagon Papers,* in December 1963.[44] While gauging Johnson's immediate reaction is difficult, it is significant that, responding to a 23 December Rostow recommendation that the President stress the issue of infiltration in his State of the Union address, Johnson declared, "In 1964 we will . . . defend the cause of freedom, whether it is threatened by outright aggression or by the infiltration practiced by those in Hanoi and Havana, who ship arms and men across international frontiers to foment insurrection."[45] But aside from this borrowed Rostovian flourish, Rostow remained on the fringe of policy formulation at the beginning of 1964. The degeneration of the military situation in South Vietnam, however, rendered his opinions more palatable as the year progressed.

Walt Rostow's intellectual makeup, while honed at universities that ordinarily brought out the Texan's prejudices, made sense to Lyndon

43. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power,* 290.

44. See *The Pentagon Papers*, 3:200.

45. See Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 505; and *Public Papers of the President: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–1964* (Washington: GPO, 1965), 116.

Johnson. Both Johnson and Rostow were outsiders—one a Southerner and the other from a modest Jewish background. But more than anything, loyalty was a virtue that the President respected above all others—indeed, he *demanded* it of all who worked with him. Lyndon Johnson resented those who rocked the boat. Rostow later disapproved of the fact that the President would escalate only to an insufficiently coercive point, but did not push his views to the degree that they annoyed Johnson. While the President refused to follow Rostow's counsel by bombing the North Vietnamese dikes, invading Laos and North Vietnam, and bombing the centers of Hanoi and Haiphong, he admired the hard-edged nature of Rostow's advice.

And so while Rostow was capable of sycophancy and flattery of the highest order, these were not the skills that facilitated his rise to foreign policy prominence from 1964 onwards; rather, his belligerence and unshakable optimism recommended Rostow to the President. The Vietnam War came to cast the blackest shadow on Lyndon Johnson's presidency, but Rostow's ebullient advice represented a chink of light. In the face of widespread, vociferous criticism, it is hardly surprising that Johnson was partial to a man who compared him directly to Abraham Lincoln, and claimed, like Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, to have an indelicate plan for victory.[46] Rostow said what the President wanted to hear, not owing to self-regarding design, but because unflappable confidence, and zealous anticommunism, defined Rostow's character.

Rostow insisted to the new President that "By applying limited, graduated military actions reinforced by political and economic pressures on a nation providing external support for insurgency we should be able to cause that nation to decide to reduce greatly or eliminate altogether support for the insurgency . . . the threat that is implicit in initial U.S. actions would be more important than the military actions themselves."[47] It is important to recognize, particularly in light of Rostow's postwar assertion that the United States "fought with an arm tied behind its back," that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) opposed Rostow's plan.[48] The JCS's position—maintained with customary rigor by Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff—was some way removed from the idea that the threat was more important than the execution: what was really

46. George Ball later recalled that Rostow was a "terrible influence" on the President. He did not "just put a distorting gloss on bad news, and amplify the good," but Rostow also created "an image of Johnson standing against the forces of evil. He used to tell him how President Abraham Lincoln was abused by everybody during a certain stage in the Civil War, and 'this is the position you are in, Mr. President.'" Quoted in Prados, *Keeper of the Keys,* 241.

47. *The Pentagon Papers*, 3:201–2.

48. Walt Rostow, interview with author, 7 August 2001.

required were "damaging actions, designed to affect Hanoi's will by destroying a significant portion of their capability."[49] By August 1964, LeMay, as head of a Pentagon Planning study, concluded that bombing North Vietnam's storage facilities for supplies, ammunition, and petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) in one fell swoop would compel Hanoi to cease infiltration. LeMay's planning team drew up a list of ninety-four targets that constituted "the essential components of the North's war-making capability." The group determined that all targets could be destroyed in sixteen days through a "severe" application of air power.[50] As LeMay recalled, had all targets been attacked, "we would have bombed [the North Vietnamese] back into the Stone Age."[51]

Pursuing such an extreme military course was, in Rostow's opinion, unnecessary, not so much because of ethical or escalatory concerns, but because the essence of applying force—as he stressed to Robert McNamara in September 1964—lay not "in the damage we do, but the character of our military disposition and or diplomatic communications."[52] Rostow was simply elaborating on his theory that, in times of war, threatening a nation's economy would prove decisive in itself. But this argument ran counter to the received orthodoxy which, as expressed by Carl von Clausewitz, holds that in war "because each side is driven to outdo the other, states tend to escalate their efforts."[53] Maxwell Taylor was also worried that Rostow's plan lacked credibility, commenting that "a surprise attack from the air could be very effective, but thereafter attacks would be less effective and losses would go up."[54] However, Lyndon Johnson—in the run-up to a presidential election in which the Republican candidate Barry M. Goldwater was pilloried as a threat to peace of apocalyptic proportions—was repelled by the course that LeMay advocated, and found solace in Rostow's contention that extreme force was unnecessary. It was on those grounds, therefore, that on 17 March 1964 Johnson approved planning for "graduated, overt military pressure," on North Vietnam in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288.[55]

On 3 August 1964, McNamara's Defense Department joined "with the State Department in a thorough analysis of and report on the Rostow

49. *The Pentagon Papers,* 3:234.

50. See Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 76.

51. Curtis LeMay with MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 565.

52. Walt Rostow to Robert McNamara, 19 September 1964, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964,* 782–85.

53. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 585.

54. Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting, 24 May 1964, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964*, 370.

55. See NSAM 288, 17 March 1964, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964*, 156.

thesis," and arrived at an ambivalent conclusion.[56] Of prime concern was the fact that the "economy of North Vietnam is 88% agricultural. It is not an island and there is no great dependence on maritime trade." Furthermore, the "kind of action envisaged by the Rostow thesis will in general not be sufficient to deal with the problems of insurgency. Successful action against insurgency requires, above all, an effective counterinsurgency program in the country under attack." These reservations were of some significance, and would prove prescient, yet despairingly the report concludes that the "counterinsurgency picture is not encouraging. The alternatives are not bright . . . the Rostow thesis may be the only viable, albeit risky, alternative."[57] This far-from-ringing endorsement was complemented by McNamara's office directly. Its analysts warned that the "likelihood and political costs of *failure* of the approach and the *pressures for U.S. escalation* if the early moves should fail require serious examination."[58]

Yet by the fall of 1964, the political and military situation in South Vietnam was degenerating rapidly. Something had to be done, and little else was on the table. Johnson's coterie of foreign policy advisers opted for Rostow's thesis less out of enthusiasm than resignation. On 7 September 1964, in NSAM 314, Johnson finally sanctioned retaliatory raids, but not based on the Rostow criteria: "We should . . . respond on a tit-for-tat basis against the DRV in any event of any attack on U.S. units."[59] Unconvinced by such half-measures, Rostow immediately shot back, "I question whether a tit-for-tat approach is wise. . . . What is required in Hanoi and Peiping is the conviction that we have decided to [escalate] on a scale sufficient to raise the question in Hanoi as to whether the war in the South is worth pursuing."[60] When on 1 November 1964 NLF forces attacked an American air base at Bien Hoa, Johnson responded by directing a NSC working group, headed by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William P. Bundy, to examine alternatives for bombing—options that went well beyond tit-for-tat. With "A" the status quo, "B" a LeMay-style heavy air assault, and "C" a graduated air campaign on the Rostow model, the last was unsurprisingly adopted with alacrity.[61] And so Bundy's "Option C" was implemented in March 1965 in the form of the Rolling Thunder campaign.

56. Department of Defense Summary, 3 August 1964, Box 13, Rostow Papers, LBJL.

57. Ibid.

58. *The Pentagon Papers*, 3:201–2, emphasis in original.

59. McGeorge Bundy, Memorandum for the Record, 14 September 1964, Box 1, Meeting Notes File, LBJL.

60. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 19 September 1964, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964*, 784.

61. See Logevall, *Choosing War,* 269–74; Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power,* 52–56.

It should be made clear that while Rostow's ideas were present at the crucial escalatory meetings of the Vietnam War, his person was not. His impact on the decision-making process prior to the launch of Rolling Thunder was significant, although he should not be placed alongside Bundy and McNamara as a direct participatory force for escalation. The foundations on which these men made their recommendations, however, were not formed in a vacuum; they were shaped by many influences, one of which was the man who fashioned a Vietnam bombing strategy before anyone else. Both State and Defense referred to the option of bombing North Vietnam as the "Rostow Thesis." The use of such terminology suggests that Rostow's influence—even from the distant remove of the Policy Planning Council—was profound.

Robert McNamara was a brilliant manager of facts and data, but no innovator. He took his ideas from others, subjected them to a searching, usually quantitative critique, and if the numbers worked, his decision was made. Dean Rusk was deferential and unwilling to impose himself on the big foreign policy questions. Rusk sought constant approval and encouragement from his president, but refused to champion a distinctive line. McGeorge Bundy had a fine mind. He could prioritize information, write pithy memoranda, and terrify subordinates with his rationality and impatience with flabby arguments. Yet Bundy also lacked creativity. He was leery of ideology and happiest managing crises, not formulating broad strategies. Walt Rostow was different: he was the prophet of American victory in the Vietnam War. He felt that he intuitively understood the nature of communist insurgency—as the "disease of the transition to capitalism"—and was confident that he knew how to win the war. And more than that, in *Stages of Economic Growth* he had mapped out the future of world history and in doing so trumped Marx's theory of inevitable communist victory. Unlike McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk, Rostow had a number of plans to defeat communism in Vietnam. He was unfailingly optimistic that the war would be won to America's satisfaction. Lyndon Johnson needed new ideas to protect South Vietnam and constant reassurance that the war was winnable. Walt Rostow provided both.

During the wilderness years that followed his removal from the National Security Council in November 1961, Rostow had argued, in the face of overwhelming apathy, that striking North Vietnam was vital. While by late 1964 this recommendation had found belated favor, and was slated for future implementation, Rostow was frustrated that it proved not to be the year for bombing: "I had failed to persuade Kennedy in 1962; and I failed to persuade Johnson in 1964."[62] This frustration with regard to Kennedy is comprehensible, but Johnson by the fall of

62. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 508.

1964 had essentially been convinced of the merits of bombing. Nevertheless, as Rostow recalled in his memoir, "my nightmare since 1961 had come true; that is, the United States acted to save Southeast Asia late in the day, in the waning situation."[63] He chose to address this waning situation, however, with a policy not of all-out attack, but of limited bombing with the threat of more to come. Rolling Thunder was the "Rostow Thesis" writ large. He supported gradualism and opposed the aggressive targeting advocated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Rostow criticized Johnson's military timidity on many occasions in his postwar career, yet it was partly of his own making.[64] Before long, however, Rostow's gradualism gave way to more LeMay-like tendencies, as North Vietnam steadfastly refused to follow the pattern of behavior that Rostow had foreseen.

Beyond the enthusiasm of one man, it is striking that the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign was accepted in government circles with such absence of hope. In December 1964, Johnson cabled Maxwell Taylor with disturbing candour that "I have never felt that this war will be won in the air."[65] In a particularly blunt discussion with Robert McNamara, the President further despaired, "Now we're off to bombing these people. We're over that hurdle. I don't think anything is going to be as bad as losing, and I don't see any way of winning."[66] McGeorge Bundy was in South Vietnam on 7 February when the NLF attacked the Pleiku airfield. Upon visiting the site and witnessing the carnage—General Westmoreland, head of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, recalls that Bundy fell under a spell of "field marshal psychosis"—he recommended to Johnson that the bombing contingency plan be implemented, not as a one-off, but in "sustained reprisal."[67] Yet once the psychosis subsided—and it took little time for the rationalist to return—Bundy's belief in the potency of bombing was shallow indeed: "It may fail, and we cannot estimate the odds of success with any accuracy—they may be somewhere between 25% and 75% . . . [but] even

63. Ibid., 508.

64. Rostow is critical of President Johnson's timidity with regard to waging the Vietnam War in Walt Rostow, Foreword to C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), ix–x; and Walt Rostow, *Concept and Controversy: Sixty Years of Taking Ideas to Market* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

65. Telegram from the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor), 30 December 1964, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964*, 1059.

66. Telephone Conversation between the President and Robert McNamara, 22 January 1965, in Michael Beschloss, ed., *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964–1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 166.

67. See H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper and Collins, 1997), 215; and William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1976), 115.

if it fails, the policy will be worth it. At a minimum it will damp down the charge that that we did not do all we could have done."[68]

It is astonishing to think—particularly in the current climate—that America would embark on war with such negative objectives, but such was the reality of Rolling Thunder. By 21 June 1965, Johnson's frustration at the somewhat limited effects of bombing, and the fear that his earlier prediction would be proved correct, was expressed again to McNamara: "I'm very depressed . . . I see no program from either Defense or State that gives us much hope of doing anything, except just praying . . . they'll quit. I don't believe they're ever going to quit. And I don't see any plan for victory—militarily or diplomatically."[69]

Such gloomy musings were in accord with the fact that Rolling Thunder was not making a significant dent in either northern morale, southern infiltration, or what Rostow took to be Ho Chi Minh's overwhelming consideration: that he "has an industrial complex to protect."[70] President Johnson would not go as far as the JCS desired in extending the bombing, as he feared direct Chinese intervention. And so an uneasy compromise was struck—that would continue through most of the bombing campaign—between the President's relative reserve and the bellicosity of Rostow and the JCS. Events were refusing to conform to his thesis that limited bombing and the threat of more to come would compel the north to cease its aggression, and so Rostow gradually shifted to the JCS position that destruction—not diplomacy backed by threats—was the crucial determinant for American victory.

By September 1965, Rostow had jettisoned the concept of threatening the north with attack, in favor of simple attack. As he confidently wrote to Dean Rusk, with no regret at his *volte-face* on "gradualism," there "is little doubt that the most effective use of airpower against North Vietnam would be systematically to attack certain target systems which are critical to the military supply and production capabilities of that country. The two best candidates are: oil storage and electric power." Astonishingly, in light of his earlier stricture that what was left untouched by bombing was as important as what was destroyed, Rostow complained that "there is evidence that the lack of system and follow through in attack . . . is denying us their full potentialities." As a sop to his earlier thesis, Rostow maintained that Hanoi would still retain "its

68. McGeorge Bundy to the President, 7 February 1965, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 2, *Vietnam, January-June 1965* (Washington: GPO, 1996), 185.

69. Telephone Conversation between the President and Robert McNamara, 21 June 1965, in Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory,* 343.

70. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 13 February 1964, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1964,* 73.

hard-won industrial and urban infrastructure.”[71] But after bombing North Vietnam’s transport system, its POL storage facilities, and its electric power stations, what exactly was left for American bombers to threaten? As Rostow’s desperation increased in 1967, he would call for bombing targets as peripheral to the infiltration effort as Hanoi’s three radio stations.[72] The “Rostow Thesis,” as the early stages of Rolling Thunder proved, was wholly inadequate.

Worldly, obstinate, and a champion of diplomacy above all, Averell Harriman was contemptuous of Rostow’s belief that air power alone would force North Vietnam to cease infiltration and negotiate. Aerial bombardment was “applying the stick without the carrot,” and his time in England during World War II had convinced him that bombing hardened, not weakened, resolve.[73] Whereas Rostow arrived in London in the autumn of 1942, some time after the worst of the Blitz, Harriman, as a trusted envoy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, had been in England during the heaviest bombing. He was full of admiration for the doughtiness displayed by Londoners, and this experience informed his reading of the conflict in Vietnam. Harriman doubted that the U.S. bombing campaign would decisively dent either North Vietnam’s morale or its ability to furnish its southern comrades with critical supplies. Rather than cowing a nation’s will, bombing solidified popular resolve like little else.

Responding to Harriman’s doubts in a forceful letter in January 1966, Rostow restated his now-modified case for bombing. Posing the question “What should we hit?” Rostow replied “the line of supply, but more systematically than we have thus far done . . . the way we kept out the Seine-Loire bridges in 1944.” Rostow, furthermore, placed oil storage at the very top of the target list and confessed, “As for electric power and mining the harbour at Haiphong, I do not share your reservations . . . I would accept no asymmetry in our freedom of action in the North

71. Walt Rostow to Dean Rusk, 8 September 1965, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, June-December 1965* (Washington: GPO, 1996), 378. (Hereafter cited as *FRUS: Vietnam, June-December 1965*)

72. Rostow rationalized that “The military case is not strong; although they are a source of vicious propaganda throughout Southeast Asia. . . . Radio Hanoi is a symbol of the regime’s power and regional pretensions.” See Walt Rostow to the President, 31 July 1967, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, 1967* (Washington: GPO, 2002), 652. (Hereafter cited as *FRUS: Vietnam, 1967*)

73. See Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891–1986* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1992).

so long as Hanoi supplies men, supplies and direction to the south."[74] Having shed the last vestiges of his earlier gradualist thesis, Rostow called for a serious escalation in bombing. As he stood alone—but for the inevitable Curtis LeMay—in advocating the bombing of North Vietnam from 1961 to 1963, so he would begin in 1966 urging the destruction of targets away from which McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara shied. His letter to Harriman concluded with a striking analogy: "I would use our air power as the equivalent of guerrilla warfare."[75]

Not everyone was so belligerent. After nine months of steadily increased bombing, many within the Johnson administration felt that North Vietnam might now be willing to negotiate an end to the conflict. To test the ground, these optimists argued that the United States had to prove its peaceful intent by making a unilateral, emollient gesture. At the close of 1965, Robert McNamara advised that the President cease bombing North Vietnam over Christmas to facilitate a possible move to negotiations. It was around that time that the first stirring of doubt had begun to chip away at McNamara's veneer of certitude. The President was skeptical that the pause would amount to anything, but his faith in McNamara's clarity of reason was still strong, and so on 24 December Johnson ordered a temporary cessation of bombing. For the thirty-seven days that followed, North Vietnam's skies were clear of U.S. Navy and Air Force vapor trails.

Robert McNamara slipped in the President's high estimation soon after his advocacy of the pause—it failed, as the President predicted it would. Rather than angrily swing back in favor of unrestricted bombing, however, McNamara opposed the plan, pushed by Rostow and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the United States should destroy Hanoi's and Haiphong's POL and power plants.[76] While the Defense Secretary recognized that an attack on POL supplies held the advantage of "surprise and [that] antiaircraft will be less alert," he recommended against such a radical course. McNamara instead advised that U.S. bombers drop their payload on "perishable targets," although he was at pains to specify that this did not mean those targets "north of Hanoi." Maxwell Taylor, then serving as a special White House consultant, was unimpressed with McNamara's hesitancy, stating that "I hope we'll get back to hitting the key rail and bridges. POL will help stop the trucks too."[77] Taylor wanted the U.S. Air Force to drop many more bombs on North Vietnam's industry and oil

74. Letter from Walt Rostow to Averell Harriman, 28 January 1966, Box 13, Rostow Papers, LBJL.

75. Ibid.

76. Notes of Meeting, 22 January 1966, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 4, *Vietnam, 1966* (Washington: GPO, 1998), 105. (Hereafter cited as *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966)*

77. Notes of Meeting, 24 January 1966, ibid., 127–28.

storage supplies. He felt that such a course would preclude the necessity of sending more American ground troops. The United States had the technical ability, Taylor reasoned, to defeat a nation from the sky alone.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Earl G. Wheeler, was scathing in his dismissal of North Vietnamese industry as a potential target, commenting that "You hear a lot about industrial targets. There are no worthy industrial targets except for one: steel and iron works. But even that is [a] low return item."[78] On this count, one might surmise that Rostow's plan was Wheeler's intended target. Wheeler opposed gradualism and obviously had doubts about Rostow's conviction that Ho Chi Minh had an industrial complex to protect. The two men were at one, however, on the decisively coercive nature of destroying a nation's oil storage supplies. Wheeler urged Johnson to sanction the destruction of North Vietnam's "POL system," which he deemed "vital."[79] The administration was decisively split over the extent to which bombing should escalate. McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk all opposed POL bombing, while Taylor and Wheeler unhesitatingly favored it. The upshot of these often-heated debates was that POL stayed out of the military's sights for the moment. Yet the balance of contending opinion was finely poised. If one of the key foreign policy trinity (McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk) were to change tack, a shift towards escalation was almost inevitable. The departure of Johnson's National Security Adviser soon opened up this possibility. Who replaced McGeorge Bundy would provide significant clues as to how fiercely Lyndon Johnson now planned to wage the Vietnam War.

It was unfortunate timing that Johnson appointed Walt Rostow as his Assistant for National Security Affairs on 1 April, for many hoped it was a prank. According to his biographer Kai Bird, McGeorge Bundy was "dumbfounded" upon hearing the news that Rostow had been appointed as his replacement. Bundy had significant concerns about Rostow's intellectual integrity, but Johnson's reasoning is simple enough to discern. If Bundy displayed, at his occasional best, some willingness to question the edifice of dogma on which America's Vietnam policy was based, Rostow adhered to the essential verities of the extended Cold War. He would see the conflict through to any dénouement and was, in Johnsonian parlance, as loyal as a beagle. The President claimed his proprietary rights to Rostow early. To one "Kennedy intimate" he boasted: "He's not [John Kenneth] Galbraith's intellectual. He's not [Arthur M.] Schlesinger's intellectual. He's going to be my goddamn intellectual and I'm going to have him by his short hairs."[80] While Johnson undoubtedly had the force of personality to

78. Notes of Meeting, January 28, 1966, ibid., 177.

79. Ibid.

80. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, 627. Halberstam does not name the "Kennedy intimate."

place him in that unfortunate position, Rostow as National Security Adviser would display bellicosity some way beyond Johnson's. As former Undersecretary of the Air Force Townsend Hoopes recalled, Rostow "proved to be the closest thing we had near the top of the U.S. government to a genuine, all-wool, anti-communist ideologue and true believer."[81]

Rostow's first recommendation following his appointment was to apply the lesson he had learned while serving with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II.[82] Rostow believed that bombing a nation's POL storage facilities constituted a potentially critical blow. McNamara's influence within the administration had waned following his strong push for the December 1965 bombing pause. But while McNamara, Rusk, and Bundy all opposed attacking POL in late 1965, McNamara began to feel that bombing should be given a final chance to prove its worth. Sensing receptivity to his ideas, Rostow first reasoned to the President that "oil hits the over-all military logistical capacity in the North, as well as industrial and civil operations . . . we should lean harder on Hanoi, on a precision bombing basis." "It is not," explained Rostow, "that I am bloody minded or a hawk [but] we've got to try to shorten the war without doing unwise or desperate things."[83]

On 6 May 1966, Rostow, drawing on "an experience in 1944 which may bear on the decision before us," wrote to Johnson, Rusk, and McNamara that while "simple analogies are dangerous . . . I feel it quite possible the military effects of bombing POL . . . may be more prompt and direct than conventional intelligence analysis would suggest."[84] Rostow's analogy was that bombing oil would do to North Vietnam's vehicles of infiltration what it supposedly had done to the German Luftwaffe in World War II. Four days later, Rostow dismissed Rusk's response that bombing POL would "greatly heighten international tensions" as "debatable."[85] And so in his first month as National Security Adviser, he had vigorously sold the merits of a strategy earlier rejected out of hand, and directly opposed the Secretary of State's diplomatic objections. His vigorous sales pitch proved successful.

As Robert McNamara remarked in the June NSC meeting called to debate the attacks, "Strikes on POL have been opposed by me for months. The situation is now changing. . . . Military infiltration is up

81. Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, 20.

82. For a discussion of Rostow's World War II career, see Walt Rostow, *Pre-Invasion Bombing Strategy: General Eisenhower's Decision of March 25, 1944* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

83. Walt Rostow to the President, 5 April 1966, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966,* 331.

84. Rostow to the President, Rusk, and McNamara, 6 May 1966, Box 7, Memos to the President: Walt Rostow, NSF, LBJL.

85. Rostow to the President, 10 May 1966, Box 7, Memos to the President: Walt Rostow, NSF, LBJL.

sharply . . . such attacks will limit infiltration."[86] McNamara's shift may be attributed to a whole host of reasons, but his rationale was presented in distinctly Rostovian terms. Rusk again voiced his concerns about the shift in strategy: "It is difficult to separate in the minds of the people attacks on POL supplies from attacks on the civilian economy . . . a go decision will produce sharp reactions across the world," but with the mood shifting toward a sharp escalation in bombing he moved with the current, and gave his assent.[87] This time it was not simply Rostow's ideas that were present at the meetings, it was his person. As Robert W. Komer, who served as National Security Adviser for six weeks between Bundy's departure and Rostow's appointment, recalled, "Walt was more of an enthusiast and less of a cold, hard calculator of odds than Bundy and he would be more inclined to press his own views than Bundy had been."[88] On POL, as on many issues in subsequent years, Komer's description is pitch-perfect.

The U.S. Air Force began its attacks on North Vietnam's POL storage facilities on 29 June 1966. Rostow wrote to the President in gushing terms that "I believe the POL bombing . . . has caught the nation's attention. Our people sense new determination; new ideas; new hope."[89] On this occasion, Rostow's appraisal did ring true: American public support for Johnson's war policy increased from 42 percent to 54 percent, and a massive 80 percent of the public thought that the bombing would lead straight to military victory.[90] The impact on the war itself, however, was less impressive. In August 1966, a joint report of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) concluded that "There is no evidence that the air strikes have significantly weakened popular morale."[91] On 12 September a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) concluded that the POL bombing did not create "insurmountable transportation difficulties, economic dislocations or weakening of popular morale."[92]

The POL bombings had failed because both China and the Soviet Union had resupplied North Vietnam to the extent that its limited oil supply requirements were unhindered by the massive U.S. bombing campaign. And once the nature of the American strategy became clear,

86. Summary Notes of 550th NSC Meeting, 17 June 1966, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966*, 439.

87. Ibid., 438.

88. Robert Komer, Oral History, LBJL, 35.

89. Walt Rostow to the President, 7 July 1966, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966*, 492.

90. Gallup Poll, 24 July 1966, cited in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 376.

91. Joint CIA-DIA Intelligence Report, August 1966, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966*, 615.

92. See SNIE Report, *Pentagon Papers*, 4: 5–6.

North Vietnam simply dispersed across the country the new supplies of oil flooding in from its two munificent donors. In World War II, following the losses of Romania in August 1944 and Hungary in February 1945, Germany had no source to which it could turn, and no route through which to receive supplies. North Vietnam, in contrast, had no such logistical problem. It has been estimated that Rolling Thunder caused North Vietnam approximately $600 million worth of damage from direct destruction and lost production capacity. Between 1965 and 1968, however, North Vietnam received over $2 billion in foreign aid, more than enough to replenish losses and fuel the relatively limited supply needs of waging guerrilla war.[93]

The POL bombing campaign was the last to which McNamara gave his assent. On 14 October, he advised the President that "at a proper time we should consider terminating all bombing in North Vietnam."[94] Rostow, conversely, was unshaken in his belief that bombing was having its desired effect. Pessimistic intelligence estimates would not stand in the way of his absolute conviction. "Clearly bombing the North has not . . . by itself brought Hanoi to the conference table," Rostow conceded, but "Bombing in the North is our equivalent of Viet Cong guerrilla operations in the South." For Rostow, this equivalence lay in the fact that bombing tied up North Vietnamese labor in repairing the damage wreaked. In making this point, Rostow had retreated somewhat from his earlier belief that the threat of bombing and then simply bombing would prove decisive, but he was clear that more of the same was required: "I am against taking the heat off the North . . . I believe we should . . . increase the pressure on the North at the right time in the future."[95] Thus the McNamara-Rostow feud began in earnest in October. "The Rolling Thunder program [has not] either significantly affected infiltration or cracked the morale of Hanoi," stressed McNamara, "there is agreement in the intelligence community on these facts."[96] Rostow's riposte came ten days later, and eloquently testifies to his Panglossian temperament: "I am convinced that bombing the North is a greater asset than our intelligence people realize."[97]

Rostow concluded his year by advocating a shift to those targets he had previously been careful to avoid: North Vietnamese industry, of which there was little, and electric power. "We must now begin to move

93. Figures cited in Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 395.

94. Robert McNamara to the President, 14 October 1966, Box 2, NSC Meetings, NSF, LBJL.

95. Walt Rostow to the President, 15 September 1966, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966,* 634.

96. Robert McNamara to the President, 14 October 1966, ibid., 728.

97. Walt Rostow to the President, 24 October 1966, ibid., 777.

more heavily against the North," he wrote on 9 November, concurring in large part with the JCS position that bombing be radically expanded in 1967.[98] The JCS called for the bombing of power plants, industry, port facilities, locks, and dams. But registering his and Rusk's reservations about this extension, McNamara equivocated: "We recommend that we do more than we are presently doing but not nearly as much as they recommend."[99] Replying to this reservation, Johnson made inimitably clear where his sympathies now lay: "I think if we're causing 'em damage and they're hurtin' but we haven't got their children's hospital afire and so forth, I think Moscow can say to Hanoi, 'Godammit, this thing is getting awfully costly on you and on us and on everybody else. Let's try and find an answer here.' "[100] Johnson and his cabinet now found themselves split over policy.

On 23 January 1967 Rostow wrote to Johnson that "Before we go into any new target systems . . . you should hear systematic argument on alternative 'northern strategies' so that we may decide something more fundamental than merely adding a few targets to the existing list."[101] What Rostow meant became clear on 15 February when he recommended that the United States mine Haiphong harbour. "We ought to lay a few of them and see what happens," Rostow urged with some flippancy. Johnson was intrigued, but was not keen on direct American involvement: "can't the South Vietnamese do it [with boats]?" enquired the President hopefully. "Well, it's kind of far to get up in a little boat," replied Rostow patiently.[102]

Ultimately, mining Haiphong harbour was one Rostow recommendation too far for Lyndon Johnson. But he was most receptive to Rostow's call, on which he concurred with the JCS, "for applying more weight [on the North to show that] the sheriff is coming slowly down the road for them."[103] Appreciating that McNamara now viewed his ideas with deep suspicion, Rostow sought to undermine the Defense Secretary's 9 March recommendation that bombing around Hanoi should be curtailed. "He honestly believes," wrote Rostow incredulously, "that our bombing around Hanoi stiffens the resistance of the people in authority there and makes it harder for them to negotiate an end to the war . . . I am not so

98. Walt Rostow to the President, 9 November 1966, ibid., 812.

99. See Editorial Note, ibid., 816.

100. LBJ to Robert McNamara, Transcript of Telephone Conversation, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1966,* 817.

101. Walt Rostow to the President, 23 January 1967, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1967,* 59.

102. Telephone Conversation between the President and Rostow, 15 February 1967, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1967*, 174–81.

103. Walt Rostow to the President, 20 February 1967, ibid., 198.

sure that his picture of the mind of the men in Hanoi is correct."[104] Johnson—whose previously exalted opinion of his Defense Secretary was in freefall by this stage—approved attacks on Haiphong's two thermal power plants on 22 March and authorized hitting those targets postponed from November. Brooking no opposition to the extension of bombing, Johnson had, on 8 February 1967, informed his NSC members that the bombing would continue "until we get something from the North Vietnamese."[105] Given that his Defense Secretary and, intermittently, his Secretary of State were both doubtful as to what extended bombing would achieve, it is very likely that the one senior civilian adviser who *believed* in bombing had an influence in convincing Johnson, against his earlier skepticism, that it could win the war.

On the issue of ground force escalation, however, Rostow and the JCS were frustrated in their 27 April call to deploy 201,000 additional combat troops to South Vietnam and across the Ho Chi Minh trail into Laos. General William Westmoreland reasoned, "Killing guerrillas is like killing termites with a screwdriver, where you have to kill them one by one and they're inclined to multiply as rapidly as you kill them."[106] There is much in Westmoreland's words to criticize. As historian Robert Buzzanco observes in *Masters of War,* "the record does not indicate whether anyone asked if 200,000 more screwdrivers could kill an indeterminate number of termites."[107] Westmoreland's request smacked of desperation, yet it was one with which Rostow enthusiastically concurred.

In fact, Rostow wanted to go a step further than Westmoreland—to eschew half-measures and simply invade North Vietnam. Rostow described Westmoreland's recommendation as "ladling some water out of the bath tub while the tap is still turned on." The National Security Adviser had a grander vision for U.S. military strategy. He believed that the American public would prefer that the President "do something big and hopefully decisive rather than something small."[108] With this in mind, Rostow later recalled that "I indicated to Johnson my preference. It was to invade the southern part of North Vietnam in order to block infiltration routes and to hold the area hostage against North Vietnamese withdrawal from Laos and Cambodia as well as from South Vietnam." Rostow was adamant, furthermore, that northern counter-intervention

104. Walt Rostow to the President, 10 March 1967, ibid., 242.

105. Summary Notes of the 568th NSC Meeting, 8 February 1967, Box 2, NSC Meetings, NSF, LBJL.

106. White House Report of President Johnson's Trip to Guam, *Declassified Documents Reference Service (DDRS)*, 85, 002248.

107. See Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 286.

108. Walt Rostow to the President, 27 April 1967, Box 15, Memos to the President: Walt Rostow, LBJL.

was highly unlikely, that the People's Republic of China would not "march the length of Vietnam, risking long supply lines, vulnerable to air and sea harassment if American forces moved [north.]"[109] Of course, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur had made a similar prediction about Korea in October 1950. That Chinese intervention in the Korean War might be paralleled seventeen years later in Vietnam was a dark possibility that consumed the President.

In *Concept and Controversy*, Rostow recalls that a potent triumvirate decisively rejected his plan: "The military and I were turned down by the President, Rusk and McNamara." On 27 April, Rostow had made an impassioned case in favor of Westmoreland's troop request, and presented his strategic masterstroke that was invading the north. During the meeting, Rostow paced the room, propped up a map of Vietnam on an easel and then, gesticulating with a pointer, explained in minute detail why his strategy would work. Yet this remarkable display left the other participants both bemused and unmoved. As Westmoreland recalled, "No one around the table, to include the President, expressed any great enthusiasm for the operation, and the discussion died with only Rostow and me participating."[110]

Thus, the Rusk-McNamara axis coalesced to oppose not just Rostow's bombing strategy, but also his call to increase America's troop presence, and take the fight northwards. Their rejection was a source of some frustration for Rostow. He contemplated so radical a course as resigning from the Johnson administration in protest. After he had enjoyed a period of significant influence over the President during the year that followed his appointment as National Security Adviser, his advice on escalating the Vietnam War was once again slipping outside the mainstream. Ultimately, Rostow opted to stay "with Johnson until the last day, while steadily but quietly opposed to the way the war was being fought."[111]

On 19 May Rostow shifted his attention from McNamara to Rusk's reservations on bombing: "Secretary Rusk feels the diplomatic cost of bombing Hanoi-Haiphong overwhelms whatever the military advantage might be," Rostow informed his president, "but he has not devised—nor can he guarantee—a diplomatic pay-off for moving the bombing pattern to the south."[112] May, however, was to prove the high watermark of Rostow's influence on Vietnam policy. By this stage, his bellicosity was such that even Maxwell Taylor, normally rock-solid in backing the bombing

109. Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, 513.

110. Quoted in Prados, *The Blood Road,* 209. Prados provides a colorful description of the 27 April meeting.

111. See Rostow, *Concept and Controversy,* 302.

112. Walt Rostow to the President, 19 May 1967, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1967*, 420.

strategy, complained to the President that "I would be cautious in extending the target system much farther." In a remark that could only have been meant for Rostow, Taylor concluded brutally: "some of our bombing advocates still think in terms of World War II and forget . . . there is really no industrial target system in Vietnam worthy of its name."[113]

Rostow had begun to sense his isolation. The manner in which the administration was critically split—with McNamara favouring diplomacy, the JCS escalation, and Rusk somewhere in between—required some bridge-building. "The question is," Rostow wrote to the President, "what kind of scenario can hold our family together in ways that look after the nation's interests and make military sense?" Rostow's answer was first to bomb Hanoi's thermal power plant, as he and Wheeler had long advocated, and then "cut back radically on attacks in the Haiphong area for several weeks," to placate Rusk and McNamara. If diplomacy should fail in this interlude, as Rostow expected it would, then the President should reconsider "the mining of the ports (and attacks on the import routes)," and the maintenance of pressure to ensure Hanoi did not "rebuild the power grid."[114] And so later that same day, in what was to be the intensity high-point of Johnson's bombing campaign, Hanoi's thermal power plant was destroyed by American bombing. The first part of his plan had been adopted, but thereafter Johnson resisted virtually all further plans for escalation presented by Rostow.

A coalition of William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, Robert McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy (who still wielded some clout as a "wise man") registered their vigorous opposition to any extension of the air war in the summer of 1967.[115] On the same day that Hanoi's power plant was destroyed, McNamara made clear his opposition to escalation in the clearest terms: "The war in Vietnam is acquiring a momentum of its own that must be stopped. Dramatic increases in attacks on the north . . . [are] not the answer."[116] Yielding partly to this advice that bombing be restrained—and perhaps worried, too, that his "family" was breaking up—Johnson prohibited further air attacks within ten miles of Hanoi. With 500,000 American troops in Vietnam by August—and the JCS and Rostow lobbying vigorously for the deployment of a further 200,000—he had arrived at the conclusion that further escalation was likely to damage not only cabinet unity, but his prospects for reelection. With the occasional flurry of intensity, bombing stabilized through the fall of 1967.

113. Maxwell Taylor to the President, 11 May 1967, ibid., 411.

114. Walt Rostow to the President, 19 May 1967, ibid., 420–22.

115. See Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power,* 108–9.

116. Robert McNamara to the President, 19 May 1967, Country File: Vietnam, Box 75, NSF, LBJL.

Rostow took to prefacing his calls for further bombing with lines like "No matter how many call me a rosy optimist," but the combination of Rusk, McNamara, and the Bundy brothers had finally stalled his momentum.[117] Furthermore, Harvard Professor of Government Henry A. Kissinger was at that point negotiating with the North Vietnamese through French intermediaries (known by the U.S. codename PENNSYLVANIA). As McNamara told the President, "it would be harmful to the Paris talks if we were to intensify the bombing."[118] Rostow was not entirely convinced that Kissinger was up to the job, warning Johnson that "he may go a little soft if you get down to the crunch."[119] But for Rostow there was no need to restrain bombing to facilitate negotiation. "I do not see any connection between bombing and negotiations," he coldly informed McNamara. "I do not think we are going to get negotiations by bombing," snapped Undersecretary of State Katzenbach in response.[120]

This exchange would be repeated through the summer of 1968, with Averell Harriman taking the place of Katzenbach. But essentially bombing had reached a point of stasis by September 1967. Johnson had ordered bombing of furious intensity from the summer of 1966 into 1967, but the intelligence agencies could discern no critical impact. Johnson was unwilling to go as far as Rostow in mining Haiphong harbour and unleashing serious, and less discriminate, destruction and so escalation gave way to stabilization. On 31 January 1968, Rostow's conviction that bombing North Vietnam was killing the southern insurgency at source was finally put to the sword.

Rostow responded to the Tet Offensive—a combined North Vietnamese–NLF assault against every significant base, town, and city in South Vietnam—not with panic, but by sending Johnson a memorandum on which he drew two simple lines to express the relative strength of the two sides. Beside one curve, rising steadily was scribbled "allies" and above the second curve, falling steadily, was written "communists." Rostow expressed the impact of Tet with a second graph overleaf. The "allies" line sailed ever upward. The "communist" line jumped sharply, and then plummeted. Rostow concluded that "the net effect of Tet could be a shortening of the war."[121] With a keen sense for untimely machismo, Rostow advised Johnson that same day to "slay the credibility dragon with one blow," with a speech that concluded: "We are going to give them the fight they want—and more than they want. We are going to mete out

117. Walt Rostow to the President, 9 July 1967, in *FRUS: Vietnam, 1967*, 584.

118. Robert McNamara to the President, Notes of Meeting, 26 September 1967, ibid*.,* 824.

119. Walt Rostow to the President, 12 September 1967, ibid*.,* 872.

120. Notes of Meeting, 26 September 1967, ibid., 824.

121. This memorandum, doodle and all, is reproduced in Rostow, *Diffusion of Power,* 517–18.

the measure they asked for—and more than the measure."[122] But Johnson had decided that blood, sweat, and tears were somewhat out of step with the general mood of the country and that Winston Churchill was not the best model to emulate. When Westmoreland made his request for a further 205,000 troops in February 1968, only Rostow concurred. In the wake of an attack that had shaken a nation's belief in the veracity of its government's public pronouncements, Rostow instead discerned "a hawkish balance" of public opinion and "a desire to do something about the situation."[123]

On 6 March, Rostow again advised the President to order the mining of Haiphong harbour. With a somewhat skewed sense of history, he concluded, "Not since the Civil War has quite so much hinged for our country on immediate battlefield events."[124] But this extraordinary flurry of activity did little to embolden Johnson, and Rostow fell further to the margins. The newly appointed Secretary of Defense, Clark M. Clifford, did not even consider Rostow in his appraisal of the post-Tet policy debate: "After Tet . . . there was no suggestion that we could see any light at the end of the tunnel."[125] On 11 March, the *Washington Post*'s influential columnist Drew Pearson starkly informed the President where he thought he had gone wrong: "I fear you have been led astray by such short-sighted advisers as Rostow and the military, while some of our advisers have not spoken up."[126] In the aftermath of Tet, a cacophony of criticism assailed Johnson. The critique of CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite was particularly difficult to dismiss: "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America," the President lamented.[127] And so on 31 March, Johnson announced a unilateral restriction of bombing, made a call for peace negotiations, and finally added that he would not seek a second term as President. Rostow's hopes that an aggressive all-out war be waged were shattered. Rostow spent the frustrating remainder of his year advising Johnson against further pauses in bombing—to Averell Harriman's chagrin. The President's chief negotiator at the ensuing Paris peace talks later described Rostow as "America's Rasputin" for the unsavory influence he exerted on Lyndon Johnson.[128]

122. Walt Rostow to the President, 8 February 1968, Box 28, Memos to the President: Walt Rostow, NSF, LBJL.

123. Memorandum for the Record, 29 February 1968, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 6, *Vietnam, January-August 1968* (Washington: GPO, 2002), 281. (Hereafter cited as *FRUS: Vietnam, January-August 1968)*

124. Walt Rostow to the President, 6 March 1968, ibid., 339.

125. Clark Clifford, Oral History, 3, LBJL.

126. Drew Pearson to the President, 11 March 1968, Country File: Vietnam, Box 127, NSF, LBJL.

127. Cited in Dallek, *Flawed Giant,* 506.

128. Quoted in Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Random House, 1995), 144.

Walt Whitman Rostow was not the sole reason why America bombed North Vietnam, but his contribution was of fundamental importance. From the theories that informed his academic work, Rostow believed that North Vietnam would succumb to bombing because Ho Chi Minh placed the priority of retaining North Vietnam's infrastructure ahead of reunification with the south. In the first instance, as extrapolated in his "thesis," Rostow held that simply threatening North Vietnam's industrial base would compel the north to seek peace.

But once that hope was rendered false by events, Rostow ditched this plan and became Johnson's strongest civilian advocate for bombing North Vietnam as heavily as domestic and international considerations would allow. Yet even that policy failed in its expressed intention. Bombing oil depots did not work as, through dispersal and a huge leap in imports from its allies, immediate North Vietnamese losses were first replenished and then rendered invulnerable to attack. Bombing industry did not work as North Vietnam had only a few factories of significance and they were quickly destroyed. Thereafter, as military historian Robert A. Pape concludes, "North Vietnam was primarily a funnel for military-related equipment provided in the USSR and the People's Republic of China."[129] The Rolling Thunder campaign killed tens of thousands of Vietnamese combatants and civilians. But in cold economic terms the advent of American bombing contributed to an increase in economic and military foreign aid to North Vietnam from $200 million, prior to 1965, to $1.6 billion per annum from 1965 to 1968.[130] The idea that Ho Chi Minh would retract his support for a reunified Vietnam because he felt North Vietnam's limited infrastructure was a potential target proved to be fanciful.

Poking fun at *Stages of Economic Growth,* Rostow's colleagues in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations joked that he envisioned "a TV set in every thatched hut."[131] And this idealism—so easy to caricature—is a significant part of Rostow's ideological makeup. If only those uninformed people in the developing world could understand that Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* provided the true path to social harmony and material success—televisions for all. Were this enlightenment to have become pervasive across Indochina, South Vietnam would have taken great strides forward economically and politically, while North Vietnam would have stagnated, its people would have become more

129. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 192.

130. Cited in *The Pentagon Papers,* 4:226.

131. Quoted in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 619.

restive, and its communism finally would have mellowed and died. Everyone would win by following Rostow's model, although those who did not would suffer. In this respect, Graham Greene's *Quiet American* provides a pertinent parallel. As the cynical English narrator says of the young American crusader, Alden Pyle, "He was impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance."[132]

The key to unlocking the puzzle as to why the development-inclined Rostow became the most hawkish civilian member of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations is his *Stages of Economic Growth.* Setting himself the task of answering Karl Marx as a student at Yale ensured that Rostow remained fixated with Marxism for a considerable period—over twenty years in total. This intense study imbued in Rostow an almost pathological desire to eradicate communism wherever it threatened the societal dynamic he had sought to create. When Rostow finally presented his alternative to Marxism in 1960, it represented both the zenith of his academic career, and its end. Having corrected Marx, and provided the true guide to world development, what remained for Rostow to do within academia? The answer was very little. And so Rostow became a U.S. foreign policy adviser, in a prime position to hurry along the history he had so recently mapped out. When this opportunity presented itself in South Vietnam, Rostow's belligerence toward communism followed naturally. Rostow was defending not just South Vietnam, but the viability of his thesis.

It was on 13 June 1961, during a speech at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, that Rostow suggested for the first time that the United States might have to bomb North Vietnam to curtail its support for the NLF. But it is the strong language that Rostow employs to describe communism that provides clues as to his future pugnacity. "They are the scavengers of the modernization process," Rostow exclaimed. "Communism is best understood as a disease of the transition to modernization."[133] In his histories of social reform, sexuality, and medicine in the nineteenth century, Michel Foucault highlights the manner in which seemingly neutral descriptive terms, such as "unnatural" or "sick," were deployed by judges, teachers, and sexologists to legitimize force against that which was deemed "deviant."[134] In characterizing communism as parasitic—as a "disease"—Rostow, in similar fashion, was following many in America who, in demonizing communism in Manichean terms, contributed to America's fateful, misguided venture into Southeast Asia. Yet the ideology

132. See Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York: Penguin, 1956), 163.

133. Cited in Frank M. Osanka, *Modern Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 466.

134. See Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), ii–vi.

that Rostow formulated was as reductionist as that of Marx. Both Rostow and Marx were blind to the fact that nationalism represented a significant impediment to their predictions that economic forces drove history towards an endpoint.

On 11 May 1964, Rostow made a speech at Kenyon College, Ohio, in which he discussed the responsibility of those who serve in government. First, he quoted John Maynard Keynes, who wrote, "When a doctrinaire proceeds to action, he must, so to speak, forget his doctrine." Pausing on this sound advice for only a moment, Rostow turned to what he described as "an even more relevant source," Winston Churchill, who once mused: "Those who are possessed of a definite body of doctrine and of deeply rooted convictions upon it will be in a much better position to deal with the shifts and surprises of daily affairs."[135] From a man who crossed the House of Commons floor not once but twice, this was quite a claim, but Rostow obviously adhered to the maxim of Churchill, and not Keynes, in his foreign policy career.

In a 1967 interview with *Life* magazine, Rostow stated that "I have learned that men who say they have no theory are controlled by bias."[136] Walt Rostow adhered rigidly to a linear theory of economic development. This theory informed both his passionate advocacy of foreign development aid and his vehement calls for the heavy bombing of North Vietnam—what Rostow viewed as America's "equivalent of guerrilla warfare." With no doubt that he had done his best, although frustrated that Kennedy and Johnson had not acted upon his advice earlier, Rostow departed office to a life in which he was not just unrepentant, but proud of his contribution to combating Southeast Asian communism. Of the Vietnam War, Rostow later commented: "I don't spend much time worrying about that period."[137]

135. Address by Walt Rostow at Kenyon College, Ohio, 11 May 1964, Agency File, Box 51, NSF, LBJL.

136. Thomas B. Morgan, "The Most Happy Fella in the White House," *Life*, 1 December 1967.

137. See "Walt Rostow, Adviser to Kennedy and Johnson, Dies at 86," *New York Times*, 15 February 2003, A23.