

NO FORTUNATE SONS: VIETNAM, 1970

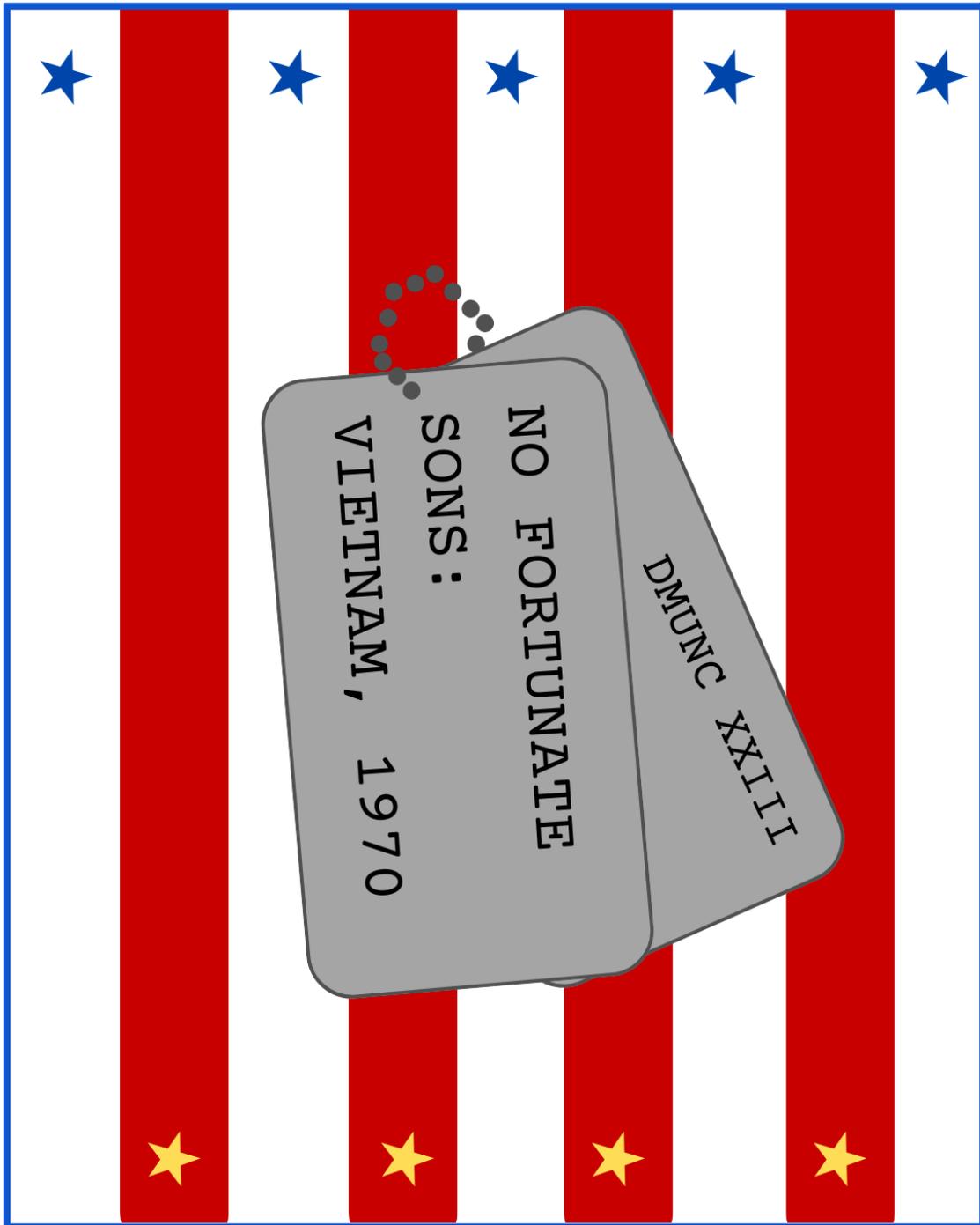


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LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY GENERAL

Delegates, Club and Team Advisors, Parents, and Any Other MUN Folks,

It is my esteemed privilege to welcome you all to Davis Model United Nations Conference XXIII! My name is Brody Andrews, and I am honored to serve as your Secretary-General for the 23rd DMUNC. On the weekend of May 2-3, 2026, delegates will have the opportunity to engage in fruitful debate and cooperation, and hopefully, make lifelong connections.

As a senior at UC Davis, this will be my final DMUNC and my final Model UN Conference. I've been to over 30 conferences in the eight years I've been doing MUN but nothing I've gotten to do in my Model UN career has been as rewarding as DMUNC. Last year I got the opportunity to serve as the Director General of DMUNC XXII and it brought me so much joy to watch a massive number of future leaders bring their imaginative ideas to important debates. Thank you all for the opportunity to watch the magic unfold again, I truly cannot wait to see and be inspired by all of you in May.

I joined MUN my freshman year in high school and I could not be more grateful for the experiences it has brought me. Having been in your position I know how simultaneously nerve-wracking and exciting a MUN weekend can be. Whether this is your first conference or your 100th I'm happy you chose to come to DMUNC. In college, MUN has only become a larger part of my life. Not only has MUN afforded me educational and competitive opportunities, but it has also brought me lasting relationships with incredible people who continue to push and support me every day.

As someone who has done Model UN for so many years, I've had all the classic MUN experiences. Every author's panel, crisis update, closing ceremony celebration, and moderated caucus speech led me to DMUNC and I couldn't be happier. As graduation looms large, I want to remind all of you of the amazing joys that MUN can bring and all of the exciting things college has in store for all of you. When you love MUN, it loves you back. The skills you will improve, friendships you will form, and knowledge you will gain from even one MUN conference is enough to make having to explain what a crisis committee is to your non-MUN friends worth it.

I have had the honor of serving as the Director General of DMUNC XXII and as the crisis director for DMUNC XXI's The Muppets committee and DMUNC XX's Star Wars JCC on the Rebels side. With three DMUNCs and countless more conferences under my belt, I feel confident that my experience and passion will help make DMUNC XXIII a truly memorable conference. However, none of this would be possible without the hard work of the CONSEC and staff members who have worked tirelessly for months to prepare for DMUNC XXIII. Running DMUNC is in *no way* a one person job and I am eternally grateful to every single DMUNC staff member. My greatest thanks goes to my Director General Mae Tyson who has stepped up at every turn in extraordinary ways. Thank you Mae, CONSEC, head chairs, crisis directors, and all the DMUNC staff.

Delegates, we have been planning this weekend since August of 2025 and we're so excited for you to enjoy it. I encourage you to read through your committee background guides thoroughly and formulate collaborative resolutions. I look forward to the thought-provoking ideas that each of you will bring forth to your respective committees. Good luck! We truly can't wait to share this with you.

Sincerely,

Brody Andrews | Secretary-General

Davis Model United Nations Conference XXIII

LETTER FROM THE HEAD CHAIR

Hi everyone!

My name is Krishna Ram, and I'm a student at UC Davis majoring in International Relations and Economics, with a deep interest in geopolitics, global history, and diplomacy. I've been involved in Model UN for about 4 years now — from competing in the college circuit to training new Davis delegates — and I'm absolutely thrilled to be serving as your Head Chair for the Vietnam War Cabinet! This committee is designed to challenge our crisis history buffs to step into the shoes of leaders navigating one of the most turbulent and consequential conflicts of the 20th century. Every choice carries real political and human consequences and as such, we expect to see professionalism and respect for the committee while also seeing delegates reveal their creative instincts as they reinterpret the conclusion of such an impactful moment in history.

Apart from that, in my free time I like to cook some fire burrito bowls every now and then and get pumps in the gym when I have the free time (I also love playing mobile games brawl stars, but don't catch me saying that haha). I absolutely cannot wait to see the passion you all will bring during the committee, and I wish you all the best in preparation!

Best,

Krishna Ram

LETTER FROM THE CRISIS DIRECTOR

Delegates,

I'm thrilled to welcome you all, first and foremost to DMUNC and especially to this year's Vietnam War committee. Model UN holds a near and dear place in my heart; I competed all four years of high school and fell in love with conference hosting during my sophomore year. Fun fact: DMUNC was my first travel conference—I was 16 at the time—and I remember being equal parts excited and anxious during my preparation. Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or comments, I'm here as a resource and I'm looking forward to answering your emails!

I'm currently a first-year transfer student studying Political Science, morbidly curious about my own history and the figures within it. That's the inspiration behind this committee: My grandfather led platoons for South Vietnamese forces and jumped across boats to arrive in the US with my grandmother before the fall of Saigon. The two of them taught me almost everything I know about Vietnamese language, culture, and values. Researching and planning this committee afforded me the opportunity to learn their sociopolitical history on a deeper level. Each of the characters in this background guide—some familiar to you, some new—are rich with potential and I'm so excited to see how you navigate dynamics between them.

Vietnam's civil war was truly an international affair. This is your chance to critically examine the forces at play, to make your own judgement calls and re-write (or replay) a conflict that too often rests on the force of the American narrative. I encourage you to wrestle with your own morality, take risks, and collaborate throughout the weekend. I look forward to changing history with you all.

See you in committee!

Lucy Davis | Crisis Director

Historical Context

SECT. I: Imperialism and Nationalism in Viet Nam, (1800 - 1954)

French Indochina

In 1858, France invaded Vietnam and its surrounding territories, consolidating its conquests into the colony of French Indochina. The French extracted large amounts of raw materials from Vietnam and forced the native peoples to work in zinc mines and rubber plantations to meet quotas. Additionally, French colonial officials tried to erase Vietnamese culture by suppressing the Vietnamese language, forcefully converting Vietnamese to Catholicism, and indoctrinating Vietnamese youth through the colonial education system.

Japanese Invasion

After the Fall of France in 1940, the Japanese Empire took advantage of the power vacuum left within Indochina and invaded Vietnam. Although the Vietnamese initially believed that the Japanese were liberators, they soon realized that the Japanese were just as brutal as the French. Resistance groups soon emerged to fight against Japanese occupation, with the most significant group being the **Viet Minh**, led by **Hồ Chí Minh**. The Viet Minh was a collection of communists and non-communists who worked closely with American intelligence (Office of Strategic Services) to disrupt Japanese industry and military installations across Vietnam. Over time, the Viet Minh became increasingly entrenched in Marxist-Leninist ideology, yet still sought positive relations with Western powers.

First Indochina War

After World War 2 and the withdrawal of the Japanese, various Vietnamese political organizations rushed to set up their own governments. However, the French returned and reinstated the colonial government of Indochina, which set off the **First Indochina**

War. The Viet Minh were pushed out of major urban areas by French forces, but retained control of much of the countryside. From their jungle bases, the Viet Minh dragged the French into a protracted guerrilla war. French reprisals for Viet Minh attacks led to hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese civilian deaths. The war culminated in the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, where 50,000 Viet Minh soldiers besieged six battalions of French paratroopers. After a bloody siege, the Vietnamese captured the French base, killing or capturing all of the French defenders. The disastrous French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ forced France to negotiate with the Viet Minh for peace and the eventual independence of the countries within French Indochina.

1954 Geneva Accords

The 1954 Geneva Accords brought an end to hostilities and outlined the withdrawal process of colonial French forces. However, the treaty also stipulated that Vietnam would be temporarily divided at the 17th parallel, creating a **communist North Vietnam** and an **anti-communist South Vietnam**. A national election was supposed to be held to determine which system of government Vietnam would adopt, but the South feared the more popular Viet Minh would win the election and thus refused to participate, thus creating a concrete political division between the two Vietnams. The permanent division of Vietnam was orchestrated by the United States, which sought to prevent the spread of communism within Southeast Asia.

SECT. II: US Interests in Viet Nam

Cold War and Domino Theory

From the fires of World War 2, the twin superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the undisputed masters of their respective domains. These once allies then turned on each other, their respective ideologies too contradictory to allow for coexistence. Both of the superpowers sought to spread their ideologies

across the globe while using any means at their disposal to hinder the spread of the other. The Cold War resulted in civil and military conflicts around the world, with countries such as Germany and Korea torn apart by the ambitions of America and the Soviet Union. Soon enough, the attention of these two powers would focus upon Vietnam, with America taking particular interest in the nation.

Within the halls of the American government, political and military leaders were obsessed with containing the spread of communism. American foreign policy was strictly centered around the idea of the Domino Theory, stating that communist revolutions would instigate communist revolutions in neighboring countries, thereby driving out American influence within a region. For Vietnam specifically, the American government feared that a successful reunification of Vietnam under the Communist government would lead to Communist revolutions in neighboring Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and the rest of Southeast Asia. To prevent this supposed “red wave”, the US government would be willing to pay whatever cost in material and lives to ensure the continued dominance of America within the region.

SECT. III: Civil War in Viet Nam (1955 - 1970)

Democratic Republic of Vietnam vs. Republic of Vietnam

Within North Vietnam, a fury had been lit among the people. After years of struggle against the French and Japanese, American suppression was an insult too grave to go ignored. Thousands of Vietnamese marshalled together to form the **Viet Cong**, a collection of insurgent cells that fought what they perceived to be an American puppet government. These fighters faced near insurmountable logistical odds: backed by the US, their opponents in South Vietnam possessed every imaginable military advantage, including advanced mechanised support, air supremacy, and sheer material abundance. Far stronger militaries had been crushed by the American war machine,

and now the full American military complex would be directed at undersupplied peasants untrained in traditional warfare tactics.

American military planners anticipated a quick end to the conflict. As American soldiers began landing in Vietnam, their preconceived notions of a quick victory would be quickly changed. American military patrols were constantly ambushed within the thick jungles of Vietnam, forward operating bases would be shelled by hidden mortar emplacements, and endless mines and traps inflicted terrible casualties among American servicemen. In return, American forces killed or seriously wounded tens of thousands of Viet Cong fighters in airstrikes and helicopter raids. The Vietnam War quickly devolved into a brutal attritional stalemate, with both sides trying to bleed the other out of will or bodies.

Timeline of Events

1858 – France invades Indochina and sets up the colony of French Indochina

1940 – Japan invades French Indochina, prompting Ho Chi Minh to found the Viet Minh

1945 – Japan surrenders and leaves Vietnam, with France returning to reclaim their colony

1946-1954 – First Indochina War

1954 – Vietnam is partitioned between a Communist North and a Capitalist South

1954-1963 – Communist guerrilla insurgency within the South prompts the US to send military aid and advisors to South Vietnam

1964 – The Gulf of Tonkin incident gives the United States the justification to send troops to Vietnam

1965 – US Marines land at Da Nang, marking the beginning of America's ground engagement

1968 – Viet Cong launched the Tết Offensive, sowing doubt among the American people over whether the United States could actually “win” the war

January 1970 – Start Date of Scenario

Geography of Southeast Asia



Vietnam

- Mountainous terrain, narrow river valleys, and dense jungles create natural defenses.
- Hanoi and Haiphong serve as the political and industrial core of North Vietnam.
- Proximity to the Chinese border allows the steady flow of material, advisors, and sanctuary.
- Overall hard to invade, ideal for guerrilla planning, and difficult for U.S. forces to target without regional escalation.

Central Vietnam

- The Annamese Cordillera (Southeast Asia's major mountain backbone), forms the border between Laos and Vietnam and runs from north through south Vietnam, forming a mountainous spine across the region
- The Demilitarized Zone at the 17th parallel is fortified, infiltration may require more detailed steps
- Simultaneously a barrier and a corridor, while its elevation shelters any sort of insurgency, coastlines can remain vulnerable to attack

Southern Vietnam

- The Mekong Delta is Vietnam's agricultural heartland, producing rice and stable agriculture for millions of people.
- Flat terrain, numerous canals, and marshlands make conventional warfare somewhat difficult, not to mention the population and sourcing for supplies
- Saigon, the political center of South Vietnam, depends on surrounding provinces for security and supply.
- Overall, an extremely fertile and soil-rich part of the nation, whoever controls the Delta, will therefore control food production, river traffic, and the stability of the South

Cambodia

Eastern Borderlands

- Sparsely governed, forested, and adjacent to South Vietnam.
- Key sanctuary points for Viet Cong and North Vietnam forces.
- Contains segments of the Ho Chi Minh Trail's lateral extensions.
- Cambodia's neutrality is fragile; a shift in alignment would immediately affect supply routes and cross-border operations.

Central Plain & Phnom Penh

- Political core of Cambodia, surrounded by agricultural flatlands
- Vulnerable to internal insurgency due to weakened state institutions
- Any instability here radiates outwards very quickly, and could easily threaten regional diplomatic balance.



Cardamom Mountains & Northwest Corridor

- Rugged, isolated, and difficult for Phnom Penh to control. Could be ideal for guerrilla activity and future insurgent expansion.

Laos

The Laotian Panhandle (Southeast)

- A critical artery for the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
- Dense jungle and mountains make it nearly impossible to control conventionally.



- As long as this region is open, North Vietnam maintains strategic endurance, due to the difficulty of infiltrating the area.

The Plain of Jars (Northeast)

- A central battleground between the variety of Royal Lao forces, the Pathet Lao, and Hmong units under Vang Pao.
- Elevation and open rolling hills create a rare theater for larger ground engagements.
- Whichever faction dominates this area shapes the political fate of Laos.

3. Mekong River Boundary

- Forms the spine for Laotian politics and population distribution.

- Serves as a natural barrier and logistical route.
- Control over river towns will affect foreign entry, aid distribution, and troop movement.

Current situation: January 1970

By January 1970, the Vietnam War had already reached an unstable phase with multiple parties trying to claim victory. Be that as it may, no actor in particular—domestic or international—seems able to end the war decisively. Instead, the war has metastasized into a larger regional crisis with multiple strained alliances, governments and questioning of public legitimacy across not just Vietnam but the whole of Southeast Asia. Therefore, decisions made by each respective group and their people must be met with dexterity and political consciousness as to ensure that the ending of the Vietnam War is done so in a way that plans and sets the long term future of Southeast Asian power and control.

North Vietnamese/VC Forces

Guided by figures such as Võ Nguyên Giáp and prime minister Phạm Văn Đồng, North Vietnam continues its strategic position of prolonged conflict and stagnation. While the Tet Offensive failed to secure any real decisive military lead, it was however able to expose the limits of U.S. and South Vietnamese control, and heavily altered global perceptions and U.S. decisiveness of continuing the war. Nevertheless, the VC Forces, aim to maintain their ideological cohesion and long term patience, waiting for an opportunity to further the disarray of U.S. led forces. However, they currently face constraints on external supply routes through Laos and Cambodia, especially considering that these nations aim to maintain neutrality and are not necessarily loyal to the Vietcong. Escalation risks as a result may provoke broader international involvement, while prolonged conflict will continue to strain their resource pooling. The Force's strength lies in endurance and consistency in order to grab the opportunity to usurp the power balance. They may not be able to dictate the war's tempo as of now, but they certainly have the ability to capitalize on the disarray caused by the Tet Offensive and outlast their opponents through lack of unity or resolve.

South Vietnamese Forces

The Republic of Vietnam, led by President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, senior officials such as Cao Văn Viên and political strategists such as Nguyễn Thi Hai maintain formal sovereignty over much of South Vietnam currently and have generally continued to receive international appraisal as leaders of the nation. Under heavy U.S. support, South Vietnamese military forces have expanded and increasingly shoulder frontline responsibilities against the Northern Vietcong. Although these attributes have been provided, the government's authority has remained uneven and fragile. Current internal politics have been divided and there are questions for South Vietnamese legitimacy, as American aid has been questioned as a long-term sustainable plan. Rural areas still remain contested and public confidence in Saigon tends to be lacking. Although U.S. support confidence is lacking, South Vietnam does hold a pivotal geopolitical position, where if it endures, it will continue to receive a majority international backing. However, its collapse would redefine the war's meaning entirely, solidifying the fact that if it wishes to maintain its international backing, it must find a way to stabilize or unravel the conflict before further bloodshed is spilled.

Cambodia and Laos

Sitting as the attempted neutral parties of Southeast Asia, despite their limited state capacity, the two nations have been forced up till now to be key players within the war effort. Political elites in Cambodia such as Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, struggle to maintain sovereignty amid mounting internal and external pressures, simply due to Cambodia's geographical entrapment within the war and the lack of political institutions to preserve leadership. North Vietnamese infiltration and domestic insurgency led by figures such as Pol Pot have threatened to destabilize the country almost entirely. In Laos in particular, Vang Pao commands anti-communist forces with foreign support, while local communist factions are slowly gaining influence. Although both of these small states are premature in their ability to command their respective territories, their silver lining lies ironically within their geographical positioning, making them valuable to all sides as an asset. Therefore, if leadership is managed internally within the two nations, disproportionate influence could be dealt out as shifts in their political alignment, neutrality, or internal collapse have dramatic effects on the altering supply routes, escalation of future risks, and overall international responses.

U.S. Government

Remaining the most powerful visible external actor within the conflict by far, the U.S. has maintained significant military presence, economic leveraging, and diplomatic influence within Southeast Asia. President Richard Nixon, supported by his senior officials consisting of Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, and Robert McNamara, formally controlled a majority of U.S. war policy and international negotiations. However this seemingly strong authority remains constrained. Rising domestic opposition, particularly after the Tet Offensive, has created congressional scrutiny, and both national and international skepticism about the continuation of the war through the current lens of the government. Decisions to escalate, withdraw, or negotiate all carry much more political risks, abroad and at home now, with Media exposure and public opinion significantly affecting military fundage, alliance cohesion, and overall diplomatic credibility. Although they still hold heavy influence within Vietnam, the questionability of their ability to provide especially for the South Vietnamese has been rising, ensuring that any measures taken next MUST leverage strategic timings, and damage control on both sides of the globe, to ensure chaos does not befall at a faster rate than it already has been.

Third-Party/International Actors

Finally, addressing the external power bodies, journalists such as David Halberstam and Beverly Deepe Kever, along with prominent international figures such as Olof Palme, operate outside of the norm of direct commanding in the war effort but exert significant influence of the legitimacy of the conflict (especially involving the U.S. government's decisions). Media reporting, public scrutiny and international advocacy all become weapons used by these actors to shape the way the war is understood and judged. Although these actors may not be able to command armies or sign legal treaties, they are able to redefine the meaning of success and failure within the grand scheme of things. Exposure of certain misconducts, framing of negotiations, or even mobilization of public opinions can highly constrain governments and leadership on all sides of the war, accelerating withdrawals from the war or delegitimization of “military gains” that may be propagandized by certain governments. In this era of unprecedented war coverage across the globe, they exemplify the importance and vulnerability media presence provides, acknowledging that narrative control will end up directing a significant portion of the war's direction.

Committee Objective

By January 1970, the war in Vietnam settled into its prolonged, unstable phase. Although conventional victory seems to remain elusive on all sides, the political consequences of the war have accelerated. As alliances become strained, neutral states becoming more and more vulnerable and legitimacy being questioned, delegates must advance all political, military, and humanitarian goals through global-minded interests, however utilizing personal interests to formulate different paths to eventually achieving the overarching goals of the committee.

Primary Objective

Stabilize the Southeast Asian region by 1973.

How this is achieved is left entirely to you, as the delegates. Stability may emerge through negotiated settlement, decisive military action, diplomatic realignment, controlled escalation, a coup d'état, or even unexpected power shifts.

There is no single “correct” ending. Instead, the committee should organically develop one or more of the following regional trajectories:

- **A negotiated or forced resolution to the Vietnam conflict**
- **Formation or fragmentation of regional alliances**
- **Stabilization, collapse, or reconfiguration of Cambodia and Laos**
Shift in U.S. involvement and global Cold War positioning
- **Humanitarian, political, or ideological outcomes that reshape Southeast Asia**

Delegates should recognize that **multiple endings are indeed possible**, and each will reflect the decisions, conflicts, and negotiations that emerge throughout committee.

Questions to Consider

- What does “peace” look like in Southeast Asia for each faction of the committee? How will you work to achieve it?
- What are the resource limitations currently imposed upon your portfolio powers (social, economic, political, logistical, etc.)?
- How will your faction leverage alliances, rivalries, or other neutral players to your advantage to shift the balance of power without provoking uncontrolled escalation of the war?
- Recognize your strengths and most importantly your weaknesses. What internal vulnerabilities, legitimacy crises, faction divisions, public dissatisfaction, or leadership constraints would pose the greatest threats to your character and how would you overcome them?
- How are you able to use your resources efficiently such as narrative framing, resource gathering, or media influence to your advantage to undermine your opponents?

- What geographic chokepoints are most critical to your strategy and how will you secure/disrupt them?
- Overall, given the competing pressures of national interests, foreign policy, economic outcomes, and humanitarian costs, what trade offs are you as a character willing to pursue in order to shape the post 1973 stabilization of Vietnam?

Character List

UNITED STATES

Richard Nixon – President

Personal Background

Before he was 37th President of the United States, Richard Nixon built himself up from humble beginnings in California citrus farms. A bright and involved student, he earned a bachelor's degree from Whittier College and, later, a law degree from Duke University in 1937.

He married Pat Ryan in 1940, and in 1942 began training to join the US Naval Reserve as a lieutenant junior grade. Nixon served as a lieutenant in the Navy from 1943 to 1946, retiring from active duty after the conclusion of WWII but not retiring from the Naval Reserve itself until 1966. He spent 10 years as a lieutenant (1943-1946) before being promoted to commander in 1956, a title which he held until retirement.

In Congress, Nixon served on the Education and Labor and Herter Committees, steadily gaining attention in Washington, DC for his strong anti-communist sentiment. After serving as Eisenhower's Vice President from 1953 to 1961 and narrowly losing the 1960 presidential election, Nixon re-established his career and won the presidency in 1968.

Ideology and Worldview

Nixon is a pragmatic realist obsessed with credibility, power, and historical legacy. Publicly anti-communist, privately flexible, he values stability over ideology. He fears appearing weak—both internationally and domestically—and views politics as a zero-sum game.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Armed Forces
- Authority over foreign policy and negotiations
- Access to intelligence agencies and covert operations
- Ability to escalate or de-escalate U.S. military involvement

Crisis Arc Potential

- Secretly pursue peace while publicly projecting strength
- Use bombing, troop withdrawals, or diplomacy as bargaining chips
- Manage domestic political fallout and leaks
- Decide how far to trust Kissinger—or control him

Relevance to the Committee

Nixon anchors the U.S.–South Vietnam alliance and shapes whether the war ends through negotiation, coercion, or collapse.

Henry Kissinger – Secretary of State

Personal Background

A German Jewish refugee and Harvard academic ('50, '52, '54, respectively), Kissinger began his service journey at the age of 20 when he joined the US Army in 1943. His fluent German helped him excel for three years in US counterintelligence efforts until his discharge in 1946, upon which time he pursued academia. He earned all of his higher education degrees from Harvard University. While at Harvard, he led classes and founded the International Seminar (an annual summer gathering of diplomats from around the world to speak about their policy and goals).

It was during his PhD dissertation that Kissinger wrote that peace was “an international agreement about the nature of workable arrangements and the permissible aims and methods of foreign policy. It implies the acceptance of the framework of international order by all major powers.” He was heavily inspired by Austrian *politik* Klemens Von Metternich.

Eventually, Kissinger departed from academia and journeyed into politics. He worked as a senior foreign policy advisor to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s presidential campaigns throughout the 1960’s, but when it became clear that Rockefeller was not the Republican Party’s chosen leader, he agreed to serve under Richard Nixon instead. By 1970, Kissinger was Nixon’s chief strategist and widely considered the architect of U.S. foreign policy, deeply involved in Vietnam, secret diplomacy, and Cold War maneuvering.

Ideology and Worldview

A realist to the core, Kissinger prioritizes balance of power over morality. He believes secrecy, leverage, and psychological pressure are essential tools of statecraft.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Direct access to the President
- Control over backchannel diplomacy
- Influence over intelligence and covert actions
- Architect of secret negotiations with North Vietnam

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Trade regional stability for geopolitical advantage
- Sideline allies if they complicate negotiations
- Clash with journalists and Congress over secrecy

Relevance to the Committee

Kissinger is the committee's master schemer—ideal for backroom deals, secret ceasefires, and controversial compromises.

Melvin Laird – Secretary of Defense

Personal Background

Melvin Laird has politics in his bones: son to a politician and grandson to one of Wisconsin's lieutenant governors, he served a brief stint in the Navy at the close of WWII, earning a Purple Heart and leaving the service in 1946. The same year, he secured a Wisconsin State Senate seat at 23, in a special election to replace his father. In 1952 he moved to the federal House of Representatives and worked specifically on the Defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. He remained there for sixteen years, developing a reputation as an energetic legislator with particular expertise in defense oversight and budgeting.

As a Congressman, Laird supported a strong military posture but grew openly critical of Pentagon management and the Johnson administration's handling of Vietnam, often clashing with Secretary McNamara. When President Nixon appointed him Secretary of Defense in 1969, he implemented a decentralizing strategy that allocated planning authority to the services while retaining firm civilian control. Laird prioritized budget discipline, organizational reform, and patching up Congressional relations even as total military personnel and conventional forces were sharply reduced.

Vietnam dominated Laird's four years in office. He shifted combat responsibility to South Vietnamese forces while steadily withdrawing U.S. troops. Under his stewardship, American troop levels and casualties fell dramatically, even as domestic unrest intensified.

Though he privately opposed major escalations, Laird remained committed to disengagement, even as home opposition swelled and his administrations became deeply unpopular. He was committed to the objectives dictated by the Presidents he served under.

Ideology and Worldview

Cautiously pragmatic. Laird supports “Vietnamization”—reducing U.S. troops while strengthening South Vietnamese forces. He is sensitive to public opinion and military overstretch.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Control over U.S. military planning and budgets
- Oversight of troop deployments and withdrawals
- Liaison between military leadership and the White House

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Push troop withdrawals faster than Nixon prefers
- Argue with generals over escalation
- Balance military realism with political pressure

Relevance to the Committee

Laird determines how much war the U.S. can still afford—financially, militarily, and politically.

Robert McNamara (Secretary of War; legacy role)

Personal Background

San Francisco native and UC Berkeley alumni, Robert McNamara was a WWII veteran and Harvard professor before entering the fray of Washington, DC. He was a businessman first: the first non-familial leader of Ford Motors, McNamara’s talent for financial systems and management caught the eye of young President Kennedy. Any ambition to establish tenure in his presidency at Ford was replaced by motivation for public service and international impact—McNamara joined Kennedy’s cabinet in 1961.

McNamara’s area of expertise was business, but he quickly educated himself about the nuances of defense and applied his broader skill set to his role as Secretary. Working with President Kennedy, he emphasized aggressive flexibility and adaptation to matters abroad. He was incredibly active in Cold War policy formation, especially in regards to nuclear activity. His time in Washington was controversial in part because the decision mechanisms on which he depended were systematic rather than intuitive—analysis of variables decided action, movement, and budget.

By the mid-1960s, most of McNamara's day-by-day work concerned Vietnam. After the French withdrawal in 1954 the US had pledged support to fighting Communist forces, but the 1960s brought an influx of troop deployment and bombing to the region. Often taking trips to Vietnam to assess the ground situation, the Secretary was increasingly hesitant to approve resources. Witnessing Vietnam's geographical and socioeconomic devastation took a toll on his psyche. Frequently in dispute with now-President Johnson over American escalation or de-escalation of conflict, McNamara resigned and joined leadership at the World Bank in 1967.

Ideology and Worldview

Technocratic and data-driven, but morally shaken. Increasingly doubts whether war metrics can capture human cost.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Institutional memory of U.S. escalation
- Credibility with international institutions
- Analytical frameworks for war assessment

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Leak doubts or warnings
- Advocate humanitarian considerations
- Clash with realist hardliners

Relevance to the Committee

McNamara embodies the moral reckoning of U.S. involvement and can influence humanitarian changes.

VIETNAM

Trịnh Thị Ngọ (Propaganda Radio Broadcaster)

Personal Background

Born into an affluent North Vietnamese family, Ngo spent her childhood surrounded by American cinema. She was a huge fan of classic films like *Gone With the Wind*, and thanks to private tutoring was able to enjoy the original English versions without subtitles. She in 1955 joined the Voice of Vietnam radio station.

During her time at Voice of Vietnam, Ngo was assigned broadcast duties thrice a day. Her messages, which she wrote in collaboration with the Viet Cong, were meant to demoralize

American soldiers by invading their psyche. She would insist, for example, that the GIs would be bombed in their sleep or abandoned by their own platoons, that they would die drowning in mud, and that they were fighting a war they could not win. Communist forces even fed her names of dead soldiers so she could wish them a happy birthday—knowing the men would never get to celebrate.

Ngo believed in her cause wholeheartedly; she was the voice of Hanoi for seven wars as the war raged on. Though it is unclear how much of an impact her broadcasts had, they were undoubtedly cleverly designed to weaponize the fear and anger of American soldiers.

Ideology and Worldview

Believes narrative wins wars. Loyal to the revolution.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Access to recording studio, familiar with staff
- Access to Viet Cong intelligence forces and information

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Manipulate journalists
- Shape ceasefire narratives
- Undermine enemy morale

Relevance to the Committee

Words are war's sharpest weapons, and she knows it.

Phạm Văn Đồng — Prime Minister

Personal Background

Born in Quang Ngai province, Pham Van Dong came of age amid the disintegration of French colonial authority in Vietnam. Educated at the University of Hanoi and Whampoa Military Academy, it was in China that he first encountered Ho Chi Minh, beginning a relationship that would define his political life. By the early 1940s, Dong was among a small circle of young intellectuals who helped Ho and Vo Nguyen Giap build the Viet Minh, transforming a fledgling guerrilla movement into a revolutionary force that would ultimately defeat France in 1954 and, decades later, the United States.

Dong emerged onto the international stage at the Geneva Conference of 1954, where he led the Vietnamese delegation negotiating the end of French rule. Elevated to prime minister in 1955, Dong survived the volatile early years of communist rule through unwavering loyalty to Ho Chi Minh, who trusted him deeply in return. While others shaped ideology and

strategy, Dong ensured implementation, cultivating a reputation as a disciplined administrator rather than a visionary policymaker.

As Ho's health declined in the 1960s, Dong assumed a more visible role. His coolness, polished French, and cultural fluency earned both admiration and suspicion abroad. Despite his prominence, Dong wielded less real power than his title suggested, sidelined by party leaders who dominated wartime and postwar decision-making. In peacetime, the limits of his administrative skill became evident as Vietnam struggled under rigid central planning, economic isolation, and policy missteps. Reserved, cautious, and rarely outspoken, Dong became a symbol of revolutionary endurance largely insulated from blame for the failures of the system he was supposedly responsible for creating.

Ideology and Worldview

Communist nationalist. Values unity, discipline, and long-term victory.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Civilian authority over war policy
- International diplomatic channels

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Balance Soviet and Chinese interests
- Decide when peace serves revolution
- Manage propaganda vs. reality

Relevance to the Committee

Đông represents the political endgame of North Vietnam. He was confident that the

Nguyễn Thi Hai — Politician and Pharmaceutical Chemist

Personal Background

Nguyễn Thi Hai was born in the Mekong Delta, the first daughter of a fourth-generation delta family. Her parents were progressive for their time, funding her education first through private tutoring then through high school and pharmaceutical school. By the age of 40, she was comfortably trilingual (French, Vietnamese, and English), a graduate of Saigon University, and married to one of her pharmacy-school classmates, with whom she began a pharmaceutical factory in Saigon.

In 1970, Nguyễn was also a prominent politician: the first woman deputy speaker of Vietnam's Lower House Assembly (in the Mekong Delta) and a close friend of President Nguyen Van Thieu and his wife. (It is speculated that her relationship with the government is

what secured her political position in the first place; she was not afraid to use connections to her advantage.)

Almost two decades into her pharmaceutical venture, she and her husband have recouped their initial investment exponentially: though they began the first 24-hour pharmacy in Saigon, financial success allowed them to purchase their own means of production (a factory, which she oversaw administratively). During the war, Thi Hai's factory began producing their own pharmaceutical products in hopes to export for international profit. She was rumored to be a millionaire, pouring money into hospitals for war victims and partnering with the president's wife on food drives. She was also a strong advocate for women's health and reproductive rights, specifically regarding access to birth control.

Ideology and Worldview

Close ties to the South Vietnamese government but unclear political stance in practice at the Vietnam Lower Assembly. Progressive re: women's rights, believing that an effective ceasefire would benefit all parties but that winning (and rebuilding) requires significant sacrifice.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Administrative control of Saigon's biggest pharmaceutical company
- Extensive biochemical / drug development knowledge
- Political ties in the Mekong Delta / to the South Vietnamese government

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Aid the war effort with resources
- Influence legislation (and people) in the Lower Assembly
- Grow the pharmaceutical business

Relevance to the Committee

A woman with connections up and down the political ladder, Thi Hai's unique interdisciplinary socioeconomic assets have varied, untapped potential for the war effort.

Võ Nguyên Giáp — General and Strategist

Personal Background

General Võ Nguyên Giáp was a self-taught strategist who rose to become one of the most consequential military commanders of the twentieth century. Trained as a lawyer and history teacher, Giáp founded the Armed Propaganda Brigade for the Liberation of Vietnam with just 34 fighters in 1944. A decade later, he commanded the Vietnamese People's Army that defeated France at Dien Bien Phu, ending colonial rule in Indochina.

Giáp's intellectualism blended Vietnamese nationalist tradition with Marxist thought and close study of revolutionary warfare. Educated in Hue and Hanoi, he was deeply influenced by Vietnam's historical resistance to foreign domination, while also reading Mao Zedong and other theorists of guerrilla war. After joining Ho Chi Minh in China in 1940, Giáp helped found the Viet Minh and briefly took power during the August Revolution of 1945. Negotiations with France failed, leading to an eight-year war. Despite early setbacks and heavy losses, Giáp orchestrated the logistics-heavy siege of Dien Bien Phu, mobilizing tens of thousands of civilians to haul artillery and supplies into the surrounding hills.

After 1954, Giáp became defense minister of North Vietnam and a central figure in the war against the United States and South Vietnam. His career was marked by political tension, especially during the Sino-Soviet split, and by staggering battlefield casualties. Though tactically outmatched at times, particularly against U.S. air mobility, Giáp excelled at sustaining a long war through logistics, diplomacy, and morale. He saw the 1968 Tet Offensive as a psychological triumph, knowing it would desecrate American public support for the war. He understands war as a game of moves and countermoves where survival is more valuable than winning battles.

Ideology and Worldview

Revolutionary nationalist. Believes time, morale, and popular support outweigh technology.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Strategic control over North Vietnamese forces
- Guerrilla warfare expertise
- Revolutionary legitimacy

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Debate negotiation vs. total victory
- Clash with civilian leadership
- Decide how much suffering is acceptable

Relevance to the Committee

Giáp defines whether the war ends by diplomacy—or exhaustion.

LAOS & CAMBODIA

Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak — Cambodia

Personal Background Born into one of two Cambodian royal bloodlines, the young Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak had ambitions of assuming the Cambodian throne. His expensive

education was afforded in the hope that he would govern, but that authority went to his cousin of separate bloodline, Norodom Sihanouk. He and his cousin did not agree on key issues, among them being the encroachment and presence of the North Vietnamese Viet Minh on Cambodian soil and the government's complacency thereof. Throughout his time serving under Sihanouk, Matak spent the majority of his time abroad, building a long list of international contacts.

During this time, Matak held fast to his original political ideals, including a sensibility that was strongly nationalist. The Khmer Renovation Party, which he'd been active in before his stint as his cousin's emissary, aligned more with his beliefs: like him, the party valued the monarchy and Khmer ethnic heritage, endeavoring for freedom from French colonialist influence. This party came back into power in 1969 and so did Matak, assuming the prominent role of deputy premier (akin to a vice president in a presidential system).

While in this office—and at the beginning of our start date—Matak's role functions at the nucleus of the Cambodian government while tensions flare between the North Vietnamese (to whom he is not sympathetic in the least). A coup against the government is brewing, which he knows, but that is secondary to his immediate interests of de-regulating the economy and facilitating a private-interest economic agenda. He balances political and social interests as Cambodia's second-in-command while planning to emerge as a leader of a new era of Cambodian politics.

Ideology and Worldview

Nationalist conservative. Fears communist takeover.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Political legitimacy
- Influence within Cambodian elite

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Support coups or foreign intervention
- Risk destabilizing neutrality

Relevance to the Committee

Cambodia's fate could regionalize the war, and the prince holds the scale that could tip the region in one way or another.

Pol Pot — Communist Cambodian Leader

Personal Background

Before he made a name for himself via brutal totalitarian politics, Pol Pot was a Khmer boy

whose family lived off the land in Cambodia. He did not excel academically and instead chose to refine his skills in the trade of radio electronics. He was skilled enough to secure a scholarship in Paris in 1949. During the his four years in France, he grew familiar with the writings of Rousseau and Stalin, combining political philosophies until he fashioned a unique one to his liking, hoping to apply it to Cambodia. He participated in Marxist conversation circles and French Communist activity that eventually interfered with his studies. Still underperforming at school, Pot was forced to return to Cambodia in 1953.

Pot was an early contributor to the Viet Minh, and worked as an assistant to a Khmer Viet Minh Secretary in the early 1950's. His end goal was a legitimate socialist Cambodian government, but civil war and political factions made such ambitions difficult. Cambodia won independence in 1954 but the Communist party remained mostly out of the mainstream, working with left-wing parties rather than standing on its own. Pot continued to build political infrastructure.

It wasn't until 1960 that Pot gained status in the Cambodian Communist Party, first in 1960 as a general member in the "committee" (a nucleus of party leaders) and then as committee secretary (paramount leader) in 1962. He had the opportunity to ally with Cambodia's legitimate government—that of national royalty, Prince Sihanouk—but instead Pot chose to establish a guerrilla war force called the Khmer Rouge and fight the government instead.

At the start date, Pot is reckoning with the significant weakening of Royal forces and the growing presence of US military aid.

Ideology and Worldview

Radical agrarian communist. Sees violence as necessary and purifying.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Guerrilla forces
- Ideological fanaticism

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Exploit chaos
- Hide intentions behind alliances

Relevance to the Committee

Pot is a looming catastrophe disguised as a revolutionary ally. He has great potential sway over the stability of the Cambodian government and their contribution to the war effort.

Vang Pao — Lao General

Personal Background

Born in December 1929 in a remote village in northeastern Laos, Vang Pao began his military life as an interpreter for French colonial forces during World War II, later advancing to sergeant and, after Laotian independence in 1954, to officer in the national army. By 1960, as President Eisenhower declared Laos strategically vital in the global struggle against communism, Vang Pao was already fighting Communist forces on Laotian soil—positioning himself at the center of a conflict that would soon merge with the broader war in Vietnam.

Though he was a strategist by office, Vang Pao's true power came from his leadership of clandestine Hmong forces. The CIA financed his guerrilla army throughout the span of the conflict, eventually totalled around 39,000 fighters which he led personally into battle. They fought most often along stretches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail against the North Vietnamese, with geographical familiarity and climate adaptation that the American forces both acutely lacked and sorely needed. His authority was powerful enough to unite the Hmong's 18 clans.

When not in battle, Pao was in constant communication with American forces. His deep anti-communist sentiment stemmed from an interest of self-protection: he saw the North Vietnamese, communist agenda as a threat to the Hmong way of life, their agency, and their dignity as a people. Working in such close proximity with American intelligence and Western power was both a power and a burden. As perhaps the most influential Hmong leader of the war effort, he carried the responsibility of a general and a representative of an ethnic group that had been historically marginalized and were grappling with the effects of American biochemical warfare in their forests, homes, and families, a true dichotomy of interests.

Ideology and Worldview

Survival-focused anti-communist. Feels deeply responsible for the well-being of his people and committed to fight against the North Vietnamese to achieve those ends.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Irregular forces
- CIA connections

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Bargain loyalty for protection
- Fear abandonment

Relevance to the Committee

Represents the hidden wars beneath official diplomacy.

3RD PARTY ACTORS

David Halberstam — Journalist

Personal Background

Halberstam had two great loves in his life: writing and sports. He grew up in Yonkers, New York, and attended Harvard University. While at Harvard, he served as the managing editor of *The Crimson*, and after graduation, reported on the early Civil Rights movement of the 1950s from Mississippi and Tennessee, in turn.

In 1960 he accepted a place at the *New York Times*. By 1962, Halberstam had worked across Washington and the Congo, finally settling into his post in South Vietnam. While reporting in Vietnam, he was vocal about the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese government and warned about the inevitable demise of the US-backed operation against communism. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964 for his work in Vietnam and left the *Times* in 1967.

Until his death in 2007, Halberstam published more than a dozen books (most of them about sports, but one about Vietnam).

For purposes of this Crisis Committee, it will be up to the delegate whether or not Mr. Halberstam has emerged from retirement and is back with the Times doing war coverage or if he's a truly independent agent on the ground.

Ideology and Worldview

Truth-seeking, skeptical of power. Professionally non-partisan.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Media influence
- Local government knowledge
- Public opinion leverage

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Expose secrets
- Shape war legitimacy

Relevance to the Committee

He can topple narratives—and governments.

Beverly Deepe Kever — Journalist

Personal Background

The longest-serving correspondent during the Vietnam War, Kever covered Viet politics from 1962 to 1969. She began as a political science-journalism double major in Nebraska, but earned her Master's in journalism from the Pulitzer school at Columbia University in the class of 1958. That same year, she travelled to Poland and Russia (then called the USSR).

In 1960, she took a solo trip through Asia, documenting her travels via articles published by the Associated Press. She covered sociopolitical unrest in Seoul, opium dens in Shanghai, and eventually began a long stay in Vietnam. She covered the Tonkin Gulf incident, the Tet Offensive, and illustrated day-to-day dynamics of Vietnamese reporting for the American audience. She became incredibly familiar with the region, its religions, and its people.

Kever's work captured every voice of the war, from peasants to Vietnamese generals and US officials. She worked closely with translators to provide accurate reporting, focusing especially on the role of women on both sides of the war effort and probing each of her sources about their long-term goals and motivations. Her position as a freelancer ensured that her work reached national (and sometimes international) audiences. She was famous for her bitingly honest reporting of corruption in Washington, DC about Vietnam policy, so much so that a number of her articles were censored and later confirmed in the Pentagon Papers.

Ideology and Worldview

Fact-driven, nuanced, non-partisan professional.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Credibility with policymakers
- Access to ground truth
- Trust of locals and familiarity with local governments

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Challenge propaganda
- Humanize civilian suffering
- Investigate all sides of conflict

Relevance to the Committee

Bridges battlefield reality and public conscience.

Olof Palme — Prime Minister of Sweden

Personal Background

Though Palme and his siblings were born into wealth with aristocratic lineage, he was profoundly shaped by his experiences internationally. An alumni of Kenyon College in Ohio, where he spent four years, and a traveler familiar with various Asian countries (Burma, Japan, and Sri Lanka among them), he witnessed the sociopolitical effects of institutional injustices on ordinary people and decided to fuel change at home in Sweden.

He joined the Swedish Democratic Socialists in 1949 and earned a spot in Parliament a few years later. Throughout the 1960s, Palme served in Parliament in various committees, revamping university education and radio and television media while leading Communications and Education, respectively.

He was outspoken about his criticism of US foreign policy, and during his time in Parliament even participated in a student-run antiwar protest.

Upon his election to the Prime Minister position in 1969, Palme preserved his anti-war values and continued critiquing the United States' foreign policy agenda. He made no secret that US draft dodgers would find refuge in Sweden, which was one policy among many that led to temporarily frozen US-Sweden relations. Highly controversial and dearly beloved in corners of Sweden, Palme was a true political trailblazer of the era.

Ideology and Worldview

Social Democrat with a strong humanitarian vision.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Diplomatic legitimacy
- Direct connection to Parliament
- Government budget architect

Questions for a Crisis Arc

- What role does Sweden play in the Vietnam conflict?
- How can Swedish aid in Vietnam make a broader statement about Sweden's moral judgement about the war?
- How outspoken should the Swedish government be about Vietnam, and how will that materialize through their head of state (Palme)?

Relevance to the Committee

One of many international critics of US foreign policy during this time, Palme is uniquely positioned to leverage European resources and public opinion. Sweden's role as an aid leader

and trailblazing “reforming” country is championed by Palme’s strong moral convictions, perhaps applicable to the situation in Vietnam.

Amy Lauer — Technology Developer, US Army*

Personal Background

Born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana, Lauer grew up fascinated by corn. Her father and grandfather were both farmers by occupation (though both did service time in the US Marine Corps), and she spent summers experimenting with ways to rid the crop of insect pests. This enduring curiosity led her down the road of biology, where after a time she graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in chemistry.

While at MIT in the 1960s, she conducted ongoing joint research with Harvard University about DDT bioaccumulation from World War II, examining the environmental impacts of its use on farmland and the surrounding ecosystems. She was slightly infamous among classmates for being enormously brilliant and equally socially awkward: once, she spent three consecutive weeks in the MIT lab testing compound variations, storing extra clothes and saltines in an unused closet locker. Already considering military service, she was tapped by the US Army on recommendation of her dean, who received word about a vacancy in their chemical development lab.

Cold War anxiety poured money into research on all technological-defense fronts. Ironically, Lauer harbored long-standing anti-war sentiment. Extended family members lost overseas and veteran classmates returning shaken by the horrors of battle made her wary of government agenda, but the programs it boasted and the opportunities at hand were too valuable to dismiss as a new graduate. She’s just received a new assignment: modifications on Project Rainbow, a combination pesticide for battlefields in humid, dense-jungle areas.

Ideology and Worldview

Aware of and sympathetic to anti-war sentiment, which can come into conflict with her family’s long military history. Motivated to research above all else, but not truly aware of the scope of her work’s consequences.

Portfolio Powers and Resources

- Access to some classified US Army intelligence, relevant to projects
- Full US Army lab clearance
- Fresh connections

Hints for a Crisis Arc

- Explore the creation and distribution of Agent Orange from lab to field
- Reconcile anti-war beliefs with gravity of current position

- Take some political stance via work

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