

Harold Wilson, the British Labour Party, and the War in Vietnam

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Introduction

Michael Stewart, who served as Harold Wilson's foreign secretary for nearly four years in the 1960s, later said that Vietnam "was to prove the most difficult and the most agonizing of all the problems I had to face."¹ Vietnam was also an agonizing issue for the British Labour Party, causing the left wing of the party to become profoundly disillusioned with the Wilson governments. Whereas Wilson and other Labour leaders saw Vietnam within the context of the Cold War, many rank-and-file party members saw Vietnam largely as a war of national liberation.

Surprisingly little has been written about Wilson's efforts to cope with conflicting domestic and international pressures on Britain over its support for the United States in Vietnam. Historical accounts of the British governments from 1964 to 1970, including many of the biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs, focus on the supposed existence of deals or implicit agreements between Lyndon Johnson and Harold Wilson over foreign relations and economic policy, particularly U.S. support for sterling in return for British support for U.S. actions in Vietnam.² A growing body of excellent work focuses on what Vietnam meant for Anglo-American economic and political relations or on Wilson's diplomatic missions.³ Although many of these

1. Michael Stewart, *Life and Labour: An Autobiography* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980), p. 151.

2. See, for instance, Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 386–387; Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964–1970* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), chs. 3, 13; and Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson* (London: MacDonald, 1989), pp. 37, 117.

3. On Anglo-American economic and political relations, see Kevin Boyle, "The Price of Peace: Vietnam, the Pound, and the Crisis of the American Empire," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 37–72; Alan Dobson, *The Politics of the Anglo-American Economic Special Relationship 1940–1987* (Brighton, UK: Wheatsheaf, 1988); Alan Dobson, "The Years of Transition: Anglo-American Relations 1961–1967," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (July 1990), pp. 239–

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studies draw on a vast quantity of government records, none of them really considers the impact of Wilson's support for U.S. policy in Vietnam on intra-Labour Party dynamics. Conversely, the ever-expanding literature on the Labour Party says remarkably little about Vietnam.⁴ Left-wing accounts simply see Vietnam in terms of Wilson's alleged betrayal of the Labour Party that spawned the bitter internal rifts of the 1970s.⁵ U.S. accounts of the war pay little attention to the role of the British.⁶ George C. Herring has rightly pointed out that "the international aspects of the war have not been given the attention they deserve."⁷ Fredrik Logevall's superb book *Choosing War* goes a long way toward rectifying this problem by providing accounts of Johnson's response to the British position that draw on British as well as American archives.⁸ However, Logevall argues that Wilson quietly opposed escalation because British officials had concluded that the war was not winnable through military means and that negotiations were the best solution.⁹ Logevall con-

258; John Dumbrell, "The Johnson Administration and the British Labour Government: Vietnam, the Pound and East of Suez," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1996), pp. 211–231; Sylvia Ellis, "Lyndon Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War," in Jonathan Howell, ed., *Twentieth Century Anglo-American Relations* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 180–204; Rolf Steininger, "The Americans Are in a Hopeless Position': Great Britain and the War in Vietnam, 1964–5," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (November 1997), pp. 237–285; and John W. Young, "Britain and 'LBJ's War', 1964–68," *Cold War History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (April 2002), pp. 63–92. On Wilson's diplomatic missions, see John Dumbrell and Sylvia Ellis, "British Involvement in Vietnam Peace Initiatives, 1966–1967: Marigolds, Sunflowers and 'Kosygin Week,'" *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 113–149; Ponting, *Breach of Promise*, pp. 223–226; John W. Young, "The Wilson Government and the Davies Peace Mission to North Vietnam, July 1965," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (October 1998), pp. 545–562; and John W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970*, Vol. 2: *International Policy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003), ch. 3.

4. For example, Brian Brivati and Richard Heffernan, eds., *The Labour Party: A Centenary History* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), contains one reference to Vietnam. Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party since 1945: Old Labour: New Labour* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996), contains two references. Michael Gordon's study, *Conflict and Consensus in Labour's Foreign Policy 1914–1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), contains three references to Vietnam, but the study ends with 1965. A useful short account is provided by Chris Wrigley, "Now You See It, Now You Don't: Harold Wilson and Labour's Foreign Policy 1964–70," in Richard Coopey, Steven Fielding, and Nick Tiratsoo, eds., *The Wilson Governments 1964–70* (London: Pinter, 1993), pp. 123–135.

5. For example, Peter Shore, *Leading the Left* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. 95.

6. For example, Lyndon Johnson in his memoirs refers to Britain and the Vietnam War only when discussing the Soviet-British talks of January 1967. See Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), pp. 253–255.

7. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), p. 335.

8. Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance of Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). A useful collection of essays placing Vietnam in its international perspectives is Andreas Daum, Lloyd Gardner, and Wilfried Mausbach, eds., *America, The Vietnam War and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press and the German Historical Institute, 2003).

9. Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 255, 276–279.

tends that after Wilson visited Washington in December 1964, he “had grown more concerned about the deepening politico-military deterioration in South Vietnam and the seeming proclivity of Lyndon Johnson to expand the fighting.”¹⁰ My argument is that this shift occurred not because Wilson was morally opposed to the war or thought the United States could not win, but because he was concerned about the impact of the war on his own power base in the Labour Party.

Wilson’s policy on Vietnam must be understood not only within the context of Anglo-American relations but also in terms of his handling of pressures from within his own government and political party. This article therefore draws on personal papers and the Labour Party archive as well as British and U.S. government records. The article begins by outlining Britain’s position on the conflict in Vietnam and the policy adopted by the incoming Wilson government. The article then assesses the government’s and the Labour Party’s attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Vietnam galvanized left-wing opposition to Wilson’s pro-American stance, causing anger and disillusionment among Labour Party members and activists, who were never at ease with the government’s stance of moral support for the United States. At the Labour Party’s annual conferences in 1966 and 1967, the members voted to reject the government’s policy on the Vietnam War—the first time that an annual conference of the party had renounced its own government’s policy. This rebuff not only highlighted the problems of internal party democracy but also conspicuously demonstrated the deep divisions within the party over Vietnam.

The conflicting pressures on Wilson from within his own domestic base and from the United States are evident throughout this article, which shows that Wilson’s attempts to broker a peace deal between the combatants were largely designed to placate the Labour Party while highlighting Wilson’s profile as a world statesman—a strategy that brings to mind Robert Putnam’s conception of diplomacy as a two-level game.¹¹ Although the Vietnam War spurred the left to charge that Wilson had betrayed the party, he actually was fairly successful in managing British policy on the war. He kept Britain out of the fighting but maintained the country’s “special relationship” with the United States. Wilson’s ability to hold together a party that was deeply divided on foreign policy, especially as Vietnam came to a head, while retaining Britain’s relationship with the United States has been generally overlooked in the existing literature.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

11. Robert Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” in Peter Evans, Harold Jacobson, and Robert Putnam, eds., *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 431–468.

Britain and the Vietnam War

The Labour Party gained power in October 1964 with only a four-seat majority, but members from the left wing of the party had high expectations of what could be achieved by a government headed by Harold Wilson, who traditionally had been seen as a leftist. As in 1945, many expected that Labour would implement a foreign policy radically different from the traditional course pursued by the Conservatives. This “socialist” foreign policy, the leftists hoped, would be anti-imperialist, internationalist, and based on universal norms. Labour’s 1964 election manifesto had promised “an end to colonialism,” vigorous efforts to relax Cold War tensions, the introduction of new initiatives on disarmament, and leadership at “the United Nations [as] the chosen instrument by which the world can move away from the anarchy of power politics towards the creation of a genuine world community and the rule of law.”¹²

One immediate issue on which Labour Party members wanted a shift away from previous Conservative policy was the conflict in Vietnam. On 7 August 1964, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the U.S. Congress authorized President Johnson to undertake military action against North Vietnam, setting the stage for a major escalation of the war and of U.S. involvement. British support for U.S. military action was an important aspect of the “special relationship,” and the United States wanted Britain to provide troops for Vietnam. The Conservative government had publicly supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam, arguing that U.S. action was purely defensive.¹³ Harold Macmillan had sent a five-man British Advisory Mission, headed by Sir Robert Thompson, to Saigon in 1961 to advise the South Vietnamese government on the use of police and paramilitary forces against Communist guerrillas, based on the lessons of Britain’s own counterinsurgency activities in Malaya.¹⁴ British officials, however, also felt that they had a special role to play in urging a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Britain and the Soviet Union

12. “Labour Manifesto 1964,” in F. W. S. Craig, ed., *British General Election Manifestos, 1900–1974*, rev. and enlarged ed. (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 267–270.

13. See Peter Busch, “Supporting the War: Britain’s Decision to Send the Thompson Mission to Vietnam, 1960–61,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 2, No.1 (October 2001), pp. 69–94; Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US and the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Stephen Dorril, *MIG: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), pp. 715–716; and Antonio Varsori, “Britain and US Involvement in the Vietnam War during the Kennedy Administration, 1961–63,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (January 2003), pp. 83–112.

14. Interestingly, Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s special assistant for Vietnam, William Sullivan, complained on 24 June 1964 that the delegation had not been fully used over the past three years because it had not been given proper access to the U.S. mission in Vietnam. See U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. I (*Vietnam 1964*), p. 526 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

had been the two co-chairs of the Geneva Conference of 1954 that had led to peace settlements for French Indochina, the withdrawal of French colonial forces from Vietnam, and the establishment of the ceasefire line between North and South Vietnam along the 17th parallel.¹⁵ Both Britain and the Soviet Union had an ongoing monitoring role aimed at promoting elections in the North and South if conditions became possible. This meant that any British government would feel an obligation to uphold the Geneva settlement and urge a peaceful resolution. Both the outgoing Conservative government and the incoming Labour government were also concerned that any escalation of military action in Vietnam might prompt either the Soviet Union or China to come to the aid of the North Vietnamese, transforming a regional problem into a direct Cold War confrontation. Thus, the future direction for British policy on Vietnam was not at all clear-cut when Wilson took office.

The election of the Labour government further complicated Britain's reaction to U.S. requests on Vietnam. In the 1950s Wilson had been a harsh critic of U.S. foreign policy, especially in Southeast Asia. During the 1954 Geneva Conferences on Indochina, he had argued that "we must not join with nor in any way encourage the anti-Communist crusade in Asia" and that "a settlement in Asia is imperiled by the lunatic fringe in the American Senate who want a holy crusade against Communism."¹⁶ Labour Party activists were expecting the new prime minister to criticize U.S. action in Vietnam, but they failed to realize that Wilson had softened his position by 1964. As Paul Foot noted, "only by the odd question or emphasis did Wilson suggest that Labour took a different view of the Vietnam War from that of the Tories."¹⁷ In the House of Commons, Wilson had been making non-controversial statements about Vietnam, for instance when he asked Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home to "make it quite clear . . . that he would not support any extension of the war into North Vietnam."¹⁸ Because this was already British policy, Wilson was not signaling any change. The Labour Party's Overseas Department, in outlining the party's stance on Vietnam in August 1964, said that "no British Government, Labour or Conservative, could ignore the effect that a total communist victory in Indo-China might have on the security of

15. See Kevin Ruane, "Anthony Eden, British Diplomacy and the Origins of the Geneva Conference," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1994), pp. 153–72; and Geoffrey Warner, "The Settlement of the Indochina War," in John W. Young, ed., *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration* (Leicester, UK: Leicester University Press, 1988), pp. 233–259. The United States declined to take part in the Geneva Conference.

16. Harold Wilson speeches, 3 May 1954, in Liverpool and Manchester, cited in Paul Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968), p. 203.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

18. Harold Wilson, Speech to the House of Commons, 30 June 1964, *House of Commons Debates (H.C. Deb.)*, 5th Ser., Vol. 697, Column (Col.) 1135.

Malaysia—and ultimately of India.”¹⁹ This formulation also was in line with the Conservative government’s position. In addition, the Labour Party leadership had no desire to alienate the United States shortly before a general election. Patrick Gordon Walker, Labour’s shadow foreign office spokesman, had recently published an article in the U.S. journal *Foreign Affairs* stating that “the prime concern of a Labor [*sic*] Government would be the maintenance of the Western Alliance and, above all, Britain’s close relationship with the United States.”²⁰ Members of the shadow cabinet had also made a number of trips to the United States in the run-up to the general election in order to establish a good working relationship with their American counterparts.

At lower levels of the Labour Party, however, many were eager for a new foreign policy that would reject the power politics of the previous Conservative government and emphasize the need to ease Cold War tensions. The party had always had a pacifist wing, including some who were, for want of a better term, “fellow travelers” of the Communist states. Wilson therefore had to hold together a party and a government riven by discordant views on foreign policy. According to Tom McNally, the Labour Party’s International Secretary at this time, Wilson’s skill in holding the party and government together as Vietnam came to a head has often been underestimated.²¹ Many on the left of the Labour Party saw Vietnam largely as a war of national liberation, whereas most of the party leaders regarded it as part of the global struggle against Communism. Michael Stewart privately wrote that although the United States had “made errors of judgement” over Vietnam, Britain “must not lose sight of the great issue of human liberty.”²² Leftists in the party wanted to place less emphasis on the “special relationship” with the United States, whereas party leaders viewed the Anglo-American relationship as the bedrock of British foreign and security policy and were generally reluctant to criticize the United States in the lead-up to the November 1964 presidential election. This situation was especially tricky because Johnson was set to increase his demands for British involvement in Vietnam, suggesting that the extant policy of support for U.S. defensive action was no longer sufficient.

Johnson sought not only public support from Britain but also the deployment of British troops to confer legitimacy on U.S. actions. This issue, ac-

19. “The Crisis in Vietnam,” 18 August 1964, p. 18, in Overseas Department Box, Labour Party Archive (LPA), Manchester Museum of Labour History, Manchester, UK.

20. Patrick Gordon Walker, “The Labor [*sic*] Party’s Defense and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (April 1964), p. 391.

21. Lord Tom McNally, interview, London, 25 July 2006 (henceforth cited as McNally, interview).

22. Diary Entry, 10 April 1968, in File 8/1/5, Box 8, Michael Stewart (Baron Stewart of Fulham) Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

cording to the British ambassador in Washington, Tom McNally, “acquired an almost dramatic importance when the President began to reflect seriously upon the potential consequences of Britain drifting seriously out of line.” In particular, “it is extremely important from the point of view of American standing with world opinion that the leading socialist-governed country in the world should support their objectives in South East Asia.” McNally stressed that this was also important for domestic public opinion because “American public opinion still [had] a latent sense of guilt which it [was] much easier to allay when the Administration [could] point to the moral and physical support of other countries for what the U.S. [was] trying to do in Vietnam.”²³ Support for U.S. policy in Vietnam became a major focus of discussion during Wilson’s first trip to Washington as prime minister in December 1964 when U.S. officials directly asked both him and Foreign Secretary Gordon Walker for a British commitment to the U.S. war effort. Johnson even took Wilson for a walk in the Rose Garden and “pressed him to send the Black Watch to Vietnam; even a few pipers would be better than nothing.” Wilson apparently did not respond.²⁴ Foreign Secretary Walker was more up front, telling U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the United Kingdom already had troops in Malaysia, a former British colony under attack from Indonesia, that were comparable in number to the U.S. presence in Vietnam, and “he was emphatic that the United Kingdom could not have troops on the ground in Vietnam.” But he added that Britain was ready to help in other ways that could be made public and would amount to an increased commitment, including the training of more men in jungle warfare, the dispatch of more police advisers to Saigon, and greater cooperation in the medical field.²⁵ Wilson deemed the meeting a success and sent a message to his colleagues at home reassuring them that “we have not accepted any new commitment as regards South Viet Nam.”²⁶

This first meeting set the pattern for subsequent transatlantic diplomacy, as Wilson parried subsequent requests for troops by reminding Johnson of Britain’s deployment of 54,000 troops in Malaysia. Wilson’s other stock response was that sending troops “would not have been compatible with Brit-

23. Sir Patrick Dean, British Ambassador in Washington, to C. M. MacLehose, Foreign Office, 6 August 1966, in PREM 13/1262, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK).

24. Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorised Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. 222.

25. “The Prime Minister’s Visit to the United States and Canada,” 6–10 December 1964, p. 31, in PREM 13/104, TNAUK. See also “Memorandum of Conversation,” 8 December 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. I, p. 985.

26. Prime Minister to First Secretary of State, Telegram No. 4046, 9 December 1964, in PREM 13/104, TNAUK.

ain's position as co-chairman" of the Geneva accords.²⁷ He also frequently reminded Johnson of the problems of managing a Labour government if he were to make an immensely unpopular decision to send British troops to Vietnam. Johnson was "outraged by Wilson's steadfast refusal" and said privately that he had made it clear to Wilson at their December 1964 meeting that "the only effective contribution Britain could make to the war effort would be soldiers on the ground."²⁸ Johnson dismissed as a "fig leaf" Wilson's argument that Britain could not send troops without jeopardizing its role as the co-chair of the Geneva accords.²⁹

Wilson's opposition to the sending of troops was not spurred by ethical concerns. He confided to Jack Jones, the leader of Britain's largest and most powerful trade union, the Transport and General Workers Union, that "he would have much more influence with President Johnson on Vietnam if we could send in a token force."³⁰ Indeed, Wilson surreptitiously provided a little more than just moral support. Britain secretly sold arms to the United States for use in Vietnam, with clandestine deliveries of weapons, including napalm and 500-pound bombs, from Hong Kong.³¹ In the House of Commons, Wilson artfully denied that such deliveries were taking place, claiming that "no licences have been granted for the export of arms to Vietnam" and that "we are not supplying arms directly or indirectly for the fighting in Vietnam."³² Wilson also continued the policy started by Macmillan of providing military training for the South Vietnamese in Malaysia and signals intelligence to the United States from Hong Kong regarding intercepts of North Vietnamese radio traffic. Under Wilson, Britain also provided a limited amount of laboratory and technical equipment for Saigon University, a medical pediatric team, police advisers, and teachers and technical experts. In addition, from 1968 to 1971, Britain supplied economic aid to South Vietnam valued at \$2.4 million.³³ The SAS apparently provided some training for U.S. Special Forces

27. Stewart, *Life and Labour*, p. 153; and "Memorandum of Conversation," 8 December 1964, pp. 985–986.

28. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 373.

29. Briefing Book 7/29/66, 29 July 1966, in Box 215/6, Country File UK, National Security File (NSF), Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL).

30. Jack Jones, *Union Man: The Autobiography of Jack Jones* (London: Collins, 1986), p. 176.

31. Stephen Dorril, *MIG: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 718–719; and Sylvia Ellis, "British Opposition to the Vietnam War, 1964–68," in Kristaan Versluys, ed., *The Insular Dream: Obsession and Resistance* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1995), pp. 173–174.

32. Harold Wilson, Speech to the House of Commons, 17 May 1966, *H.C. Deb.*, 5th Ser., Vol. 728, Col. 1119.

33. Stanley Robert Larsen and James Lawton Collins, *Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), pp. 166–167.

personnel in Borneo as part of the British agency's ongoing exchange program with the United States.³⁴

These actions indicate that Wilson's refusal to commit British troops to the war effort resulted mainly from his practical concern about the strong opposition he would confront within his party. The provision of direct military support would have caused outrage within the Labour Party and the government. Some government ministers would likely have resigned, and the left-wing Labour members of parliament (MPs) might have withdrawn from the Labour Party whip in protest, in effect refusing to cooperate with the government. Because Wilson had a governing majority of only four MPs, the dispatch of British troops would have risked the end of his premiership, something he was not prepared to do. Instead, Wilson confined himself to offering strong public moral support for the U.S. intervention in Vietnam.

Wilson did also famously try to offer Johnson the benefit of his advice. When the United States launched its first heavy bombing attacks on North Vietnam on 7 February 1965, Wilson phoned the president to express his concern about the escalation and to urge caution. The historian Fredrik Logevall notes that "the conversation began poorly and got worse" and "laid bare the growing Anglo-American differences over the war."³⁵ Wilson later recalled that after he suggested he come to Washington for urgent talks with Johnson about the dangers of escalation, the president had responded harshly: "To my surprise, he let fly in an outburst of Texan temper." Johnson averred that there was no point "jumping across the Atlantic" every time a critical situation arose, and he complained that the international community was willing to share advice but was unwilling to share responsibility. "I won't tell you how to run Malaysia," he said, "and you don't tell me how to run Vietnam. . . . If you want to help us some in Vietnam send us some men."³⁶ Wilson was concerned about public opinion in Britain and knew that when he spoke in the House of Commons the next day he would face criticism from his own backbenchers over support for U.S. policy. He felt that if he could say he was going to visit Johnson immediately to discuss the situation, it might placate them. Johnson's pointed reply was that "it would be a mistake for the Prime Minister to try to use the President as an instrument in the House of Commons" and that Wilson "would have to decide what side he was on."³⁷

34. Ken Connor, *Ghost Force: The Secret History of the SAS* (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 109–110. See also Dorril, *MI6*, p. 718–719.

35. Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 339–340.

36. Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964–1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1971), p. 80.

37. "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson," 10 February 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–68, Vol. II, p. 230.

The result was that this telephone call, “far from moderating Johnson’s behaviour, merely harmed his view of British resolve.”³⁸ In a memorandum to Johnson, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy spoke of “the very great damage which Wilson did to himself by his outrageous phone call to you.”³⁹ In subsequent months, however, Johnson’s advisers did their best to convince the president that Wilson was actually giving the United States as much public support over Vietnam as he possibly could. When Secretary of State Rusk urged Johnson to meet with the new British foreign secretary, Michael Stewart, he reminded the president that “the British Government has, despite pressures from the left wing of the Labor [*sic*] Party, maintained solid support for United States policy in Viet-Nam.”⁴⁰

Wilson’s policy of giving the United States moral support for its war in Vietnam while resisting the pressure to send troops did not fully satisfy either the anti-Vietnam lobby within Britain or President Johnson, but it was, perhaps, the most realistic policy option at the time, given the conflicting domestic and international pressures. According to Shirley Williams, a British cabinet member in the late 1960s, Wilson was “personally put under huge pressure by Lyndon Johnson,” who was “very mean” and “very rude” toward the British leader.⁴¹ Denis Healey argues that Wilson showed a good deal of courage in resisting U.S. pressure to send troops.⁴² Ben Pimlott, in his biography of Wilson, says that the prime minister “courageously, persistently and despite the strongest inducements, declined to provide [troops]. Words of support were one thing, British lives another.”⁴³ Peter Shore, a minister in the second Wilson government, told Pimlott that “it is hard to imagine any other Labour leader resisting very strong American pressure so successfully. Enormous efforts were made by the Foreign Office, the Treasury, the Americans to get Britain wholly to identify with the war and express this with a military presence.”⁴⁴ Wilson’s success in resisting this pressure while maintaining the Atlantic alliance as the core of British security policy required great political skill.

Shore’s assertion that Wilson came under pressure from the Foreign Office seems overstated. By all indications, the Foreign Office was decidedly

38. Young, “Britain and ‘LBJ’s War,’ 1964–68,” p. 67.

39. McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 22 March 1965, in Vol. 4, Memoranda to the President, NSF, LBJL.

40. Memorandum from Dean Rusk to President Johnson, 10 March 1965, in Box 2778, POL 7, 1964–66, Record Group (RG) 59, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration II (NARA).

41. Baroness Shirley Williams, interview, London, 6 April 2005.

42. Lord Denis Healey, interview, Alfriston, East Sussex, UK, June 2005.

43. Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, rev. ed. (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 388.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 388–389, citing interview with Peter Shore.

unenthusiastic about having British troops thrust into the Vietnam quagmire. Sir Robert Thompson, the head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam, had sent a memorandum to the Foreign Office in August 1964 reporting that the situation in South Vietnam was hopeless, that defeat of the South by the Viet Cong was “inevitable,” and that the Americans should negotiate with the North while they still could.⁴⁵ These recommendations coincided with opinion in the Foreign Office, where many officials by the summer of 1964 were deeply pessimistic about the possibility of military success in Vietnam and were convinced that the United States should negotiate rather than send combat troops.⁴⁶ No one in the Foreign Office supported the dispatch of Britain troops, and instead the main question was how to avoid damaging Anglo-America relations and how best to manage public opinion in the UK. Foreign Office officials were increasingly concerned about British public and elite opinion on Vietnam and warned that opposition to the government’s policy “is by no means confined to Communists, fellow-travellers and professional anti-Americans.”⁴⁷ In September 1965 the Foreign Office commissioned a poll of 310 “opinion-moulders” (politicians, communicators, businessmen, trade union officials, academics, civil servants, and military writers), and the results were compiled in a report titled *Vietnam: British Elite Opinion*. Sixty percent of the respondents felt that the Vietnam War was the main threat to world peace. When asked what British policy toward Vietnam should be, 33 percent urged the promotion of negotiations, 23 percent advocated full support for the United States, 21 percent wanted qualified support for the United States (e.g., supporting the United States but retaining the right to criticize), and 16 percent called for the maintenance of existing policy.⁴⁸

These sentiments help to explain why the U.S. embassy in London frequently warned policymakers in Washington that U.S. policy in Vietnam and the British government’s support of it were coming under strong criticism in both the press and the parliament. According to the embassy, the British reaction to U.S. policy resulted primarily from three factors: first, an underlying fear that the conflict might lead to a Third World War; second, a widespread sense that “it is high time for vigorous expressions [of] criticism [of] U.S. policy in order to influence it”; and third, the “persistence of [a] relatively small

45. Thompson to FO, 13 August 1964, in FO 371/175501, TNAUK.

46. See Logevall, *Choosing War*, pp. 223–227.

47. C. M. MacLehose at the Foreign Office to J. O. Wright, Wilson’s Private Secretary, 8 September 1965, in PREM 13/689, TNAUK.

48. *Vietnam: British Elite Opinion*, December 1965, in PREM 13/689, TNAUK.

but well-organized and vociferous group [of] left-wingers and pacifists who [are] adept at exacerbating these fears and frustrations.”⁴⁹

Labour Protests over Vietnam

Wilson’s moral support for U.S. policy in Vietnam became a major focus of revolt among backbench MPs after the United States initiated heavy bombing raids against North Vietnam in February 1965. The Tribune Group of left-wing MPs started pressing for a debate on Wilson’s policy in the House of Commons.⁵⁰ An editorial in *Tribune*, the weekly paper from which the group took its name, argued that “if [Wilson and his ministers] took the trouble to sound backbench opinion,” they

would not now be in the situation where their own stubborn and feeble refusal to take any kind of initiative over Vietnam has lost them the goodwill and support of so large a section of the Parliamentary party, not to mention the disappointment which is so widespread among socialists outside Westminster.⁵¹

Numerous MPs wrote to *The Times* of London demanding that Britain “take an immediate initiative to achieve a ceasefire.”⁵² On 4 March 1965 sixty backbench MPs, “many of them . . . not among those who usually supported left-wing *demarches*,” tabled an emergency motion in Parliament.⁵³ The backbenchers claimed that because British policy toward Vietnam was based on the 1954 Geneva Declaration and because U.S. policy “springs from non-acceptance of that declaration,” the “objectives of the two countries cannot be the same.” They urged the British government to “take an early initiative in order to bring about a cease-fire and a political settlement.”⁵⁴ Wilson later said that “the parliamentary situation—on our side—was becoming critical,” and he argued hard to maintain the existing line that “we were co-chairman of the Geneva Conference, we were pressing our co-chairman in Moscow for action leading to a conference.”⁵⁵

49. Telegram, U.S. Embassy in London to Secretary of State in Washington, 16 December 1965, in Box 2786, POL 1 UK-US, 1964–66, RG 59, NARA.

50. Tribune Group Meeting of 15 March 1965, in RICH/3/1/3, Jo Richardson Papers, LPA. See also N. H. Twitchell, *The Tribune Group: Factional Conflict in the Labour Party 1964–1970* (London: Rabbit Publications, 1998), p. 28.

51. Lead editorial, *Tribune*, 19 February 1965, p. 21. Surprisingly, *The New Statesman* made relatively little comment on Vietnam, focusing its criticisms on the government’s progress with Rhodesia.

52. Young, “Britain and ‘LBJ’s War’, 1964–68,” p. 68.

53. Wilson, *Government*, p. 79.

54. *H.C. Deb.*, 4 March 1965, 5th Ser., Vol. 707, Col. 1530.

55. Wilson, *Government*, p. 84.

After the February bombing of North Vietnam, resolutions of concern about the government's position and U.S. actions in Vietnam suddenly started flooding in to Labour Party headquarters. From October 1964, when Labour came into office, until early February 1965, the party's Overseas Department had received only three resolutions concerning Vietnam.⁵⁶ But by 9 March the department had received twelve resolutions from constituency Labour parties expressing concern over Vietnam, condemning U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, and urging the government to bring about peace by reconvening the Geneva Conference.⁵⁷ At the Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting on 28 April 1965, the Overseas Subcommittee reported that it had received another 31 resolutions.⁵⁸ In May, 28 more resolutions came in, and in June and July another 40 were received from constituency Labour parties and two from trade unions—an unprecedented number of resolutions for the party headquarters to receive on any single topic.⁵⁹ In May, the Parliamentary Labour Party noted that “many Party workers felt the Government should show greater independence from the United States in its foreign policy.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, on 27 September 1965, just in time for the annual conference, the NEC released a statement on the government's foreign policy saying that “we endorse the successive attempts by the Government to secure a just and peaceful solution” to the Vietnam conflict and listing the government's recent attempts to promote a diplomatic solution.⁶¹

On 22 March 1965 the U.S. Defense Department acknowledged the use of napalm and CS gas in Vietnam and indicated that further escalation of the war was possible. This announcement caused a furor in the Parliamentary Labour Party, especially because Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart was visiting Washington at the time. Six senior backbenchers, including Philip Noel-Baker, the chair of the Labour Foreign Affairs Group, sent a telegram to Stewart demanding that he convey the “horror and indignation” felt in Britain at

56. These were discussed at the NEC meeting of 27 January 1965. See Resolutions from Constituency Parties, January 1965, in OV/1963-4/32, Overseas Department, LPA.

57. Resolutions from Constituency Parties, 9 March 1965, in OV/1965/7, Overseas Department, LPA.

58. NEC Meeting Notes, 28 April 1965, NEC/5/1964-5, in OV/1965/9, Overseas Department, LPA.

59. Resolutions from Constituency Parties, 11 May 1965, in OV/1965/11, Overseas Department, LPA; and Resolutions from Constituency Parties, 13 July 1965, in OV/1965/14, Overseas Department, LPA.

60. Notes of Meeting, 12 May 1965, in Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) Minutes Box, PLP Papers, LPA.

61. *Labour Party Annual Conference Report* (London: Labour Party, 1965), Appendix III, p. 278 (hereinafter referred to as *LPACR*, with appropriate year and page numbers). This was a slightly toned-down version of the draft proposed by the Overseas Department. See NEC Minutes, 25 September 1965, in OV/6, 7 September 1965, LPA.

this disclosure.⁶² The telegram called on Wilson to dissociate Britain from the U.S. position and said that the party could not understand the government's apparent determination to support actions that were "in conflict with accepted morality." The signers warned that a failure to decry the war effort would be detrimental "to the Party's future and to the Government now."⁶³ Wilson himself was deeply concerned that the use of gas and napalm "ha[d] greatly aggravated the concern felt . . . in Parliament and indeed more widely" and had made it harder for him to counter accusations that the British government was serving as "the tail-end Charlie in an American bomber."⁶⁴

In meetings with Secretary of State Rusk on 23 March, Stewart "emphasised the extremely strong feelings that had been aroused by the use of gas and napalm bombs which inflicted undue suffering and were of limited military value." Rusk responded that Britain itself had used such weapons before and that "this Viet-Nameese war was not a Sunday-school party. It was a rough business."⁶⁵ In a speech to the National Press Club that day in Washington, DC, Stewart said that "in the choice of measures everyone responsible should consider not only what is militarily appropriate for the job in hand but the effect on people around the world." Alluding to the American Declaration of Independence, he expressed hope that the United States would display a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind." Wilson wrote that Stewart's "uncompromising approach won the approval of Labour MPs."⁶⁶ In the House of Commons on 23 March, Wilson managed to avoid directly criticizing U.S. policy by noting that Stewart had met with Rusk and promising that Britain would "take the initiative" to bring about peace negotiations in Vietnam.⁶⁷ William Warbey, the left-wing MP for Ashfield, was unconvinced and gave up his post as Labour whip in September 1965 to protest the government's Vietnam policy. He subsequently wrote a scathing book about Wilson's support for the United States.⁶⁸

The extent to which Wilson was affected at any given time by the backbench revolt and by the information from party headquarters about constituency Labour organizations is difficult to assess, but the intensification of com-

62. Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 85; and Telegram from Philip Noel-Baker to Michael Stewart, 22 March 1965, in PREM 13/693, TNAUK.

63. Sydney Silverman to Harold Wilson, 22 March 1965, in PREM 13/693, TNAUK.

64. Harold Wilson to Michael Stewart, Telegram No. 2328, 23 March 1965, in PREM/13/693, TNAUK.

65. Record of a Conversation between the Foreign Secretary and Dean Rusk, 23 March 1965, in PREM 13/693 DV 103145/60, TNAUK.

66. Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 85–86.

67. Harold Wilson, Speech to the House of Commons, *H.C. Deb.*, 5th Ser., Vol. 709, Cols. 324–328.

68. William Warbey, *Vietnam: The Truth* (London: Merlin Press, 1965).

plaints clearly posed problems for Wilson's slim majority. He could not afford to lose support from any backbench MPs, particularly because three by-elections, which threatened to reduce his majority even further, were coming up in January 1966. The Leyton and Nuneaton by-elections were held on 21 January. Rather embarrassingly, Labour lost in Leyton, where the candidate, Patrick Gordon Walker, had been Wilson's foreign secretary from October 1964 to January 1965 and had been attempting to reenter Parliament after losing his seat in Smethwick in the 1964 general election. The swing against Labour at Leyton was 8.7 percent. Labour held Nuneaton, where Minister of Technology Frank Cousins was standing, but with a much reduced majority.⁶⁹ During the run-up to the Hull North by-election on 27 January 1966, the media predicted that Labour would lose. The seat was marginal for Labour, which had gained it from the Conservatives in 1964, and a swing of only 1 percent was needed to return it to the Tories.⁷⁰ Richard Gott, a hard-left journalist for the newspaper *The Guardian*, stood as an independent on an anti-Vietnam war platform and gained a great deal of press interest. He publicly stated that he hoped that his intervention would drain enough votes from Labour to cause it to lose the seat, helping to bring down the Wilson government. However, Labour held the seat with a swing of 4.5 percent in its favor, and the big loser was Gott, who received only 253 votes and had to forfeit his deposit. He later recalled: "Everyone was against the war in Vietnam, but many questioned whether it was tactically correct to try to bring down the Labour government, barely 18 months in office. Many were worried by the situation in Rhodesia, which had just declared its illegal independence, and feared the return of the Tories."⁷¹

The slenderness of Labour's majority might also have dampened criticism from the Parliamentary Labour Party, which, while expressing dismay at the events in Vietnam, would not have wanted to bring about the downfall of the first Labour government in thirteen years. Labour had suffered from intra-party splits over foreign affairs and defense policy throughout the 1950s, and many in the party had hoped that the election of Wilson as party leader would end the battles that had bedeviled his predecessor, Hugh Gaitskell. The small majority also provided Wilson with an excuse for not undertaking radical initiatives in foreign affairs.

The situation changed, however, after the general election of 31 March 1966, which saw Labour returned to power with a much larger majority. The

69. David Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (London, Macmillan, 1966), pp. 8–9.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

71. Richard Gott, "How I Won Hull," *The Guardian*, 1 February 2006, p. 8.

party ended up with 363 seats, the Conservatives 253, and Liberals 12.⁷² The victory evidently spurred Wilson to try to regain discipline over his increasingly fractious MPs. On 15 June 1966, he delivered a lengthy speech to a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) declaring that in the next parliament he wanted “to see a much more fruitful two-way co-operation between the Government and the Parliamentary Labour Party.” He urged the PLP to work with the government and called for an end to continual leaks, which had become such a problem that Wilson had asked the foreign secretary to stop attending meetings of the PLP’s Foreign Affairs Group. The motions being put before the PLP criticizing the government’s foreign policy, Wilson argued, were doing nothing but damage. He stressed that the government had no intention of sending troops to Vietnam and was doing all it could to bring about peace there. He claimed that to avoid disrupting sensitive diplomatic talks, the government could not reveal the full scope of its attempts to achieve a peace settlement: “I must ask you to realise that we shall get peace only by efforts, most of them secret, and, because of the special key role of Hanoi in this, some of them complicated, intricate, even possibly devious.”⁷³

Labour’s gains in the elections caused a surge in party members’ expectations of the new Wilson government, but Britain’s lack of power to influence events in Vietnam became even more apparent. In July 1966 Johnson again asked Wilson to send troops, even if only a token force: “A platoon of bagpipers would be sufficient; it was the British flag that was wanted.” Wilson says he “replied courteously but firmly—there could be no British troops.”⁷⁴ By this time, anger in Britain at U.S. action had intensified.

The further escalation of hostilities in May 1966 with the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in North Vietnam had caused outrage among Labour MPs. In response to earlier complaints from the PLP, Wilson had repeatedly told the Commons that “we could not support any extension of the bombing against North Vietnam by stages to Hanoi and Haiphong.”⁷⁵ He thus had little choice but to condemn the United States for undertaking the very actions he had said he would not support. Indeed, when Wilson first learned from David Bruce, the U.S. ambassador in London, that the United States was

72. David Butler and Gareth Butler, *British Political Facts 1900–1985*, 6th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 227.

73. Speech by Harold Wilson to the Meeting of the PLP on 15 June 1966, in File PLP Minutes 1964–6, Box of PLP Papers, LPA.

74. Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 264.

75. See, for example, Harold Wilson, Speech to House of Commons, 21 December 1965, in *H.C. Deb.*, 5th Ser., Vol. 722, Col. 1909; and Harold Wilson, Speech to House of Commons, 8 February 1966, *H.C. Deb.*, 5th Ser., Vol. 724, Col. 259.

going to bomb the North Vietnamese cities, he had sent a telegram to Johnson explaining the difficult position this would put him in. Wilson explained that he would have to make a statement in the House of Commons disassociating Britain from this action, and he urged Johnson “to reconsider whether this action, whatever its results in terms of immediate military advantage, is worth the candle.” Johnson’s response was to send a military officer over to brief Wilson about the two oil targets near Hanoi and Haiphong.⁷⁶ Ambassador Bruce reported back to Washington: “My estimate is that Prime Minister will weather storm in Commons by reiterating doubtful distinction between disassociation Haiphong Hanoi action, and support for basic U.S. policy Viet-nam.” Bruce noted that distinguishing between the specific targeting of North Vietnam and U.S. policy in general “has for long been [Wilson’s] stock in trade for fending off left wing attacks.”⁷⁷ On 29 June, in a carefully worded statement, Wilson duly told the House of Commons that the government “noted with regret” the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong and dissociated itself from that action. But he also stressed “that the United States are right to continue to assist the . . . South Vietnamese,” that “the North Vietnamese refusal alone” was preventing peace negotiations, and that “we deplore Hanoi’s constant rejection of the path of peace.”⁷⁸

Although leftists in the party welcomed Wilson’s limited criticism of the extension of the bombing to North Vietnam, they were disappointed that he did not go further and condemn the war outright. At the PLP meeting on 6 July 1966, Sidney Silverman proposed a motion urging the government to dissociate itself completely from U.S. policy in Vietnam, but the motion was defeated in favor of one supporting Wilson’s House of Commons statement.⁷⁹ In June 1966, Labour Party headquarters again reported “a marked increase in the number of resolutions critical of Government and Party policy on Viet-nam.” These resolutions adopted by constituency Labour parties focused on British support for U.S. bombing operations and on the “continued intensification of the war [which] makes the U.S. statement that it is prepared to negotiate seem insincere.” The resolutions also condemned the South Viet-

76. Telegram from U.S. Department of State to Embassy in London, 28 May 1966, in Box 2786, POL 1 UK-US, 1964–66, RG 59, NARA; and Johnson to Wilson 27 May 1966, in Box 2786, POL 1 UK-US, 1964–66, RG 59, NARA.

77. Telegrams from David Bruce, London, to Secretary of State, Washington, 2 June 1966, in Box 2786, POL 1 UK-US, 1964–66, RG 59, NARA; and Telegram from Ambassador David Bruce, London, to Secretary of State, Washington, 3 July 1966, in Box 2786, POL 1 UK-US, 1964–66, RG 59, NARA.

78. Harold Wilson, Speech to House of Commons, 29 June 1966, *H.C. Deb.*, Vol. 730, Cols. 1796–1797.

79. PLP Minutes, 6 July 1966, in File PLP Minutes 1964–6, Box of PLP papers, LPA. Silverman’s motion was defeated 214 to 46. No one voted against the motion supporting the government.

name government for being “totally undemocratic and unrepresentative” and insisted that a request for U.S. aid from such a government “is irrelevant.”⁸⁰ Many resolutions were forwarded to the Labour Party to be proposed at the annual conference, and some Labour members resigned from the party in protest at the government’s policy on Vietnam.⁸¹

From 1965 on, the war in Vietnam was the central rallying point for left-wing activists at Labour’s annual conferences, earning some support from across the party. At the 1965 annual conference, two resolutions condemning U.S. intervention in Vietnam were defeated, but the debate over them was lengthy and heated.⁸² At the 1966 annual conference, a resolution from the Fire Brigades Union was passed calling on the government “to bring all pressures on the United States of America to end the war in Vietnam.” The resolution advocated a peace settlement based on the 1954 Geneva Agreement and called “for the cessation of the bombing by the United States of North Vietnam.”⁸³ This wording went slightly further than the NEC’s position in demanding an unconditional cessation of the bombing of the North. Many of the delegates construed the statement as a rejection of the NEC’s position, and thus a rejection of the government’s stance.⁸⁴ But this was partly a matter of semantics and punctuation, including discussion of the placing of a semicolon in the NEC statement, which called for “the cessation of bombing operations against North Vietnam; the cessation of the movement of North Vietnamese military forces or material to South Vietnam.”⁸⁵

At the 1967 annual conference a resolution was narrowly adopted calling on the government to “dissociate itself completely” from U.S. policy in Vietnam, to persuade the United States to end its bombing of North Vietnam “immediately, permanently and unconditionally,” and to strive for a peace settlement based on the 1954 Geneva Agreement. The sponsor of the resolution, from the Cambridge constituency, declared that Britain must stop supporting Johnson in “his ill-begotten, misdirected and wholly criminal policy” and that the government’s policy had forced party members to defend British policy while out campaigning: “I find myself, in answer to questions about Vietnam,

80. Memorandum from Geoffrey Robinson to Gwyn Morgan, Overseas Secretary, 10 June 1966, in Box on Vietnam 1957–73, LPA.

81. See, for example, the memorandum from Gwyn Morgan, Overseas Secretary, to K. Crowley, Sheffield, 3 March 1966, in Box on Vietnam 1957–73, LPA.

82. *LPACR*, 1965, pp. 182–200.

83. *LPACR*, 1966, p. 255. Votes for the resolution were 3,851,000, and those against 2,644,000 (*ibid.*, p. 273).

84. *Ibid.*, pp. 256, 302.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 302. See also Lewis Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference: A Study in the Politics of Intra-Party Democracy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 291, which depicts the decision as a rejection of the government’s policy on Vietnam.

having to hold my tongue, cross my fingers and drag my feet, and I am wondering personally how long I can remain in this uncomfortable posture and at the same time have a hand still willing to hold a Labour Party card.”⁸⁶ He added that “our support for the American policy hampers our efforts to find peace. It is quite intolerable and it is anomalous. We press for peace, yet we send our soldiers and police to train the South Vietnamese.”⁸⁷ Foreign Secretary George Brown urged the conference not to support the resolution, but it passed by 2,752,000 votes to 2,633,000—a clear rejection of government policy by the party’s membership.⁸⁸

Concern about Damage to the Labour Party

Nothing inherently prevented the Labour Party and the Labour government from having different policies on the same issue. The annual party conference rejected Wilson’s foreign and defense policies on several occasions from 1966 to 1968.⁸⁹ Wilson publicly treated the situation as an inconvenience rather than an intractable problem for the party, telling the 1968 conference that “every resolution carried against the platform [i.e., the NEC] this week—and you have not been unproductive in this regard—we accept as a warning to the Government. A warning, not an instruction.” Wilson noted that the government was responsible to Parliament, not to the conference, and that this had been the case since the first Labour government.⁹⁰ He warned his own MPs in June 1966 that the party included some “who do not see the Labour Party as a Party of power, who see it more as a Party of protest who are much happier in Opposition, who find it hard to face up to what power means, and what is involved in using that power to realise our international ideals.” He emphasized that his government would do all it could to dislodge this attitude.⁹¹

Actually, though, the situation was more problematic than Wilson let on. Unlike the Conservative Party, the Labour Party had developed outside the existing parliamentary elite. Organizationally and traditionally, the party had encouraged participation by Labour activists. In particular, this was manifested through the power of the annual conference to make policy—what has been termed conference sovereignty. Labour’s constitution stated that one of

86. *LPACR*, 1967, pp. 223–225.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*, pp. 235–236.

89. Minkin says this occurred six times, but that would include the debatable example of the 1966 resolution. See Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference*, p. 291.

90. *LPACR*, 1968, p. 299.

91. Harold Wilson, Speech to the Meeting of the PLP, 15 June 1966, in PLP Mins 1964–6, LPA.

the objectives of the party was “to give effect as far as may be practicable to the principles from time to time approved by the Party Conference.”⁹² Many assumed that conference decisions were binding on a Labour government. Never before 1966 had the annual conference rejected a Labour government’s policies. According to Tom McNally, the party’s International Secretary during this period, Wilson and the party leadership went to great lengths to avoid being defeated at the party’s annual conference.⁹³ Nonetheless, the definitive statement on the relationship between the PLP and the party as a whole, put forward by Keir Hardie in 1907, suggested that the party conference could not bind the PLP and that Wilson therefore had a good deal of leeway:

Resolutions instructing the Parliamentary Party as to their action in the House of Commons be taken as the opinions of the conference, on the understanding that the time and method of giving effect to these instructions be left to the party in the House, in conjunction with the National Executive.⁹⁴

As Wilson saw it, he could weather the conference’s rejection of government policy without undermining the party.

Wilson’s view of the matter was not universally shared, however. Left-wing party activists and rank-and-file members emphasized the principle of conference sovereignty and erroneously thought that Wilson’s left-wing past would mean that he would regard conference decisions as binding on a Labour government.⁹⁵ The previous Labour prime minister, Clement Attlee, had treated conference decisions as equivalent to a vote of confidence and had gone to great lengths to prevent government policy from being rejected by the conference.⁹⁶ Party activists were dismayed when Wilson decided to ignore the annual conference. The sense of betrayal felt by party leftists was not only over Vietnam but also over the relationship between the Labour Party and the Labour government. They claimed that Wilson was ignoring the wishes of the party. The left’s concern about this matter persisted and led in 1970, after Labour’s defeat in the general election, to the adoption of a resolution at the annual conference affirming that the PLP should reflect the views of the Labour movement and declaring that conference “deplores the Parliamentary Labour Party’s refusal to act on Conference decisions.”⁹⁷

92. Constitution of the Labour Party, Sec. 3, Clause 3, in *LPACR*, 1918, Appendix 1, p. 82.

93. McNally, interview.

94. *Keesing’s Contemporary Archives*, Vol. 12, 1959–60 (London: Keesings Worldwide, 1960), p. 17,744. See also Kenneth O. Morgan, *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), p. 168.

95. Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference*, p. 290.

96. See Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World*, Vol. 1: *The Evolution of Labour’s Foreign Policy, 1900–51* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 168–171.

97. *LPACR*, 1970, p. 180.

Although Wilson was determined to press ahead, he and other senior officials were concerned about the damage the party might suffer over the issue of Vietnam. Wilson's chief whip, Edward Short, repeatedly says in his memoir that Vietnam "caused me more trouble and embarrassment" in the PLP than did any other issue.⁹⁸ Dissent over Vietnam and over Labour's defense review prompted the PLP's Liaison Committee in November 1966 to propose two motions concerning party organization—one condemning personal attacks made by PLP members against other PLP members, and the other reminding the PLP that membership in organized groups not officially recognized by the PLP was incompatible with PLP membership. This latter motion was aimed at curbing attempts by groups of left-wing dissidents to organize against the PLP. Supporters of the motion argued that "a civil war in the Party must be avoided. The situation today is more dangerous than in 1945–51." They called for a "higher degree of discipline" within the PLP. The motions were passed by 136 to 18 and 120 to 49.⁹⁹

A review carried out by Tom McNally in 1970 said that Vietnam had been "the issue which caused most disillusionment within the Party" and that "leaving foreign policy to the foreign policy pundits" was dangerous, "especially since the Labour Party has always had among its rank a higher percentage of people deeply concerned about foreign policy issues than can be found among the electorate as a whole." McNally concluded:

The lesson to be learnt from this is that a wrong foreign policy decision may lose us only a minute percentage of votes; but it can lose us a much higher percentage of party activists. Foreign policy has, for this reason, a much greater importance for the Labour Party than crude statistics of voting motivations would suggest. For many thousands of our activists their socialism only has meaning if a socialist domestic policy is also reflected in our foreign policy.¹⁰⁰

One practical result of the splits over the Vietnam War was a proliferation of single-issue pressure groups, which saw themselves as part of the "New Left" opposed to the Labour Party because of Wilson's stance on Vietnam. Although there is no evidence of a direct link with attitudes over Vietnam, individual membership in the Labour Party dropped from 830,000 to 680,000 in 1970, and then rose again slightly to 700,000 in 1971.¹⁰¹ As disillusionment with the Labour government increased, left-leaning students and intellectuals evidently sought avenues of protest outside the party system. From

98. Short, *Whip to Wilson*, pp. 97, 117, 160.

99. National Executive Committee Minutes, 2 November 1966, in LPA.

100. Tom McNally, "Foreign Policy Formation," June 1970, in International Department, ID/1970-71/65, Box LI, 23 June 1971, NEC Mins, LPA.

101. Butler and Butler, *British Political Facts*, p. 152.

April 1965 on, the monthly newsletter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), *Sanity*, regularly featured articles about Vietnam on the front page that criticized Wilson as a hypocrite because of his support of the United States. CND also published pamphlets on the topic.¹⁰² The International Confederation for Disarmament and Peace (ICDP), which was an international version of CND consisting of some 50 peace organizations, was formally established in 1964. The ICDP in turn set up a Vietnam emergency liaison committee in London, which published *Vietnam International* and helped to organize the Stockholm World Conference on Vietnam. The Stockholm World Conference was first held in July 1967 with representatives of peace organizations from all over the world to lobby for peace in Vietnam and to increase pressure on their own governments to condemn U.S. policy.¹⁰³ The British Communist Party set up the British Council for Peace in Vietnam, and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and the War Crimes Tribunal joined with the Trotskyite International Marxist Group in June 1966 to set up the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign.

The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign circulated appeals in the Labour Party and trade union movement asking for money to provide medical aid in Vietnam. The campaigners made “dozens of contacts with sections of the Labour movement” that proved to be “extremely useful.”¹⁰⁴ Some Labour Party activists got involved with the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, which also published pamphlets on the war. One particularly vitriolic pamphlet, by the Trotskyist Ken Coates, claimed that thousands of innocent Vietnamese civilians had been “slaughtered,” “tortured,” “disembowelled, castrated, raped and eviscerated.” According to Coates, anyone who might question these assertions was “steeped in the vulgar, philistine bigotry of a Michael Stewart, or morally null, a dollar-neuter like the capricious, ego-centred moral eunuch upon whom he fawns.” Coates excoriated Labour’s policy, which he attributed to the foreign secretary’s “stupidity” and the prime minister’s “duplicity”: “Lies are meat and drink to [Wilson].”¹⁰⁵

102. John McDermott, *Vietnam Profile: A History of the Vietnam Conflict and Its Origins* (London: CND, 1965); Peggy Duff, *Vietnam: The Credibility Gap* (London: CND, n.d.); and CND, *Vietnam Briefing* (London: CND, n.d.). All three pamphlets are in 328.68 Vietnam Pamphlets, LPA.

103. Message from Stockholm World Conference on Vietnam Editorial Committee to W. H. Ferry, 22 February 1967, in MSS 181/6, Box 90.29, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament Archive, Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.

104. John Callaghan, *British Trotskyism: Theory and Practice* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 128.

105. Ken Coates, *The Dirty War in Mr Wilson: Or, How He Stopped Worrying about Vietnam and Learned to Love the Dollar* (London: Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, 1966), pp. 2–3, in 328.68 Vietnam Pamphlets, LPA. The pamphlet was reprinted in Ken Coates, *The Crisis of British Socialism: Essays on the Rise of Harold Wilson and the Fall of the Labour Party* (London: Spokesman Books, 1971), ch. 8.

The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign also attracted considerable support among university students and sponsored mass demonstrations in London on 17 March and 27 October 1968, with marchers converging on the U.S. embassy in Grosvenor Square. Although the demonstrations included people of all age groups, students were by far the most numerous. Sylvia Ellis argues that “Vietnam played a crucial part in politicising British youth,” though she acknowledges that “Vietnam was mainly of humanitarian and symbolic importance.”¹⁰⁶ Kenneth Morgan notes that Vietnam brought “a kind of passionate political violence to the London streets unknown since the anti-fascist battle of Cable Street in 1936.”¹⁰⁷ Tariq Ali, a firebrand activist and founding member of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, later claimed that “Revolutionary socialism was reborn in 1968.”¹⁰⁸ Many observers regarded further student violence as a possibility. In the run-up to the October 1968 demonstration, articles appeared in the London *Evening News* and *The Times* outlining supposed plots to use home-made bombs and foment violent unrest at the coming demonstration. These stories apparently were planted by Special Branch.¹⁰⁹ James Callaghan, who was Home Secretary at the time, said that he came under great pressure in Parliament to ban the march and that “an agitated atmosphere [had been] built up based on very little reliable information, with newspaper reports making the ordinary citizen’s blood curdle about the horrors to expect.”¹¹⁰ Estimates of the number of demonstrators in March ranged from 10,000 to 25,000 and possibly as many as 100,000 at the October event.¹¹¹

The far left was joined by more moderate elements of the Labour Party in criticizing the government’s stance. As early as 1965 the Fabian Society said that “Mr Wilson’s Vietnam policy is not wrong because it is unpopular, it is wrong because it is wrong.” The Fabians warned that the escalation of the Vietnam War was threatening to undermine the Western alliance itself: “The bleak anger of the French at American policy, and the sheer contempt in which [the Americans] hold the British for their pusillanimous attitude, sug-

106. Sylvia Ellis, “A Demonstration of British Good Sense?” British Student Protest during the Vietnam War,” in Gerard DeGroot, ed., *Student Protest: The Sixties and After* (London: Longman 1998), pp. 54, 56.

107. Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace: British History 1945–1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 294.

108. Tariq Ali, *1968 and After: Inside the Revolution* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1978), p. vii. See also Ali’s *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* (London: Collins, 1987).

109. See Stephen Dorril and Robin Ramsay, *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State* (London: Grafton, 1992), pp. 185–186.

110. James Callaghan, *A House Divided: The Dilemma of Northern Ireland* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 8; and James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London: Collins, 1987), p. 258.

111. See Ellis, “A Demonstration of British Good Sense?” pp. 63–64.

gest the days of Atlantic co-operation are numbered.”¹¹² Some Labour Party MPs also got involved in campaigning about Vietnam. Hugh Jenkins set up the Vietnam Fund in his Putney constituency to raise money to help victims of the war. As part of the effort, Jenkins sent 100 pounds to the South Vietnamese embassy in London for the “aid of people in the village recently bombed by accident by the Americans.”¹¹³

Wilson did not yield to the demands for condemnation of U.S. military action in Vietnam, but he did seek to reassure public opinion and to ward off pressure from within the Labour Party by engaging in peace diplomacy. Wilson realized that if he could act as a go-between for the United States and the Soviet Union in brokering a ceasefire, it would be an important breakthrough. The North Vietnamese were refusing to have face-to-face talks with the U.S. administration, and many observers in both Washington and London assumed that the Soviet Union had a great deal of influence in Hanoi and could act as an intermediary. Wilson believed that he had a special relationship not only with the United States but also with the Soviet Union, which he had visited several times over the past two decades, most recently in May 1963 and April 1964 when he had discussed East/West tensions with Nikita Khrushchev.

Wilson’s Peace Initiatives

In April 1965, Wilson sent former foreign secretary Patrick Gordon Walker on a fact-finding tour of Southeast Asia to explore North Vietnamese and Chinese Communist views on a settlement, but Hanoi and Beijing refused to give Walker permission to visit, leaving him with nothing to report.¹¹⁴ Wilson’s next initiative came in June 1965 at the Commonwealth meeting of prime ministers. He suddenly proposed that the Commonwealth send a delegation of three or four prime ministers, headed by himself, to visit Moscow, Washington, Beijing, Saigon, and Hanoi to explore the possibility of a peace conference. Wilson had not consulted his cabinet about the proposed trip and had “informed” rather than “consulted” Washington about it. He also had not

112. The article was published by the Fabian Society in *Venture*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (April 1965), p. 1. A copy is available in 527 Vietnam, Peter Shore Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science (LSE Library).

113. Memorandum from Hugh Jenkins to the Ambassador for South Vietnam in London, 3 November 1965, in 1/2 Vietnam Fund, Hugh Jenkins Papers, LSE Library.

114. Patrick Gordon Walker, *Patrick Gordon Walker: Political Diaries 1932–1971*, ed. by Robert Pearce (London: Historians’ Press, 1991), p. 302.

previously discussed it with any of the other countries involved.¹¹⁵ According to Richard Crossman, the proposal was mostly a “stunt” designed to mollify the left of the Labour Party and create a more positive atmosphere at the Commonwealth Conference.¹¹⁶ The Labour Party was quick to put out a press release describing the Commonwealth mission as “an inspiring attempt to seek peace in Vietnam” and emphasizing that it was “to be led by our own Premier, Harold Wilson.” The press release noted that “the Prime Minister’s recent effort is only the latest of a series of positive proposals that the Labour Government has made to halt this dangerous war.”¹¹⁷ At a speech in Glasgow, Wilson emphasized the gravity of the situation in Vietnam and the “sheer tragedy and horror of all that is going on there.” He averred that he, like everyone else, had “seen those terrible pictures of dead or orphaned children, of innocent civilians mangled through a war they did not seek and do not want. We have all seen the picture of that little Vietnamese girl wounded, limping, crying.”¹¹⁸ He said that because the UN could not take the initiative on Vietnam, the Commonwealth must act as a force for peace: “Someone has to do something about it.”¹¹⁹

This initiative, however, proved stillborn. The North Vietnamese and other Communist governments refused to see the proposed Commonwealth mission, disparaging the whole enterprise as a “swindle.” Hence, the trip was called off.¹²⁰ The cancellation came as a relief to the U.S. State Department, which had been concerned that the delegation would cause trouble by publicly urging the United States to pause or even cease bombing, “while Communist powers, under [a] double standard, would probably escape with light criticism.”¹²¹ In July 1965 the British government secretly prepared another trip, that of Harold Davies, a left-wing MP who had previously visited Hanoi and met with Ho Chi Minh. The hope was that Davies would receive a visa to go to North Vietnam and would be able to get access to Ho Chi Minh, on the condition that the trip and subsequent negotiations were kept secret. According to Wilson, this peace mission was sabotaged by a disastrous leak to the

115. Entry for 17–18 June 1965 in Castle, *Diaries*, pp. 40–42.

116. Entries for 17–27 June 1965 in Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, Vol. 1, *Minister of Housing, 1964–66* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 252–255.

117. Labour Party Press Release, 26 June 1965, File Vietnam 1965, in Box on Vietnam, LPA.

118. Harold Wilson’s Speech in Glasgow, 26 June 1965, in File Vietnam 1965, Box on Vietnam, LPA.

119. *Ibid.*

120. Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1970), p. 329.

121. Telegram, Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, Washington, to American Embassy in London, 23 June 1965, in Box 2278, POL 7, RG 59, NARA.

press in London.¹²² Although Davies was granted a visa, he was greeted on arrival in Hanoi with bitter complaints about the leak and was punished by being given seventeen hours of meetings with lower party officials and no meeting with Ho Chi Minh. This failure, too, was welcomed by the U.S. administration, which had been concerned that “Davies is traveling alone, does not have diplomatic experience, does not speak French, is [a] talkative left-wing sympathizer, and is not noted for his judgement.”¹²³ Some British officials shared these reservations and believed that Davies was a “person who could easily be used by communists” and that Wilson should never have agreed to the trip.¹²⁴ Crossman referred to the Davies peace mission as “only a gimmick.”¹²⁵ According to Barbara Castle, Wilson had been afraid that the leak might wreck the mission, but he was “well satisfied with the gesture.”¹²⁶ Later that month, a Foreign Office official, J. E. Cable, concluded that the peace missions had “failed to produce any significant progress towards negotiations in Viet-Nam.” The problem was that the combatants did not accept the British government’s view that a compromise settlement would be preferable to the risks of escalation. The warring parties still felt that they had something to gain through military action. Cable warned that “further British initiatives will probably do more harm than good, by reinforcing the Communist conviction that the Americans are on the run.”¹²⁷

The British government did make further initiatives, however. When Foreign Secretary George Brown visited the Soviet Union in November 1966, he offered his services as an intermediary, apparently hoping to persuade Moscow to encourage Hanoi to negotiate. The State Department had been apprised of the mission, but in Washington “the universal feeling [was] that Brown has limitations as an intermediary. He could easily plant us into a corner or be misunderstood with serious consequences.” U.S. officials therefore decided not to “give Brown any really new elements to work with (even if we knew what they were).” Brown had visited Washington the previous month, and some State Department officials worried that President Johnson might have “inadvertently” given Brown the impression that the United States had a

122. Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 122. On the Davies peace mission, see Young, “The Wilson Government and the Davies Peace Mission to North Vietnam.”

123. Telegram, Ambassador David Bruce in London to Secretary of State, Washington, 9 July 1965, in Box 2278, POL 7, RG 59, NARA

124. Telegram from David Bruce, U.S. embassy in London to Secretary of State, Washington, 8 July 1965, in Box 2278, POL 7, RG 59, NARA.

125. Entry for 8 July 1965 in Crossman, *Diaries*, Vol. 1, p. 269.

126. Entry for 7 July 1965 in Castle, *Diaries*, p. 46.

127. J. E. Cable, “Secret: Vietnam and Negotiations,” 12 July 1965, with Comments by E. H. Peck and J. Nicholls, 21 July 1965, in FO 371/180587/DV1075/165, TNAUK.

concrete peace proposal to convey to Moscow.¹²⁸ In the end, Brown's talks with Soviet officials failed to generate any progress toward peace negotiations.

Subsequently, Wilson himself became enmeshed in the diplomatic quest for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. He hoped to succeed where everybody else, including his political rival George Brown, had failed, but he ended up finding it an immensely frustrating, and even somewhat humiliating, experience (though he presented it as a personal triumph to his colleagues and the party). The attempt came during a visit by Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin to Britain in February 1967, a visit that coincided with the traditional Têt ceasefire to mark the Vietnamese New Year. Wilson suggested that he and the Soviet prime minister might be able to act as intermediaries between the Americans and the North Vietnamese. During the discussions, Wilson kept in contact with the Americans and was aided by Chet Cooper, who had been sent over by President Johnson to represent the U.S. administration.¹²⁹ The proposal, which took the form of a Phase A/Phase B formula, was that the United States would cease bombing North Vietnam if the North Vietnamese would give a secret assurance that they would not take advantage of the cessation by moving troops into South Vietnam.¹³⁰ Wilson also proposed his own initiative of reconvening the Geneva Conference, even though the North Vietnamese had previously rejected this scheme and Washington was "unenthusiastic" about it.¹³¹ Kosygin agreed to take the Phase A/Phase B proposal in writing back to Moscow to be passed on to Hanoi.

After Wilson and Kosygin reached agreement, the text was sent back to Washington for confirmation. A reply quickly came back that the document would have to be changed: Johnson had just written directly to Ho Chin Minh to say that if North Vietnam agreed to "an assured stoppage of infiltration into South Vietnam, then the United States would cease bombing and stop increasing U.S. troop strength."¹³² This was, in effect, a reversal of the Phase A/Phase B plan and was an indication that the U.S. position on mutual de-escalation had "hardened significantly" sometime in early Febru-

128. Note by Assistant Secretary of State to Secretary of State, Regarding "Planned Message to George Brown: for Luncheon Discussion Today," 15 November 1966, in Box 2788, POL 17 UK-USSR, 1964-66, RG 59, NARA.

129. Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 346.

130. For more detail on this event, see Dumbrell and Ellis, "British Involvement in Vietnam Peace Initiatives, 1966-1967." For American accounts of the Wilson-Kosygin talks in February 1965, see Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 345-350; George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 108-111; and Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Time Books, Random House, 1995), pp. 250-252.

131. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade*, pp. 357-358.

132. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 255. The text of the letter is included as an appendix, pp. 592-593.

ary.¹³³ Wilson was thus in the position of having to explain the change to Kosygin, who had already left to catch the train to Scotland. Wilson had not been informed in advance about Johnson's direct approach to Ho Chi Minh (which meant that the British-Soviet negotiations were redundant anyway) or about the shift in the U.S. position, and he naturally was furious. He sent a telegram to Johnson expressing his frustration: "You will realise what a hell of a situation I am in for the last day of talks with Kosygin."¹³⁴ U.S. officials, for their part, "were outraged that Wilson had jumped the gun without their authorization."¹³⁵ Johnson said in his memoirs that the British had made a mistake in giving Kosygin a written proposal without approval from Washington, though he conceded that "the result was a diplomatic mix-up for which we [in Washington] shared a certain amount of responsibility."¹³⁶

Wilson believed, both then and afterward, that "a historic opportunity had been missed."¹³⁷ This seems doubtful, however. For one thing, all evidence suggests that North Vietnam at this point had no interest in negotiations and was committed to fighting on to victory.¹³⁸ Similarly, most accounts conclude that the U.S. administration had little interest in Wilson's peace initiatives and no actual need for Britain to act as an intermediary. According to Chet Cooper, the sense in Washington was that the British government was pushing so hard to undertake the role of mediator in order to bolster Wilson's own prestige. According to Cooper, U.S. officials had no desire to see Wilson gain the credit for bringing Hanoi to the negotiating table.¹³⁹ Wilson's peace diplomacy had no real chance of success in terms of actually bringing about a cessation of hostilities. Wilson's authorized biographer concludes that "it can fairly be said that Wilson devoted a disproportionate part of his time and energies to a problem like Vietnam, in which the British interest was no more than peripheral."¹⁴⁰ Peter Jones argues that the long-term effect of Wilson's failed peace mission was "to reduce very significantly Britain's credibility as a go-between in superpower negotiations."¹⁴¹ A similar point is made by the

133. George C. Herring, ed., *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 374.

134. Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 358–359.

135. Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 375.

136. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 254.

137. Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 365.

138. Liên-Hãng T. Nguyễn, "The War Politburo: North Vietnam's Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2 (February/August 2006), pp. 4–58.

139. Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, pp. 355–356.

140. Ziegler, *Wilson*, p. 219.

141. Peter Jones, *America and the British Labour Party: The 'Special Relationship' at Work* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997), p. 154.

eminent historian George Herring, who maintains that Wilson's attempt at peace diplomacy resulted in "Anglo-American recriminations comparable to Suez and Kennedy's cancellation of the Skybolt missile project in 1962."¹⁴² The only dissenting view on the matter comes from Robert McNamara, who claimed in 1999 that the Wilson-Kosygin talks were "very, very close to a breakthrough" until the Johnson administration suddenly changed its policy and reversed the Phase A/Phase B formula.¹⁴³

Whatever the chances of success may have been, Wilson's peace diplomacy was immensely useful for his dealings with the Labour Party. As John Young points out, Wilson's initial peace overtures came in 1965 at a time when he was facing rising complaints from within the PLP that endangered his slim parliamentary majority.¹⁴⁴ If Wilson had managed to broker a peace deal, it would have further legitimized his stance on Vietnam and pleased his party. Such a success also would have raised his profile as a world statesman who could succeed where so many others had failed. The U.S. ambassador at the time, David Bruce, had pointed this out: "The Prime Minister would dearly love a British role in the Viet Nam peace negotiations to bolster Britain's sagging international prestige but, even more, to earn him badly needed political credit at home."¹⁴⁵ Even though Wilson failed in his efforts, his willingness to undertake peace missions and to reconvene the Geneva conference could be cited as evidence of his determination to heed the wishes of party activists and use his influence to bring an end to the conflict in Vietnam. In later years, Tom McNally concluded that Wilson's "Government was able to carry successive [Labour] conferences by pointing to some recent initiative or new peace plan."¹⁴⁶ Official replies to complaints and concerns from party members, constituency parties, and trade unions had highlighted Wilson's peace initiatives, describing them as "second to none."¹⁴⁷ In all these respects, Wilson's peace diplomacy was a success in terms of party management.

On balance, Wilson's approach to the Vietnam War can be deemed relatively successful in view of the contradictory domestic and international pressures he was facing. He resisted U.S. demands for British troops but preserved

142. Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 375.

143. Robert S. McNamara et al, *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 1999), p. 308.

144. Young, "Britain and 'LBJ's War', 1964–68," p. 68.

145. David Bruce, "Annual Assessment on Britain, Spring 1968," 1 June 1968, in Memos 1/68–7/68, Box 212, Country File UK, NSF, LBJL.

146. Tom McNally, "Foreign Policy Formation," June 1970, in International Department, ID/1970-71/65, Box LI, NEC Mins, 23 June 1971, LPA.

147. See, for example, the memorandum from J. Gwyn Morgan, Overseas Secretary, to Crawley Labour Party, 2 March 1966, in Box on Vietnam 1957–73, LPA; and J. Gwyn Morgan to David Francis, National Union of Mineworkers, 3 August 1966, in Box on Vietnam 1957–73, LPA.

close Anglo-American relations that were crucial to Britain. Wilson's dual policy of dissociating Britain from the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam while upholding Britain's support for the overall U.S. action in Vietnam repeatedly won support in the House of Commons. Similarly, his peace diplomacy was just enough to placate a party that contained activists who to a large extent viewed Vietnam as a war of liberation rather than a Cold War struggle.

Thus, although many on the left in Britain lambasted Wilson's stance on the war, his finely balanced approach demonstrated considerable political acumen and diplomatic skill. To be sure, Wilson's approach contributed to what Logevall has called the "permissive context" of the Johnson administration's military escalation in 1965 and gave some semblance of international legitimacy to U.S. military action, but it is doubtful that a more critical stance would have been enough to push the Johnson administration to abandon the war.¹⁴⁸

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148. Logevall, *Choosing War*, p. 403.