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# President Makes Three Misstatements on Vietnam

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President Reagan rewrote the history of early U.S. involvement in Vietnam yesterday while defending himself against press charges that he made numerous mistakes at his Jan. 19 news conference.

Reagan made three major misstatements on Vietnam at his news conference yesterday.

He said that North and South Vietnam were two separate countries prior to the colonization of Vietnam by France in the 19th century. In fact, when the French arrived, the area was already divided into three parts: from south to north they were Cochin China, Annam and Tonkin.

The president also said that President Ho Chi Minh of North Vietnam refused to participate in the election scheduled for 1956 by the agreements that ended French control over Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers and other histories of that time make clear that it was South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem who refused to take part in elections. The Pentagon history concludes

that the United States did not "connive with Diem to ignore the elections." However, it says that President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles favored postponing elections for as long as possible. It quotes a Dulles cable arguing that delay is important because it is "undoubtedly true that elections might eventually mean unification [of] Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh . . ."

Reagan also said that "the first move toward [U.S.] combat troops in Vietnam" was when President Kennedy "authorized the sending in of a division of Marines."

On Feb. 7, 1965, President Johnson ordered the first 550 Marines, accompanying Hawk missiles, to Vietnam. In March he sent 3,500 more Marines. In April, he dispatched 1,400 more. According to a Marine spokeswoman, the only Marines in Vietnam before that were advisers who helped establish the South Vietnamese Marine Corps. This small group arrived in 1954 and left in 1956.

Although Reagan's history was wrong, the question to which he was replying was based on a false premise and the president was correct in denying that premise.

"In the 1960s, the CIA came up with a secret plan to get us involved in Vietnam in a surreptitious, covert manner," the questioner said, asking whether such means might be employed to get the United States more deeply into Latin America.

The United States did not become involved in Vietnam covertly in the 1960s. As advisers were sent to South Vietnam, their numbers were announced. In 1954, Col. Edward Lansdale had commanded covert sabotage operations in North Vietnam as the French pulled out.

Reagan correctly said he did not see any parallel relating to covert activities.

Reagan opened his news conference with a joke about press reports of his misstatements and he ended with a claim that his Jan. 19 news conference had not been studded with errors. Reagan said "the score was five to one in my favor." His count, however, refers to a White House refutation of a wire-service story on misstatements, not to the errors Reagan made at his Jan. 19 news conference, where every unemployment statistic he used was incorrect.

Washington Post researchers Valarie Thomas and Maralee Schwartz contributed to this article.