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Masters of war? Military criticism, strategy, and civil-military relations during the Vietnam War. (Volumes I and II)

Buzzanco, Robert, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1993

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"[Jose Arcadio Segundo] taught little Aureliano how to read and write, initiated him in the study of the parchments, and he inculcated him with such a personal interpretation of what the banana company had meant to Maconda that many years later, when Aureliano became part of the world, one would have thought that he was telling a hallucinated version because it was radically opposed to the false one that historians had created and consecrated in the schoolbooks."

Gabriel García Márquez
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MILITARY CRITICISM, STRATEGY, AND CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS
DURING THE VIETNAM WAR
Volume I
DISSERTATION
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By
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1993

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Copyright by
Robert Buzzanco
1993
To Janie and Kelsey,
  Dad and Mom,
  Bill, and
  Diane
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Above all, I would like to thank my wife, Jane Kelso, our son, Kelsey Niccolo Sandino Buzzanco, and my father, Nick Buzzanco; without their support, both moral and financial, and their love I would have never completed this project. My dear friend Bill Walker and my acupuncturist/guru Diane Shelton contributed to my work in more ways than they'll ever realize. In the OSU Department of History, my advisor, Michael J. Hogan, kept me focused and on schedule, and Warren Van Tine and Marvin Zahniser also deserve thanks for their help, both as academic advisors and department chairs. Keith Olson, of the University of Maryland, introduced me to my topic, and I will always be grateful for it. I would also like to acknowledge the Marine Corps Historical Center, the LBJ and JFK Libraries, and the OSU History Department for their financial assistance, and Marine historian Jack Shulimson for all his help. Finally I would like to thank my grad school comrades from Columbus Vibert White, Ann Heiss, Mike Weis, Eric Karolak, Kurt Schultz, Paul Wittekind, and Jim Rohrer.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Though inarguably America's most divisive and unpopular war while being fought in the 1960s, the U.S. intervention in Vietnam has experienced a historiographical and political renaissance in the last decade or so. Beginning in the late 1970s, at roughly the same time as the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan and the Republican right, various politicians, military leaders, and scholars began to rehabilitate the American involvement in Vietnam. Where most Americans had believed that the United States suffered a military defeat in its attempt to contain communism in southern Vietnam, these new revisionists contended that in fact U.S. forces had gained conclusive military success there.¹

Conditions at home, however, prevented American military leaders from capitalizing on their battlefield victories, as the defenders of intervention saw it. By refusing to activate Reserves or mobilize, restraining the air war above the seventeenth parallel while limiting the war geographically below it, and failing to authorize the
full measure of troops requested by U.S. commanders, the White House, the revisionists allege, unduly limited America's military capabilities and made success virtually impossible. Exacerbating such political constraints, they add, the U.S. media and antiwar movement, with their consistently bleak outlook on the war, undermined American morale and strengthened the enemy's will. By the mid-1980s, this view of the war was increasingly reflected in political debate, academic discourse, and popular culture, and, in large measure, helped condition American involvement in areas such as Latin America and the Middle East. In fact, just as he unleashed American air power against Baghdad, George Bush told a national audience that "our troops . . . will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back," as they had done in Vietnam.

Bush's view of America's previous war, despite creating a great deal of political currency, is bad history. The conservative revisionists and others who have considered the meaning and impact of Vietnam have simply overlooked the U.S. military's own misgivings about intervention and the political maneuvering involved in making policy during the war. American military leaders, the victims of political cowardice according to the revisionists, were in fact deeply divided over the decision to intervene, the level of commitment, and the strategy to be employed in Vietnam. From the early 1950s to the late
1960s, American officers, at various times and to varying degrees, questioned, criticized, and even opposed the war. Vietnam, many if not most service leaders believed, was an area of but peripheral importance and did not justify U.S. combat involvement.

Even after political leaders decided to fight there in 1965, the brass continued to recognize the parlous situation and obstacles to success in Vietnam. Despite public claims that U.S. forces had "turned the corner" in Vietnam, or saw "light at the end of the tunnel," service leaders did not anticipate a military victory, and were as likely as not to be pessimistic about American prospects in the war. At the same time, the U.S. military community in Vietnam and Washington was badly divided over the proper approach to Vietnam, with military advocates of attrition, air power, and pacification engaging in a virulent and counterproductive dispute over strategy. In the meantime, the Communist enemy grew stronger and fought more effectively, while America's ally in the south experienced constant political turmoil and military shortcomings.

Given those conditions, U.S. military leaders clearly, if implicitly, understood that they were involved in an essentially unwinnable war in Vietnam. Their rosy public projections notwithstanding, the brass always acknowledged its problems in Vietnam, expected a long and costly war, and were not especially confident of success. American
generals and admirals never reached a consensus on whether or how to fight the war, and they always lacked the unity of purpose that is imperative to successful military campaigns. By 1968, in the aftermath of the decisive Tet Offensive, U.S. intervention in Vietnam, as many officers had earlier prophesied, had failed. U.S. forces had indeed suffered a military defeat.

The revisionist focus on domestic politics is, however, warranted, only in a far different manner than they apply it. Politics, certainly as much as military developments, conditioned the responses of both military and political leaders to the war. Despite their candid and often bleak evaluations, American military leaders, rather than urging deescalation or disengagement, in fact did the opposite. As the war deteriorated, they constantly pressed the White House for authorization of more resources, expanded warfare, and national mobilization. The brass did this in large part for political reasons. Since the 1950s, civil-military relations had become increasingly strained, especially during controversies over defense budgets in the late 1950s, the invasion of Cuba in 1961, and intervention in Vietnam.

By the later 1960s, then, armed forces and civilian leaders were fighting each other as well as the Vietnamese Communists. American officers sensed both that the war in Vietnam would not go well and that the military would be
held accountable for that failure. Given their past conflicts with civilian officials, armed forces leaders knew that significant political stakes were involved in military policymaking for Vietnam. America's ranking officers, who had recognized the risks of intervention and the political imperatives driving Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the war, nonetheless excoriated the president's decisions after American troops had withdrawn from Indochina and the historical dust began to settle. Military leaders, it seems, wanted to have it both ways. They delivered candid reports on the war to cover their political flanks, but also consistently forced Johnson to reject their proposals for escalation and to assume responsibility for a failed war. As early as 1961, General Lionel McGarr, the ranking U.S. officer in Vietnam, worried that the armed forces would be blamed for losing the war. Six years later, Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson would similarly fear that the military was about to "take the fall" for the coming disaster.

But rather than admit that they could not alter the situation in Vietnam, which would be a blow to the military's institutional influence if not integrity, the brass constantly requested measures that they knew the president would not authorize, thus forcing the White House to accept responsibility when short-handed American forces could not effectively thwart the enemy's progress.
Civilian leaders, who had pressed the military into intervention, supplied it handsomely but not without limits, and then expected prompt success, had virtually invited such behavior. American leaders, uniformed and civilian, were thus fighting for their place in history as well as for anticommunism in Southeast Asia. Expecting the worst and looking for ways to avoid responsibility for it, American officers had in fact developed, at the outset of their commitment in the mid-1960s, the critique of the war that conservative revisionists would find so popular over a decade later.

Those major themes—military recognition of the peril of intervention, interservice division over mission and strategy, and civil-military political maneuvering—were evident throughout the U.S. experience in Vietnam. As seen in chapters two and three, during the Eisenhower administration, when the United States made its initial, and as it turned out, irrevocable, commitments to southern Vietnam, virtually all American military officials opposed intervention in Indochina, and they played a key role in preventing U.S. entry into the war during the Dien Bien Phu crisis of Spring 1954. The brass, however, could not prevent the United States from assuming the burden of funding and training the government and military in the Republic of Vietnam, so found themselves in the later 1950s simultaneously preparing for but trying to avoid war. As
chapter four shows, by 1961, when John F. Kennedy moved into the White House, military leaders neither desired nor expected to enter combat in Vietnam.

Within a year, however, America was indeed more deeply involved in the war there. Although the military felt no compulsion to intervene, it did understand that the young president, a Cold Warrior who had failed at the outset of his administration to stop Communists in Cuba and Laos and apparently was not respected by Soviet leaders, needed to respond successfully to Communist expansion, and Vietnam was as good a place as any to take a stand. Service leaders, burned politically in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, thus opposed intervention, through October 1961 at least, but also tried to pin down Kennedy to decide just what type of military involvement he anticipated in Vietnam and to make him accountable for whatever consequences occurred. A year later, especially after the president had replaced holdover military chiefs with his own appointees, American commanders were more responsive to intervention and, with their helicopters and napalm, badly hurt the enemy in 1962. Trouble lurked ahead, however. As chapter five shows, political chaos in southern Vietnam and enemy improvements in the field tended to negate the growing U.S. presence. By the time Kennedy died in late 1963, military leaders, though sanguine about their ability to preserve the southern state, still hoped to avoid expanded combat
Their wish would not come true. As Lyndon B. Johnson took over the presidency, as seen in chapter six, conditions in Vietnam began to fall apart. Without U.S. intervention, it was clear to all, the Communists would unify Vietnam under their direction—sooner rather than later. Even then, however, military men, particularly General Maxwell Taylor and also U.S. Commander William Childs Westmoreland, understood and feared the consequences of large-scale intervention and thus were not eager to participate in a ground war in Vietnam. Civilian leaders such as Johnson, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, John McNaughton, and others were, however, so in early 1965, the Marine Corps committed the first U.S. ground forces to Da Nang, as shown in chapter seven.

From that point on, the war spiralled downward. In mid-1965 the president, to virtually no one’s satisfaction, expanded the war significantly but not anywhere near the levels that the military and secretary of defense were urging. Because of the importance of his domestic political agenda, particularly his Great Society programs, and fear of widening the war, Lyndon Johnson decided to try to win Vietnam on the cheap, relatively speaking. Thus he refused to activate Reserves or mobilize, and, although he generally met the military’s manpower requests, never fought the type of unrestrained war that various generals
were advocating. At the same time, as detailed in chapter eight, interservice feuding over the way the war should be fought erupted, as Marine leaders such as Victor Krulak and Wallace Greene, champions of pacification, charged that Westmoreland, who had devised a strategy of excessive firepower and attrition, was doing little more than setting up a bloodbath for American soldiers. As a Marine historian explained, the Vietnam War was an example of coalition warfare, and the coalition was the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps.\textsuperscript{5} Such internecine struggles obviously did little to help the United States achieve any objectives in Vietnam. At the same time, retired Generals Matthew Ridgway, James Gavin, and David Shoup were publicly attacking the war, thereby making it more difficult for the president and other advocates of intervention to rally public support for the American commitment to Vietnam.\textsuperscript{6}

With such internal division, and with U.S. efforts in the field foundering, American officers increasingly turned to political maneuvering to cover their flanks, the details of which are especially covered in chapters nine and ten. By consistently putting forth the same recommendations for escalation that the president had already rejected and was sure to refuse again, and even considering group resignation to humiliate the civilian leadership, U.S. military chiefs created an alibi for the failure that they feared and probably expected. Instead of looking for ways
to disengage from their failed efforts, American leaders were more concerned with deferring responsibility for that failure onto others. For over a decade-and-a-half, the United States increased its stake in Vietnam despite easily-recognized and widely-disseminated evidence that the situation there was troubled and worsening. Civilian leaders generally ignored or dismissed the military's frank reports of conditions in Vietnam and expanded the American commitment. Military leaders, for their part, overcame their own reservations or opposition to expanding the conflict and accepted greater obligations in the war. Military criticism of the war, division over strategy, and political maneuvering converged as American officials looked for a way out of Vietnam without leaving their fingerprints on it. In the meantime, the war raged on.
CHAPTER II:
PROLOGUE TO TRAGEDY:

U.S. MILITARY OPPOSITION TO INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM,
1950-1954

Although American leaders in the following decade would establish Vietnam as the central battlefield in the global cold war, U.S. military officials in the 1950s argued that intervention in Indochina would be a mistake. Indeed, throughout the early part of that decade, the U.S. armed forces worked against military involvement in the first Indochina war more than any other institution, in or outside of government. From 1950 to 1954, when the Truman and Eisenhower administrations made a series of irrevocable commitments to the French and then native anti-communist elements in southern Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS], its various committees, respective service leaders, and other senior officers working in government voiced serious misgivings about intervention in Indochina. For the most part, in fact, they were opposed to any U.S. military involvement in or substantive commitments to Vietnam. In light of U.S. limits and priorities, they explained, an
expanded role in Vietnam would damage the national interest.

Much of the scholarly work on this era overlooks the nature of the military's skepticism regarding U.S. involvement in Indochina. Those works that do consider the subject do not adequately acknowledge the systematic progression, depth, or importance of the military's opposition to intervention, or the relevance of those arguments against combat to the subsequent American failure in Vietnam.¹ In the early 1950s, however, military officers presented a complex yet well-developed case against involvement in Indochina based on comprehensive and interrelated political, economic, and military factors. Above all, the brass rooted its opposition to war in its conception of grand strategy. Given America's expanded commitments, especially in Europe, at the outset of the Cold War, U.S. generals such as J. Lawton Collins, Hoyt Vandenberg, James Gavin, Matthew Ridgway, and others simply did not believe that they had the resources to get involved in areas of peripheral significance such as Indochina.² More to the point, military officials defined the national interest more narrowly than did their civilian counterparts. In the early years of Cold War, U.S. policymakers accepted global commitments which assumed that American resources, soldiers, and national will were abundant, if not limitless.³ At the same time the armed
forces held serious reservations about the United States's ability to counter communism in every place that it appeared. Thus the debate over Indochina policy was also a duel over the nature of the national interest and the relationship between American resources and objectives.

Such considerations of commitments and limits thus led the military to oppose intervention in Vietnam during the Truman administration and even more strongly after 1953, when President Dwight Eisenhower introduced his "New Look" defense policy and called for reductions in military spending. The services also believed that budget considerations made any large-scale involvement in Vietnam impractical, that the United States would need British cooperation in Indochina, and that American forces should not be expected to unilaterally protect the French position there. With this recognition of American limits and priorities, military leaders not only rejected a combat role in Vietnam and but also called into question the very idea of global containment which was fueling the Cold War.4

Critics within the military also understood that the objective conditions in Indochina militated against U.S. intervention there, and rejected involvement in Vietnam for four interrelated reasons. First, the military recognized that the first Indochina war had deep, indigenous roots. Native distrust and hatred of the French, and, in turn,
France's lack of control and effective leadership, had created an inchoate political environment. Next, American officers recognized that the Vietminh forces of Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap, headquartered in Tonkin but strong throughout Vietnam, enjoyed great popular support and possessed the military capacity to conduct both guerrilla and conventional warfare over extended areas and a long period of time. Third, the Communist patrons of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [DRVN] and the Vietminh, the People's Republic of China [PRC], and to a lesser degree the Soviet Union, would benefit strategically from the diversion of U.S. resources to Indochina, an area of ancillary importance, and would moreover exploit U.S. intervention as a propaganda weapon in the war for the hearts and minds of anti-colonial Asians. Finally, American generals realized that involvement in an Asian war of national liberation-cum-revolution could create intense and possibly insurmountable problems for their conventionally-trained and technologically-oriented soldiers.

The military's reservations about involvement in Indochina were already apparent at the end of World War II. The JCS, with White House agreement, held that Southeast Asia was "not included within the sphere of interest of the American Chiefs of Staff." More directly, Major Allison Thomas, head of an intelligence mission to Vietnam, and
General Philip Gallagher, U.S. advisor to Guomindang occupation forces in northern Vietnam, actively lobbied for American contacts with Ho and sympathized with the nationalist, albeit Leftist, Vietminh. "Confidentially," as Gallagher wrote, "I wish the Annamites [Ho's northern followers] could be given their independence."5

America's most respected service leader, General George C. Marshall, who served as secretary of state from 1947 to 1950 and then secretary of defense to 1951, likewise doubted that the West could thwart the Vietnamese independence movement. In 1947 Marshall scored a French proposal to restore Emperor Bao Dai to the throne because it implied that the West had to "resort [to] monarchy as a weapon against communism." A year later he admitted that French forces "have no prospect" of success in Vietnam. Rather than demonstrate influence, Marshall predicted, the Indochina war "will remain a grievously costly enterprise, weakening France economically and all the West generally in its relations with Oriental peoples."6

In July 1949 the JCS produced its most striking summation of the perils of interference in Indochina in JCS 1992/4. To the Chiefs, the "widening political consciousness and the rise of militant nationalism among the subject people" could not be crushed by Western arms. Indeed, Indochinese nationalism was a force that "cannot be reversed." To attempt to do so, the JCS presciently
argued, would be "an anti-historical act likely in the long run to create more problems than it solves and cause more damage than benefit." 7

Although key military leaders held well-established views concerning the dangers of involvement in Vietnam in mid-1949, they soon would be thrown on the defensive by a wave of international events that intensified the Cold War, including Mao Zedong's proclamation of the PRC, the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], the successful test of a Soviet atomic bomb, and, at home, the development of NSC 68—which envisioned a huge American military build-up to pursue containment policies globally. Under the weight of these events, U.S. leaders inflated the importance of previously peripheral areas such as Vietnam and began to accelerate aid to those places. Thus the JCS, despite Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins's warnings against a "primarily military effort" in Indochina, recommended assistance to Southeast Asian nations to "check . . . the influence of the USSR in Asia." On 3 February 1950 President Harry Truman recognized the government of the rehabilitated Emperor Bao Dai in Vietnam. And in the Spring, NSC 64, which pressed for "all practicable measures" to protect Indochina, and then NSC 68 further expanded the American commitment to Vietnam.8

Though not discounting the perceived threat of Indochinese communism, American service leaders expressed
caution, doubt and concern regarding an extended U.S. commitment to Vietnam. An ad hoc JCS committee warned that the introduction of American military advisors into Indochina would identify the United States with colonialism. Under such circumstances the Americans and the French could "expect little success in opposing Communism irrespective of the sincerity of their efforts."

A report by the Army Plans and Operations (P & O) division criticized American policy more pointedly. It advocated assistance to France only "consistent with other global commitments of higher priority and short of [the] commitment of . . . combat forces . . . in Indo-China."

The P & O pessimistically estimated that the Vietminh would drive the French out of Indochina on the basis of popular support, not Chinese assistance. Ho enjoyed the support of 80 percent of the Vietnamese people, Army planners reported, yet 80 percent of his followers were not Communists. Such indigenous appeal, as well as PRC support, virtually assured Vietminh success.9

Despite such misgivings the President, in early March, approved a $15 million, essentially military, assistance package to Indochina. Truman's *fait accompli* notwithstanding, Army intelligence continued to question such commitments. Vietminh General Giap, it reported, controlled ninety thousand regular forces and eighty six thousand irregulars, who admittedly had a great advantage
fighting in Vietnam's "rugged terrain." With Chinese assistance alone, but not combat intervention, the Vietminh might oust the French within a year or two. Even a more upbeat JCS report wondered whether U.S. military aid could do more than "create the possibility of success" in Vietnam.10

By mid-1950, however, political leaders seemed deaf to such analyses. Truman, with Secretary of State Dean Acheson's encouragement, appropriated another $10 million in military assistance to Vietnam in May and shortly thereafter created an economic aid mission to Indochina. Moreover, the outbreak of war in Korea and a joint State Department-Military mission to investigate the situation in Vietnam (the Melby-Erskine mission) which urged intensified American efforts there convinced the administration even more of the need to contain Asian communism. Nonetheless, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) reported that the Vietminh, mainly using its own resources, continued to expand and effectively conduct guerrilla operations. The JCS agreed, warning that a military solution to this "internal security problem" was not possible. The chiefs also stressed that France would have to be told that, material aid notwithstanding, no U.S. armed forces would be committed to Indochina.11 The Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JSSC), in evaluating the situation after Vietminh military successes in late 1950, agreed that it
was in America's best interest to "minimize [any] commitments to Indochina." Even token air or naval support carried great danger as such measures, if not initially effective, could force further American commitments and lead to a major U.S. presence in Vietnam.\(^2\)

To the JSSC's bleak outlook the JCS added that the Vietminh now numbered 92,500 regular forces and about 130,000 guerrillas, and was developing task forces of 3000 to 5000 troops, a situation that pointed to a "developing capability for more conventional warfare." Given such size and organization, Giap's forces had the military capacity to move freely throughout most of Indochina, support the resistance in French-occupied areas, continue to harass lines of communication, and even seize French border outposts. Accordingly, the chiefs, in response to NSC pressure for intervention, asserted that "regardless of current . . . commitments for [the] provision of military assistance to Indochina, the U.S. will not commit any of its armed forces to the defense of Indochina against overt foreign aggression or augmented internal Communist offensives." The Joint Strategic Plans Committee (JSPC) agreed and saw no reason for the United States to consider committing forces to a "series of inconclusive peripheral actions which would drain our military strength and weaken . . . our global position." Collins was more blunt. "France will be driven out of Indochina," he prophesied,
and was "wasting men and equipment trying to remain there."  

Despite such dire warnings the Truman administration committed over $130 million in additional funding and materiel to Vietnam by late 1950. Apparently emboldened by the American assistance, French leadership appointed World War II hero Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to command its forces in Indochina with instructions to prosecute the war vigorously. French hopes then rose dramatically as de Lattre's forces successfully repulsed Vietminh offensives at Vinh Yen and Mao Khe, north of Hanoi, and in June gained an impressive victory at Phat Diem in the Hong River delta, some eighty miles southeast of Hanoi. 

American service leaders were not so impressed with these "glorious victories," as de Lattre had described them. The JSPC and JCS insisted that if the French requested even air or naval support "they will have to be told point blank that none will be committed." The United States "has no intention" of supplanting French efforts in Indochina, Assistant Army Chief for P & O Maxwell Taylor ironically affirmed, "either at the present or in the future." Army planner General Robinson Duff further pointed out that any increased commitments to Asia would damage America's capacity to defend "our primary strategic area, Western Europe." Such misgivings were well-founded, as Army intelligence showed. Despite French military
success the Vietminh totalled 120,000 regular forces in early 1951, a one-third increase in six months, and had rearmed four infantry divisions in Tonkin. With these forces Giap was now disposed to attack "virtually any part" of the French perimeter in the North.¹⁵

Such military reservations, however, did not go unchallenged as political and military officials such as Donald Heath, the Ambassador to Saigon, General Francis Brink, the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), David Bruce, the Ambassador to Paris, and Admiral Arthur Radford, the commander-in-chief of Pacific forces, remained sanguine about American prospects in Vietnam and pressed Washington to "exert every care" to check communism there. Most U.S. military leaders, however, were more firmly opposed to war in Indochina, in large measure due to the U.S. experience in Korea. With hopes for a decisive victory in Korea dashed by 1951 the military realized that the outlook for Indochina was little better. To the JIC, it was clear that U.S. intervention in Vietnam "would involve political and military disadvantages and costs similar to those sustained in Korea." Ironically, an early conclusion to the Korean War would actually diminish American prospects in Vietnam. In the event of a Korean armistice the PRC would be free to transfer 340,000 forces from North Korea and 330,000 from Manchuria to Indochina, while the Americans would still
have to maintain troops and materiel in South Korea.\textsuperscript{16} In recognition of that situation the JCS rejected de Lattre's contention that Korea and Indochina were but separate fronts in "one war" against Asian communism. With de Lattre visiting Washington in September 1951 the Chiefs urged against further aid to France "to cover what is substantially an internal budget deficit of another country."\textsuperscript{17}

Again, though, the military lost a political battle as de Lattre left the United States with increased assistance and a public relations success. The JCS nonetheless still insisted that it was impossible to transfer resources from other programs to support the French against the "indigenous Vietminh armed forces" without the United States "becoming engaged in war" itself. They also continued to resist the idea of involvement in Vietnam at a meeting between state department officials and the JCS on 21 December. France's position had deteriorated, having just been routed at Hoa Binh, west of Hanoi. Against that backdrop, Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt Vandenberg, while not urging intervention, wondered whether the United States was "prepared to let Southeast Asia go?" Collins, however, pointed out that the "loss" of Indochina would not prompt its neighbors to fall like dominoes to communism. The Chair of the JCS Omar Bradley doubted that "we could get our public to go along with the idea of our going into
Indochina in a military way." Collins shared such worries and concluded that "we must face the probability that Indochina will be lost." In the meantime the JSPC, citing the "current deterioration of the local situation," warned that even limited involvement in Vietnam "could only lead to a dilemma similar to that in Korea, which is insoluble by military action."  

Throughout 1952, as the Truman administration--already bearing one-third of the cost of France's war--hiked its level of assistance to Vietnam, political and military officials continued to joust over American policy in Indochina. In NSC 124/2, officially adopted in June, the Security Council saw Southeast Asia as an area of vital interest to the United States and contemplated military intervention to support friendly governments. While Ambassador Heath and General Brink scored the "over pessimistic" intelligence reports recently received from Vietnam, Dean Acheson suggested that a naval blockade or air attacks might be needed to prevent PRC intervention in Vietnam. The military continued to distance itself from such bellicose suggestions, and neither political nor military leaders seriously considered combat intervention at this time. The JCS, as defense secretary Robert A. Lovett wrote to the commanding general of NATO, Dwight Eisenhower, remained "unanimously opposed to the commitment of any troops" to Indochina. As General Collins pointed
out, the United States lacked the resources to become more deeply involved in Indochina. The JCS turned Collins’s observation into policy by refusing to transfer funding from programs for Taiwan, the Philippines, Thailand, and elsewhere to Indochina because reducing such aid "would appreciably retard . . . these countries with the attendant risk of jeopardizing the U.S. military position in the Far East." As he surveyed the situation in Vietnam in late 1952, incoming MAAG Chief General Thomas Trapnell was more succinct, complaining that "the enemy retains the initiative." 20

In early 1953, however, new President Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who had attacked Truman and Acheson during the 1952 campaign for being soft on communism, seemed likely to reverse the deteriorating situation in Vietnam and substantially increase the U.S. commitment or even intervene there. But the new administration tempered any desire to take a military role in Vietnam because of its "New Look" defense policy--a preponderant reliance on nuclear weapons to cut military spending and balance the budget. Thus the Republicans continued to press the French and native armies to retain dominant responsibility for their war in Indochina. 21

As Air Force General and Joint Staff director Charles Cabell explained, increased commitments would pose
greater dangers because "terrain difficulties, the guerrilla nature of Vietminh operations, and the political apathy of the population preclude decisive consolidation of areas cleared of Vietminh, unless . . . physically occupied by friendly forces." Such a commitment, Cabell concluded, "is beyond the capabilities of the friendly strength." The JCS elaborated that point, explaining to the new defense secretary, Charles Wilson, that the Vietnamese lacked both incentive and qualified leadership and that Vietnam did not possess adequate resources for military operations.22

Military conditions in Vietnam thus had not changed appreciably in the first months of the Eisenhower administration. The U.S. military found the new French strategy--the Letorneau plan, a three-phase program to end the war by 1955--preferable to continued stasis, but even France's biggest booster, Admiral Radford, recognized that the French and Americans were at a disadvantage in Vietnam. The Vietminh, as Radford understood, was committed to national liberation, had superior intelligence, could conduct guerrilla operations freely, and could rely on PRC support. More stridently, J. Lawton Collins charged that French Commander Raoul Salan was a "second-rater," while Hoyt Vandenberg wondered whether the United States was "pouring money down a ratheole" in Vietnam. The Air Force chief was particularly alarmed because he believed that France was the keystone to European security and thus "the
Indochina thing has to be settled before NATO will work."

When General Giap's incursion into Laos in mid-April seemed to confirm the pessimistic assessments of Collins and Vandenberg, Eisenhower and Dulles sent the caustic, bellicose general, John "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, to study the situation in Vietnam. They also pressed the French to appoint a more aggressive Commander, with Henri Navarre their agreed-upon choice. Despite intelligence and JSSC analyses that offered a bleak forecast for the French at that time, O'Daniel was not dismayed. On the contrary, the general, the White House, and the Congress were all buoyed by the so-called Navarre Concept, which envisioned immediate local combat initiatives to be followed by a general offensive in the Fall, and by French premier Joseph Laniel’s transfer of some political authority to Indochinese states to "perfect" their independence. To American officials, such measures indicated that the French were seriously attempting to correct the military and political problems plaguing their efforts in Indochina. As a result, Washington appropriated $785 million in military assistance to Vietnam in 1953.

The JCS endorsed the fait accompli of additional aid, but questioned the optimistic assessments that prompted it. At a joint meeting with diplomatic officials, the chiefs doubted that the French military would improve and, in what
had already become their mantra, rejected any combat involvement in Indochina. Commitments elsewhere, the need to maintain the strategic reserve, and budgetary limits—as well as deteriorating conditions inside Vietnam—precluded American intervention. General Collins pointed out that a campaign in Indochina would be worse than Korea. Any U.S. forces could expect a "major and protracted war . . . . Militarily and politically we would be in up to our necks." But Collins also understood that he spoke "from a military point of view" and that the JCS's judgment was not decisive. Stating the obvious, the army chief conceded that "if our political leaders want to put troops in there we will of course do it."

The National Security Council did want to put troops into Vietnam. In NSC 162/2, authorized in October 1953, NSC officials cited Indochina as an area of vital strategic importance that the United States would defend with military forces if needed. Perhaps the NSC was eager to intervene because, inside Vietnam, the politico-military situation had reached a turning point. In October, the frustrated Vietnamese National Congress threatened to withdraw from the French Union, while Vietminh forces simultaneously routed units of the Vietnamese National Army at Bui Chi in Tonkin. Against that backdrop O'Daniel returned to Vietnam in early November to evaluate the French military's performance and prospects. The general
reported that Navarre had made considerable progress and that reorganized "mobile groups," newly-established light battalions, and cooperation with U.S. advisors all pointed to success within a year. Felix Stump, the new commander-in-chief of Pacific forces, Robert Carney, the new Navy chief of staff, and Matthew Ridgway, the new Army chief, questioned O'Daniel's optimism, however. They contended that victory was not possible given the indigenous resentment against and weak leadership of the French.26

A Special Intelligence Estimate--which the JCS and the three services coordinated with the Central Intelligence Agency--was even more gloomy regarding the U.S. future in Indochina. American involvement had already helped the PRC, the report began, by giving it license to intervene in Southeast Asia to "liberate Indochina from American imperialism." Should the United States assume a combat role in Vietnam, the climate and terrain, along with native resentment of Western intervention, could lead to "a long and indecisive war" that "could be exploited politically." In time, "the U.S. and Vietnamese will to fight might be worn down." Even if Franco-American forces could defeat the Vietminh, Giap's forces could regroup, continue guerrilla operations, and force the United States to maintain a military role in Vietnam "for years to come."27

The JSPC and the JCS added to that blunt report in December with their most detailed consideration of military
planning to date. Any U.S. contribution to the war would have to be huge, including two hundred thousand ground troops, four thousand military trainers, six infantry divisions, several air wings, and a number of naval craft, as well as new base construction. Such a commitment could cost billions of dollars and would thereby drain logistic reserves and force reductions and delays in aid to NATO and other army units. It would also force major production increases, and, most importantly, would require increased draft calls, extended terms of service, and a recall of reservists.28

While American officials debated such issues, the battle in Indochina reached its denouement. In late November 1953, Navarre’s forces occupied the village of Dien Bien Phu in northwest Vietnam to use as a garrison from which to conduct conventional operations with twelve battalions, artillery, and air support. In December, however, Giap laid siege to Dien Bien Phu. Navarre clearly had blundered, and by early 1954 the Vietminh had isolated French forces in that remote village on the Laotian border.29 In Washington, Dulles and other diplomatic officials advocated using the relief of Dien Bien Phu as a pretext for committing American forces to Vietnam, a position with which defense representatives at an 8 January 1954 NSC meeting strongly disagreed. Admiral A.C. Davis, director of the Pentagon’s Office of Foreign Military
Assistance, warned that the "involvement of U.S. forces in the Indochina war should be avoided at all costs. . . . [T]he U.S. should not be self-duped into believing the possibility of partial involvement--such as 'naval and air units only.' One cannot go over Niagara Falls in a barrel only slightly." "It must be understood," the Admiral insisted, "that there is no cheap way to fight a war, once committed."30

As usual the NSC balked, optimistically arguing that a Communist victory in Indochina was not likely, but anomalously clamoring for U.S. intervention to stem the disintegration there. Army P & O, however, rejected its arguments and found "grave implications" in a French request for flying crews and maintenance personnel because "if fulfilled, the U.S. will be participating in actual operations." Even France's advocate Admiral Radford conceded that the Air Force had sent two hundred mechanics to Indochina though it needed them at home. "It really hurts to have to produce these things," the new JCS Chair lamented. General Walter Bedell Smith, the undersecretary of state, added that the introduction of more mechanics or trainers into Vietnam could "create . . . the impression that we were backing into the war in Indochina."31

Amid these debates, O'Daniel traveled to Dien Bien Phu and reported no cause for alarm. Incredibly, the general believed that French confidence and effectiveness had in
fact increased. O'Daniel's sanguine views notwithstanding, the JCS still understood that the Vietminh held the military initiative and identified itself with "freedom from the colonial yoke and with the improvement of the general welfare of the people." The Communists, the chiefs held, had maneuvered the Vietnamese "into a frame of mind that supports their political-military program." Despite that analysis, American policymakers such as Dulles, Radford, and Bedell Smith were pressing for combat intervention to rescue the French at Dien Bien Phu. Radford, however, did concede that the Vietminh had several military advantages over the French, including more mobility, greater efficiency with fewer forces, and familiarity with the terrain. The JCS chair also admitted that indigenous support was the basis of the Communists's success. The PRC sent just one thousand tons of materiel to Ho monthly, which Radford considered "a very small amount."

Such analyses served as prologue to the decisive Spring 1954 debate over intervention. Despite recognizing the troubled military situation Radford continued to press for intervention. When General Paul Ely, chair of the French chiefs of staff, requested more assistance and combat intervention, the JCS chair pledged aircraft, helicopters, and maintenance personnel and "envisaged" intervention. While Radford also confided to Dulles that
"we must stop being optimistic about the situation," he nonetheless urged the president to "be prepared to act promptly and in force possibly to a frantic and belated [French] request ... for U.S. intervention." Toward that end Radford, on 31 March, convened the JCS to propose direct American intervention in Vietnam.33

Ridgway led the opposition, immediately and emphatically rejecting the chair's recommendation. To the army chief, America's capacity to affect the outcome at Dien Bien Phu was "altogether disproportionate to the liability it would incur," which included a "greatly increased risk of general war." Marine Commandant Lemuel Shepherd bolstered Ridgway's dissent. American intervention in Vietnam, Shepherd contended, held out "no significant promise of success." Air support would be "an unprofitable adventure ... without important effect on the fortunes of the soldier on the ground." As the Commandant saw it, the United States could either accept failure or intervene in Vietnam with ground troops. Though America could "ill afford" the former, Shepherd did "not believe that the other is a matter which we should even consider under present circumstances."34

Such JCS opposition, however, did not end the debate over intervention. Dulles and Radford continued to press allies and politicians to support the French presence in Indochina, largely because of Eisenhower's insistence that
he would not intervene unilaterally or without congressional approval. In fact, the president, writing to the U.S. Commander in Europe, General Alfred Gruenther, condemned the "astonishing proposals for unilateral American intervention in Indo-China." Gruenther's own "adverse opinion," of military action in Vietnam "exactly parallels mine," Eisenhower wrote. If the war in Indochina was to continue, he observed, the bulk of ground forces would have to come from France while "additional forces should come from Asiatic and European troops already in the region."35

General Albert Wedemeyer, the president's friend and past U.S. commander in China, supported the views of Eisenhower and Gruenther. Wedemeyer congratulated the president for his restraint during the Dien Bien Phu crisis, agreeing that native forces should be responsible for any combat in Vietnam because of Asian resentment against any western presence. Yet, both the NSC and a special presidential committee on Indochina weighed in on the side of intervention. General Graves Erskine, chair of Eisenhower's committee, found it imperative that "the Western position in Indo-China . . . be maintained and improved by a military victory," even if, the Security Council added, the war expanded beyond the Indochinese theater.36

Ridgway again dampened such enthusiasm for
intervention. He pointed out that the Army would have to commit at least seven divisions to fight in Vietnam, even with air and naval support or the use of atomic weapons. Bolstered by the report of a technical survey team, he added that Vietnam lacked adequate port and bridge facilities, that monsoons would limit military operations, and that the local communications system was too primitive to support an American presence there. Such overwhelming logistics difficulties would thus "preclude effective large-scale, short-duration military operations." Even if engineers could build up ports and airfields to handle the influx of U.S. troops, standard Army units were "too ponderous" for combat in Vietnam, a land "particularly adapted to the guerrilla-type war" at which the Vietminh had been so successful. The Army chief stressed, moreover, that the PRC, not Ho and Giap, represented the more viable threat to U.S. interests in Asia. Accordingly, a combat commitment in Vietnam "would constitute a dangerous strategic diversion of limited . . . military capabilities . . . in a non-decisive theater to the attainment of non-decisive local objectives." Ridgway reported such findings to the president in a late May briefing and he believed that "to a man of [Eisenhower's] military experience its implications were immediately clear."37

Ridgway may have been overly optimistic though, because the president, Dulles, Radford, and O'Daniel
continued to look for ways to increase the American stake in Vietnam. The JCS made it clear, however, that intervention at Dien Bien Phu would not be a "'one-shot' affair," but rather a "continuing logistic supply requirement" for America's Far East forces. Any commitment of planes, crews, or supervisors, the chiefs contended, would involve U.S. troops in direct military operations, lead to an increasing demand for reinforcement, raise the risks of American casualties, and increase the likelihood of Chinese intervention. Thus the "real question" attending the debate over Dien Bien Phu was whether the United States would "commence active participation by forces in the Indochina war." By early May 1954 military opponents of intervention clearly held the upper hand. The French garrison at Dien Bien Phu was doomed and U.S. officials were headed to the conference on East-West affairs in Geneva where they would partition Vietnam. Eisenhower could find no allies willing to join in bailing out France, and, except for Radford, the chiefs had rejected all pleas to begin an American version of the Vietnam war.38

Throughout the first months of 1954 the military had coordinated a strong campaign against intervention. Though concerned with the ramifications of Communist success in Vietnam, most officers understood that the political and military environment in both America and Indochina
militated against U.S. prospects in Southeast Asia. General Thomas Trapnell, past MAAG commander, typified the American military dilemma regarding Vietnam. Though an advocate of holding the line against the Vietminh, Trapnell recognized that Ho was the most respected leader in Vietnam, that native resentment of the French was overwhelming, and that Indochinese communism had attracted intellectuals, peasants and urban workers alike. Ho and Giap, moreover, directed an experienced force with about three hundred thousand troops, including one artillery and six infantry divisions, engineers, and numerous support units. The Vietminh, Trapnell added, had developed effective regional militia, possessed a "tremendous capability" for mobility and endurance, and was skilled in political and psychological indoctrination. Believing that time—and U.S. and French public opinion—was on their side, Vietnamese Communists were conducting "a clever war of attrition." Though Trapnell believed that the United States should resist the Left in Asia, he insisted that a "military solution to the war in Indochina is not possible." 39

The Army's assistant chief for planning, General James Gavin, corroborated that assessment in a one-hundred page long report on Vietnam that Ridgway had commissioned. To wage war in Indochina, Gavin found, the United States would have to transfer vast amounts of resources from other
programs in different parts of the world. The Army would also have to extend its terms of service for active personnel, activate reservists, and increase draft calls. Worse, Gavin estimated that American troops would suffer about twenty eight thousand casualties monthly. The services would also need to reopen military bases and increase material production for Indochina, which ran contrary to New Look budget policy. And of course, Gavin reminded his superiors, the Vietminh remained a formidable military force.\textsuperscript{40}

Even into mid-1954, Eisenhower, although he had rejected intervention at Dien Bien Phu, and Dulles still sought collective action to stem the Communist advance in Vietnam and they did not dismiss a combat role there. The JCS again moved to scotch any plans for intervention, limited or otherwise. Any involvement, the chiefs explained, "would continue and expand considerably even though initial efforts were indecisive. This would ultimately require participation of additional U.S. naval and air forces and extensive ground forces to prevent the loss of Indochina." The JCS also rejected an offer by Syngman Rhee to send troops to Vietnam. South Korean involvement would, "in effect, constitute U.S. intervention," by proxy, which was a steep price to pay to save a country "devoid" of vital resources and in an area that was "not a decisive theater" in Asia. Defense
Secretary Charles Wilson, presumably putting forth the JCS's views, argued that the most desirable course of action in Vietnam was to "get completely out of the area. The chances of saving any part of Southeast Asia were . . . nothing." Gavin was more succinct as he echoed General Omar Bradley's analysis of Korea in asserting that an American military commitment to Vietnam "involves the risk of embroiling the U.S. in [the] wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time."41

Such views held sway in 1954. U.S. forces did not intervene in Indochina, although neither did the United States dissociate itself from Vietnamese affairs. To the contrary, American political leaders immediately began to assume the French role in Vietnam while military leaders continued to question the wisdom of U.S. policy. Specifically they had doubts about getting involved while political conditions in southern Vietnam were still unstable, about sending a U.S. military training mission to Vietnam, and about involving the United States in a collective security arrangement for Southeast Asia. So far as the first reservation was concerned, the U.S. military wanted no part in a military adventure in Indochina because of the constant political turmoil in Saigon associated with Bao Dai and then Ngo Dinh Diem. Prior to the Geneva armistice that partitioned Vietnam along its seventeenth parallel and provided for timely elections to unify the
country, the JCS conceded that any settlement of the French-Vietnamese conflict that was "based upon free elections would be attended by the almost certain loss of [Indochina] to Communist control." 42

Even supporters of Bao Dai and Diem recognized the inherent weaknesses in their regimes. Colonel Edward Lansdale, head of an intelligence mission to Saigon in 1954-1955, conceded that prospects for a stable, pro-American government were "gloomy" in Vietnam. The Vietminh, following Mao's axiom that guerrillas needed grassroots support like fish needed water, had "exemplary relations" with the villagers. In contrast, southern soldiers had become "adept at cowing a population into feeding them [and] providing them with girls." An Army study further detailed the troubled political situation in the south. Although American officials had envisaged an internal security force of 89,000 soldiers to maintain stability below the seventeenth parallel, its development and potential for success remained in question. In contrast, the Vietminh could count on about 340,000 soldiers, with about one-fourth of those active below the partition line. 43

By late 1954, it was clear to the JCS that Vietnam's internal political situation was "chaotic" and that Diem's government could not guarantee the loyalty of its military forces. Without native support and sacrifice, the chiefs
warned, "no amount of external pressure and assistance can long delay complete Communist victory in South Vietnam." The military's analysis of Vietnamese politics thus pointed out that government stability was a prerequisite to military credibility. It also made clear that the second Indochina war had deep indigenous roots indeed.44

General J. Lawton Collins, sent to Vietnam as Eisenhower's special representative in December 1954, also understood that internal turmoil, not outside aggression, was destroying southern Vietnam. Collins was appalled by Diem's authoritarian ways and failure to challenge the various sects involved in southern politics and economy and he recognized as well that the Vietminh "have and will retain the capability to overrun Free Vietnam if they wish." He even suggested that U.S. withdrawal, although the "least desirable" option, "may be the only sound solution."45 Diem, however, rescued his position in April 1955 by successfully beating back the sects's challenge to his leadership, at which point Eisenhower and Dulles decided to stick with him over the long haul. It was, as David Anderson asserts, the "point of no return" for America in Vietnam. By October 1955, when Diem won election as president with more votes cast than names on the rolls, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was officially established and the United States was heading toward war in Vietnam.46
The military had also long been critical of plans to establish a training mission in Indochina. As Dien Bien Phu fell Ridgway scored plans for such a program because American trainers would be in the "invidious position" of bearing responsibility for inevitable failures over which they had no control. Ridgway also established preconditions for the development of any training mission, including full independence for the states of Indochina, American control over indigenous forces, and political stability in southern Vietnam. Without political stability, the JCS cautioned, it was "hopeless to expect a U.S. military mission to achieve success." Communist troops were "laying the groundwork for a strong, armed dissident movement" in the south and it would be dangerous to put American trainers in the middle of an imminent "civil war," concluded Gavin and General Paul Adams, and might well provoke greater intervention by the Soviets and the Chinese.

The JCS additionally estimated that training could cost about $440 million, which would push the total U.S. bill in Indochina for 1954 to over $1 billion. Because of that financial burden, and the continuing "unstable political situation," the chiefs contended that military support of Vietnam "should be accomplished at low priority and not at the expense of other U.S. military programs and should not . . . impair the development of effective and reliable allied forces elsewhere." "It may be several
years," the chiefs presciently, and optimistically, observed, "before an effective military force [in the RVN] will exist." Dulles, however, found the JCS's cost estimates "excessive" and attacked its tentative approach to the training issue. Ultimately, then, the chiefs acquiesced to a training mission because "political considerations are overriding." As Gavin later recalled, "we in the Army were so relieved that we had blocked the decision to commit ground troops to Vietnam that we were in no mood to quibble" over training." It is not likely that the military could have done otherwise.

Similarly, the armed services would not wage a political battle over U.S. participation in a collective security arrangement for Southeast Asia. The JCS was responsive to plans for collective action against communism in that region but held "serious misgivings" that they might "imply commitments which the United States would not be able to meet." Accordingly, the chiefs insisted that any treaty to which the United States was a party make no commitment to raise, equip, or maintain indigenous armies, nor agree to deploy U.S. forces to defend the national territories of other signatories. The JCS also balked when Dulles proposed that a coalition of nations protect Vietnam in the event of external aggression, while training the Vietnamese to maintain internal security. Thus the military held its ground when Thailand and the Philippines
sought a U.S. commitment for the defense of other member nations. 50

The final pact establishing the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization reflected such concerns. Admiral Davis, a Pentagon representative at the inaugural conference, found the "consultative" U.S. role outlined in the pact "consistent in its military implications with [JCS] positions." U.S. political and military leaders had thus sent mixed signals regarding their interests in Asia. The secretary of state, as the Pentagon Papers authors observed, wanted to "put the communists on notice that aggression would be opposed"; the JCS on the other hand "insisted that the United States must not be committed financially, militarily, or economically" to intervention in Southeast Asia. Despite Dulles's bellicose rhetoric, the final treaty manifested the military's reservations regarding collective action more than it did any American desire to roll back communism in Asia. 51

Rather than simply execute American policy in Indochina, the JCS, the army, and various officers staged an offensive of their own against intervention. Without the military's forceful and consistent opposition throughout the early 1950s, U.S. entry into the war in Vietnam might well have occurred a decade earlier. The armed forces's ever-pessimistic outlook and cautious
approach to any involvement in Vietnam, along with the
White House's failure to enlist other nations for a
campaign in Indochina, effectively dashed any plans to
intervene. Thus when he wrote his memoirs in 1956 General
Ridgway would express his pride in poignant yet ultimately
empty words: "[W]hen the day comes for me to face my Maker
and account for my actions, the thing I would be most
humbly proud of was the fact that I fought against, and
perhaps contributed to preventing, the carrying out of some
hare-brained tactical schemes which would have cost the
lives of thousands of men. To that list of tragic
accidents that fortunately never happened I would add the
Indo-China intervention."

While other scholars have correctly cited British
reluctance and Franco-American difficulties in the American
decision against war in Vietnam, it seems that the
military's opposition was crucial as well. Even if the
president did not explicitly credit Ridgway and his
associates with the decision against intervention, it is
clear that Eisenhower and the brass thought similarly about
Indochina, at least in early 1954. As the president later
explained, "a proper political foundation for a military
action was essential. Since we could not bring it about
. . . I gave not even a tentative approval" to entering the
war. "This war in Indochina," he added, "would absorb our
troops by the division." Of course, the military had been
sounding such themes since the end of the Second World War and, as Richard Immerman has observed, the decision against intervention was consistent with Eisenhower's military background and his concept of national security. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the military's dissent did not influence the president. From mid-1954 onward, however, Eisenhower and his successors ignored or dismissed virtually every reservation concerning Vietnam that the military had put forth, with tragic yet--as Ridgway understood--predictable consequences. Indeed, as General Gavin observed, by 1954 Vietnam was already becoming a "swamp-ridden jungle Moloch with an insatiable appetite for aircraft, arms, and other military supplies."  

The military's rebuff to intervention was short-lived. It had gained only pyrrhic victories. In the end American service leaders did not determine policy, but repeatedly had to adapt their views to suit political imperatives. Though military leaders tried to damper political advocacy of intervention in Vietnam, they routinely had to acquiesce to civilian policies, which the officers would subsequently attempt to temper again. Thus the military became caught in a cycle of conducting rearguard actions to stave off greater commitments to Vietnam. Faced with a series of faits accomplis, the service leaders could do little else. By the early 1960s new generals had assumed control of the
military establishment and, guided by the new political environment, accepted greater responsibilities in Vietnam.

Nonetheless the military had sounded a prescient warning on Vietnam, and had indicted the national security state as envisioned in NSC 68 as well. To officers in the early 1950s North America, Europe, and certain areas in Asia--Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines--all merited greater priority in defense policy considerations than did Southeast Asia. The military moreover stressed that it did not possess the resources or capabilities to become engaged on every front. In its conception of grand strategy, a commitment in Indochina was not a reasonable end given America's limited means. While civilians might wage Cold War at all points on the globe, the military insisted that it fight hot wars only in settings vital to the national interest and under circumstances conducive to success.

Government leaders, however, ignored the military's clear and detailed warnings about the danger of war in Vietnam. They did not rush blindly into Indochina or get mired in a quagmire once there, but simply ignored knowledgeable counsel and consciously expanded their commitment to Vietnam. Indeed the very factors that service leaders of the 1950s cited to argue against intervention--economic constraints, the relatively low priority accorded to Indochina, political instability, the indigenous appeal of the enemy, the perils of jungle
warfare--became even greater barriers to success in the following decade and directly led to U.S. failure in the Vietnam war. There is no irony; the system did not work.54

America's military leaders had different, more limited conceptions of national security than did the civilian foreign policy establishment. Administration officials had a broader, in fact an exaggerated, sense of American capabilities and saw Vietnam as an important theater in the Cold War. As various scholars have shown, U.S. leaders conditioned Indochina policy on the need to maintain French fealty in the NATO and build a new capitalist order in Asia.55 Along those lines taking a stand in Vietnam became unavoidable. Civilian officials thus discounted the service leaders' military advice in the pursuit of more extensive goals. The generals may have acted in what they thought was the national interest, but civilian leaders had a truly internationalist perspective.

With America's political and service leaders approaching Indochina from fundamentally different viewpoints in the early 1950s, the stage was set for the next two decades of destruction and despair in Vietnam. Military leaders, despite their consistent efforts to crush the Communist enemy, retained their reservations about the war and were frequently and irreconcilably divided over the U.S. commitment and strategy in Vietnam. Politics in
Saigon and Washington would determine the nature of the war as much as events on the battlefield. And civil-military relations would progressively deteriorate and accordingly erode the U.S. effort in Vietnam. By the mid-1950s, then, America was trying to both prepare for and avoid war in Vietnam.
CHAPTER III:
PREPARING FOR AND AVOIDING WAR:
MILITARY AFFAIRS AND POLITICS IN VIETNAM AND
THE UNITED STATES, 1955-1960

From the Collins mission and Diem's successful response to the sect crisis in April and May 1955 to the end of the Eisenhower presidency, Vietnam was not a primary concern to U.S. policymakers. They focused their attentions instead on areas of greater importance such as Europe, Japan, China, and the Middle East. Nevertheless, after the Geneva partition of Vietnam, the creation of the SEATO, and the establishment of a U.S. Army training mission to Vietnam, the American commitment to Diem was unmistakable and irrevocable. As a result, America's military leaders began to take a more optimistic approach to affairs in Vietnam, apparently reversing their earlier views about the dangers of war in Indochina.

These appearances were somewhat deceptive, however; the change in military thinking was not as profound as it seems at first glance. To be sure, the new MAAG Commander, General Samuel Williams, was as optimistic and deaf to criticism as his predecessor, O'Daniel, had been. Williams
ignored both Diem's repressive ways and the need to train
the southern Vietnamese army to fight a guerrilla war.
With his acquiescence, Diem organized his army not to fight
the Communist enemy so much as to maintain his own
authority. Other military leaders, however, continued to
debate military policy in Vietnam. Many remained wary of
an expanded American commitment there and virtually all of
them believed that Vietnamese, not American, troops would
have to be responsible for any combat against the Vietminh
or the northern army [the Peoples Army of Vietnam, or
PAVN]. In addition, political developments in the United
States growing out of Eisenhower's New Look defense policy,
especially interservice friction over budget appropriations
and deteriorating civil-military relations, had a
significant impact on Indochina policy and helped lay the
groundwork for the U.S. experience in Vietnam in the
succeeding decade.

The military continued to hold strong misgivings about
Collins's analysis, the JSPC found it "apparent that if the
1956 elections are held, the Communists will probably
emerge victorious." Yet the JCS's planners took a
contradictory view of events in Vietnam. They saw no great
advantage to either intervening or increasing aid to Diem,
but also sought actions against the "military power of the
aggressor," presumably Hanoi or Peking, rather than
"reaction locally at the point of attack." Nonetheless, as Radford put it, the JCS still saw Indochina as just "an important part of Southeast Asia which merits limited U.S. support in the implementation of national policy."4

In early May, the JCS, which did see Diem offering the "greatest promise" of stability, continued to hold reservations about the RVN leader and his army, which could offer no more than "token resistance" to enemy aggression and whose loyalty to Diem was "open to question" in any event. But from such premises, which had been put forth repeatedly since 1950, U.S. service leaders now concluded that the support of an "outside military force," presumably either American or SEATO, would be needed to ensure the RVN's stability and territorial integrity.5 Yet they still assumed that the Vietnamese themselves, not Americans, would be responsible for their own defense, a condition made clear during deliberations over the size of the RVN's army--initially called the Vietnamese National Army [VNA] and later known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN]--and over possible American involvement in military action in Vietnam.

At the same time that the NSC was preparing for combat in Indochina, preferably with SEATO forces "but if necessary alone," military officials in Washington and Saigon were pressing for an expansion of the VNA so that
such U.S. intervention could be avoided. American officials originally had hoped to establish a 100,000 man Vietnamese army in 1955, but it soon became clear that more forces would be needed both to provide internal security and resist outside aggression. In August 1955 the outgoing MAAG chair, O'Daniel, argued that the RVN was "at the critical point in its fight for freedom," and pressed Washington to fund a 50,000 troop increase in Diem's army. Given the Vietminh's organization, capabilities, and size--Ho and Giap now had approximately 367,000 forces, up 26,000 from mid-1954, with their battle corps increased to 250,000 from 147,000--the VNA, O'Daniel estimated, would eventually need about a quarter-million troops to adequately defend the RVN. In addition to such increases, O'Daniel admitted that popular support of the Diem regime was a crucial aspect of any security policy.

In a September analysis of U.S. options in the event of renewed war in Indochina, the JCS expressed similar concerns in greater detail. Although confident of the American military's ability to repel an attack from the DRVN, or even to unify Vietnam under anticommunist rule, the chiefs recognized that any commitment to do so would have to include large elements of naval, air, and ground forces. Given the VNA's problems, however, and the low priority of Vietnam in strategic considerations the JCS incredibly urged nuclear strikes against the Communists.
"If atomic weapons were not used," the chiefs explained, "greater forces than the U.S. would be justified . . . providing would probably be needed."

Such recommendations also reflected division within the military over its approach to Vietnam. The Army and Marines, who would be responsible for any ground combat, believed that an effective response in Vietnam would require an effort comparable to that in Korea, which would be impossible under New Look policy in any event, and thus contended that any successful intervention would depend on the "military energy and solidarity of the Vietnamese" themselves. Air Force planners, on the other hand, maintained that successful intervention would depend on the "swift intervention of U.S. forces" and the use of atomic bombs. Without nuclear weapons, the Air Force believed, Vietnam would be overrun by the Communists "before sufficient U.S. strength could be brought to bear."

That debate over U.S. policy in the Autumn of 1955 was important for two reasons. First, it sent the mixed message that the military was sanguine about its ability to intervene in Vietnam, but also reluctant to commit valuable resources there. Moreover, it revealed that intra-military division over policy was a significant factor in war planning and would continue to be so throughout the U.S. involvement in Indochina. On top of those developments, military officials continued to recognize that Diem had yet
to achieve political stability in the south. A Joint Staff intelligence study in December 1955 pointed out that the RVN leader was "prudently" excluding opposition candidates from upcoming elections and admitted that "Diem has no intention of tolerating an election he cannot win." Even Radford, the RVN's biggest booster among the chiefs, returned from a January 1956 trip to Vietnam and reported a "much worse picture of the situation" there than he had earlier observed. Despite those views, O'Daniel remained optimistic, terming allegations that Diem was a dictator "nonsense," giving a positive appraisal of the VNA's development, and calling for additional U.S. assistance. But his successor, General Williams, arrived in Saigon to find the American effort in shambles. Some officers had spent a year in Vietnam without travelling outside of Saigon, he complained. "You can well imagine," he wrote to a fellow officer, "how little they knew of the problems of the fellows in the field. Many of them could not have cared less."

Given such appraisals, U.S. officials spent the early months of 1956 looking for ways to increase the American role in Vietnam in order to stem the disintegration in the south. As a first step, both diplomatic and military leaders pressed Washington for an increase in the MAAG advisory contingent in Vietnam above the 342 established at Geneva. Without a substantial increase in advisors, the
JCS and others argued, the MAAG could not achieve its training objectives in Vietnam. The State Department agreed with such sentiment but did not want to expressly repudiate the ceiling set at Geneva and thus sought to expand the U.S. presence through extra-legal measures. The result was the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM), an organization of about 350 U.S. military logistics experts and civilian technicians from other SEATO countries.

Military leaders, however, held few illusions that the TERM would solve the myriad problems of Vietnam. Although the Army asked for more than the 350 advisors allocated to the mission, a military officer in the Pentagon’s International Security Affairs (ISA) division discouraged the request, possibly concerned about deepening the American commitment in the RVN. At the same time an Air Force study found the VNA’s leadership in dire shape. Although it had about 65 percent of the officers needed to meet its planned force levels, "the majority are not fully trained or qualified." While about 70 percent of the VNA’s company-grade officers were competent, only 30 percent of field-grade and a mere 10 percent of senior officers could be considered qualified for their positions.

An Army staff study of the VNA corroborated such findings and questioned the loyalty of the officer corps, which was often insubordinate and more concerned with
politics than war. Army officers had to "admit in all sincerity that we do not have all the necessary elements to contain [the enemy] much less defeat him." Nonetheless, the MAAG Chair, General Williams, did little to address such problems, while his predecessor, O'Daniel--retired but still active in matters relating to Vietnam--continued to tell anyone who would listen that Diem was popular and that the VNA's reorganization was going well. Yet O'Daniel also admitted that, with so many southerners swayed by Communist public relations efforts, it would be "suicidal" for Diem to agree to national elections. He thus urged U.S. leaders to maintain a strong presence in Vietnam, "which may be necessary for as much as 25 years."16

Other military officials were not very enthused about such a long-term commitment. Although some remained optimistic about their ability to contain communism in Indochina, various generals continued to assume that the VNA would have to be responsible for any combat. At the same time, General Williams was developing the Vietnamese military along conventional lines despite the guerrilla nature of the war, thereby laying the groundwork for interservice feuds over the U.S. strategy in Vietnam that would explode in the mid-1960s when the American commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, and Marine leaders respectively championed the strategies of attrition and pacification.17
Even in the spring and summer of 1956, when the NSC directed the JCS to examine the military's capability to respond to local aggression in Vietnam, the military was split over the nature and extent of any U.S. combat role in Indochina. The JCS chair, Radford, and Admiral Arleigh Burke, the chief of naval operations (CNO), both assumed that the ARVN would successfully take control of all of Vietnam while U.S. participation would be limited to advising and to providing air and naval support. On the other hand, the CINCPAC, Admiral Felix Stump, and the MAAG chair, General Williams, both envisioned a large-scale American commitment with an invasion across the seventeenth parallel likely.18

Such deliberations spoke directly to the issue of the U.S. training, and thus the ARVN, mission. Williams, influenced by Ridgway's aggressive tactics in Korea, anticipated large-scale, conventional ground combat and again argued that the RVN's military force would have to be enlarged. He agreed with established policy that the southern Vietnamese, backed by other Asians, would have to repel Ho and Giap, but added that the Vietminh outnumbered the VNA by a two-to-one ratio and lamented that "large-scale Asiatic support would not appear to be forthcoming." In the event of hostilities, Williams estimated that VNA forces north of Tourane (Da Nang) would "unquestionably be badly mauled" but that if Diem reinforced that area the
Communists would simply bypass it. Ironically, the ever-sanguine MAAG leader provided a laundry list of VNA disadvantages in any war against the Vietminh: Ho and Giap could not be expected to attack without thorough planning and infiltration along protected routes; Vietminh morale would be bolstered by claims that Diem was a "puppet" of "Western colonialists"; the ARVN would find it difficult to establish communications systems to provide contact with field units; and the rainy season would thwart established plans to attack northward via Laos. In effect, then, the VNA's lack of skill and experience put it at an even greater disadvantage that its numerical inferiority. At least two U.S. divisions would be needed to contain the Vietminh, Williams assumed, but the development of a much larger and stronger indigenous ground force remained the key to successful warfare in Vietnam.¹⁹

Questions over the size of the southern army naturally led to considerations of its mission. In late 1954, U.S. leaders had envisioned the VNA's role as simply providing and maintaining security within Vietnam south of the seventeenth parallel.²⁰ The JCS, however, worried that such a "single mission concept" for the VNA would eventually force American troops to assume responsibility for preventing the northern Communists from expanding into the RVN. The U.S. military, for the duration of the war, would not resolve the ensuing dilemma over whether to focus
on local defense in southern Vietnam or to exercise Massive Retaliation against the DRVN. In addition, the military continued to see Vietnam as a peripheral interest, devoid of decisive objectives, yet contemplated using nuclear weapons in Indochina. As a result, American leaders constantly expanded the U.S. mission to cover such ambiguous and seemingly contradictory planning concepts. SEATO responsibilities, the French withdrawal, and Diem’s constant pressure also served to enlarge the U.S. role in Indochina, while in the pentagon military planners were using the example of Korea—a huge conventional war—to prepare for combat in Vietnam.21

Such factors led the MAAG to create the Vietnamese armed forces in the image of the U.S. Army, with an emphasis on superior technology and weaponry and a corresponding neglect of paramilitary and counterinsurgency (CI) capabilities. U.S. planners expected the ARVN to have a principally defensive mission, delaying external aggression until outside, presumably U.S., forces intervened.22 At the same time the MAAG commander essentially ignored any training for pacification. He assumed that internal conflicts would be handled by the Vietnamese Civil Guard (CG), national police to be trained by the CIA and advisors from Michigan State University. As Williams saw it, instruction in counterinsurgency would divert the ARVN from its more important conventional
duties. "A division on pacification goes to pieces fast," Williams believed. As guerrillas went underground the ARVN troops would "start sitting around . . . and go to pot."23

Despite such planning for conventional warfare, other military officials were not prepared to give Williams carte blanche to build up the ARVN. In May 1956, Admiral Stump forwarded Williams's request to expand the Vietnamese army to 170,000 soldiers with his "non-concurrence," while Radford, meeting with Diem in July, gave "no encouragement whatever" to his overtures for a troop increase. Into September, in fact, CINCPAC and JCS representatives were more concerned about reducing the size of the ARVN than adding 20,000 forces to it.24 Caught between the political commitment to ensure an anticommunist southern state in Vietnam and New Look restrictions on U.S. involvement, the military simultaneously prepared for a huge conventional war in Indochina, assumed that indigenous armies would be responsible for combat, and then rejected attempts to build up the ARVN to accomplish a task that was beyond its capabilities in any case. With such incoherent planning, the failures of 1975 should have been anticipated two decades earlier.

In truth, the JCS did have a sense of the dilemmas it could face in Vietnam. Surely, military leaders remembered how Collins and Ridgway, among others, had fought against intervention in the early 1950s. So when NSC 5612 claimed
that the loss of Southeast Asia would "destroy" the balance-of-power in Asia, the chiefs rejected such alarmist language, instead expecting "adverse" consequences to U.S. security in that area. The original grandiose statement, the JCS argued, improperly implied that the United States could or should establish an "equipoise of power in Asia." 25

From Hawaii the CINCPAC staff rejected proposals to create a training academy for SEATO military officers. They believed that a training school could not succeed "because of [the] current lack of indigenous capability, traditional Asian jealousies and over-all tendency of Southeast Asians to avoid interdependence on one another." 26 Surely, the military did recognize the barriers to developing efficient Vietnamese forces and the difficulty of conditioning events in that region along favorable lines. Thus in late 1956 the JCS again rejected State Department proposals to earmark U.S. forces for Southeast Asia as done with NATO. The chiefs insisted that U.S. leaders should not develop strategic planning with SEATO signatories, but only discuss methods of providing support "without making a specific commitment of forces." 27

From Saigon, the MAAG too reflected such an ambivalent view of the war. Although satisfied with the American effort and convinced of the need to maintain forces in Vietnam, MAAG officials also understood that "extreme
nationalism and anti-Western feeling can not be far below the surface." Maintaining a large number of U.S. forces was thus "a potential source of offense to Vietnamese sensibilities." Accordingly, the U.S. presence should be limited to "absolute needs" while "discretion and circumspect behavior is a must." Despite apparent stability, even Williams hoped to "resist pressure to increase American personnel" in Vietnam, in part by employing "non-American contract employees" instead of U.S. nationals where possible.28

Again O'Daniel offered contrast, if not comic relief, to the military's cautious views. During an Autumn 1956 visit to Vietnam, the past MAAG chief incredibly found the RVN "entirely pacified and secure," even though its forces lacked proper equipment and were "relatively small and woefully weak," had been "inadequately trained for modern war," and were "particularly weak in their command structure and in technical know-how."29 With such reports, it seems, Williams was trying to win support in Washington for additional resources. Similarly, just months later, Admiral Stump cited such "discouraging changes" in Vietnam as Vietminh expansion to 275,000 regular troops, organized in 18 divisions, increased Communist infiltration, and DRVN neutralization of Laos and Cambodia and he, too, asked Dulles to augment the MAAG beyond the 342 advisors and additional TERM personnel then
in the RVN.\textsuperscript{30}

Pessimism or political manipulation aside, U.S. and Vietnamese leaders still assumed that the ARVN would have to carry the burden of a ground war. Even Diem's brother and counselor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, meeting with American diplomatic and military officials in April 1957, understood that "it would not be desirable . . . to send American troops into Viet-Nam since this would be, after all, a civil war."\textsuperscript{31} Accordingly, Diem again asked for authorization to increase his army to 170,000 troops in order to meet the Communist challenge. And again American leaders, worried that such a military build-up would deflect attention from the need to create a viable economy and social structure in the RVN, rejected his pleas.\textsuperscript{32}

Although the debate over the size of the ARVN and of the U.S. advisory group in Vietnam seemed to focus on budgetary constraints, Vietminh capabilities, and Vietnamese economic development, the unarticulated factor behind the Ngos's requests for more troops was the desire to strengthen their grip on the political process in the RVN. Diem's and Nhu's repressive ways are so well known that they need no discussion here.\textsuperscript{33} Maintaining a large and loyal military was essential to Diem's plans to retain power. Indeed, the RVN's alarmist reports about Ho's designs on the south had little credibility, but gave Nhu and Diem a justification for seeking more U.S. support.
General Tran Van Don, an aide to the RVN leader, admitted to General Alonzo Fox, a Pentagon military advisor, that the RVN had no evidence of any Vietminh build-up or plans to attack across the seventeenth parallel. Don additionally noted that both the PRC and the Soviet Union gave limited aid to the DRVN, and that the RVN's intelligence apparatus, not coincidentally dominated by minority Catholics loyal to the Ngos, was deeply troubled.34

The MAAG pointed out, however, that the Vietminh continued to "constitute a serious internal security problem" for Diem's government in mid-1957, especially in Saigon and other southern RVN areas.35 At the same time, Admiral Stump, General Williams, and U.S. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow met with Diem and suspected that he might be exaggerating the Vietnam's internal, "terrorist," threat so as to preempt any U.S. aid reduction and to bolster his plans to raise another 20,000 more troops for the ARVN.36 By October, Durbrow and Williams understood that Diem would not enact any of the agricultural or economic reforms that were needed to provide stability in the south. Facing the prospect of American aid cuts, they believed, Diem had most likely decided that he needed a strong, loyal military machine to maintain his rule.37 According to Ronald Spector, Williams was less critical of Diem than Durbrow, but there is little doubt that the Army, Navy and Air Force
attaches shared the ambassador's view. Williams, Spector observes, believed that the U.S. team in Saigon should avoid such criticism of Diem in order to maintain his cooperation and confidence. And the MAAG chair, as always, maintained that Diem was properly focusing his attention and resources on military planning over economic development.

By late 1957, it is clear, U.S. policy in Vietnam had assumed the characteristics that would continue for the duration of the American experience there. Despite their increasing awareness of Diem's repression, the ARVN's weaknesses, the Vietminh's strengths, and politico-military constraints at home, U.S. service leaders kept insisting that they could build a credible military establishment in the south and contain communism in Vietnam. The authors of *Pentagon Papers* would later refer to this as the non sequitur approach to military policymaking. From the mid-1950s onward, the military would time and again report on the myriad obstacles to progress in Vietnam, yet would always conclude that success would be achieved. Although Williams, other officers, and many scholars who write about these years stress the U.S. military's optimism about its future in Vietnam, the truth is that many American service leaders had realistically evaluated the shortcomings of the RVN and did not feel compelled to intervene in combat there during the Eisenhower administration.
Indeed, by mid-1958 MAAG intelligence was estimating that Ho and Giap could now rely on about 270,000 regular troops and 235,000 paramilitary forces, which would gain the military initiative at the outset of any conflict and could effectively conduct both conventional and "subversive" operations in the south. Meanwhile, the JCS, in response to a Navy proposal to establish a military mission to Southeast Asia, rejected expanding the American commitment to Diem due to "world-wide military personnel limitations and the uncertainly as to when a military mission might be required." Likewise, as Ridgway later noted, the Army in the 1950s had so many obligations--in NATO, SEATO, and other pacts--that it could never have fulfilled them all. Making matters worse, intelligence operatives in the Pacific Command reported that the RVN's Self-Defense Corps (SDC) and CG were not combat-effective even though they were supposed to maintain internal security and were subsidized with over $6 million annually. The paramilitary units were unable to free the ARVN for combat and, in the *Pentagon Papers* analysts' words, were "confusingly organized, inadequately equipped, poorly trained, and badly led--even when compared with ARVN." Such critical evaluations were not coincidental, for the MAAG had virtually ignored counterinsurgency in its training activities. MAAG reports from 1955 to 1959 were essentially silent on the issue of pacification. In fact,
in March 1959 MAAG officers complained that the ARVN was diverting troops and equipment to pacification and security missions—presumably to satisfy Diem's and Nhu's political objectives—to the detriment of "formal training programs." And although those programs did little to train paramilitary units, the MAAG expected the CG to "eventually assume complete responsibility for the internal security of the nation."43

As Williams was preparing the ARVN to counter and reverse any encroachment by Hanoi, Eisenhower appointed a special committee, headed by retired General William Draper, to evaluate U.S. foreign aid programs. The subcommittee on Southeast Asia, chaired by former National Security Advisor Dillon Anderson and including General Collins and Colonel Lansdale, urged limited U.S. objectives and roles in that area. U.S. military assistance, committee members contended, should contribute to internal security against Communist "subversion" and support only the "minimal" forces required to meet outside aggression. Thus, the U.S. representatives advocated, in contrast to General Williams, training and equipping the CG and other paramilitary forces to eventually replace ARVN units in internal security tasks.44

The proposed budget for Fiscal Year 1960, however, included reductions in aid to Vietnam which Collins and Durbrow feared would kill efforts to improve the CG.
General Collins, whose views on Diem and the ineffectiveness of the ARVN had not changed much from 1955, questioned the need for Saigon to maintain 150,000 troops. Such a force, he claimed, would drain resources needed for economic development. A smaller force would protect such programs without diminishing security, as the ARVN was not capable of waging war against the north anyway.

Eisenhower, however, again stood by Diem despite the general's charges. As Dillon Anderson, whose own analysis was similar to Collins's, reported, the president was determined to continue his support of the RVN, but also had no intention of intervening in combat there: "[H]e wasn't going to do it. Either there or anywhere else on the continent of Asia."45

Eisenhower's sentiment was certainly appropriate, for the military was not offering a rosy view of U.S. prospects in that area. General Ridgway--the administration's foremost public critic--reminded the media that any war in Indochina would have to be fought in rugged terrain where "air power in a combat role would be almost useless."46

In a mid-1959 evaluation of U.S. policy in the Far East, the JCS recognized that indigenous problems, not outside, Moscow-directed subversion, were fueling discontent in Asia. Even non-Communist areas on that continent were "characterized by inter- and intra-national stresses and strains that almost defy solution by orderly processes."
In those area, including Indochina, nationalism, "fed by residual resentments against European colonialism," inhibited cooperation with the United States. Accordingly, American leaders could not expect their policies to be sympathetically received unless they offered Asians some positive benefit rather than only stressing the negative goal of containing communism. Complicating such problems in Asia, the chiefs understood that America's allies in Europe were more concerned with matters affecting the NATO, and thus offered little support to the United States in Southeast Asia.⁴⁷

Circumstances inside Asia were none too favorable either. In a November 1959 summary of the situation in Vietnam, the MAAG reported that the ARVN had made little or no progress in addressing its problems over the past five years. Included in the MAAG list of ARVN deficiencies was an unclear force structure, especially regarding command and control; a politically-motivated officer corps; inadequate internal security planning due to the "virtually non-existent capabilities" of the CG and SDC; insubordinate and irresponsible behavior at both the field and command levels; and poor logistics and technological services and support. U.S. Marine advisors working with the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) similarly complained about its "defensive psychology," which was "threatening the American effort" to create a credible fighting force. Despite such
concerns, a U.S. Army Command and General Staff College report from mid-1960 proclaimed, apparently in all seriousness, that the ARVN was now ready to "march to Hanoi."48

Such bravado notwithstanding, the JCS admitted that the RVN's armed forces were "inadequately trained and organized." While admitting the failure of its training mission, the U.S. military, which also noted that the security situation in the south had "deteriorated markedly," lamented the ARVN's inability to effectively counter the enemy's guerrilla tactics. Since 1955 the MAAG had prepared the ARVN along conventional, big-unit lines, but in early 1960, as Diem put it, the RVN was engaged in "all-out guerrilla war with the Viet Cong," Diem's derisive term for the Vietminh. Accordingly, the JCS and CINCPAC agreed that CI training for the ARVN was now imperative, but again recognized the dilemmas that Americans faced in trying to build such capabilities in the Vietnamese military. The Army chief of staff, General Lyman Lemnitzer, explained that the International Control Commission (ICC), the agency established at Geneva in 1954 to oversee the armistice, would likely protest any expansion of the U.S. role in Vietnam, but that the disintegrating situation in the south provided an "overriding opposite consideration."49

General Williams offered an even bleaker view of
events in early 1960. A resurgence of enemy activity in Military Region V, south of Saigon, had made the situation "rather tight" there. The VC would attack sharply, draw the ARVN and VNMC into battle, and then "disappear into thin air when they came along." Simultaneously, the insurgents were able to strike CG posts and kidnap some village officials "with apparent ease and at will." In the delta, the ARVN's 32d Regiment was particularly hard-hit, with the enemy killing about thirty troops in a sixty minute fight, destroying several buildings, and capturing a large number of ARVN weapons. "The brazenness of this attack shocked the Vietnamese to the roots," Williams admitted. "[A]nd in that respect," he added, looking for a silver lining, "the attack may have been a good thing." Given such performances by the Vietnamese military, the MAAG commander concluded, it was necessary to "sabotage" Diem's plans to establish a separate force of 10,000 commandos because it would remove what good officers he had from the army.50

In mid-1960 General Lionel McGarr, slated to replace Williams as MAAG chair, also scored Diem's proposals. In a commissioned study of the RVN's military, his deputies concluded that Diem "continues to organize military units outside the aegis, and contrary to the advice, of the U.S. MAAG." Such units, the Command and General Staff College report asserted, were of "questionable value." They
drained the ARVN's "best people" from U.S.-supported units and, still worse, might then require "support, not previously programmed."\textsuperscript{51}

As U.S. leaders deliberated over policy for Vietnam, the internal situation continued to worsen. In August 1960, the intelligence community in Vietnam found the Communists on the offensive, perhaps because long-accumulating grievances against Diem "have been increasingly urgent and articulate." At the same time the number of confirmed enemy in the south continued to rise, and it was clear that the ARVN was unable to deal with either the main-force Viet Cong (VC) units or smaller guerrilla bands.\textsuperscript{52} As a result of these developments, the military finally decided to try to develop a viable counterinsurgency capability within the RVN's armed forces. The new CINCPAC, Admiral Harry Felt, stressed that the MAAG had to train the southern military to maintain local security "on a continuing basis" while simultaneously earning the allegiance of the people via programs to improve their political, economic, and social welfare. American advisors, he claimed, were reorganizing southern forces "so they are not built in the image of U.S. divisions, but are being built to do a job in their own country." Unlike Europe, where general war was possible, Indochina was "an area where brush fire, or limited wars can break out and be fought, can be kept limited by their
political objectives, and so forth, and not necessarily
develop into general war." As Felt put it, the
"maintenance of internal security is not a purely military
job."  

McGarr used similar language to emphasize the need for
CI skills within the ARVN. Defeating the insurgency in the
south, the new MAAG leader argued, "hinges on the
capability of the armed forces to protect the very lives of
the people" from Communist attack. The VC, he said, had
the initiative, and to get it back the RVN had to develop
better intelligence about its foe and create what McGarr
called an "anti-guerrilla guerrilla." The conventionally-
trained ARVN was too inflexible and slow to thwart the
insurgency in the south, McGarr noted, and the MAAG’s
"conventional" thinking was "too often geared to highly
sophisticated weapons systems, complex logistics, stylized
or rigid tactics, and vulnerable lines of
communication."  

McGarr thus recommended an overhaul of the RVN’s armed
forces. Waxing philosophical, he asked his officers to be
"creative" and to develop a new approach to the war which
should synthesize "the usable portions of history, the
closely coordinated military and political concepts of our
enemy, and the application of both conventional and
unconventional warfare." He also urged that the government
transfer the CG out of the Department of Interior, which
was under the Ngos' political control, to the RVN Department of Defense, modify the ARVN's structure to establish clear lines of command and control, and streamline the military's bureaucracy. The MAAG commander, however, did not seem optimistic. VC military success "can happen here--it is our job to prevent it. At present, better use of resources is Vietnam's only readily available solution--and it is at best a marginal one."\textsuperscript{55}

McGarr's frankness offered a stark contrast to his predecessor's reporting on the war in Vietnam. Under Williams, a MAAG official later charged, "there was a tendency to report things optimistically . . . people held back a little bit in reporting anything wrong because they feared that it would reflect on them adversely." More pointedly, a MAAG trainer attending a late 1959 conference of senior advisors was "shocked to hear some advisers reporting on a world I had never seen." Colonel Russell M. Miner, a senior advisor in the northern RVN, admitted, however, that most ARVN units, including those he trained, "couldn't really punch [their] way out of a paper bag." Miner's report, another advisor observed, "blew the lid off" the conference and left Williams "absolutely incensed."\textsuperscript{56}

The MAAG Chair's efforts to present a sanguine view of the war notwithstanding, military officials in Washington were not as enthused about combat as Williams. The CNO,
Arleigh Burke, a strident hawk in the 1960s, believed that neither Eisenhower nor anybody else "had any intention of committing troops to either South Vietnam or Laos." Lemnitzer, the Army chief and later JCS chair, observed that the military always expected to limit its role in Vietnam to military assistance and advisory groups. Military leaders such as Eisenhower and General Douglas MacArthur insisted "that we should not get engaged in a land battle on the continent of Asia." J. Lawton Collins agreed, adding that he did not "know of a single senior commander that [sic] was in favor of fighting on the land mass of Asia." And General Lewis Fields, a Marine representative on the Joint Staff from 1958 to 1960, noted that the JCS "didn't think the United States should get involved in that conflict. It's a morass, it's a swamp." Vietnam, Fields lamented, "just grabs you up and takes so much effort--to accomplish what?"

Despite such sentiments, American leaders turned Vietnam into a symbol of the Cold War and progressively increased the U.S. stake there. Although military leaders in Saigon and Washington presented an ambivalent view of their prospects in Indochina, American aid continued to flow to a country that was led by the authoritarian Ngo family and that had an ill-prepared army without a credible mission. Although American leaders saw problems with the RVN, 78 percent of U.S. aid to Diem from 1956 to 1960 went
into the military budget, while only 2 percent was allocated to health, housing, and welfare programs.\textsuperscript{61}

Though claiming to want to avoid American intervention in Indochina, U.S. leaders, by feeding Diem's and Nhu's addiction to power, guns, and money, made it inevitable. As the Ngos received more resources from the United States they became even more arbitrary and authoritarian and, in turn, unpopular. Ultimately, American "advisors" would enter Vietnam to prop them up. Despite reports from Saigon that stressed the confusion and contradiction inherent in the American policy in Vietnam, military and political leaders never advocated the type of "agonizing reappraisal" that might have led to a different policy. U.S. military officials consistently recognized the enemy's strength as an indigenous force in the south, the fatal weaknesses of Diem and the ARVN, and the questionable priority of Indochina in national security considerations, yet they continued to accentuate whatever positive characteristics they could detect or invent in the RVN. By late 1960, when McGarr presented his bleak report on Vietnam and decided to emphasize counterinsurgency, John Kennedy of Massachusetts was awaiting inauguration as president, and the American role in Vietnam was about to expand markedly.

Kennedy's ascendancy is thus a fitting segue not only to a consideration of his policies in Vietnam, but also of the political developments that helped propel him into the
White House and that gave him material for the script he would write on Vietnam. Although not stressed in studies of Vietnam in the late 1950s, political events at home played a major role in defining the eventual U.S. commitment to Indochina. In particular, budget battles emanating from the New Look, interservice rivalries, and political debates over the theory of limited war created the conditions under which American would enter combat in Vietnam, against Ho’s Communists and, given the military’s internal disagreements, seemingly against itself.

Throughout the Eisenhower years, the JCS and White House engaged in a virulent and eventually public debate over defense policy and spending. At the same time, the military services fought among themselves over both the limited resources available in New Look budgets and the type of military strategy that would best serve the interests of their respective branches. Ironically, the results of those battles, including increased defense spending, a reassertive military in the 1960s, and the military doctrine of Flexible Response, laid the groundwork for both war in Vietnam and for subsequent military criticism of that very war. The Army feared for its institutional integrity, if not existence, under the Massive Retaliation doctrine, under which the Air Force’s capability to deliver nuclear weapons had the first priority in defense considerations. Because of that and
the shrinking budgets of the 1950s, it pressed for a flexible defense capability to wage "limited" or non-nuclear war, principally in the Third World. The Army's alternative strategy, which Army Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor called "Flexible Response," caught Kennedy's attention and facilitated his intervention into Vietnam. It also led, however, to virulent division between the services over the military strategy that the Army, which dominated the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) during the war, would pursue.

In similar fashion, the budget battles and political ill will between the civilian and military leadership, and between the services themselves, prompted American generals to overcome their misgivings about war in Vietnam in order to reassert their institutional importance and lay claim to greater allocations and more influence in national security policymaking. Having felt Eisenhower's wrath in the 1950s, the military came to see intervention in Vietnam as a way to maintain its institutional power vis-a-vis U.S. political leaders, as well as a means to expand the mission of the respective services.62

The military's feud with Dwight Eisenhower and his Defense Secretary, Charles Wilson, has been well-documented and does not require a detailed elaboration here.63 To Eisenhower, America's huge advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear weapons served as an effective deterrent to
Communist aggression. With an expanded Air Force capable of delivering atomic bombs, the other services were placed in the background as Eisenhower proposed deep cuts in conventional forces, especially in the Army. The president thus merged his goals of containing communism and balancing the U.S. budget into the New Look, which promised not only security but economy.

From the start, however, the military was not enthused about Eisenhower's plans. The Army and Navy resented the Air Force's ascendancy (it would receive 46 percent of defense appropriations between 1952 and 1960), the military in general complained of diminishing appropriations, and military leaders, as Maxwell Taylor explained, feared that the president was turning the JCS into an essentially political body loyal to him. Although Taylor's lament was disingenuous--the military had always been involved in politics--the 1950s did mark a transitionary phase in military affairs. Civil-military relations, strained in the late 1940s during the controversy over defense unification and in 1951 when Douglas MacArthur was fired, became even more politicized and difficult in the later 1950s. By the end of the Eisenhower presidency, some of America's best-known Army leaders--including Ridgway, Gavin, and Taylor--had publicly broken with the administration's defense policies, leading the president to complain that the military's behavior bordered on
The Army especially challenged Eisenhower’s conception of national security. Ridgway, the chief of staff from 1953-1955, balked when appropriations for his service dropped from $16 to $9 billion and when ordered to reduce troop strength from 1.5 to 1 million by Fiscal Year 1956. Such dramatic cuts, the general complained, "would so weaken the Army that it could no longer carry out its missions." Defense Secretary Wilson nonetheless ordered the Army staff to make the reductions and adjust to the New Look’s budget realities. Ridgway in turn retired after just two years as chief and blasted the president’s defense policy in a highly publicized memo to Wilson. More pointedly, a senior officer retiring at the same time told Ridgway he was "convinced that if present trends continue the Army will soon become a service support agency for the other armed services." Ridgway’s successor, Maxwell Taylor, and other officers shared his fears that the military in general, and the Army particularly, were ill-prepared to ensure the national security. In 1956 General Gavin, head of Army research and development and charged with developing an anti-ballistic missile defense system, the Redstone, complained that the Navy and Air Force had forced their less successful missile programs on the Pentagon to the detriment of Army efforts. Before a congressional
committee the general also scored the New Look and feared that the use of atomic weapons would have "catastrophic effects." In response, Undersecretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr. charged that Gavin's testimony had "made the orderly conduct of our foreign relations almost impossible."

Taylor not only supported Gavin but developed a specific program to remedy the Army's situation. The result of his work, the doctrine of Flexible Response, would attract Kennedy's attention and help lead America into the Vietnam War. Taylor's "National Military Program" turned New Look security policy on its head. Rather than rely on ponderous units backed by massive firepower, the general urged the develop of smaller and more mobile groups that could fight against Soviet-supported insurgencies in the Third World. Taylor's analysis thus had a double advantage for him and the Army. It correctly anticipated that the superpowers would compete in the developing countries--not against each other directly--in the 1960s, thereby gaining notice from U.S. policymakers. And it gave his service the primary role in defense policy formulations. In the 1950s, as Lt. Colonel A.J. Bacevich explained, Army soldiers had "lamented a perceived loss of status and esteem in the eyes of their countrymen"; the Army was represented by Beetle Bailey, the Air Force by Steve Canyon. Perhaps a bit paranoid, Army officers feared
becoming little more than an "auxiliary service," to be used for "ceremonial purposes while the Air Force girds its loins to fight our wars." Taylor's plan offered redemption. Having lost the battles over the budget and control of nuclear weapons, the Army could recoup its influence with Flexible Response and counterinsurgency.

Therein, however, also laid the roots of war. The Army, as Ridgway had pointed out during the Dien Bien Phu crisis, was not capable of intervening with its conventional forces in Indochina. Taylor's program, on paper at least, not only made limited wars in Third World environments possible, but also promised success. The Army, as it saw events, had suffered under Eisenhower's budget cuts while the Air Force had gained political and economic primacy. To aspiring politicians like Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, who headed a subcommittee in 1959 to investigate Army complaints about defense policy, Vietnam would became a test case for the new military doctrine.

At the same time, however, the Army would find old habits hard to break. Having been reinvigorated by Kennedy's election (and in some cases rehabilitated: Taylor returned as the president's military advisor and then JCS chair, and Gavin became Ambassador to Paris), the Army still was not terribly eager to fight in Vietnam or to change its mission to emphasize CI. Having gained a
strategic victory in battle on the Potomac, the Army did not hunger for war on the Mekong, or for an overhaul of its traditional approach to combat. Thus it was virtually the exact type of Army that fought in Vietnam as had in Korea a decade earlier, limited war theory notwithstanding.

But the political conditions under which Americans fought had changed markedly. Civil-military relations had been badly strained in the years between World War II and Vietnam. Political and service leaders would henceforth view each other warily and, during the Vietnam War, would develop policy with politics as well as military needs in mind. The services, mindful of the feuds over budgets and mission in the 1950s, would be vigilant in securing and protecting resources and influence for their respective branches. As a result, U.S. soldiers in Vietnam entered a war to defend an unworthy regime, which they were unlikely to win, with distrustful politicians and generals leading them, and without any coherent strategy for success.
CHAPTER IV

PINNING DOWN THE PRESIDENT:

JFK, THE MILITARY, AND POLITICAL MANEUVERING,

JANUARY-OCTOBER 1961

In 1956 Senator John F. Kennedy saw the Republic of Vietnam as the "cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia." Diem's regime, he also admitted, "is our offspring, we cannot abandon it."1 Four years later, while campaigning for the presidency, Kennedy charged that Dwight Eisenhower had not confronted communism vigorously enough, and he promised a new, activist military program for America, at times invoking Generals Taylor, Ridgway, and Gavin to add credibility to his criticism that Massive Retaliation had not provided security against American enemies.2 Just months later, in his inaugural address, the new commander-in-chief pledged to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty."3

Despite Kennedy's adversarial world view and strident, Cold War rhetoric, many recent studies have cleared him of
responsibility for the U.S. commitment to and subsequent aggression in Vietnam. Filmmaker Oliver Stone, historian John Newman, and former C.I.A. operative Fletcher Prouty, among others, have contended that the young president had decided by late 1963 to quit Vietnam, reverse the Cold War, and challenge the political power of the military-industrial-intelligence complex at home. Amid such pacifism, a militaristic cabal led by the JCS and the CIA decided to do away with Kennedy and go to war in Vietnam.4

Although such revisionism can be lucrative, it is wrong. Between January 1961 and November 1963 John Kennedy daily confronted a growing crisis in Vietnam and increasingly staked U.S. credibility and treasure there. Where about 2000 military advisors had been deployed by late 1961, over 16,000 were stationed in Vietnam at the time of the president’s assassination. Where Eisenhower had given the MAAG a principally training mission, Kennedy began a war of aggression, complete with air power, helicopters, napalm, crop destruction, and defoliation.5 And where Indochina had once been a "peripheral" interest, Kennedy made it the centerpiece of the Cold War, the place where American would draw the line against world communism.

Without question, Kennedy had planted, then fertilized, the seeds of disaster in Vietnam during his one thousand days in the White House.

Although Kennedy’s responsibility for war in Vietnam
is clear, the military’s role in intervention is less so. Its response to White House policy on Vietnam from 1961 to 1963 was variously ambivalent, critical, or even inchoate. Clearly U.S. military leaders did not respond to the prospects of intervention as Ridgway, Collins, Gavin, and others had a decade earlier. But neither did they behave according to the hawkish caricature that many liberal critics have developed over the years. In fact, military leaders in Washington and Saigon recognized the perilous situation in Vietnam, were never eager for combat, understood the politico-military obstacles to success, and were aware of the domestic political implications of warfare in Indochina. Yet, within two-and-a-half years, they had overcome their reluctance to intervene and had begun to pursue a military solution in Vietnam. At the same time, service leaders recognized that U.S. prospects in Vietnam were uncertain and that an American combat role could not ensure success. By November 1963, then, the U.S. military--in concert with Kennedy’s political objectives--was involved in a war in Vietnam which would serve neither U.S. nor Vietnamese interests.

Kennedy’s intervention in Vietnam was affected by a crisis half a world away. Less than one hundred days into his presidency, he sanctioned at attack against Fidel Castro’s revolutionary government in Cuba by U.S.-trained,
Miami-based Cuban terrorists. Castro's army routed the invaders at the Bay of Pigs and Kennedy, despite what the Cuban emigres thought he had promised, failed to provide air or naval support to the anti-Castro forces. The Cuban government had barely subdued the attack when recriminations for the fiasco began to fly around Washington, especially between the White House and the military. The president was most disappointed with the JCS, which, he believed, had only cursorily reviewed the Bay of Pigs plans and had not forthrightly expressed its serious reservations about them. The military, Kennedy feared, would try to blame him for their failure. "I hope you kept a full account of that," the president told his advisor and biographer Arthur Schlesinger after the Bay of Pigs affair, "you can be damn sure that the CIA has its record and the Joint Chiefs theirs. We'd better make sure we have a record over here."8

Kennedy, who feared that his interests were not being adequately represented in military decisions, accordingly brought Maxwell Taylor out of retirement to head a commission to investigate the Cuban affair. The subsequent findings were just what the president wanted. The chiefs, Taylor reported, had given the White House the impression that they favored the assault and expected success, thereby prompting Kennedy to initiate the attack against Cuba.9 Taylor had thus given Kennedy a credible reason to blame
the holdover brass from the Eisenhower era for his problems. "My God," he lamented, "the bunch of advisers we inherited." After the Bay of Pigs, Schlesinger added, the president saw the JCS, and CIA, as "soft spots" in his administration and "would never be overawed by professional military advice again." The chiefs too resented the political aftermath of the Cuban debacle. Of all the civilian and military officials involved in the planning for Cuba, none was as critical as Marine Commandant David Shoup, who explained later that once Kennedy had decided to invade the island, the chiefs "were just trying to help him do what . . . had been approved by giving people, material, training help, and God knows what else." There was "complete unanimity" among military people, he added, that the plan "had one very poor chance of success."

Taylor's report on civil-military relations—which urged "direct and unfiltered" military advice to the president—thus angered the JCS. To the chiefs Taylor was now an "outsider" who was exploiting the Bay of Pigs situation to promote his own views on strategy, especially Flexible Response, to the president and was scapegoating the armed forces in the process. From that point on Taylor was Kennedy's most trusted military advisor and, in October 1962, became the new JCS chair. The general's reemergence notwithstanding, the president's relations with the military would remain strained after the events of April
and May 1961. As Taylor himself admitted, "this unhappiness with the Chiefs hung like a cloud over their relations with the President after the Bay of Pigs episode."\textsuperscript{12}

Such deteriorating civil-military relations would thereafter be a principal factor in developing policy for Vietnam. From the outset of the Kennedy presidency, through the 1968 Tet Offensive which ended any American hopes of success in the war, the White House and armed services would always approach Vietnam with an emphasis on politics at home as well as military needs on the battlefield. Military leaders, who had done battle against Eisenhower over the New Look and defense budgets just a few years earlier, had initially looked with favor upon Kennedy, who had run as the consummate Cold Warrior in 1960. But after the Bay of Pigs and the Taylor report, they would find it more difficult to trust the president. Service officials, who recognized the obstacles to success in Vietnam and the political imperatives driving Kennedy’s policy there, would follow the president’s aggressive lead on Indochina policy, despite their reservations. In fact, the military took the president at his word with regard to Vietnam so, while Kennedy sought to achieve victory against Ho’s Communists while keeping U.S. costs down, the military, more wary of political leaders than ever, would seek an expanded war in order to make the president
accountable for his commitment to Vietnam.

The Bay of Pigs and its aftermath not only helped to condition the military's response to Vietnam, but put added pressure on the White House for a foreign policy success as well. After the failure to oust Castro, as George McT. Kahin points out, Kennedy had been "hoist with the petard of his own campaign charges" that the Eisenhower administration was soft on communism. So he had to take a stand elsewhere. Walt Whitman Rostow, the president's advisor on national security issues, likewise told Secretary of Defense Robert Strange McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk that "clean-cut success in Vietnam" might ease the political tension created by the Bay of Pigs failure. From Saigon, the MAAG chief, General McGarr, also noted the White House's "strong determination" to stop the "present deterioration [of] US prestige" after the events of April 1961. Clearly the Cuban misadventure, along with a political setback in Laos at the same time, made it imperative for the president to justify his Cold War credentials somewhere. Vietnam became the place where Kennedy would make his stand.

As Kennedy assumed office, however, Vietnam was not the principal focus of his foreign policy considerations. If fact, at a 19 January transition meeting, the outgoing president considered Laos, where an American-backed, corrupt government verged on collapse, rather than Vietnam
to be the key to anti-communist success in Southeast Asia. Kennedy first dealt with Vietnam in late January, when he met with his advisors to discuss General Edward Geary Lansdale's recent mission there. Lansdale, the Air Force General with a specialty in psychological warfare who was also a close friend of Diem, had returned from a two-week tour of the RVN with an alarming view of the situation. His report, as Rostow put it, gave the president his first "sense of the danger and urgency of the problem in Vietnam." Both American and Vietnamese intelligence officers, as well as Diem himself, held "grim views" about the VC's strength in the south. As Lansdale saw it, 1961 "promises to be a fateful year for Vietnam," with the RVN able to do "no more than postpone eventual defeat" without a dramatic turnaround in morale and a national mobilization for war. Although prone to hyperbole, the general correctly noted that the people of Vietnam had progressed materially with U.S. support "but are starting to lose the will to protect their liberty." Lansdale was wrong to equate Vietnamese liberty with loyalty to the autocratic Diem junta, but, in an analysis ironically similar to that of radical historian Gabriel Kolko, he understood that the American presence in Vietnam was fundamentally altering the nature of Vietnamese society and culture, a condition that would continue to engender resentment against the U.S. role there in the
During a 28 January meeting to discuss Cuba and Indochina, Lansdale and others stressed the need for immediate action to stem the Communist insurgency in southern Vietnam. The DRVN, under pressure from its southern cadre to intensify the war against Diem, had just approved the establishment of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in order "to overthrow the dictatorial . . . Diem clique, lackeys of the U.S. imperialists, to form a . . . coalition government in south Vietnam, to win national independence and . . . to achieve national reunification."

The Lansdale mission and formation of the NLF, as well as Nikita Khrushchev's recent pledge to support "wars of liberation" in the Third World, thus compelled Kennedy to respond, and on 30 January he approved the Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP) for Vietnam. The president, prompted by Taylor's doctrine of Flexible Response, saw counterinsurgency as the means to defeat the VC short of total war. American officials had been working on the CIP since the previous year and McGarr, as noted in the previous chapter, had questioned the MAAG's failure in the 1950s to train the ARVN to handle the communist insurgents. The CIP recommended that the United States fund a 20,000 troop increase in the ARVN, to 170,000, and a 36,000 force rise in the CG, to 68,000. It would also
increase subsidies to Diem by another $42 million, to be added to the $225 million annual contribution already being made to the RVN. In return for such support, Diem would be expected to reform his government's autocratic political structure, or aid could be withheld.20

Despite approval of the CIP, many American officials had reservations about the plan. The president himself wondered why such increases in the ARVN were needed if, as military officials in Saigon reported, the VC had only about 10,000 guerrillas in the south. Admiral Felix Stump, the CINCPAC in the mid-1950s, complained that officials from the state department and pentagon had not taken Lansdale's concerns about the insurgency seriously enough. Lansdale, after meeting with McNamara, found the defense secretary "very hard to talk to [about CI]. Watching his face as I talked, I got the feeling that he didn't understand me." Army Chief of Staff George Decker simply challenged the need for CI, telling Kennedy that "any good soldier can handle guerrillas." And McGarr himself urged that the White House reconsider its proposal to withdraw aid to Diem if political liberalization was not forthcoming.21

McGarr's ambivalent views on CI would come to typify the U.S. military approach to Vietnam. The MAAG chief had alternately advocated, then questioned, the emphasis on counter-guerrilla warfare.22 In the same way, other
military leaders, beginning during the April 1961 Laos crisis and continuing to 1963, would begin to put forth similarly ambivalent proposals regarding the need for or wisdom of deploying U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. The Laos issue began to boil over at the precise time that acrimony between civilian and military officials over the Bay of Pigs would reach its peak. At a 27 April meeting with the JCS, Kennedy first raised the idea of putting troops into Laos to prop up the shaky regime, then being pressured by Communist Pathet Lao guerrillas moving on Vientiane.

The chiefs, while stressing that intervention was a political decision and that they would carry out whatever course the president chose, did not encourage U.S. combat in Laos. As Roger Hilsman, the director of the State Department's bureau of intelligence and research, explained, it was a "shibboleth" among the JCS that American forces should "perhaps never again . . . fight any kind of the war on the ground in Asia." Accordingly, the chiefs told Kennedy that he would have to support a huge troop commitment to defend Laos, between 60,000 and 140,000 troops, and authorize U.S. military commanders to employ nuclear weapons in the event of PRC intervention. The military also shocked the president by informing him that such a sizeable deployment would unduly drain troops from Europe amid the Berlin crisis while the strategic
reserve at home was becoming dangerously low. 24

The services themselves were split over intervention, with Generals Decker and Shoup, the chiefs of the services most likely to see combat in Laos, pointing out the logistics, health, and battle problems inherent in a jungle war there and warning that Mao or other Asian Communists could open another front against the west elsewhere in the region. As Shoup put it, the military was mostly interested in "finding some way to stop [the Laos imbroglio] and get out." For his part, Decker "thought that there was no good place to fight" in Southeast Asia, though he hoped to hold onto as much of Indochina as possible. Only the Navy and Air Force chiefs, Arleigh Burke and Curtis LeMay, whose troops would fight at a distance and suffer limited casualties, were more amenable to intervention.25

Kennedy thus was left to accept the establishment of a coalition government in Laos, which included the Pathet Lao as a major partner, and which constituted another blow to the president's anti-communist reputation as Republican congressional leaders and former-Vice President Richard Nixon rushed to charge him with defeat in Southeast Asia.26 Clearly, April 1961 had not been a good month for the new administration, with the Cuban and Laotian situations casting a pall over U.S. foreign policy. In May 1961, then, Kennedy and his advisors would begin to
seriously consider American military intervention in Vietnam and set the country, irrevocably as it turned out, onto the path toward full-scale war in Indochina over the course of the next decade.

Throughout the early 1961 deliberations, Kennedy consistently took a hard line regarding the need to make a stand in Vietnam. Anyone questioning the president's commitment to do whatever necessary to preserve a friendly government in the south needs only to consider his oft-stated views on Vietnam at the outset of his presidency. After just ten days in office Kennedy told his National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy, to study U.S. policy in Vietnam and Laos, where "we must be better off in three months than we are now," and he established a special Presidential Task Force on Vietnam to develop a program to do just that. On 1 March a Rusk telegram to the embassy in Saigon reported that the "White House ranks [the] defense [of] Viet-Nam among [the] highest priorities [of] US foreign policy," with Kennedy especially afraid that the RVN could not survive over the two-year period anticipated for the CIP to become effective. By the end of the month McGeorge Bundy wanted the newly-appointed Ambassador, Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., to arrive in Saigon, for Kennedy was "eager indeed that [Vietnam] should have the highest priority for rapid and energetic action." Throughout May, as the foreign policy establishment debated, the
president repeatedly emphasized his commitment to stop the VC. General Lemnitzer, the JCS chair, told McGarr that "Kennedy was ready to do anything within reason to save Southeast Asia."30

The military also recognized the political factors driving Kennedy's position on Indochina and thus sought to pin down the president on what his objectives in and commitment to the RVN would involve. Lemnitzer, during a trip to Southeast Asia, feared that the White House would repeat its vacillating approach to Laos, "which can only lead to the loss of Vietnam." But, the JCS leader wondered, would Kennedy seek to maintain a pro-American RVN, and if so, would he take military action in a timely manner or "quibble for weeks and months" over policy, funding, and Vietnamese political problems? The current "marginal and piecemeal efforts" would have to stop if the United States was to reverse the insurgents's success in Vietnam, as Lemnitzer saw it.31

McGarr, after meeting with Lemnitzer, informed Admiral Felt, the CINCPAC, that the JCS chair and Kennedy both "have repeatedly stated [that] Vietnam is not to go behind [the] Bamboo Curtain under any circumstances, and we must do all that is necessary to prevent this from happening." Moreover, the MAAG chief stressed, "they both state this is a primarily military problem" and that U.S. forces should not be restricted by the Geneva accords, budgetary
constraints, or red tape in obtaining military support. The politicians, McGarr said, needed to get the MAAG off of its "short leash."\textsuperscript{32} Given such views, there seems little question that George McT. Kahin is absolutely correct to observe that "from the early months of his presidency Kennedy sought a military solution in Vietnam, and he soon began to militarize the direct American intervention that Eisenhower had initiated."\textsuperscript{33}

The military's approach to Indochina was a bit more nuanced than Kennedy's. Various service leaders had debated the merits of a CI strategy, resisted intervention in Laos, recognized the VC's strength in the south and Diem's shortcomings, and, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, began to view the president's military policies with suspicion. But the brass also thought that Kennedy should increase the size of the ARVN and CG and unleash American military personnel in Vietnam as well.\textsuperscript{34} The chiefs, it seems, were thus hedging their bets on Vietnam. Obviously, Lemnitzer, McGarr and others were not considering bolting from Vietnam, but they also recognized that the president had attached the greatest importance to success against communism there. So military leaders, as the debate over Vietnam in May would show, were not clamoring for combat, but they would follow Kennedy's lead. At the same time, to avoid further civil-military acrimony and immunize themselves from culpability for any future failures,
American generals would try to pin down the White House on its commitment to and accountability for military action in Indochina.

The Washington, D.C. policy debate over Vietnam in May 1961 offers a fascinating picture of the decisionmaking process and an effective counter-argument to those who contend that the military coerced the president into war. Most works point out that the JCS urged Kennedy to deploy troops to rescue Diem at this point, thereby setting into motion the interventionist U.S. approach to Vietnam. Recognizing Kennedy's political will, the chiefs did urge the despatch of U.S. troops to Vietnam, but simultaneously continued to point out flaws in Diem's government and army, admit the VC's increasing infiltration into the south and their inability to stem it, understand the political implications of Caucasian interference in Indochinese affairs, and cite the possibility of PRC intervention in response to a large American presence in Southeast Asia. The military, still trying to pin down Kennedy on the nature of the commitment he envisioned, was clear on the significant task ahead of it in Vietnam, and not unduly optimistic about its future there. Most importantly, the service chiefs continued to assume that America would provide principally economic aid to Diem and that U.S. troops in Vietnam would not assume a combat role. The RVN's armed forces, U.S. service representatives believed,
would have to be responsible for any battles against the Communist insurgents.

Prior to raising the troop issue with his JCS in early May, Kennedy received advice on the situation in Vietnam from various sources. General Thomas Trapnell, the U.S. commander in Vietnam before Dien Bien Phu, had visited Indochina in March 1961 and reported that about half of the U.S. MAAG officers believed that Diem should be replaced as head of state if the RVN was to achieve political stability and challenge the VC. Likewise the outgoing Ambassador, Elbridge Durbrow, and Theodore Sorenson of the U.S. Information Agency stressed the need for social, economic, and political reform and wondered "whether [deploying U.S.] forces in Viet-Nam (shaky) and Thailand (doubtful regime) [will] commit [the] U.S. to areas we might otherwise regard as no better a place to fight than Laos." 

Robert W. Komer from the NSC staff, a CI advocate, further complained that "the average MAAG officer is simply not suited for the type of war we're going to have to fight (Lansdale is well aware of this)." Military plans for Indochina, he added, seemed to rely on "forces too large and unwieldy for early action" because the purpose of deploying U.S. troops "is not to fight guerrillas." Accordingly, Komer was "not convinced" that Kennedy should send forces to Vietnam, though some type of U.S. military "presence" would be needed. Secretary of State Dean
Rusk also opposed the use of combat troops in Vietnam at that time, urging both intermittent increases in the MAAG to avoid attention on America's moves and further study of the troop question.40

Before considering the troop issue, then, Kennedy's advisors were noncommittal at best about the future U.S. role in Vietnam. At the 4 May meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, however, Deputy Defense Secretary Roswell L. Gilpatrick directly posed the troops question with JCS representative General Charles Bonesteel, III, who admitted that the chiefs had assessed possible deployments to Laos, but "not specifically" with regard to Vietnam. Responding to a question from Ambassador to Thailand Kenneth T. Young on the U.S. ability to choke off communist infiltration, Bonesteel doubted that the Vietnamese or American military could seal off a 1500 mile-long border. In turn Young wondered why the United States was pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into Vietnam if it could not accomplish such a fundamental task as keeping the VC out of the south. Young's criticism then gave the general an opening to again call on the president to determine the U.S. role in Vietnam. To Bonesteel, the "central point" was to discover "how seriously are we to take the objective" of the Task Force report, namely preventing a communist takeover in the south. "If we are to take this seriously," he observed candidly, "we should recognize that
it posed a major requirement for very sizeable force commitments." The JCS thus needed a statement of "real national intent" before developing any troop proposals.\textsuperscript{41}

Bonesteel thus had made it more clear than ever that the JCS would be following Kennedy's lead, not pushing the president to intervene in Vietnam. It is also possible that the military never wanted to place combat troops into Vietnam and, to avoid another Cuban-type episode, made clear its reservations up front with the expectation that the president would have to seek an alternative to American war there and thus absolve the services for any unpopular decisions on Indochina in the future. The White House, however, still, and perhaps contradictorily, hoped to achieve anti-Communist success while limiting its commitment to the RVN. In National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 52, drafted on 6 May and authorized five days later, the president augmented the MAAG's training mission, funded increases for the ARVN, CG, and SDC, and agreed to improve the RVN's air and naval defenses. In the event that U.S. troops would be needed in Vietnam it was "considered desirable to deploy . . . a tailored, composite joint task force specially designed for carrying out a counter guerrilla-civil action-limited war mission" in the south. As the White House envisioned it, "task forces" of combat engineer troops, mobile medical teams, and water purification units could both help the Vietnamese fight
against the VC and improve their lives, and be a symbol of America's "willingness" to defend the RVN.\textsuperscript{42}

The JCS wanted to do more. "Assuming that the political decision is to hold Southeast Asia outside the Communist sphere," the chiefs maintained, "U.S. forces should be deployed immediately to South Vietnam." Such a commitment, military leaders hoped, would preempt the need for more combat troops later by deterring the DRVN or PRC from intervening in Vietnam, releasing the ARVN from static defense positions to conduct CI operations, increasing the American training function, providing a nucleus if the war did spread, and indicating America's anti-Communist resolve throughout Asia. Accordingly, the chiefs recommended that McNamara urge Diem to request American forces during his upcoming visit with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson in Saigon.\textsuperscript{43}

Diem, and Ambassador Nolting, however, feared that a larger U.S. military presence would revive anti-colonial, and thus anti-Diem, sentiment, and so they were not receptive to the vice president's offer of troops and a bilateral defense treaty. Upon his return to Washington, Johnson informed the president of Diem's rejection and assumed that the troop issue was resolved. But that view, as the \textit{Pentagon Papers} analysts pointed out, was "not very emphatically passed on [by Kennedy] to subordinate members of the Administration," most likely because the president
himself wanted to keep the option of deploying forces to Vietnam alive. Accordingly, both Lansdale and McGarr, among others, continued to look for ways to get Diem to accept more American military personnel.44

Admiral Felt, however, "strongly opposed" U.S. troop deployments, especially because he feared that American forces would usurp Vietnamese responsibilities and that, in the absence of any DRVN intervention in the south, the United States would be seen as the aggressor in the war. Felt also pinpointed the dilemma which Kennedy and the military had created. Limited war in Vietnam "would commit the U.S. to another Korea-type support and assistance situation." Once American forces intervened, "we can't pull out at will without damaging repercussions." Even after the JCS's call for troops, many which would be transferred from the CINCPAC to Vietnam, on 10 May, Felt still believed that "there is not sufficient justification to tie up forces which are now assigned to me." Felt's policy, as one of his staff officers explained, was to "help the Vietnamese get organized, get trained, [be] given the military equipment to fight their own war, but to keep U.S. troops out of that country."45

Although Felt was an outspoken opponent of an American troop commitment to Vietnam, his views in some ways represented mainstream military thought. U.S. military leaders in May 1961 were neither envisioning nor advocating
that America go into combat in Vietnam. Even a MAAG estimate of requirements to "save Vietnam from Communist aggression" detailed a support, not battlefield, role for American forces. The MAAG was not naive or sanguine about the situation in the RVN, recognizing that the PAVN, absent western intervention, could gain control of Indochina, or at least infiltrate three divisions into the RVN and then launch a coordinated attack with ten divisions from north of the seventeenth parallel. With about 70 percent of its forces involved in static guard duties and internal security, the ARVN and CG could do little to contain such Communist moves. Despite that bleak outlook, the MAAG expected the southern Vietnamese "to give [their] lives and material sacrifice" to save the Diem government if the United States would "support the entire effort in money, equipment, and supplies", including $175 million for a 100,000 man increase in the ARVN, equipment, and logistics and combat support--but not U.S. combat troops. Such assistance, McGarr added, was urgently needed because "every day the RVNAF mobilization is further delayed is dangerous."47

Diem himself, who had not been responsive to Johnson's offer a month earlier, now wanted increased assistance, asking Kennedy on 9 June to subsidize a 100,000 man expansion in his armed forces, up to 270,000.48 American officials, although they recognized the RVN leader's
shortcomings, had also made clear the U.S. commitment to Vietnam, and so Diem's request put the administration on the spot for a decision. As Lyndon Johnson, who had called Diem "the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia" during his visit in May, told an associate "shit, man, he's the only boy we got out there." Walt Rostow was not as blunt as the vice president but was "distinctly uneasy about . . . Vietnam and the grasp of our men there upon it," and feared that the crises in Vietnam and Laos would peak at the same time and thus urged the president to send Taylor to Indochina to study the Diem troop request. The general did not tour Vietnam at this time, but did recommend that Kennedy consider a 30,000 troop increase in the RVNAF, to 200,000, while studying the issue further. Roswell Gilpatrick, McNamara's deputy at the pentagon, agreed with Taylor's 30,000 force proposal, but Rostow, more tentative on Vietnam than would be expected, thought that the MAAG recommendation for 100,000 additional troops in the RVN "sounds like desperation." Again facing an ambivalent response on Vietnam from his advisors, Kennedy asked for further study of the issue. At this point Maxwell Taylor, whom the president had appointed as the White House Military Representative on 1 July and who would become, in General Shoup's words, "the military part of . . . Kennedy's mind," began to play a primary role in Vietnam policy. Taylor, looking to
"limit . . . U.S. troop participation" in Southeast Asian operations while "maximizing Thai and Vietnamese participation," immediately criticized SEATO planning which would rely on outside forces to defend the RVN.53 As other officers had done over the preceding months, the general also pointed out that it was difficult to consider future moves in Vietnam without a statement of the U.S. objectives and military mission in Vietnam. As Taylor saw it, the United States could assume three tasks in the RVN. In trying to accomplish the first two--securing the Mekong Valley and Laotian panhandle, and launching offensive air and guerrilla operations from the panhandle--"we should make maximum use of indigenous [Vietnamese, Lao, Thai] ground forces." If prompted to expand its mission to include military pressure against the DRVN (the third option), Taylor added that the American role should be limited to air strikes, and base and supply protection.54

While he could never be mistaken for a dove on Vietnam, Taylor was obviously not comfortable with the prospect of sending U.S. soldiers to combat in Indochina. Admiral Felt was more blunt, finding "no justification" for significantly increasing the RVNAF.55 From Saigon McGarr did urge that Kennedy approve a 30,000 force extension of the RVNAF because, MAAG studies had confirmed, Diem was using about 90 percent of his soldiers for CI action which, as indicated in the previous chapter, meant that the
Vietnamese military was principally employed in propping up his regime. The JCS did not believe that Diem would need so many forces, up to 270,000, to conduct CI operations and concurrently prepare to meet overt aggression, and so it determined that plans for a nine-division RVNAF [about 200,000 troops] were adequate.\textsuperscript{56}

On the troop issue, then, military leaders with differing views on Vietnam such as Felt, McGarr and the Joint Chiefs all agreed that the RVNAF itself would be responsible for military action against the VC and that the United States should have a minimal combat role at best. While the means they advocated may have diverged—Felt wanted no increase in the RVN's military, for example, but Taylor and McGarr wanted funding for 30,000 more men—the ends those officers sought, the RVN's survival without U.S. intervention, were similar. As General Philip Davidson, later intelligence chief for the U.S. military in Vietnam, observed, the "truth is that in this summer of 1961, nobody in Washington or Saigon seems to have thought seriously of using American troops to fight the Viet Cong." U.S. personnel, "if brought in at all," would train or relieve the RVNAF from passive security duties.\textsuperscript{57}

The president, however, was more intensely committed to supporting the RVN than the military, especially after Khrushchev had seemed so intransigent on the Berlin issue at Geneva in June. "That son of a bitch won't pay any
attention to words," Kennedy remarked about the Soviet leader, "he has to see you move." "Now we have a problem in making our power credible," the president then told New York Times reporter Scotty Reston, "and Vietnam looks like the place" to correct it. Accordingly, the White House authorized the 30,000 increase for Diem and instructed military and diplomatic advisors to develop an overall strategic plan to control the subversion in southern Vietnam. With the military's reluctance to enter combat well-established, but with his credibility on the line after the Bay of Pigs, the Laos settlement, and the Khrushchev meeting, Kennedy had to deal with competing interests regarding Vietnam. Ultimately, the president would decide to seek victory despite his access to candid evaluations of the situation in Vietnam, first by progressively expanding his support of the Diem regime and, when that failed to accomplish success, by effectively beginning to Americanize the war in 1962.

Various appraisals of the war in mid-1961 gave Kennedy clear proof of the parlous situation facing the United States in Indochina. As early as June the ambassador and others reported the VC's growing strength and feared that American personnel in Vietnam would be targeted by the VC. By September, conditions in the south had deteriorated further for the RVN and, thus, for Kennedy. The VC had progressively extended and strengthened its
influence and, as the embassy in Saigon put it, "probably represents the most powerful guerrilla force in the world." Taylor added that the VC had increased its force strength by about 300 percent since early 1960, to 15,000, and was infiltrating by land and sea into the south "without too much difficulty." 

With over 30 battalions, 63 company-type units, and 10,000 additional political and support personnel disposed throughout the south, plus the PAVN in the north, the enemy was capable of conducting both clandestine operations in the RVN as well as large-scale attacks "at times and places of his choosing." In late September the VC did just that, assaulting ARVN posts at Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Da Nang. McGarr saw those actions in the 1st Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ, or I Corps), coupled with impressive enemy progress in II and III Corps, as "portend[ing] [a] significant increase [in] larger size VC . . . activity throughout South Viet Nam as part of [a] possible . . . attempt [to] move into [a] more advanced phase [of its] overall plan."

Just as they recognized the VC's strengths, military leaders were aware of the RVNAF's deficiencies as well. A U.S. Army study of the RVN's military revealed the same major weaknesses that had been evident for years already, including inexperienced leadership, excessive politicization, inadequate logistics and technical support,
poor morale, and combat ineffectiveness. McGarr, in an otherwise upbeat report, further scored the ARVN's CI performance in mid-1961 because of "insufficient civil-military preplanning" regarding the need for political, social, economic, and psychological--as well as military--measures. "Permanent pacification . . . can never be accomplished by military sweeps . . . alone," the MAAG chief stressed.

Colonel Robert Levy, a JCS staffer who had just returned from Vietnam, had a more grim assessment. In addition to the VC's growing prowess, Levy warned that Diem did not trust his Air Force leaders, that the Vietnamese Navy's anti-infiltration activities had "not been very good," and that there was poor coordination among the various RVNAF services. The colonel, however, also believed that the United States and RVN could "lick the Viet Cong problem if we are given sufficient time," but if the VC conducted a full-scale guerrilla effort "Viet Nam will not be able to manage the problem." Despite such problems, Levy lamented, the government of the RVN, which had so far failed to appreciate its situation and was tied down in operations against the enemy, had not developed an overall plan to deal with the insurgency. Colonel Wilbur Wilson, the senior U.S. Army advisor in II Corps, added that a good many of the ARVN's already "dangerously low" infantry units had suffered so many casualties in
September that they were less than 50 percent combat-effective. That situation had to change, Wilson asserted, because the VC's recent actions "indicate that we are at war."68

Amid the increasingly grave situation the White House developed its plans for Vietnam. The lack of planning before that point indicated both the military's relative indifference toward Vietnam and the obstacles Kennedy would face as he sought victory there. The president himself already recognized the reluctance "of many distinguished military leaders to see any direct involvement of U.S. troops in that part of the world," but asked for military preparations for Vietnam nonetheless.69

Taylor agreed on the need to develop an overall response to communism in Southeast Asia, but "was not convinced" that "a truly feasible military plan" existed. Even if developed, any proposals would have to include "political and economic elements as well," which constituted a rather large task since the United States could not "afford any further delay in this matter."70

The JCS too sensed the urgency of the situation in the RVN but its response offered little that was new. As Lemnitzer explained, the chiefs's planning would seek "to minimize U.S. military involvement" while requiring "a maximum effort from the indigenous forces." Short of a DRVN attack across the seventeenth parallel, American forces would just
serve as trainers and act as an emergency reserve. Native soldiers would have to contain the principal problem, VC infiltration, "without any significant involvement of American troops," because that was likely to generate PRC intervention in return. From the Pacific, Admiral Felt again stressed his opposition to any U.S. troop introduction into Indochina. A naval blockade, which some officers advocated to reduce infiltration, would be a "belligerent act," as the CINCPAC saw it, so the "best course" was still to develop the RVNAF's capabilities to defend its own country.

The courses advocated by Taylor, the JCS, and Felt would all take time, however, and other U.S. officials were pressing Kennedy for immediate action. At the very time that Lemnitzer sought to "minimize" U.S. involvement, the JCS also contended that the "time is now past when actions short of [outside] intervention . . . could reverse the rapidly worsening situation." Nolting, expecting the VC to attempt a final drive on the RVN in the near future, warned the Washington that "if [the] situation substantially worsens" in Vietnam, the United States "will be faced with the alternatives of sending . . . forces into SVN or backing down." Deterioration on the battlefield and poor morale throughout the south, the State Department agreed, required "emergency actions within 30 days." Accordingly, the White House stepped up its training role and increased
aid deliveries to the south.73

The military's approach to Vietnam at this point seemed quite inchoate, if not cynical. While assuming that the southern Vietnamese, not Americans, would actually fight the VC, the chiefs also urged the White House to avoid undue preoccupation with the Berlin situation because Southeast Asia was "now critical from a military viewpoint." As a result, the president should consider "additional mobilization to maintain our strategic reserve," a dramatic gesture with political risks for Kennedy that could not have escaped the chiefs.74

Only days later, however, the JCS tempered its views again, dismissing a Rostow proposal for a SEATO army of 25,000 troops to prevent infiltration along the Vietnam-Laos border between the DMZ and Cambodia. Such a patrol would be thinly spread across several hundred miles and "will be attacked piecemeal or by-passed at the Viet Cong's own choice." It would also be stationed in the most vulnerable position should the DRVN or PRC join the war and would exacerbate logistics and support problems. The JCS likewise rejected an alternative plan to put in troops along the seventeenth parallel itself. It did, however, recommend the establishment of a 20,000 man force centered in the central highlands of the RVN even though the likelihood of massive intervention by Ho or Mao "might well become substantial." The Soviet Union, the chiefs also
recognized, could stage diversionary operations in Berlin, Korea, or Iran.\textsuperscript{75}

Nonetheless, William Bundy, a McNamara assistant, and Rostow believed that "it is really now or never" to stop the VC. Nolting sent along more bad news about the enemy's success and ally's deficiencies and added that "we badly need official guidance on Washington['s] thinking regarding sending US forces to SVN."\textsuperscript{76} Although aware of the White House's resolve to win in Vietnam, the president's advisors had sent mixed signals regarding America's policy and prospects there. Thus Kennedy, on 11 October, announced that General Taylor and Rostow would head a mission to Vietnam to evaluate the war and consider the feasibility of U.S. military intervention or "other alternatives in lieu of" combat forces.\textsuperscript{77} Kennedy assumed that the "initial responsibility" for the war rested with "the people and government" of Vietnam. Taylor apparently took those views seriously, noting that the U.S. force structure was not sufficient to both meet its obligations in NATO and Berlin and also implement military plans for Vietnam. He then placed the burden of decision on Kennedy's shoulders. "The capital question," as the general saw it, "is whether additional forces should be mobilized now or the limitation of our military capabilities in Southeast Asia accepted as a permanent fact."\textsuperscript{78}
The White House and military, it seems, were maneuvering to force each other into accountability for Vietnam. In spite of his fervent commitment to save Diem, the president, aware of the military perils of war in Vietnam, called on the feeble RVNAF rather than U.S. troops to stop the enemy. For its part, the armed forces frankly pointed out America's questionable ability to affect the deterioration in the south but also called for intervention in concert with Kennedy's political goals.

This much was clear even before Taylor left for Vietnam. In a thorough, indeed incredible, analysis of the political and military factors—in both Saigon and Washington—which were conditioning U.S. policy in Indochina, McGarr revealed that the type of civil-military acridity so evident during the New Look era and Bay of Pigs tangle was also characterizing and dragging down the American experience in Vietnam. The MAAG chief made it clear that the military was at odds with the state department, embassy, and Vietnam Task Force appraisals and recommendations for Vietnam. Their reports of deterioration in the south and the urgent need for action from Washington, McGarr wrote to Lemnitzer, were "written primarily for high level civilian consumption to cover [the] State Department with paper in the eventuality that the situation here goes from bad to worse." Recent bleak reports had merely "point[ed] up dangers . . . of which we
were already well aware and [which we] previously reported." Where a joint state-defense department review had called for emergency action in Vietnam within thirty days, the MAAG leader reminded the JCS chair that he had already begun to enact key measures that they had suggested. Diplomatic officials, McGarr complained, had only just started "reading their mail" and learning the details of the war."

Clearly McGarr feared that the civilian establishment would try an end run around the military in Saigon so, "for the protection of the Armed Forces of the United States and specifically the Army which runs MAAG Vietnam," he wanted Lemnitzer to see his unfiltered judgment of the "presently worsening situation here." State Department officials, McGarr believed, were overlooking past mistakes and "basic differences of opinion between them and the military" in Vietnam. Both Foggy Bottom and the embassy, he added, had ignored or opposed the need to build up the ARVN and develop the CIP, and it was only "Kennedy's pronouncements on Vietnam as well as Vice President Johnson's visit here, not to mention increasing Viet Cong pressure, [that] made [the RVNAF increase] imperative." Worse, the RVN's leaders, also bypassing reluctant U.S. military officials, now "feel they can get anything they want, regardless of MAAG recommendations, by going through the Ambassador to top American levels." While McGarr was not as pessimistic
as he had a right to be, he did see a "slimmer and slimmer" chance to "pull this one out of the fire." Aware of the political factors involved in developing Vietnam policy, the MAAG chief concluded with striking honesty that "as I am jealous of the professional good name of our Army, I do not wish it to be placed in the position of fighting a losing battle and being charged with the loss."80

McGarr’s views may be as close as one comes to finding a "smoking gun" on the politics of Vietnam in the Kennedy years. In his report the MAAG chief had crystallized the major factors that were dooming the U.S. experience in Vietnam. Not only clearly recognizable battlefield deterioration—caused principally by an imposing enemy as well as a deficient ally—but, just as importantly, domestic political brawls would make it virtually impossible for America to meet its objectives in Vietnam. It was against this backdrop that Taylor toured Vietnam and Kennedy committed U.S. soldiers and treasure to an impending disaster in Vietnam.

Exacerbating such politico-military tension, reports out of Vietnam offered a bleak picture. From the MAAG, General Charles Timmes, Chair of the U.S. Army Section in Saigon, and Colonel Wilbur Wilson criticized the ARVN’s faulty intelligence structure and its officer corps, with Wilson charging that Vietnamese commanders often ignored their orders in order to pursue promotions or more
resources rather than fight the VC, and that few officers had any understanding of anti-guerrilla warfare. Marine general and CI expert Victor H. Krulak added that, in both the United States and Vietnam, "nobody knew anything" about counterinsurgency. A Marine major who had just visited Vietnam further told Rostow that about 90 percent of the RVNAF was not even engaged, its command and control structure was inadequate, and the MAAG had "no sense of urgency," not even putting in a forty-hour work week. Nonetheless, he believed that the Vietnamese could contain the enemy with just U.S. advisory, logistic, and technical support. 81

Admiral Felt, the commander with overall responsibility for the area in which any combat would take place, dispelled even that level of optimism. During a Taylor stopover in Hawaii, the CINCPAC again opposed an expanded American commitment to Vietnam in strong terms. The admiral, who had earlier joined McGarr in rejecting the transfer of U.S. jet aircraft to the RVN, offered Taylor a litany of the disadvantages inherent in any combat role in Vietnam. Felt told Kennedy's Military Representative that using U.S. troops in Indochina would "stir up [a] big fuss throughout Asia about [the] reintroduction of [the] forces of white colonialism" into Vietnam, could provoke intensified Communist aggression, might prompt the NLF to establish an alternative government somewhere in the south,
and would lead to a long-term commitment with U.S. soldiers "likely to be forced into varying forms of military engagement with [the] VC . . . in proportion to the duration of their stay." Before deploying combat troops, Felt concluded, the United States should exhaust the range of alternatives "which will not kick off war with Communist China." 82

By October 1961 Kennedy's service leaders were not pressing him into war and, had the president so desired, he could have invoked military criticism of the RVN to back away from a commitment and immunize himself against charges of being soft on communism. Given its reactive approach and reluctance to fight, it is probable that the brass would not have complained so long as the civilian leadership did not try to deflect blame onto them, as had happened after the Bay of Pigs. But after nine months in office with no foreign policy achievements of note, Kennedy was committed to firm action to maintain the RVN. Taylor's evaluation, then, reflected both strains in official U.S. thinking on Vietnam. The general, prompted by officers in Saigon, urged the president to deploy troops to Vietnam under the guise of a logistical task force in the Mekong delta, which had been recently ravaged by floods and which was also a VC stronghold. Taylor also recommended that the White House send more aviation and helicopter units to Vietnam, offer more funding to develop CG and SDC forces,
and establish a "limited partnership" with Diem by offering more aid in exchange for political reform.\textsuperscript{83}

Taylor's interventionist response, however, did not really square with his bleak assessment of the situation in Vietnam, and his reports seemed filled with non sequitur more than reasoned analysis. The general recognized the VC's build-up and success, the ARVN's command and intelligence inadequacies and passive defense, and the political mess which the Ngos had created. Even more the military representative was aware of the peril involved in sending troops to Vietnam. At home the strategic reserve was too weak to tolerate further depletion to a "peripheral area" where U.S. forces would be "pinned down for an uncertain duration." Once in Indochina, the American presence would "increase tensions and risk escalation into a major war in Asia." If initial deployments did not produce results, "it will be difficult to resist the pressure to reinforce" and, should the United States want to actually eliminate the insurgency in the south, "there is no limit to our possible commitment," unless Kennedy authorized attacks against Hanoi itself.\textsuperscript{84}

But Taylor also believed that the introduction of logistics task force was imperative to reverse the "present downward trend of events" by boosting Vietnamese morale, improving the ARVN's defensive and combat capabilities, and serving as a deterrent to future Communist moves. He also
"had no enthusiasm for the thought of using U.S. Army forces in ground combat in this guerrilla war" where the large American units would have to maneuver and fight in a jungle environment. The general found it "noteworthy," however, that the forces he was proposing for Indochina would not be charged with clearing VC out of the south, which would continue to be "the primary task of the [RVNAF] for which they should be specifically organized, trained, and stiffened" by U.S. advisors. McGarr and Lansdale also stressed the need to develop the ARVN's CI capabilities, a job allegedly begun several years earlier. "Just adding more things, as we are doing at the present," Lansdale lamented, "doesn't appear to provide the answer that we are seeking." 

Many of the president's other advisors, including many civilians, thought otherwise. McNamara, Rusk, the Bundys, Gilpatric, Rostow, and Komer, as well as the Joint Chiefs, actually wanted to expand on Taylor's proposal for an 8000-man flood relief force. On 1 November the secretary of state warned against a "major commitment [of] American prestige to a losing horse." Days later, however, he agreed with McNamara and the chiefs that Vietnam would not survive without U.S. troop support on a "substantial scale," that an eventual force of 205,000 with reserve mobilization might be required, and that Kennedy ought to preserve the RVN and commit "whatever . . . combat forces
may be necessary to achieve this objective." McGeorge Bundy did not go quite so far. Citing Felt’s critical views, he was wary of an expanded commitment but nonetheless urged the president to deploy limited forces, about a division, for military operations, not morale boosting, in the south.\textsuperscript{87}

Taylor, however, continued to advance his relatively temperate views. His naval aide, Lt. Commander Worth Bagley, again stressed that Taylor designed his troop plans to reassure the south of U.S. resolve, "not . . . to accomplish any positive military task other than . . . self-defense." U.S. forces, Taylor and Bagley added, would not "get mired down in an inconclusive struggle" because they had not envisaged "any positive military objective." The general and his aide nonetheless understood that the Rusk-McNamara call for "substantial forces" indicated that Taylor’s "lower-tone approach . . . is not viable."\textsuperscript{88}

Taylor in October 1961 might have played the type of critical role Ridgway had during the Dien Bien Phu crisis in May 1954. To be sure, he was as aware of the peril of war in Indochina as his predecessor as Army chief, yet the White House Military Representative did not heed his own warnings about intervention. Although recognizing the morass in the RVN and the prospects of initial troop movements into Vietnam snowballing into a large-scale, long-lived commitment, Taylor wanted to send troops
camouflaged as flood relief personnel. Perhaps the general earnestly wanted to preserve a non-Communist state in an admittedly "peripheral" area, or he simply lacked the courage to forcefully express his convictions. More likely, however, he knew what his patron in the White House wanted to hear and tailored his response accordingly, but with enough reservations to deflect blame if the situation in Vietnam fell apart. George McT. Kahin, whose work on the Vietnam war is unparalleled, is only partly correct in observing that "in sending out his most hawkish advisors, Kennedy presumably expected them to come up with hawkish recommendations, and that is clearly what he got."89

Within the Kennedy administration, however, there would be a good many civilians far more hawkish than Taylor, and the president in November did not firmly decide which side he would join. Kennedy thus rejected the McNamara-Rusk-JCS call for a massive commitment, Taylor's logistics force, and further negotiations based on the 1954 Geneva settlement, as proposed by ambassador-at-large Averell Harriman. At a 15 November NSC meeting, the president's angst regarding the troop issue was noticeable. Unlike Korea in 1950 or Berlin at that time, enemy action in Vietnam was "more obscure and less flagrant." Kennedy "could even make a rather strong case against intervening in an area 10,000 miles away against 16,000 guerrillas with a native army of 200,000, where millions had been spent for
years with no success." Rusk, McNamara, Lemnitzer, and McGeorge Bundy were not so reflective, however, and the president ended his devil's advocacy and "returned the discussion to the point of what will be done next in Viet Nam rather than whether or not the U.S. would become involved." Although the White House did not send combat troops, Kennedy did authorize the transfer of two fully-operational helicopter companies to Vietnam, increased the number of U.S. advisors, and allowed Air Force trainers to participate in operations against the VC. By December had sent about 2200 "advisors" to the RVN, an increase of nearly 300 percent from January of that year.

In his first ten months as president, John Kennedy moved Vietnam from a secondary foreign policy consideration to a centerpiece of the Cold War. Unable to displace Castro or prevent Pathet Lao success early on, the president determined that he would confront growing Communist insurgencies in places such as southern Vietnam "regardless of the cost and regardless of the peril." Indeed, "no greater task faces this country or this administration," Kennedy told newspaper editors in April. The president and his advisors, however, would find it difficult to develop the means to meet their goals in Vietnam. In their initial considerations of the insurgency there, U.S. military leaders pointed out the
obstacles to and peril of involvement in Vietnam. In particular, American officers noted that the political situation in the south was unstable, the ARVN was ineffective, and the VC was strong and growing.

To the president, however, Vietnam was a test of national will and political credibility. If the United States did not protect "small and weak" countries such as the RVN and Laos from Communist attack, "the gates will be opened wide" for insurgency elsewhere, he warned. To Maxwell Taylor, the Kennedy commitment to Vietnam was so clear that he did not even consider whether the preservation of the RVN was in the national interest during his October trip. The White House had already decided that it was.

The military, therefore, had to react to Kennedy's policy and approached Vietnam from different, and often contradictory, angles. While accepting the need to develop a capacity for anti-guerrilla warfare in the ARVN, U.S. personnel in fact created a conventional army. American officers admitted that they could do little to choke off enemy infiltration, but kept expanding the RVNAF to do that, usually at the expense of village security. Some service leaders--Taylor, Felt and Shoup, most notably--questioned the expanding American commitment, but most generals simply deferred to the White House. And while virtually every military official of significance rejected
any type of U.S. combat role in Vietnam, the brass declined to press for disengagement, or even a more temperate approach to the war, and thus helped create the conditions that would lead to American intervention. Although aware, as Taylor had warned, that the pressure to reinforce could become irresistible once American personnel were in country, the brass continued to raise the ante in Vietnam, with American advisors, troops, and treasure as their chips.

In large measure, political considerations were conditioning the military's response to Vietnam. U.S. intervention there, many officers feared, could not only lead to serious problems, if not disaster, but might further damage the military's political and social status. Thus service leaders consistently pressed the president to determine and announce America's objectives in Vietnam. They wanted the administration, in effect, to assume responsibility for the war, so that the military could avoid blame in the event of failure. Months earlier the military had opposed the Bay of Pigs attack, only to have the president authorize the operation, see it fail, and criticize the armed forces for not preventing it. The brass did not want to see the same thing happen in Vietnam.

As the policymaking dialectic progressed throughout 1961 it became clear that the president and his defense secretary, among others, were committed to effective action
in Vietnam. Kennedy had invested, and lost, a good deal of political capital in the Caribbean, Europe, and Indochina and desperately wanted a Cold War victory. U.S. military leaders, however, responded to different factors. Politically hardened after several years of civil-military feuds, the brass wanted to pin down Kennedy on his Vietnam policy and make him responsible for it. At no time before the Taylor mission was there any consensus in the armed forces regarding increased levels of support to the RVNAF or the need for, or desirability of, U.S. military action in Vietnam. In fact, many, maybe most, generals had been shaped by the Eisenhower-era military response to Indochina and thus recognized the dangerous nature of the conflict and wished to avoid combat. And, as McGarr's remarkably insightful October analysis had shown, the military understood the political implications of failure in Indochina as well. But the president's own political considerations fueled policy and a major U.S. role in Vietnam became a *fait accompli* by the time Kennedy pledged a "sharply increased joint effort" to rescue Diem's state in NSAM 111, which he authorized on 22 November 1961.94

Over the course of the following 24 months that effort would continue to increase but become even less "joint" as U.S. military personnel took on increasing responsibilities and turned the Vietnamese conflict into an American war. November 1961 may well have been Kennedy's last best chance
to avoid intervention, but he instead chose to go to war, with an uncertain future and reluctant military lined up behind him.
Having decided to maintain and increase the American commitment to the RVN but defer on combat troop deployments, John Kennedy would spend the next two years of his presidency, and his life, groping for an effective response to the southern insurgency and political turmoil in Saigon. Despite political and military problems recognized by all, the president would authorize an 800 percent increase in U.S. advisors to Vietnam, extend American participation in operations against the VC, and ultimately help coordinate the overthrow of the Diem government. By November 1963, the United States would be well on its way toward intervening in a major war in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, U.S. military officials would express conflicting views regarding Vietnam policy. The brass generally supported the president's expansion of the American role in Vietnam, especially after Kennedy replaced
holdover military leaders with his own generals. Optimism grew within military circles with General Paul Harkins's arrival in Saigon in 1962, just as U.S. resources were pouring into the RVN and American aircraft appeared to be containing the VC. Even critics of the U.S. role fell in line and supported the growing commitment. Significant problems remained apparent to American officers, however. U.S. service leaders continued to recognize that the VC was stronger and committed to conducting long-term, attritional warfare, which could not be defeated with a conventional military response. They continued to lament the incessant political repression and chaos in Saigon, and, in the case of John Paul Vann and others, the politicization and incompetence of the RVNAF. And, whatever their opinion of the wisdom or risks of intervention, virtually every American military official assumed that the United States would not send combat forces into battle in southern Vietnam.

The U.S. military remained divided over Vietnam policy as well. Continuing a trend that would ultimately prove disastrous, American officers engaged in internecine warfare over the organization and mission of any U.S. force that might be committed to Vietnam. While the various services fought over control of the war in Saigon and the type of strategy to be employed against the VC, U.S. military personnel already in the field in the RVN were
seriously divided over whether General Harkins's conventional approach could succeed in a conflict that seemed to demand counterinsurgency strategy. In the end, though, effective anti-guerrilla action would take too long. Heretics like Lionel McGarr and John Vann would be ignored or dismissed. Washington seemed to want a war in Vietnam, and U.S. military officials provided it.

Although Kennedy may have rejected the deployment of combat forces to Vietnam after Taylor's visit, he had not wavered at all in his commitment to the RVN. In turning down proposals for a negotiated settlement, the president asserted that "if we postpone action in Vietnam to engage in talks with the Communists, we can surely count on a major crisis of nerve in Viet-Nam and throughout Southeast Asia. The image of U.S. unwillingness to confront Communism--induced by the Laos performance--will be . . . definitely confirmed. There will be panic and disarray." As Kennedy saw it, the stakes in Vietnam were higher than ever. "If we negotiate now--while infiltration continues--we shall in fact be judged weaker than in Laos, for in that case we at least first insisted on a cease-fire." As a result of Kennedy's position, the military would pursue a more activist policy in 1962, and would continue to follow the White House's lead on Vietnam.

But military leaders also continued to recognize just
how badly conditions in Vietnam had deteriorated. McGarr scored the RVN for making "little or no progress in developing an overall plan" for the war, while the VC insurgency was "in an advanced state" and there was "a lack of adequate force to counter it." In his year-end report the MAAG chief estimated that VC strength in the south had risen to about 12,000 active fighting forces, a trend which, "if continued, can be fatal," and that the enemy now controlled or influenced about 60 percent of the RVN. In addition to recognizing those problems on the ground, the military understood the constraints to be imposed on U.S. policy. As McNamara explained, the chiefs would have to adjust to a "perennially unclear political framework and to a policy that for overall national reasons sets limits on military action." The defense secretary did, however, reassure the brass that they would be given "considerable scope" in conducting their affairs in Vietnam and that the pentagon was willing to press the White House for more resources as the military saw fit.

In mid-December, at a meeting with military leaders in Honolulu, McNamara was more assertive. He informed the generals that the United States "had made the decision to pursue the Viet Nam affair with vigor and that all reasonable amounts of resources could be placed at the disposal of the commanders in the area." That commitment notwithstanding, the consensus at Honolulu was that
"there's not likely to be any gimmick which will win the war for us. While air and naval action [can] contribute, it's mainly a ground force problem." McNamara told the chiefs, however, that Kennedy was still not prepared to send such combat forces to Vietnam. The defense secretary also lamented that the United States was "stuck" with Diem, should not expect him to reform, and would have to do its best regardless of political chaos in the RVN.5

Meanwhile, reports from the field continued to emphasize the RVNAF's problems, including poor intelligence, low morale, and nepotism and politicization within the military. Many officers in II Corps, Wilbur Wilson wrote to McGarr, believed that "no significant gains are being made against the Viet Cong."6

Such bleak reports, consistently despatched from Vietnam throughout 1961, had not convinced American policymakers to reappraise their commitment to Diem. Negligible progress and uncertain prospects, however, did create major impediments to military planning, and in late 1961 American officials would still be looking for an effective strategy for Vietnam. The resolution of that search--the reliance on conventional military means while at the same time establishing the Strategic Hamlets program--would prove to be a decisive and divisive point in the U.S. war in Vietnam.

By December 1961, the military had yet to develop any
strategy for Vietnam. In November, Felt had complained that it was "not possible" to draw up military plans for Vietnam unless American officers had better information on the VC's strength and geographical disposition. The CINCPAC "entertain[ed] a great deal of skepticism" about proceeding into Vietnam without adequate plans, and he charged that "the intent is to develop tactical plans before a sound strategic concept." Felt had indeed touched upon a central dilemma in the U.S. military's approach to Vietnam. After training the ARVN to fight a conventional war throughout the late 1950s, the MAAG--a dedicated follower of prevailing fashion--shifted to emphasize CI with Kennedy's emergence. But the brass would be deeply divided over whether the Americans ought to develop CI capabilities in fact, or continue to fight the kind of wars they had experienced during World War II or in Korea. By late 1961 and early 1962, the military would elect to pursue traditional means to gain victory, relying on firepower and attrition in Vietnam, while the centerpiece of American CI policy, the Strategic Hamlets program, would become a famous failure.

It seemed clear to many Americans in Vietnam that the ARVN was incapable of quashing the insurgency and a new approach was needed. In Saigon, McGarr was convinced that Diem had to accept the new CI doctrine, utilize new weapons and strategies, and reorganize the RVNAF command and
control structure. Diem, however, feared losing his grip over the ARVN and was wary of such MAAG recommendations. Accordingly the RVN head-of-state latched onto a proposal developed by a British CI expert, Robert Thompson, who had gained experience in suppressing a Communist rebellion in Malaya, to stop the VC with minimal U.S. military interference. Thompson, unlike most American officers, argued that rural political turmoil, rather than the VC, was the biggest threat to stability in the south. It followed then that Diem ought to provide economic development to outlying areas and provide security with police forces instead of only trying to destroy the enemy.

The U.S. military reacted to Thompson's proposals sharply. Lemnitzer believed that the Briton's experience in Malaya was not relevant to Vietnam and that the VC insurgency had already developed "far beyond the capability of police controls." The JCS chair was also suspicious of Thompson's motives because of recent "indications that the British, for political reasons, wish to increase their influence in this area and are using the Thompson mission as a vehicle." McGarr likewise scored the Thompson plan for emphasizing security in the Mekong delta instead of "War Zone D"--a VC stronghold about twenty miles northwest of Saigon, also known as the "Iron Triangle"--and for urging that police rather than military forces provide
village security. The MAAG chief, aware that Washington wanted to see results in Vietnam, also charged that it would take too long for Thompson's plan to become effective.\(^{11}\)

McGarr and Felt, however, agreed with the Thompson group that the situation "is critical, with the peak of the crisis possible at any moment." The CINCPAC again stressed that "an over-all operational plan defining responsibilities, tasks and priorities must be produced."\(^{12}\) Rather than developing a comprehensive plan, however, Diem and his American patrons hoped that the establishment of Strategic Hamlets--"safe areas" to which peasants would be transferred to deprive the VC of recruits and support--would alter the course of the war.\(^{13}\) In contrast to the military, the White House saw the program as the "principal operational vehicle" by which the CI doctrine would be "translated into reality." That reality, however, was never achieved and by late 1963 the RVN abandoned the counterproductive Strategic Hamlets program after it had facilitated VC recruitment and done more harm than good for the Vietnamese.\(^{14}\)

The debate over strategy in general also claimed McGarr as a victim. The MAAG chief from September 1960 to July 1962, McGarr is barely a footnote in most studies on Vietnam, but his outlook on the politics of the war and U.S. prospects in Vietnam is nonetheless enlightening and
essential to understanding Kennedy's policy toward Indochina. As the U.S. military's ranking officer in Saigon, McGarr understood the politico-military morass in Diem's state and his reaction to it offers a clear contrast to the White House's appraisals of Vietnam. Although imbued with what Andrew Krepinevich calls the Army's "Concept" on strategy—the traditional reliance on firepower and conventional strategy—McGarr seems to have been among those military leaders who did pay more than lip service to developing capabilities for political warfare and CI in the RVN. He also understood the political stakes involved in Vietnam policymaking at home. Thus, his virtual ouster as military leader in Vietnam in early 1962, engineered by various U.S. officials, mostly civilian, indicates that CI, although a successful public relations strategy at home with green beret-clad soldiers at the Special Forces school at Fort Bragg, would not be seriously pursued in Vietnam.

Washington had begun to question McGarr's role in Vietnam before the Taylor mission, with Dean Rusk asking Nolting whether he was "the right man for the job" in early October. The ambassador, while admitting that relations between Diem and the MAAG were strained, expressed confidence in the commander but urged Taylor to study the situation while in Saigon. Taylor's views on McGarr were apparent immediately; on 24 October he excluded the
MAAG chief from a meeting scheduled with Diem and U.S. representatives.\(^1\) By mid-November, Rusk, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy were intent on reorganizing the U.S. military in Vietnam to supersede McGarr. Bundy, agreeing with the secretaries of state and defense, urged that a "military man" take over the war in Vietnam, with Nolting as a "complement" but not the "head man" there. McGarr, Bundy observed, "has been inadequate" and must be replaced. Consequently, McNamara instructed the JCS to develop plans for a new command structure in the RVN and to recommend a senior officer to assume control of it.\(^1\)8

The chiefs replied that the CINCPAC should run the war, because all of Southeast Asia, not only Vietnam, was at stake. Still trying to pin down the White House and pentagon, they also noted that any changes in the command structure had to be preceded by "clearly defined United States objectives that will be pursued in South Vietnam." Rostow, however, more directly responded to the issue, telling the president that the United States was wasting its money on "choppers and other gadgetry" unless "we . . . get a first class man out there to replace McGarr."\(^1\)9 Lansdale and Samuel Williams, McGarr's predecessor, also weighed in against the MAAG chief. Although the war had worsened, Lansdale wrote to Williams that "your successor seems to be fighting it with memos," and thus had lost his influence among the RVN's leaders. Williams added that...
recent rumors had indicated that Kennedy, McNamara, the ARVN's generals, and MAAG officers had all lost confidence in McGarr and someone was needed to "ride herd" on the RVNAF.20

By late December, McGarr's days as the military's top man in Vietnam were numbered. Lemnitzer informed him on 23 December that, while the chiefs were "completely satisfied" with his performance, his civilian counterparts in Washington wanted to begin a "new era" in U.S.-RVN relations, which meant establishing a new command structure in Vietnam.21 The new organization, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), would stress the role of U.S. assistance rather than advice, as embodied in the MAAG, and would give the American military representative in Saigon the "controlling voice . . . on military matters" on both the U.S. and Vietnamese side. McGarr and the MAAG would thus be subordinate to the new four-star commander.22 Felt and Rusk, however, objected to the JCS reorganization. Both believed that the CINCPAC should coordinate the U.S. military effort for all of Southeast Asia, with Rusk insisting that the ambassador retain overall authority for U.S. activities in the RVN. Thus the Pacific commander of the Navy, the service with the most limited role in Vietnam, would run the war, much to the chagrin of the other branches. Such wrangling over command arrangements would continue to haunt the military
throughout the war.\textsuperscript{23}

From Saigon, McGarr criticized the new structure and the overall American approach to Vietnam. The MAAG commander, admitting that he was "professionally and personally disappointed," lamented that his "frank periodic reports have failed to apprise top civilian policy makers of [the] crux [of the] situation here, as they [keep] thinking of solving a very unconventional situation in a basically conventional manner." The civilian demand for large-scale military success without corresponding political-economic-psychological planning, McGarr charged, had forced the RVNAF to take military action for which it was ill-prepared and which proved counterproductive. The general, who had sought more authority to press Diem for action throughout 1961, further charged that the new administrative structure, though intended to open a "new era" with Diem, had "disregard[ed] the basic nature of the man [whom McNamara] stated we could not change." The reorganization, McGarr added, gave the Vietnamese leader "virtual veto power over . . . proposed measures required to win." In one of the greater ironies of the war to that point, McGarr, a conventionally-trained Army commander, had attacked the Kennedy administration, supposedly imbued with the doctrines of Flexible Response and CI, for ignoring the need to develop the RVNAF's capabilities for anti-guerrilla war. "Permanent results require long range coordinated
action on all fronts and defeat of insurgencies historically takes years," the MAAG chief reminded Lemnitzer. The emergence and triumph of the MACV over the MAAG, Bruce Palmer later charged, was a major mistake, as it signalled that the United States, in emphasizing its assistance to Saigon, would overlook its primary military mission, namely the development and training of native forces.24

If the McGarr coup was not indicative of the civilian establishment's preparations to escalate the U.S. commitment in Vietnam, the announcement of the new commander surely was. Although Roger Hilsman and others wanted Kennedy to appoint General William P. Yarborough, head of the Special Forces school, or another officer with CI experience to command the MACV, the president in February 1962 chose Paul D. Harkins, an old tank commander and protege of Maxwell Taylor.25 Harkins, an unimaginative but politically-connected general, essentially ignored training for CI warfare and adopted a strategy based on the traditional Army concepts, namely attritional warfare designed to destroy the enemy's army. As Harkins envisioned it, the Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps would provide security while the ARVN would smash VC main-unit forces. The MACV commander, and Taylor, believed that technological superiority could decide the war in America's favor. They especially stressed the U.S.
advantage in airmobility, anticipating that the ARVN could call in air support to flush out the VC guerrillas and then destroy them.\textsuperscript{26} But the Vietnamese forces, as the military had repeatedly pointed out since the 1950s and as McGarr had just charged, were neither trained for nor competent to assume such tasks.

With Harkins in and CI downplayed, the U.S. military began to aggressively confront the VC and progressively Americanize the war. Yet within military circles, criticism of that approach was still commonplace. Lansdale, fighting a losing battle against Taylor for influence within the Kennedy administration, continued to press his views on counterinsurgency. But Taylor excluded him, like McGarr, from meetings with the Vietnamese leaders during the October mission.\textsuperscript{27} Colonel Burris, the vice president’s military aide, observed that the U.S. program in the south had yet to reverse the level or intensity of VC operations and that Taylor and the chiefs had failed to produce any timetable to end that trend. Given the limits on U.S. policy in Vietnam, Burris believed, America could expect huge losses and a ten-year war in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{28}

From Hawaii, the U.S. Army’s Pacific Command (USARPAC) added that VC attacks were "keep[ing] the nation in turmoil" and the NLF could be on the verge of establishing a provisional government in the south. Despite relying on
small-scale but widespread action, the VC was capable of launching "battalion-strength operations anywhere in South Vietnam at times and places of their own choosing." John Newman contends that Kennedy had not received information regarding the USARPAC's bleak reports. Considering that they were "unclassified" this seems unlikely. But even if the president had not seen the intelligence bulletins, he was surely aware of conditions in Vietnam, because even the JCS, which had invoked the domino theory to assert the importance of Vietnam, admitted that a slight decrease in insurgent activity "in no way indicates a diminishing capability of the VC [to] mount larger scale attacks at any time." McGarr, still MAAG chief, continued to forward his candid evaluations on the war. "While the VC retains the capability to launch attacks at the time and place of his choosing," he wrote to Felt, "available information indicates [that] acts of terrorism, sabotage and propaganda," which Harkins's strategy would not hamper, "will form the main effort for the VC for the immediate future." Writing to Lyndon Johnson, the MAAG chief scored the "attractive idea [of] quick and spectacular military victories" that had, unfortunately, gotten the upper hand over a sustained, long-range, realistic approach. While supportive of U.S. aid increases to the RVN, McGarr reminded the vice president that Diem continued to run the
show in the south and could not be relied upon to vigorously prosecute the war. "In providing the GVN [Government of Vietnam, i.e. the RVN] the tools to do the job," the MAAG chief thus warned, "we must not offer so much that they forget that the job of saving the country is theirs--only they can do it."

Commandant Shoup also had reservations about the expanding American role in Vietnam, and so opposed the deployment of a helicopter squadron to the Mekong delta because it would upset long-range Marine planning. Finally in April, at the JCS's direction, Shoup sent the squadron, task unit SHUFLY, to Soc Trang, eighty-five miles southwest of Saigon.

Perhaps more telling than the USARPAC, McGarr, and Shoup views was the report of the JCS's Joint War Games Control Group--which conducted a war game on Vietnam, Sigma I-62, in February. The game pitted officials representing the "Red" (NLF) and "Blue" (U.S.) governments, and the results could not have been reassuring. The Blue representatives admitted that the NLF had a "tremendous head start" in covert warfare and that civic action (CI) programs in the south would not show results until the RVN stopped VC infiltration. "Without plugging the flow of infiltration," the Blue officers revealed, "it is both physically and psychologically impossible for [pacification] programs to take hold." The simulated U.S. response thus involved a huge commitment, including air
strikes against the DRVN and a U.S. marine attack across the seventeenth parallel. Such a commitment, Blue officials recognized, would prompt PRC intervention and require changing the U.S. political objectives in Vietnam. The Red officers understood that the U.S. team was impatient and would not allow appropriate time for civic action programs to develop. They also said that America lacked a coherent set of objectives, and that political restraints and the threat of DRVN or Chinese intervention would temper American action. Maybe the situation was best summed up by the game director, who observed that "it appears that Red wanted to win without a war while Blue wanted not to lose also without a war."3

Among other officials, however, optimism was prevalent as U.S. material began to pour into the RVN. Beginning in January 1962 the White House had authorized the transfer to the RVN of Army helicopter companies, fixed wing aircraft, a troop carrier squadron with aircraft operating out of southern Vietnam and the Philippines, reconnaissance planes, air control personnel, equipment for crop defoliation, Navy mine sweepers, and more advisors, and it approved the use of napalm against the VC. In thus expanding the American role, the chiefs continued to insist that they still planned to build up the RVNAF to fight the war itself, though they were prepared to request U.S. combat troops if conditions continued to worsen.34 In
early 1962, however, the American helicopters and chemical weapons sent the VC reeling. The napalm, as Harkins explained, "really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong... and that is what counts." Both the MACV commander and Nolting agreed that a "spirit of movement" was finally noticeable due to the American military's contributions to the RVN.

Apparently emboldened by such optimism, visiting Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy assured officials in Saigon that "we are going to win in Viet-Nam. We will remain here until we do win." To make certain that his brother's prophesy came true, the president himself directed the Joint Chiefs to develop contingency plans to save the RVN should present efforts prove inadequate. The JCS chair also reaffirmed the American commitment. Lemnitzer, commenting on a proposal to negotiate with Ho put forth by the U.S. Ambassador to India John K. Galbraith, charged that such talks would put the United States in the position of reneging on "what is by now a well-known commitment to take a forthright stand against Communism in Southeast Asia." Citing Kennedy's and McNamara's pronouncements on Vietnam, he stressed that America would support Diem and the Vietnamese "to whatever extent may be necessary" to eliminate the VC.

In early 1962 the military had apparently little reason to question such a commitment, in large part because
reports on the war from Saigon were becoming progressively more positive. The period between the introduction of American aircraft, napalm, and defoliants into Vietnam and the end of 1962 may have been the military high point of the U.S. war in Vietnam as Harkins's reliance on firepower and technology kept the VC off balance and caused tremendous damage to the insurgency. In fact optimism ran so high that Kennedy, in July 1962, rejected another Harriman proposal for negotiations to establish a coalition government and hold free elections in the south, even though the NLF had agreed to talks. As Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz observed, "the President preferred to seek victory, rather than accept defeat, however much disguised or delayed."

Notwithstanding the heightened commitment and attendant optimism of early 1962, many American officers continued to point out serious problems in the RVN and hedge their bets on the necessity or viability of a U.S. combat commitment. In late February Admiral Felt, who still had not joined the bandwagon on Vietnam, recognized that the VC was forcing RVNAF and U.S. forces to fight on its terms, that the enemy's unconventional warfare would extend the war and sap the RVN's strength, and that the Communists's elusive methods were negating America's firepower advantage. Main-unit VC forces were numerically stronger than ever and maintaining high levels of political
and military activity, the CINCPAC added, controlled large chunks of southern territory, had kept open infiltration routes, enjoyed high morale and the support of a "significant segment" of the rural population, and could attack at will and force the ARVN "into sedentary--fixed positions." Given such politico-military factors, Felt understood, "time appears on the side of the Viet Cong" as it would seek "a prolonged form of attritional warfare" which could not "be defeated by purely military means."42

The USARPAC's intelligence report for March--candidly titled "Guerrilla War Drags On In South Vietnam"--estimated that VC armed strength had risen to about 22,000 and local militia and political cadre could total as much as 100,000. Waging mostly small-scale guerrilla warfare, the VC had maintained the military initiative--having just achieved its highest rate for initiated incidents for the week ending 19 February--but had the ability to conduct larger operations as well. As the RVN government seemed incapable of regaining influence over VC strongholds, it was clear that the NLF's political activity had also expanded and improved. Not only did such developments provide the enemy with a significant advantage in the south, but the United States and RVN had limited responses open to them because, as Army officials put it, "Communist strategy is not designed to achieve total victory . . . but to force a political settlement through . . . military pressure,
subversion, and propaganda."\textsuperscript{43}

Burris and Bagley, the military advisors to Lyndon Johnson and Maxwell Taylor, added that the VC had intensified its activity on an "increasingly broad spectrum" while ARVN desertions, about 1000 monthly, coupled with battle losses had made improvements in the southern military situation unlikely. Bagley noted that it was imperative for Diem to liberalize his regime if success was to be even possible, but Burris, noting several plots against Diem in the planning stages, found it almost "certain [that] Diem will be overthrown."\textsuperscript{44} In April the USARPAC likewise criticized the southern political structure and the RVNAF's failure to plan for CI warfare, while pointing out that VC-initiated incidents had risen again.\textsuperscript{45}

The noted military historian General S.L.A. Marshall, after a briefing in Saigon during which Harkins boasted of U.S. helicopters moving ARVN troops to various flashpoints, told the MACV commander, "you know it will not work. Right now Charly [soldiers' slang term for VC] is making himself furtive and hard to find." Once the VC recognized the U.S. tactics, Marshall warned, it would expose itself to draw the helicopters into areas near its base camps, where "ambush will follow ambush."\textsuperscript{46} Generals William Rosson and William Yarborough, recently returned from a tour of Southeast Asia, during which Harkins said that defeat of
the VC was "at hand," found "almost universal skepticism" away from MACV headquarters in Saigon.47

In his report after returning Rosson decried the continuing absence of an effective CI strategy. The CIP was "about the size of a Washington telephone directory and it presents such a formidable appearance that the [ARVN] is afraid of it." The RVNAF, moreover, was still poorly trained and too passive, civic action was "disorganized and fragmented," and the U.S. command structure required "reorganization and simplification." Although Rosson did not appear discouraged, his report, as the record of his briefing reads, "did not present a picture which would give rise to optimism." The Army staff in Washington, however, paid little attention to his analysis, although, as Andrew Krepinevich observes, "the negative reports given Rosson by advisers in the field were symptoms of an emerging revolt from below by many Army advisers against the Army hierarchy's view" of the war's progress and conventional warfare methods.48 General Krulak, the JCS's expert on CI and optimist on Vietnam, similarly believed that "the battle will largely be won in the hamlets and the countryside by the less sophisticated elements."49 Nonetheless Krulak and others who knew better continued to follow Harkins's lead on Vietnam strategy, in large part because Kennedy was publicly committed to the RVN. The United States "cannot desist in Viet-Nam," the president
asserted at an April news conference, even as the number of American casualties in the RVN continued to rise.\textsuperscript{50}

Throughout June and July 1962 various military officials continued to submit candid evaluations of the VC's military successes and emerging economic warfare, rising infiltration into the south, and continued deficiencies in the Strategic Hamlets program. Put together, those conditions could, as Wilbur Wilson put it mildly, "cause some degree of alarm."\textsuperscript{51} Perhaps because of such frank assessments the military, despite its outward optimism and belligerence, was not unduly eager for combat.

Roger Hilsman, in fact, charged that armed forces leaders were tying the president's hands on Indochina policy. In mid-1962, amid continued turmoil in Laos and Vietnam, Kennedy and his chiefs considered possible military responses. Although the president and secretary of state, among others, wanted to deploy U.S. troops to the area--in Rusk's case into the DRVN--Hilsman and NSC staff member Michael Forrestal worried "that the military was going to go soft" in its approach to Indochina. General Decker, acting JCS chair at the time, had drawn up a list of possible courses of action--including negotiations, diplomatic approaches to the Soviet Union, bringing the situation before the ICC for resolution, or committing SEATO defense forces--which Hilsman called "the damndest collection of mush and softness I have seen in a long
time." Because of this weakness, he believed, "of course the President was in no position to do the military moves he wanted." Kennedy was thus "boxed in" because the military had put forth only limited measures for Indochina and Kennedy "hasn't decided enough to deter the Communists but he has decided more than enough to get into all sorts of political trouble . . . at home."52

Kennedy would soon find such political trouble, in both Vietnam and at home, in the person of John Paul Vann. Two of the classic works on the Vietnam War--David Halberstam's *The Making of A Quagmire* (1965) and Neil Sheehan's more recent and compelling *A Bright Shining Lie* (1988)--have thoroughly covered Vann's ideas and impact, so his story does not require a full retelling here. But it is necessary to take account of his insights on Vietnam, both because they widely diverged from established U.S. policy and because of the attention he received, principally from Halberstam's reports in the *New York Times*.

Lt. Colonel Vann was the advisor to the ARVN's 7th Infantry Division, operating in the northern Mekong delta. The 7th Division's commander, Colonel Huynh Van Cao, was an exceedingly cautious and vain man who was more concerned with minimizing his own losses that engaging the enemy, characteristics that Vann believed were prevalent throughout the RVNAF.53 Thus, for the better part of a
decade after his arrival in Vietnam in the Spring of 1962, Vann would concern himself with making the Vietnamese responsible for their own war. Toward that end, he stressed the development of effective civic action programs to diminish the popular appeal of the NLF's nationalism and land reform program. To Vann, America's principal concern in the RVN had to be keeping the people safe. "Without security, he believed, "nothing else we do will last." 54

Harkins's tactics, however, were counterproductive to such goals in Vann's view. With U.S. air power and the ARVN artillery unleashed in 1962, indiscriminate bombings of peasant hamlets became commonplace, thus facilitating NLF and VC recruiting and propaganda. In addition, the ARVN often brutalized peasants, usually after falsely accusing them of being VC sympathizers, which Vann and many other advisors saw as the worst conceivable behavior in a guerrilla war. When actually facing the enemy, however, the ARVN often fled, and the VC accordingly built up an arsenal of American weapons as a result. Vann's pleas about such problems to MACV headquarters, however, fell on deaf ears and when, in September, he briefed incoming JCS Chair Maxwell Taylor, Harkins consistently "presented views and/or overrode key points" that the dissident colonel tried to present. 55 Thus Halberstam would write on 20 October that "the closer one gets to the actual contact level of the war, the farther one gets from official
optimism." A "high American officer" cited in the New York Times report added that he thought that "this war is being officially reported to look good on short-range progress reports . . . [but] some basic things just aren’t being corrected and I don’t know if we’re in a position to correct them."56

In mid-1962, however, Washington maintained its sanguine outlook on the war. Hilsman found "no evidence" to support charges from the field of continued politico-military deterioration in the RVN. McNamara, citing "tremendous progress" and aware of the tenuous nature of public support for a long-term commitment to Diem, directed the chiefs to develop plans to build up the RVNAF to the point where the United States could begin to phase out the use of American personnel in Vietnam.57 The Pentagon and White House thought such action was feasible in no small part because Harkins had assured the defense secretary that "there is no doubt we are on the winning side." The commander, in fact, estimated that it would only take about a year for the MACV to get the ARVN, CG, and SDC fully operational and engaged against the VC "in all areas." McNamara was not quite so optimistic, so he told Harkins to assume that it would take three more years "to bring the VC in SVN under control."58

Notwithstanding such planning, John Vann was not alone among military officials in expressing reservations about
the war, even as optimism was peaking in the later months of 1962. Several American officers, after touring Vietnam, had expressed varying degrees of pessimism. Most pointed out the VC’s capabilities, ARVN’s weaknesses, and continued political turmoil in the south. Diem had retained "absolute control" over his armed forces, to the point of refusing to arm certain units for fear that the weapons could be used against his regime in a coup attempt. The officers further warned that the absence of competent junior and non-commissioned officers was certain to exacerbate problems in the field, while "the attitude of the Army is pervaded by apathy. They just don’t seem to possess the will to win." The Vietnamese were "equally proficient," as one officer sarcastically observed, "at attacking an open rice field with nothing in it and . . . at quickly by-passing any heavily wooded area that might possibly contain a few VC." Summing up his visit, the officer believed that "the military and political situation in South Vietnam can be aptly described by four words, ‘it is a mess.’" 59

The MACV itself found that the number of VC-initiated attacks and infiltration continued to rise, with a confirmed 1600-1800 guerrillas entering the south in recent months, more than offsetting increased VC casualties. The Army’s Pacific command added that the insurgents "almost undoubtedly still retain the initiative and are free to set
the pattern of military action." Indeed the VC's capabilities had "not been significantly reduced by GVN offensives; Communist vigor remains undiminished." Harkins admitted that the VC "completely dominate [the] bulk of inhabitants" in the border areas of southern Vietnam and "can move across the border . . . to locations deep within corps area with little or no chance of being detected or [reported]." At the same time Colonel Burris warned the vice president that RVNAF casualty and desertion rates remained high, principally in combat units, so "not only is troop morale low, but Government officials as well have begun to manifest pessimism." Even "cautiously optimistic" American officers like the naval attache in Saigon, Commander Everett Parke, advised that "we must not expect to see a sudden dramatic improvement. We are up against people who are capable of outlasting us and outwaiting us, and unless we make up our minds to . . . get this thing put into long-term perspective, I think we will be deluding ourselves."60

By later 1962 the military seemed to be of two minds on Vietnam. While Harkins and his officers pushed the official line that the RVN could successfully eliminate the enemy in short time, others had desolate views of the war and urged a long-range perspective. By that time, however, service leaders understood the president's determination to achieve success in Vietnam, especially after Kennedy
replaced the Eisenhower holdovers on the JCS in the Fall, and so continued to follow the White House's lead on Indochina policy. The incoming JCS chair, Maxwell Taylor—who had consistently expressed his own reservations about Vietnam and on that very day heard Vann's biting remarks on the war—nonetheless met with Nhu, Nolting and Harkins on 11 September and was "much encouraged" by the progress in Vietnam since his October 1961 visit. He observed that the situation "resembled that which usually exists during any war. There is a period during which an impasse exists, and then, suddenly, a sudden surge to victory."61

In his official report, filed on 20 September, Taylor added to his sanguine outlook on the war, lauding progress in the Strategic Hamlets program, improved training in the ARVN, better performances from the CG and SDC, reforms in the command and control structure, reduced casualty rates, and greater RVN control over southern territory.62 At the same time the JCS chair-designate recognized that serious obstacles to success continued to exist. Infiltration remained high, there was "still no coordinated national plan establishing priorities for operations against the VC," and RVNAF intelligence remained inadequate despite U.S. efforts. Taylor, Bruce Palmer later observed, was so closely associated with the president that his "objectivity and independence of mind had to be somewhat compromised." As a result, he appeared "to be ambivalent on the basic
issues of Vietnam."

Just as Taylor returned to Washington, David Shoup, the only chief to retain his position after Kennedy's reorganization of the JCS, arrived in Vietnam. The Commandant "came back an expert," he sarcastically observed later, but his evaluation at the time was not optimistic. He especially criticized the Strategic Hamlets program, which was dislocating rural Vietnamese and thus undermining efforts to win the allegiance of the people. The Vietnamese Marine Corps, being trained by U.S. Marines, had shown negligible progress as well. Shoup thus continued to oppose U.S. combat entry into the war "with no qualms whatever" and believed that such resistance to intervention was the position of "every responsible military man to my knowledge." The new Army Chief of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, also seemed to have a realistic outlook. Vietnam was "getting warmer all the time," he conceded, and the United States had to increase its support of the RVN "in a rather massive way."

Despite such substantial aid to the RVN, an October 1962 analysis of the war from Saigon did not offer a promising outlook for the next six months. MACV intelligence lauded RVN improvements and remained optimistic that American airmobility, close air support, and firepower would continue to seriously damage the enemy. As the MACV saw it, the VC "need a significant military
victory, or victories, to reestablish their public image and discredit the government forces." Such sanguine views, however, did not flow easily from the intelligence estimate. The VC, U.S. officers reported, had increased its strength to about 22,000 confirmed main-unit forces, 120,000 guerrillas, and additional political support personnel. About 1000 guerrillas continued to infiltrate monthly, while about 3500 guerrillas based in Laos could infiltrate at any time, and the PAVN had over 17,000 troops near the DMZ which could enter the RVN without undue opposition. The MACV also expected VC activity to remain at past levels, while its logistics support would also continue unabated. The insurgents would likely retain the tactical advantage in I and II Corps, where VC attacks against southern military units "would have a number of obvious advantages"—including retarding ARVN progress, giving Ho an international propaganda victory over the United States, and possibly sparking a coup attempt against Diem. For the remainder of 1962 military reports out of Vietnam sounded similarly ambivalent themes about the war.

Both the JCS chair and USARPAC admitted that the strategic hamlets, though improving, were poorly constructed and defended. By November 1962, Taylor reported, the Vietnamese had developed less than one-third of a projected 11,000 areas designated as hamlets, with
only 600 of those adequately secure and properly administered. USARPAC officers were more pleased with the ARVN's performance in IV Corps, where the VC effort "has been neutralized, if not forced on the defensive." But Army officials at home were not as hopeful as their Pacific brethren. In a late November briefing, representatives of the Army's Southeast Asia branch contended that the VC was "still forcing the [RVN] to fight on the Communists' terms." Trends for the future were also troubling. The enemy was arming itself with captured weapons to such an extent that "today, the Viet Cong has a claim on the arsenals of the United States and the Government of South Vietnam." Such developments demonstrated that the VC had successfully met its needs--weapons, equipment, food--from inside the RVN itself. With "minimal and simple" logistics requirements, the VC was "almost completely self-sufficient through in-country procurement." 

Field reports from Vietnam, however, showed diminishing VC activity, "growing effectiveness" from the ARVN, and greater hamlet control. The U.S. military was generally pleased with the RVNAF's expansion--ARVN strength had risen to 219,000, the CG to 77,000, and SDC to 99,500--and performance, while the increased U.S. presence in Vietnam, including 11,000 "advisors," 300 aircraft, 120 helicopters, heavy weapons, pilots flying combat missions, defoliants, and napalm, had sent the VC reeling.
Likewise, Colonel Wilson, whose assessments from the highlands had been often bleak, found the ARVN fighting aggressively while the VC seemed to be avoiding combat. "The tide has turned" in II Corps, he concluded.\textsuperscript{72}

The tide seemed to reverse itself quickly, however. Hilsman and Forrestal, whom the president had despatched to Saigon to report on the war, arrived and on 2 January 1963 reported that "things are going much better than they were a year ago," although "not nearly so well as" Harkins and others might suggest.\textsuperscript{73} That very day the VC proved that Hilsman's latter observation was true. At Ap Bac, about 35 miles southwest of Saigon, in the Mekong delta, the RVNAF, being pressed by American advisors for a victory in a set-piece battle, saw a golden opportunity to rout VC forces. With a four-to-one troop advantage and supporting artillery, armor and helicopters, American observers expected the ARVN's 7th Division to control the field at Ap Bac. The VC, however, dominated the battle that day, inflicting heavy damage on the RVN troops, killing three U.S. advisors, and downing five helicopters. The ARVN failed to adequately use U.S.-provided armored personnel carriers, and refused to engage the enemy for fear of incurring greater casualties. Ap Bac shocked many Americans in Vietnam, but, as Halberstam wrote at the time, "the only people not surprised are the American advisors in the field." While Harkins and Felt, among others,
proclaimed success, John Paul Vann bitterly attacked the ARVN in his after-action report on Ap Bac. As Vann saw it the southern Vietnamese were still poorly-trained, afraid to fight, and lacked battle discipline. The USARPAC likewise scored the RVNAF and pointed out that the American and Vietnamese losses "will be turned into [a] propaganda weapon and will provide [the] enemy with [a] morale-building victory."

At the same time General Edward Rowny, an old associate of Hilsman then in Vietnam on a special mission to introduce new weapons and techniques to the Vietnamese, more generally questioned U.S. optimism. A year after reorganization, Rowny reported, the MACV command structure was still troubled, with CINCPAC "trying to run the war even in practical detail." While Harkins was "a good officer and competent" he was "not . . . imaginative and driving, highly motivated or creative." The MACV's saving grace, Rowny believed, was its junior officer corps, most of whom challenged Harkins's strategy and called for more political and civic action programs.

Rowny, who took part in twenty operations during his visit, also criticized the ARVN, as Vann had, for its "considerable delay" in waiting for air strikes, for allowing the VC to escape, and for its brutal habit of capturing or shooting anyone left in a bombed-out village on the grounds of being "suspected VC." While harsh with
senior citizens and children, the ARVN soldiers "do not really want to tangle with the enemy" because Diem's prohibition on defeat had led to "excessive caution" among his commanders. Hilsman and Forrestal themselves were guardedly optimistic, concluding that "the war will last longer than we would like, cost more in terms of both lives and money than we anticipated, and prolong the period in which a sudden and dramatic event could upset the gains already made."77

Ap Bac and candid reports out of Vietnam notwithstanding, Kennedy and McNamara continued to insist that all was well in Vietnam. As Chester Cooper, an NSC analyst, explained, Washington looked upon Ap Bac as only "an embarrassing trough in an upward-moving curve of government progress."78 Reports by the CIA, Bagley and Burris, however, pointed out the VC's growing capability. To Burris the war was an "escalating stalemate," while Bagley warned the JCS chair that no amount of military aid would save Diem unless accompanied by "parallel . . . economic and social reform."79

Army Chief of Staff Earle Wheeler, head of a military team which Kennedy sent to Vietnam in late January, offered a far more sanguine view. Wheeler praised the Strategic Hamlets program--the "single greatest case for . . . encourage[ment]"--and lauded improvements in the ARVN, CG, and SDC. The Army chief nonetheless recognized the U.S.
dilemma in Vietnam. America could not withdraw its personnel, but also had to guard against an "over commitment of forces" and could not assume command authority over Vietnamese units. Wheeler, however, also wanted to make the DRVN "bleed a little bit" so urged that the ARVN, with U.S. training, stage a "powerful military endeavor" of "sabotage, destruction, propaganda and subversive missions against North Vietnam." Even without such measures, he concluded that "we are winning slowly on the present thrust" and there was thus "no compelling reason to change" course.\textsuperscript{80}

Forrestal immediately challenged Wheeler's enthusiasm, telling Kennedy that a White House meeting with the Army chief "was a complete waste of your time for which I apologize." The "rosy euphoria" of Wheeler's report, Forrestal charged, made effective planning for future action impossible.\textsuperscript{81} Harkins, however, had no such planning problems. After the JCS had approved an earlier augmentation of the American air support program, Operation FARMGATE, the MACV commander sought a further reinforcement of 129 aircraft. Felt, who had told the chiefs that Harkins's previous request was his last, balked. He pointed out that Washington would interpret such a vast expansion as proof that the RVN "in fact was unable to achieve victory over the VC without a significantly increased US commitment in Viet-Nam."\textsuperscript{82}
Felt, however, had joined the bandwagon on Vietnam by early 1963, predicting that victory was likely by 1965, even though "the VC are still everywhere. They still have much of their relatively secure strategic base structure." Harkins also continued to insist that the RVNAF's performance was improving, the VC defection rate had risen, and the Strategic Hamlets program was providing security to rural Vietnamese. Given such "Alice-in-Wonderland reporting," as George McT. Kahin called it, Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared that the war was "turning an important corner" with the ARVN holding "the initiative in most areas of the country."

By contrast, reports from the field were gloomy. In February, advisors Vann, Wilson, and Daniel Boone Porter, and MACV official General Robert York, among others, raised Harkins's ire with harsh assessments of the war. Porter charged that the ARVN's reckless use of artillery was disproportionately harming "innocent women, children and old people." Wilbur Wilson, his successor as senior advisor in III Corps, scored the ARVN's ineffective pacification efforts and "favoritism and graft" among the local officials.

Colonel Francis P. Serong, an Australian Army advisor working with Harkins, also noted several "disturbing trends." Although hailed by the MACV, a recent slowdown in activity by the VC "has been their own choice," Serong
observed. In addition, the quality of VC armaments had improved, the insurgents's infrastructure in the south had been thoroughly developed, and the VC build-up in the north continued unhindered, with the Communists able to double their troop strength "overnight" if needed, logistics problems notwithstanding. An Army advisor who had just completed his tour in Vietnam further told Roger Hilsman that successful civic action, not "simply killing Viet Cong," was imperative to winning the war. The officer also expressed his "considerable skepticism" with regard to claims that airpower was under tight control, telling Hilsman of a recent air strike on a village in Lam Dong province which had caused fifteen casualties, including women and children, without apparent reason.

While contending with such bleak reviews of the war from the field, the MACV leadership had to confront another problem which, over la longue durée, would become more grave. From the initial deployment of U.S. advisors to Vietnam, a serious interservice feud had developed within the MACV. In 1960 Air Force General Theodore Milton criticized McGarr's plans, which were "entirely dominated by classic ground force thinking." At the same time, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis LeMay, charged that the Army, in developing James Gavin's concept of airmobility, was "in effect building another air force for the Army." The February 1962 MACV reorganization also
caused acrimony, as the Army and Air Force both opposed CINCPAC’s operational authority for the war. LeMay was also at odds with Harkins—whom he considered an "idiot"—because few Air Force officers were on the MACV staff and air activities, he charged, were "depreciated in South Vietnam." But when LeMay complained that his representatives could not get past Harkins’s Chief of Staff, Marine General Richard Weede, to discuss air operations, Commandant Shoup shot back that "if Senior Air Force officers in Saigon were not man enough to insist on seeing [Harkins] on a vital issue, we were in greater difficulty there than he had thought."8

Such division escalated throughout 1962. The Army and Air Force continued to argue over command of the air, with LeMay wanting his commanders to control all aircraft and aviation units in Vietnam, including the Army’s, while Army officers insisted that its ground commanders control their aviation elements.9 The Commander of the 13th Air Force equated prospects for success in Vietnam with Air Force interests. With the Army imposing its will over the MACV and dominating the CI effort, the Air Force mission would be diminished and that "will cost US lives in future actions." The Air Force’s director of planning was more blunt, remarking that "it may be improper to say we are at war with the Army. However, we believe that if the Army efforts [to control strategy and air assets] are
successful, they may have a long term adverse effect in the US military posture that could be more important than the battle presently being waged with the Viet Cong."91

At the same time relations among the Joint Chiefs in Washington were increasingly strained. As Taylor became the JCS chair, the other service leaders chafed at his relationship with the president. As LeMay saw it, the Chiefs were excluded from the decisionmaking process. "Taylor might have been" active in developing policy on Vietnam with Kennedy, the Air Force chief noted, "but we didn't agree with Taylor in most cases."92 Air Force General Nathan Twining, the JCS chair from 1957 to 1960, later charged that Taylor's rise to prominence in the Kennedy administration was a turning point in Vietnam policy. Twining "couldn't understand how they [Taylor and Kennedy] were putting so many troops in there." Many other officers, he contended, believed that any U.S. commitment would necessarily escalate. "We got euchered into" intervention based on Taylor's rosy outlooks, the general argued, but "we used to fight with him all the time. This was in the JCS."93

Twining's enmity for Taylor ran deep. "I've always felt sorry for him. He must have a hard time living with himself," he maintained. His charges about Taylor's decisive role are exaggerated too, but Twining's analysis does speak clearly to the deep divisions within the
military regarding Vietnam. In turn, Air Force leaders came under criticism from the Army. General Rowny told Hilsman that the U.S. Air Force in Vietnam was reluctant to provide close air support for helicopter missions, and was stressing "interdiction" and "retaining command of the air" even though the DRVN had no air power to speak of in the south. Such internecine fighting would continue within the MACV throughout the war and come to a head in early 1968, when, in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, the Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps were virtually at war against each other, and by which time it was clear that America would not achieve success in Vietnam.

In mid-1963, however, Harkins and his associates were principally concerned with ending the war in Vietnam. Since January of that year he and Felt had been developing plans to augment the RVNAF, eventually to 575,000 forces, and withdraw about 1000 American military personnel "based on the assumption that the progress of the counterinsurgency campaign would warrant such a move." Obviously the chiefs and MACV believed that conditions in the RVN did warrant withdrawal plans. Harkins reported that two-thirds of the projected strategic hamlets had been completed and were providing security to about 8,000,000 villagers in the south. Accordingly the MACV commander told Taylor that "we have accomplished our part of everything we set out to do after your visit in the Fall of
'61--all except ending the war, and that is not far off if things continue at present pace." All that was needed to finish off the VC, Harkins believed, was the "will and determination of the Vietnamese to win." In Washington, Kennedy's will and determination was not in question. The president and his advisors "believe strongly" in maintaining an independent RVN, Kennedy told reporters in July, and "we are not going to withdraw from that effort." Disengagement or a reduced commitment, he added, "would mean a collapse not only of South Viet-Nam, but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there."

Harkins must have sincerely believed that victory was imminent in August 1963. There was, however, plenty of evidence to indicate otherwise. Political turmoil, an increasingly-grave problem after Diem became head of state in 1955, reached a crisis stage in mid-1963. The RVN president intensified his persecution of Buddhists in the south while his brother, Nhu, was making overtures to the NLF about a negotiated, neutralist solution in Vietnam. As acrimony between Diem and the Americans was escalating, John Vann added to Harkins's problems by again challenging the MACV view of the war. By July 1963 Vann's outlook on Vietnam had attracted the attention of Army Generals Harold K. Johnson, Barksdale Hamlett, and Bruce Palmer, who arranged a briefing by Vann to the Joint Chiefs. Taylor and Krulak, however, conspired to cancel Vann's appearance,
prompting an "open war" in the JCS. An enraged Vann said that the United States "couldn't win the war," and other chiefs charged that Taylor was covering for his friend Harkins, while Palmer believed that the JCS chair and McNamara were concerned with Kennedy's 1964 election hopes and did not want the likes of Vann rocking the boat.\textsuperscript{100}

Despite the attempts to quiet Vann, other advisors continued to follow his example. After a Vietnamese officer briefing Krulak reported that 123 secure hamlets existed in the southern delta, Lt. Colonel Fred Ladd informed the Marine general that only eight could be considered safe--thereby earning Harkins's rebuke for his honesty.\textsuperscript{101} Likewise, John Mecklin, the Embassy's Public Affairs Officer, received a glowing report from a senior officer at an American outpost in the delta, only to have the MAAG deputy there later confide that the situation was "rapidly deteriorating."\textsuperscript{102} Meanwhile in II Corps, Colonel Hal D. McCown, Wilbur Wilson's successor, had accepted Harkins's outlook on the war but his deputy, Colonel Rowland Renwanz, had a markedly different view. While McCown saw final success forthcoming, Renwanz scored ARVN inactivity, claimed that the Strategic Hamlets program had made little progress, and that it would take as long as six years just to pacify II Corps.\textsuperscript{103} Even Wheeler later conceded that "things went to hell in a handbasket" in Vietnam after the political crises of late 1963.\textsuperscript{104}
Kennedy, however, stayed the course on Vietnam. During a 2 September interview with Walter Cronkite the president, while asserting that it was the RVN's war to win or lose and "all we can do is help," did not "agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. I know people don't like to see Americans to be engaged in this kind of effort . . . but it is a very important struggle even though it is far away." A week later he told Chet Huntley essentially the same thing. Although Americans would get anxious or impatient about Vietnam, withdrawal "only makes it easy for the Communists. I think we should stay."

Krulak held similar views, returning to Washington after four days in Vietnam with an enthusiastic endorsement of Harkins's policies. But the new ambassador to Saigon questioned such optimism. Henry Cabot Lodge "doubted the value of the answers which are given by young officers to direct questions by generals or . . . ambassadors. The urge to give an optimistic and favorable answer is quite insurmountable—and understandable. I, therefore, doubt . . . that the military are not affected by developments in Saigon." Even Taylor, who was pleased with Krulak's assessment, used a 10 September NSC meeting to reaffirm that "he would not be associated with any program which included [a] commitment of U.S. Armed Forces."
Weeks later, Taylor himself and McNamara travelled to Vietnam to appraise the war. The JCS chair and secretary of defense accepted Harkins' view of "great progress," recommended that the 1000-man withdrawal be publicized, and anticipated that the "bulk of U.S. personnel" could be phased out by the end of 1965. But amid the continued crisis in the RVN, with the ARVN attacking Buddhists as well as plotting against the Ngos, Taylor's report, as George McT. Kahin explained, was "replete with ambiguity and inconsistency" regarding its political evaluations. The "high tension" in the south, Taylor and McNamara admitted, could adversely affect military operations. Nevertheless, the White House issued a statement at the same time again affirming its support of and commitment to the RVN.

In the month following Taylor's and McNamara's return, such fears were confirmed. As the U.S. military tried to continue prosecuting the war, the political turmoil in Saigon was intensifying daily, culminating in a 1 November coup during which ARVN troops murdered Diem and Nhu. The Diem ouster had thus laid bare Harkins' optimistic outlook on Vietnam, and the VC immediately went on the offensive in November 1963. The MACV commander, and Lodge, however, still expected a "stepped-up campaign against the Viet Cong" and a more rapid conclusion to the war than would have been possible under Diem. The MACV also continued
to insist that the ARVN had the situation in the south under control and promised "excellent working relations" between U.S. officials and the new leaders of the RVN, a junta headed by General Duong Van "Big" Minh.\textsuperscript{113}

Not everyone in uniform was so optimistic. In fact, Krulak believed that it was an "implicit syndrome" among officers to send back sanguine assessments of the war, a condition "exacerbated by the fact that the people on the ground themselves did not know the magnitude of the problem which faced them."\textsuperscript{114} But at its first meeting after the coup, the JCS observed that Kennedy wanted political stability, not necessarily democracy, in the RVN but that the "next governmen[t] has only [a] 50-50 chance of being any better."\textsuperscript{115} Colonel Serong, who surveyed the military situation in the RVN after the coup, also took a dim view of events in a report forwarded to Harkins. The war "is now running against us--and has been for some months," Serong noted. The RVNAF's rate of operations was dropping while casualties and weapons losses had risen. The VC was strong in all regions, particularly in the Mekong delta, and the PAVN was capable of successfully intervening in I Corps. Although the colonel saw some short-term benefits in ousting Diem, he believed that the RVN political system would not be significantly modified and that personality conflicts would riddle the junta, hamper military operations, and distort national strategy. Serong thus
drew up a list of problems still plaguing the war effort, including "The VC growing stronger. A depleted national manpower base. A SH program which must be made to work. An inferior officer corps. A low morale military component. An open border. Buddhists--and others. A dispirited population. A dictatorship." In concluding, he could only lament that "except for two personalities, very little has changed."116

Clearly John Kennedy saw a troubled country and deteriorating war effort when he looked at the RVN in November 1963. But the young president who had staked so much American credibility and treasure there would not see the impact of his policies in Vietnam. As Kennedy travelled to Dallas on 22 November 1963, there was no evidence indicating that he would renege on his commitment to the RVN, despite the politico-military turmoil in the south that was recognizable to all.117

In the year preceding the president's assassination--when, not coincidentally, Kennedy appointees Harkins and Taylor began to run the war in Saigon and Washington--the military's reports had become exceedingly positive. But even those generals most sanguine about conditions in the south constantly recognized that serious problems existed in the RVN and assumed that indigenous forces, not American combat troops, should fight the war in Vietnam. At lower
levels, especially among U.S. advisors in the field, the critique of the war was more biting, with John Vann, Wilbur Wilson, and so many others offering candid, and at times desolate, observations about the war.

Such division within the military was endemic to U.S. policymaking for Vietnam, but is still overlooked in studies of the war. Nearly three decades have passed since Kennedy’s death, but his legacy regarding Vietnam is still controversial and open to widely divergent interpretations. But much of Kennedy’s record is clear. The young president, especially after political crises in Cuba, Laos, and Vienna, and thus at home, in the early days of his administration, had decided to commit American resources and credibility to defend the RVN to whatever extent necessary. The military’s outlook was more ambivalent, but no wiser. Most service leaders did not abandon their fundamental objective of training and expanding the RVNAF to fight against the VC so that U.S. combat troops would not have to do so. Nor were most officers naive or unduly sanguine about U.S. prospects in Vietnam. For the most part American generals such as Felt, McGarr, and even Taylor, as well as advisors in Vietnam like John Vann or Wilbur Wilson, recognized that the VC’s strengths, RVNAF’s deficiencies, and political chaos in the south were creating tremendous, possibly insurmountable, obstacles to success. Many military officials also understood that any
initial commitment of U.S. forces would inevitably lead to an expanded American effort and combat participation in a drawn-out war.

At the same time the military was badly fragmented in its approach to Vietnam, with Army, Air Force, and Marine generals divided over questions of organization and strategy. The debate over strategy in particular would intensify and undermine American military prospects in Vietnam. While McGarr and many of his advisors seemed to believe in the need to develop the RVN counterinsurgency capabilities and establish a stable political system, MACV leaders chose to employ conventional tactics such as firepower, air support and attrition to defeat the guerrillas. As General Harkins—whose range of options for strategy in Vietnam ran the spectrum from A to B—took over in early 1962, U.S. forces in Vietnam began to progressively employ traditional means to destroy the enemy’s army, even though the VC was not an "army" in the traditional sense. When others questioned that strategy—McGarr and Vann for instance—Taylor, Harkins, and White House officials silenced those military critics rather than reevaluate the nature of the war and the American role in it.

Indeed, no fundamental reappraisal of the war was ever likely, or maybe even possible. The military had recognized the political imperatives driving Kennedy’s
policy on Indochina and reacted accordingly. Despite often-grave misgivings about the commitment to the RVN, American generals consistently accepted greater responsibility for the war. Some of the brass, Harkins and Taylor for example, seemed to have sincerely believed the prevalent optimism in Saigon at times, although the JCS chair especially was aware of the perils of Vietnam and never wavered from his opposition to deploying ground troops there. Even more, however, Taylor and other generals had seen civil-military relations progressively deteriorate during political battles in the previous few years. Having been burned by the White House in consecutive administrations, as military leaders saw it, it became essential to pin down the administration on the nature of the U.S. commitment to Vietnam and to force the president to be accountable for any decisions on the war. As a result McGarr in 1961 explicitly warned Lemnitzer that America might very well fail in Vietnam and the military could likely be blamed for the loss. While their reports out of the RVN candidly spoke of conditions there, American officers also knew that the White House wanted to hear good news about the war. As it turned out, military assessments of Vietnam were filled with non sequitur as much as analysis.

For his part Kennedy was well-informed and deliberate in making Vietnam policy. Indeed, some of his supporters
believe, as John Newman put it, that "the preponderance of evidence strongly suggests that by 1963 Kennedy knew the war was a lost cause." If so, however, the president consciously extended American participation in an inevitable disaster, for his actions up to November 1963 do not indicate any desire to disengage. He kept increasing the size of the U.S. force in Vietnam, authorized more extensive operations against the VC, and never backed off from his commitment to the RVN. Had he wanted to pull back from Vietnam, Kennedy could have cited the military's own doubts about the war to cover himself against the political fallout from such a move. He never chose to do so.

Instead, as Bassett and Pelz observe, the president overrode the reservations of key officials who sought to make the RVN responsible for its own war and "sent in 16,000 advisers, 100 of whom had died by the end of 1963; he sponsored the strategic hamlet program; he unleashed a war of attrition against the NLF; and he allowed the military to use napalm, defoliation, and helicopter envelopment tactics." At the time of his assassination, his vice president, Lyndon Johnson, pointed out that Kennedy "had not revised his assessment of our role there or of the importance of South Vietnam to Southeast Asia and our own security. He continued to believe that the conquest of Southeast Asia would have the most serious impact on Asia and us."
For about a year, between Harkins's arrival and the Buddhist uprisings, it appeared that Kennedy's policies might pay off, and the JCS even began to plan for the withdrawal of American personnel from Vietnam. But by late 1963 it was evident that McGarr, Felt, Shoup, Vann, Wilson, and at times Taylor, among others, had earlier and more realistically described conditions in the RVN. But, as Taylor himself later admitted, many American officials during the Kennedy years "didn't foresee the toughness and endurance of the North Vietnamese or the ineptitude of the South Vietnamese leaders in unifying their own people and in using the many forms of aid the U.S. would give." Several American officers, however, did anticipate such problems, but the new administration in Washington was committed to continuing the Kennedy legacy, with the maintenance of the RVN a central component of its national security policy.
CHAPTER VI
"SEEING THINGS THROUGH IN VIETNAM": LBJ, THE MILITARY, AND THE GROWING AMERICAN COMMITMENT TO VIETNAM, NOVEMBER 1963-DECEMBER 1964

As Lyndon Johnson moved into the Oval Office, U.S. policy in Vietnam was in disarray. The events of November 1963 had undermined the optimistic claims of Harkins, Taylor, and others, and the enemy was successfully exploiting the political crisis in the south. Despite those problems, the new president would not deviate from the path that Kennedy had established. With over 16,000 military personnel already deployed, the United States had begun to make a substantial commitment to the RVN, and the American presence would grow exponentially in the coming years. In the course of his first year in the Oval Office, Johnson would authorize covert operations, approve a massive bombing campaign against the DRVN, and be on the verge of introducing ground combat troops into the conflict. By early 1965, despite many military leaders's reservations, the United States was about to take over the
war in Vietnam.

During the first year of his presidency, Johnson expanded the U.S. presence in Vietnam with clear recognition of the deteriorating politico-military conditions in the south and the hazards of military intervention there. Like his predecessor, however, he believed that political factors, both at home and internationally, made it imperative to continue to protect the RVN. Thus predisposed to find an effective antidote to Communist expansion in Indochina, the president rapidly increased America's military stake there.

Less than five years later, Johnson's policy was in shambles. America's soldiers, firepower, and bombs could not cure the various illnesses of the RVN. Rather than confront the pathology of southern Vietnam's condition, Johnson and his advisors, both civilian and military, tried to cure the RVN with the panacea of technological warfare. In the end, the United States destroyed Vietnam in an attempt to save it. At the same time, America's national health suffered. The U.S. intervention in Vietnam would in short time undermine Johnson's political agenda at home, engender mass opposition, rupture the Cold War consensus on foreign policy, and signal the further decline of America's postwar hegemony.

The Vietnam War would also lead to a grave crisis in civil-military affairs. Relations between America's
political and armed forces leaders, who were mistrustful of each other as a result of the New Look, Bay of Pigs, and Vietnam policies in the preceding half-decade, would become increasingly strained during the Johnson years. By the mid-1960s U.S. generals and the White House would be at odds over the nature and direction of the war. Although armed forces leaders had endorsed American intervention, they still had no unified approach to Vietnam. Indeed, the military itself would be deeply divided over the conflict, with the MACV, Marines, and Air Force offering fundamentally different views of America's role and strategy in Vietnam. And it would become clear to many military officials that success would not be forthcoming in a timely manner and that the president would establish limits to the American war in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, the military would keep pressing Johnson for more resources and the geographical expansion of the war, which the president would approve to a lesser extent than the brass had proposed. This cycle of military requests and partial authorization would repeat itself time and again. As a result, the military, which still recognized the barriers to successfully preserving the RVN, would then accuse the White House of unduly restraining its ability to wage war. The "revisionist" critique that American troops had to fight with "one hand tied behind their backs" was thus created by U.S. military leaders at
the outset of the war.

The military's reaction to Vietnam policy in late-1963 and 1964 bears out such developments. Throughout this crucial period U.S. military officials consistently recognized that the war was going badly and that any improvement in the near future was not likely. American officers would also, for the most part, oppose the entry of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam. Simultaneously, however, they would urge an intensified air campaign against northern Vietnam, press for more resources and authority to conduct offensive operations, and ask for the deployment of combat forces to the RVN. As they had done during the Kennedy years the military leadership continued to pursue a dual path on Vietnam policy. On one hand they remained wary of intervention in the war and candidly reported the perilous situation in southern Vietnam. But they also understood that the president was disposed to take action to save the RVN and so consistently pressed for more resources than would be forthcoming. By early 1965, both the military and civilian leaders had created a trap for themselves. Although they feared long-term failure in Vietnam, they were just as reluctant to accept the political responsibility for "losing" Vietnam in the short-term. As a result, U.S. service and political leaders would fight against Ho Chi Minh, and among themselves, for the remainder of the Johnson years.
Just after taking the oath of office Lyndon Johnson vowed to carry out Kennedy's agenda, and "that meant seeing things through in Vietnam." Just three days later, at a meeting with Ambassador Lodge, McNamara, and military officials, the new executive stressed that he was "not going to lose Vietnam" or "be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."¹ He also told his advisors to "tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word."² Two weeks later Dean Rusk reiterated Johnson's commitment in a cable to Lodge. "The President has expressed his deep concern that our effort in Viet-Nam be stepped up to [the] highest pitch," the secretary of state told the ambassador, "and that each day we ask ourselves what more we can do to further the struggle." Both Rusk and CIA Director John McCone, however, were giving the president bleak assessments of Vietnam, prompting Johnson to express his "serious misgivings" to Lodge. Nonetheless the president also downplayed the need for political reform in the RVN because of the difficulties involved in establishing a stable government amid the VC war in the south.³

Despite, or maybe because of, such problems, Johnson also signed off on NSAM 273 on 26 November. Prepared under Kennedy, this directive emphasized that America's "central objective" in Vietnam was still to prevent Communist victory in the south and that the United States must be
prepared to take action to ensure that development. In late December, the president took steps toward accomplishing that goal, approving Operations Plan (OPLAN) 34-A to provide for increased military and political pressure and "punitive or attritional" operations against the DRVN. Such measures had no immediate impact in Vietnam, however. With Lodge sending bleak evaluations of the RVN's politico-military performance, the president despatched McNamara, McCone, and William Bundy, the assistant secretary of state for Far East Affairs, to assess the war in Vietnam. The defense secretary's report, as Johnson put it, "was gloomy indeed." The VC was gaining strength and extending control over more area in the south, Communist infiltration into the RVN was still rising, and the Strategic Hamlets program had shown few returns. McNamara thus found the situation in the south "very disturbing" and feared that "current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state." Worst of all, from McNamara's perspective, the new Minh government was "indecisive and drifting," and without any clear concept of how to run the country or the war.

McNamara, however, failed to mention in his report the principal American complaint against the new regime in the RVN. "Big" Minh and his prime minister, Nguyen Ngoc Tho,
had approached the NLF with proposals to establish a "government of reconciliation" in the south. But, as Tho told George McT. Kahin, those plans were leaked and "the American government got wind of them." At the same time Harkins and Taylor criticized Minh for his failure to take a more aggressive military approach to the war. Indeed the Vietnamese general had just rejected a plan put forth by McNamara, Walt Rostow, and the JCS to begin to bomb Vietnam above the seventeenth parallel and strike VC bases in the south. Throughout January 1964, then, pentagon officials began to actively seek an alternative to Minh's leadership. Not coincidentally, a coup led by General Nguyen Khanh and supported by the MACV and U.S. Department of Defense ousted Minh on 30 January.7

During the short-lived Minh administration, Harkins, Taylor, and Curtis LeMay had been pressing the White House and RVN leadership to expand the air war and conduct offensive operations against the VC.8 Not all U.S. officers, however, were so eager to widen the war. In III Corps, Senior U.S. Army Advisor Wilbur Wilson reported that the VC had "attacked, harassed and taunted GVN forces and the population with relative impunity." The enemy could conduct regimental- or company-sized operations throughout all of III Corps, had infiltrated the RVN's political and military institutions, continued to undermine the pacification program, was still obtaining weapons from ARVN
forces, and had developed an effective anti-aircraft capability. Wilson also found "no indications" that the Communists's capacity for guerrilla warfare had diminished, and he was "alarm[ed] to note the regularity with which they are able to approach, encircle, infiltrate, and/or penetrate friendly defenses without detection."9

Some officers in Washington also expressed concern about the U.S. future in Vietnam. In an address at Marine headquarters in late 1963 the incoming Commandant, General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., explicitly rejected American participation in the war in Indochina. Greene was relieved that Kennedy had not intervened in Laos, but he was "not so sure that we aren't mired down in South Vietnam . . . . We're up to our knees in the quagmire and we don't seem to be able to do much about it." The general had hoped that the current Marine presence in Vietnam, about 550 troops, would remain low. "Frankly, in the Marine Corps we do not want to get any more involved in South Vietnam because if we do we cannot execute our primary mission," Greene admitted. With more important commitments elsewhere, he feared that the Corps would be overextended in Vietnam. "I don't know how Vietnam is going to come out," Greene lamented, but "you see what happened to the French? Well, maybe the same thing is going to happen to us."10

At the same time General Krulak, who was assuming command of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific [FMFPac], was
convinced that American forces were headed into Vietnam "in some strength." But, Krulak added, "I wasn't necessarily assured that . . . it was the best idea." General Donald Bennett, the director of the Army's Office of Strategic Plans and Policies from 1963 to 1965, likewise "had a feeling that things were not going well out there, and they seemed to be rolling downhill at a greater speed."

The United States, the general believed, was in a "no win" situation in Vietnam, and he suggested moreover that other officers understood the risks of war there and were in no hurry to engage the VC in battle. "Certainly from September of [19]63 on," Bennett later charged, "the forcing [into war in Vietnam], as far as I could tell, came from the civilian side."

Bennett's views, even if exaggerated, demonstrated that American officials were divided over the U.S. role in Vietnam. Krulak, who had misgivings about the commitment to the RVN, nonetheless recommended to the president, who had directed him to study OPLAN 34-A, that American begin to put "progressively escalating pressure" on the DRVN to convince it "to desist from its aggressive policies."

Krulak's boss, Commandant Greene, had also joined the bandwagon and joined LeMay to press for expanded air operations against northern Vietnam. The other service leaders, as Marine General Henry Buse noted, were "apathetic" about such proposals, but Maxwell Taylor "was
holding the whip hand over the chiefs" to make JCS policy
conform to his and McNamara's view of the war.\textsuperscript{13}

The JCS chair and defense secretary were hardly doves
on Vietnam, however. Taylor, writing for the other chiefs,
cited Johnson's commitment to the RVN in NSAM 273 and
wanted to "make plain to the enemy our determination to see
the Vietnam campaign through to a favorable conclusion."
To do so, he added, the White House and chiefs would have
to be prepared for "whatever level of activity may be
required," including assuming temporary operational
authority over the ARVN, pressuring the RVNAF to do more to
stop infiltration, conducting air strikes against the DRVN,
or even committing U.S. forces "as necessary in direct
actions against North Vietnam."\textsuperscript{14}

In his report, which would become NSAM 288, McNamara
recommended against overt ARVN or U.S. military action
against the DRVN, but otherwise accepted the JCS's views
and urged the president to reaffirm his commitment to the
RVN, continue to fund and supply the RVNAF, and be prepared
to retaliate or begin operations against the Communists.
"We seek an independent, non-communist South Vietnam," U.S.
officials declared in NSAM 288, and unless America "can
achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of
Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist
domination."\textsuperscript{15} From Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge endorsed
plans to exert pressure against Vietnam above the DMZ both
to bring about a cease-fire and to neutralize the DRVN, thereby "turning it into an Oriental Yugoslavia."¹⁶ Walt Rostow more forcefully told Rusk that the United States had to "draw the line in the dust at the borders of South Viet Nam" by moving additional forces into Indochina to block infiltration into the RVN and by threatening Ho with American retaliation to enforce compliance.¹⁷ The president himself was not so combative, but did direct Lodge to press Khanh for more aggressive action against the VC and to indicate to the RVN leader "our continuing availability to help him carry the war to the enemy and to increase the confidence of the Vietnamese people in their government."¹⁸

Again, however, American leaders were ratcheting up the war due to the dismal reports coming out of Vietnam. Throughout 1964 U.S. military and political officials were providing Washington with uniformly negative assessments of the situation in southern Vietnam. McNamara, Lodge, Felt, Wilson, Marine advisors, and the MACV staff variously pointed out the VC’s growing strength, the ARVN’s continued ineffectiveness, inadequate intelligence, futile pacification efforts, poor morale in the south, and continued political chaos in the RVN. In March, after McNamara and Taylor had returned from another tour of Vietnam, the defense secretary and JCS chair told the NSC that conditions had "unquestionably been growing worse."
The VC controlled at least 50 percent of the land area in 22 of 43 southern provinces. The ARVN's desertion rate and incidents of draft dodging in the south had soared while the VC was "recruiting energetically and effectively." Between July 1963 and early 1964 the enemy had virtually destroyed the Strategic Hamlets program. And the political environment in the RVN was more uncertain, with 35 province chiefs having been replaced since the November coup.  

Despite such continued bad news, the White House remained committed to staying the course in Vietnam. In January 1964 the president, McNamara, Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy rejected Senator Mike Mansfield's proposal for a truce and neutralization of the RVN after Bundy reminded Johnson of the political fallout for Harry Truman after Mao's victory in China in 1949. Accordingly, the president had limited options with regard to Vietnam policy. "The only thing I know to do," he lamented to Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Chair J. William Fulbright, "is more of the same and do it more effectively." As Johnson saw it, he could not withdraw, neutralize, or send in combat troops that "may be bogged down in a long war against numerically superior North Vietnamese and Chicom forces 100,000 miles from home." The United States would thus continue its current policy of support and training in the RVN.
Other administration members urged the president to do more. At an NSC meeting following McNamara's return from Vietnam, Rusk, Taylor, and the secretary of defense urged Johnson to accept the JCS's proposals to establish a border control force, begin retaliatory actions against the north, and eventually develop a "graduated overt military pressure program" against the DRVN. The secretary of state recognized that such measures might not stop the deterioration in the south, but at least would enable the United States to more easily deploy "forces which could be used if it were decided later to take the war to North Vietnam." The JCS chair, however, saw the risks inherent in his own proposals. Taylor understood that even limited measures would produce a "strong reaction" in northern Vietnam and could even prompt Ho to invite the PRC to intervene in Indochina. Nevertheless Taylor and the other chiefs supported the McNamara-NSAM 288 plans and urged the pentagon to prepare for future deployments in the event of American escalation of the war. McNamara added that the costs of his program would be significant, with initial expenditures of about $60 million by the RVN and $30 million by the United States. With such aid, American officials still hoped, "the total number of U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam need not be increased at present, and the policy should continue of withdrawing U.S. personnel where it is clear that their roles can be assumed
by South Vietnamese without sacrifice to combat capability."²¹

Within armed forces circles, however, there was significant division over the nature of any future military action in Vietnam. Clearly, the MACV's conventional, firepower-oriented strategy had not worked as its ever-optimistic commander had anticipated. With Harkins's retirement scheduled for June 1964, the president in January appointed General William Childs Westmoreland to serve as his deputy until assuming the MACV command in a few months. Westmoreland's arrival raised some officers's hopes that Harkins's approach to the war would be displaced. General Bruce Palmer, the Army's deputy chief of staff for operations, told John Paul Vann that many Army officials had agreed with his alternative view of the war and expected Westmoreland to stress improving the advisory effort for the RVNAF, as Vann had long emphasized.²²

From Fort Bragg, the commander of the Special Warfare Center, General William Yarborough, wrote to Westmoreland that "I cannot emphasize too greatly that the entire conflict in Southeast Asia is 80 percent in the realm of ideas and only 20 percent in the field of physical conflict." So long as VC guerrillas continued to believe in the virtue of their cause "there can be no peace." The RVN and United States, Yarborough believed, would not lose the war militarily because of "repeated terrorist acts" by
the enemy, but "a war can be lost mentally and morally through these means. This . . . is a danger to be guarded against at all costs." 23

Harkins and Felt, however, were "of the same opinion" regarding strategy for Vietnam. They believed "that it is necessary to kill and destroy; that it is necessary to penetrate; that it is necessary to harass and ambush; that it is necessary to clear and hold." 24 Retired General Douglas MacArthur, perhaps the country's best-known military man, offered similar advice from a different, less optimistic, perspective when he told Westmoreland in early 1964 "not [to] overlook the possibility . . . that in order to defeat the guerrilla, you may have to resort to a scorched earth policy." To Michael Forrestal of the NSC staff, such observations served as "warning indicators" that American military policy in Vietnam was dangerously misguided. As Forrestal saw it, the MACV's reports on and approach to the conflict, "which places such emphasis on military activities so similar to those which failed the French, suggests a lack of understanding of what the war is about." 25

The JCS's Joint War Games Agency [JWGA] likewise pointed out the problems of war in its April 1964 final report of Sigma I-64, a war game concerning Vietnam. The participants--including Taylor, Wheeler, LeMay, Bruce Palmer, John McConne, the Bundys, Michael Forrestal, George
Ball, and Chester Cooper—assumed that current U.S. efforts would remain inadequate, but were aware of the peril in an expanded effort as well. There was a significant difference of opinion among American officials, however, regarding the likelihood of thwarting the insurgents in the south by attacking the DRVN. Many participants doubted that the VC responded to Hanoi's control to any major degree, instead believing that the northern influence was "mainly psychological and disciplinary, not material." Even those, presumably military officials, who urged pressure against the north to "take the heat off" in the south recognized that "a small expenditure of iron bombs involves [the] potential commitment of major US forces representing millions of dollars if the DRV doesn't fold up .... Meanwhile, the problem of winning popular support in South Vietnam still goes on with less command attention and perhaps fewer resources available to cope with real RVN domestic problems."^26

Such American measures would likely prompt the PRC, which would probably not intervene directly, to nonetheless warn the United States that its "aggression" would be met by "appropriate countermeasures." While U.S. strategy was to avoid negotiations while maintaining military pressure, "little evidence" existed to suggest that the DRVN or PRC would capitulate. There was also likely to be a strong domestic repercussion to U.S. escalation. While congress
would give a "reluctant go-ahead" to U.S. attacks on the
DRVN, there would be "moral and legal questions"
surrounding such actions aimed at "innocent populations."
The administration could also expect "obvious difficulties"
in gauging the "extent of Communist involvement in 'honest'
revolutionary movements [the NLF] against despotic regimes
[the RVN]." Indeed, the U.S. planners admitted, America's
past support of such regimes and the likelihood of doing so
again was sure to be a sticky political issue.27

Reports from Vietnam were no more positive.
Throughout April, May, and June, VC activity was continuing
at "high intensity," especially in areas around Saigon and
in II Corps. The VC was also mining railway tracks in I
Corps and had effectively used anti-aircraft fire in both
the far northern and southern provinces of the RVN.
Throughout all regions of the south the insurgents were
conducting sabotage, harassments, assassinations of local
officials, and small-scale combat, all of which seemed to
indicate that the RVNAF and Americans were not able to
provide basic village security. By June the VC was
conducting fewer operations but increasing the size and
tempo of its attacks, often engaging its main-unit forces
in battalion-sized actions.28

The secretary of defense similarly reported the
worsening conditions in the south at a mid-May NSC meeting.
Both the number of people and the amount of southern
territory under VC control continued to rise and the enemy had maintained the military initiative. On the political front, the new Khanh government "is fragmented and a religious crisis [with the Buddhists] is brewing." Such conditions of course made effective military action against the Communists unlikely. Reflecting that situation, military leaders proposed mixed responses to the crisis in the RVN. LeMay and Greene urged reconnaissance missions and air strikes against the DRVN, but Taylor, Harold K. Johnson, the new Army chief of staff, and Admiral David McDonald, the chief of naval operations, opposed starting the air war at that time. As the JCS chair explained, any U.S. attack against the north would provoke "a strong reaction by the Viet Cong in the south" which the Communists would be able to increase to levels commensurate with American initiatives. Given such assessments, as well as continuing congressional criticism of American involvement in Indochina, the president "concluded the [NSC] meeting by commenting that even with increased U.S. aid the prospect in South Vietnam is not bright."²⁹

Despite Johnson's bleak view, the secretary of defense was proud that critics had labelled Vietnam as "McNamara's War," telling reporters that "I think it is a very important war and I am pleased to be identified with it and do whatever I can to win it."³⁰ Lodge cabled Rusk and the president that, the "fragile and unstable" situation
notwithstanding, Blair Seaborn, a Canadian diplomat, should
tell Ho that America would not withdraw from Vietnam.
Rather "we will enlarge. We intend to stay. We expect to
win." Rusk expected the U.S. public to support any
expansion of the war and agreed with the need to remain
steadfast in Vietnam. "The prospect that we might strike
the north, with all of the attendant risks, only to lose
the south," the secretary of state cabled Lodge, "is most
uninviting." Both Bundys also put forth hawkish
proposals. While William Bundy preferred air strikes
against the DRVN, he thought, and Rusk agreed, that
"significant US ground forces" might also be needed in the
south. His brother, McGeorge, assumed that American
leaders would not tolerate a Communist triumph in Southeast
Asia. He also believed, however, that U.S. prospects were
bleak "without a decision to resort to military action," and he called for "selected and carefully graduated
military force" against the DRVN.

Not everyone in an official capacity offered such
belligerent plans. Michael Forrestal of the NSC decried
the emphasis on military solutions to political problems
with the warning that "we are trying to fit our familiar
tools and way of doing things to a problem we have never
really bothered to analyze." As he was about to assume
command of the MACV, General Westmoreland "found the
thinking in Washington on increasing the American
commitment in South Vietnam, possibly to include bombing North Vietnam and even introducing American combat troops, far more advanced than anything we were considering in Saigon." The president, however, wanted to expand the American role in Vietnam, and so directed his civilian and military advisors to meet at Honolulu in early June to discuss the war.

Lyndon Johnson was already facing a dilemma in Vietnam in mid-1964. Reports from Saigon and the field consistently indicated a worsening situation, while his advisors in Washington were encouraging escalation with no guarantees of success. Political factors, however, were overriding. If the United States quit Vietnam and "let Ho Chi Minh run through the streets of Saigon," Johnson later told Doris Kearns, it would be rewarding aggression just as the west had done with Hitler in the 1930s. Worse, Communist victory in Vietnam would cause an "endless national debate--a mean and destructive debate--that would shatter my Presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy," just as Mao's victory in China had undermined the Truman administration and brought on McCarthyism. Indeed, as the president saw it, Truman's problems with the PRC "were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam." Johnson's advisors, civilian and military, likely had similar world views of domestic politics, so, at the Honolulu meeting, they
focused on ways to improve the situation in southern Vietnam. Despite understanding the political and military troubles facing the United States in Vietnam, Johnson's foreign policy team did not even consider disengagement.

An "atmosphere of considerable gloom," as Westmoreland put it, permeated the Honolulu meetings. The military situation, the new MACV commander reported, was "tenuous but not hopeless," while the political situation, still the key to success, resembled "the most absurd opera bouffe" with Buddhist-Catholic tensions and infighting among junta members making it impossible to achieve stability.39 While everyone could recognize such problems within Vietnam, there was no consensus on a future approach to reverse the deterioration. The president wanted to extensively integrate American officials into the RVN administrative structure but Westmoreland, Lodge, and Taylor—who was about to become ambassador upon Lodge's departure—doubted that there were enough qualified Americans to fill such positions or that a U.S. takeover was the politically correct way to bolster the RVN.40

The JCS itself was also split over future policy. The chiefs, over Taylor's objections, again expressed concern over "a lack of definition" of U.S. objectives, without which they could not "advocate a desirable military course of action to achieve" American goals. Nevertheless, LeMay, Greene, incoming JCS chair Earle Wheeler, and Lodge all
favored beginning an air campaign against the north to stop infiltration and show American resolve. Taylor, however, feared that strikes against infiltration points such as Dien Bien Phu or Vinh might provoke DRVN or even PRC aggression in the RVN. He also understood that "political considerations"—it was an election year and Johnson was running as a peace candidate against the hawkish Senator Barry Goldwater—would guide U.S. policy, so the JCS chair-cum-ambassador urged "demonstrative attacks" against limited military targets as a way to show American willingness to engage the enemy in Vietnam. Taylor, with Westmoreland's agreement, also believed that any decision to widen the war "should be delayed for some time yet."

Thus the conferees adjourned on 3 June committed only to expanding the advisory effort, refining plans for pressuring the DRVN, and beginning a public relations campaign to prepare Americans for an escalated effort in Vietnam and to secure allied assistance for the RVN.41

The failure to develop a strategic concept at Honolulu offered more evidence that American policy was adrift in mid-1964. Earle Wheeler had to admit that "we have never been able to recover the same degree of military success that we were having a year earlier [before the Diem coup]. The political situation . . . has steadily gotten worse; the government has gotten weaker.42 The Commandant of the Marine Corps seemed to place much of the blame for that
predicament on Maxwell Taylor. As General Greene saw it, Taylor assumed "an increasingly more dominant and powerful role" as JCS chair. The Commandant also believed that many civilian officials in the pentagon had supported Taylor's power grab and created a situation where the "position of the chairman is enlarged only at the expense of the corporate body of which he is a member."43

Taylor's successor, General Wheeler, and Westmoreland were also coming under fire at this time. The new JCS leader, his critics emphasized, was a lifetime bureaucrat who had "never heard a shot fired in anger." Wheeler was, maverick Marine Colonel William Corson charged, "the Army's highest-ranking sycophant" who had gained promotion via consistent agreement with his superiors. Apparently the other chiefs also questioned whether Westmoreland, a favorite of John Kennedy and dubbed "the inevitable general," should be commanding the MACV given his limited background in insurgency warfare and his image-conscious and aloof manner. Wheeler and Westmoreland, however, shared a strong sense of the political ramifications of military policy, an understanding which would increasingly bear on their handling of the war in Vietnam over the next four years.44

By Autumn 1964, however, neither political nor military conditions were in America's favor. The MACV again noted a "rise in tempo and intensity" of both small-
scale and battalion-size or larger VC actions all across the RVN. American advisors seemed more worried, however, about the foundering pacification campaign. The VC was impeding CI progress in key provinces in I Corps, while the RVNAF had to divert forces from pacification duties to fight the insurgents in III Corps because the Mobile Action Cadre--Saigon-recruited, specially-trained pacification squads--"have displayed much more concern for their own personal safety than for the accomplishment of their mission." In Quang Ngai, in I Corps, the provincial chief had to recall several hundred combat cadre to attend a reorientation course in pacification due to their "lack of ability, supervision, and motivation." In the northern Phuoc Tan district, in what could have been an analysis of the program in general, the MACV reported that Vietnamese personnel "have no clear concept of their mission and role in pacification."\(^{45}\) Nor were the Americans adequately supporting civic affairs policies, Army advisor Captain Dave Richard Palmer charged. "Lip service--yes, honest effort--no," was his description of the U.S. pacification program.\(^{46}\)

Despite such problems, Lyndon Johnson thought he would have to wait until November, after the presidential election, to take effective action on Vietnam. But in early August, in the DRVN's territorial waters in the Gulf of Tonkin, the president would find a reason to expand the
war. At that time the RVN's navy had been bombarding the northern Vietnamese coast as part of OPLAN 34-A operations. Two U.S. destroyers, the Maddox and the C. Turner Joy, were also in the area of the Gulf of Tonkin and on 4 August American naval officials alleged that DRVN torpedo boats had attacked the ships. The strikes, never substantiated, and an attendant congressional resolution authorizing the president to "take all necessary steps" to defend the RVN, gave Johnson a virtual carte blanche to wage war in Vietnam. Fulbright had pushed the resolution through the senate with just two votes cast against it. One of the dissenters, Wayne Morse of Oregon, had considered calling Generals Ridgway, Gavin, Shoup and Collins to testify against it, but Fulbright had not allocated adequate time for debate. The resolution, the president later explained in his inimitable Texas style, "was like Grandma's nightshirt, it covered everything."47

The United States would wait, however, to more forcefully expand its war. With the RVN again in political turmoil--Khanh had been ousted and returned to power, only to be removed again in later September--and the election coming, the president would remain cautious. Nonetheless, Washington was preparing for an escalation of its intervention into Indochina. Indeed, within the six-month period from Autumn 1964 to Spring 1965, Johnson and his advisors would progressively extend the American air war
over the DRVN and ultimately deploy combat troops into a war of attrition.

The Tonkin Gulf affair intensified the policymaking process and set into motion the American takeover of the war in Vietnam. Indeed, the U.S. air strikes and the Southeast Asia resolution in Congress convinced the southern leadership of America's resolve to remain in the RVN. As CIA operatives observed at the time, "many [RVNAF] officers feel that the U.S. is now fully committed, and that more of the burden of carrying on the war will now pass to the U.S."48 As the Johnson administration moved closer to full-scale intervention, however, significant officials, especially Taylor and even Westmoreland, were still hoping to limit U.S. involvement in Indochina. Yet they were also willing to expand the war at the same time. Westmoreland, at the outset of his command, was already taking the dual approach to policymaking that would characterize his time in Vietnam. On one hand, his assessments candidly reflected the serious problems existing in the south. On the other, he would optimistically conclude that success would be forthcoming once American resources, weapons or soldiers reached the battlefield in sufficient numbers. In this way the commander was telling his superiors in Washington what they wanted to hear, but also covering his flanks by offering honest evaluations of the situation on the ground. Such
were the politics of the war in Vietnam in mid-1964.

Westmoreland's response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident reflected his concern about escalating the war. Should the United States initiate military action against the north, the MACV commander assumed that the PRC would increase aid to Ho or even intervene, northern infiltration into the RVN would rise, and the VC could take further offensive actions, especially by attacking vulnerable American air bases at Da Nang, Bien Hoa, and Tan Son Nhut. To protect those bases, he thus recommended that a Marine Expeditionary Force, Army elements, and logistics units prepare to deploy to Vietnam. Already in August 1964 Westmoreland was aware of the barriers to victory, but preparing for a longer-term commitment in Vietnam which, he hoped, would not include combat forces.49

The MACV commander was taking a relatively temperate approach compared to the Joint Chiefs in Washington. On 26 August, the JCS pointed out that the United States was "already deeply involved" in the war in Vietnam and thus asked McNamara to authorize air strikes against 94 targets in the north that the chiefs had previously selected. The course of action offering the "best chance of success," the JCS told the defense secretary, would be to destroy the DRVN's capabilities to support the insurgency in the south via such attacks. While the chiefs admitted that such an air campaign "will not necessarily provide decisive end
results," they believed that the enemy would interpret anything less as a "lack of resolve."\textsuperscript{50}

McGeorge Bundy wanted to do even more than the JCS. In May he and his brother had first raised the subject of sending combat troops to Vietnam. Now, believing that limited air or naval operations would do little more than show U.S. resolve, the national security advisor thought that Johnson ought to begin thinking about committing a substantial number of U.S. forces to action against the VC. "Before we let this country go," Bundy warned, "we should take a hard look at the grim alternative."\textsuperscript{51} The Bundys were not alone in raising the ground force issue. In June the JCS had directed the USARPAC to study the feasibility of deploying forces across the RVN and Laotian panhandle to the Mekong river as a way to interdict infiltration. In August the Army estimated that four divisions could accomplish the task and Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson contended that, with such a force, the United States could avoid provocative air attacks and put the burden for breaking the defensive cordon onto the DRVN.\textsuperscript{52} Critics of both the panhandle and air war plans emerged at once. Admiral Felt attacked the Army plan, citing enormous logistics problems and terrain difficulties to question whether it would stem infiltration. The outgoing Pacific Commander also feared that U.S. troops would get tied down in static positions "in an environment worse than that of
ARVN pacification forces" in the south. Such an effort would, moreover, indicate that the United States had "shot a big wad at a point of no decision."\(^{53}\)

The military was also split over the advisability of an air campaign against the north. Both LeMay and Greene found it "now necessary to execute extensive U.S. air strikes" over the DRVN. The Air Force chief, as Mark Perry explained, hoped that an air campaign would stem Communist success before ground troops would have to intervene in a "full-blown conventional ground conflict." Wheeler, Harold K. Johnson, Admiral McDonald, and Westmoreland, however, agreed with Maxwell Taylor that such measures would "overstrain" the shaky government of the RVN. As Taylor saw it, the government, then under Khanh's control in between coups, would be too weak in the foreseeable future to handle the risks of an escalated air war, which could include increased VC or PAVN actions in the south. Americans "should not delude ourselves," Taylor warned, "that we can put together . . . a really effective government" in the RVN. When the president asked Taylor to compare Khanh with Diem, he only lamented that "the people did not care for either one."\(^{54}\) Although Khanh's return might be helpful in the short term, Westmoreland added, the long-range impact of such political moves "could be profound." The MACV commander also questioned the utility of air strikes against the north because the insurgency and
continued infiltration in the RVN was his first priority, and air power would not affect that appreciably. Harold K. Johnson agreed on the limits of air war and, as Army historian Vincent Demma explained, consistently tried to moderate the JCS's calls for bombing the north. "If anything came out of Vietnam," the Army chief later said, "it was that airpower couldn't do the job."55

Given such views, the president wondered at a 9 September meeting whether Vietnam was "worth all the effort," only to have his advisors reassure him that preserving the RVN was essential to preventing a Communist takeover of all of Southeast Asia.56 Such sentiment was surely widespread if not unanimous, but still no consensus existed on the means to achieve American goals. In NSAM 314 Johnson authorized resumed naval patrols and 34-A operations in the Gulf of Tonkin, limited operations in Laos, retaliatory actions in the event of DRVN or VC attacks against American units, and continued political-economic programs to develop the RVN.57 The administration would do little more in September 1964 because the presidential election was just two months away and, as John McNaughton, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, put it, "we must act with special care" to both send signals about U.S. intentions to the DRVN and RVN, and to show the U.S. public "that we are behaving with good purpose and restraint."58
Westmoreland's concerns were more forthright. He could not conceive of any joint command arrangements with the RVNAF, the commander explained, unless U.S. forces were committed to combat, "which he did not contemplate," as Taylor reported. Westmoreland thought, the ambassador added, that "such a course would be a mistake, that is the Vietnamese's war."59

Similarly, Vice Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Navy's Pacific Fleet Commander, argued that the United States had to give more than "lip service" to the need for an integrated politico-military strategy in Vietnam, a concept which "has really never been meaningfully applied."60 Westmoreland, in a radio interview in early October, also stressed the non-military aspects of the war. Vietnam was "decidedly different from conventional wars" like World War II or Korea, the commander explained. As well as fighting against an elusive enemy in a battle without fronts, American leaders had to take account of "political considerations" in developing strategy. Anti-Communist success, Westmoreland noted, "requires a combination of military force, psychological activities, and means of improving the physical welfare of the people."61

In October 1964 the United States was markedly deficient in meeting such criteria. MACV reports showed that less than half of the southern provinces were making any progress in pacification, while the residents in only
about 20 percent of the villages were willing to provide the RVN officials there with any information about the VC. Maxwell Taylor added that the "unsettled political climate" had constrained American counterinsurgency efforts, and was also limiting the ARVN's effectiveness. Just as importantly, the Vietnamese people's attitudes showed no improvement. Urban residents simply expected the political turmoil to drag on, while rural dwellers were more concerned with their own security than government maneuvering in Saigon. As a result, reports from the field often cited "government instability, civil disorders . . . increased infiltration from the North, and a high level of [VC] military activity" to explain the lack of progress in southern Vietnam. Although hoping for political reform, Taylor expected a coming showdown between Generals Khanh and Minh to only magnify the government's shortcomings.

Despite the risks of deeper U.S. involvement amid the endless political clashes in the RVN, John McNaughton believed that it was "essential" for America to maintain its status as a world power, "however badly [Southeast Asia] may go over the next 2-4 years." The United States would have to emerge from Vietnam as a "good doctor," McNaughton asserted. "We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly" in order to prevent other potential enemies from questioning "US power, resolve, and competence."
Credibility, not victory, was thus McNaughton's goal in Vietnam. The MACV was not achieving either in late 1964.

Advisors continued to report that both small- and large-scale VC incidents were rising, the pacification program had made no breakthroughs, village security remained inadequate, and the Communists were exploiting the political chaos in Saigon by conducting both military and political operations throughout all four Corps Tactical Zones. Westmoreland was more worried that the political maneuvering in the capital had further damaged the RVNAF. Fearing a purge after the Khanh-Minh feud was resolved, southern officers might lose their will to fight or else made a "desperate move to regain power," neither of which, Westmoreland warned, would help the United States achieve its objectives in Indochina.

Back in Washington, the Joint War Games Agency was pointing out even more obstacles to future success. In another war game, Sigma II-64, sponsored by Wheeler, the JWGA once more offered a desolate outlook regarding U.S. prospects. American officers fully expected the U.S. military role in Vietnam to expand. The president would likely establish permanent base facilities in the RVN, deploy U.S. troops to protect them, and fly more sorties against the north, the Sigma II participants assumed, correctly as it turned out. Such action, however, was
risky. Whether sending American ground forces into the RVN or intensifying the air war over the DRVN, Communist powers could be expected to respond to such offensive measures with either Soviet counter-moves in Europe, especially Berlin, or PRC intervention into northern Laos. U.S. ground troops, to be deployed only when the VC came into open combat against the ARVN forces, would then be fighting and dying against guerrillas. As a result, JWGA officials warned, "the US would be branded the aggressor for using regular units to fight the people of Vietnam."

Representatives of both the Red [Communist] and Blue [U.S.] teams, moreover, recognized that an increased American commitment would face serious military and political problems. A majority of participants believed that, despite heavy bombing of industrial and military targets in the north, the insurgency in the south was not weakening.  

Because of the "stoic attitude of a regimented oriental population," and the "racial undertones of [a] war in which US pilots kill women and children," the Sigma II participants questioned the reliance on an air campaign over the DRVN. Citing stiffened civilian morale during the Battle of Britain, "Red" officers boasted that, in the DRVN, "the people's rage had been turned against the American murderers." They also pointed out that the air war was already showing diminishing returns. "The more you
attack us," the "Red" officials told their American counterparts, "the less we have to lose" because American pilots had hit most of the valuable targets in the north. Accordingly, the main goal of the bombings, ending DRVN support of the VC, was now moot. As Sigma II and previous games indicated, the northern economy, already strained for over a year, was now much worse, but that had little impact on the war. "Most important[ly]," the Communist team members observed, the VC could continue operations in the south utilizing existing stockpiles, captured arms, and levies on the population.

Although all participants assumed that the United States would escalate, they recognized that various factors would continue to constrict American efforts. Logistics planners, worried about the terrain, weather, and size of Vietnam, expressed serious reservations about deploying and supporting a sizable number of American forces. Other officials expected tension between Buddhists, Khanh, and Minh to continue and sought an American takeover of the war. Only when RVN leaders had established a stable government "completely responsive to US direction," could ARVN and American forces make progress. "Red" representatives, however, reminded the others that such measures would be sure to spark political quarrels at home. The U.S. public might say that "we're not doing so well, so why not just let it die on the vine and pull out of there"
rather than taking over the war. The Sigma II participants knew that the Johnson White House would not withdraw and had developed their approaches to Vietnam accordingly, but they had nonetheless confirmed that the military and political odds were not in America's favor at that time.68

General Donald Bennett, a war game participant, later observed that "there was very little understanding about Vietnam . . . either in the military or on the civilian side" in 1964. If anything, however, the Sigma II conclusions revealed a sharp understanding of the risks of involvement in the war in Indochina. George Ball, the undersecretary of state and primary war critic within the administration, believed so, later citing the results of Sigma II to argue that an air campaign against Hanoi would accomplish little.69 Notwithstanding the JWGA's bleak assessments of American prospects, especially its unpromising view of the air war, many of Johnson's advisors were urging him to subject the DRVN to an extended bombing campaign. Those advocates of air strikes became more vocal after the VC successfully mortared a U.S. air base at Bien Hoa on 1 November. During deliberations in a special NSC Working Group that the president established after the Bien Hoa incident, the JCS again urged a progressive air campaign against the north while Admiral Sharp, the CINCPAC, thought that American pilots should make an "inexorable and increasingly destructive march toward
As the director of the Working Group, William Bundy, explained, the president was also "clearly thinking in terms of maximum use of a Gulf of Tonkin [reprisal] rationale." There was division within the military, however, on the extent and efficacy of the air war. Although he later observed that "all of Southeast Asia and the area around it was sort of going to hell in a hand basket" after the Bien Hoa attack, Harold K. Johnson remained the military's most vocal critic of the American air strategy. The chiefs, however, urged a controlled and swiftly applied program of military pressure against the DRVN—to include strikes in Laos, on airfields and industrial and petroleum installations in Hanoi and Haiphong, against infiltration routes, and against the 94 targets compiled previously—but they also reiterated that the administration should establish a "clear set of military objectives" before deepening the American involvement in Indochina. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, while urging a "clearly tougher" approach to the DRVN, nonetheless wanted to conduct "less drastic" air operations than the "full and relentless" attacks against the 94 targets advocated by the chiefs. Even William Bundy, who believed that Ho was nervous that the DRVN's transport and industrial systems were vulnerable to air attack, expected the northern leadership to accept such damage in a test of wills against...
Maxwell Taylor, who would play both sides of the air war issue in 1964-1965, was the most vocal critic of the air campaign in November, because of both military and political factors in the RVN. Indeed, his reports from Saigon were consistently desolate and his apprehension about America's growing role in Vietnam was obvious. After the attack at Bien Hoa, in which the VC had destroyed five B-57 bombers and damaged other planes and helicopters, Taylor counseled patience amid the various calls for retaliation. The ambassador saw "no overall advantage either for morale or signalling purposes in releasing U.S. aircraft for action against the VC," principally because the southern government was not stable enough to handle the type of wider war that such measures were likely to produce. He thus urged that the United States conduct air strikes in reprisal for Communist attacks, but otherwise take caution not to unduly provoke Ho. Despite the JCS's views to the contrary, the ambassador observed that too much coercion would likely alienate Hanoi, just as too little would embolden DRVN leaders to take further offensive action. Above all, he warned, "what we don't want is an expanded war in [Southeast Asia] and an unresolved guerrilla problem in [the RVN]." The ambassador also suggested that the VC strike at Bien Hoa demonstrated the futility of extending U.S. operations. Taylor saw
"nothing but disadvantage" in pursuing the Communist rebels outside the RVN's borders. "We don't often catch the fleeing VC in the heart of SVN," he conceded, so "I see little likelihood of doing better in Cambodia."  

Taylor was especially anxious because the political situation in the RVN had deteriorated to its nadir. Tran Van Huong of the civilian-led High National Council had replaced Khanh in September, only to be ousted due to Buddhist pressure three months later. In January 1965 both Huong and Khanh would return to power only to be removed again. All told, the RVN experienced about a half dozen changes of government between September 1964 and February 1965. It was thus easy to understand why Taylor told Rusk that the RVN lacked the "minimum level of government required to justify military pressures against the North." Because of the pervasive "war weariness and hopelessness" already evident in 1964, the ambassador found it "impossible to foresee a stable and effective government under any name in anything like the near future."  

Taylor was merely stating the obvious. By early December, although the president had affirmed his support of the RVN, Taylor noted that the chaos in Saigon had "completely dismayed the staunchest friends of South Vietnam" in the United States. Without political stability in the south, officials in Washington understood, American aid would accomplish little." By late December,
conditions had worsened to the point that Taylor, reporting on "another first-class governmental crisis in Saigon," described a "three fronts" war: the government against the military, the RVNAF against the U.S. embassy, and the Buddhists against the government. No one, apparently, was fighting the VC.80 Indeed, the situation in Vietnam had become so dire that the embassy was looking into "various degrees of controlling US aid" and, although unlikely, admitted that "one possibility would be to go home."81

Although Taylor had the most noted concerns among U.S. officials in late 1964, others were also wary of expanding American involvement. Like the ambassador, Westmoreland warned that the U.S. response to the Bien Hoa attack "cannot be of such nature and magnitude as to trigger reactions on a scale for which we are not fully prepared or to expand the war to a level inconsistent with our objectives in this area." The MACV commander thus opposed JCS proposals for a massive air campaign and instead called for increased efforts in the south and continued covert, 34-A, operations at sea.82 General Krulak, the Marines's CI expert, also questioned America's preoccupation with the DRVN, believing that the conflict between the PAVN-VC forces and the United States "could move to another planet today and we would still not have won the war." Only when U.S. and Vietnamese forces began to to stop the subversion and guerrilla war in the south, he maintained, could the
The RVN, moreover, was in no condition to fight an expanded war, as Westmoreland saw it. With continued deficient leadership, a rising desertion rate, and tactical weaknesses which "run the entire gamut," the southern military was unable to fight effectively, and pacification efforts were still foundering. Even worse, the ARVN's senior officers were "absorbed in political activity," while there was "undoubtedly a preoccupation" with government intrigue at lower levels as well. Given such assessments, Westmoreland, although "generally more optimistic" than Maxwell Taylor, was hoping to wait six months or so "to have a firmer base for stronger actions." Such a delay, however, was neither militarily nor politically practical. American policymakers had clearly recognized the U.S. dilemma in Vietnam in late 1964. Without a stable government in the south, an expanded U.S. role would likely be counterproductive, if not fatal, to the RVN. The American presence could alienate the local population and provoke the Communists, yet the various Saigon governments were not likely to survive without increased American support and perhaps a U.S. combat role. Even then, there was great division within American circles over the means to develop a stable situation in the RVN. While almost all U.S. officials agreed on the need for some
type of bombing campaign, Taylor, Westmoreland, Harold K. Johnson, the JWGA and others had pointed out the limited impact, but great risks, such actions might carry. Nonetheless, American policymakers, although aware of the shortcomings of their attempts to develop a viable southern state so far, continued to do more of the same, thus leading to the Americanization of the war in short order.87

Indeed, the NSC Working Group on Vietnam, administration officials, and the president himself all understood the limits and hazards of expanding the war in 1964 but, having cast their lot with the RVN to that point, had to prove their credibility by deepening the American involvement in Vietnam. During the group’s discussions, the JCS continued to press for heavy air assaults to force the DRVN to stop supporting the NLF and VC in the south. Most officials, however, rejected the chiefs’s position because it risked "major military conflict" with the DRVN or PRC and might lead to a massive commitment in Vietnam that could be "extremely adverse" to America’s international position.88 While McNamara and Rusk led the fight against the JCS plans, Taylor urged reprisal bombings and intensified covert operations, both to dissuade the DRVN from supporting the insurgency and to stabilize the government in the south. The United States could then gradually escalate the air war, preventing northern success
unless it "paid a disproportionate price."\textsuperscript{89} Taylor's views must have made an impact on the Working Group, which forwarded his recommendations to the president for a 1 December approval.\textsuperscript{90}

The president approved the Working Group's suggestions fully aware that the United States would have to do much more in Vietnam. Indeed Johnson and his advisors, though committed to the RVN, were also trying to buffer themselves from the political consequences of defeat at some future date. In a strikingly honest memorandum to the president, his close advisor Jack Valenti advised Johnson to "sign on" the JCS before making any "final decisions" about Vietnam. Fearing the "future aftermath" of such decisions, and invoking Omar Bradley's support of Harry Truman at the MacArthur hearings during the Korean War, Valenti wanted the JCS's support of the president's policy to be made public so as to avoid future recriminations. In that way the chiefs "will have been heard, they will have been part of the consensus, and our flank will have been covered in the event of some kind of flap or investigation later."\textsuperscript{91}

Valenti's memorandum was indeed instructive, for, as the president himself indicated at a 1 December meeting, those "final decisions" would involve a greater American commitment in Vietnam. Johnson was clearly alarmed by the situation in the RVN but he warned his advisors to "keep [the] problem from looking worse here than it is." The
president, however, did see a "day of reckoning coming" and thus wanted "to be sure we've done everything we can" to preserve the RVN. Again Johnson stressed that political stability was a prerequisite to U.S. escalation, and a purpose of the meeting was "to pull a stable government together." In fact, the president told his advisors, "if need be, create a new Diem, so when [we] tell Wheeler to slap, we can take [a] slap back." Johnson was concerned about the international implications of Vietnam as well, and thus pressed for third-country assistance to the RVN so that it did not seem as though the United States alone was supporting the south, or to provide cover for an American takeover of the war. If Vietnam was "as serious as [we] believe," then the administration needed to approach other nations to help the RVN and would have to "get big numbers from them." Such assistance was especially important because the RVN's leaders were aware of America's strategic role in the Far East and knew that Johnson's credibility would require staying the course in Vietnam. The president too understood this, and lamented "have we oversold them on our necessity of being [a] power in the Pacific."92

Lyndon Johnson's outlook in December was indeed sobering. His suggestions to establish a new government in the south and obtain third country assistance clearly signalled his desire to do much more in Vietnam. The president, in fact, more explicitly indicated his
intentions. He understood that the conflict would require a long-term commitment, noting that it was "easy to get in or out," but "hard to be patient." Johnson would, however, do whatever was needed. When Maxwell Taylor told him that effective anti-guerrilla action would be costly--approximately 20 billion piasters, or $175 million--the president urged full support, joking that he did "not want to send [a] widow woman to slap Jack Dempsey." The United States, he stressed, "must do [its] damndest" in the RVN.

So, for the time being, he would pursue Taylor's program of reprisal bombing against the north, but the president also made it clear that intensified action would be forthcoming. Aware that Wheeler and McNamara believed that "it's downhill in SVN no matter what we do in country," Johnson was ready to expand the air war over the north, as well as the ground war in the south. While willing to give the ambassador's approach "one last chance" the commander-in-chief also told Wheeler that if it was ineffective "then I'll be talking to you, General." In any conversation between the president and JCS chair, the issue of sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam was sure to arise. The NSC group was debating the merits of deploying an "international force" to the DMZ to deter a DRVN attack across the seventeen parallel. Meanwhile, Johnson, aware that U.S. air power was not going to bring victory in
Vietnam, added that "I am now ready to look with great favor on that kind of increased American effort [ground forces]."  

The president was not the only American official thinking about sending ground troops to Vietnam, although his position was more certain than many others. In October Admiral Sharp and Vice Admiral Moorer, for instance, had opposed a JCS plan to commit a Navy Special Landing Force to Quang Ngai because they believed that RVN forces, not U.S. Marines, should fight the war. In mid-November, Maxwell Taylor, in a reversal of his October 1961 policy, advised against sending logistics squads, with combat force support, to flood-ravaged areas in the central provinces. Such measures, he feared, would indicate that America was prepared to take over more of the RVN's responsibility, make U.S. soldiers the target of VC actions, and lead to increased casualties. Westmoreland too was wary of adding ground troops to the U.S. force already in the RVN. When asked to address the need for combat personnel, he responded that "a purely military solution is not possible" and that he might ask for more advisors if that could hasten the pace of the war. He did not mention any need for ground troops at all.

Marine Commandant Wallace Greene, a great advocate of military pressure against the north, was just as hesitant to send his troops into combat in the south. To Greene it
was "an alarming and major fact" that the public did not realize that the United States was already fighting a war in Southeast Asia. As a result, he anticipated that "any major commitment of U.S. troops (casualties), money (tax $), [and] rationing will arouse a storm of protest" at home and be "extremely unpopular throughout the world." The Johnson administration, "sinking in a quagmire of indecision," as Greene put it, had to determine the nature of its commitment to Vietnam. While the Commandant counselled against "muddl[ing] along" the present course, he understood the requirements and perils of expanding the war, which would include indoctrinating the U.S. public, introducing large numbers of troops, expecting Soviet or Chinese intervention, making America vulnerable in other areas, risking a wider war in Laos, gaining third country assistance, and trying to accomplish all this without U.S. ground troops. Despite this litany of tasks, Greene did not urge withdrawal from the RVN, although he did emphasize that Johnson should "avoid [the] commitment of [a] large ground force." The Commandant had thus analyzed the war in a manner which would typify the military's response to Vietnam policymaking. Although candidly recognizing the serious disadvantages America would have to overcome, Greene and other senior officers continued to encourage escalation and to force the White House to make and be accountable for the major decisions on the war."
Such decisions, it was clear in late 1964, could not be long delayed, even though political and military officials seemed reluctant to press for an expanded war. The military itself was still divided over the best approach to Vietnam, with the Air Force and Marine leaders urging air war over the north, while Taylor, Harold K. Johnson, and Westmoreland knew that bombing was no panacea for the problems of Vietnam. Civilian officials, too, avoided making hard choices on Vietnam. In fact, when Westmoreland, in the United States for his father's funeral, passed through Washington to meet with the Joint Chiefs in mid-December, neither Lyndon Johnson nor Robert McNamara met with the MACV Commander. "When I learned later that at the time of my visit major new steps for escalating the war were under consideration," Westmoreland observed, "I deemed it odd that neither the President nor the Secretary had sought my views." 98

Apparently wanting to maintain a low profile on Vietnam issues at the time, Johnson, with Dean Rusk's encouragement, also refused to respond to a Christmas eve attack on a U.S. officers's billet in Saigon, despite pressure from the chiefs and Taylor for strikes against the north. Such an attack, the president feared, would provoke "a major reaction from Hanoi and its friends." The political base in the south, however, was "too shaky to withstand a major assault by the Communists." 99 Despite
such reservations, American officials could not wait for political stability in the south to take military action. As the MACV staff pointed out, the government of the RVN was "unstable and ineffective," military, political and religious leaders had shown "no letup in political maneuvering" since Diem's ouster, and the ARVN was passive and outgunned.\textsuperscript{100}

U.S. troops would thus begin to pour into Vietnam, although American officials would continue to recognize that such vexing problems would not be resolved for the remainder of the war. In deciding to intervene despite political turmoil, military stasis, and gloomy prospects, Lyndon Johnson was carrying Kennedy's policies to their natural outcome. The new president had inherited a situation in Vietnam in November 1963 that, despite the artificial optimism of earlier months, was heading steadily downhill. Committed to fulfilling his predecessor's pledges, Johnson was quickly making the protection and preservation of the RVN the centerpiece of his foreign policy, and he was willing to take whatever measures deemed necessary, including using U.S. combat forces, to achieve his objectives. Many of his advisors supported the president's commitment. McNamara, the Bundys, and McNaughton especially urged intensified U.S. efforts in southern Vietnam. In large part these advocates of
intervention believed that American credibility was in question in Vietnam and that the United States had to assume the role of "good doctor", as McNaughton had termed it, even if the patient was terminally ill. Throughout 1964, then, the Johnson White House demonstrated its resolve by authorizing more sorties, deploying more military personnel, and sending more resources into the RVN.

At the same time, military leaders continued to react ambiguously to the war. American officers were divided over the requirement for and advisability of air war over the DRVN, with Army leaders especially challenging sanguine projections of bombing success. The war, they asserted frequently, would be won or lost in the south, not over the skies of the north. Most military leaders also did not seem enthused about combat involvement in the war. Maxwell Taylor, Westmoreland, Felt, Greene, and Moorer, among others, all were on record opposing U.S. ground force entry into Vietnam, with the JCS chair-turned-ambassador most stridently rejecting U.S. combat in Vietnam. As Taylor saw it, without a stable government and effective military in the south, there was little America could do to contain VC expansion. Once American troops started landing, Vietnamese politicians and generals would simply allow the United States to assume an increasing burden against the VC. Westmoreland shared many of Taylor's doubts and his
reports from Saigon candidly described the problems and risks facing American military personnel in Vietnam. While hoping to limit U.S. participation in the war, however, the MACV commander was at the same time preparing for a large-scale, long-term commitment.

As such, political considerations, as much or more than military factors, were prompting Westmoreland's and many other policymakers's approach to Vietnam. With the White House committed to the RVN, eager to do more, and concerned about U.S. credibility, military leaders followed the political line on Vietnam despite any misgivings they might have had. American officers both told U.S. politicians what they wanted to hear and honestly assessed the chances of success in Vietnam. The military also tried to make the White House determine the objectives and levels of commitment involved in an American war in Southeast Asia and take responsibility for intervention. The brass, it seemed, wanted to accept credit for any success in Vietnam, but avoid blame for future misfortune. The White House too was concerned with the issue of political accountability, as demonstrated by Valenti's advice to Johnson to "sign on" the military to cover his political flanks if Vietnam turned sour. For the next several months the White House and military would continue such maneuvering while more soldiers landed in Vietnam and the United States took over the war.
CHAPTER VII

HOPE FOR THE BEST, EXPECT THE WORST:

U.S. GROUND TROOPS ENTER THE VIETNAM WAR,

JANUARY-JULY 1965

As political and military conditions in southern Vietnam continued to deteriorate throughout 1964, it became increasingly clear to the White House that the United States would have to increase significantly its presence in the RVN to stave off defeat. With U.S. credibility at stake and his own political fortunes attached to the outcome of the war, the president never wavered from his commitment to Vietnam, notwithstanding the ample evidence of decay there. Thus Johnson, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, among others, took crucial steps in early 1965, such as intensifying the air war, deploying ground troops, and authorizing offensive operations against the VC. By mid-year the United States was well on its way toward taking over the war.

At the same time, military men were divided over U.S. policy and prospects in Indochina. Maxwell Taylor and Westmoreland initially pointed out the risks of greater
intervention and urged that the United States maintain its support role, not engage in combat. Toward that end, the ambassador and MACV commander rejected the White House's calls for ground troops at the beginning of 1965. Within two months, however, Westmoreland, sensing that defeat was imminent and recognizing the political realities of escalation, would request combat forces and assign them an offensive mission. It would then become immediately clear that the U.S. presence in Vietnam would have to expand exponentially to make any impact amid the political chaos and military disintegration in the RVN. The air war, counted on by some military and political officials as the keystone to U.S. strategy in Vietnam, would not decisively affect the DRVN's support of the insurgency and would make a negligible impact in the RVN, as Army representatives had argued. Nor would the initial deployment of ground troops, or the ROLLING THUNDER air operations, do much to stabilize the political situation in Saigon, which was a prerequisite for U.S. success. Many American officers understood this, but rushed into war in Vietnam nevertheless.

In part, U.S. service leaders suffered from the hubris endemic to hegemonic powers and were seduced by the prospects of waging technological warfare against Asian guerrillas. American military leaders, however, also understood the Johnson administration's determination to show its resolve in the RVN to whatever degree necessary.
Thus, U.S. officers consistently produced gloomy reports on the war, yet developed sanguine assessments of U.S. prospects in Vietnam. In that way, they would continue to fulfill their obligation to honestly evaluate conditions in the RVN, thereby covering their flanks if things turned sour, while at the same time telling the president, the secretary of defense, and other war advocates what they wanted to hear. The military was still divided over the extent and nature of any commitment to Vietnam and the strategy to be employed in the war there. There was, it seemed, little military compulsion to fight in Vietnam. Political considerations overrode such factors, however, so American leaders optimistically went to war in Vietnam while fully aware of the risks and problems there.

To be sure, there were many true believers inside the armed forces, although even they were aware of conditions in the RVN. General William DePuy, a strident advocate of the war who would help to develop America's strategy of firepower and attrition, was as critical of the ARVN as he was confident of the ability of U.S. forces to alter events in Vietnam. He understood, "Because we are white--strong and rich," he saw serious political obstacles in the RVN. "Because we are white--strong and rich," he understood, "we are peculiarly vulnerable to VC propaganda." Any Vietnamese officials supported by Americans would be seen as "collaborators" or "petit
bourgeoisie," while, DePuy admitted, "the VC on the other hand prefer to mold their leaders from the common clay."
Although political reforms were essential to military success, the MACV planning chief added, "we must admit [that they] are highly unlikely." As a result, DePuy had to conclude that "neither time nor human nature would seem to be on our side."

Despite such predicaments in Vietnam, American political leaders were not softening their commitment. To John McNaughton the most important stake in Vietnam was "our reputation," and so U.S. leaders had to be "sensitive to how, as well as whether, the area is lost." William Bundy stressed the need to act and decisively. The "introduction of limited US ground forces into the northern area of South Vietnam," he wrote to Rusk, "still has great appeal to many of us." American troops would stiffen morale in Saigon and send a signal to Hanoi, although, Bundy admitted, they would be "attrition targets for the Viet Cong." The president, while hoping to "minimize [the] risk of rapid escalation," was still convinced that it was "of high importance" to preserve the RVN.

Even as the political situation deteriorated, with General Khanh deposing Huong for another return to power, Johnson remained "determined to make it clear to all the world that the US will spare no effort and no sacrifice in doing its full part to turn back the Communists in
Vietnam. On that same day, 27 January, McGeorge Bundy and McNamara scheduled a meeting with the president to tell him "that both of us are now pretty well convinced that our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat." The United States, they believed, could no longer "wait and hope for a stable government" while the VC expanded its control over the RVN. The national security advisor and defense secretary urged Johnson to "use our military power in the Far East and to force a change of Communist policy." McNamara and the Bundys were thinking similarly in January 1965. Indeed, Taylor was "caught by surprise" when the administration began to press for combat troop deployments to the RVN. "The President was thinking much bigger in this field," the ambassador recalled, "than the tenor in Washington" had indicated.

Clearly, then, America’s civilian leadership favored introducing combat troops into Vietnam in early 1965. At the same time, as McGeorge Bundy admitted, "we had no recommendations from the military for major ground deployments." There was in fact no military imperative to intervene. After the VC had bombed an officers’ billet in Saigon on Christmas eve, the White House had encouraged Taylor to ask for the deployment of ground troops, but the Ambassador, Westmoreland, and Taylor’s deputy, U. Alexis Johnson, quickly moved to scotch such measures.

In an analysis of U.S. policy, Westmoreland and his
staff explained their resistance to employing combat forces, and recommended that the United States continue on its flawed path of providing operational support and improving the advisory system. As the MACV staff saw it, various plans involving the use of U.S. ground troops in Vietnam carried great disadvantages. Any military value provided by American troops would be offset by the political liability incurred, Westmoreland explained. The United States had already spent a great deal of time trying to develop a skilled and motivated ARVN. "If that effort has not succeeded," the MACV commander lamented, "there is even less reason to think that U.S. combat forces would have the desired effect." The Vietnamese, he assumed, would either let Americans carry the burden of war or actively turn against the U.S. presence in their country. Given such circumstances, Westmoreland and his deputies concluded that the involvement of American ground forces in the RVN "would at best buy time and would lead to ever increasing commitments until, like the French, we would be occupying an essentially hostile foreign country." 12

Army Chief Harold K. Johnson was not unduly optimistic either, telling an audience in Los Angeles that he expected U.S. military involvement in Indochina to last a minimum of five years, and possibly as long as two decades. 13 Johnson, as well as Westmoreland and DePuy, would overcome their reservations about sending ground troops to Vietnam
only two months later. Maxwell Taylor, however, continued to virulently oppose such steps. In a series of memoranda to the president and others throughout the winter months of 1965, the ambassador gave detailed assessments of the risks of U.S. intervention and of the bleak prospects facing American soldiers in southern Vietnam. Above all, he still insisted that political turmoil in the RVN was the major obstacle to success, and one which American troops could not remove. In early January, as Khanh maneuvered to return to power, Taylor called for "hard soul searching" to decide whether U.S. officials ought to tolerate another coup, or instead reject Khanh altogether and accept the consequences, "which might entail ultimate withdrawal." To Taylor, the choices were so stark because the United States could ill afford to fight a ground war in Vietnam. The RVN simply lacked the resources and resolve to engage an impressive enemy and it was neither "reasonable or feasible" to expect U.S. or third-country forces to assume the burdens of guerrilla war. As a MACV study found, the United States would have to commit about 34 battalions of infantry with additional logistics support, a total of about 75,000 troops, just to provide security to American personnel and facilities already in Vietnam. To the Ambassador, this "startling requirement" would inevitably "bring us into greater conflict with the Vietnamese people and the government." After Khanh had
staged another coup on 27 January, Taylor advised against recognizing the new government, telling Bundy that the United States should prepare to "reduce [its] advisory effort to policy guidance [or] disengage and let the [RVN] stand alone."16

The ambassador thus had "one basic conclusion" about Vietnam. The United States, as he saw it, "is on a losing track in [the RVN] and must change course or suffer defeat, early or late as one chooses to interpret the known facts."17 Dean Rusk also interjected a note of caution into the proceedings, but offered different advice on future policy. As McGeorge Bundy told the president in his memorandum of 27 January, the secretary of state, like Westmoreland weeks earlier, believed "that the consequences of both escalation and withdrawal are so bad that we simply must find a way of making our present policy work."18

Unlike Rusk, Taylor continued to see air power as a virtual panacea to America's problems. A program of graduated air strikes "directed against the will of the DRV" would signal to Ho the cost of supporting the insurgency, provide leverage in any negotiations, and improve RVN morale. While Taylor, and most other military and political officials, did not expect an air campaign to decisively alter the situation in Vietnam, they did see it as a way of "producing maximum stresses in Hanoi minds."19 With the war going so badly, the president had little choice but to
finally accept Taylor's strategy. Thus, by mid-February, the United States was beginning a full-scale air campaign in Vietnam.

The immediate cause of the air war came on 7 February, when the VC mortared an Army barracks in Pleiku, killing 9 and wounding 109 Americans, and destroying or damaging 22 aircraft. U.S. officials then cited the attack at Pleiku as an intensification of the war that warranted American retaliation, but any provocation would have satisfied the administration's desire to expand the war. Indeed, McGeorge Bundy was in Vietnam with McNaughton and others at the time and, looking to justify stronger military measures, saw the incident as the vehicle by which the president could authorize an air campaign against the north, even sarcastically observing that "Pleikus are like streetcars." Thus, within a week after the VC strike on the American base, Johnson authorized Operation ROLLING THUNDER, which in three years would unleash more tonnage of bombs than all previous air wars combined. A new bombing campaign, as Bundy saw it, would demonstrate American credibility, for in the RVN he had found a "widespread belief that we do not have the will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course." Unless the United States significantly increased its role in Vietnam, the national security advisor warned, "defeat appears inevitable." Accordingly Bundy, in a
memorandum that McNaughton drafted, urged the president to execute a program of "sustained reprisal" against the DRVN, with U.S. air and naval attacks to be justified by and calibrated according to the VC's activities in the south. As enemy "outrages" continued in the RVN, the American air strikes against the north would take their toll.**2**

The president thus authorized reprisal strikes, Operation FLAMING DART, against the DRVN on 8 and 9 February, and ROLLING THUNDER on 13 February. As Mark Clodfelter has shown, Johnson's decisions satisfied few officials. While Taylor, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and McNaughton thought that the president had demonstrated American resolve, William Bundy and Rusk doubted that air strikes would deter Ho.**2** The JCS, although satisfied that Johnson had finally acted, continued to press for intensified air operations against the north.**2** Harold K. Johnson continued to protest the emphasis on the air war over the DRVN since the United States, he believed, would have to focus on defeating the insurgency in the south to achieve success. His fellow chiefs had confused American ends and means by calling for the "destruction of DRV will and capabilities." The United States, Johnson contended, did not have to destroy the north to force a settlement in the RVN.**2** Westmoreland "also doubted that the bombing would have any effect on the North Vietnamese," although he did hope that it might boost southern morale.**2**
General Bruce Palmer, the Army's deputy chief for operations, also pointed out just how divisive and political the making of strategy had become. While the Army did not believe that air power would appreciably alter the war, and the Navy "wasn't too sure about it," the Air Force and Marine leaders, McConnell and Greene, kept pressing Wheeler to recommend a bombing campaign to the president. The JCS chair, in turn, pressured General Johnson and Admiral McDonald into supporting the air war in order to send a unified proposal to McNamara. If Wheeler, who was always aware of the political implications of decisionmaking, forwarded a split recommendation, then the defense secretary and president would have made the final decision on strategy, thus infringing on what the JCS leader considered the military's prerogative. As far as Palmer was concerned, Wheeler had done Lyndon Johnson, and the nation, a disservice. "Where there are fundamental differences of opinion among the chiefs," he later observed, "the political leaders should know so that they do not embark on a murky path with unclear consequences."  

While it may be unlikely than the president and McNamara were not aware of military differences over strategy, it is clear that the air war was divisive and controversial at the outset and would remain so for the duration of the war as military and civilian officials
constantly debated the merits of air strikes, target selections, and bombing pauses. But it was evident to most American officials that air power would not win the war. That would require ground troops, and the momentum toward such deployments had become inexorable in February 1965.

Indeed the air war showed no returns at the beginning. Due to poor weather and continued political chaos in Saigon, U.S. officials delayed ROLLING THUNDER until March. As Westmoreland's assessments emphasized, political instability was already seriously limiting his military options, a situation that was to become endemic to U.S. policymaking in Vietnam. By late February the MACV commander was expecting the worst. Within six months the government in Saigon might only control a limited number of provincial and district capitals, refugees would clog the roads, and "end the war" groups would proliferate and demand a settlement. Such trends, Westmoreland estimated, presaged a VC takeover within a year. To buy time he, and the JCS, thus asked for the deployment of a Marine Battalion Landing Team (BLT) to Da Nang, which the president authorized on 26 February along with more helicopters, increased air support, and additional advisors at the fighting unit level. While the chiefs had urged the Marine deployments and were, in effect, recycling the request, Westmoreland's support for combat troops marked a distinct reversal of his outlook of just weeks earlier.
In part, the continued deterioration conditioned the call for ground troops to protect the American base at Da Nang. As Westmoreland pointed out, the "strength, armament, professionalism and activity of the VC have increased to the point where we can ill afford any longer to withhold available military means to support the GVN counterinsurgency campaign." But even he was not anticipating the large-scale use of ground troops. The MACV commander believed that there were two areas in which U.S. combat support could have a significant impact, citing air and surface sea power, but not combat personnel. Whatever steps the United States took, Westmoreland found it "most important . . . to avoid the impression by friends and enemies that [the] U.S. has taken over responsibility for war from the Vietnamese."30

The CINCPAC, Admiral Sharp, was also ambivalent over the latest moves. While he, too, recognized the corroded situation in the RVN and accepted Westmoreland's rationale for the BLT in Da Nang, Sharp believed that long-term success would require "a positive statement of national policy and specifically a command decision as to whether or not we are or will participate actively in the fighting in [the] RVN, or whether we will continue to adhere to our long standing policy that this is a Vietnamese war and that we are only advisors."31 As U.S. officers had done since 1961, Sharp was once more pressing the civilian
establishment in Washington to take responsibility for Vietnam. The administration, however, was concerned more with taking action in Vietnam than formulating grand strategy. Thus Wheeler, after a meeting on Vietnam with the president and others, told Sharp and Westmoreland that the White House was determined to "press forward despite difficulties to achieve the limited objectives set by the U.S." in Vietnam. "At the same time," the JCS chair saw "evident concern" that America was "not doing enough to achieve these objectives."³²

It appeared that American officials were taking a temperate view of their role in Vietnam prior to the Marine deployments of 8 March. In fact, however, the United States was taking its infant steps into a major land war in Indochina. While continued disintegration in the south accounted for the first combat troop movements to the RVN, there was also a strong political component in the decision to send soldiers to Da Nang. The military had abandoned its reluctance to commit ground troops to Vietnam not only because of the declining prospects of the southern half to survive the Communist insurgency, but even more because America's civilian leaders had made it clear that such intervention was their policy choice. As the president, McNamara, Bundy, McNaughton and others began to advocate ground force deployments to retard or reverse the situation in the RVN, the military followed along. American officers
had not recommended the use of combat troops before February 1965 and, in Westmoreland's case, had firmly rejected such proposals earlier. But with the highest civilian authorities in Washington rushing in that direction, Wheeler, the MACV commander, and other brass fell in line, as concerned with the political impact of decisionmaking as with the war in Vietnam itself. The deployment to Da Nang resulted from civilian pressure, not military factors, and was likely even prior to the events of early 1965. As General DePuy later observed, the commitment of combat forces was not the "product of a Westmoreland concept for fighting the war." The commander and his staff, the planning chief explained, still expected U.S. troops to advise and assist the ARVN, not fight the war themselves.33

So did Maxwell Taylor. Although he had to acquiesce in the troop commitment, the ambassador persisted in warning about and opposing a wider war. Expressing his "grave reservations" about "reversing [the] long standing policy of avoiding [the] commitment of ground combat forces" in Vietnam, the soldier-cum-diplomat warned that "once this policy is breached, it will be very difficult to hold [the] line" on future troop moves. As soon as the RVN's leaders saw that the United States was willing to assume new responsibilities, they would certainly "seek to unload other ground force tasks upon us," which would
inevitably lead to increased political tension with the local population and friction with the RVNAF over command arrangements. While Taylor recognized the need to defend U.S. airfields at sites such as Da Nang or Bien Hoa, he pointed out that accepting a combat role against the VC was just not feasible. The "white-faced soldier armed, equipped, and trained as he is," Taylor explained, was "not a suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles." Pointing to the French inability to adapt to such warfare in the First Indochina War, the ambassador "doubt[ed] that US forces could do much better."34

He also continued to lament that internal political factors would seriously retard America’s ability to improve the situation. In "the most tipsy-turvy week since I came to this post," as Taylor wrote to the president in late February, Khanh had again been ousted, this time replaced by a reformist cabinet minister, Dr. Phan Huy Quat. Without a legitimate and stable government in Saigon, effective military action was virtually impossible.35 The southern Vietnamese themselves, Taylor observed, were not clamoring for U.S. troops either. RVN leaders, after a 1 March meeting with the Ambassador, did not object to the use of American troops for base protection, but told Taylor to bring them into Da Nang "in the most inconspicuous way feasible."36

As Taylor saw it, America’s best hope to influence
events in Vietnam remained reprisal air strikes against the DRVN to force Ho to withdraw support from the VC in the south. Directly contrary to the Army’s emphasis on the insurgency in the RVN, the ambassador believed that "if we tarry too long in the south, we will give Hanoi a weak and misleading signal which will work against our ultimate purpose." In thus arguing against active combat by U.S. troops and in favor of a principally air war, he lost out on two counts. Although he was probably the most reputable military man in America in the early 1960s, the administration ignored Taylor’s urgent dissent. Civilian officials had already decided to wage war in the RVN and so political imperatives had overridden Taylor’s provocative analysis of America’s problems and prospects. At the same time the ambassador, in urging the use of air power against the DRVN to defeat the VC in the south, demonstrated the conflict within U.S. circles over the direction of the war, and revealed that he did not really understand Vietnam much better than anyone else in Washington.

Division and ignorance, however, would be no obstacle to an expanded war. As soon as the Marines arrived at Da Nang, it was clear that their presence would make little impact and within a short while, as many generals had anticipated, those initial deployments led to an American takeover of the war. General Fredrick Karch, the commander of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB), later
renamed the 3d Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), arrived in Vietnam only to have MACV intelligence give him a "rather dismal" briefing about American prospects. The VC controlled vast territory in both the cities and the countryside, making it dangerous for U.S. personnel to travel only two miles outside Da Nang or Saigon. Political intrigue continued to dominate RVNAF affairs, Karch added, and various "warlords" were engaging in widespread corruption and graft, which made it impossible to channel aid to the village level where it was most needed. "Vietnam was just one big cancer," the Marine commander lamented.38

And it was metastasizing. In I Corps, the 9th MEB's Tactical Area of Responsibility (TAOR), "the communist guerrillas enjoyed essentially uncontested dominance over most of the rural population," the Marines admitted. The enemy, organized at various levels from main-unit forces down to hamlet guerrillas, could utilize "a spectrum of military capabilities ranging all the way from coordinated operations of battalion size down to sabotage, terrorism, intelligence, and propaganda activities in the heart of GVN-dominated sectors."39 Westmoreland further explained that the enemy held the initiative throughout the RVN, was consolidating its political gains in rural areas, continued to infiltrate and recruit military personnel, and was "implanting a sense of the inevitability of VC success"
among southerners. Because of such developments, the MACV commander hedged his bets on the troop issue, requesting forces but stressing that "overall responsibility for the defense of the Danang area remains a RVNAF ... responsibility." Taylor added that America's "basic unresolved problem" was its failure to provide security to the people of southern Vietnam. Like Westmoreland, he also cited VC control of the countryside and continued infiltration, along with chaotic political affairs in Saigon, to explain the grim situation facing the United States.

Such gloomy appraisals stiffened the president's will. Johnson reaffirmed his determination to protect the RVN to whatever extent needed, including more combat troops. Toward that end, the president directed the military man most supportive of sending combat forces into Vietnam, Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson, to survey the situation and to "get things bubbling." President Johnson "very clearly was not going to lose Vietnam," General Johnson understood, and so the Army chief developed policy accordingly.

After a week in Vietnam it was clear to the visiting general that the situation "has deteriorated rapidly and extensively." Time was "running out swiftly," so "expedient measures will not suffice." Only if the United States applied its capabilities with "speed, vigor and
imagination," as Johnson put it, could it reverse the slide in the RVN without unduly risking a wider war. Toward that end, the Army chief devised a 21-point program of logistic, financial, intelligence, and training support to strengthen the RVNAF, improve village security, and stem VC expansion in the south. The keystone of his report, however, was a recommendation for substantial ground troops in the RVN, either a division to free the ARVN by assuming base protection or taking defensive responsibility in II Corps, or by deploying a 4-division force across the RVN and Laos to the Mekong (the so-called Panhandle plan).43

Although the president had sent the general to Vietnam because of the likelihood of the Army chief recommending ground troop deployments,44 it was somewhat ironic that Harold K. Johnson had become the military's point man on the combat force issue in early March. Just a month earlier he had met with New York Times writers who reported that the general expected "Korea all over again," with the enemy exploiting sanctuaries outside the RVN and the United States unable or unwilling to use its full power. Johnson thus "had no great desire to go to war in Vietnam."

Shortly thereafter he told Tom Wicker that any troop commitment would have to be vast. It would require 15,000 troops to protect Pleiku alone, Johnson estimated. He was equally blunt with Westmoreland during his tour in Saigon, warning the MACV commander of the enemy's determination and
capabilities. "We're ready, sir," Westmoreland replied. "No, you're not," Johnson told him.45

Bruce Palmer, the Army's deputy chief for operations, explained that Harold K. Johnson was the "most knowledgeable and understanding of any American leader on Vietnam," but that the chief of staff was worried that, unless willing to "go all the way" and even take action that might provoke PRC or Soviet countermeasures, the United States should avoid Indochina altogether. Palmer himself apparently agreed. While it was legitimate to consider the impact of the fall of Vietnam on American security and credibility, "South Vietnam was not vital to the United States," he believed.46 Policymakers far more influential than Palmer believed it was, however. Secretary McNamara, responding to Harold K. Johnson's call to determine just what levels of support America would offer the RVN, told him that "Policy is: anything that will strengthen the position of the GVN will be sent."47

After the Johnson trip to Vietnam, the United States was well on its way to a large-scale commitment of offensive ground troops. Just days after the general's return McGeorge Bundy advised the president that America's "eventual bargaining position will be improved . . . if the U.S. presence on the ground increases in coming weeks."48 McNaughton similarly advocated "a massive US ground effort" in the south. The U.S. stake in Vietnam, he reiterated,
was psychological and political more than military, and troop deployments would enable America to demonstrate resolve and help maintain its credibility. As McNaughton saw it, 70 percent of the reason for intervention was "to avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as guarantor)." Twenty percent of America's motivation was to keep the RVN out of "Chinese hands," while only the remaining 10 percent was to "permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life."

McNaughton's views, George McT. Kahin explains, were typical of the Johnson administration's approach to Vietnam. The White House had made a "political calculation" that a humiliating defeat in Vietnam would open the Democrats to a new version of the "loss of China" charges of the early 1950s and the president would then be vulnerable to a "serious domestic political attack" from his critics. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University on 7 April, the president thus invoked the U.S. commitments to southern Vietnam under Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy to justify continued action. Clearly, America's credibility was on the line. Since the 1950s U.S. leaders had pledged to defend the RVN and Johnson intended to "keep that promise." America "will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw . . . . [So] we must be prepared for a long continued conflict," Johnson declared. From Berlin to Bangkok, as well as in Saigon, Communists
were attacking America's friends and the United States had to take a stand. "To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next," the president believed, "We must stay in Southeast Asia." 

Even though the president's intent was clear, Taylor continued to warn against further ground troop moves. Perhaps he just did not understand the depth of the U.S. commitment to the RVN, for the Ambassador found it "curious" that Johnson was reluctant to approve an air campaign against the DRVN, while it was "relatively easy to get the Marines ashore." And more would be landing if Westmoreland got his way. On 16 March the MACV commander requested that Taylor authorize another Marine deployment, this time to Phu Bai—about 8 miles south of Hue and 50 miles below the DMZ in Thua Thien province in I Corps—to protect the 8th Radio Research Unit (RRU) there. "Intrinsic in my proposal," Westmoreland later observed, "was that American troops would be used in offensive operations." Taylor immediately balked. The request for protection for the 8th RRU "is a reminder of the strong likelihood of additional requests for increases in US Ground Combat Forces in South Vietnam," he complained to the president. Such commitments, he added, might induce the ARVN to perform even "worse in a mood of relaxation at passing the Viet Cong burden to the US." 

Marine leaders too questioned the move to Phu Bai, an
area that General Krulak thought was "as tactically indefensible as anyone could imagine" due its distance from Da Nang, about 50 miles, and the difficulty of providing logistical support. Westmoreland, however, had already invested about $5 million in the communications center there and "was determined not to see it move," Krulak charged. The troop movements to Phu Bai, as the Marine general interpreted it, constituted a case "where dollar economics wagged the tail of military deployment."  

The Marine leadership, Taylor, and Admiral Sharp also shared reservations over the conventional, offensive mission Westmoreland was developing for the U.S. troops in Vietnam. They preferred, as General Johnson had, that American troops deploy to coastal enclaves, rather than assuming "search and destroy" or other types of missions that would actively engage the Viet Cong. To the ambassador, Generals Krulak and Greene, or retired General James Gavin, it was imperative to avoid large-scale combat in Vietnam. American troops, those critics of Westmoreland's policy believed, should focus on building up the ARVN and protecting U.S. installations rather than conducting a war of attrition against guerrillas. 

Westmoreland, however, had other ideas. As General DePuy, the other architect of the firepower and attrition strategy, observed, in early 1965 MACV officials were in transition "from a staff that originally was very much
concerned with counterinsurgency . . . to a staff concerned with [large-scale] operations." At the outset of the U.S. ground war, American generals were thus divided once more over the appropriate strategy for Vietnam. Although such differences may not have seemed critical at the time, overlooked or dismissed in the rush to send forces to the RVN, they would continue and intensify after the major U.S. commitments of mid-1965 and affect the war for the remainder of the Johnson years.

In March 1965, however, military, and civilian, officials were principally, if not exclusively, focused on getting a sufficient quantity of ground forces into Vietnam. The deployment of the 9th MEB had not alleviated the situation in the south and Wheeler, as MACV historians explained, "feared that the VC gains might have reached the point where, regardless of US action against [the DRVN], the RVN would fall apart." Other officials had equally forthright reservations. The Marine deployments to Vietnam had alienated various generals pointed out to General Greene that the Corps "was overcommitted . . . and unable to meet any kind of challenge in the Atlantic area." Army General Arthur Collins, a planning officer who believed that the United States was going to "nibble away at this Vietnamese problem" and that the southern Vietnamese had no will to fight, urged Bruce Palmer to oppose the moves to the RVN in early 1965. Collins and
the Marines both got nowhere with their complaints. The United States had already passed the point of no return in Vietnam, and in March and April 1965 American policymakers seemed solely concerned with sending more troops to the RVN, not in debating whether they should be there.

Although military authorities had just deployed the 9th MEB to Da Nang and explicitly forbade it from taking offensive action, it was evident that such measures would have a negligible impact on the conflict in general. The United States would have to do much more to make a difference. Upon his return from Vietnam, Harold K. Johnson met with the president, secretary of defense, and other chiefs and "sent quite a shock wave through the administration," as Wheeler's aide General Andrew Goodpaster put it, by estimating that the United States would have to commit at least 500,000 troops, for a minimum of five years, to achieve success in the RVN. The Army chief, a skeptic on the benefits of air power, assumed that such a vast number of soldiers was required to effectively develop a strategy of counterinsurgency. Although the president probably had not previously anticipated such figures, he nonetheless reaffirmed his determination to maintain the RVN with whatever resources needed.  

Emboldened by the president's largesse in sending forces to Vietnam, the JCS upped the ante in late March, going beyond General Johnson's recommendations for one division by
requesting that two U.S. divisions be deployed for active combat, to Da Nang and the central highlands, and one Korean division be positioned to operate in the RVN. 62

Westmoreland had developed the new troop requirements based on a comprehensive analysis of America's alternatives, which he forwarded to his superiors on 26 March. As the MACV commander saw it, the new three-division deployment offered the best hope of success in Vietnam. He again dismissed an expanded air war and build-up of the RVNAF because such measures did nothing to stabilize the political situation in the south or attack the principal problem, the VC insurgency below the DMZ. Citing the impossibility of providing logistics support to forces along the seventeenth parallel in a timely manner, the general also rejected a version of Harold K. Johnson's panhandle proposal. 63 Westmoreland, with Wheeler, pitched the new proposal to the president and defense secretary at a 29 March meeting, after which Johnson was publicly non-committal about future American moves in Vietnam. Admiral Sharp, however, pointed out that the president had not been forthright about his plans because he was about to approve a "far reaching strategy change--namely, the concept of U.S. forces engaged in ground operations against Asian insurgents in South Vietnam." 64

Sensing the nature of Johnson's coming moves, Maxwell Taylor continued to challenge White House policy on
Vietnam. With an NSC meeting scheduled for 1-2 April, the ambassador returned to Washington to make the case against the military's plans. A three-division commitment would dangerously escalate the war, he feared. The RVN leadership, Dr. Quat had reported, was not excited about the new deployments, and anti-American sentiment was sure to rise as more U.S. soldiers arrived in Vietnam.65

Taylor thus "strongly opposed" an active U.S. combat role. Once more he urged intensified air attacks against the DRVN. In apparent agreement with McNamara, he also wanted the Marines in I Corps to establish coastal enclaves. As McGeorge Bundy saw it, Taylor had become too antagonistic and obstructionist and should be replaced as ambassador. "In the long pull," he wrote to the president, "we need a McNaughton-type in Saigon."66 For the time being, however, Rusk and McNamara backed Taylor's position. As a result, rather than three divisions, the president authorized two additional Marine battalions and about 18-20,000 other support forces for Vietnam, while at the same time approving a change in mission to allow the 9th MEB to actively fight the VC.67

Taylor, as Larry Berman observes, left Washington satisfied that the president was not rushing into a ground war in Vietnam. But the ambassador had gained only a pyrrhic victory in delaying the three-division commitment. Johnson had in fact significantly extended the U.S. role in
Vietnam as American soldiers would now be waging war on the
ground in the south.\textsuperscript{68} NSAM 328, the formal declaration
of the president's directives, was a "pivotal document," as
the \textit{Pentagon Papers} analysts put it, because it marked a
significant expansion of the U.S. role in Vietnam. Johnson,
as so many had urged, was prepared to engage the enemy
directly, but his actions were not wholly accepted. John
McCone, the outgoing director of central intelligence,
questioned the move to active combat operations without a
corresponding escalation of the air war. While NSAM 328
had sanctioned "the present slowly ascending tempo of
ROLLING THUNDER operations," the CIA chief believed that,
unless "our airstrikes against the North are sufficiently
heavy and damaging" to deter Ho from supporting the
insurgency, American ground forces would have little
impact. The United States should "tighten the tourniquet"
around the DRVN as he saw it, not kill civilians in the
south. Up to that point, however, the air campaign had
shown few returns. "If anything," McCone admitted, "the
strikes to date have hardened [the DRVN's] attitude."\textsuperscript{69}

Earle Wheeler's evaluation of the air war was much
more desolate. Since 7 February the United States and RVN
had conducted 44 air strikes, he reported, but DRVN anti-
aircraft forces had shot down 25 American and 6 Vietnamese
planes. One Vietnamese pilot had died and two were
missing, while one U.S. airman was killed, two were
captured, and 9 more were missing. "The air strikes have not reduced in any major way the over-all military capabilities of the DRV," the JCS chair admitted. Although some bombs had damaged supply depots and ammunition dumps, which did reduce the supply of some materiel, "these losses should not be critical to North Vietnamese military operations." Attacks against barracks, airfields, and radar sites, the general added, were "not such as to hamper in a serious way DRV capabilities," while the economic impact of the air operations was "minimal." Wheeler, apparently desperate to put the best spin possible on ROLLING THUNDER, resorted to arguing that the DRVN would have to focus more resources on air defense at the expense of other economic and social sectors and that the northern population would be apprehensive about continued bombings. While such observations may have been true, they constituted a rather weak rationale for emphasizing a costly and destructive air war. At any rate, the JCS chair concluded that Ho had been "uninfluenced" by American air power and that the north might be willing to "pay a price for South Vietnam" by withstanding the U.S. assaults from the sky.70

Although many of Lyndon Johnson's critics would argue that he undermined the air war by limiting the number of sorties flown and targets struck, it was clear at the outset that air power would not win the war and that, as
Mark Clodfelter has shown, American service leaders remained divided over its priority and prospects. Although Air Force generals and Wheeler championed ROLLING THUNDER, Harold K. Johnson never joined the bandwagon on air power, nor did Westmoreland see it as a viable strategy for Vietnam. "Even had Washington adopted a strong bombing policy" without target restrictions and pauses, the MACV commander "still doubt[ed] that the North Vietnamese would have relented." To force DRVN leaders to stop supporting the VC in 1965 the United States "had to do more than hurt their homeland; we had to demonstrate that they could not win in the South, and [the RVN] had to make real progress in pacification." U.S. aircraft could not accomplish that, and in fact could provoke a DRVN reaction "that might overwhelm the existing unstable government." Indeed, the Air Force's principal problem was not politically-imposed constraints so much as inadequate air base defense. As the earlier VC mortar attacks at Bien Hoa and Pleiku had indicated, America's formidable array of aircraft would have little value if destroyed in the airfields. Yet the Air Force, despite the military emphasis on CI training, "did not actively consider the impact of insurgency warfare on air base defense," as its own history admits.

With the efficacy of air power seriously in doubt, American leaders recognized that they would have to send more combat troops to Vietnam to have any impact on the
VC's progress.74 As the two Marine BLTs authorized in NSAM 328 were arriving in the Hue-Phu Bai and Da Nang areas in mid-April, bringing the U.S. total to four maneuver battalions, American officials were laying the groundwork for a much larger commitment. Between 8-10 April Admiral Sharp sponsored a planning conference at which U.S. military leaders decided to expand markedly American troop levels in Vietnam. Toward that end, Westmoreland requested the deployment of an airborne brigade to Bien Hoa and an Army brigade to the Qui Nhon-Nha Trang areas on the coast of II Corps, each to consist of about 5000 troops plus support personnel. On 14 April the president met with his advisors and the JCS and then, without consulting Taylor in Saigon, approved the deployment of the 173d Airborne Brigade, which at the time constituted the CINCPAC's airmobile reserve, to the Bien Hoa area.75

The White House, the Pentagon Papers authors noted, "was well ahead of Saigon in its planning and its anxiety" over coming moves in Vietnam.76 The president and his advisors were assuming that the worst possible outcome, continued breakdown in the RVN and rapid VC progress to victory, was forthcoming and took action to forestall it. Washington was so eager to engage the enemy that, when Westmoreland anticipated that the Marines might not begin offensive actions for several weeks, Sharp pointed out that, "if I read the messages properly, this is not what
our superiors intend. [I] recommend you revise your concept accordingly." The new deployments and mission, as McGeorge Bundy recognized, were sure to be a "very explosive" issue with Taylor as well. Bundy of course was right. The ambassador, left out of the loop at the key mid-April meetings, had heard about the 173d Airborne deployment and reacted with rancor, accusing Washington of reversing its earlier position that it would allow the Marines to experiment with a counterinsurgency role before bringing in other contingents.

Taylor found it "difficult to understand" the administration's enthusiasm for offensive forces. For both military and political reasons, he cabled Rusk, "we should all be most reluctant to tie down Army/Marine units in this country and would do so only after the presentation of the most convincing evidence of the necessity." America's first objective in sending in ground troops, assuring the RVN and DRVN of the U.S. determination to stay the course in Vietnam, had been met with the initial deployments, and Taylor saw no need to make additional moves to reinforce that point. The ambassador also warned that other arguments for U.S. reinforcement--including freeing the ARVN to fight the VC or having a presence in Vietnam as a contingency for future crises--"could be adduced to justify almost unlimited additional deployments of US forces." In time, "the mounting number of foreign troops may sap the
GVN initiative and turn a defense of the homeland into what appears a foreign war." Tension between the Vietnamese and their "white allies" would worsen, Taylor added, and the growing American role would likely prompt the PRC to increase its support of Ho. Taylor's apostasy notwithstanding, Johnson, after brief deliberations with McNamara, Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy, decided to proceed with the new commitments and he directed that the ambassador be cabled that the president "believes the situation in South Vietnam has been deteriorating and that, in addition to actions against the North, something new must be added in the South to achieve victory."  

Ironically, Taylor, who had consistently opposed an American ground war because of the RVN's fragile political situation, responded to the president's directive by claiming that the conditions in the south had improved measurably and new U.S. forces were not needed. Complaining that the young Quat government already was being forced to accept "a 21 point military program, a 41-point non-military program, a 16-point Rowan USIS program, and a 12-point CIA program," he sarcastically wondered whether "we can win here somehow on a point score." The White House's best approach, the ambassador told McGeorge Bundy, would be to leave Quat alone for the time being. The RVN could win, he suggested, "unless helped to death." Taylor, however, also understood that his
position was untenable in the face of Johnson's desire to send more combat forces into the RVN. So, while still "badly [in] need of a clarification of our purposes and objectives" to justify the new troop moves to the Saigon government, he otherwise obeyed directions and even drafted the instructions that he would need for approaching Quat about the coming deployments.84

By mid-April 1965 Taylor's influence had waned and the White House could essentially dismiss his dissenting views. The embittered ambassador finally realized at that point, as Andrew Krepinevich observes, that the president "had been egging on the JCS all along for a major introduction of U.S. ground forces" despite his objections. Taylor himself later complained that Johnson "was the fellow with the black snake whip behind [the chiefs] saying, 'Let's get going--now!' He did all this behind my back . . . . Once he made his decision he couldn't get going fast enough."85

At the same time, Taylor remained a strident advocate of air attacks over the north to shut down the insurgency in the RVN. He thus came to embody the U.S. experience in Vietnam as much as anyone. His admonitions about the political turmoil and perils of ground war may have seemed prophetic, but his claims that the war was going well and that air power would prove decisive not only diverged from the military consensus but were examples of Taylor's naivete, if not ignorance, about Vietnam and of his
awareness of the politics of the war. Taylor, as Douglas Kinnard's recent study shows, was a transitional figure in the evolution of the U.S. military leader from warrior to bureaucratic manager. Although he had sufficient credibility to more forcefully or publicly press his misgivings, Taylor's political education had taught him to defer to the political will and not challenge Washington on policy, as, for instance, Ridgway, Gavin, and others had done in 1954. Having gone into battle against Eisenhower as Army chief and then been given another chance by Kennedy, Taylor was a veteran of civil-military maneuvering and so, in April 1965, he knew he had lost. Lyndon Johnson would get his war. 

With Taylor's concerns overridden and Johnson anxious to develop plans for the new commitment to Vietnam, the president directed his principal advisors—including McNamara, McNaughton, William Bundy, Sharp, Wheeler, Westmoreland, and the ambassador—to meet at Honolulu on 20 April. At that point the United States had approximately 33,000 troops in-country and another 20,000 were on their way. Those numbers were about to jump rapidly, and the administration was aware of the political and military implications of the coming American escalation. Jack Valenti, once more stressing the domestic political impact of the war, advised the president to meet with White House correspondents and their editors to sell them on Vietnam.
"During the next few weeks," Valenti warned, "the Viet Nam embroilment will come under heavy attack. Some editors are . . . queasy about where it is all leading us."  

U.S. officials may have been a bit queasy as well. At Honolulu the conferees, according to McNamara, determined that the enemy would not capitulate anytime in the near future and that "a settlement will come as much or more from VC failure in the South as from DRV pain in the North," which could take "perhaps a year or two" to accomplish. Despite Admiral Sharp's objections, the defense secretary reported that the officials at Honolulu had agreed that the air war's "present tempo is about right." From that point on McNamara and Johnson would subordinate the air war to ground operations. Toward that end, U.S. policymakers recommended the prompt deployment of 82,000 American and 7000 third-country forces, and envisioned the additional transfer of about 56,000 troops to Vietnam later in the year, all of whom could be used in ground operations in the south.  

Taylor, the good soldier as well as policy critic, had come on board at Honolulu too. In fact he believed that "if we keep up our bombing and introduce substantial US and third-country forces," a favorable settlement in Vietnam might occur in a matter of months rather than the year or two that McNamara was expecting. Although now a team player, Taylor, as his most recent biographer observed, was only a "background
figure in Vietnam" after April 1965. "In that fateful spring," as Douglas Kinnard put it, "Mars was on the loose" and neither Taylor nor anyone else would contain him.90

Among U.S. military men, however, there were clear signs that America's problems were only beginning. Taylor reported that Quat was still reluctant to accept U.S. troops. Victor Krulak added that the ARVN commander in I Corps, General Nguyen Chan Thi, opposed any American patrols or offensive action beyond the airfield at Da Nang. "This is enemy country," Thi told the Marine general, "you are not ready to operate there." The Marine Commandant dismissed the ARVN general's counsel, however. "You don't defend a place by sitting on your ditty box," Wallace Greene observed during a visit to Da Nang.91 The Commandant believed that the White House would have to expand the 9th MEB if it was to be able to clear VC from I Corps, but he continued to press for expanded air operations in the north, possibly even strikes against dikes to ruin rice fields and starve the DRVN into submission, as a key to overall success in Vietnam. At the same time, however, Greene recognized the limits of air war. The DRVN's anti-aircraft capabilities were already well developed and U.S. planes flying north, he admitted, "get the living hell beaten out of them by 37, 57, 85, 100 millimeter guns [and] radar control."92

The Commandant seemed bellicose on Vietnam but in fact
offered ambivalent, if not contradictory, views on the war. He already understood that much of the public opposed "this unwanted, undesired, miserable war." Although U.S. participation in combat had just begun, Americans "don't want a thing to do with it." Greene nonetheless thought it was important to hold the line in Vietnam, not because of America's pledge to protect the RVN from communism so much as because the United States had a "national security stake" in Southeast Asia. If America withdrew, the Commandant warned, it would also lose two centuries of prestige and credibility, and merely postpone the day "when we're gonna have to meet these bastards somewhere in India, in the Near East, Latin America--It's coming." He thus believed it necessary to conduct a "radical" public relations blitz to sell the war, prepare Americans for national mobilization, and impress upon them the need to pay "whatever it takes" in Vietnam. Given Greene's awareness of problems in Vietnam and the public's already-evident antipathy toward the war, however, it was unlikely that such preconditions would be met, or that the United States would succeed in Vietnam.93

Taylor and Westmoreland were also pointing out difficulties in southern Vietnam. The ambassador reported that the VC was increasing its infiltration into and action inside the RVN, while the influx of American troops was disrupting life in the coastal areas and straining
logistics facilities. The Vietnamese had to absorb the 80,000 troops already in-country, so more soldiers should be sent "only in case of clear and indisputable necessity," Taylor advised.\textsuperscript{94} The MACV commander, however, wanted more forces, perhaps because he also recognized serious problems in the RVN. By May 1965, Westmoreland found that ROLLING THUNDER "had no measurable effect" on pacification in southern Vietnam. Even during a three-month lull in VC activity, the counterinsurgency program "has continued to regress in I and II Corps to an alarmist degree."\textsuperscript{95}

General Krulak, after visiting Da Nang in May, was satisfied with the Marines's activity to that point, but he too recognized shortcomings. The VC, as a Marine briefer told his Pacific commander, "continue to harass and wear out our forces, forcing us to move out of their operational area out of despair." In addition, native resentment over government and U.S. interference with their lives was apparent, while the 9th MEB was experiencing serious logistics, supply, and communications flaws. The "powdered sugar" beaches at Chu Lai made vehicle transportation nearly impossible, Phu Bai was still "relative[ly] indefensible," and Krulak had "never seen a worse situation" in communications than at Da Nang, where some messages might not get out for thirty hours, while others never arrived. While at Da Nang Krulak also met with Maxwell Taylor and he reported that the ambassador believed
that "however successful we are, it is still going to take a long time to win, and he is fearful that the nation at large may not have the requisite patience."  

Americans would need a great deal of patience, however, because conditions in Vietnam were not improving. In June the political chaos in the RVN worsened again as Quat resigned, eventually to be succeeded by a junta headed by Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and General Nguyen Van Thieu, and the VC continued to make steady progress throughout the south. Even when suffering heavy losses the insurgents, as MACV authorities suggested, had displayed their strength and could gain a "subsequent psychological victory among the populace throughout the RVN." Westmoreland accordingly was planning for the worst. The MACV commander believed that "the DRV will commit whatever forces it deems necessary to tip the balance and the GVN cannot stand up successfully to that kind of pressure without reinforcement." The Joint Chiefs agreed, explaining to McNamara that the deterioration in the south made imperative "a substantial further build-up of US and allied forces in the RVN, at the most rapid rate feasible on an orderly basis." Westmoreland thus requested an immediate increase of over 40,000 troops, but added that 52,000 more might be needed in a short while. In addition to the forty-four battalions--34 American (22 Army and 12 Marine) and 10 from Third Countries (Korea, New Zealand,
Australia) -- the MACV commander sought authority to more actively conduct operations in the RVN.97

Although not articulated as such, Westmoreland's 44-battalion proposal essentially involved taking over responsibility for offensive warfare from the ARVN. Clearly the decay in the RVN, and VC success, had forced U.S. leaders into the stark choice of either vast escalation or defeat. The MACV commander and other brass, however, also understood that their own credibility, as well as the president's and the nation's, were at stake, and that Lyndon Johnson and his principal civilian advisors on Vietnam, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, had most vigorously pressed for U.S. combat involvement and expected prompt success. Only a substantial U.S. combat role, military leaders recognized, could even offer any such hopes. Accordingly, American officers, despite their constant recognition of the risks of intervention, not only accepted the White House's determination for a ground war in the south, but indeed upped the ante by requesting deployments in excess of what the civilians had envisioned. If the president wanted a war in Vietnam, the U.S. military apparently reasoned, he would have to be responsible for its outcome.

Admiral Sharp, in fact, explicitly addressed such political considerations in his instructions to Westmoreland regarding the MACV commander's authority to
take the offensive against the enemy. Although the ambassador had already told MACV commanders that they could commit their forces to battle against the VC, and Sharp had reiterated that authorization, the CINCPAC also warned Westmoreland that "I’m sure you realize that there would be grave political implications involved if sizable U.S. forces are committed for the first time and suffer a defeat." The commander should thus "notify CINCPAC and JCS prior to [the] commitment of any U.S. ground combat force."98

Indeed, such political maneuvering would be an implicit yet critical element in Vietnam policymaking from that point on as civil-military relations as well as battlefield conditions would determine the nature of U.S. involvement in the war. Although American officers were not usually as candid as Sharp in discussing the "grave political implications" of their decisions, they were continually aware of such factors. Throughout the war, U.S. service leaders recognized that the president and defense secretary would never authorize unlimited resources or operations in Vietnam. Military policy was thus not made in a vacuum. Public opposition to the war, Johnson’s domestic agenda, and international political considerations, as well as the situation on the ground in the RVN, would always be significant elements in the formulation of strategy. The president himself made this
clear at a mid-June NSC meeting on Vietnam. To Johnson, dissent at home, trouble in the field, and the threat of PRC intervention meant that the United States had to limit both its means and ends in Vietnam. It thus had to contain the enemy "as much as we can, and as simply as we can, without going all out." By approving Westmoreland's 44-battalion request, he explained, "we get in deeper and it is harder to get out . . . . We must determine which course gives us the maximum protection at the least cost." 99

The president's concern about a deeper commitment was revealing, indicating that he would not authorize wholly unrestrained operations in Vietnam or unlimited commitments of resources. Johnson would, however, escalate the war to levels not imagined just years earlier. Military leaders, despite recognizing the risks of intervention in Vietnam and having arrived at no consensus on how to conduct the war, nonetheless continually pressed the White House to expand the U.S. commitment. Unable to develop any new ideas to alter conditions in the RVN or to admit that they were not likely to reverse the situation there, American officers asked for more of the same. The president in turn would both "get in deeper" but not fully satisfy the brass's requests. Either way, Lyndon Johnson would be responsible for what happened in Vietnam.

This process was already evident during the deliberations over Westmoreland's proposals in June and
July 1965. Military leaders continued to take an equivocal, if not contradictory, approach to the war. While urging the president to meet Westmoreland's request, the JCS opposed MACV plans to deploy American forces in the highlands of the RVN, instead preferring to use them as a mobile reserve near the coast. Westmoreland, however, had a different concept of operations. Believing that only RVNAF soldiers could conduct the pacification program, he anticipated employing U.S. forces against "hardcore" PAVN and VC units, both "in reaction and [in] search and destroy operations." By assuming such security tasks, Westmoreland hoped to free the Vietnamese to attack VC strongholds in populated regions along the coast, in the delta, and around Saigon.\textsuperscript{100} The MACV commander, of course, would get his way on the employment of U.S. forces, giving them principally a conventional mission in an otherwise guerrilla war. His decision, however, would remain a divisive issue within military circles for the duration of the war.

In July 1965 American officers subordinated such differences to the need to take action in Vietnam. The RVN leadership, now under General Ky's direction, was pressing Taylor for troops in late June. The ambassador, now on the team regarding Vietnam, relayed the request to Rusk with his support because the air campaign had not produced significant results and he did not expect Hanoi to "show
weakness under the pressure generated thus far." McNamara too advised the president to authorize the 44-battalion deployment to Vietnam and once more urged him to expand the air war against the north. Underlying his, and Westmoreland's, approach was their determination that the war had entered the "third stage" of people's war as formulated by Mao Zedong. The defense secretary and MACV commander now believed that the struggle in Vietnam was a "conventional war in which it is easier to identify, locate and attack the enemy." McNamara was well aware, however, that the introduction of additional American troops in Vietnam did not ensure success. While Westmoreland hoped to "re-establish the military balance" by year's end, he admitted that the new commitments "will not per se cause the enemy to back off." Accordingly, MACV leaders could not yet estimate the troop levels that might be needed in future years "to gain and maintain the military initiative, although Westmoreland "instinctively" expected "substantial US force requirements" in 1966. The number of battalions eventually required, Westmoreland alerted McNamara, "could be double the 44 mentioned above." The president expected to increase his commitment to Vietnam as well. At a White House meeting on 2 July, Johnson was clearly predisposed toward accepting McNamara's recommendations, which Rusk had also supported. At a press conference a week later the president announced that
America's manpower requirements in Vietnam "are increasing and will continue to do so . . . . Whatever is required I am sure will be supplied." McNaughton also backed the new deployments to Vietnam, even though he assumed that perhaps 400,000 troops would eventually be needed to give the United States a 50 percent chance of success by 1968. Lyndon Johnson was clearly heading toward a wider war, but he remained aware that a significant number of Americans continued to question or oppose U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As a result, the president directed McNamara to visit Saigon again to examine the situation and prepare the public for the coming measures.

McNamara and his party departed for Vietnam on 14 July to determine whether the new deployments would assure ultimate success, or rather cause the ARVN to "let up" and also engender greater resentment against Americans among the Vietnamese. Neither Westmoreland nor Taylor, who was in his last days as ambassador, could guarantee decisive results even with the reinforcements. The VC and PAVN would likely expand their force levels to correspond with American increases, or, if needed, could avoid "conclusive military confrontation" against U.S. or ARVN regular units by resorting to guerrilla tactics. Unless the VC abandoned the insurgency due to a variety of factors--such as the effectiveness of ROLLING THUNDER,
Soviet or Chinese pressure, continuing signs of American resolve, the development of political stability in Saigon, and an improved performance from the ARVN—the troop expansion, according to Westmoreland, "is not believed to be sufficient to eliminate the widespread VC capability for control of major segments of the country."107

McNamara received more sobering news during a meeting in Saigon with Westmoreland, Wheeler, and MACV briefers, among others, on 16 July. The DRVN was continuing to infiltrate men into the south at high levels despite the U.S. air strikes, and was supporting the insurgency with only 14 tons of supplies per day, according to a JCS study. To the defense secretary this meant that the United States had only a "very small" chance of upsetting infiltration via air attacks. To stop even the "meager supplies" moving into the RVN would require "tremendous activities on the ground." Such increased operations, however, carried grave risks. Although hoping that the proposed reinforcements would force the enemy to disseminate its troops, stand and fight in conventional battles, and suffer greater losses, Westmoreland conceded that "the chances of [the VC] standing up to fight US forces is questionable; they may be hard to find." In addition to this significant point, the MACV intelligence chief observed that the insurgents could shift between various phases of warfare easily. "With 100,000 guerrillas," General Joseph McChristian explained,
the VC "can fight now and then return to the plow."

Overall, McChristian added, the enemy had approximately one million men within its manpower pool and could increase its strength at the rate of about 100,000 troops per year.108

Because of such enemy capabilities, Westmoreland anticipated that he would require another vast reinforcement in 1966, including 24 maneuver, 14 artillery, 3 air defense, 8 engineer, and 6 helicopter battalions, as well as 12 helicopter companies and additional support units. With such forces the MACV commander planned to defeat the enemy in a three-phase war, initially halting the losing trend by the end of 1965, then taking the offensive in high-priority areas after that, and finally destroying any remaining VC forces and base areas by 1968. McNamara essentially accepted Westmoreland's assessment, but because of the VC's potential manpower reserve of one million the defense secretary also recognized that American deployments could conceivably expand beyond current estimates for phase three operations.109

McNamara returned to Washington and delivered his report to the president on 20 July, touching off the most intense week of deliberations on Vietnam policy until the 1968 Tet Offensive. To achieve a "favorable outcome"--which would involve an end to the insurgency, the existence of the RVN, and the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces--the secretary of defense advised Johnson to authorize the
deployment of 34 additional maneuver battalions, and 43 if the Koreans failed to contribute 9 battalions as planned, by October 1965. Those troops, along with support personnel, would raise the U.S. force structure in Vietnam to 175,000 or more. McNamara also urged a national mobilization for Vietnam, recommending that the administration activate 235,000 men in the Reserve and National Guard, increase the size of the armed forces by 375,000 via recruiting, draft calls, and extended tours of duty, and seek a supplemental appropriation to cover the costs of this new build-up. Once in place, this American force could take the offensive against the VC in the south while the air war over the north would expand from 2500 to 4000 sorties per month. At the same time, the reserve call-up and other military augmentations would create about 63 additional maneuver battalions to use as a contingency force.¹¹⁰

The defense secretary's report sparked a series of intense meetings on the war, even though the president had already told McNamara's deputy, Cyrus Vance, that it was his "current intention" to approve the reinforcements.¹¹¹ Despite Johnson's decision to escalate, American officials, who supported the president almost without exception, continued to recognize the gloomy situation they faced in Vietnam and the costs and peril of war there. In July 1965 U.S. officials consciously decided to take responsibility
for a war in Southeast Asia with their eyes wide open to the realities and drawbacks of intervention. George Ball, the undersecretary of state, Clark Clifford, an informal advisor to the White House, and Maxwell Taylor actually opposed McNamara's plans, with Ball in particular offering a spirited and, as it turned out, prophetic assessment of the hazards of war.¹¹²

But the advocates of intervention were aware of what the future held as well. McNamara was prepared to request at least $2 billion in supplemental funding for Vietnam in 1965, while Vance though that the costs of national mobilization could reach $8 billion. McGeorge Bundy, however, warned the president that such a vast appropriation would be a "belligerent challenge" to the Soviet Union, become a propaganda tool for the Communists, and hurt economic confidence at home. Bundy was also concerned about McNamara's program of reinforcements. While urging Johnson to approve the 44-battalion plan, he also advised the president to defer making any further commitments for a few months. "After all," the national security advisor pointed out, "we have not yet had even a company-level engagement with the Viet Cong forces which choose to stand their ground and fight."¹¹³ Jack Valenti too urged Johnson to take whatever steps necessary to conclusively alter the war in as short a time as possible, but he also warned that Republicans as well as liberal
Democrats would be sure to find fault with the president's policy as the war became "long, protracted, [and] uglier."

U.S. military officials, while supporting the Westmoreland-McNamara proposals, once more did not offer sanguine views of the situation in Vietnam. While Wheeler was optimistic that the additional U.S. forces would have a decisive impact and that the United States could, if need be, "handle" both the DRVN and PRC, some of his associates were not so bold in predicting success. John McConnell, the Air Force chief of staff, hoped that the new troops, along with increased air and sea operations, would "at least turn the tide where we are not losing anymore." Wallace Greene, still advocating the enclave concept rather than MACV's conventional strategy, urged both combat reinforcements and air strikes against the DRVN's industrial base, and a blockade of Cambodia to choke off infiltration into the south. As the Commandant saw it, such measures would require a 500,000-troop commitment in the RVN for at least five years. "I think the US people will back you," he optimistically told the president. Harold K. Johnson, who told Johnson that he believed Ho's recent statement that the Vietnamese Communists were prepared to fight for twenty more years if needed, was not so hopeful. "We are in a face-down," he explained. "The solution, unfortunately, is long-term. Once the military
solution is [found], the problem of political solution will be more difficult."115

Despite such blunt assessments and his own fear of provoking the PRC or Soviet Union to intervene in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson believed that he had "very little alternative to what we are doing." To Johnson it was "more dangerous" to lose the war "than [to] endanger a greater number of troops." Should he not come to the RVN's rescue, the president feared that other nations would consider the United States a "paper tiger." "Wouldn't we lose credibility by breaking the word of three presidents" concerning America's pledge to preserve an independent southern state, Johnson asked George Ball.116 The president, however, also recognized the potentially serious political consequences, both domestic and international, of a total commitment to Vietnam. If Johnson accepted the McNamara-MACV program in whole, with possibly endless deployments, a Reserve call-up, and supplemental appropriations, Hanoi would then use the American escalation as leverage to receive more aid from Chinese and Soviet sources. At home, "this dramatic course of action" would involve declaring a state of national emergency and additional funding of several billions of dollars. The president did not want such drama and tension, especially when civil rights and Great Society legislation dominated his domestic agenda. "I think we can get our people to
support us without having to be provocative," Johnson observed wistfully. 117

The president’s steadfast commitment to see the war in Vietnam to a successful conclusion had come into conflict with his fear of provoking a wider war in Asia and of the domestic political and economic implications of national mobilization. Accordingly on 28 July Johnson announced that he was increasing the total of U.S. forces in the RVN from 75,000 to 125,000 and would send additional troops "as requested." The president would also double the number of monthly draft calls to 35,000, but would not activate the Reserves. Although he gained no pleasure in sending "the flower of our youth" into war, Johnson had to prevent the RVN from being "swept away on the flood of conquest." For such reasons, "we will stand in Vietnam." 118

With the president’s decision that day, the United States took a major step on the path to disaster. Despite the parlous situation facing U.S. forces in Vietnam, which included costs and perils recognizable to virtually all American officials, Johnson had decided to, in essence, take over responsibility for the war. At the same time, he alienated U.S. military officials by refusing to mobilize the country for war in Vietnam or to activate large numbers of reservists. Service leaders were already aware of the implications of the newly-established policy. When Harold K. Johnson, who had assumed until the last moment that the
president would mobilize for war, learned that the commander-in-chief was not going to utilize the reserves, he told McNamara that he could "assure you that the quality of the Army is going to erode to some degree that we can't assess now. I just know that." Marine General Raymond Davis later made the same point about the failure to activate the Reserves and added that the military had initially requested $11 billion for Vietnam but, because of political pressure from advocates of domestic programs, ended up with just a small percentage of that amount.

American officers, however, should not have been shocked by Johnson's decision. Their own assessments of the war had always pointed out the barriers to success in Vietnam and decried the continued erosion there. Their often-sanguine projections for the future were thus born of either bold confidence in the capabilities of the American war machine or, just as likely, recognition that war in Vietnam was politically inevitable and, like it or not, they would have to wage it. "No longer was the United States pursuing the more limited objective of denying the enemy victory in the South and convincing him he could not win," Bruce Palmer observed. The U.S. goal "now was to defeat the enemy in the South, relying primarily on American troops. Unfortunately these actions gave the impression . . . that the United States intended to win the
war on its own."121

General William Rosson, the MACV chief of staff, was also troubled by the American approach to Vietnam. To Rosson, the president’s July 1965 decision was a "major strategic mistake" that "entailed risks we need not have taken." Many officers were as skeptical as he was, "but the course of action selected by the administration was clear" and the military went along with it. The prospects of achieving success "through what I understood was to be a limited military reinforcement" were, to Rosson, "unrealistic."122 He and other officers in Saigon and Washington nonetheless accepted the responsibilities of war in mid-1965 although they were well aware of both the difficult situation in the RVN and the political constraints of their warmaking potential.

Despite such recognition those military officials would conduct an expanding war of destruction and attrition in Vietnam while, at the same time, remain aware of their limited ability to produce the desired results. Even more, American service leaders would continue to urge the president to authorize the very measures--a fully unrestrained air campaign, geographical expansion of the conflict, national mobilization, and a call-up of Reserves, among others--that could not ensure success and that Lyndon Johnson had rejected already. Either the military thought that it could break the president’s will through repeated
pressure or, failing that, make him responsible for the stasis that was sure to result from U.S. involvement in the war. Either way, Larry Berman was surely right in contending that, with the July 1965 decisions, American officials had "decided to lose the war slowly."\textsuperscript{123}

In just over eighteen months the United States had extended its involvement in southern Vietnam from supporting the ARVN, to protecting bases with U.S. soldiers, to engaging the enemy in combat, and eventually to turning the conflict into an American war. For Lyndon Johnson and other civilian officials such as McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and McNaughton, the grave conditions in Vietnam and the need to maintain U.S. credibility made it imperative to take such action. American military leaders too understood the stakes involved in Vietnam, but took a somewhat tortured path toward their commitment to the war. The services themselves were initially divided over the proper approach to the conflict, with some generals urging air war over the north as the means to end the rebellion while others, especially Army leaders, rejected it as a diversion from the heart of the struggle, the southern insurgency. At the same time, the brass, with the exception of Harold K. Johnson, showed little interest in assuming the responsibilities of ground war in the RVN. Indeed, only two months before U.S. Marines hit the beaches at Da Nang General Westmoreland had advised against such
deployments, both because they were of questionable military value and could lead to a political situation not unlike that of France in the 1950s. Even more, Maxwell Taylor, arguably the most respected military authority of the period, virulently opposed American combat in Vietnam for a variety of military and political reasons.

The Johnson White House, however, dismissed such criticism and caution and went to war in the RVN. General Matthew Ridgway, a critic of U.S. policy in Indochina for two decades, later observed that the president was "gung-ho on that thing." Johnson's increasing commitments to and decision to enter combat in Vietnam "far exceeded what you would hope would be the activities of the Commander-in-Chief," as Ridgway saw it. While the president did push the United States into war, it was also clear that American military leaders did not serve him well either. Rather than contemplate their own misgivings about the situation in Vietnam and the prospects of an effective military response there, U.S. officers generally ignored their own warnings, followed the White House lead on Vietnam, kept asking for measures that would not be forthcoming, and then blamed the president when things, inevitably, turned sour. Neither military nor civilian officials had been adequately introspective in early 1965 and so they optimistically intervened in a foreign war that would cause unimaginable distress, internationally and at home. Some Americans saw
it coming, however. When Ridgway met with the secretary of state shortly after the president's decision to engage in combat in Vietnam he lamented, "My God, Dean, don't we learn anything?" Maybe Rusk thought that the General's concerns were valid for, Ridgway added, "there was no answer."
CHAPTER VIII

WAR ON THREE FRONTS:

U.S. FORCES VS. THE VC, WESTMORELAND VS. THE MARINES,
AND MILITARY LEADERS VS. THE WHITE HOUSE,
JULY 1965-DECEMBER 1966

Dean Rusk may have used silence to express his reservations, but other officials would become increasingly vocal throughout 1965 and 1966 in pointing out the pitfalls facing U.S. forces in Vietnam and in criticizing Westmoreland's approach to the war. During that period the three factors that had principally characterized America's problems in Vietnam--the U.S. military's recognition of its foundering position, interservice feuding, and political maneuvering--became more pronounced and showed American officials just how elusive success had become. By late 1966 the nature, and eventual outcome, of the war were thus apparent. It was already clear that American forces had not been able to reverse conditions on the ground; military leaders were aware of the limits to be placed on their operations; the services themselves were brawling over MACV strategy; influential officials, such as Robert McNamara

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and Victor Krulak, were sounding alarms about the U.S. future in Vietnam; and Lyndon Johnson's political career was on the line as the war in Indochina replaced the War on Poverty as the dominant national issue. Although the conflict would continue for many more years, the blueprint for failure had been drawn at the outset of intervention.

Throughout the year and one-half of full-scale military involvement in Vietnam following the president's July 1965 decisions, America's problems in the RVN and in Washington mounted. Despite public claims of progress and often-rosy outlooks from Westmoreland, Wheeler, and others, U.S. officers still realized that the ARVN was allowing American forces to carry the brunt of the war and that the enemy was withstanding the U.S. ground and air assault and showed no signs of quitting. Although service leaders often complained, during the war and thereafter, that political constraints undermined their efforts, in reality they recognized that Communist infiltration, morale, and capabilities had not deteriorated and continued to pose serious obstacles to American progress. In addition, the brass conceded that the enemy held the military initiative, would simply avoid combat except on favorable terms, and had time on its side. Perhaps most importantly, American officers understood that the VC-NLF forces were making further political headway among the Vietnamese people, while the southern government was still unable to develop a
stable administrative structure or provide security. Under such circumstances, any military expectations of future success were delusive at best.

Such battlefield and political conditions in the RVN, as U.S. officers admitted, were exacerbating their troubles in Vietnam. More critically, the U.S. military itself was engaged in an increasingly-sharp fight over Westmoreland's strategy in Vietnam. As the MACV commander decided to wage a conventional war, emphasizing firepower, mobility, and attrition, various detractors within the military raised their voices in protest. Rather than address what they saw as the fundamental needs of the Vietnamese people--security and political stability--Generals Krulak, Greene, Johnson, and others charged that the MACV strategy was needlessly bleeding American forces by engaging the enemy in big-unit encounters while the VC infrastructure remained virtually untouched. Army leaders, in a thorough analysis of the war sent to Harold K. Johnson in early 1966, reached similar conclusions and, like the Marines, urged a strategy of civic action, or pacification. Westmoreland, however, would continue his futile strategy of attrition for the remaining two years of his command.

At the same time, civil-military relations continued to deteriorate and political factors were ever present in the policymaking process. To the military, the president was waging war half-heartedly. The brass saw Johnson's
failure to mobilize and activate Reserves, his bombing pauses and restrictions on air operations, and his concern over widening the war as fatal missteps with grave long-term implications. Military leaders, however, also understood that Johnson would try to limit the war, in terms of troop numbers, sorties flown, and geographical areas of combat. The military had consistently pressed Johnson to declare a national emergency without success throughout 1965 and 1966, yet, as the president’s domestic problems mounted, continued to call for such measures even though they would not be authorized as the war dragged on. Rather than devise strategy based on such political realities, however, U.S. officers kept urging the president to approve the stronger measures that he had repeatedly rejected. Even after Defense Secretary McNamara soured on the war in 1966, American military officials did not reappraise their approach to Vietnam.

Given the president’s concerns, such a reevaluation may not have been possible in any case. Johnson feared both the international repercussions of escalation and the impact of Vietnam on his Great Society programs, so hoped to find a way to end the war promptly and successfully. Given such objectives, it was not surprising that the military pursued the course of attrition and air power. Even if the Marines and Harold K. Johnson had convinced Westmoreland to emphasize nation building and turn over
responsibility for combat to the ARVN, the war would have continued for years to come. To the president, an interminable commitment in Vietnam was simply unacceptable from a political viewpoint. Thus Johnson would wait for Westmoreland to achieve success, the military, when not fighting itself, would try to expand the war, and both sides would try to pin the other with responsibility for the disaster that was surely coming.

Following Johnson's moves of July 1965, the military began to prepare for full-scale combat in Vietnam, but without Reserves or other extraordinary measures. The Army, as Harold K. Johnson explained, thus faced a great dilemma as it had to support the war in Vietnam without mobilization and without reducing its worldwide commitments. Although aware of the political constraints on strategy, General Westmoreland and his staff nonetheless planned on waging a huge, conventional war in Vietnam, much as had Harkins during his time in Saigon. Thus the MACV commander and the JCS forwarded their strategic blueprint to McNamara in late August. The military's "Concept for Vietnam" assumed that the DRVN and VC would continue to grow and control more of southern Vietnam, that the inchoate political situation in Saigon would persist, and that PRC intervention remained a possibility in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the western Pacific. The chiefs and
Westmoreland also understood that the VC would avoid risky engagements with American forces and would instead conduct smaller-scale operations "to bleed and humiliate US forces." Notwithstanding that recognition, the brass intended to conduct the very type of war that the enemy would probably avoid. To both attack the "source" of aggression in Hanoi and "vigorously" eliminate the VC in the south, Westmoreland would intensify military pressure in the north via air and naval power, interdict supplies and reinforcements heading southward, and "by aggressive and sustained exploitation of superior military force" defeat the enemy in three phases by 1968.²

Implementing such plans would obviously require additional forces, so Westmoreland immediately asked for, and McNamara approved, the despatch of an additional 85,000 troops, thereby raising the number of U.S. military personnel in the RVN to over 200,000.³ The chiefs further pointed out that such requests would continue and so again pressed the administration to activate Reserves, extend terms of service for active-duty soldiers, expand the manpower base, and mobilize the industrial and financial sectors. In that way, the United States could both fight the war in Vietnam and maintain American commitments in Europe.⁴

Although the JCS signed off on Westmoreland's new requirements, there was concern within the military over
the inflated troop numbers for Vietnam. Westmoreland suspected that Harold K. Johnson and senior staff members thought that "I was being unreasonable in stating my requirements for Army resources." The MACV commander anticipated that a conflict of interest between he and the Army chief was "inevitable" given the demands of the war in Vietnam and the limited resources available to Johnson in Washington. Although Westmoreland had no trouble receiving authorization for his requests in 1964 and early 1965, his latest requirements were "cutting into the meat and vitals of the Army and therefore the seeds of resentment are bound to appear."5

The seeds of disaster were already sprouting. Despite the new American commitments, conditions in Vietnam remained parlous and the outlook for future improvement was uncertain at best. In another war game, Sigma II-65, the Joint War Games Agency expected the Communists in Vietnam to wait out the U.S. buildup and focus their attention on longer-term objectives such as destroying the political order and disrupting the economy in the south. Although recognizing the ability of American forces to blunt the VC's military offensives, the enemy did not believe that U.S. offensive action could significantly hurt them or prevent continued erosion in the RVN. Still believing that "time is on our side," the insurgents, the JWGA pointed out, did not expect the United States to sustain its
expansion in Vietnam. Massive buildup on the ground notwithstanding, the United States could not convince the DRVN and VC that it was willing "to take appropriate action" to prevent a Communist victory.\textsuperscript{6}

Even General DePuy offered a bleak appraisal of the war. Speaking at Marine headquarters in late October, he described the military situation as "tolerable" but found pacification "totally unsatisfactory." Although confident that U.S. combat efforts could reverse battlefield conditions, DePuy anticipated a long-term commitment. "The thing that's going to keep U.S. troops in Vietnam for a long, long time," the MACV planning chief told the Marines, "is the fact that the government of [southern] Vietnam is really bankrupt." In addition to the VC subversion and Buddhist-Catholic division, the "congenitally conspiratorial" Ky-Thieu junta was exacerbating the political turmoil in the south, DePuy charged. Such chaos surely was taking its toll on the people of the RVN, most of whom, the general admitted, expected the Communists to win the war. Such problems, he added, were likely to get worse. It was just October 1965 but DePuy recognized that, if the people of Vietnam "lose morale again, I'd hate to try to buy it back one more time. I suppose it could be done . . . but each time it's more difficult."\textsuperscript{7}

DePuy was barely more positive in evaluating the ARVN. Though he did see some improvements in the southern
military performance, the planning chief admitted that the MACV was working hard simply "to put ARVN back into the war." Moreover, DePuy questioned the loyalty of the senior officer corps and pointed out that many southern soldiers had to be "dragooned" into service. Accordingly, American officers were trying to teach the RVNAF "simple tasks, and short, step-by-step objectives," while the United States would work on longer-range goals. The VC, however, did not suffer from such shortcomings. Enemy troops, DePuy admitted, "fight like tigers." During Operation STARLITE in I Corps in August, the VC "maneuvered in the jungle, maintained tactical integrity, withdrew their wounded, lost practically no weapons, and did a first-class job." Paying the enemy the ultimate compliment, DePuy confessed that "we'd be proud of American troops of any kind who did as well against such a large force that surprised them in the middle of the jungle."  

The VC, in fact, was operating effectively throughout the RVN. The insurgents, MACV officers explained, "have penetrated Vietnamese society in depth. It is a problem US forces have not encountered before." It was also a problem likely to worsen, for, as Westmoreland reported to Sharp, recent enemy infiltration was "greater than suspected." The U.S. buildup, the MACV commander also explained, might have little impact on the flow of Communist reinforcements into the RVN. Ironically,
Westmoreland predicted that the number of infiltrators would expand as the weather improved "and [as] US forces increase." In large measure American soldiers were having such difficulties containing infiltration because they were often protecting U.S. installations. At each U.S. airfield in the south, Westmoreland observed, there was a "serious risk" of VC mortar, light artillery, or commando attack "even though a significant proportion of ground forces are tied to air base defense roles."\(^{10}\)

Despite these problems, Westmoreland and other officers still insisted that the war was going well, especially after the mid-November battle of Ia Drang valley. While patrolling in the central highlands near the Cambodian border, in the vicinity of Pleiku, units attached to the 1st Cavalry Division came into contact with and routed PAVN regulars. Using their superior mobility and firepower against the northern army, which was fighting without heavy weapons, American forces killed over 2000 Communist troops in the Ia Drang valley, while losing about 240 of their own during the battle. Ia Drang, as Westmoreland and DePuy interpreted it, validated their strategy of attrition. To General Phillip Davidson, a MACV intelligence officer, it was a "major victory" for the Americans. Even the normally-skeptical Harold K. Johnson initially believed that the worst was behind the United States after November 1965.\(^{11}\)
In Washington, however, the war's biggest booster was not so enthused. Robert McNamara, who, as George Ball put it, "more than almost anyone else had led the country into" the war, was clearly shaken by the events in the Ia Drang valley. To the defense secretary the United States, despite inflicting great losses on the enemy, had incurred an inordinate amount of casualties itself. On top of such concerns, McNamara, just a week after the battle, received another troop request from Westmoreland, this time for forty additional battalions, instead of his initially-projected twenty eight, to meet rising Communist infiltration into the RVN. In fact, the number of PAVN forces in the south had risen from 6000 to 71,000 during the summer of 1965 while the number of guerrillas had increased to 110,000.12

Given these developments McNamara, in Paris for a NATO meeting, took a detour to Saigon to meet with Westmoreland, who told him that the enemy had been building up its forces at double the initial MACV estimates. The commander, while invoking Ia Drang as proof of the effectiveness of his strategy, nonetheless told the defense secretary that "the war had been characterized by an underestimation of the enemy and overestimation of the [southern] Vietnamese." He also made what he termed a "passing observation" that the war was increasingly taking on "an attritional character with heavy losses on both sides." With such observations
on top of another request for reinforcements Westmoreland had thus made it clear that he would, like Harkins before him, wage a conventional war of attrition in Vietnam. At the same time the Army commander suggested that U.S. leaders "take a good hard look at our future posture."13

McNamara did precisely that. In a memorandum to President Johnson, the defense secretary cited "dramatic recent changes" in the military situation, especially increased infiltration of personnel and supplies and Communist willingness to fight, to conclude that earlier force projections were inadequate. The United States, McNamara believed, could negotiate a compromise solution—an option he dismissed immediately—or "stick with our stated objectives and with the war, and provide what it takes in men and materiel." Staying the course, the secretary explained, would involve an intensified air campaign against the north and an increase from 34 to 74 combat battalions in 1966. Under this plan the U.S. presence in Vietnam would grow to include about 400,000 troops within a year, with possible reinforcements of 200,000 in 1967. Such deployments, however, would not guarantee success. As McNamara saw it, about 1000 American soldiers would die every month of the war "and the odds are even that we will be faced with a 'no-decision' at an even higher level."14 The secretary of defense, as had Westmoreland, recognized just how badly the war was going
at the end of 1965. Nonetheless both urged more of the same. The United States had thus arrived at a pivotal point in the war. Despite increased troop levels and perceived success at Ia Drang, the American military position in Vietnam had not improved to any appreciable degree. In fact, Ia Drang had been instructive to General Giap too, and he would thereafter avoid big-unit engagements unless PAVN forces held the initiative and maintained access to cross-border sanctuaries.\textsuperscript{15}

As such battlefield developments continued to impede U.S. progress, various political factors involved in strategymaking took on greater importance. Both civilian and military leaders recognized that more than the survival of the RVN was at stake in the conflict in Indochina. To Lyndon Johnson the Great Society, and his own political legacy, would crumble if the war became divisive and boundless. For its part the military, just marginally optimistic about American prospects in Vietnam in any case, also understood that the president would constrain its tactics in Vietnam for political reasons. Nonetheless U.S. officers would continue to seek authorization for more resources and extended operations, although they too recognized the limited value of such measures and the political pitfalls associated with expansion, and failure, in Vietnam. Although such political-military maneuvering was commonplace after Vietnam became a priority in the
1950s, it entered a new, more intense phase in 1965. For the next two and one-half years the White House and the brass would continue to play politics with the Vietnam war, and, by early 1968 they would create one of the gravest crises in civil-military relations in contemporary times.

For Lyndon Johnson, the final days of July 1965 had capped what he called "the most productive and most historic legislative week in Washington during this century." Congress had either passed or was prepared to vote on bills that would establish the Great Society—including Medicare, voting rights, War on Poverty, and education legislation. During that very week, however, the president had also increased the American stake in an overseas war and "the lowering cloud of Vietnam," as Johnson himself noticed, was beginning to affect his domestic political agenda. As the costs of the war grew, Charles Schultze, the administration's budget director, informed the president that tax increases would be necessary to subsidize the U.S. presence in Vietnam, while Wilbur Mills, powerful chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, saw the beginnings of a "very serious inflationary crunch." Among others, Gardner Ackley, chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, was telling Johnson that 1966 "would not be a good year." At the same time the "winds of reform" were already beginning to calm as
Congress voted down home rule for Washington D.C., despite the president's support of the bill.\(^\text{16}\)

International politics were affecting U.S. policy as well. In late 1965 Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and other Soviet officials were pressuring Rusk, William Bundy, Harriman, and others to establish a bombing pause and negotiate with the NLF. Dobrynin pointed out that the United States was a "big power" yet made no peace overtures. Were the Americans "trying to impress the Soviets," the ambassador from Moscow asked. Bundy reported that another Soviet official told him that, if the United States truly wanted peace in Vietnam, it would have to make a gesture that was "quite major and specific relating to the South. (Perhaps, for a guess, suspension of reinforcements)."\(^\text{17}\)

In addition to Soviet pressure, American political leaders, including Senators Warren Magnuson, John Pastore, and Bobby Kennedy, were urging the White House to look for a way out of Vietnam before it became even more militarily difficult and politically divisive.\(^\text{18}\) Maxwell Taylor, now an advisor to the president on military affairs, also warned McNamara to show "more concern about the homefront." Although he thought that public opinion on Vietnam was generally favorable, Taylor also noted "gnawing questions and uneasiness" that could grow and seriously hamper U.S. efforts in the war.\(^\text{19}\)
Active-duty military leaders were also aware of the relationship between Vietnam and domestic politics. In August, Westmoreland had already recognized the tactical limits that the White House would place on American forces, scotching an Abrams proposal to cut off infiltration in the Laotian panhandle. Such a plan, the MACV leader explained, "was not in the cards for the foreseeable future because of complex political and other considerations." Not surprisingly, he resented such "considerations." When the secretary of state and ambassador expressed their concern over the counterinsurgency campaign, Westmoreland lamented what he saw as Rusk's and Lodge's "violation of the prerogatives of the military commander." Should civilians continue to pressure the military on strategic matters, the MACV commander expected a return "to the situation of a year ago when Washington attempted to call all the shots, project all plans, and dictate how this war would be fought." Thus Westmoreland pledged to "do everything I can to discourage this tendency."\(^{20}\)

Although questioning the civilian direction of the war, Westmoreland did recognize that the administration would determine the course of affairs relating to Vietnam. DePuy did as well. During his October briefing to Marine leaders, the planning chief conceded that the MACV would not receive the full measure of its troop requests. The United States, he explained, would never be able to
maneuver the VC into a big-unit war on terms favorable to American forces, so "it's more likely we'll be forced to win the war by attrition and penny packets [a derisive term for incremental reinforcement.]" Nor could the United States expect the RVNAF to pick up the slack any time soon. Although the Marines wanted authorization for 40,000 more Vietnamese forces in I Corps, Commandant Wallace Greene admitted that such an increase was a "virtual impossibility" because of manpower shortages in southern Vietnam and because a "considerable number" of local villagers supported the VC.

Harold K. Johnson had also resigned himself to the political realities of the war. In a visit to Vietnam after the battle of Ia Drang, the Army chief feared that the United States would never find a suitable way to end the war. Despite questioning Westmoreland's strategy, he and the other chiefs were also looking for ways to provide the requested reinforcements to the MACV. Johnson, however, was "not optimistic about acceleration [of deployments to Vietnam] because virtually all the blood is out of the turnip." While the United States "could overcome our deficiency very quickly with an extension of terms of service or a selected Reserve call-up," the Army chief saw "no inclination to declare a national emergency." Westmoreland too recognized that such measures were not forthcoming. Although he raised the issues of Reserve
activation and extended tours with Ambassador Lodge, the MACV leader acknowledged that those steps "might require some drastic action that would be politically difficult for the President." Although he offered a "grim prospect" for the war, Westmoreland "felt in all fairness" that he should inform Lodge of conditions in Vietnam as he saw them.  

Such bleak assessments extended beyond considerations of troop levels in Vietnam. At the same time that Westmoreland and the MACV were clamoring for Reserves, reinforcements, and mobilization, the military continued to pressure the president to intensify the air war. The ROLLING THUNDER campaign, however, was but a palliative to the military problems of Vietnam, as U.S. service leaders recognized. Indeed, the United States was pursuing limited objectives in the air war over the north--trying to coerce Ho to negotiate, using the bombing as a bargaining chip, and cutting infiltration--rather than developing air power as a strategy for victory. Even then, however, the air strikes had but a limited effect on both PAVN and VC operations. Admiral Sharp, arguably the military's strongest booster of the air war, pointed out that the United States had already caused heavy damage to most of the important military targets in the DRVN by August 1965, yet no American commander was suggesting that such measures had significantly altered the military situation in Vietnam. In fact, the JCS had reported that even an
increased program of interdiction would not appreciably reduce the flow of materiel required for current, or even expanded, VC and PAVN activity. At best, it might constrain the transfer of increased supplies needed "to sustain a major step-up in operations."  

Given the limited impact of air operations, McNamara, upon his return from Vietnam in late November, urged the president to halt the air war for the time being. To the defense secretary such a pause would give Hanoi a chance to slow down the war, would create the impression in other nations that the United States was sincerely interested in a negotiated settlement, and, in the event that Ho did not respond favorably, justify resuming and intensifying the bombing. On Christmas eve Johnson accepted McNamara's proposal and began a 37-day bombing pause. To General Taylor, a long-time advocate of air power in Vietnam, the military costs of such actions were not significant but the political rewards could be, so he urged the president to continue the pause. Most military representatives, however, reacted vitriolically to the pause, especially Sharp and Westmoreland, with the CINCPAC calling it a "retreat from reality."

Although a contentious military issue, the bombing pause, as General Phillip Davidson observed, was even more a divisive political issue. Under the guise of determining how to conduct the air war, civilian and military officials
were in fact vying for control of military operations. Writing after the war ended, Davidson wondered "where, in 1965-1966, the real war was actually being fought--in the jungles and skies of Vietnam or in the corridors of the Pentagon." The "real war" included the services fighting among themselves as well. Indeed, struggles between military branches over the management of and strategy to be used in the war, already an irritant in policymaking considerations, reached new levels and became an explosive issue by late 1965 and 1966.

Barely six months after the heightened U.S. commitments of July, various military leaders had become intensely critical of Westmoreland's conduct of the war and in their dissent provided strong evidence that America was headed toward disaster. On one level, the interservice feuding was a continuation of the fight for larger roles and more influence that had marked the military's approach to Vietnam since the 1950s. Thus, the Air Force and Marines continued to press the Army-dominated MACV for greater representation on Westmoreland's staff and for more autonomy in conducting their own operations. That situation, however, had worsened so much that Wheeler found himself trying to stave off a "major blow up" between the Army and Air Force in November over the placement of Air officers on the MACV staff.

More critically though, the services found themselves
engaged in a virulent battle over the type of military strategy to be used in Vietnam. Criticism of MACV strategy was nothing new, as John Vann and others had already proven, but in late 1965 the military debate over the proper approach to Vietnam erupted and became a major impediment to progress thereafter. American officers had begun to argue about strategy as soon as the president had decided to deploy combat forces to Vietnam. Much of the contention revolved around, as it had since the Kennedy years, whether the United States should follow conventional military doctrine, with firepower, mobility, and attrition, or stress counterinsurgency warfare. Westmoreland opted for the former, the Army "Concept" as Andrew Krepinevich called it, deploying heavy weapons to Da Nang in March although Maxwell Taylor considered howitzers and tanks "inappropriate for counterinsurgency operations." As noted earlier, the ambassador, Harold K. Johnson, and Marine officers favored the establishment of coastal enclaves from which the American troops could maneuver against enemy forces, and they also wanted to emphasize the important political tasks of nation-building while holding the RVNAF responsible for the brunt of the war.

By June, however, the MACV had abandoned the enclave concept. With ROLLING THUNDER unable to force the DRVN to capitulate and the situation in the south still deteriorating, U.S. officers could not experiment with a
strategy that emphasized the time-consuming tasks of counterinsurgency and political reform. Westmoreland thus began to employ search-and-destroy tactics, utilize the MACV's heavy advantages in firepower and mobility, and conduct a war of attrition. While doing this he also admitted that Vietnam "is no place for either tank or mechanized infantry." General Krulak, who would become Westmoreland's biggest critic within the military in a short time, questioned the MACV approach. "No military strategy," he charged, "will achieve success without corresponding non-military programs aimed at exploiting the benefits of the security brought by an effective military plan."

In a meeting with McNamara in July, Krulak expressed such concerns about Westmoreland's strategy and believed that he had swayed the defense secretary with his descriptions of the Marines's effective pacification efforts "and of the imprudence of trying to stage decisive battles with the VC on the Tannenberg design." The Commandant weighed in on the strategic issue as well, telling fellow officers that he still preferred the "constant enclave concept." Greene and his deputies believed that "we can't afford to go into [Vietnam]--not only from the Marine Corps point of view, but from the over-all point of view--and do what the French did." Specifically, he explained, U.S. forces should not be
deployed in land where "thousands upon thousands" of Vietnamese could surround them. The French had placed twelve battalions at Dien Bien Phu, Greene reminded other Navy and Marine officers, but "what the hell happened to them? They lost 10,000 men."37

In a similar vein, Marine General Lewis Walt, who had assumed command of the reorganized 3d Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) in June, argued that U.S. strategy had to emphasize the political benefits the Vietnamese would gain by defeating the Communists, even though such an objective would not be easy. Although he cited the VC's "terror" as its principal tactic, Walt found that, in areas where the insurgents had been strong for some time, the Communists had established stable political environments. The VC-controlled villages "were tidy and well run, [and] the people were adapted to government by the communists . . . . Where Viet Cong control was absolute, it was superficially reasonable and often appeared mild." Accordingly, Walt urged that U.S. forces "temper . . . the fight with an understanding of the people, compassion toward them, and the exercise of good works, even in the midst of war."38

Westmoreland, rhetorically at least, acknowledged such concerns. As a MACV directive put it, the conduct of U.S. soldiers and application of military force would have to be "carefully controlled at all times." The American military objectives, crushing the VC but minimizing collateral
damage to the people of Vietnam, thus required "the exercise of judgment and restraint not formerly expected of soldiers."³⁹

Such restraint, many other officers believed, would be difficult to achieve, given Westmoreland's conventional strategy. Indeed, internal criticism of the MACV approach to the war in general was escalating by late 1965 and began to gravely affect the American role in Vietnam. Maxwell Taylor, for instance, objected to the MACV/JCS "Concept for Vietnam" which entailed using conventional means to extend Saigon's control over the entire RVN. Reiterating themes that he had been stressing over the previous several years, the White House's military consultant "anticipate[d] an endless requirement for American troops if we undertook to pursue the enemy into the remote vastnesses of the Vietnam frontier," as Westmoreland's plan envisioned. In such areas, the VC "would be close to his cross-border sources of supply and ... the terrain would be favorable to his hit-and-hide tactics."⁴⁰

John Paul Vann, in Vietnam as a civilian official connected with the embassy, also continued to attack Westmoreland's program for Vietnam. The "widespread use of air and artillery as a substitute for getting into the countryside," he once more complained, "is regrettable."⁴¹ The emphasis on military operations, Vann continued, had alienated the southern population, not only because
American forces were destroying the countryside but because the United States was ignoring the need for political reform. The U.S. government simply kept propping up the regime in Saigon even though it could not "establish stability, even with dictatorial powers, let alone achieve a popular base among the people." Maxwell Taylor added that the ARVN, as he had warned, was shirking its duty and the United States had become the "primary doer" in the war. The president's military advisor feared that American forces were about to take on a "preponderant ground role" in Vietnam. If that happened, Taylor expected 50 to 75 per cent of Vietnamese units to end up in static defense roles, American casualties to rise sharply, and, accordingly, public criticism of the war to become more vocal. Such concerns were apparently widespread, for various junior officers told Harold K. Johnson during his December visit that Westmoreland would have to "end the big-unit war; we're just not going to win doing this." Others did recommend to the Army chief that the United States take the fight to the DRVN but, as Mark Perry explains, this was "an option [that] Johnson knew was out of the question." Westmoreland, however, believed that he could not divert from a strategy of attrition and firepower because the White House, for ostensibly political reasons, would limit his military options in Vietnam.

More than anyone, the Marines challenged
Westmoreland's views. Although in agreement with the MACV commander on the impact of political constraints on military affairs, Krulak, Greene, and others attacked Westmoreland as harshly as many civilian critics of the war. Where the MACV leader had envisioned a three-phase effort to halt the slide in Vietnam, then go on a limited offensive, and, finally, destroy the enemy, the III MAF urged an "oil spot" approach. From their coastal deployments the Marines would extend their areas of operations, like spreading oil, as pacification efforts bore fruit and as resources became available.\(^4\) Westmoreland, however, had countered that U.S. forces had to "forget about the enclaves and take the war to the enemy."\(^4\)

To Krulak and other Marine leaders, Westmoreland's strategy was dangerously misguided from the start. Indeed, since mid-1965 the III MAF's reports consistently pressed for an emphasis on pacification while trumpeting their own successes in counterinsurgency operations.\(^4\) General Karch, the first Marine commander at Da Nang, believed that "there was only one way that that war could be won, and it was going to take a force of 250,000 troops ten years of pacification to do it." As he saw it, patience was essential to any strategy. American soldiers, Karch advised, should root out the VC and pacify the south at increments of about a half mile. "[I]ts's going to be a long, hard struggle," the Marine general understood.\(^4\)
General Keith McCutcheon, a Marine aviation commander, pointed out another problem that Westmoreland's approach was not addressing. "[P]robably the most difficult problem" that the Marines had encountered was "identifying the enemy from the friendly or neutral," he explained. A VC soldier "one minute . . . may be a farmer in the field or a fisherman on the beach and the next he could pull a rifle out of a concealed hole and become an enemy."50

It was Krulak, however, who offered the most comprehensive and trenchant critique of the MACV strategy in Vietnam. When Westmoreland, despite fearing an "interservice imbroglio," wanted to "get the Marines out of their beachheads" and onto the offensive, Krulak countered that such MACV plans might be appropriate in the central highlands or other open areas, but not in the populated, and ultimately decisive, political and military centers of the RVN. "You cannot shoot anything that moves" in the Da Nang area," Krulak complained to McNamara, "where the population runs as high as 1,000 per square mile." The "Army maneuver technique," he further charged, would leave the majority of land and people in the south unprotected, would force Americans to engage the enemy in the hinterlands to U.S. disadvantage, would be difficult to conceal from the VC's impressive intelligence operatives, and, maybe most importantly, would generate excessive manpower requirements. Because of these problems, coupled
with the RVN's own personnel deficiencies, Krulak warned the defense secretary that he expected "an inordinately long struggle, with the U.S. being forced to put far too much power into rural security of the heavily populated areas." To avoid that, he advised McNamara, U.S. forces should "fight a guerrilla/counterinsurgency war, and clean the [RVN] up a bit at a time."51

By December 1965, General Krulak had become more frustrated and angry over the MACV strategy, considering it "wasteful of American lives, promising a protracted, strength-sapping battle with small likelihood of a successful outcome." Continued Communist infiltration and poor ARVN morale, which Westmoreland conceded, and the results of Ia Drang, a great triumph to MACV leaders, had actually confirmed to Krulak the futility of the U.S. approach to the war.52 The Marines's Pacific commander therefore produced a seventeen-page memorandum on strategy that presented a markedly different view of the war from anything written in Saigon and that would be widely disseminated among U.S. policymakers. Krulak began his evaluation by asserting that Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, despite "limited progress, in recent months," was wholly inadequate. While geography, political and religious friction, and economic underdevelopment were all making America's task in southern Vietnam more difficult, it was the MACV reliance on attrition that was the
principal impediment to any progress. With over one-hundred million men available for duty in the DRVN and PRC, it was the Communists, Krulak contended, who were effectively waging attritional warfare. In just three months, he reported, the U.S.-RVN advantage in the ratio of enemy soldiers killed had decreased from 2.8 to 1 to 1.5 to 1.5.

Even if U.S. troops killed ten enemy soldiers for every one of their own lost, Krulak added, it would still require a tremendous sacrifice in American blood. The DRVN and VC, without Chinese support, could recruit from a manpower base of about two and one-half million men. If the United States just continued its current rates of attrition, the general estimated that "it will cost something like 175,000 U.S./GVN lives to reduce the enemy pool by only a modest 20 percent." Krulak thus argued that two elements were essential to a successful strategy--increased air attacks against the Communist lines of supply, and abandoning the Westmoreland reliance on attrition that "promises us nothing but disappointment."

Only if American officials "put the full weight of our top level effort into bringing all applicable resources--U.S. and GVN--into the pacification program," as well as providing village security and expanding air strikes, could progress be made. Based on his analysis, Krulak offered "only two basic points" in his conclusion. No military
strategy, he warned once more, could succeed without addressing the political, economic and sociological factors driving the war. Manpower, Krulak added, was the enemy's "greatest strength" and thus "we have no license and less reason to join battle with him on that ground."54

Krulak's assessment had shown just how desolate America's prospects in Vietnam had become. His critique of the Westmoreland strategy was detailed and biting, but his solutions, more air power and pacification, were not politically feasible. Nonetheless, the Marine general had offered an alternative to the strategy of attrition and had forced a debate within the military about Westmoreland's planning for the war. The Marine Commandant added to the feud, reinforcing Krulak's views during a January 1966 visit to Vietnam. U.S. and ARVN forces, General Greene noted, "could kill all [the] PAVN & VC [in the south] & still lose the war" unless pacification was given priority. The Commandant compared Westmoreland's strategy of attrition to "a grindstone that's being turned by the Communist side, and we're backing into it and having our skin taken off of . . . our entire body without accomplishing a damn thing because they've got enough to keep the old stone going." Greene also understood that the VC could withstand significantly more losses that America "because in the end, although their casualty rate may be fifty times what ours is, they'll be able to win through
their capability to wage a war of attrition." Yet, Greene concluded, "this is a thing that apparently the Army doesn’t understand." Krulak added that Wheeler "doesn’t understand it" either, whereas American congressmen, who were presumably beginning to sense the rising antiwar sentiment at home, were aware of the perils of Westmoreland’s program for Vietnam. Krulak, citing the JCS chair’s pleasure with recent operations in which the VC suffered about seven times more casualties than Americans, had to wonder "just how . . . did that bring us nearer to winning the war? . . . [T]his is not the strategy for victory."55

Such brash criticism within the military, on top of McNamara’s bleak appraisals of late November, ought to have made it clear that America was headed toward even greater problems in Vietnam in the coming years. Some officials did seem to grasp the importance of the attacks on Westmoreland’s strategy. Both the CINCPAC, Admiral Sharp, and Commandant Greene supported Krulak’s December 1965 analysis and tried to rally other brass to the strategic implications of attrition, in Greene’s case by commissioning a long study on pacification by the Marine staff, but to little avail. The defense secretary too was "struck by Krulak’s mathematics of futility," as Neil Sheehan described it, since it had confirmed his own fears about the future in Vietnam. McNamara thus advised the
maverick Marine to explain his views to the president. Before that, however, he met with Averell Harriman, then working out of the state department, to complain about limits on the air war. The meeting with Harriman did not go well and by the time Krulak met with Lyndon Johnson, in August 1966, U.S. military strategy in Vietnam was inflexibly established.56

Krulak and other military critics, it seems safe to say, were fighting a losing battle from the beginning. Since Paul Harkins had gone to Vietnam in early 1962 the MACV had decided to defeat the enemy with technology and attrition, the warnings of John Vann, Harry Felt, Maxwell Taylor, Krulak, or others notwithstanding. By late 1965, the Army, which dominated the U.S. military establishment in Saigon, was not about to give up its primary mission—conventional warfare using heavy weapons—and adopt a strategy of pacification. Indeed, Westmoreland and his Army deputies attacked the Marines and their concepts as strongly as Greene and Krulak had challenged the MACV approach. Westmoreland was "increasingly concerned," he wrote to a subordinate commander, "that we are not engaging the VC with sufficient frequency . . . to win the war in Vietnam." He thus reiterated his emphasis on the big-unit war.57

Others more stridently attacked the Marines's theories and practices. General Harry Kinnard, commander of the 1st
Cavalry Division, was "absolutely disgusted" with the situation in I Corps. The Marines "just would not play," he charged. "They don't know how to fight on land, particularly against guerrillas." DePuy similarly observed that the III MAF "just sat down and didn't do anything." Their attempts at counterinsurgency were "of the deliberate, mild sort." More importantly, the only U.S. official whose opinion mattered in the end rejected the Marines's strategic recommendations. Deploying soldiers to enclaves, Lyndon Johnson told reporters aboard Air Force One in early 1966, was "like a jackass hunkering up in a hailstorm." Unhindered escalation, his other military option, was also impossible due to political considerations, so the president concluded that the United States would have to continue its policy of "pressure with restraint."

No matter how passionate, or even accurate, Westmoreland's critics and the advocates of pacification might have been, their strategy was virtually impossible to implement. By later 1965, with Vietnam beginning to affect the Great Society at home, public resistance growing, and other military figures pressuring his administration to intensify the war, the president could not afford to accept a military policy that was time-consuming and difficult to measure in terms of progress. Johnson needed results--enemy soldiers killed, northern targets destroyed, reduced
infiltration—and U.S. troops could not produce them if "hunkered up." Politics and warfare, converging since the United States had intervened in Vietnam, had collided sharply in 1965 and would decisively affect the war thereafter.

Lyndon Johnson, however, maintained his commitment to Vietnam in spite of the myriad military and political problems associated with the war. "This nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough," he observed in his 1966 State of the Union address, "to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home." Despite such public confidence, the president and other officials would have to confront greater problems in Vietnam throughout 1966 as military difficulties, division within the U.S. camp over strategy, and political maneuvering worsened. Neither civilian nor military leaders had changed their positions on the war to any appreciable degree since mid-1965, so fundamental questions of troop deployments, mobilization, strategy, and the role of the Vietnamese military were still being debated as the war raged on. Although there were already about 220,000 American soldiers in Vietnam, Westmoreland had just asked McNamara for 75 additional battalions, 30 above his initial request, which would bring the total number American military personnel in the RVN to 400,000 by year's end.
While deliberating over that request the president, at an NSC meeting in late January, asked the chiefs "what do you want most to win?" Harold K. Johnson answered. "A surge of additional troops into Vietnam," the Army boss replied. "We need to double the number now and then triple the number later. We should call up the reserves and go to mobilization . . . This involves declaring a national emergency here and in Vietnam." Johnson, however, had to know that such measures were not going to be authorized. McNamara had already told reporters as much, and various military officials, after meeting in Hawaii in mid-January, reported to Westmoreland that "everyone here is of the opinion that mobilization is not in the cards." Clearly U.S. officers recognized at that early date the manpower limits under which they would fight. Whether American service leaders, who at that time and since have attacked Johnson's decision not to activate Reserves and declare a national emergency, have a credible argument is thus beside the point. The president was not going to mobilize, ever, and everyone associated with the war understood that. Continued calls for him to do so served primarily as political capital to be used when recriminations began to fly around Washington for the disaster in Vietnam.

It was also clear that U.S. leaders would not reassess their military strategy in Vietnam. Prior to the president's meeting with Ky and Thieu in Honolulu in
February 1966, the MACV reaffirmed its conventional approach in its campaign plan for 1966. At the same time, William Bundy told the American ambassadors to various Pacific nations to convey their "assurance that [the] Honolulu conference will not . . . be aimed at any significant changes in the conduct of the war." Westmoreland, in fact, asked for more of the same at the conference. After discussions with McNamara, the commander proposed that U.S. manpower be more than doubled, to 429,000, in 1966, and he understood that no Reserve callup would be included in any force structure package. He also devised a set of objectives for U.S. forces in the coming year, including increased security in the south, more opened road and railway use, greater destruction of VC and PAVN base areas, improved pacification, and most importantly, attrition of enemy forces at a rate greater than their capacity to reinforce in the RVN. This final goal, reaching the "crossover point," was crucial to U.S. strategy, but flew in the face of the earlier McNamara and Krulak estimates.

Lyndon Johnson, under pressure in Washington as Fulbright was holding televised hearings on Vietnam featuring war critics James Gavin and George Frost Kennan while he was in Honolulu, nonetheless agreed to Westmoreland's request for more troops. The president, however, also made it known that his patience was not
unlimited, telling Westmoreland to "nail the coonskin to the wall" in 1966 with the new reinforcements. Johnson, satisfied that the MACV commander was "sufficiently understanding" of the political constraints driving American policy, further warned Westmoreland, "General, I have a lot riding on you. I hope you don't pull a MacArthur on me." Such admonitions notwithstanding, Honolulu was a clear victory for advocates of the MACV strategy and a repudiation of the Marine views. As Westmoreland later put it, the decisions made in February 1966 "basically set and had a lot to do with the tactics of the war." The commander, moreover, did "not recall any dissent that was made" by administration officials at the time. Accordingly, American leaders had decided to continue their war of attrition in Vietnam, but with a vastly-expanded U.S. force there. Rather than develop a strategic plan, Westmoreland, as General Douglas Kinnard has charged, would just continue to establish a program for troop increases.

Increasing U.S. troop numbers, however, seemed to have little impact in Vietnam. Despite MACV statistics indicating an erosion in enemy strength in the south and a sanguine report by Vice President Hubert Humphrey after a February trip to Vietnam, it was still clear that the United States faced serious problems in the war. The MACV recognized the continuing buildup of PAVN units in the
DRVN, Laos, and Cambodia and improved Communist logistics capabilities.\textsuperscript{69} Walt Rostow, now the president's special assistant for national security affairs following McGeorge Bundy's resignation, lamented both the endemic corruption in southern Vietnam and the "almost universal" passivity among ARVN forces. At the same time, Krulak continued to challenge Westmoreland's search-and-destroy measures and stressed the need for political reform in the RVN. And Jack Valenti, the president's trusted advisor, had already soured on the war, informing Johnson that "I truly believe we need to find some way out of Vietnam . . . [There] is no reasonable hope. All your military advisors insist you must double your force, and still they give you no prophesy of victory, however shapeless, however mild."\textsuperscript{70}

While Washington continued to worry about the war, the situation in Vietnam in the Spring of 1966 worsened. In March the Buddhist-led "Struggle Movement," which included ARVN officers and units, conducted large-scale anti-government demonstrations in Da Nang, Hue, and elsewhere in I Corps. The impact of such political turmoil on the U.S. effort was obvious. The MACV deputy commander, General John Heintges, warned that "our people back home are going to get their dander up and want to wash their hands of this mess over here." Krulak was more bleak. "Repressive measures are all that is left" to quash the Buddhists "and you will recall," he reminded Admiral Sharp, "what happened
after Diem launched his repressive measures." The uprising in I Corps also prompted the Marine general to admit to Navy Undersecretary Robert Baldwin that, "despite all our public assertions to the contrary, the South Vietnamese are not--and never have been--a nation."71

Wheeler's outlook from Washington was just as alarming. Several "key congressmen," he informed Westmoreland and Sharp, believed that America was now "overextended in our military commitments . . . and will be unable to support adequately our present forces and surely cannot support additional forces." The JCS chair also reported that civilian officials had expressed concern over not only the political disarray in the RVN but also the "very low level of Vietnamese military activities" during the Buddhist crisis. U.S. officials were particularly upset about the ARVN's casualty rates, which were lower than those of American forces although the Vietnamese were supposed to be carrying the greatest burden of the war.72

By late May Wheeler found the reaction in Washington to the "continuing political turmoil . . . far more adverse than heretofore" experienced. With 250,000 troops in Vietnam, the nation's prestige on the line, and U.S. casualties mounting, the American people "rightly or wrongly" saw developments in the RVN as "proof positive" of antiwar leaders's charges that U.S. soldiers were fighting and dying while RVN officials "squabble pettily among
themselves to achieve political advantage." Wheeler also realized that even a "farfetched"—to use his description—proposal by Senator Jacob Javits to stop the air war and cease offensive ground operations would have "distinct appeal," both to political doves and "even more importantly, to the relatives of our men in South Vietnam whose lives are at risk." And Wheeler himself admitted "much sympathy" for the latter group.73

Time, then, was not on Earle Wheeler's side in early 1966, as public opinion at home, the continuing enemy buildup in the south, and interservice friction were conspiring to even more seriously hamper the U.S. military campaign.74 Even if, as Westmoreland was claiming, the media had exaggerated the gravity of U.S. problems in the war, the perception among Americans of stasis in Vietnam could not be ignored.75 Dwight Eisenhower, considerably more hawkish on Vietnam in the 1960s than when he occupied the White House, recognized this, and was "much concerned" that the American public would cease to support a war that was "simply dragging on inconclusively." Wheeler, citing Gallup Poll statistics on rising antiwar sentiment, understood the public's unease as well and observed that press reports, albeit "highly colored," would "if true" point to a "far more serious situation, both current and impending, than you and your officers on the scene believe to be the case."76
The MACV, however, was well aware of the gravity of its problems in the RVN, as made eminently clear in an early May intelligence estimate for the coming year. "We must not underestimate our enemy nor his determination," intelligence chief Joseph McChristian pointed out. American forces, he observed, "are engaged in a complex, extensive and large war against determined and capable enemies" who had previously achieved military success against the Japanese, Chinese, and French. Those Communist forces, already impressive, were improving. The PAVN's ground forces now included 9 divisions, 6 infantry brigades, 10 infantry regiments, and 6 artillery regiments, as well as 29 anti-aircraft regiments and a growing air force. Because of such capabilities, MACV intelligence expected the northern Vietnamese to continue supporting VC troops and increase its infiltration of personnel and materiel into the south. The DRVN, which had been capable of moving 195 tons of supplies daily into the RVN in mid-1965, had just completed a major truck-building and road construction effort and would be able to transfer over 300 tons a day in the coming months."

Given such logistical improvements, continued infiltration, and successful recruiting in the south, the VC-PAVN forces in the RVN could be expected to increase substantially in 1967. As of mid-May 1966 the MACV listed 144 Communist battalions, both confirmed and probable, in
its Order of Battle. That number would probably rise to 180 battalions by early 1967, U.S. intelligence officers observed. With those forces, the VC "will exert continuous pressure to interdict roads and railroads, to terrorize areas of government control and to wear down our will to resist." American forces, however, could do little to counter such measures for, as McChristian conceded, "the VC will avoid combat unless they expect victory." In addition to such Vietnamese advantages, MACV intelligence pointed out that the PRC--with 30 Army divisions deployed in southern China and 45 infantry divisions ready to be used as reinforcements, over 20 submarines, about 400 jet fighters and bombers based just north of the DRVN, and a population psychologically prepared to wage war against the United States--was capable of supporting the Vietnamese Communists with materiel and military personnel if needed.78

Despite recognizing such conditions, McChristian incredibly concluded that the MACV strategy of attrition would show decisive results over the next twelve months and, by mid-1967, the United States would reach the crossover point at which it was killing more enemy soldiers than were infiltrating into the south.79 Again the MACV had ignored its own potentially explosive analysis of the war and decided to remain on its present course in Vietnam, however specious the reasoning behind that policy may have
been. And, in fact, there was more evidence than the intelligence assessment to testify to America's troubles in Vietnam.

A MACV study pointed out that the RVN's primary manpower pool--twenty to thirty year old men--would be exhausted by 1968, and the secondary groups--those 16 to 19, 31 to 45, and others previously considered unqualified for service--would run out by mid-1969. Along with such personnel shortages, the RVN lacked the material resources to sustain its economy, creating serious inflation and "diluting the focus of the war effort." To Westmoreland it was thus "obvious . . . [that] the RVN has failed to organize itself to meet the heavy demands placed upon its manpower and its economy by the pressures of war."

Accordingly the southern Vietnamese would have to fully mobilize all their resources, human and material, for the war effort, but the MACV commander understood that such moves would carry "serious implications" for both the United States and RVN. In addition to planning for mobilization, the MACV also understood that it had to confront serious corruption within the ARVN, which could not be overcome by "changing a man or two or by other half-way measures." As one of Westmoreland's deputies put it, "the entire administrative system must be overhauled."

As structural problems in southern Vietnam exacerbated the MACV's problems, the interservice feud over strategy
continued at a fever pitch. The Marines were still attacking the Westmoreland strategy of attrition and search-and-destroy operations. Such tactics, Wallace Greene charged, involved U.S. forces "traversing the same terrain repeatedly against a nebulous foe--while the people were untended." While American troops had assumed responsibility for destroying the VC, they were overlooking the need to provide security. The government and army of the RVN, meanwhile, had "paid scant regard to the needs and interests of the people." ARVN soldiers, Greene explained, were "as feared by the villagers" as the VC.82

The juxtaposition between Greene's position and that of the Army was publicly evident as well. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Wheeler, defending Westmoreland's conduct of the war, explained that the U.S. mission was "to kill as many Viet Cong" as possible and to "destroy" areas used by the VC. At the same hearings, the Marine Commandant countered that "we aren't executing this program by the rifle and the sword. We are helping these people help themselves." Victory in Vietnam, Greene believed, "will hinge on the success of the pacification program."83 Krulak added that the VC, despite suffering heavy losses, was tying down American forces in big-unit engagements and was diverting U.S. soldiers away from the village level. The Marine general was thus "deeply concerned that the enemy has played the
tune, [and] induced us to dance to it." Westmoreland's "mutation strategy" of conducting conventional operations and paying lip service to pacification, Krulak contended, had "no virtue." If U.S. forces "persisted in such a compromise," he later lamented, "we would bleed ourselves--which we did."84

Greene and Krulak, however, had been criticizing Westmoreland in that manner without success for over a year, and by mid-1966 it was clear that the MACV commander would dismiss their complaints. "Barring unforeseen changes in the enemy strategy," Westmoreland announced in August, "I visualize that our strategy for South Vietnam will remain essentially the same throughout 1967." The president felt the same way. Johnson, after being pressured by McNamara and the Commandant to meet with Krulak, finally agreed to talk to the general. After listening to him advocate unrestrained air operations and pacification, the president, as Krulak told it, "put his arm around my shoulder, and propelled me firmly toward the door."85

Although they would maintain their dissent throughout the war, the Marines had thus been rebuffed by America's ranking military and civilian officials. Potentially more serious criticism of the MACV's concepts for Vietnam, however, was found in an Army report on strategy that reached Harold K. Johnson's desk in the Spring of 1966.
Commissioned by the Army chief several months earlier, the "Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam," or PROVN, study "forthrightly attacked [Westmoreland's] search-and-destroy concept," as General Phillip Davidson put it.86 "The situation in South Vietnam has seriously deteriorated," Army officers who produced the PROVN report observed, and "1966 may well be the last chance to achieve eventual success." To gain "victory" it was imperative to gain the support of the Vietnamese people "at the village, district, and provincial levels."87

Because the grassroots level was "where the war must be fought . . . [and] won," the PROVN study argued that "rural construction," its term for civic action or pacification, "must be designated unequivocally as the major US/GVN effort. It will require the commitment of a preponderance of RVNAF and GVN paramilitary forces, together with adequate U.S. support and coordination and assistance." To facilitate this shift in strategy, Army officers recommended that the United States use whatever leverage at its disposal--spanning a "continuum from subtle interpersonal persuasion to withdrawal of U.S. support"--to induce RVN compliance.88 Although a strong indictment of strategy with influential advocates--such as Harold K. Johnson, vice chief Creighton Abrams, and the Army's Pacific commander, General Dwight Beach--behind it, the PROVN study ultimately suffered the same fate as other
criticism of U.S. strategy.\textsuperscript{89}

The MACV either dismissed or ignored the main charges and recommendations found in the PROVN report, and continued its strategy of attrition. Even Westmoreland, however, seemed to realize that the prospects for a war of attrition were not bright. In a mid-1966 analysis requested by McNamara, the MACV staff itself concluded that they would need about 1,000,000 Vietnamese and 500,000 U.S. troops for another ten years to wrap up the war. Westmoreland, as Lewis Sorley explains, refused to forward the report, telling his subordinates that its implications were "politically unacceptable."\textsuperscript{90} Wheeler too realized that the U.S. strategy in Vietnam was not succeeding. Despite his public advocacy of firepower, the JCS chair warned Westmoreland that continued failure to show progress on counterinsurgency, along with ARVN passivity, would cause increased problems for the MACV staff from U.S. political leaders.\textsuperscript{91}

Despite the internecine fight over strategy and continued recognition of the barriers to progress in Vietnam, Westmoreland remained sanguine about the war. During a meeting with the president at his ranch in mid-August, the MACV commander accepted Johnson's reasoning behind the decision against mobilization. The United States had "benefitted [from the] fact [that] Reserves haven't been called up," they agreed. The MACV as
constituted at that point had professional leadership, and its soldiers were "not overseas against their will." Activating Reserve units, Johnson believed, would force Americans to break their ties with family and business and undermine morale on the home front. Westmoreland did not challenge the president's assessment. "We're going to win this war for you without mobilization," he assured his commander-in-chief.92

Writing to Harold K. Johnson a month later, Westmoreland reiterated such views. Although he hoped for a "maximum buildup" to bring "an earlier successful conclusion" to the war, the MACV commander added that "considerations of quality, including morale, may well justify a smaller force" than originally envisioned. Such considerations, he understood, "include the assumption that there will be no major call up of reserves." Nevertheless, Westmoreland would continue to make that very request throughout the war.93 The Army chief of staff also understood that Washington was wary of a further buildup of U.S. forces in Vietnam and of expanding either air or ground operations into the north. The more Harold K. Johnson deliberated over the MACV's troop requests, "the more uncertain I am as to my ability to give you a [satisfactory] answer." With voluntary enlistments lower than expected, draft calls inadequate to meet Westmoreland's goals, too little time to train new troops,
and congressional criticism that the Army was overextended in Southeast Asia, Johnson saw "no indication here to carry the war outside South Vietnam." In fact, "the tendency to limit the war to South Vietnam is hardening."

Westmoreland then claimed to be shocked by Johnson's report of Washington's concern over expanding the war, replying to the general that "your analysis of the [political] impact on forces requested by this command is far greater than my wildest assumptions." 94

Westmoreland's astonishment, however, reminds one of Claude Rains's shock at discovering gambling at Rick's Place. At a debriefing with Marine leaders, the MACV commander and Admiral Sharp reported that McNamara had again informed them that U.S. force levels would "have to be consistent with political, psychological and economic factors, as they impact on the GVN." Westmoreland and Sharp realized that there was a "definite limit" to the amount of money, and hence the number of U.S. soldiers, that could be put into the RVN without recklessly destabilizing southern society. Accordingly, Victor Krulak observed that the MACV would have to contend with a new limitation on U.S. military policy, and it was "one that cannot be related to shortages back home." Westmoreland understood the situation as well, admitting that "we have really crossed the Rubicon. We are involved deeply in what is almost certain to be a long war. Everyone knows this,
and what we need now is to settle down with a professional force that our country can support for the long pull, without calling up reserves." The MACV leader then estimated that a force of 400,000 troops would be adequate for Vietnam, which was almost precisely the number that McNamara had earlier put forth. The agreement on force levels between Westmoreland and the defense secretary "seems remarkable," Krulak acerbically observed, "and convenient too."95

Krulak’s sarcasm was appropriate, for McNamara had clearly soured on the military’s spiralling requests for reinforcements, and indeed on the war itself. In a memorandum to the president on 14 October, the secretary offered his most bleak assessment of Vietnam yet. Despite inflicting heavy losses on the enemy, McNamara saw "no sign of an impending break in enemy morale" and in fact it seemed likely "that he can more than replace his losses by infiltration from North Vietnam and recruitment in South Vietnam." Although U.S. forces had prevented a Communist victory in 1966, he added, the VC had adapted by employing "a strategy of keeping us busy and waiting us out (a strategy of attriting our national will)." Because of the enemy’s patience and continued high morale, as well as the limited achievements of ROLLING THUNDER and a pacification program that "has if anything gone backward," McNamara saw "no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon." The
United States, he lamented, was "no better, and if anything worse off" that it had been just years earlier.96

As a result of his analysis, the defense secretary urged the president to stop escalating the war. Because the air campaign had neither reduced infiltration nor broken Hanoi's resolve, McNamara recommended another bombing pause as a way to convince Ho to negotiate. To break the cycle of military attrition and bloodshed, he further urged that the MACV give priority to a vigorous pacification program. Above all, though, McNamara wanted to end "the spectre of apparently endless escalation of U.S. deployments." He thus advised Johnson to establish a ceiling of 470,000 American troops in Vietnam, an increase of only 70,000 over present levels and about 100,000 less than Sharp and Westmoreland wanted. "Even many more than 470,000," the secretary believed, "would not kill the enemy off in such numbers as to break their morale so long as they think they can wait us out."97 McNamara, sounding like Krulak a year earlier, had thus renounced Westmoreland's program for Vietnam and urged the White House to develop a new approach to the war.

The JCS emphatically rejected the defense secretary's recommendations, even though it conceded that much of his analysis was accurate. The chiefs, in evaluating McNamara's report, "agree[d] there is no reason to expect that the war can be brought soon to a successful
conclusion." The enemy, the brass also recognized, was prepared to "wait it out" and expected to "win this war in Washington, just as they won the war with France in Paris." Westmoreland agreed, observing that the VC's tactics "suggest that the enemy intends to continue a protracted war of attrition." Given such conditions, the chiefs could only weakly defend the military situation in the RVN, essentially arguing that the U.S. presence had prevented Communist victory and ensured a stalemate on the battlefield. The MACV's analysis was candid as well, citing increased infiltration, the appearance of new enemy divisions, the introduction of new heavy weapons, well-maintained lines of communications, and expanded activity in the DMZ and Cambodia to point to the peril of war in Vietnam and justify Westmoreland's troop requests. Like McNamara the JCS believed that the war had reached a decisive point and "decisions taken over the next sixty days can determine the outcome of the war and, consequently, can affect the over-all security interests of the United States for years to come."98

Despite that nearly-apocalyptic warning, the chiefs recommendations for future strategy offered nothing new. Indeed the JCS merely recycled its standard requests, calling for more troops and expanded air operations. McNamara's call for a limit of 470,000 soldiers was "substantially less" than they deemed necessary to conduct
operations in Vietnam, the chiefs complained. They also rejected the defense secretary's appraisal of ROLLING THUNDER and again protested the political constraints imposed upon the air campaign. In leveling such charges, however, the JCS seemed to overlook the reality of the war in 1966. Lyndon Johnson had been consistently expanding the war per the chiefs's wishes and to that point had acquiesced to their numerous troop requests. "Westmoreland has received all that he has asked for," the president accurately told congressional leaders. "He'll ask for more . . . [and] we'll send whatever he needs."9

Wheeler had also notified Westmoreland and Sharp earlier that the White House had been prepared to authorize expanded air strikes against the DRVN until political turmoil in the south forced a reconsideration. "There was surprisingly little opposition" to approving new targets in the north, the JCS chair explained. In fact, as Walt Rostow informed the president, U.S. pilots had struck targets containing 86 percent of the DRVN's petroleum and lubricant storage capacity and had actually destroyed nearly 60 percent of it.100 In view of such facts, the chiefs's advocacy of more troops and bombing in reality offered little promise of altering the situation in Vietnam. The JCS itself, as well as Westmoreland and others, had consistently recognized that the enemy had maintained its posture and morale at the same time that the
government and military of the RVN was showing negligible effectiveness or improvement. The continued reliance on attrition and air war under such circumstances thus revealed that the U.S. military was already strategically bankrupt by late 1966.

Westmoreland and others nonetheless remained upbeat about the war and continued to press Washington for more resources. Such optimism notwithstanding, Harold K. Johnson confessed his "continuing concern with the level and tempo of combat activity that we can support." Concern over inflation in the RVN had forced McNamara to limit U.S. expenditures to about 44 billion piasters and, the Army chief realized, a ceiling on deployments was forthcoming as well. "We are already overcommitted in maneuver battalions for the level of support that is available for them," Johnson warned Westmoreland, and limits to piaster spending would continue to directly affect U.S. combat capability in Vietnam.101

McNamara made that precise argument to Wheeler, observing that economic stability in the RVN was essential for both political stability and military progress. "Runaway inflation," the secretary warned, "can undo what our military operations accomplish." Westmoreland understood such worries, telling U.S. congressmen that "we had to prepare the American people for a long war in Vietnam. I frankly could not see an early ending." In
this war of attrition, U.S. leaders would thus have to
create a force that could be "sustained indefinitely." Thomas Moorer, now chief of naval operations, was similarly
candid in describing "the problem facing us" to other
officers. The United States would have to "carry on an
effective war without mobilization, without escalation,
without inflation, and without [a] greatly increased gold
flow," the Admiral realized.

Like many American officers, Moorer had recognized the
limits under which the war would be fought, yet, like so
many others, did not reconsider the nature of the U.S.
military commitment to Vietnam. Civilian leaders, however,
were wavering in their support of the war. Various members
of the house and senate had called on the military to
emphasize its pacification efforts in Vietnam, with the
influential Hale Boggs observing that "in this new kind of
war . . . civil actions on both sides are often more
important in the long run than military actions." More
critically, the continued morass in Indochina was surely
affecting Lyndon Johnson's political fortunes. Senator
Stuart Symington, especially respected on defense issues,
told Walt Rostow he was "thinking of getting off the train
soon." "Nixon will murder us," in the 1968 election,
Symington warned. "He will become the biggest dove of all
times. There never has been a man in American public life
that could turn so fast on a dime."
The president heard similar concerns expressed by Democratic governors at a meeting at his Texas ranch in late December. Governors Harold Hughes of Iowa, Warren Hearnes of Missouri, and John Connaly of Texas, among others, told Johnson that his reelection was in doubt because of growing public impatience with Vietnam. "Eat out the Republicans as often and as strongly as you can, at every opportunity," was the president's main advice to the state executives, hardly a reassuring approach to the growing domestic crisis caused by Vietnam.107 American service officials were just as clearly aware of the public's anxiety about the war in late 1966. Despite the JCS's constant clamoring for mobilization, "each of the chiefs replied in the negative" when McNamara asked whether they favored a callup of Reserves in December. Undoubtedly the brass knew the president was opposed to such measures and that the political risks of continued war in Vietnam were becoming greater for Johnson. Admiral Sharp was more pointedly unnerved by the politics of the war. "With no end in sight" to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the American people, he observed, "are more apt to become aroused against the war." Sharp's "limited sounding of public opinion, including the thoughts of quite a few members of Congress," he wrote to Wheeler and Westmoreland, "leads me to believe that we had better do what we can to bring this war to a successful conclusion as rapidly as
possible." The CINCPAC had recognized that time was working against the United States in Vietnam, yet his solution to the dilemma was the typical military response--more troops and sorties.\textsuperscript{106}

Despite McNamara's apparent epiphany on Vietnam, the intense military feuding over strategy, congressional and public division being engendered by the war, the damage done to Lyndon Johnson's political career, and an uncertain if not doomed situation on the battlefield, American officers, like Sharp had, continued to offer up the same shopworn and ill-considered proposals for future policy. The brass, however, did realize that Washington was increasingly anxious over the lack of progress in Vietnam. Various civilian officials, Wheeler reported to Westmoreland, were beginning to raise questions about the conduct of the war "which may in a fairly short time cause us difficulty." Specifically, Washington remained troubled by the continuing lack of ARVN military activity and growing Communist infiltration into the south, which was offsetting the VC's huge losses.\textsuperscript{109} But thwarting the enemy's movements into the RVN, Westmoreland conceded, was especially hard because the MACV lacked "any precise means to differentiate between the North . . . and South Vietnamese."\textsuperscript{110}

The MACV commander, despite Lew Walt's confidence that pacification would improve, also expected continued
deterioration in counterinsurgency operations in the northern provinces in 1967. In fact, the enemy had the potential to disrupt the U.S. effort through the RVN. The VC or PAVN "can attack at any time" in I, II, or III Corps with divisional strength, and in IV Corps with regimental strength, local forces, and guerrillas. At the same time the guerrillas would continue harassing attacks at points of their choosing. In addition, Chinese and Soviet aid to the insurgents would likely increase, as would infiltration into the south and the training of political cadre already there. MACV officers continued to cite the ARVN's deficiencies as well. The rapid expansion of the RVN's military establishment, Westmoreland noted, had "negate[d] concurrent efforts" to increase the level of armed forces leadership. And that situation was nearing a crisis point. Future success would thus require "immediate and substantial qualitative improvements in all aspects of RVNAF capabilities and operations." Despite such forthright evaluations, the military continued to emphasize its accomplishments and to expect progress. In a January 1967 evaluation, the MACV stressed that the American and ARVN forces were routing the enemy, many VC and supporters were rallying to the RVN, and pacification was likely to improve in the coming year. While the enemy's determination remained strong, "the conflict has taken a decided turn for the best." The
JCS had a more ambivalent view of the war. In a report for McNamara on future courses of action, the chiefs pointed out that they had consistently requested a greater bombing effort over the north, mining of ports, cross-border operations, a callup of Reserves, and extended terms of service for U.S. soldiers. Although the JCS sought to "break the [White House's] pattern of slow escalation and apparent vacillation," it recognized that "fundamental parts" of the military's planning for expanded war "have never been accepted." The chiefs nonetheless put forth the same recommendations that they had been sending to the civilian leaders in Washington to over two years already.\textsuperscript{114}

The military's own pattern of dreary assessments and stale recommendations certainly complemented the Johnson administration's slow and vacillating approach to Vietnam. Indeed, both civilian and service leaders were aware of the political and military problems and risks involved in the U.S. takeover of the war. Various military leaders warned that the MACV reliance on conventional warfare and attrition would bleed American forces but make only a negligible impact on the enemy. Opponents of Westmoreland's strategy, however, advocated the time-consuming and deliberate tactics of counterinsurgency and national building, measures that the American commander and
president were sure to reject for both political and military reasons. Pacification, as Maxwell Taylor pointed out, was no panacea for America's ills in Vietnam. U.S. forces had already taken over the main-unit war in 1967 and was sustaining an inordinate number of casualties. Should it assume a substantial share of the civic action program, the general warned, the ARVN would be even more tempted to sit back and let the Americans suffer greater losses.\textsuperscript{115}

At the same time, many officers continued to see the air war as a virtual panacea to their problems in Vietnam, even though they admitted that the bombing campaign over the north would achieve limited results and although they knew that full authorization for unrestrained strikes was not forthcoming. By 1966, then, victory through the air was an elusive, if not desperate, goal. Nonetheless, even Krulak and Greene, who provided the most striking and exhaustive critique of the American strategy in Vietnam, were seduced by the promise of air power. Perhaps the PROVN report, commissioned by the military's biggest critic of air operations, Harold K. Johnson, in reality offered the best, albeit thin, hope for the United States in Vietnam.

Even more than recognizing the failure of U.S. strategy, if not doctrine, in Vietnam, military leaders also understood the impact of politics on their warmaking capabilities. Given the president's fear of widening the
war and, more importantly, the impact of Vietnam on his domestic agenda and future, the brass recognized that politics and public opinion would necessarily force Johnson to try to limit the war. Military leaders understood that the president would not declare a national emergency or activate the Reserves, and they warned fellow officers to resign themselves to receiving "penny packets" rather than large-scale reinforcements. Despite that awareness, Westmoreland, Wheeler, Sharp and others did not pursue any alternative policy course in Vietnam, but instead kept asking the White House for more of the same. The military's criticism of the administration was thus disingenuous on one hand, because Johnson and McNamara had approved the MACV's troop requests through 1966. On the other hand, their attacks on Johnson were politically motivated, because their recycled requests forced the president to repeatedly reject calls for mobilization and expanded war, and to bear the onus for the whatever consequences occurred. As General Dave Richard Palmer observed, "to be sure, political considerations left military commanders no choice other than attritional warfare, but that does not alter the hard truth that the United States was strategically bankrupt in Vietnam in 1966."116

Rather than adapt to the political-economic-military realities of the war, Westmoreland, Wheeler and Sharp were,
in essence, forcing the president to choose between a politically difficult, if not impossible, escalation, or continued stasis. Since Johnson was no more likely than the brass to reevaluate the war or his commitment to the RVN, and was, if anything, more aware of the domestic ramifications of both escalation and failure, America’s service chiefs had put the ball into the White House’s court. With American forces unlikely to attain success in Vietnam, civilian and military leaders were scrambling to avoid blame in Washington.
CHAPTER IX

"THE PLATFORM OF FALSE PROPHETS IS CROWDED":
PUBLIC HOPE AND PRIVATE DESPAIR IN VIETNAM, 1967

Despite foundering efforts in the field, interservice dissension, and an emerging political crisis in the United States, American officials did not fundamentally reevaluate the war in 1967. The White House continued to hope for the best in Vietnam while trying to rein in the military’s repeated requests for more soldiers and a wider war. For their part, Westmoreland, Wheeler, and other officers kept forwarding optimistic projections of the war despite their continued bleak reports on conditions in the RVN. The ARVN was passive and seemed to be allowing American soldiers to carry the burden of the fight, they suggested, while the enemy was growing, maintained the initiative, and could be expected to prolong the war to its advantage. Pacification was not going well, U.S. officers added, and America’s principal response, the air war, was not making a decisive impact.

Even after recognizing such problems, military leaders continued to pressure the White House for more of the same,
including additional troops, wider authority to bomb the DRVN, activation of Reserves, and mobilization. By recycling and expanding such requests—especially evident in Westmoreland’s proposal in April for a reinforcement of 200,000 troops—the military was effectively admitting its failure. As McNamara, Krulak, and others had prophesied much earlier, the United States could not match the Communists in a war of attrition. The enemy’s manpower base was too large, its ability to infiltrate and recruit had continued despite American firepower, and it still determined the scale and nature of engagements against U.S. units.

Even more, political factors plagued American efforts. On one hand, international considerations, such as fear of a general war in Asia or shortchanging European forces, and growing domestic opposition to the war were making it imperative to find a prompt way out of Vietnam. On the other hand, both civilian and military leaders wanted each other to find that solution. Thus the president began to more explicitly express his concerns to Westmoreland and Wheeler about their plans for reinforcement and escalation. For its part, the military understood that Lyndon Johnson wanted good news and the brass decided to provide it, to the point of suppressing evidence that indicated otherwise. But Westmoreland, Wheeler, and others were, at the same time, candid about the serious problems that they faced.
On the surface, such behavior may have seemed inconsistent or erratic. Given the politics of Vietnam, however, it was understandable. By 1967, U.S. military leaders were disgusted with the war. Many officers had not wanted a large-scale intervention in Vietnam but, once committed, expected the White House to authorize a fully unrestrained war. From the beginning, however, it was clear that Johnson did not want the conflict in Vietnam to spill over into China or, at home, undermine his dream of building a Great Society. The president therefore took what the military saw as a piecemeal approach to the war. As a result, American officers wanted to make it clear that it was Johnson and McNamara, not U.S. commanders in Vietnam, who should be held accountable for the coming disaster. Thus military officials in Saigon and Washington, instead of re-thinking the war, kept making the very proposals—massive reinforcement, increased sorties, Reserves, mobilization—that the president had already rejected, and would surely turn down again. By late 1967, the JCS, afraid it would "take the fall" for Vietnam, even decided to resign to protest civilian handling of the war. The chiefs, as it turned out, decided to keep their jobs, but they had given up on the war nonetheless.

As American officers analyzed the war in early 1967 it was clear that they expected events in Vietnam to continue
along already-established lines. In a January summary of the enemy's position, Westmoreland found the VC-PAVN forces capable of reinforcing, resupplying, and preparing for a new offensive. The Communists "can attack at any time" in division strength in the northernmost provinces and in regimental strength in IV Corps, he found. The VC would also likely continue its attacks on the government in the south at all levels and try to increase political instability through attacks on economic targets. Despite its huge losses, the enemy, Westmoreland conceded, could still infiltrate about 8400 men into the RVN from the north and recruit about 3500 in the south, both on a monthly basis. Still controlling the battlefield, the Communists could withdraw or break down their main force units into smaller groups to wage guerrilla war, stop or alter its political attacks if challenged, or move out of disputed areas and resurface elsewhere.¹

The commander, while consistently denying that the southern troops were avoiding combat, nonetheless forwarded statistics showing that the ARVN had actually made contact with the enemy in only 40 percent of its operations. Thus Westmoreland's "constant objective" in coming operations would be "to increase the effective employment of ARVN assets." His level of trust in the southern military's abilities, however, was still questionable. In Westmoreland's battle plan for 1967, the commander
continued to envision U.S. forces holding primary
responsibility for offensive action against the
Communists's main force units and base areas, while the
RVNAF would protect its own bases and focus on pacification
operations. Just as the ARVN's problems persisted, the
enemy's strengths remained evident. Even though he
expected U.S. units to continue to inflict sizable
casualties on the enemy, Westmoreland thought it would be a
"grave error" to assume that the PAVN or VC military or
logistics capabilities had been significantly damaged.²

Admiral Sharp likewise anticipated that the VC would
try to prolong the war, disrupt civic action programs, and
resort to conventional operations "only when the odds favor
his success."³ Despite conceding the initiative to the
enemy, Sharp agreed with Westmoreland's goals for 1967,
namely the "total destruction, or total denial" of
Communist bases, caches of weapons, and lines of
communication. Although U.S. public opinion might be
questioning the war, the Admiral believed that "the
military" had to "go all out at all levels in SVN if we are
to win." American troops were now involved in a "full
blown and difficult war" to which had already committed "a
huge amount of combat power." Yet, Sharp realized, "we are
still a long way away from achieving our objectives." To
win in Vietnam, even more power was needed, he believed.
"Our ground forces must take the field in long term
sustained" operations, notwithstanding the "reticence" of political figures and the American public.⁴

The JCS also wanted the president to take stronger measures in Vietnam, recommending heavier pressure against the north and another substantial buildup in the south. The chiefs called for stepped-up air strikes against the DRVN, additional U.S. troops to attack the enemy in the south, extended tours of duty, and, at home, expanded draft calls, activation of Reserves, and economic mobilization. The president had repeatedly turned down this program and there was no indication that he was likely to authorize it in early 1967. The chiefs, of course, were well aware of Johnson's political calculations in developing Vietnam policy and understood that allied reluctance to support the United States in Vietnam, fear of provoking the PRC or USSR, concern about the impact of the war on the 1968 elections, growing public protests, and "domestic anti-military feeling" could coalesce to convince policymakers "to give little consideration to military recommendations." Once more, America's military leadership had recognized the military and political factors limiting the war in Vietnam but responded in their typical fashion by calling for a larger war.⁵

Victor H. Krulak recognized those factors as well, but offered a markedly different evaluation of the war based upon them. Unlike the chiefs, who contended that American
forces had turned the corner in Vietnam and were badly hurting the enemy, Krulak believed that the war was in a state of "equilibrium," with both sides capable of intensifying their efforts and prolonging the conflict. The general, moreover, seemed anxious over the possibility of Soviet or Chinese intervention, Ho's ability to shift between conventional or guerrilla warfare as it suited him, and, even more, political instability in Saigon and the ARVN's passivity. Not surprisingly, Krulak continued to attack Westmoreland's conduct of the war as well. Although agreeing with the MACV leadership on the desirability of more troops, the Marine leader stressed to McNamara that the United States should avoid the type of manpower-intensive strategy that Westmoreland had implemented, and instead try to damage the Communists while minimizing American losses, preferably via escalating air strikes. As Krulak saw it, Ho had "made a sagacious . . . and a far reaching" decision to engage in protracted combat and erode the American manpower base. Westmoreland, by ignoring pacification and trying to win a war of attrition, had played in the DRVN leader's hands.  

Westmoreland, however, charged that the Marines were to blame for their problems in I Corps. After visiting General Walt in Da Nang the MACV commander complained that the III MAF leaders had committed too many troops to inaccessible areas where they could not concentrate enough
forces for offensive action. The general trend in Marine areas, he lamented, was "toward steady deterioration," as the proximity to the DMZ and easy infiltration from the north enabled Ho to reinforce his units in I Corps with whatever numbers needed. 7 The MACV intelligence chief, General McChristian, offered an even more grim view of the enemy's capabilities. The Communists, he told Maxwell Taylor during his visit to Saigon in late January, would likely infiltrate about 7000 soldiers per month and recruit another 7500, for a total reinforcement of 174,000 for the year, which amounted to a net gain in enemy strength of about 65,000 in 1967. 8

Other officers found McChristian's figures "unduly pessimistic," however, and continued to emphasize U.S. progress in the war. American and ARVN forces "have defeated the enemy in every recent encounter," according to a MACV briefer. The Communists, Westmoreland added, "no longer have the capability of achieving a military victory." Wheeler agreed, and he told the president that if the United States "applied pressure relentlessly in the North and the South" the DRVN would withdraw support from the VC and "at that point, the war would be essentially won." 9 The MACV commander himself, however, had a more sobering assessment in mid-February. Although U.S. forces had hurt the enemy in 1966, "he is far from defeated." The MACV had just begun anti-guerrilla operations and had not
even made contact with many PAVN and VC main force units for months. Westmoreland even had to "say without hesitation" that the ground war, beset by intelligence shortcomings, inadequate helicopter support, and uncertain troop availability, "cannot be significantly accelerated" beyond current levels. Harold K. Johnson sounded a similar theme, informing the commander in Saigon that he would have to increase the lead time on troop and equipment requests due to political pressure and budget constraints. While Johnson would continue to press the administration for all available resources, the Army chief "simply want[ed] to point out that the rules of the game are changing." The "rules"--the political factors involved in developing military policy--may not have been changing so much as taking on greater importance. By early 1967, civilian and military leaders held well-established assumptions about the war and were unlikely to reconsider them. The president wanted a timely end to the conflict without spiraling escalation and at the least cost to his political concerns. The military, recognizing stalemate in Vietnam, kept asking the White House to expand the war and, if refused, had an excuse for failure. Over the next year, through the Tet Offensive, such political considerations would erupt as the political war in Washington intensified along with the shooting war in Vietnam. As a result,
civil-military relations deteriorated to crisis proportions.

By 1967, Vietnam had become a political albatross around Lyndon Johnson's neck. The president "totally agreed" with Senator Fulbright's view that "the war poisons everything else" and had to be ended promptly.12 Wheeler also understood the politics of the war. The debate over the air campaign, he told Westmoreland, had "heightened in intensity, with critics of bombing most vocal."13 It was thus a "political decision," the JCS chair added, to determine when to resume air strikes after a five-day bombing pause in February. The precise timing of the renewal was "not going to make that much difference militarily."14 Days later, after again pressuring Washington to authorize new measures, including air attacks on the DRVN's critical port at Haiphong, Wheeler, as Krulak put it, was "not too optimistic that much will come of it."15

Although Wheeler complained about the limits that the White House was placing on U.S. operations, especially the air war, the JCS chair and Admiral Sharp recognized that the president was trying to accommodate them. Johnson, stung by rising media criticism of the bombing of northern Vietnam, directed Wheeler to prepare a public relations campaign to show the importance of ROLLING THUNDER.16 Sharp, while noting the president's efforts to remove
restrictions on the air war in Laos, also admitted that "the influx of men and materials" into the RVN had increased "despite considerable air effort expended to hinder infiltration." Although admitting that interdiction strikes were of questionable utility, Sharp still believed that the White House's reluctance to remove even more restrictions was "based primarily on political considerations." Curiously, the JCS chair thought that those political factors might also work to the military's benefit. In addition to citing damage done to the VC and PAVN by U.S. air strikes, Wheeler contended that growing antiwar sentiment might induce the president to grant broader authority to conduct the bombing campaign. Johnson, Wheeler believed, valued the military's advice above all others. Accordingly, "the only obstacle which could impede additional authority for military action would be one created by us." 17

Although the obstacle to which Wheeler referred was public criticism of the president by military leaders, another appeared just days later. In revising its statistics on enemy action, the MACV found that the number of VC- and PAVN-initiated major unit attacks was actually about four times higher than initially estimated. Even worse, the enemy was getting stronger as the U.S. presence increased. Where the original figures had listed only five Communist-initiated engagements for the period between
September 1966 and January 1967, the revised, accurate count was eighty seven. The implications of the new numbers, Wheeler recognized immediately, were "major and serious." The MACV's statistics on large-scale enemy initiatives had been a principal element in its evaluations for the president, McNamara, congress and even the media. "In cold fact," the JCS chair admitted, "we have no other persuasive yardstick." As such, the new totals had just undermined America's raison d'guerre. Wheeler could thus "only interpret the new figures to mean that, despite our force buildup, despite our many successful spoiling attacks and base area searches, and despite the heavy interdiction campaign in North Vietnam and Laos," the enemy was more effective than ever.18

Upon receiving the new estimates, Wheeler directed Westmoreland to suppress the statistics, cabling the MACV commander that "if these figures should reach the public domain, they would, literally, blow the lid off of Washington." He thus directed the MACV to do "whatever is necessary" to avoid disclosure of the new information. The JCS leader surely understood the political impact of the new appraisals. "I cannot go to the President," he said, "and tell him that contrary to my reports and those of the other chiefs as to the progress of the war . . . the situation is such that we are not sure who has the initiative in South Vietnam." But the president could not
have been ignorant of that reality. Johnson "never intended" to escalate the war as the military was urging, and developments in Vietnam in early 1967 had reinforced that position.¹⁹

Wheeler's alarmist response to the MACV statistics showed that he, and certainly other U.S. officers, were aware that conditions in the field in Vietnam, not in the pentagon or White House, were making success virtually impossible. Nonetheless the military once more sought to burden the president with responsibility for future failure with another huge request for reinforcements. In earlier force projections for 1967, known as Program IV, MACV officials assumed that the U.S. troop total would rise to about 550,000 by the end of the year. Due to economic and political problems in both the RVN and United States, however, the American force structure stood at 470,000. Westmoreland argued that such numbers were clearly inadequate because "the enemy has increased his structure appreciably" and was confronting American units with large troop concentrations in the RVN, Laos, and Cambodia. The commander, again recognizing that the U.S. battlefield efforts would not decisively alter the war, urged multiple efforts on political, economic and psychological fronts in order to buy time for the RVN to grow stronger. "Military success alone," Westmoreland knew, "will not achieve the US objectives in Vietnam." But pacification, presumably one
of the extra-military programs to which the MACV leader referred, was another problem, with 35 of 47 provincial officials reporting that civic action programs were not developing satisfactorily in their areas. MACV intelligence added that the enemy "will continue to avoid combat unless it is on his terms," or, if badly hurt, would alter his course of action in ways that American operatives could not predict.20

Such assessments were nothing new by March 1967. Nor was Westmoreland's reaction. As he had done repeatedly since 1964 the MACV commander followed a bleak evaluation of the war with another request for more troops, this time asking for four and two-thirds additional divisions, or about 201,000 soldiers, in the coming year. The U.S. force in the RVN, if the president authorized Westmoreland's plan, would thus rise to over 670,000 by 1968, thereby allowing the MACV, it hoped, to destroy or neutralize the enemy's main force units and root out the Communist infrastructure.21 Westmoreland's strategy, as Krulak had charged almost eighteen months earlier, was amounting to an American bloodletting as the MACV commander consistently asked for more combat troops despite his awareness of the volatile and eroding situation into which they would be thrown. Perhaps Westmoreland sincerely believed that an additional 200,000 forces would turn the tide in Vietnam and bring victory in a short time. It is hardly likely,
however, that he could have expected Lyndon Johnson to approve that reinforcement in the Spring of 1967.

Immediately after forwarding his proposal for more troops, Westmoreland met with the president and other American and Vietnamese civilian and military officials at Guam, where the MACV commander tried to sell his program. "Killing guerrillas," Westmoreland explained, "is like killing termites with a screw driver, where you have to kill them one by one and they're inclined to multiply as rapidly as you kill them." Thus, more troops were needed to win a war of attrition. Westmoreland's "frank review of the military situation" apparently did not go over well with the other conferees. "The war could go on indefinitely" if the Communists maintained their fighting and infiltration capabilities, he warned. Following his briefing, Westmoreland noted the "looks of shock" on the faces of U.S. officials "who had obviously been hoping for some optimistic assessment." Walt Rostow, in a bit of understatement, found Westmoreland's presentation to be "conservative and non-promissory." The record does not indicate whether anyone asked if 200,000 more screwdrivers could kill an indeterminate number of termites.

Wheeler's and Westmoreland's actions in March 1967 marked another pivotal point in the war. Up to that time U.S. military leaders, despite their awareness of military problems in the RVN, might have sincerely believed that
America would turn the corner in Vietnam and begin to wear down the Communist enemy. But after the new MACV statistics showed just how strong the enemy was, prompting Wheeler's anxiety and Westmoreland's massive troop request, the brass should have known that U.S. strategy in Vietnam had failed. Although they now faced nearly a half-million U.S. soldiers, and American firepower and airplanes, the VC and PAVN forces had matched enemy escalation and remained as formidable as ever. Given those bleak conditions, there was no chance of receiving another 200,000 troops. Since the early 1960s, U.S. military officials had openly recognized the perils of intervention in Vietnam. Service leaders never felt compelled to go to war, yet always acquiesced to the political will and accepted new commitments in the RVN, including combat. In some sense, Wheeler, Westmoreland, and other officers had inherited war from John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, but by early 1967 it was clear that they had made the worst of it.

Following Westmoreland's new troop proposal and the Guam conference, the situation in Vietnam showed few visible signs of improvement. The commander remained concerned about the "deteriorating situation in I Corps" where the PAVN had made aggressive moves across the DMZ and continued to infiltrate large numbers of troops. The northernmost provinces that Westmoreland saw as "decisive" combat areas should have been the most appropriate staging
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ground for conventional operations as the war in I Corps increasingly became a conflict between the Marine Corps and the PAVN in 1967. The Marines, however, were in a "stalemate situation" at best, and Westmoreland had to declare I Corps a "holding area" since he preferred to deploy reinforcements "in more strategically important parts of Vietnam." Ironically, the III MAF, the strongest military advocates of pacification, now faced "a major change in its orientation" and was charged with the most intensive conventional warfare responsibilities, and left shorthanded at that, because nation-building, as Westmoreland saw it, was a "relatively unimportant endeavor."

With the enemy's strength growing in the northern RVN and Marine-Army sniping over strategy continuing, the president, as Westmoreland later put it, "wanted bad news like a hole in the head" in April 1967. With the commander preparing to visit Washington to press for 200,000 reinforcements, Wheeler informed him to expect intense questioning over the ARVN's contribution to the war. There was a "wide impression" within the administration, Wheeler noted, that the southern Vietnamese troops "have now leaned back in their foxholes and are content for us to carry the major share of combat activity." Apparently, the president shared such views, for he told the JCS chair that Westmoreland ought to discuss the matter with Ky and
"explore whether and how the South Vietnamese propose to carry their fair share of the combat load." John Paul Vann, back in Vietnam as a civilian pacification official, further testified to the ARVN's weaknesses. Despite thirteen years of American assistance and advice, Vann observed that "the problems of leadership in the [RVNAF] have probably never been more serious."  

Such problems in Vietnam surely troubled Lyndon Johnson, but it was the reinforcement issue that dominated his talks with Westmoreland and Wheeler. The president was feeling more political heat because of Vietnam and, with the 1968 elections a year off, wanted more than ever to find a solution to the war. In February, he had offered Ho a bombing halt as a quid pro quo for ending infiltration, but the DRVN leader rejected the deal. By Springtime, many administration confidantes, including the Bundys, Robert Komer, CIA officials, and members of the pentagon's Systems Analysis Office, were expressing their reservations about any proposals to expand the war. John McNaughton, an early architect of intervention, had soured on the war as well. "We now have enough troops to do the job we should be doing," he believed. Besides that, "the enemy can in most cases avoid contact with our forces, thus neutralizing the effect of our deployments." And McNamara of course remained convinced that Westmoreland's war of attrition, as Larry Berman wrote, would ultimately fail "as a military
strategy as well as a presidential policy for political survival." Politically, then, major reinforcement was not in the cards in early 1967.31

The president himself had made such concerns clear to Westmoreland and Wheeler when the MACV commander claimed that U.S. and ARVN forces had eroded enemy strength to the "crossover point" at which Communist losses exceeded input into the south. In response, Johnson wondered, "when we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions? If so, when does it all end?" The president, typically concerned with possible PRC reactions to American escalation, also asked "at what point does the enemy ask for [presumably Chinese] volunteers?" The two generals's answers were not reassuring. The insurgents had eight divisions already in the RVN, Westmoreland reported, and could add four more. By maintaining current U.S. troop levels of 470,000 "we would be setting up a meat grinder." With 100,000 additional forces the war "could well go on for three years," and even with maximum reinforcement to bring U.S. manpower to 670,000 it could continue for another two years. Wheeler added that such a buildup would have important international repercussions. The JCS chair expected diversionary pressure from North against South Korea, Soviet moves in Berlin to force America to reinforce its thinning force structure in Europe, Chinese, Soviet or Korean "volunteers" possibly going into the RVN, or even
overt Chinese intervention into Vietnam or elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Like Che Guevara before him, Earle Wheeler was raising the specter of "two, three, many Vietnams."
The JCS chair also admitted that the air campaign, the military's redundant answer to the problems of the war, "is reaching the point where we will have struck all worthwhile fixed targets except the ports." As a result of such evaluations, on top of the blunt military reports arriving from Saigon, the president's rejected the upper-limit request in April 1967.

The White House, however, did not interpret the events of early 1967 as proof of U.S. failure in Vietnam and continued to seek ways to revitalize the war. The civilian leadership directed Wheeler to find new ways to increase the RVN's manpower contribution, "thereby reducing the need for US troops." Thus the JCS asked Westmoreland to consider extending ARVN tours of duty, reenlisting previously-released veterans, or reducing the draft age. The MACV commander too recognized that the "increasing tempo and scale of the VC/NVN aggression" in the south would "dictate a concomitant increase in the combined military effort." Westmoreland, however, also recognized that the "present intensity of civilian dissent" would inevitably temper such escalation. By May the commander knew that the American "political climate . . . militates against further substantial troop augmentation," at the
very least until the Vietnamese themselves demonstrated their own contribution to the war.34

The importance of the early 1967 political maneuvering and decisions regarding the future of the war cannot be underestimated. Well before the decisive Tet Offensive, the White House and the JCS and MACV had clearly drawn the lines over which civil-military battles would be fought. The civilian leadership could see that success was hardly imminent, but it continued to reject unrestrained warfare. The military had recognized the continued peril of war in Vietnam as well, and was aware that it would not receive authority to fight without limits. The JCS and MACV knew that the president and defense secretary would "avoid the explosive congressional debate and U.S. reserve callup" included in Westmoreland's program. Admiral Sharp, who never quit pressing for an unlimited air campaign, nevertheless admitted that "recent strikes in the Hanoi area have raised the temperature of the war in a manner which could elicit additional Soviet assistance to the North Vietnamese." Wheeler was more bleak, adding that, short of population bombing or closing ports--"neither of which would be politically acceptable"--the air war could not reduce infiltration into the south or coerce the DRVN into negotiations. The JCS chair also lamented the White House's understanding that "the Main-Force war . . . is stalled . . . and there is no evidence that pacification
will ever succeed in view of the widespread rot and corruption of the government, the pervasive economic and social ills, and the tired, passive and accommodation prone attitude of the armed forces of South Vietnam."

Even though Wheeler may not have subscribed to that description, there was widespread anxiety within the military, over both Vietnam and defense policy in general. In its evaluation of American military posture, the chiefs "view[ed] with increasing concern the loss of the strategic initiative in Southeast Asia and the current restrictive worldwide US military posture." With its present force ceiling, the armed services could not vigorously prosecute the war in Vietnam, prepare for any contingencies in Southeast Asia, or meet its commitments or contingencies elsewhere, the JCS told McNamara. Such conditions were likely to worsen. Enemy forces in Vietnam now included 68 PAVN and 85 VC infantry battalions in the south and 4 divisions in the DMZ, the PRC and Soviet Union had raised their assistance to the DRVN, and the northern air force and air defense system was aggressive and expanding. Outside of Southeast Asia, the United States faced serious problems as well. The Soviet Union could still divert American attention from Indochina by staging actions in North Korea or Berlin, while North Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America continued to "exhibit a high potential for instability, subversion, and violence." With such
international crises on the horizon, the chiefs again recommended that the White House significantly expand U.S. troop numbers and escalate the war in Vietnam in order to bring it to a timely conclusion and then "achieve an appropriate worldwide military posture."36

Specifically, the chiefs urged that the president approve Westmoreland's plan for four and two-thirds additional Army divisions, increased Navy assets, and substantially more Air Force tactical fighters and reconnaissance aircraft. Once more the JCS proposed that Johnson activate Reserves and extend terms of service as well. Above all, the JCS wanted to expand ROLLING THUNDER to "curtail" the DRVN's efforts to support the war by destroying more human and material resources in the north.37 Westmoreland, however, conceded that air operations had remained at a high peak over the past two months, yet enemy activity in the highlands had "stepped up significantly." Despite pentagon claims that Ho was sending fewer men into the south, General Phillip Davidson, who had just replaced McChristian as the MACV intelligence chief, confessed that "if anything infiltration is increasing." The Communists had also expanded their forces in Cambodia, near Pleiku, and they showed no evidence of any shortages of weapons or ammunition. Accordingly the commander anticipated "an intensification of enemy attempts to achieve his summer campaign objectives." American
attacks had caused huge losses and disrupted the enemy's time schedule, Westmoreland believed, but the Communists's overall plan remained in effect. The commander continued to assert, however, that American forces were dealing serious blows to the VC, and he remained optimistic that forthcoming offensive action would decisively hurt the enemy.38

Krulak again challenged Westmoreland's review of the situation in Vietnam. The Marine general charged that he still did not understand "the enemy's announced purposes and obvious capabilities," that the MACV had established no visible objectives for the future, and that the commander still ignored the importance of pacification. Writing to Commandant Greene, Krulak pointed out the contradiction in Westmoreland's view of the war. While he had boasted of blunting the enemy offensive in I Corps, the MACV leader also admitted that Communist infiltration, strength, and armament had increased, and that the enemy position in the highlands was imposing. The VC and PAVN, Westmoreland claimed, had suffered 11,000 battle deaths in just two months, but Krulak questioned those numbers and pointed out that, even if true, the ratio of Communist to U.S.-RVN soldiers killed, about 4 to 1, was not as favorable as the commander believed. To Westmoreland, the American ability to meet expected Communist threats signalled the success of his strategy. Krulak countered that the United States
could not "win" the war simply by "defending our positions and maintaining a good posture to meet each new enemy threat." To achieve victory, he reiterated, the MACV would have to emphasize civic action, now referred to as "Revolutionary Development." Even if all the enemy main force units in the RVN were to "vaporize" immediately, Krulak cautioned, U.S. forces "would still have a tremendous war on [their] hands in Vietnam." America's problems would be "much more manageable," he suggested, if U.S. personnel focused on eliminating the guerrilla infrastructure rather than the big units.  

Sharp challenged the most recent JCS and MACV analyses of U.S. policy in Vietnam as well. Both the chiefs and Westmoreland had presented "unacceptable" courses of action to the president, as the Admiral saw it. The reinforcements that the JCS requested "are simply not going to be provided," he understood. "The country is not going to call up the Reserves and we had best accept that." On the other hand, Sharp, like Krulak, saw Westmoreland's plans as a "blueprint for defeat." The CINCPAC, as unimaginative as ever, nonetheless still relied on air power to alter conditions in Vietnam, but also urged Westmoreland to keep the pressure on the White House. "Continue to state your requirement for forces," he told the commander, "even though you are not going to get them."  

If politicians in Washington stabbed the
military in the back, as Sharp alleges in his memoirs, then the Admiral had at least seen the knife headed his way well before the war had ended. Westmoreland too understood the political considerations involved in developing strategy. In a somewhat contradictory reply to his boss's charges, the commander "caution[ed] against too gloomy an appraisal" of his campaign plans, but he also told the Admiral that their analyses of the situation in Vietnam were "identical." Accordingly, Westmoreland decided to seek a third course, somewhere between the JCS call for reinforcement and Reserves and his own plans.41

In the end, of course, Westmoreland would develop no new approach to the war. Instead he continued to request more troops and resources, despite Sharp's blunt awareness that they would not be forthcoming, and despite similar warnings from Harold K. Johnson. "You are painfully aware of the problems ahead of us," the Army chief cabled Westmoreland, "if we cannot find some way to bring our authorized and operating strengths into line." Calling for "personnel economy" and greater "discipline" in requisitioning resources, Johnson asked for the commander's support to stem the problem before the pentagon began to investigate the Army's handling of manpower issues.42 The pentagon boss, however, had already decided how to handle the request for additional troops and expanded air operations. To McNamara, even a more intense ROLLING
THUNDER "would neither substantially reduce the flow of men and supplies to the South nor pressure Hanoi toward settlement." It would also cost an undue number of American lives and prompt even greater criticism of U.S. policy at home and overseas.43

After visiting Saigon in early July, the defense secretary was still steadfastly opposed to committing another 200,000 forces to Vietnam, Westmoreland's and Wheeler's rosy reports there notwithstanding. As a result of McNamara's continued bleak evaluations, the president agreed to send more troops, but urged his advisors to "shave it as best we can." Johnson moreover told McNamara that the MACV should make better use of the U.S. troops already in Vietnam, reiterated that no Reserves would be activated to meet manpower requirements, and insisted that American officials convince the media that "there is no military stalemate." The president, in a compromise between the military and McNamara, also agreed to deploy another 45,000 troops to Vietnam, thereby raising U.S. strength there to 525,000. Surely the White House was not about to cut and run from the RVN, but the authorization was far below the military's request for minimal reinforcement and it presented another unmistakable sign that political conditions in Washington were not conducive to repeated pleas for additional forces.44

Although not receiving the full measure of its troop
request, the military forwarded upbeat reports on the war. The JCS, Westmoreland, and Sharp all boasted that the ROLLING THUNDER campaign, recently expanded by the president, had produced impressive results, destroying about 85 percent of the DRVN’s sources of power, one-third of its railway system, and about 7500 trucks and boats. American bombs, Westmoreland reported, had reduced the northern air defense capability by 50 percent, stopped production at DRVN steel and cement plants, and forced Ho to divert 500,000 people from other tasks to rebuild damaged areas. MACV officials also contended that the land war was going well. American forces were providing security to southerners and maintaining constant pressure on the VC in populated areas, Westmoreland reported in August. In his assessment of the war, General Fred Weyand, a MACV commander in II Corps, saw "an enemy who is on the run, fighting only defensively," a sentiment echoed in Westmoreland’s reports to Sharp.

The president, despite his partial authorization, also seemed content with the situation in Vietnam, and pledged to do more. "We are going to send Westmoreland the troops he needs," Johnson told Wheeler even after the defense secretary returned from Vietnam. In mid-August, as McNamara was trying again to limit air strikes over the north, Johnson observed that "it doesn’t look as though we have escalated enough to win." Even so, the president told
Democratic congressmen that Westmoreland "has turned defeat into what we believe will be a victory." Johnson, however, was not so sanguine when domestic political affairs intervened in considerations of policymaking for Vietnam. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the president's ally on civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, had broken with the White House over the war, charging that the United States was the "greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and that the Great Society had died on the battlefields of Vietnam. The economy was also causing problems. Not only would the president have to refuse appropriations for infrastructure repairs, but, with the deficit nearing $30 billion, Johnson knew that he would both have to raise revenues and cut defense spending. Increased taxation, however, would only turn more Americans against the war, while the military was sure to fight any reduction in its budget.

The president also faced a virtual mutiny from senators in his own party. Fulbright, the leading senate critic of Johnson and the war, told the president that Vietnam was "ruining our domestic and our foreign policy" and that he was considering bottling up the Foreign Assistance bill in committee. Several southern Democrats, usually loyal Johnson supporters, were also unnerved by the political fallout from Vietnam. Richard Russell, John Stennis, Robert Byrd, and Ernest Hollings, among others,
had a "general feeling that we are on a treadmill in Viet Nam." The United States was "vastly overcommitted," Stennis had told Hollings, but was nonetheless "fighting at the level the enemy dictates." Clark Clifford, who had just returned from a trip with Maxwell Taylor to press American allies for greater involvement in Vietnam, told foreign heads of state that the president faced great budget problems and public disenchantment with the war and thus would have to limit the U.S. role in Vietnam some time soon. The American people, Clifford observed, were asking, "if we have to put this much money in the war, what are our allies going to do?" Given such conditions, it was clear to Johnson that the "greatest deterrent" to finding a solution to the war was the "anticipation in Hanoi that we won't be able to hold out in America."50

Johnson had correctly judged public displeasure with the war, but he could have acknowledged that there were great impediments to progress in Vietnam as well as at home. John Chaisson, a Marine general and director of the MACV Combat Operations Center (COC), lamented that, after several years in the RVN, American troops could still not adequately protect U.S. air fields. The "most significant tactical issue" in Vietnam in August 1967, he told Marine debriefers, was finding some way to prevent Communist rockets from "plastering the airbases." A VC attack on the Marine base at Da Nang alone had caused about $40 million
in damage. The Army was at even greater risk, Chaisson charged, because "every one of their air bases is wide open." This problem was particularly disturbing because the airfield strikes were the enemy's "cheapest investment in manpower and energy," yet had brought great returns in damage on American installations.51

Although not adequately protecting their bases, Air Force and Marine leaders did find time to have "quite a rhubarb," as Chaisson described it, over control of air assets in I Corps. The Air commander in Vietnam, General William Momyer, refused "under any circumstance" to coordinate his operations with the Marine Corps near the DMZ. For their part, III MAF leaders wanted to employ their own aircraft at their discretion, without receiving Air Force approval via the chain of command.52 Such infighting had earlier prompted Marine aviator General Keith McCutcheon to observe, only half-jokingly, that "in addition to fighting the VC, we are still fighting the Air Force. They are like Notre Dame, they never give up. We are not going to give up either." Eighteen months later, the general's words still rang true, and American efforts suffered accordingly.53

While McCutcheon scored the Air Force, Krulak continued to nip at Westmoreland's flanks. Even though 80 percent of the RVN's population, and 90 percent of its wealth, resided in the coastal lowlands, the MACV commander
was still sending American forces into the "infertile and insignificant" mountain areas further to the west to chase after PAVN units. To the Marines, such tactics were a "maldeployment of forces, [and] a misapplication of power." Yet the Corps had "carried out their orders loyally" since 1965, but had "never been shaken of their knowledge where victory really lies," namely civic action. Army leaders, in response, scored the Marines's "beach head mentality" and planted stories critical of the III MAF in U.S. newspapers, prompting Krulak to complain to other media representatives of "an artesian flow of anti-Marine sentiment" within the MACV. The Vietnam War, if is safe to say, was not a positive experience for the Marines. Its soldiers suffered significant casualties in fighting near the DMZ, the Corps experienced serious manpower shortages as the war dragged on, and the commitment to Southeast Asia had a "devastating impact" on other Marine forces, especially the Atlantic fleet.

Other officers were also apprehensive about the war, though not to the degree of Krulak and his Marine comrades. Admiral Sharp, increasingly concerned with public attitudes on the war, complained that service leaders had "trapped ourselves" by attempting to quantify the strategy of attrition by using the enemy body count as a gauge of progress, while at the same time ignoring America's broader objectives in Vietnam. Sharp also lamented that the
American public considered ROLLING THUNDER a failure because the air strikes had failed to reduce infiltration, which did not seem like an illogical interpretation. Westmoreland himself offered a rather oblique endorsement of the war. Because of American pressure, he contended, the enemy's strength was declining, although "not spectacularly and not mathematically provable." As a result, the commander believed that U.S. forces "may have" reached the crossover point, a claim he made with more authority during his talks with the president four months earlier. Westmoreland, it would seem, believed that the military situation in the RVN had validated his strategy of attrition. The commander, however, also argued for more troops and materiel because U.S. combat units were originally structured for conventional war, "whereas we now are fighting a counterinsurgency war in the tropics."

Conditions inside Vietnam may have been open to different interpretations, but in Washington the chiefs agreed that it was time to confront the president on his handling of the war, in particular the air campaign. Although Johnson had authorized substantially expanded bombing runs against the north in April, American commanders continued to criticize the restraints under which they operated. General McConnell, the Air Force chief of staff, was, along with Sharp, the strongest military advocate of ROLLING THUNDER. By mid-1967,
however, the limited air war had prompted him to lament, "I can't tell you how I feel . . . I have never been so goddamn frustrated by it all . . . I'm so sick of it." Such alienation came out clearly in August when Senator Stennis, chair of the Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, opened hearings on the air war. Stennis, hoping to offset Fulbright's increasingly antiwar hearings, gave the military an open mike with which to blast civilian control of the war over the north. Wheeler thus charged that the administration's failure to increase pressure against the DRVN was making it impossible for the United States to win the war. Unless the president authorized the military's full target list, including attacks on Haiphong, significant progress was unlikely.

McNamara, testifying after the JCS chair, challenged Wheeler's analysis. The White House had approved 302 of 359 suggested targets, about 85 percent of the chiefs's list, the secretary of defense maintained. The brass may have believed that ROLLING THUNDER was a failure because of imposed restraints, but as McNamara saw it the air war was going well, making infiltration more costly and difficult. The JCS could not believe such claims. The defense secretary had simply dismissed the chiefs's evaluation of the air campaign and rejected their argument that they would have to shut off the flow of supplies from Communist
allies to the DRVN, rather than focus on the south, to win the war. The JCS-McNamara feud then set off one of the gravest crises in civil-military relations in modern U.S. history. The chiefs believed that they had been betrayed by their civilian superiors and did not expect a successful conclusion to the war. Harold K. Johnson, expecting the worst, feared that the military would "take the fall" for the impending disaster, and he noted "a very substantial closing of the ranks" among the chiefs. The JCS closed ranks so much that, at the chair's suggestion, the respective service leaders apparently agreed to resign en bloc to protest Johnson's and McNamara's conduct of the war.61

The chiefs ultimately did not follow through on their threatened resignation. Nonetheless, it was obvious that civil-military relations had descended to new depths. In retrospect, however, the events of August 1967 may have been the natural outcome of the political battles that political and military officials had been waging since the New Look and Bay of Pigs controversies. Despite its public optimism and constant calls for escalation, the military, in truth, always recognized that it probably would not achieve success in Vietnam, and feared that its institutional integrity and influence would diminish as the war worsened. By mid-1967, victory was more unlikely than ever, so the chiefs, fearing that they would be blamed for
the failure, more directly than ever tried to pin the White House with responsibility for the war. Where American officers had been forcing Johnson to refuse authorization for more troops and bigger operations, they escalated their own political tactics in August. With Wheeler blasting administration policy at the Stennis hearings and the JCS considering group resignation, the military gave a clear signal that it would engage the president in political warfare in Washington.

For the remainder of the year, then, public relations became an even more critical factor in developing U.S. policy for Vietnam. While being careful to "avoid charges that the military establishment is conducting an organized propaganda campaign, either overt or covert," Westmoreland found it imperative to counter media reports of military inaction or stalemate. Despite challenging a report by the journalist Peter Arnett that the RVNAF was essentially paralyzed, the commander had to admit that leadership problems still plagued the ARVN, "corruption is everywhere," night operations were unproductive, U.S. advisors were having difficulty working with their Vietnamese counterparts, and the desertion rate remained high. In addition, Westmoreland, Sharp, and Harold K. Johnson, the acting JCS chair at the time, were all concerned with the heavy casualties American forces were suffering in the northern provinces, both because of their
political impact and the limited operational benefits that were "not consistent with the losses incurred."\(^6\)

Nor were they compatible with the political heat the MACV was taking. In a *New York Times* article, an unnamed U.S. general charged that Westmoreland's continued need for reinforcements "is a measure of our failure with the Vietnamese." The president seemed to agree. At this weekly luncheon meeting with advisors in mid-September, Johnson directed the Joint Chiefs to "search for imaginative ideas . . . to bring this war to a conclusion."
The military, the president told Harold K. Johnson, should not "just recommend more men or that we drop the Atom bomb" since he "could think of those ideas" himself.\(^6\)

Creativity was apparently in short supply, however, as the military continued to stay the course in Vietnam. The MACV still insisted that the enemy was weakening and that U.S.-ARVN forces had taken the initiative. The JCS continued to score the White House for imposing limits on the air war, although the president claimed to have approved all but 19 of 479 recommended targets, and did not expect to break the DRVN's will if the present pace of ROLLING THUNDER was not accelerated. Wheeler, despite the White House's repeated rejections, even continued to press for full mobilization and activation of Reserves, requests that the president of course refused again.\(^6\)

By late 1967 there was no chance that the president
would escalate the war to the levels that the military was proposing. McNamara had again presented Johnson with a long report outlining his belief that "continuation of our present course of action in Southeast Asia would be dangerous, costly in lives, and unsatisfactory to the American people." Though not as pessimistic as the defense secretary, Dean Rusk also advised against expanding American ground operations into northern Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, or flying sorties against Hanoi and Haiphong, where U.S. pilots would be vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire. The president himself, while opposing McNamara's call for a bombing halt and a standdown in ground operations, did agree that additional American troops would not be sent to Vietnam and that the ARVN would have to take over the war.65

Indeed, Johnson had been complaining to Wheeler for some time that the ARVN was avoiding its share of military action. "Why aren't [the Vietnamese] bearing their share of the burden," the president wondered. "Why does this have to be a white man's war?" Many Americans apparently were asking the same questions, causing the president to bemoan the "deteriorating public support" for the war.66 Facing such criticism regarding ARVN inactivity, Westmoreland blamed the media and politicians who had derogated the Vietnamese military's skills. Rather than put pressure on southern commanders to reform their units,
the MACV commander opted for a political solution, namely a public relations campaign to improve the ARVN's image in the United States.68 Such a response was not surprising. By that time, civilian and military officials were engaged in a determined battle to avoid blame for Vietnam. Johnson, aware that "our people will not hold out for four more years," was desperately seeking a way out of the war, even proposing to halt all attacks against the north to bring Ho into negotiations, the so-called San Antonio Formula, an offer that the DRVN leader rejected. Despite such problems with the Vietnamese Communists, the president asserted that "the main front of the war is here in the United States."69

General William Yarborough, now in Washington as the Army's assistant chief for intelligence, agreed. Upon observing antiwar demonstrations in the nation's capital in late 1967, he feared that "the empire was coming apart at the seams."70 Though not so alarmist, Westmoreland, preparing to depart for a late-November public relations blitz in Washington, did realize that the president expected his commander to bring home good news about the war in Vietnam.71 In Saigon, however, bad news seemed to be spreading. Various reports from the field challenged Westmoreland's rosy estimates about reaching the crossover point. Marine officials noted an "enormous buildup" of enemy troops at the DMZ, throughout I Corps, and in Laos.
More importantly, a new MACV Order of Battle study had found that VC and PAVN numbers were increasing throughout the RVN. Westmoreland, several MACV intelligence officials would later charge, ordered the new figures suppressed because, he apparently told his former intelligence chief, General McChristian, they would create a "political bombshell" in Washington.\(^7\)\\(^2\)

Such allegations and Westmoreland’s subsequent denial are not as important as the political realities underlying such developments. "I am in deep trouble," Lyndon Johnson had earlier admitted, so by late 1967, he had to have good news. Not only the war but his political future depended on it. But, given his refusal to escalate, the military saw little reason to accept responsibility for the situation in Vietnam or to develop a way out that might benefit the president. Accordingly, Westmoreland, during his visit in late November, offered a rosy view of the war. Citing enemy losses and RVNAF improvements, the MACV leader anticipated that the Vietnamese themselves would increasingly take responsibility for the war and, within two years, some U.S. troops would begin to withdraw. Although he expected tough times ahead, Westmoreland could see "some light at the end of the tunnel."\(^7\)\\(^3\)

Although Westmoreland had received favorable reviews for his performance in Washington, American officials remained reluctant to widen the war. Thus Rusk, McNamara,
who had decided to resign as defense secretary, and Clark Clifford, his successor at the pentagon, all opposed Westmoreland's plan to extend operations into Cambodia and north of the DMZ in an effort to damage PAVN forces. That kind of escalation, they warned, would invite international condemnation of American aggression and provoke greater division and dissent within the United States. McNamara was "scared to death" of fighting outside of the RVN because "the war cannot be won by killing North Vietnamese [but] only . . . by protecting the South Vietnamese so they can build and develop economically for a future political contest with North Vietnam." Although not explicitly agreeing with McNamara, Harold K. Johnson was alarmed by Westmoreland's recent moves, particularly his prediction of success. The Army chief, writing to General Abrams, now the MACV deputy commander in Saigon, could only hope that Westmoreland "has not dug a hole for himself with regard to his prognostications. The platform of false prophets is crowded!"  

Admiral Sharp's views were more ambiguous, but uncomfortable just the same. While maintaining that the enemy was badly hurt and at a critical juncture in its war in the south, the CINCPAC knew that the Communists remained a formidable foe. More importantly, Sharp again emphasized that political factors were driving the war, and, accordingly, expected the VC to probably try to stage some
type of offensive action in early 1968 to increase opposition to the war in the United States and therefore force the president to accept a Communist-dominated coalition government. Even if such plans failed, the enemy would "revert to his proclaimed strategy of a protracted war," albeit at a reduced pace. General John Chaisson offered a more pointed, and more bleak, analysis. During a radio interview on New Year's day 1968, the COC director, just six weeks after his boss saw light at the end of the tunnel, asserted that there was "a long road ahead of us in winning this war." Nearly 90 percent of the geographic area of the RVN, and over one-third of the population, was under Communist control, Chaisson admitted. The enemy, though pounded and weakening, had disrupted the pacification program, could still put an effective army in the field, and had a "great ability" to absorb American attacks, rebuild, and fight again. Chaisson thus saw no value to escalating the war, a move that could bring on Chinese intervention. Although not "unduly pessimistic," Chaisson believed that the United States faced "a very difficult military [and] . . . political operation" in Vietnam, and so he found it impossible to predict how much longer the war would take."

Like fellow Marine officers, Chaisson also questioned Westmoreland's strategy. The MACV commander was still focused on, if not obsessed with, the enemy threat in the
highlands, in II Corps, rather than, as Chaisson and others had advised, the situation near the DMZ or pacification. Deployments to the highlands, the COC director feared, diverted troops from more important areas. Even though U.S. operations had cause substantial losses in II Corps, the Marine general questioned their value. "Is it a victory," he asked, "when you lose 347 friendlylies in three weeks," as done in fighting near Kontum in October, "and by your own spurious body count you only get 1200?" Because of such operations, Chaisson, unlike Westmoreland, believed that "we're not anywhere near close to a decision in this country." As evidenced by the enemy's ability to "crank up the offensive from one end of the country to the other," as it had done in 1967, the Communists were "far from dead." American forces, Chaisson anticipated, would "have to do an awful lot of hard, dirty fighting" in 1968.78

At the outset of 1967 American military officials had expected an intensified war in Vietnam. The enemy, U.S. generals knew, was capable of expanding its human and material commitment in the south and could pose grave challenges to the American-RVN military position. If the accounts of John Chaisson, Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, and even Westmoreland and Wheeler are any indication, the situation had not changed appreciably during the year, notwithstanding their otherwise rosy assessments and
sanguine predictions. In reality, service leaders, as they had done since U.S. forces began fighting in Vietnam, lamented the enemy's capabilities, complained of the ARVN's shortcomings, and criticized American strategy throughout the year. During 1967, U.S. forces in Vietnam killed huge numbers of Communist soldiers, but, as Victor Krulak, Wallace Greene, and others had warned, that slaughter did not alter the outcome of the war.

If conditions in Vietnam did not improve to a perceptible degree, the situation in Washington was, if anything, worse. Throughout the year, the political battleground at home became as intense and important as the fighting in southern Vietnam. Civil-military relations, never harmonious to begin with, steadily deteriorated as the White House rejected the military's proposals to expand the war and the president tried to distance himself from responsibility for future failure. "This is not Johnson's war," he told journalist Chalmers Roberts. "This is America's war. If I drop dead tomorrow, this war will still be with you." The president was only partly right, however. The conflict might continue no matter who occupied the Oval Office, but was surely Lyndon Johnson's war just the same.

American military leaders too sought ways to avoid responsibility for the ill-fated effort to preserve the RVN. Thus Earle Wheeler feared that the release of figures
on Communist military action would "blow the lid off" of Washington in March, and Westmoreland likewise understood that statistics on increased enemy infiltration would create a "political bombshell" at home in November. Under intense pressure to produce results, the chiefs closed ranks, as Harold K. Johnson observed, and nearly resigned as a way of humiliating the president and the secretary of defense. If the JCS had to close ranks in mid-year, however, one can assume that it was earlier divided, and therein lay a fundamental problem for the United States throughout the year, indeed throughout the war.

At no time were American military leaders unified on their goals, needs, or strategy in Vietnam. Variously recommending accelerated air power, pacification programs, search and destroy operations, or attritional warfare, American officers could not devise the means to achieve success in their war against Vietnamese nationalists-cum-Communists. By 1967, they faced a frightening situation, with the war going badly, under intense political pressure at home, and facing rampant drug use, fraggings, and dissent among American soldiers in the field. Despite such salient and clearly-recognized problems, however, there would be no agonizing reappraisal of the war, either at MACV headquarters, JCS offices, or the White House. Instead the president and Westmoreland, among others, put on their best faces and publicly proclaimed that success
was at hand. Events in early 1968 would show otherwise. The platform had indeed been crowded with false prophets.
MASTERS OF WAR?:
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CHAPTER X
THE MYTH OF TET:
MILITARY FAILURE AND THE POLITICS OF WAR

The light at the end of the tunnel, William Childs Westmoreland's critics would later joke, was a train headed toward the general, and on the night of 29-30 January 1968, it thundered through the RVN. On that date the enemy began its Tet Offensive, a countrywide series of attacks that would in short time effectively signal America's defeat in Vietnam. The offensive, coming just months after U.S. officials were so publicly optimistic about the war, instead validated the previous warnings of so many military officials and precipitated the final stage in the civil-military crisis that had been developing over the years prior to 1968. Militarily, the United States, after three years of intense combat, could not contain the enemy in southern Vietnam. Politically, the American people were no longer willing to support a war without measurable success or without an end in sight. When, on 27 February 1968, Walter Cronkite, broadcasting from Vietnam, urged disengagement from the war "not as victors but as an
honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could," it was evident that the United States would not soon or successfully conclude its involvement in Indochina. "If I've lost Cronkite," the president lamented, "I've lost middle America." Lyndon Johnson, it went without saying, had lost the war as well.

Over the past decades the Tet Offensive has become probably the central event in considerations of Vietnam. Indeed, as many conservative military and political figures see it, Tet serves as a metaphor for the entire war. The United States was actually successful during Tet, they argue, but had its best efforts undermined at home by the media, the peace movement, and craven politicians who had forced American soldiers to fight with "one hand tied behind their back." In reality, then, the United States achieved a decisive military victory but suffered an equally conclusive political and psychological defeat.

Even scholarly critics of the war have generally accepted that view, essentially agreeing that "Tet was, as the military believed, a great American victory."

The military's own evaluations and analysis of Tet belie such claims. From the outset of the offensive, Westmoreland, Wheeler, MACV officers, and other service chiefs recognized that Tet had posed new and even more intense, probably intractable, difficulties for the United
States. As Clark Clifford, secretary of defense during the Tet crisis, observed, "despite their retrospective claims to the contrary, at the time of the initial attacks the reaction of some of our most senior military leaders approached panic." Indeed the U.S. military recognized its dilemma in Vietnam at once. Despite public assertions of success, the military candidly reported that conditions in the south had deteriorated, that the RVN government and military lacked the means necessary to recover effectively, and that the Communists were replacing their losses and remained a viable and effective threat. In addition to noting such problems, military leaders also understood that civilian officials—who had rejected substantively escalating the war long before Tet—had been shocked and unnerved by the enemy offensive. Yet in late February Westmoreland and JCS Chair Earle Wheeler requested 206,000 additional troops and the activation of 280,000 Reservists.

Rather than change course after Tet, the military had thus sent notice that it would continue to rely on its now-discredited war of attrition. That approach, however, reflected the armed forces's political rather than military appraisal of the war to that point. The MACV and JCS had recognized the enemy's capacity to match American reinforcements, thus seriously limiting the value of any additional troop deployments, and were also aware that the president and McNamara were adamantly opposed to escalating
the war and calling up Reserves. Under those circumstances it hardly seems likely that Westmoreland and Wheeler could have expected the White House to approve such an immense reinforcement request.

But given the nature of civil-military relations over the decade preceding Tet, the political maneuvering over the reinforcement request had a certain logic. Since the New Look budget battles in the 1950s and civil-military acrimony after the Bay of Pigs disaster in 1961, American service and political leaders had been increasingly distrustful of each other, a condition exacerbated by the intervention into and strategy employed in Vietnam. By February 1968 then, it was clear to U.S. policymakers in both Saigon and Washington that they would not "win" in Vietnam. Thus American military leaders requested additional troops in such vast numbers in order to more forcefully shift the burden for the conduct of the war onto the president.

Long aware of the parlous nature of the war, and angry and frustrated by their inability to defeat the enemy and by Johnson's vacillating and indecisive approach to Vietnam, Westmoreland and Wheeler forced the president into the dilemma of either authorizing the deployment of 206,000 more troops and activating the Reserves, which would cause inestimable public hostility, or of rejecting the request, which would provide the armed forces with an alibi for
future problems. Barely a month later, Lyndon Johnson's political career was ending, and U.S. officers were charging that civilians were tying their hands in Vietnam. The military's political performance in Washington had exceeded its battlefield efforts in the war.

Less than two months after Westmoreland's tour of the White House, the halls of congress, and the National Press Club, however, the MACV began to anticipate large-scale enemy action, and in late January the PAVN massed perhaps forty thousand forces for an attack on U.S. outposts at Khe Sanh, in the northwest RVN near the Laotian border, just below the seventeenth parallel. By late Spring, it would become clear that Khe Sanh had been a DRVN ruse to draw U.S. troops from urban centers in anticipation of the Tet attacks. Nonetheless, on 20 January, Westmoreland warned of the enemy's "threatening posture" in the north and also anticipated further enemy initiatives, warning of a "country-wide show of strength just prior to Tet." Wheeler similarly warned that the MACV "is about to have the most vicious battle of the Vietnam War." And during a press briefing just days before the Tet attacks began, General Fred Weyand, one of Westmoreland's deputies, admitted that "there is no question about it, The South Vietnamese Army is outgunned by the Vietcong." Wheeler and Weyand were right. Taking advantage of a
Tet New Year cease-fire, roughly sixty thousand PAVN and VC forces attacked virtually every military and political center of importance, even invading the U.S. embassy grounds. Initially Westmoreland, still focusing on the war in the northern provinces, argued that the attacks were a Communist diversion to move military emphasis from I Corps and Khe Sanh in particular, but he also claimed that the U.S. forces had the situation "well in hand" while President Johnson interpreted the attacks as a "complete failure" for the DRVN.8

General Weyand, however, pointed out that the enemy had successfully concentrated on "remunerative" political and psychological objectives in its attacks. Wheeler likewise admitted that the Communist presence was expanding because "in a city like Saigon people can infiltrate easily .... This is about as tough to stop as it is to protect again an individual mugging in Washington, D.C." General Edward Lansdale, now serving as special assistant to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon, also lamented that Tet had practically "destroyed all faith in the effectiveness" of the government of the RVN, brought Vietnamese morale "dangerously low," and made southern villagers even more "vulnerable to further VC exploitation." Still worse, any possible American counter measures appeared to Lansdale to be "rather shopworn and inadequate."9
General Chaisson elaborated on such problems. "We have been faced with a real battle," he admitted at a 3 February briefing in Saigon, "there is no sense in ducking it; there is no sense in hiding it." Because of its coordination, intensity and audacity, Chaisson had to give the Communists "credit for having engineered and planned a very successful offensive in its initial phases." Moreover, the DRVN and VC had withheld their main force and PAVN units in many areas, with Westmoreland pointing out that the enemy "continues to maintain a strong capability to re-initiate attacks country-wide at the time and place of his choosing." Although Chaisson then concluded that the Communists's sizable casualties might eventually constitute a "great loss," his analysis had revealed the depth and nature of the MACV's dilemma as a result of the offensive.  

At the outset of Tet, then, military officials inside Vietnam recognized that the situation there was perilous. This was also true of the JCS in Washington, which conceded that "the enemy has shown a major capability for waging war in the South." But on 3 February the brass requested an intensified bombing campaign against Hanoi, even though the scope of the Tet attacks had demonstrated the ineffectiveness of air power in preventing or containing enemy initiatives. Once more, the military's approach to the deteriorating situation in the south seemed like a non
sequitur. Despite admitting that grave problems existed, the armed forces asked for bold but unsound responses that placed the burden for a decision firmly on the shoulders of civilian officials in Washington.\textsuperscript{11}

As Washington debated the bombing request and the full dimensions of Tet began to emerge, military officials remained worried. "From a realistic point of view," Westmoreland reported to General Wheeler, "we must accept the fact that the enemy has dealt the GVN a severe blow. He has brought the war to the towns and cities and has inflicted damage and casualties on the population . . . . Distribution of the necessities has been interrupted . . . . and the economy has been disrupted . . . . The people have felt directly the impact of the war." As a result, the RVN faced a "tremendous challenge" to restore stability and aid those who had suffered. But Westmoreland's report ended on an upbeat note. Because enemy losses were sizable and the VC had not gained political control in the south, he contended, the offensive had been a military failure.\textsuperscript{12}

Westmoreland then contradicted himself, making the crucial recognition that the enemy's objectives were finally clear and "they were primarily psychological and political." The Communists, he observed, sought to destroy southern faith in the government of the RVN, intimidate the population, and cause significant desertions among the ARVN. The DRVN's military objectives, Westmoreland
admitted, may have been secondary to its political goals, and included diverting and dispersing U.S. forces throughout the south. The enemy, moreover, posed major threats at many areas, including Saigon, Khe Sanh, the DMZ, and at Hue, and more attacks were likely. Thus at the same time that Westmoreland claimed military success, he conceded that the Communists were engaged in psychological and political warfare. Throughout the next two months, his and other officers's reports would further reveal that the enemy criteria for success—undermining the southern government and military, prompting popular discontent, and destabilizing American policy—had indeed been accomplished throughout the RVN.¹³

Such military concern was further evident when Westmoreland and the JCS, on 9 February, reported that the DRVN had added between sixteen and twenty-five thousand troops in the Khe Sanh area and continued to pose a threat of "major proportions." The enemy, Wheeler predicted, "is going to take his time and move when he has things under control as he would like them." To that end, PAVN infiltration had risen from 78 to 105 battalions and the ratio of U.S. and ARVN forces to Communist troops, which had been 1.7 to 1, was now at 1.4 to 1. The Communists were also applying heavy pressure in Hué and Da Nang, had cut off the Ai Van pass, and threatened Highway 1—the major transportation route in southern Vietnam. In Quang Tri and
Thua Thien, in northernmost I Corps, the controlling factor in America's performance would be logistics, which Westmoreland admitted were "now marginal at best" even though he had redirected the 101st Airborne Division and 1st Cavalry Division to the north. But further to the south, the MACV claimed, the enemy posed no serious threat. The ally, however, did.14

Extensive damage to lines of communication and populated areas, heavy casualties--about 9100 between 29 January and 10 February--and significant desertion rates had riddled the ARVN. Accordingly, Westmoreland urged RVN President Nguyen Van Thieu to lower the draft age to eighteen to increase the armed forces by at least 65,000 troops, the number depleted in the initial Tet attacks. "Realistically," the MACV Commander lamented, "we must assume that it will take [the ARVN] at least six months to regain the military posture of several weeks ago."

Consequently, Westmoreland, for the first time after Tet, asked for additional forces. Wheeler had encouraged the MACV Commander to seek reinforcements, but admitted he could not guarantee them. "Our capabilities are limited," the JCS chair explained, with only the 82d Airborne Division and half of a Marine division available for deployment to Vietnam. Nonetheless, as Wheeler saw it, "the critical phase of the war is upon us" and the MACV should not "refrain in asking for what you believe is required
under the circumstances." The JCS chair's timing in raising the reinforcement issue was appropriate, for Westmoreland had thinned out III Corps by transferring forces to the north after a PAVN strike at Lang Vei days earlier. That diversion had troubled the MACV because it needed those forces to fight the enemy's main force units and support pacification, but the commander did not see it as an unacceptable risk.15

It was "needless to say," however, that Westmoreland would welcome reinforcements to offset casualties and desertions, to react to the DRVN's replacement of southern forces, which was conditioning the MACV's own plans, and to put friendly forces in a better position to contain Communist attacks in the north and take the offensive if given an opportunity. Again Westmoreland finished an otherwise frank evaluation of the military situation in southern Vietnam with a non sequitur: high hopes that additional forces would facilitate greater U.S. success.16 Washington was not so enthusiastic. Having turned down the JCS's bombing request three days earlier, on 9 February the pentagon directed the chiefs to furnish plans to provide for the emergency reinforcement of the MACV. The resulting memoranda between Westmoreland and Wheeler demonstrated that the military understood that its position in Vietnam was untenable.

Although the MACV publicly claimed that only pockets
of resistance remained, Wheeler told the president that the JCS "feel that we have taken several hard knocks. The situation can get worse." In fact, at a 12 February meeting, White House officials found that Westmoreland’s reports had raised as many questions and concerns as they had answered. The MACV reports from Vietnam had made the president and his advisors anxious and they had interpreted Westmoreland’s messages and requests for reinforcements as indications of the ARVN’s weaknesses and evidence that the troubled logistics and transport systems in the north had made deployment of additional forces imperative simply to maintain the American position.

Such candid reports continued to unnerve Johnson, who wondered "what has happened to change the situation between then [initial optimism] and now." Maxwell Taylor, the president’s military advisor, also "found it hard to believe" that the bleak reports reaching Washington were "written by the same man," Westmoreland, as the earlier optimistic cables. Against that backdrop Washington began to discuss the reinforcements issue. The president and McNamara reiterated already-strong reservations over additional deployments because of the impact of Tet and the spiraling financial burdens of the war. General Taylor, however, believed that the situation was urgent, interpreting Westmoreland’s cables as proof that "the offensive in the north is against him."
Westmoreland told the White House that defeat was not imminent. Nonetheless, he admitted that he could not regain the initiative without additional forces, and he warned that "a setback is fully possible" if not reinforced, while it was "likely that we will lose ground in other areas" if the MACV had to continue diverting forces to I CTZ. But Westmoreland still maintained that the enemy's strong position at Khe Sanh and the DMZ, not the VC infrastructure in the cities, was the most serious threat, and if it was not contained the U.S. position in the northern RVN would be in jeopardy. The MACV commander also expected another Communist offensive in the north, which he pledged to contain either with "reinforcements, which I desperately need" or at the risk of diverting even greater numbers of forces from other areas. Thus far, Westmoreland added, Vietnam had been a limited war with limited objectives and resources, but, as a result of Tet, "we are now in a new ballgame where we face a determined, highly disciplined enemy, fully mobilized to achieve a quick victory." 20

Based on such communication with Westmoreland, the JCS developed its analysis for McNamara. As of 11 February, the Chiefs noted, the PAVN and VC had attacked thirty-four provincial towns, sixty-four district towns, and all of the autonomous cities. Despite heavy losses, the enemy had yet to commit the vast proportion of its northern forces, while
the PAVN had already replaced much of its losses and equalled U.S. troop levels in I Corps. Westmoreland and his deputy Creighton Abrams were moreover concerned that the ARVN was relying even more on American firepower to avoid combat and that widespread looting was alienating the population. The ARVN, additionally, had suffered its worst desertion rates prior to the 1975 breakdown of the RVN. Its average battalion was at 50 percent strength, its average Ranger Battalion was at 43 percent strength, and five of nine airborne battalions were not combat-effective, according to MACV standards.21

Even when using questionable criteria such as enemy losses or inability to capture control of government as measures of military success, the MACV and JCS appraisals pointed out increasing problems. As a result, the Chiefs had strong reservations about reinforcing the MACV. Admiral Sharp had urged the White House to meet Westmoreland's request, arguing that additional forces could exploit enemy weaknesses. If U.S. officials had underestimated Communist strength, Sharp added, "we will need them even more." Nonetheless the JCS warned that transferring forces to Vietnam would drain the strategic reserve and exacerbate shortages of skilled personnel and essential equipment. Thus for the first time the Chiefs rejected a MACV request for additional support. "At long last," the Pentagon Papers authors explained, "the
resources were beginning to be drawn too thin, the assets became unavailable, the support base too small."22

The JCS had rejected Westmoreland's plea for more troops, they contended, principally to pressure the president to activate reserves in the United States, or face responsibility for continued deterioration. But McNamara on 13 February directed that an emergency force of 10,500 soldiers, including the remainder of the 82d Airborne--the only readily deployable division among Continental U.S. forces--be sent to Vietnam to reconstitute the MACV reserve and to "put out the fire." President Johnson hoped that the additions would reinforce stretched lines and guard against another series of enemy attacks, but clearly the defense secretary and president were not about to increase their commitment in Vietnam by that point. Westmoreland, however, remained alert to the VC threat in the cities and continued to expect a major PAVN blow at Khe Sanh and accordingly sought at least six additional combat battalions. At the same time MACV officials and General Lansdale continued to warn of future enemy action and point out problems associated with the ARVN. Thus the president remained anxious about the U.S. position in Vietnam and dispatched Wheeler to Saigon on 23 February to review the situation.23

Wheeler visited Westmoreland from 23 to 25 February and filed his report with the president on 27 February. The
Chair's appraisals contrasted sharply with public optimism about the war. As Westmoreland publicly continued to claim success--concluding that he did "not believe Hanoi can hold up under a long war"--Wheeler told reporters that he saw "no early end to this war," and cautioned that Americans "must expect hard fighting to continue." Privately, Wheeler was more pessimistic.24

The JCS chair, a skilled veteran of pentagon politics, was losing confidence in the MACV Commander and, as Clark Clifford put it, "presented an even grimmer assessment of the Tet offensive than we had heard from Westmoreland and Bunker."25 "There is no doubt that the enemy launched a major, powerful nationwide assault," Wheeler observed. "This offensive has by no means run its course. In fact, we must accept the possibility that he has already deployed additional elements of his home army." The JCS chair also admitted that American commanders in Vietnam agreed that the margin of success or survival had been "very small indeed" during the first weeks of Tet attacks. The enemy, with combat-available forces deployed in large numbers throughout the RVN, had "the will and capability to continue" and its "determination appears to be unshaken." Although the Communists's future plans were not clear, he warned, "the scope and severity of his attacks and the extent of his reinforcements are presenting us with serious and immediate problems." Several PAVN divisions remained
untouched, and troops and supplies continued to move southward to supplement the 200,000 enemy forces available for hostilities. The MACV, however, still faced major logistics problems due to enemy harassment and interdiction and the massive redeployment of U.S. forces to the north. Westmoreland in fact had deployed half of all maneuver battalions to I Corps while stripping the rest of the RVN of adequate reserves.  

Worse, Wheeler, though surprisingly pleased with the ARVN's performance, nonetheless questioned their stamina to continue, pointing out that the army was on the defensive and had lost about one-quarter of its pre-Tet strength. Similarly, the government of the RVN had survived Tet, but with diminished effectiveness. Thieu and Ky faced "enormous" problems with civilian casualties, morale, and a flood of over 500,000 additional refugees--all part of the huge task of reconstruction which would require vast amounts of money and time. The offensive moreover had undermined the American pacification program, considered a keystone in the U.S. effort since the early 1960s. Civic Action programs, Wheeler admitted, had been "brought to a halt. . . . To a large extent, the VC now control the countryside." He added that the guerrillas, via recruiting and infiltration, were rebuilding their infrastructure and its overall recovery was "likely to be rapid." Clearly, then, the military had developed its analyses and policy
recommendations in February 1968 from candid, at times desolate, views of the effects of Tet. Later claims of success aside, in February Wheeler at best found the situation "fraught with opportunities as well as dangers" and conceded that only the timely reaction of U.S. forces had prevented Communist control in a dozen or so places. "In short," Wheeler had to admit, "it was a very near thing." Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson did not resort to such euphemism. "We suffered a loss," he cabled to Westmoreland, "there can be no doubt about it."28

Having been concerned up to Wheeler's visit with the shorter-term results of Tet, the military understood clearly throughout February 1968 that the enemy offensive had created dynamic new problems for its forces in Vietnam. Subsequently, Tet entered its "second phase" and the MACV and JCS began to discuss longer-term policy in the wake of the enemy's attacks. Yet in doing so service leaders continued to acknowledge problems in the RVN but still rejected developing new approaches to the war. Instead, they insisted that the MACV simply continue its war of attrition, but with a huge increase in American soldiers--206,000 troops and the activation of 280,000 reservists. With such a proposal, which "simply astonished Washington" and "affect[ed] the course of the war and American politics forever," in Clark Clifford's words, and which the White House would not view favorably, the brass had conceded that
substantive success would not be forthcoming, but left it to the president to accept responsibility for subsequent military failures in Indochina.\(^{29}\) Wheeler's reports and request caused a political hurricane in Washington in February 1968 and since then have had central places in considerations of Tet. While scholars correctly point to Wheeler's candid assessments as proof of American problems in Vietnam, they tend to see the subsequent reinforcement request as a military response to the crisis: having failed to stem the enemy's advances with 525,000 forces, the military sought a 40 percent increase in troop strength to either stave off defeat or take the offensive, and also to replenish the strategic reserve at home.\(^{30}\) There was, however, an essentially political character to the proposal for additional troops. Even before the crises of February and March 1968, military and civilian leaders understood that the political environment in Washington had made reinforcement--especially in such vast numbers--impossible.

Wheeler recognized the pervading gloom in the White House, admitting that "Tet had a tremendous effect on the American public . . . on leaders of Congress . . . on President Johnson." General Dave Richard Palmer remembered that Wheeler and Westmoreland had asked for such reinforcement a year earlier and were, in effect, recycling an old request. "The ground had already been fought over,"
Palmer observed, "the sides were already chosen." Indeed, throughout the previous year military and civilian officials had been debating the reinforcement issue, with Washington always reluctant to escalate the war in any dramatic fashion. As a result, while Wheeler was in Vietnam, Bruce Palmer, now a MACV commander, informed Westmoreland that General Dwight Beach, the Army's Pacific commander, had been aware of the new reinforcement request and "had commented that it would shock them [Washington officials]."31

Clearly, then, any major reinforcement was unlikely in February and March 1968. As Westmoreland himself admitted, he and Wheeler "both knew the grave political and economic implications of a major call-up of reserves." But Westmoreland also suspected that even Wheeler was "imbued with the aura of crisis" in Washington and thus had dismissed the MACV's sanguine briefings. "In any event," the MACV Commander added, the JCS chair "saw no possibility at the moment of selling reinforcements" unless he adopted an alarmist tone to exploit the sense of crisis. "Having read the newspapers," Westmoreland wondered, "who among them [civilian leaders] would even believe there had been success?" Wheeler's approach to the issue notwithstanding, Westmoreland suspected that "the request may have been doomed from the first in any event" due to long-standing political pressure to de-escalate.32
Harold K. Johnson suspected as much. In their initial meetings after the Tet attacks began, the chiefs decided to wait for the dust to settle before making recommendations for future strategy. Within days, however, it was clear that the JCS and MACV did not have that luxury, and would have to make a prompt policy statement. Instead of deliberating over the proper course for the future, Johnson observed, the chiefs just endorsed a program for major reinforcements. "I think this was wrong," the Army chief later asserted. "There should have been better assessment" of the situation before forwarding military plans to the White House. The chiefs, despite their misconceptions, approved the reinforcement request anyway, essentially because they did not want to reject the chair's suggestion. "If you want it bad," Johnson sardonically remarked, "you get it bad."

And the brass did get it bad. Political leaders had also made it clear that substantive reinforcements would not be forthcoming. Even before Tet, the PAVN strike at Khe Sanh had alarmed Johnson. Meeting with his advisors the president charged that "all of you have counseled, advised, consulted and then--as usual--placed the monkey on my back again . . . I do not like what I am smelling from those cables from Vietnam." During his first post-Tet press conference the president asserted that he had already added the men that Westmoreland though were necessary. "We
have something under 500,000," Johnson told reporters. "Our objective is 525,000. Most of the combat battalions already have been supplied. There is not anything in any of the developments that would justify the press in leaving the impression that any great new overall moves are going to be made that would involve substantial movements in that direction." By the following week, with more advisors expressing their concern about Tet and the war in general, it was clear to the president that the military could exploit White House division over Vietnam. "I don't want them [military leaders] to ask for something," Johnson worried aloud, "not get it, and have all the blame placed on me."35

Dean Rusk was also arguing that then-current levels of U.S. and RVN troops were adequate to achieve American objectives, and he thus recommended against any increase. Moreover, even congressional hawks began to waver, thereby complicating the political nature of the reinforcement request. As Stanley Karnow has observed, hard-line senators such as John Stennis and Henry Jackson, who had "consistently underwritten the military establishment now began to see the hopelessness of the struggle." McNamara, though on his way out, was still pointing out the costs of escalation. The Wheeler-Westmoreland request would require an increase in uniformed strength of 400,000 men, which, the defense secretary estimated, would require additional
expenditures of at least $10 billion in Fiscal Year 1969, with an automatic addition of $5 billion for Fiscal Year 1970. McNamara further questioned the military's motives in asking for the additional 206,000 men, which, as he saw it, was "neither enough to do the job, nor an indication that our role must change."36

Thus, by mid-February, as Clark Clifford has pointed out, "the President did not wish to receive a formal request from the military for reinforcements, for fear that if it leaked he would be under great pressure to respond immediately." More importantly, Clifford added that the military was conscious of the situation and so "a delicate minuet took place to create the fiction that no request was being made." Similarly, Philip Habib, a state department specialist in East Asian affairs, reported that there was "serious disagreement in American circles in Saigon over the 205,000 request." White House aide John P. Roche elaborated that "Johnson hadn't under any circumstances considered 206,000 men. Wheeler figured this Tet offensive was going to be his handle for getting the shopping list okayed." Along those lines, Ambassador Bunker, in late February, had warned Westmoreland about asking for those troops, explaining, as Neil Sheehan reports, that such reinforcement was now "politically impossible" even if the president had wanted to, which was also more unlikely than ever.37 To say the least, the military's candid, bleak
outlooks throughout the first month of Tet followed by the huge reinforcement request had created an atmosphere of crisis in the White House.

Accordingly, Johnson, alarmed by the Wheeler report and similar evaluations from the CIA and the pentagon's International Security Affairs (ISA) division, directed incoming Secretary of State Clark Clifford to begin an "A to Z Reassessment" of the war. Johnson charged the Clifford Group with reviewing current and alternative courses of action, with two questions central to its study: Should the United States stay the course in Vietnam? And could the MACV succeed even with 206,000 additional forces? Both the CIA and ISA sent back pessimistic analyses, warning that additional deployments would further Americanize the war and prompt DRVN escalation in kind. General Taylor urged the White House to consider the political effects of future policy. "In the end," the president's military advisor cautioned, "military and political actions should be blended together in an integrated package." The JCS instead concentrated on military solutions, again urging a wholly unrestrained air war against the north. Westmoreland and Wheeler, moreover, were appalled by the ISA's charge that the military sought reinforcements as "another payment on an open-ended commitment." Instead, the MACV argued that it needed the forces to ensure "the security of the GVN in Saigon and in
the provincial capitals." In Washington, however, military officials seemed more introspective regarding the impact of Tet. Even the hawkish Joint Staff of the JCS challenged the MACV's assessment and goals. Not only would Westmoreland need another 200,000 forces, but would also have to regain the military initiative, cause heavy enemy losses, train the ARVN, and escalate the air war, all measures that had been recommended, and failed, repeatedly over the previous years. Without such improvements and reinforcement the DRVN would retain the military initiative and "allied forces can expect increasingly grave threats to their security with high casualty rates." Despite a continued, hopeful reliance on the strategy of attrition and air power, the Joint Staff had provided a desolate view of the war.39

The late February-early March reports in Vietnam and the debate over reinforcements provided the clearest demonstration to that point of the armed forces's non sequitur approach to policy. The military's candid, usually pessimistic, reports and analyses might have led to a new American outlook on the war, but the brass advocated more of the same. By insisting on huge reinforcements and attacking temperate views of the situation, the military rejected opportunities to seek a quicker and less violent solution to Vietnam, but more clearly thrust onto the White House the burden for an ultimate decision regarding
America's future in the war.

While the heated debate over reinforcements continued, the situation in Vietnam remained explosive as well. From late February to mid-March the enemy continued its politico-military pressure throughout the RVN, causing significant damage and casualties. In II Corps, John Vann pointed out that native resentment against U.S. and ARVN troops who had damaged homes and villages had risen. "Unless stopped," he warned, "the destruction is going to exceed our capability for recovery and battles we win may add up to losing the war." Similarly, Lansdale warned the embassy that the ARVN command, which included several "notoriously corrupt" officers, was undermining U.S. efforts to recover the pre-Tet military position.

Vann also complained that MACV officers had duped Westmoreland with optimistic briefings. During a visit to II Corps to "kick ass and energize offensive operations," the MACV Commander had been preempted by Army briefers who stressed the impressive Tet body counts as measures of success. These officers, however, had ignored government and military inaction in the south and did not mention that the VC was "being given more freedom to intimidate the rural population than ever before in the past two-and-a-half years." Vann, in fact, pitied Westmoreland because "even his best subordinates . . . continually screen him from the realities of the situation in Vietnam. As an
honorable man he has no choice but to accept what they say and to report it to all his superiors." Thus the MACV—whether duping its commander as Vann judged, or openly aware of its problems as the Wheeler reports indicated—understood the severity and extent of its dilemma in March 1968.41

In fact, the MACV itself was in organizational disarray as the Army, Marines, and Air Force, already involved in a long-simmering feud over strategy, heightened their interservice conflict. Under the pressures of Tet many Army officers complained about the Marines's conduct of the war in I Corps, and thus Westmoreland reorganized the MACV by replacing Marine Commanding General Robert Cushman with Army General William Rosson. General Victor Krulak, the Marines' Pacific Fleet Commander, blasted such developments. After a Los Angeles Times article detailed the Army-Marine rift, Krulak, though excoriating the paper in a letter to its publisher and in cables to the MACV Commander, privately charged that "the attack—one of several—was launched by the army, of course." If possible, Krulak added, he would publish a rejoinder titled "The Army is at it Again."42

Marine Aviation Commander General Norman Anderson similarly complained that the "immense" logistical problems caused by the influx of new units after Tet had become "almost too great to comprehend." Yet, Anderson charged,
in spite of our pleas to slow down the introduction of troops, the four stars in Saigon merely wave their hands and release dispatches directing the units to move. I think much of it is by design, with the ultimate aim of embarrassing" the III MAF. Some of the Marines's "biggest battles," he added, were "with the other Services rather than the VC and NVA [North Vietnamese Army]." Indeed, infighting over operation control of tactical aircraft was so intense that Air Force commanders "would rather see Americans die than give in one iota of the Air Force's party line."43

Amid such division and uncertainty, the Clifford Group forwarded its recommendations to the White House on 4 March. The new defense secretary had been particularly alarmed by the Wheeler report and thus urged Johnson to meet the first increment of Westmoreland's request with a 22,000 troop deployment, but he otherwise rejected the MACV proposals. Citing instability in the government and ARVN, the Clifford Group found "no reason to believe" that 206,000 more forces--"or double or triple that quantity"--could rout the Communists from southern Vietnam. If granted, reinforcement requests might then continue "with no end in sight." The new secretary then called for the MACV to consider new strategies. Wheeler balked, principally because he resented pentagon civilians developing strategic guidance for field commanders, and
because the 22,000 reinforcements, though useful, were insufficient. The MACV needed assistance urgently, Wheeler asserted, particularly because Westmoreland had reported "no change in his appraisal of the situation" since the chair's visit two weeks earlier.

In early March 1968 the United States was surely at the crossroads in Vietnam. Following a month of candid, bleak assessments, Wheeler and Westmoreland unleashed their bombshell request on Washington. But if, as the MACV boasted, it had decisively eliminated the enemy during Tet, Westmoreland would hardly have needed 206,000 more troops to complete the rout. Even if the MACV sincerely believed that more forces would turn the tide, it certainly understood that they would not be forthcoming. Indeed, given the brass’s pessimistic evaluations and the president’s attendant anxiety, it is not likely that the military was surprised that Tet seemed to be an American defeat. Although the New York Times front page story of 10 March shocked Americans with its stark portrayal of the U.S. position in Vietnam, it in large measure reflected the military’s own appraisals of the war from the previous six weeks.

Obviously the continuing public outcry over Tet did little to assuage the White House. The president, who on 13 March had agreed to send 30,000 more forces to Vietnam with two reserve callups to sustain the deployments, then
called on the "Wise Men"—former government and military officials—to help decide the reinforcement issue. General Ridgway, an increasingly outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, was one of the Wise Men, and he urged that the United States equip and train the ARVN for two additional years and then had over responsibility for the war and begin troop withdrawals. With a few exceptions, Ridgway and the other Wise Men urged the president to deescalate. At the same time, General Shoup, a hero among Doves for his attacks on the war, gave the White House another political setback as he told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that "it would take a rather great stretch of the imagination" to believe that Tet was an American victory. The General also scored the reinforcement request, pointing out that the United States might need 800,000 troops just to protect the cities attacked during the offensive. When asked how many forces might be required to actually repel the enemy, Shoup lamented, "I think you can just pull any figure you wanted out of the hat and that would not be enough."46

Simultaneously, Johnson met with Wheeler and Creighton Abrams, who had just been designated the new MACV commander, replacing Westmoreland, who had been "fired upstairs" to become Army chief. Days earlier Abrams had sought to "divorce myself from somewhat more optimistic reports coming out of Saigon" and he recognized "a tough
fight ahead against a skilful [sic] and determined enemy." Wheeler reported that the MACV did not fear general defeat, but pointed out that continued DRVN infiltration—possibly 60,000 Communist forces had moved southward—and lack of adequate reserves "could give the enemy a tactical victory." The ARVN remained "frozen" in a defensive posture while the enemy had established a "stranglehold" around numerous cities, especially near Saigon and Hué. Khe Sanh, Wheeler also conceded, had suited the DRVN's purposes by diverting U.S. forces to the north as Communist troops moved south- and eastward.47

Upon receiving such appraisals Johnson interpreted the reinforcement request as a defensive reaction to continued Communist success rather than as a means to defeat the enemy, and he lamented that "everybody is recommending surrender." Clearly the president was feeling the political heat from Tet. In a sometimes rambling soliloquy to Wheeler, Abrams, and Rusk, he expressed alarm at the economic and political repercussions of the war. "Our fiscal situation is abominable," Johnson pointed out, with rising deficits and interest rates and devaluation of the dollar making a new tax bill necessary. The military's request for more troops and reserves, at a cost of $15 billion, "would hurt the dollar and gold." Such economic considerations, the president admitted, were "complicated by the fact it is an election year" and "we have no support
for the war." Johnson then complained that the media and "Senator Kennedy and the left wing" were undermining his efforts to find a solution to Vietnam. As a result, "I will have overwhelming disapproval in the polls and elections. I will go down the drain. I don't want the whole alliance and the military pulled in with it." 48

Westmoreland's 28 March report was equally depressing. The enemy, in its post-Tet strategy, was targeting the people of the RVN; its "main objective is to destroy, or greatly weaken, the GVN." Accordingly, the VC was continuing to isolate the cities, put the ARVN on the defensive, agitate against the government, and proselytize among villagers. The Communists also maintained the politico-military initiative. The enemy, Westmoreland reported, "has no predesignated point for his main effort, no timetable, only a constant opportunism which will take advantage of vacuums [sic] in rural and border areas, weakness in city defenses, or any other favorable circumstances that provides [sic] an opening in the tactical situation." And, the MACV Commander conceded, the enemy retained the capability to exploit circumstances. It had between 100 and 110 combat-effective battalions in the south and was replacing its losses with infiltration and by taking advantage of the absence of U.S. and ARVN forces to recruit in the countryside. "In view of past performances and capabilities," Westmoreland noted, "the enemy could
bring two division equivalents into the RVN over the next
two or three months."49

Given such considerations, it was an obviously-
dismayed president who addressed the nation on 31 March.
Johnson again claimed that Tet had been a U.S. success and
he announced a token increase of 13,500 troops to be
deployed to Vietnam. But he also ordered a partial bombing
halt as an incentive for peace talks, and he stunned the
country by withdrawing from the 1968 presidential campaign.
So, precisely two months after the initial enemy attacks,
Lyndon Johnson had become the latest and best-known
casualty of the Tet Offensive.50 Westmoreland, however,
continued to smile through the storm, optimistically
claiming in early April that the enemy had suffered a
"colossal military defeat" and that the United States had
"never been in a better position in South Vietnam." Yet he
also informed Wheeler that the enemy had infiltrated
between 35,000 and 40,000 troops into the south, and feared
that such figures were "increasing almost daily . . . . The
final total may be significantly higher." Such admissions,
in fact, continued for the next two months as Communist
replacement of its Tet losses, human and material
infiltration, and recruiting persisted.51

Even into late summer military leaders continued to
lament the impact of Tet. Westmoreland and Sharp reported
that pacification had suffered a "substantial setback" as
Vietnamese forces withdrew from the countryside to defend urban centers. General Abrams added that counterinsurgency had ground to a "virtual halt," and that Tet attacks had devastated local Vietnamese units charged with village protection [so-called RF/PP units]. Due to continued VC infiltration, only provincial capitals and district towns were "marginally safe" but the "situation was subject to further deterioration." Abrams also scored the inchoate political atmosphere in the RVN, conceding that perhaps the "most serious--and telling--flaw in the GVN/Allied effort has been the conspicuous shortage of good Vietnamese leadership (both civilian and military) at all levels of command."52

Only months after Westmoreland had forecast America's bright prospects in Vietnam, the Communist Tet offensive had torpedoed U.S. efforts and shocked a hopeful nation. Yet in early 1968 and thereafter supporters of the war claimed that Tet was in fact a decisive American victory undermined at home by anti-war forces. Such claims, however, are disingenuous at best, for American military leaders themselves had consistently recognized that the enemy offensive was laying bare the contradictions inherent in the U.S. war in Indochina. Despite committing billions of dollars and 500,000 men, and inflicting huge casualties and massive hardship, the United States could neither
contain the enemy nor protect its allies. Communist attacks had continued throughout 1968, and the DRVN retained the capacity to match American escalation of the war. If, as Westmoreland and others contend, such conditions constituted a decisive military victory, then America had been waging war through the looking glass.

On a more salient level, the military also recognized that Tet had been a devastating political failure for the United States. Accusations of being "stabbed in the back" notwithstanding, the military realized that political factors in Vietnam, far more than in Washington, had doomed the American effort. Westmoreland and others had recognized the DRVN's conception of political warfare, understood the enemy's psychological goals, and lamented the RVN's instability. The military also understood that the already-volatile domestic situation seemed ready to boil over. Media and public perceptions of Tet, as military leaders charged at the outset of the offensive and repeatedly since, had made any attempt to escalate the war politically risky. When considered in light of the president's, defense secretary's, and key political leaders' misgivings about, and opposition to, an increased commitment, reinforcement became politically impossible.

Yet after the shock of Tet Westmoreland and Wheeler chose to continue their war of attrition and asked for 206,000 more troops and 280,000 reserves. Why was American
military thought so apparently barren in early 1968?

The military implicitly expected and understood the impact of its proposals. Operating from the recognition that the war had descended to its nadir and that reinforcements would not be forthcoming, the military made its immense request for troops in order to defer its share of responsibility for the American failure in Vietnam onto the White House. Although recognizing the American dilemma in Vietnam, Westmoreland and Wheeler discounted advice to change strategy and instead proposed a massive escalation of the war, which necessarily would have made the president accountable for the failed conduct of Vietnam policy. Bewildered by the enemy's initiative and under increasing fire at home, the military asked for more of the same and forced Johnson to choose between the Scylla of reinforcement and its attendant consequences, or the Charybdis of staying the course and bearing responsibility for the continued stasis. More than simply conniving for troops, military leaders sought to immunize themselves from greater culpability for the U.S. failure in Indochina and in the process forced the president into an intractable political dilemma. By rejecting the military's request to escalate, Johnson provided the services with an alibi for future failures, as the emergence of postwar revisionism on the war attests.

U.S. forces continued to fight for nearly five years
after the Tet Offensive, but America's fate was effectively sealed by mid-1968. Intervention in Vietnam, as so many officers had predicted for over a decade, had become a catastrophe. American soldiers kept pouring into Southeast Asia, pilots dropped millions of tons of bombs on Vietnam, north and south, and U.S. weapons killed untold numbers of enemy soldiers and civilians and ravaged a country. Yet William Westmoreland was no closer to being a victorious commander in the Spring of 1968 than when he had arrived in Saigon in 1964. Tet, as it were, had become the U.S. obituary in Vietnam.

The MACV commander, Wheeler, Sharp, and others, however, conducted their political warfare more skillfully. The president, who never seemed to clearly determine his own objectives and strategies for Vietnam, had simultaneously escalated the war to unexpected levels while trying to limit it because of the political implications of total war. Lyndon Johnson, his critics would later allege, had tied his commanders hands throughout the war, especially in early 1968. By that time, civilian, and military, leaders had already established patterns of behavior that had more to do with avoiding blame for failure than finding a solution to the war. Under such circumstances, victory, no matter how defined, was not possible. Escalation and attrition, it was just as obvious, did not constitute a viable strategy. American
forces, no matter the number deployed or tactics used, could not stop the enemy. Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, for all their shortcomings, did not cause America's defeat. The Vietnamese Communists did.
By the time of the Tet Offensive, the United States had over 525,000 soldiers in Vietnam and its pilots had flown millions of sorties and dropped several million tons of bombs, yet victory was no more likely than it had been before Americans took over the war.\(^1\) Despite progressively expanding its commitment to the RVN between 1950 and 1968 and causing untold destruction on both sides of the seventeenth parallel, the United States was unable to prevent the enemy's political and military forces from uniting Vietnam under Communist direction. Be it the Viet Minh, Viet Cong, or PAVN, the enemy remained militarily strong and politically active all over the south. The ally, whether Ngo Dinh Diem or one of the various juntas occupying power in Saigon in the 1960s, never achieved stable government or built up an effective military. American officers, despite their efforts in Vietnam, always recognized such problems and could not even agree on whether or how to fight there. Under such circumstances, the United States could not achieve success in Vietnam.
Since the war ended, many of those officers have contended that craven politicians, especially Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, unduly limited their ability to fight the enemy and, in effect, made American soldiers fight with one hand tied behind their backs. In reality, service leaders from the top down--JCS chairs, MACV commanders, military chiefs of staff, field advisors--always recognized that the war in Vietnam was not going particularly well and that the Vietnamese Communists were militarily and politically superior to the representatives of the artificially-created southern state to which the United States had attached its hopes.

Given that knowledge, American officers had opposed military involvement in Vietnam in the early 1950s. After assuming responsibility for training the RVN's armed forces in the latter part of the decade, U.S. military leaders still did not contemplate a U.S. combat role in Indochina. During the Kennedy years, the military increased its commitment to southern Vietnam but the brass remained wary of sending troops into battle in the RVN, agreeing to expand U.S. efforts only if the president would be responsible for whatever outcome occurred. Even as Commander Paul Harkins was predicting early success from Saigon, Harry Felt, Lionel McGarr, David Shoup, and John Vann, among others, were warning of the grave political and
military problems facing America in Vietnam.

By the Johnson administration, the brass was well aware that a Communist victory was forthcoming unless U.S. troops intervened. Nevertheless, American officers, especially the JCS chair-cum-ambassador Maxwell Taylor, continued to fight against a U.S. combat role in Vietnam, preferring instead to drop bombs on the DRVN, increase their support of the ARVN, and hope that a government in Saigon might achieve political stability at some point. These same men went along with Johnson’s and McNamara’s decision to enlarge, and thus Americanize, the war in mid-1965, in spite of their anger and frustration over the president’s decision not to activate the Reserves or to mobilize the U.S. economy and society to fight in Vietnam.

Once committed, American officers continued to acknowledge their problems in Vietnam and, more importantly, fought among themselves over the strategy and politics of the war. Westmoreland and the MACV staff, the architects of firepower and attrition, had to constantly contend with attacks from within their own camp over their approach to the war. Victor Krulak, Wallace Greene, Harold K. Johnson and Army officers who had written the PROVN report, and John Paul Vann, to name a few, presented a well-developed and biting critique of the commander’s conduct of the war in Vietnam. Such criticism was to little avail, however. Westmoreland was not a particularly
imaginative or adaptive man, so he never changed the way American forces fought the war, all evidence of failure notwithstanding.

And there was ample evidence that things were not going well in Vietnam. Perhaps most telling, U.S. military leaders always recognized that the enemy was growing via infiltration and recruiting and adequately supporting its forces. Both VC and PAVN units maneuvered effectively and maintained the military initiative, while the NLF attracted the people of southern Vietnam to its political program, all the while withstanding American firepower and air assaults. As Westmoreland admitted later, Ho Chi Minh was the most popular national figure in both northern and southern Vietnam, and he "was not necessarily a communist hero; He had gained Vietnam's freedom from the French." Meanwhile, the various southern leaders could develop no effective government, while the Americans in Vietnam were tainted with the image of a colonial power. As a result, the Vietnamese people never welcomed the United States into their land. Many of them, Marine General Raymond Murray feared, "were ready to slit our throats the first chance they would get."2

Military leaders were not unaware of this environment. Because of the unstable social and political situation in the RVN, many officers opposed the deployment of ground forces to Vietnam in the 1960s just as Ridgway, Gavin,
Shoup, and others had done in previous years. The Marines, for instance, were never enthusiastic about intervention, and Generals Krulak and Greene were probably the strongest critics of the war among active-duty officers. Westmoreland himself was also reluctant to send U.S. forces into combat in 1965, but finally acquiesced in March. Undoubtedly the most significant opponent to intervention was General Taylor. "Clearly Taylor not only knew the problems and pitfalls but was also in a position to wield great influence," General Bruce Palmer later observed, but even he was unable to convince Lyndon Johnson to change course in Vietnam. Why was Taylor, Palmer wondered, unable to bring about "a sounder strategic approach to the war?"3 Perhaps the JCS chair-turned-ambassador had failed because the president's commitment to the war was irrevocable. As McGeorge Bundy later explained, Lyndon Johnson was not influenced by Taylor, George Ball, or other critics. The president was clearly willing to expand the war, "in spite of all contrary counsel," just as John Kennedy had been before him.4

The military may not have been responsible for the decision to enter combat in Vietnam, but it made the worst of a bad situation once there. The American commanders, Harkins and Westmoreland, both rejected fighting a war of counterinsurgency with an emphasis on pacification. They, instead, hoped to use their overwhelming technological
superiority to destroy the enemy. During the war, and since then, U.S. commanders have come under attack for that strategy, with a good deal of the criticism coming from American officers who served in Vietnam. Marine leaders, particularly Victor Krulak, presented a compelling critique of the MACV strategy, with the general arguing as early as December 1965 that Westmoreland's approach would lead only to disaster. As Bruce Palmer saw it, the Vietnamese conflict was a war of national liberation and was "basically and predominantly political in nature, and not [a] military undertaking." All military actions, he contended, should have been "subordinate to and supportive of the political interests and aims, not vice versa."

Westmoreland, however, had decided to grind down the Communist manpower base even though "the North could suffer frightful losses and still replace them quantitatively." Had the United States begun to seriously erode the Communist forces, General Keith McCutcheon pointed out, Ho's Chinese allies "might have poured down" into Vietnam.6

Harold K. Johnson also offered a harsh indictment of Westmoreland's strategy, charging that American commanders "were indiscriminate in our use of firepower . . . I think we sort of devastated the countryside." General Dave Richard Palmer agreed. A commander who resorts to attrition, he asserted, "admits his failure to conceive of
an alternative . . . He uses blood in lieu of brains."8
American officers also attacked the extravagant use of U.S. air power in Vietnam. Although Air Force General Otto Weyland had observed in 1957 that he did not expect to see "B-52s finding and dropping weapons on a small guerrilla troop concentration in the jungles of Indo-China," that is precisely what happened a decade later.9

Among service leaders, Harold K. Johnson most virulently criticized the air campaign in Vietnam, finding it a diversion from the more important war on the ground in the south. In 1968, the Army chief computed that U.S. pilots had dropped enough bombs in the DRVN to cover the entire country with one-eighth inch of flat steel; by 1970 probably another one-fourth inch could be added to that total. Despite such massive uses of air power, ROLLING THUNDER did not sufficiently damage Communist capabilities or will.10 In fact, when General Douglas Kinnard surveyed American commanders after the war, about one-third of them believed that close-air and artillery support was too excessive, "considering the nature of the war," while over half said that B-52 strikes were neither vital nor worth the costs involved.11 Even so, Admiral Sharp and others still contended than an "unrestrained" air war would have been decisive.

To be sure, the U.S. military strategy in Vietnam was open to question. Westmoreland, Wheeler, Sharp, and others
did, however, understand the politics involved in making military policy. Thus the brass, during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, spent a great deal of time and effort forcing the civilian leadership to be accountable for any failures in Vietnam. American officers candidly assessed conditions in the RVN, were not markedly optimistic about their prospects there, and were aware of the limits to be placed on military operations. They knew that the White House would not call up Reserves, mobilize, sanction attacks on sensitive targets in the DRVN, or otherwise escalate the war in unduly provocative ways. Yet they consistently forwarded rather hawkish proposals to Washington for those very measures, even though no general could have expected the president to authorize them. Both Kennedy and Johnson had made clear what they expected from their commanders in Vietnam, namely prompt victory without an unwieldy commitment. Such a mission was never possible. Rather than admit as much, military leaders kept projecting success in spite of their own analyses otherwise.

Because their evaluations were so often bleak and they feared the political fallout from "losing" Vietnam, American officers let politics guide their approach to the war, as did the White House. The politics of the Cold War had guided America's initial commitments to Indochina in the 1950s, as U.S. advisors and resources poured into Vietnam even though it was an admittedly peripheral
interest. American military leaders recognized this; thus the chiefs acquiesced to a training mission in the RVN because "political considerations are overriding." By the latter part of the decade, the brass and the White House were in open conflict as Generals Ridgway, Taylor, Gavin and others attacked Eisenhower's decision to cut military budgets per his "New Look" national security strategy. Although these political battles did not directly pertain to Vietnam, they indeed had a great impact on events there. Military leaders, Army officers in particular, developed the idea of Flexible Response as a way to boost their institutional power, and, in turn, provided John Kennedy with a military strategy for Vietnam. More importantly, civilian and military officials became increasingly mistrustful of each other, thereby setting the stage for the politics of war in Vietnam.

During the Kennedy years, political maneuvering became more commonplace and critical in policymaking. Kennedy needed foreign policy success after accepting a coalition government in Laos and especially following his ill-fated attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro. Vietnam then became the place where the United States would stop the Communists. Despite the recent hagiography of Kennedy as a dove who was prepared to quit Vietnam and end the Cold War, the evidence indicates that the young president and his civilian advisors were the driving force behind the growing U.S.
role in Indochina. Had Kennedy, or his successor for that matter, wanted to disengage from Vietnam, either president could have cited the military's own doubts and reservations to deescalate or withdraw from the war with the least amount of political fallout at home. Neither Kennedy nor Johnson chose to do so. For their part, military leaders did not clamor for intervention. But in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs disaster, the military had come under attack for its failure to prevent Kennedy from invading Cuba. From that point on, civil-military relations worsened and had a growing impact on Vietnam policy. As a result, American officers, especially Maxwell Taylor and Paul Harkins, accepted Kennedy's commitments to Vietnam and increased the U.S. military stake there, even though Taylor, the president's most trusted military advisor, urged him to avoid combat in Indochina. At the same time, to prevent a repeat of the Cuban episode, the brass kept pressing the White House to identify its objectives, the level of American involvement, and the strategy to be used in Vietnam. Civilian leaders, not soldiers, would thus have to be responsible for the war. The military's primary concern, as General McGarr frankly observed, was to avoid blame for failure in Vietnam. Although political and uniformed officials were supposed to be fighting a common enemy in the jungles of Indochina, there was insufficient cooperation between the civilian
foreign policy establishment and the armed forces.

During the Johnson years, as combat troops entered Vietnam and took over the war despite the reservations of many military leaders, politics increasingly determined the U.S. approach to the war. The president pursued the contradictory objectives of "winning" the war—that is, preserving an independent southern state—while limiting it in order to avoid Soviet or Chinese countermeasures and to keep his political focus on building a Great Society at home. In truth, the military itself had recognized that even totally unrestrained warfare would not have brought a military victory, but the brass did correctly understand that the president's efforts would be far from decisive. Thus Wheeler, Westmoreland, Sharp, and others played politics, and held their own, against the master politician from Texas. Even though Jack Valenti wanted to "sign on" the JCS in the event of a "flap or investigation later," the chiefs always kept the pressure on Johnson to make the crucial decisions regarding the war. Certainly that was his job as commander-in-chief, but the brass did not make it any easier with their repeated calls to escalate a futile war. Indeed, as Sharp put it, there were "grave political implications" involved in military failure. Evidence of stalemate or deterioration, Earle Wheeler likewise understood, would "blow the lid off of Washington." By mid-1967, Harold K. Johnson saw the
military taking the fall for the coming disaster. Preserving their own and the armed forces's reputation, not maintaining the RVN, had become the principal goal of American generals by that time.

The president, too, played politics with the war. Caught between his anti-Communist convictions in Southeast Asia and his commitment to civil rights and a war on poverty at home, Johnson spent the better part of four years waiting for his commanders to achieve success at the least cost to his political agenda. The military, of course, instead kept pressing the White House to do more in Vietnam. Thus, by early 1968 Johnson complained that American officers had placed the monkey on his back for decisions on Vietnam, albeit that was where it belonged, and, after Tet, worried that he would have to turn down the military's proposals and than "have all the blame placed on me" for the subsequent failure.

Both the president and military leaders were fighting the war in Vietnam with an eye toward history. Although they had confronted the abyss in Vietnam, America's political and uniformed officials seemed to be more concerned with the way they would be judged after the war than in finding a way out of the conflict. Johnson, McNamara, Westmoreland, or Wheeler never really looked for any creative alternative to their conventional war in Vietnam, but instead muddled along the same paths they had
recognized as so seriously flawed years earlier. Despite illusions of success—the huge number of enemy soldiers killed, attacks on northern targets, southern villages allegedly pacified, staged elections in the RVN—American leaders always had access to information that revealed the true nature of the conflict. They chose not to act upon that knowledge, and so the war continued.

A significant number of military leaders, however, did offer different assessments and proposals for the war. Many of the more influential and incisive officers in the U.S. armed forces, including Matthew Ridgway, J. Lawton Collins, James Gavin, David Shoup, Maxwell Taylor, Harry Felt, Lionel McGarr, John Vann, Wilbur Wilson, Victor Krulak, Wallace Greene, Harold K. Johnson, and Bruce Palmer, variously criticized the American commitment to Vietnam, the expansion of the U.S. role there, and the way the war was fought. Some, Taylor, Krulak and Greene, for example, attacked the war but retained their faith in the efficacy of air war. Others willingly accepted the commitment to Vietnam, but complained that the American strategy was ill-conceived and counterproductive. And a few, Shoup, Gavin, and Ridgway most notably, opposed intervention in terms as harsh as almost any critic of the war in the 1960s. Even the war's biggest boosters, Westmoreland, Wheeler, and Sharp, constantly recognized how badly conditions were deteriorating. There was, Marine
General Edwin Simmons pointed out, "more diversity of thinking about Vietnam amongst the senior officers" than one would expect. 13

"Military dissent," a contradiction in terms to many, was commonplace in the Vietnam era, but it was not a decisive factor in the eventual outcome of the war. As Bruce Palmer pointed out, the JCS or Westmoreland never advised the president that they would be unable to achieve their objectives in Vietnam. The "only explanation" for this that he could offer was that those officers were imbued with the "can do" spirit and did not want to appear disloyal to their commander-in-chief. Harold K. Johnson, who had pointed out the chiefs's failure to Palmer, "could offer no logical rationale for this lapse" either. 14 More than a "lapse" or omission, the military's failure to admit its inability to succeed in Vietnam was the result of long-term political maneuvering over its role in policymaking. For over a decade American officers had wanted a greater role in establishing national defense policy, and Vietnam became the vehicle for attaining that objective. 15

An entire generation of military leaders accepted commitments in the RVN despite their own knowledge of conditions there and pessimism about America's ability to make a difference. From the outset of the U.S. commitment in the 1960s, many military leaders understood, sometimes
openly, sometimes implicitly, that they would not win the war, yet chose to stay the course in Vietnam in order to win political points in Washington. By 1968, when conditions, inevitably, hit bottom, Westmoreland and Wheeler were able to take advantage of the situation and, in effect, cause Lyndon Johnson to abandon his political career. The president, after all, had made them fight in Vietnam, so perhaps the military was looking for payback.

To Matthew Ridgway, Johnson's deescalation and withdrawal from the campaign showed that Americans had "learned our lesson." But, he asked, "have we thought about how we can prevent another such catastrophe in the long run, when memories begin to fade?" If the past two decades of civil-military relations are indicative, then it seems clear that American service leaders have indeed learned lessons from Vietnam. Although Harold K. Johnson later complained that "the whole onus for Vietnam . . . has fallen upon 'the military,'" the armed forces has survived and prospered since the late 1960s. As a result of the political maneuvers between civilian and service leaders during the Vietnam period, the military has become a more assertive force in policy deliberations. At different times, American officers have challenged Jimmy Carter over his plans to reduce U.S. troop levels in Korea, helped Ronald Reagan's ascent via the Committee on the Present Danger, and may have prevented U.S. intervention in
Nicaragua and El Salvador in the mid-1980s. Two ex-chairs of the JCS publicly opposed U.S. combat in the Persian Gulf war, as apparently did America’s ranking active-duty officers at the time.18

Right now, the JCS and President Bill Clinton are publicly battling over proposed cuts in the defense budget, possible intervention in Bosnia, and the rights of homosexuals to serve in the military. Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf are national heroes, and hardly a news show goes by without a retired officer appearing as an "expert" on some facet of foreign policy. At the same time, Clinton, the alleged draft dodger who became commander-in-chief, has suffered public jeers from veterans during a Memorial Day tribute at the Vietnam "Wall." The military has, in fact, done quite well since 1968; it may not have mastered Vietnam, but it has gained appropriations, prestige and power, all after losing a war.
CHAPTER I


2. On links between the historiography of Vietnam and the politics of Reagan-Bush military policy, see LaFeber, "The Last War, the Next War, and the New Revisionists"; Paterson, "Historical Memory and Illusive Victories"; and Marilyn Young, "This Is Not a Pipe," Middle East Report (July-August 1991): 21-4.

3. Bush in Washington Post, 17 January 1991. Bush again raised the spectre of Vietnam at the end of the war. Unlike the U.S. conflict in Southeast Asia, the American war against Iraq was quick and devastating. To hawks, the decisiveness and overwhelming power exhibited in the Gulf proved that the same type of warfare would have worked in Vietnam. Thus Bush proclaimed in March 1991 that "by God, we've kicked the 'Vietnam Syndrome' once and for all." Washington Post, 2 March 1991.

5. Jack Shulimson, senior historian on the Marines's Vietnam history project, made this observation.

6. I have developed this theme more fully in "The American Military's Rationale Against the Vietnam War," Political Science Quarterly 101 (Winter 1986): 559-76.
NOTES

CHAPTER II


Ronald Spector gives the most attention to military critics of intervention of Vietnam. In his official army history of the period, Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, 1941-1960 (New York, 1985), Spector does recognize that some military leaders were reluctant to expand American commitments to Vietnam, but he considers such opposition within the overall policy dialectic of the time. Thus, military critics of intervention tend to be counterpoised to advocates of U.S. involvement such as JCS Chair Admiral Arthur Radford or Secretary of State John Foster Dulles rather than being considered as a vital, perhaps decisive, component sui generis in policymaking.

2. Ironically, military and civilian officials reached divergent conclusions although they analyzed Vietnam from similar premises. The military's "Eurocentricity"--to use George McT. Kahin's term--led it to see war in Indochina as a dangerous diversion from America's primary responsibilities to NATO, while, simultaneously, diplomatic officials with "Europe First" principles saw involvement in Vietnam as essential to gaining French support in the Atlantic alliance. See Kahin, "The United States and the


US VN Relations with appropriate volume and page designations).

6. Marshall telegram to Caffery in Paris, 13 May 1947, in Porter, Vietnam, I:145-46, doc. 101; Marshall telegram to Caffery, 3 July 1948, ibid., I:176-77, doc. 118. See also Marshall telegram to Reed, 17 July 1947, ibid., I:156-57, doc. 104; Foreign military leaders also recognized the Western dilemma in Vietnam. The supreme allied commander in Southeast Asia, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten of Britain, understood that combined British-Indian forces could disarm Japanese forces still in Indochina in a short while, but also recognized that his forces would then have "less and less good excuse" for remaining in Vietnam. "In fact," Mountbatten admitted, "we shall find it hard to counter the accusations that our forces are remaining in the country solely in order to hold the Viet Namh (sic) Independence Movement in check." Accordingly, Mountbatten urged the continued use of Japanese forces to maintain order in Indochina. SACSEA (Mountbatten) memorandum to Chiefs of Staff, 2 October 1945, SEACOS 500, RG 218, Chairman's File, Admiral Leahy, 1942-1948.


8. Chief of Staff, Army, memorandum to JCS, RG 218, CCS 452 China (4-3-45); Spector, Advice and Support, 99. See also JCS 1721/42, 17 December 1949, RG 218, CCS 452 China (4-3-45); NSC 68, "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," 14 April 1950, in ed. John Lewis Gaddis and Thomas Etzold, Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy: 1945-1950 (New York, 1978).


CSGPO, "Basic Military Information on South Asian Countries for Military Assistance Planning and Programming," RG 319, OPS 092 Asia TS, USVN Relations, book 1, IV.A.2., 5; JSSC report to JCS, "Strategic Assessment of Southeast Asia," JCS 1992/11, 5 April 1950, RG 319, OPS 092 Asia TS.


Europe," he stressed, is "still the key." General Sidney Spalding memorandum for General Burns, 19 December 1950, RG 330. CD 092 Indochina 1951; Army Intelligence Staff Study, "Probable Viet Minh and/or Chi Com Courses of Action in Indochina," 24 April 1951, RG 319, G-3 091 Indochina.


18. See JCS and JSSC memoranda cited in note 18 above; Substance of Discussion of State-JCS Meeting at the Pentagon Building, 21 December 1951, FRUS, 1951 (Washington, 1977) 6:568-70; and JSPC memorandum to JCS, "Conference with France and Britain on Southeast Asia," JSPC 958/58, 22 December 1951, RG 218, CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48), section 20.


20. Lovett memorandum to Eisenhower, 3 January 1952, Declassified Documents Reference System, 81, 36A (hereafter DDRS with appropriate year and document designations); Bradley, CJCS, memorandum for Secretary of Defense, "Supplemental FY 52 MDAP for Indochina ($30 Million)," RG 330. CD 091.3 Indochina 1952; Trapnell to Collins, 20 December 1952, RG 330, CD 091.3 Indochina 1953. See also Chief of Staff, USA, memorandum,"The U.S. Position to be
Taken at the 5-Power Ad Hoc Meeting," RG 218, CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48), section 24.


22. Cabell in memorandum, assistant secretary of state for Far East affairs (Allison), to secretary of state, 28 January 1953, FRUS, 1952-1954 13:366-9, Cabell, as the JCS and Army had done repeatedly earlier, recognized the difficulties involved in a principally guerrilla war in Indochina, which contradicts Ronald Spector’s assertion that the U.S. military underestimated the strength and ability of Viet Minh guerrillas and consistently urged a greater use of firepower against them. Spector, Advice and Support, 167-69.


30. Other Pentagon officials also balked at plans to intervene. "The commitment of U.S. forces in a 'civil war' in Indochina," one defense representative charged, "will be an admission of the bankruptcy of our policy regarding Southeast Asia and France, and should be resorted to only in extremity." PP-Gravel I:89-90.


32. JCS Paper, "The Situation in Indochina," 7 February 1954, RG 218; CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48), section 57; Radford in Executive Session, see note 30 above. See also O'Daniel Mission report, 5 February 1954, USVN Relations, Book 9, 246-58; PP-Gravel I:90-91; USVN Relations, Book 1, II.B.1., B-6.

34. Ridgway in fact charged that Radford had no place even raising the issue of intervention; only Eisenhower or Dulles, he believed, had the authority to formulate policy. The chiefs should only advise civilian leaders, for "to do otherwise would be to involve the JCS inevitably in politics." Ridgway and Shepherd memoranda for the JCS, 2 April 1954, RG 218, Radford File, CCS 091 Indo-China (April 1954); documents also in Papers of Matthew Ridgway, Military History Institute (MHI), Carlisle Barracks, PA., box 30 (hereafter cited as Ridgway Papers, MHI, with filing information).

35. Eisenhower to SAC-EUR (Gruenther), 26 April 1954, DDRS, 76, 30G. In an interview conducted ten years after the Dien Bien Phu crisis, Eisenhower continued to defend his decision against intervention. "[T]o fight against guerrillas is very difficult because guerrillas can always fade away and then come back to fight again. There's no way of getting hold of them and getting them by the throat." Eisenhower Oral History, 25, Dulles Oral History Project, Seeley Mudd Library, Princeton University.


38. JCS memorandum for Secretary of Defense, "French Request for Additional Aid," 27 April 1954, RG 330, ASD/ISA, 091 Indochina, May-December 1954. See also Secretary of Defense memorandum to the Service Secretaries and JCS, 15 April 1954, Porter, ed., Vietnam I:537-8, doc. 312; PP-Gravel I:100-06, 129; USVN Relations, Book 1, III.A.2., A-16-7; DulTe 12, Paris to Secretary of State, 24 April 1954, DDRS,


45. Collins to Dulles, 20 January 1955, DDRS, 78, 295A; Collins to Dulles, 13 December 1954, USVN Relations, Book 1, IV. A. 3., 20-22; Many of Collins's reports from Vietnam can

46. Anderson, Trapped By Success, chapters 5 and 6.


3. See also sources cited in note 48 and Gavin and Adams for Chief of Staff, USA, "U.S. Policy Toward Indochina," August 1954, RG 319, G-3 091 Indochina.

52. Ridgway, Soldier, 278.


CHAPTER III

1. The most comprehensive, although not interpretively creative, treatment of Eisenhower's foreign policy is Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President*.


5. JCS 1992/460, 9 May 1955, "Indochina (Vietnam)," RG 218, CCS 092 (6-25-48), section 8; see also *USVN Relations*, book 10, 971-73.


7. CH MAAG telegrams to CINCPAC, 11 August 1955, RG 218, CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48), section 10; see also CINCPAC telegram to OSD 11 August 1955, same source as above, Spector, *Advice and Support*, 262-68.


9. See sources in previous note; see also Spector, *Advice and Support*, 270-71.

10. Admiral Edwin T. Layton, Deputy Director for Intelligence, Joint Staff, memorandum for Director Joint Staff, 22 December 1955, "Emerging Pattern--South Vietnam," RG 218, CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48), section 17.
11. 274th Meeting of the National Security Council, 26 January 1956, Ann Whitman File, NSC Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS. (hereafter cited as DDEL with appropriate filing information); see also Donovan to Eisenhower, 5 February 1956, and Dulles to Eisenhower 10 February 1956, Whitman File, Dulles-Herter Series, box 5, Dulles February 1956 (1), DDEL.

12. R.E. Hoey, Far East division, to Mr. Kocher, PSA, 2 March 1956, "General O'Daniel's Appearance Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 29 February 1956," Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, 751G.00/3-256 (hereafter cited as RG 59 with appropriate filing information); Williams to Admiral George W. Anderson, Chief of Staff, CINCPAC, 28 March 1957, Samuel T. Williams Papers, box 2, folder 17, MHI.


23. Williams quoted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 320; on the Michigan State role in training, see Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 141-49, and, for a critical view, the April 1966 issue of *Ramparts*. The MAAG was also critical of the Michigan State advisory group. In a memorandum to General Williams, MAAG Colonel James I. Muir complained of an "unusually frustrating afternoon" he had spent with that group, concluding that the Michigan State people knew "no more about the civil guard than we do--perhaps not as much." Muir to Williams, 10 December 1957, "Interim Report, Civil Guard Study," Williams Papers, box 2, folder 122, MHI.

24. Daniel Anderson, Counselor of Embassy, to Department of State, 6 September 1956, RG 59, 751G.5/9-656, #76; Kattenburg, Southeast Asia division, State Department, to Kocher and Young, 14 September 1956, "CINCPAC Briefing on MDA Program for Viet Nam, FY 57-58, at the Pentagon, September 13," RG 59, 751G.5-MSP/9-1456.

25. 295th Meeting of the National Security Council, 30 August 1956, Whitman File, NSC Series, DDEL.


29. Memorandum of Conversation between Robertson and O’Daniel, 25 September 1956, "Viet Nam," RG 59, 751G.00/9-2556, C/S, AMK.
30. Samuel Williams, Remarks at USOM Meeting, 4 October 1956(?), Williams Papers, box 1, folder 134, MHI; CINCPAC to Secretary of State, 19 March 1957, RG 59, 751/G.5, MSP/3-1857. During visits with National Security Advisor Dillon Anderson and Army Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor, Diem reinforced Stump's views and again requested more U.S. aid. Anderson to Secretary of State, 30 March 1957, RG 59, 751G.00/3-3057, #2957.


37. Durbrow to State Department, 8 October 1957, "Conversation with President Ngo Dinh Diem on October 1, 1957," Foreign Service Despatch 115, RG 59, 751G.00/10-857.

38. Spector, Advice and Support, 304-5.


40. USVN Relations, book 2, IV. A. 5., tab 4, 18-19.

41. JCS 1992/671, 1 August 1958, JCS memorandum to CNO, "Establishment of a Nucleus for a U.S. Military Mission for Southeast Asia," RG 218, ccs 092 Asia (6-25-
471

48), section 40; Ridgway interview with Clay Blair, #4, pp. 42-44, MHI. O'Daniel, of course continued to wax optimistic about Diem and the RVN. See Elting to State Department, 26 July 1958, Foreign Service Despatch 28, RG 59, 751G.00/7-2658, and O'Daniel to Sen. H. Alexander Smith, 20 November 1958, Smith Papers, box 121, Seeley Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.

42. USVN Relations, book 2, IV. A. 4., 17-23.

43. Ibid. Maxwell Taylor, Army Chief of Staff during this time, later asserted that the question of the type of training for the ARVN never arose in JCS deliberations over Vietnam, but that U.S. military leaders "unconsciously" trained the ARVN in the U.S. image. Maxwell Taylor Oral History, interviewed by Ted Gittinger, 1 June 1981, interview 2, 2-4, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, TX (LBJL), [hereafter cited as Taylor Oral History, (2)].

44. "Summary of Paper on Southeast Asia," Draper Committee, box 2, folder: Committee Meetings--Sixth--February 24-6, 1959 (2), DDEL.


46. Ridgway answers to New York Journal American interview, 9 September 1959, Ridgway Papers, box 32, MHI.


50. Williams to General Samuel Myers, 20 March 1960, Williams Papers, box 2, folder 75, MHI.

51. USVN Relations, book 2, IV. A. 5., tab 4, 82-83.

52. USVN Relations, book 2, IV. A. 5., tab 4, 43-51.


55. See sources cited in previous note.


59. Collins interview at Combat Studies Institute, Army Command and General Staff College, 14, MHI.

60. Fields Oral History, 251, Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, [Hereafter cited as MCHC with appropriate information].

61. Anderson, Trapped by Success, 133.

62. The most comprehensive treatment of the military’s involvement in politics is Mark Perry’s Four Stars (Boston, 1989), see chapters 1-3 for this period.

63. See, inter alia, Ambrose, Eisenhower; Perry, Four Stars; Douglas Kinnard, The Certain Trumpet: Maxwell Taylor & the American Experience in Vietnam (New York, 1991);


68. Ridgway to Wilson, 27 June 1955, reproduced in *Soldier*, 323-332.


71. 290th Meeting of the National Security Council, 12 July 1956, Whitman File--NSC Series, DDEL.


73. On the political-military battles over the budget and strategy, see the sources listed in note 64. Some political leaders also suggested that reductions in appropriations to the U.S. military should be matched by cuts in assistance to other areas. Senator Hubert Humphrey pointed out that 60 percent of American aid to the Far East went to Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam, and he suggested that U.S. leaders reexamine such programs in light of budget constraints. *Mutual Security Act of 1959*, 492.

74. On the politics of military policy in Vietnam, see Buzzanco, "Division, Dilemma and Dissent," and Perry, *Four Stars*. 
NOTES

CHAPTER IV

1. Kennedy in Herring, America's Longest War, 43.


5. On Kennedy's 1962 escalation, see Chomsky, "Vain Hopes"; Young, The Vietnam Wars; Kahin, Intervention; and Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie.

6. See the sources in note 4 above, as well as Peter Dale Scott, The War Conspiracy (Indianapolis, IN., 1972). Two works which are also highly critical of the military, but more sophisticated and balanced than Schlesinger, Newman, et al., are Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore, 1986); and Cecil Currey (Cincinnatus), Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era (New York, 1981). George McT. Kahin's Intervention, and Marilyn Young's Vietnam Wars are also critical of the military's approach to Vietnam during the Kennedy years.


9. Taylor, Swords and Plowshares, 188-9; Sorenson, Kennedy, 607; Perry, Four Stars, 114-7.


11. Shoup, however, did not believe that the Taylor report was specifically aimed at placing blame for the Bay of Pigs on the military instead of Kennedy. David M. Shoup Oral History, John F. Kennedy Library, 17-25. Shoup, Ted Sorenson later recalled, was probably Kennedy's favorite chief, the only JCS holdover after Kennedy brought his own people into the pentagon in 1962. Sorenson, Kennedy, 607; Shoup is somewhat famous—or infamous, depending upon one's perspective—for his strident criticism of the war in the later 1960s, but among Marines his opposition to the Bay of Pigs plans is still highly-regarded. During the Spring 1961 preparations Shoup brought a transparent map of Cuba to a planning meeting and laid it over the United States map to show just how large the island was and how difficult it would be to subdue it. For effect, Shoup then took an overlay with a small red dot on it and laid it on top of the other maps. Shoup explained that the dot represented the size of the island of Tarawa, site of a Pacific battle in World War II where the Commandant had earned the Medal of Honor, and where, Shoup reminded, "it took us three days and eighteen thousand Marines to take it." Halberstam, Best and Brightest, 85.


14. Christian Herter, Memorandum for the Record, 19 January 1961, Post-Presidential, Palm Desert-Indio File, box 10, folder: Kennedy, J.F., 1962, DDEL; likewise, General Earle Wheeler, who would be Army Chief of Staff and JCS Chair for the better part of the Vietnam War, briefed Kennedy on defense policy at Eisenhower’s direction before the 1960 election and only cursorily discussed the situation in Laos and Southeast Asia in general. Wheeler Oral History, 6-7, JFKL.

15. Rostow to McGeorge Bundy, 30 January 1961, VN C.F., box 193, JFKL.


20. See sources cited in previous note; see also Joint State-Defense-ICA Message, 3 February 1961, VN C.F., NSF, box 193, JFKL.


22. To Andrew Krepinevich, McGarr only paid "lip service" to the need for CI, like most military leaders in Washington and Saigon at the time. Citing McGarr's statement that "we will 'out conventional' the unconventionalists," Krepinevich argues that the MAAG leaders had no intention of pursuing a strategy any different than that of his predecessor, General Williams. Krepinevich, though correct in part, exaggerates the case against McGarr. The MAAG commander did stress CI more than other military officials at the time, as evidenced by his late 1960 studies on counter-insurgency. And McGarr's emphasis on CI was credible enough to get him ousted as the MAAG leader in late 1961 in favor of General Paul D. Harkins, who pursued a strictly conventional strategy in Vietnam. Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 57-8.

24. Kahin, *Intervention*, 127, and Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 78, offer the 60,000 troop figure, while the Congressional Research Service history, *Government and Vietnam*, 26, states that the JCS wanted between 120-140,000 forces. See also Sorenson, *Kennedy*, 645.


38. Komer added that the White House would have to create a viable political system in the south to avoid a situation like that in Korea, where, eight years after that war ended, the United States was still trying to develop a stable political system in the south. Komer memorandum to Rostow, 28 April 1961, "Comments on Program of Action for Vietnam," VN C.F., NSF, box 193, JFKL.


41. Even Walt Rostow, whose hawkishness on Vietnam would be unparalleled in time, cautiously noted that "we must be honest in assessing the ability of U.S. military power to be effectively employed against the VC." Draft Memorandum of Conversation of Second Meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam, 4 May 1961, FRUS, Vietnam, 1961, 115-23.


43. JCS memorandum to Secretary of Defense, 10 May 1961, RG 218, CCS 9155.3/9108, Vietnam (27 April 1961), section 3, part 1; P.P.-Gravel, 2:48-9, 65-6; JCS to CINCPAC, 11 May 1961, John Newman Papers, JFKL. The John Newman Papers is a collection of the documents which Newman used in writing JFK and Vietnam. It had just arrived at the JFK Library when I worked there in July 1992 and had yet to be processed. At the time the documents were organized chronologically in large binders, so my citations will list the document and date.

45. Felt and Rear Admiral Henry L. Miller, in Marolda and Fitzgerald, 


50. Taylor to Kennedy, 29 June 1961, "Reply to Diem's Request for a 100,000 Man Increase in the Army of Viet-Nam," VN C.F., NSF, box 193, folder: Vietnam, 6/19/61-6/30/61, JFKL.


11, 239-40.


59. NSAM 65, 11 August 1961, "Joint Program of Action with the Government of Viet-Nam," USVN Relations, Book 11, 241-2; see also Nolting to Rusk, 8 August 1961, VN C.F., NSF, box 194, JFKL.


64. McGarr to Felt, 21 September 1961, VN C.F., NSF, box 194, folder: 9/61, JFKL, and in DDRS, R, 74B; see also SNIE 53-2-61, 5 October 1961, USVN Relations, Book 11, 291-4. William Jorden of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department also warned fellow policymakers that "we delude ourselves" by assuming that the VC effort in the south primarily involved the movement of units across borders. The enemy was relying heavily on local recruiting for the bulk of its organization, and it was increasing infiltration at the same time. Jorden to Taylor, 27 September 1961, FRUS, Vietnam, 1961, 310-14. For purposes of military command and organization Vietnam was divided into four Corps Tactical Zones moving north to south. I Corps was northernmost, beginning right below the DMZ; II Corps was below that, encompassing the vast central highlands; III Corps included the Saigon area; and IV Corps was southernmost, in the Mekong delta area.


80. See sources in previous note. Ironically, McGarr has been essentially ignored in all major works on Vietnam, but, with the publication of the FRUS volumes on Vietnam, the MAAG chief's insight and worries about the war are clear.


84. Taylor to Kennedy, 1 November 1961, USVN Relations, Book 11, 337-42; P.P.-Gravel, 2: 84-92.


90. Notes on National Security Council Meeting, Washington, D.C., November 15, 1961, 10 a.m., *FRUS, Vietnam, 1961*, 607-10; see also W. Bundy Memorandum for the Record, 6 November 1961, *Ibid.* 532-4. Marilyn Young asserts that, at the NSC meeting, Kennedy, "facing the full measure of his own doubts, . . . had turned away." I do not believe, however, that those doubts stemmed from Kennedy's personal fear of intervention so much as from the contradictory and often negative reports out of Vietnam. See *Vietnam Wars*, 81. Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz likewise credit the president for backing down in November by telling the chiefs that troops were a "last resort" for Vietnam. "The Failed Search for Victory," 238.


NOTES

CHAPTER V

1. Kennedy to McNamara and Rusk, 14 November 1961, in Kahin, Intervention, 137-9. Kennedy took the language of this memo precisely from a memo Rostow had written to him on the same day, in FRUS, Vietnam, 1961, 601-3; see also Kinnard, Certain Trumpet, 100-03.


5. General T.W. Parker, Special Assistant to the Chair, JCS, to Lemnitzer, 18 December 1961, FRUS, Vietnam, 1961, 740-1. Like McNamara, John Kenneth Galbraith, U.S. Ambassador to New Delhi, believed that reform was impossible with Diem in charge in the south. But while the Defense Secretary saw that as requiring more American resolve, Galbraith saw it as proof of the need to disengage from Vietnam. Galbraith to Kennedy, 21 November 1961, USVN Relations, Book 11, 410-8.


14. P.P.-Gravel, 2:455; FitzGerald, Fire In the Lake; Kahin, Intervention.

15. There were many more officers who, like McGarr, would stress the need for pacification in the RVN. Among the more notable were John Paul Vann and several Marine leaders who were virtually at war with U.S. commanders Paul Harkins and William Westmoreland throughout the war. For more development of this see Buzzanco, "Division, Dilemma, Dissent"; Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie.


29. USARPAC Intelligence Bulletin, February 1962, Newman Papers, JFKL.


35. Hilsman, To Move A Nation, 442-4.


43. USARPAC Intelligence Bulletin, March 1962, John Newman Papers, JFKL.


45. USARPAC Intelligence Bulletin, April 1962, and Harkins to Decker, 1 May 1962, both in John Newman Papers, JFK Library.


3, folder 8, JFKL; Rostow to Kennedy, 17 July 1962, "Next Steps in Viet-Nam," VN C.F, NSF, box 193, JFKL.

52. Hilsman Memorandum, 9 May 1962, Hilsman Papers, box 2, folder 6, JFKL. This document, a hecticly-written, somewhat stream-of-consciousness effort, was untitled, but a close reading indicates that Hilsman, who referred to himself in the third person singular throughout, was the author. It is indeed ironic that Hilsman would score the military’s alleged softness in Indochina in May 1962, for in February the JCS—urging a military emphasis in Vietnam—had criticized his "Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" which had viewed the insurgency as a primarily political problem and urged a program of civic action. Hilsman report, "A Strategic concept for South Vietnam," 2 February 1962, FRUS, Vietnam, 1962, 73-90; "Memorandum of a Discussion at Department of State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting," 9 February 1962, Ibid., 113-6.

53. Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 50, 57, 94; Halberstam, Quagmire, 144.

54. Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 67.

55. Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 97-100, 106-7, 110-12.

56. Halberstam, Quagmire, 149-50.


66. MACJ2, 11 October 1962, "Intelligence Estimate, Period October 1962-February 1963," in Task Element 79.3.3.6 Command Diary, 6 November 1962-31 October 1963, MCHC. Also at this time an Australian Army advisor to Harkins, Colonel Francis P. Serong, toured Vietnam and reported "considerable improvement" with a successful conclusion "definitely in sight." Serong added, however, that once the war ended on the battlefield "we will be faced with a political problem by comparison with which the present one will seem mild." Colonel Francis P. Serong Report, "Current Operations in South Vietnam, October 1962," William Childs Westmoreland Papers, folder 498 [2 of 2]: #1 History Backup, 30 March 1962-November 1963, Washington National Records Center (WNRC), Suitland, MD. (hereafter cited as Westmoreland Papers with appropriate filing information).


74. Editorial Note, FRUS, Vietnam, Jan-Aug 1963, 1-2; Halberstam, Quagmire, 155-69; the most detailed treatment of Ap Bac is in Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 203-65. The VC's Ap Bac success should not have been so shocking. A Marine evaluation of helicopter tactics had determined that less than 10 percent of the territory over which U.S. helicopters flew could be considered "safe areas." Commander, Marine Aircraft Group 16 to COMUSMACV, 10 January 1963, "Evaluation of Helicopter Tactics and Techniques Report," Enclosure D#15, in Task Element 79.3.3.6 Command Diary, 6 November 1962-31 October 1963, MCHC.

75. CINCUSARPAC to JCS et al., 4 January 1963, VN C.F, NSF, box 197, folder: Vietnam, 1/1/63-1/9/63, JFKL.


82. Harkins's request included one squadron of B-26s and one squadron of T-28s--both strike aircraft--and two squadrons of C-123s, three squadrons of L-19s, and one company of Caribous--all transport planes. Nolting agreed with Felt's rejection but told him that, if imperative, transport but not offensive aircraft might be sent to Vietnam. Counselor of Embassy in Vietnam (Melvin Manful) to Director of Vietnam Working Group (Chalmers Wood), 23 January 1963, FRUS, Vietnam, Jan-Aug 1963, 32-4.

83. For Felt's optimism, see Wheeler Press Conference, 4 February 1963, Hilsman Papers, box 3, folder 13, JFKL; Felt to JCS, 2 March 1963, and CINCPAC to RUEPDA/DIA, 14 March 1963, VN C.F., box 197, folder: Vietnam, 3/1/63-3/19/63, JFKL; Felt to JCS, 22 February 1963, Hilsman Papers, box 3, folder 12, JFKL.


85. Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 81-2. At the same time Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield returned from a trip to Vietnam warning that the conflict was fast becoming an "American war" and that many problems evident in 1955 still plagued the American effort. Kahin, Intervention, 146-7.

86. Serong report, 14 March 1963, John Newman Papers, JFKL.


89. LeMay in Futrell, Air Force in Southeast Asia, 101; "idiot" quote in Perry, Four Stars, 28-9; Shoup in Bagley to Taylor, 26 April 1962, FRUS, Vietnam, 1962, 343-5.

90. Eckhardt, Command and Control, 37.

91. Quoted in Mrozek, Air Power and Ground War, 35-6, 27.

92. LeMay in Perry, Four Stars, 126-8.

93. The Twining interview was conducted in the later 1960s and his criticism was even more biting. Asked whether Taylor had finally seen the errors of his ways, Twining believed he was "still fighting it," using "subterfuge" to continually expand the U.S. role in Vietnam. But Taylor was "a smart boy, he ought to be able to see now what's happened. He always goes over there and says they're [U.S. and RVN forces] doing fine. Well, sure . . . but my God, how long does it go on?" Twining Oral History (Columbia Oral History Project), 224-6, 274, Eisenhower Library.


96. Embassy in Vietnam to State Department, 6 July 1963, FRUS, Vietnam, Jan-Aug 1963, 468-70; see also report by Krulak, Ibid., 455-65.


101. Hilsman, To Move A Nation, 499.


104. Wheeler Oral History, 64-6, JFK Library.

105. President Kennedy's CBS Interview, 2 September 1963, "Statements by President Kennedy on Vietnam," NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Whitman Rostow, box 8, folder: volume 6, June 11-20, 1966 [2 of 2], Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, TX. (hereafter cited as LBJL), also in Roger Hilsman Papers, box 4, folder 1, JFK Library.


107. Krulak Report of Trip to Vietnam, 6-10 September 1963, Hilsman Papers, box 4, folder 2, JFKL. Krulak toured Vietnam with State Department official Joseph Mendenhall, whose report to Kennedy was quite bleak, prompting the president's now-famous query to he and Krulak: "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?" At that same White House meeting, Harriman called Krulak a "damn fool." CRS, Government and Vietnam War, 170-5. In a 1970 interview with Marine historians, Krulak gave a different version of his 1963 approach to Vietnam. Both Kennedy and McNamara, he charged, "had no idea of how absolutely frustrating and enervating such a war would be," while the JCS "individually or collectively did not have any idea about how complex the war would be." Krulak himself said that he did not believe the sanguine reports out of Vietnam. "I was terrified about the war from the very beginning." Krulak Oral History, 194-7, MCHC.


Taylor to Kennedy, September 1963, "Summary of Military Operations in Vietnam," POF, CF, VN, box 128a, folder 4, JFKL.

111. White House Statement approved by President Kennedy, 2 October 1963, "Statements by President Kennedy on Vietnam," NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Whitman Rostow, box 8, folder: volume 6, June 11-20, 1966 [2 of 2], LBJL.

112. Lodge 949 to Secretary of State, 6 November 1963, VN C.F., NSF, box 198, folder: President/Rusk/Lodge Messages, volume 1 [2 of 2], LBJL.


117. Many Kennedy partisans such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Kenneth O'Donnell assert he was planning to disengage after the 1964 election, but the evidence otherwise is powerful. The best analysis is Chomsky, "Vain Hopes, False Dreams." Indeed Kennedy's planned speech for 22 November talked of the need to maintain American vigilance against Communist expansion. See President Kennedy's Remarks Prepared for Delivery at the Trade Mart in Dallas, 22 November 1963, P.P.-Gravel, 2:830-1.


119. Bassett and Pelz, "The Failed Search for Victory," 250. In a similar vein, Alexander Cockburn attacks apologists of Kennedy: "The real J.F.K. backed a military coup in Guatemala to keep out Arevalo, denied the Dominican Republic the possibility of land reform, helped promote a devastating cycle of Latin American history . . . and backed a Baathist coup in Iraq that set a certain native of Tikrit on the path to power. He presided over
Operation Mongoose, inflicting terror upon Cuba. At the very moments bullets brought J.F.K.'s life to its conclusion in Dallas, a C.I.A. officer operating firmly within the bounds of Kennedy's policy was handing poison to a Cuban agent in Paris, designed to kill Castro." in The Nation, 6/13 January 1992, 7.


121. Maxwell Taylor Oral History, interview by Ted Gittinger, 14 September 1981 (interview 3), 10, LBJL.
NOTES

CHAPTER VI


4. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 45. Peter Dale Scott and others suggest that NSAM marked a clear departure from Kennedy’s policy on Vietnam and set the United States on the path to war. The final draft of 26 November, however, was virtually a verbatim copy of earlier efforts, and the commitment to the RVN was precisely the same. Scott, *The War Conspiracy*. For an excellent refutation of Scott’s thesis, see Chomsky, "Vain Hopes, False Dreams," 14-5.


10. Wallace M. Greene, Jr., "A Marine Corps View of Military Strategy," Tape #6276, MCHC. This tape, and all others cited from the Marine Corps Historical Center, were transcribed by me.

11. Krulak, Oral History, June 1970 interview, 204, MCHC.

12. Donald Bennett Oral History, section 7, 30-34, MHI.

13. CRS, Government and Vietnam War, 214-5; General Henry Buse, Oral History, 205-8, MCHC.


18. Johnson to Lodge, 18 February 1964, VN C.F., NSF, box 198, folder: President/Rusk/Lodge Messages, vol. 1 [1 of 2], LBJL.


22. Palmer to Vann, 14 January 1964, Vann Papers, folder: 1964, MHI.


25. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 40. Westmoreland also received some ambivalent opinions from a close source—his father, who wrote that "I hardly know what to think about the situation in Vietnam." Since the war in Indochina had already lasted over a decade, time was on the
enemy's side. And, the elder Westmoreland rather presciently recognized, "if I have the public opinion sized up this country would call all of you home and let that country go to [hell]." James Ripley Westmoreland to William Westmoreland, 22 March 1964, Westmoreland Papers, folder 500: #3 History Backup, 17 February-30 April 1964, WNRC. Forrestal's lamentations were actually stronger than he indicated in his memorandum. He asserted that a recent MACV report on Vietnam, although it "does not by itself prove that we have a military staff in Saigon inadequate for the job," at least makes it clear that the military's approach to Vietnam incorrectly relied on conventional strategy. But, he added parenthetically, he could only make that relatively benign observation "at the risk of violent reaction from the uniformed side of the Pentagon." Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, 30 March 1964, "South Vietnam," Reference File, box 1, folder: Miscellaneous Vietnam Documents, LBTL.


27. See sources cited in previous note.

28. See USMACV Weekly Military Reports, April-June 1964, MACV Records, part 1, reel 2, UPA.

29. Summary Record of NSC Meeting No. 532, May 15, 1964, "Reports by Secretary Rusk and Secretary McNamara," NSF, NSC Meetings File, box 1, folder: vol. 2, tab 4, LBTL; Futrell, Air Force and Southeast Asia, 204.


35. Forrestal to McNaughton, 1 May 1964, DDRS, 78, 129A.

36. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 70-1.

37. Kearns, Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream, 252-3, 258.

38. On the foreign policy consensus of the 1960s see, among others, Kahin, Intervention, or Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest.

39. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 71.

40. Taylor, Swords and Plowshares, 312-3. General Krulak, the Commander of the Marines Pacific Fleet, also opposed the "encadrement" of U.S. personnel into the RVN government or the ARVN. To Krulak, such a move would amount to a "proconsul arrangement." With such a reorganization, the United States would assume responsibility for the war, "the indigenous group learns nothing, [and] blames you for all misadventures and gradually turns against you." Krulak to CINCPAC, 29 May 1964, "Meeting on Southeast Asia," Victor H. Krulak Papers, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1964-June 1965, MCHC. On Taylor's move from JCS chair to ambassador, which Mark Perry describes as a coup d'etat staged by the other chiefs, see Four Stars, chapter 4.


42. Earle Wheeler Oral History, 64-6, JFKL.

43. Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Opening Remarks, General Officers' Symposium, 7 July 1964, Wallace M. Greene Papers, box 14, folder 167, MCHC. On JCS criticism of Taylor as chair, see Perry, Four Stars, chapter 4.

44. Quotes in Perry, Four Stars, 135-7; for more criticism of Westmoreland, see Forrestal to McGeorge Bundy, 30 March 19164, "South Vietnam," Reference File, box 1, folder: Miscellaneous Vietnam Documents, LBJL; on Wheeler's and Westmoreland's political understanding, see Perry, Four Stars, and Bob Buzzanco, "Division, Dilemma, Dissent."

45. U.S. MACV Weekly Military Reports, July 1964, MACV Records, part 1, reels 2-3, UPA.

46. Captain Dave Richard Palmer, Random Notes on the Vietnam War, 1 August 1964, Westmoreland Papers, folder 504: #7 History Backup, 27 July-31 August 1964, WNRC.


51. Bundy also tried to reassure the president that a war in Vietnam would neither require a commitment nor have an outcome similar to the Korean war: "It seems to me at least possible that a couple of brigade-size units put in to do specific jobs about six weeks from now might be good medicine everywhere." Bundy to LBJ, 31 August 1964, in CRS, Government and Vietnam War, 349-50. On Bundy’s May views see Ibid., 256-7, and Demma, "Suggestions for the Use of Ground Forces."

52. Demma, "Suggestions for the Use of Ground Forces"; Interview with Harold K. Johnson, conducted by Charles B. MacDonald and Charles von Luttichau, 20 November 1970, 6-8, CMH [hereafter cited as Johnson interview with MacDonald and von Luttichau].

53. Demma, "Suggestions for the Use of Ground Forces."


55. Taylor to Department of State, 4 September 1964, DDRS, 84, 737; Westmoreland to Taylor, 14 September 1964, Westmoreland Papers, folder 505: #8 History Backup, 1 September-8 October 1964; WNRC; Demma, "Suggestions for the Use of Ground Forces"; Harold K. Johnson Oral History, U.S. Army, Military History Institute, Senior Officer Oral
History Program, 10, used at CMH [hereafter cited as Harold K. Johnson Oral History].

56. Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 120.


59. Westmoreland added that, in the interests of morale, he would not assign any U.S. military personnel unaccompanied by family to Vietnam for more than a year. To expect longer tours would be "self-defeating and unfair." Taylor to Department of State, 4 September 1964, DDRS, 84, 737.


61. Remarks Made for Mutual Broadcasting Network, 4 October 1964, Westmoreland Papers, folder 3, WNRC.

62. Pacification Reports, October 1964, Westmoreland Papers, folder 505: #8 History Backup, 1 September-8 October 1964, and folder 506: #9 History Backup, 9 October-13 November 1964, WNRC.

63. Taylor to Department of State, 7 October 1964, DDRS, 85, 1750; Taylor to Department of State, 14 October and 20 October 1964, Vietnam Country File, NSF, box 195, folder: President/Taylor NODIS CLORES, LBJL.


66. Westmoreland to Taylor, 6 September 1964, "Assessment of the Military Situation," Westmoreland Papers, box 4, folder: #10 History Backup, I, LBJL [I did research in the Westmoreland Papers at both the Washington National Records Center and the LBJ Library. Since the filing designations are slightly different, I will indicate the archives from which the particular document cited came].
67. JWGA, Final Report, Sigma II-64, September 1964, NSF, Agency File, JCS, box 30, folder: JCS War Games, volume II [I], LBJL.

68. See source cited in previous note.

69. Bennett participated in Sigma II along with Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, and Walt Rostow, among others. Rostow, he later observed, was "startled" that no political leaders could identify the U.S. objectives in Vietnam. As a result, Bennett concluded that it was a "no win war." Donald Bennett Oral History, section 7, 26-3, MHI; Ball to Rusk, 5 October 1964, "How Valid Are the Assumptions Underlying Our Viet-Nam Policies?" NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

70. Clodfelter, Limits of Air Power, 52-4; Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy and Vietnam, 473-7, Sharp quote on 477; P. P.-Gravel, 3: 210-5; Johnson, Vantage Point, 121; Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 88.

71. P. P.-Gravel, 3: 211.


74. Rusk to Taylor, 8 November 1964, VN C.F., NSF, box 195, folder: President/Taylor NODIS CLORES, LBJL; see also Dean Rusk with Richard Rusk, As I Saw It, edited by Daniel S. Papp (New York, 1990), 446-7.


76. Taylor to Department of State, 2 November 1964, DDRS, 83, 542; Taylor to Department of State, 3 November 1964, P. P.-Gravel, 3: 590-1; on Cambodia see Taylor to Department of State, 4 November 1964, DDRS, 85, 1777; on the JCS's criticism of Taylor's recommendations--which it derisively termed "tit-for-tat" bombing--see Earle Wheeler JCSM 955-64, 14 November 1964, P. P.-Gravel, 3: 628-30; the Army's vice chief of staff, General Creighton W. Abrams, also regarded the Bien Hoa attack as a "very serious step" and added that recent intelligence reports had detected shifts in PRC air and land forces in southern China, which could possibly signal a build-up for use in Vietnam. Memorandum for the Record, 2 November 1964, Creighton W.
77. Taylor to Rusk, 10 November 1964, VN C.F., NSF, box 195, folder: President/Taylor NODIS CLORES, LBJL.

78. Taylor also observed that an American accommodation with Ho might be possible. If the DRVN would "remain aloof" from the PRC in a "Tito-like state" he envisioned that the United States could support such a government, providing it allowed the RVN to survive. Taylor, 27 November 1964, "The Current Situation in South Viet-Nam, November, 1964," DDRS, 83, 557.


80. Taylor 1826 to Rusk, 23 December 1964, VN C.F. NSF, box 195, folder: President/Taylor NODIS CLORES, LBJL; see also Taylor to Rusk, 21 December 1964, DDRS, 79, 206D.

81. M. Bundy to Johnson, 24 December 1964, "Report of Taylor Backgrounder to Media," DDRS, 79, 222C. Though not as gloomy as Taylor, Harold K. Johnson returned from a visit to Vietnam in December with his judgment reinforced about the problems facing the United States there, especially pointing out the "insensitive conduct" of the ARVN, which was alienating the population and thus undermining the struggle. Krepinevich, Army and Vietnam, 132-3.

82. Untitled document, 14 November 1964, Westmoreland Papers, folder 508: #10 History Backup, 14 November-7 December 1964, WNRC. Although untitled, I believe that Westmoreland authored this document because it expressed sentiments consistent with those in the documents cited in notes below and it reflected the concern he expressed to Taylor in early 1965 about committing combat troops. See also Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy and Vietnam, 477-9.


84. Westmoreland to Taylor, 24 November 1964, DDRS, 77, 288E; see also Westmoreland to Taylor, 14 November 1964, "Assumption by U.S. of Operational Control of the Pacification Program in SVN," and Colonel Daniel Richards to Westmoreland, 30 November 1964, "Major Hop Tac Problems," Westmoreland Papers, box 4, folder: #10 History Backup, LBJL; on military developments see U.S. MACV Weekly

86. William Bundy, 27 November 1964, Memorandum of Meeting on Southeast Asia, P.P.-Gravel, 3: 674-6.


88. See sources cited in previous note.


91. Valenti to Johnson, 14 November 1964, CF, CO 312, VN, box 12, folder: CO 312, Vietnam, 1964-65, LBJL. A handwritten note at the bottom of the document indicates that the president discussed this memorandum with Valenti.


93. See sources cited in previous note.

94. See sources cited in previous note; also Vice Admiral Mustin to Sharp and Westmoreland, 2 December 1964, Westmoreland Papers, box 4, folder: #10 History Backup, LBJL; Johnson in Berman, Planning A Tragedy, 34; Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 113.

95. Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy and Vietnam, 522-3; Taylor to Department of State, 14 November 1964, DDRS, 83, 553.

96. Consolidation of Military Questions and Answers, November 1964, Westmoreland Papers, box 4, folder: #10 History Backup, I, LBJL.

97. Remarks of General Wallace Greene, CMC, Naval War College, Newport, R.I., 5 November 1964, Greene Papers, box 16, folder 188; CMC Address, Foreign Service Institute, Washington D.C., 9 November 1964, Greene Papers, box 16, folder 189; CMC Remarks before Joint Assembly of National
War College and Industrial College of Armed Forces, Fort McNair, Washington D.C., 1 December 1964, Greene Papers, box 17, folder 194, MCHC. Greene's rhetoric could become quite hawkish as well, see Halberstam, Best and Brightest, 594. General Raymond Davis, the assistant commander of the 3d Marine Division, had visited Vietnam with Navy Secretary Paul Nitze in the Fall of 1964, and sensed that "there was no . . . really clear indication that we would be committed" prior to the March 1965 Marine landings at Da Nang. Raymond Davis Oral History, 5, MCHC.

98. Halberstam, Best and Brightest, 594-5; Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 89.

99. Johnson, Vantage Point, 121; Rusk, As I Saw It, 446-8.

100. MACV Command History, 1965, 2-3, used at MCHC.
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2. Halberstam, Best and Brightest, 657.

3. DePuy, J-3, MACV to Westmoreland, December 1964 or January 1965, "The Revolutionary Spirit," DDRS, 78, 236C; Maxwell Taylor added that, in briefings covering the Vietnamese military, DePuy "described very clearly the misbehavior of several ARVN units, complete failure of units which had been, we thought, among the most promising." Taylor Oral History (2), 27-9, LBJL.


7. Johnson 1549 to Taylor, 27 January 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

8. McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 27 January 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA, emphasis in original; see also M. Bundy 1557 to Taylor, 28 January 1965, NSC History --Troop Deployment, UPA; Johnson, Vantage Point, 122-3.


12. Westmoreland analysis in Taylor 2058 to Johnson, 5 January 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; and DDRS, 83, 2793.

13. Harold K. Johnson, MHI Oral History Program, 8, CMH.

14. Taylor to Johnson, 6 January 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; see also Taylor to Johnson, 27 January 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; Taylor to Johnson, 2 February 1965, DDRS, 77, 34D; on U.S. policy in Vietnam in 1965, the best treatment is Berman's Planning A Tragedy; on Taylor, see Kinnard, Certain Trumpet, especially chapter 5.

15. Among the missions for the 34 battalions would be protection of 23,000 U.S. military personnel, 16 airfields, 9 communications centers, 1 large POL storage area, and 289 separate installations where Americans lived or worked. Taylor 2056 to Johnson, 6 January 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

16. Taylor to M. Bundy, 1 February 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; Westmoreland also pointed out that, amid the political turmoil of late January, ARVN soldiers in Da Nang were participating in anti-U.S. demonstrations. Westmoreland Memorandum for the Record, 28 January 1965, "Discussion with General Khanh," Westmoreland Papers, box 5, folder: #13 History Backup (I), LBJL.

17. Taylor to Johnson, 2 February 1965, DDRS, 77, 34D.


20. Bundy in Halberstam, Best and Brightest, 646.


30. Westmoreland to Sharp, 27 February 1965, "Use of U.S. Air Power," Westmoreland Papers, box 5, folder: #13 History Backup, LBJL; see also Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 123.

32. Wheeler JCS 0736-65 to Sharp and Westmoreland, 27 February 1965, Westmoreland Papers, box 5, folder: #13 History Backup, LBJL.


34. Taylor 2699 to Rusk, 22 February 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

35. Taylor to Johnson, 23 February 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

36. MACV Command History, 1965, 31, MCHC.

37. Taylor 2888 to Secretary of State, 8 March 1965, VN C.F., NSF, box 45-46, folder: Vietnam, volume 1 (A), NODIS-LOR, LBJL.


40. Westmoreland in FMFPac, "Operations of the III MAF, Vietnam, March-September 1965," MCHC [hereafter cited as III MAF Operations, March-Sept. 1965]. Like Westmoreland, the JCS was cautious on the troop deployments, giving directions that the Marines "will not, repeat will not, engage in day-to-day actions against the Viet Cong." JCS to CINCPAC, 6 March 1965, USVN Relations, book 4, IV.C.4., 1.


42. Harold K. Johnson interview with MacDonald and von Luttichau, CMH; Marolda and Fitzgerald, U.S. Navy and Vietnam, 531-3.

44. Army historian Vincent Demma, in his written work and in a conversation with me, persuasively argues that Harold K. Johnson was the biggest military advocate of deploying combat forces--to be utilized in the 4-division Panhandle plan--and that the president sent him to Saigon for precisely that reason. Lyndon Johnson, as the Army chief himself noted, was committed to getting more deeply involved in the war, and expected recommendations to do so. Demma, "Suggestions for Ground Forces"; see also Harold K. Johnson, MHI Oral History Program, and Johnson interview with MacDonald and von Luttichau, CMH.

45. Halberstam, Best and Brightest, 595, 630; Johnson in Perry, Four Stars, 149.

46. Palmer, 25-Year War, 28.


50. "Domestic political considerations," Kahin pointed out, were "so ingrained in the minds of the president and his advisers as to be taken for granted and require no explicit articulation in [McNaughton's] strictly internal memorandum." Kahin, Intervention, 313.

51. Johnson in Berman, Planning A Tragedy, 8-9; in Gibbons, Government and Vietnam War, 1965, 217. Maybe not surprisingly, Johnson's account of the Johns Hopkins speech in his memoirs does not include the cited passages. It only quotes those portions of the address in which the president discusses his dreams of developing Vietnam along Great Society lines and arriving at a peaceful, negotiated solution to the conflict there. Johnson, Vantage Point, 133-4.


54. Taylor 3003 to Secretary of State, 16 March 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


59. General Norman Anderson, Oral History, 170-2, MCHC.


66. Bundy added that, although he favored the new troop proposals, the deployment of a Korean division to Vietnam might be unlikely, as Seoul was "very wary" of the plan. McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 31 March 1965, "Your Meeting with Max Taylor at 5:15 this Afternoon," NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; *P.P.-Gravel*, 3:6.


69. NSAM 328, 6 April 1965, *P.P.-Gravel*, 3:702-4, 3447; McCon to Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, Taylor, 2 April 1965, VN C.F., NSF, box 74-5, folder: 2 E, 5/65-7/65, 1965 Troop Decision, LBJL; McCon to Johnson, April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


74. *P.P.-Gravel*, 3:443-50; see also CIA Memorandum TS HI185834, "Communist Intentions in South Vietnam," NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


77. CINCPAC to Westmoreland, 14 April 1965, "Employment of MEB in Counterinsurgency," NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

78. McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 14 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

79. Taylor 3373 to Secretary of State, 14 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

80. Taylor 3384 to Secretary of State, 14 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


82. Taylor 3424 to Secretary of State, 17 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

83. Taylor 3421 to M. Bundy, 17 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

84. Taylor 3423 to Secretary of State, 17 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


87. Valenti to Johnson, 19 April 1965, Reference File, box 1, folder: Aides' Memos on Vietnam, LBJL.


89. McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 26 April 1965, "Cable from Max Taylor," NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


92. Meanwhile the Marines were hiring Vietnamese workers to build a base at Chu Lai, about 50 miles south of Da Nang, which meant that it was likely "that our permanent airfield will be build by VC labor." Conference between CMC-FMFPac, at FMFPac Headquarters, 23-29 April 1965, Tape #6298, MCHC, my transcription.

93. Greene in Tape #6298, MCHC.

94. Taylor 3632 to Secretary of State, 4 May 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; Taylor 3808 to Secretary of State, 19 May 1965, VN C.F., NSF, box 45-46, folder: Vietnam, volume 2 (A), NODIS-LOR, LBJL.


96. Victor H. Krulak, 22 May 1965, General Summary, FMFPac Trip Reports, CG's Trip Summary, WestPac Visit, 14-21 May 1965, MCHC.

97. Westmoreland to JCS, 7 June 1965, "US Troop Deployments to SVN," NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; Wheeler to McNamara, 11 June 1965, "US/Allied Troop Deployments to South Vietnam," VN C.F., NSF, box 193, folder: JCS Memos, volume 1 [1 of 2], LBJL, and in DDRS, 79, 270A; see also J-2, MACV, Intelligence Estimate, 1 May 1965, III MAF Command Chronology, July 1965, MCHC [hereafter cited as III MAF Chronology]; MACV Command History, 1965, 6-7; Embassy, Saigon, to Department of Defense, 5 June 1965, DDRS, 79, 325A; Taylor 4035 to Secretary of State, 3 June 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

98. U.S.G. Sharp to Westmoreland in NMCC to White House, 13 June 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; for background see Westmoreland to Taylor, 3 June 1965, "Authority for the Commitment of US Ground Combat Forces," Westmoreland Papers, folder 511: #16 History Backup, 10 May-30 June 1965, WNRC; Taylor 4036 to Secretary of State, 3 June 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

100. See sources cited in previous note; also Text of Cable from General Westmoreland, COMUSMACV 20055, 14 June 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.

101. Taylor 4422 to Secretary of State, 28 June 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; Taylor to Secretary of State, 11 July 1965, VN C.F., NSF, box 19, folder: Vietnam, volume 37, LBJL; see also Taylor Memorandum, 11 July 1965, VN C.F., NSF, box 190-1, folder: Vietnam, NODIS-MAYFLOWER, LBJL.

102. McNamara to Johnson, 26 June 1965 (revised 1 July 1965), VN C.F., NSF, box 20, folder: Vietnam, volume 37, Memos (C), also in NSF, NSC Meetings File, box 1, folder: volume 3, tab 35, LBJL; P.P.-Gravel, 4:296.


105. Adam Yarmolinsky, McNamara's deputy, later explained that the defense secretary "regarded his trips as theater" and even drafted his reports before departing the United States so then he would only have to revise them based on what he had observed in Vietnam. Gibbons, Government and Vietnam War, 1965, 369.

106. McNamara to Taylor, 7 July 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


108. General DePuy, the planning chief, disagreed with McChristian's analysis of the enemy's ability to make the transition between stages of warfare. The VC's main-force battalions, not guerrillas, were America's principal opponents, as he saw it. Once U.S. troops began to locate and engage those forces, DePuy believed, the war would change in their favor. Record Group 407, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, DA/WMRC Administrative Files Relating to Westmoreland/Capital Legal Foundation v. Columbia Broadcasting System, Litigation Research.


114. Valenti to Johnson, 22 July 1965, Reference File, box 1, folder: Aides' Memos on Vietnam, LBJL.

115. Notes of Meeting, 22 July 1965, Meeting Notes File, box 1, folder: July 21-27, 1965, LBJL.


119. As the Army chief saw it, not using the Reserves was the "single greatest mistake we made." Harold K. Johnson, MHI Oral History Program, 13.

120. Raymond Davis Oral History, 93-4, MCHC.

121. Palmer, 25-Year War, 41-2.

122. William Rosson interview, Senior Officer Oral History Program, used at CMH.


124. Ridgway Interview/Question Period at Command and General Staff College, 1984, 15-6, 22-3, MHI.
NOTES

CHAPTER VIII

1. Harold K. Johnson, MHI Oral History Program, 12-3, CMH; Harold K. Johnson, Challenge: Compendium of Army Accomplishments--1968. A Report by the Chief of Staff, Washington, D.C., July 1964-April 1968, iii-x, used at CMH (courtesy of Graham Cosmas). When Creighton Abrams learned of the president's decision against using Reserves he complained that "the only Americans who have the honor to die of their country in Vietnam are the dumb, the poor and the black." in Sorley, Thunderbolt, 183; see also Douglas Kinnard, The War Managers (Hanover, N.H., 1977), 118-21; Palmer, 25-Year War, 42.


3. McNamara to Johnson, 1 September 1965 and 22 September 1965, both in NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA.


8. See source cited in previous note.


11. Westmoreland, Soldier Reports, 157-8; Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 571-9; Kinnard, Certain Trumpet, 165-6; Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 168-9; Davidson, Vietnam at War, 360-2.


14. McNamara to Johnson, 30 November 1965, VN C.F., NSF, box 74-75, folder: 2EE, 1965-67, Primarily McNamara Recommendations re. Strategic Actions [1965-1966], LBJL (the 30 November memorandum was a supplement to a McNamara memo to the president of 3 November 1965 titled "Courses of Action in Vietnam," in same source as above); see also McNamara to Johnson, 6 December 1965, "Military and Political Recommendations for South Vietnam," same source as above. McNamara's commitment to let Westmoreland establish strategy was obvious to his aides. When Pentagon
staffers complained that the Ia Drang valley was not an advantageous place to fight because of its proximity to Laos and distance from Saigon, McNamara rebuked them, explaining that "we can't run this war from Washington; let Westmoreland run it." In Shapley, Promise and Power, 356-7.


16. Johnson clearly understood the significant interrelationship between Vietnam and the Great Society. In his memoirs he wistfully observed that on 27 July 1965 "two great streams in our national life converged—the dream of a Great Society at home and the inescapable demands of our obligations halfway around the world. They were to run in confluence until the end of my administration." Johnson, Vantage Point, 322-5; Mills and Ackley in Merle Miller, Lyndon: An Oral Biography (New York, 1980), 539-40.

17. Memorandum of Conversation between Rusk, Dobrynin and Llewellyn Thompson, 8 December 1965, "Viet-Nam," and Memorandum of Conversation between William Bundy and Alexander I. Zinchuk, Minister Counselor, Soviet Embassy, 16 December 1965, "Vietnam," both in NSF, Memos to the President, McGeorge Bundy, box 5, folder: Volume 17, LBJL.

18. McNamara, Memorandum of Telephone Conversations with Members of Congress Relating to South Vietnam," 9 December 1965, NSF, Memos to the President, McGeorge Bundy, box 5, folder: Volume 17, 11/20-12/31/65 [2 of 2], LBJL.


20. General Westmoreland's History Notes, Entries of 29 August and 16 September 1965, Westmoreland Papers, folder 458 [2 of 2]: #1 History Files, 19 August-24 October 1965, WNRC.

21. "This will take more troops, [and] it will take longer," DePuy admitted, but he concluded optimistically that "it will succeed." DePuy Briefing at HQMC, 21 October 1965, Tape #6173, MCHC.

22. Greene in Annex C, FMFPac: CG's Visit to Western Pacific, 3-11 December 1965, FMFPac Trip Reports, MCHC.

23. Johnson WDC 10453 to Westmoreland, 1 December 1965, Westmoreland Papers, folder 358b: Message File, WNRC; General Westmoreland's History Notes, Entry of 9 December 1965, Westmoreland Papers, folder 459: #2 History Files, 25
October-20 December 1965, WNRC; Perry, *Four Stars*, 156-7.

24. McNamara to Johnson, 31 July 1965, "Evaluation of the Program of Bombing North Vietnam," VN C.F., NSF, box 20, folder: Volume 37, Memos (B), LBJL.


27. Taylor in McGeorge Bundy to Johnson, 27 December 1965, NSF, Memos to the President, McGeorge Bundy, box 5, folder: Volume 17, 11/20-12/31/65 [1 of 2], LBJL.


31. Taylor to Rusk, 14 April 1965, DDRS, 79, 211C.

32. P.P.-Gravel, 3:452-4; Harold K. Johnson to JCS, 12 April 1965, NSC History--Troop Deployment, UPA; Conference between CMC/FMFPac, at FMFPac HQ, 23-29 April 1965, Tape #6298, MCHC; Krulak to Sharp, 27 April and 14 May 1965, Krulak Papers, box 2, folder: Correspondence, 1964-June 1965, MCHC; Krulak, General Summary, 22 May 1965, FMFPac Trip Reports, CG's Trip Summary, WestPac Visit, 14-21 May, 1965, MCHC.

34. Westmoreland MAC 3407 to Harold K. Johnson, 5 July 1965, Westmoreland Papers, folder 512: #17 History Backup, 1 July-28 August 1965, WNRC.


36. Krulak to Greene, 18 July 1965, Krulak Papers, box 2, folder: Correspondence, July-November 1965, MCHC.

37. Wallace M. Greene, Address at Flag/General Officer Selectees Briefings at the Pentagon, 10 August 1965, Greene Papers, box 20, folder 234, MCHC.


41. Vann to Lansdale, August 1965, Lansdale Papers, folder 1392, Hoover Institution.

42. Vann’s analysis was presented in a widely-circulated memorandum--"Harnessing the Revolution in South Vietnam"--in early September. Although disseminated and commented upon by various U.S. officials in the RVN, Vann’s views ultimate got nowhere, again. See Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 537-58; Kahin, Intervention, 408-12.


44. Perry, Four Stars, 156-7.


48. See, for example, the reports of FMFPac, III MAF Operations, March-September, October, November, and December 1965, MCHC.

49. Karch Oral History, 77, MCHC.


54. See source cited in previous note. The conflict between the U.S. and Communist forces in Vietnam, Krulak later added, "could move to another planet today and we would still not have won the war . . . [but] if the subversion and guerrilla efforts were to disappear, the war would soon collapse as the Viet Cong would be denied food, sanctuary, and intelligence." In Shulimson and Johnson, *Marines in Vietnam, 1965*, 212.

55. Greene's handwritten notes, Greene Papers, box 39, folder 415-1: Notes on Trip to WestPac, 3-15 January 1966, MCHC; Greene and Krulak in FMFPac Briefing for CMC, Headquarters, FMFPac, Camp Smith, HI., January 1966, tape #6278, MCHC, my transcription; see also Greene's and Krulak's comments in Vietnam Comments File, 1966, MCHC.


62. Summary Notes of 556th NSC Meeting, 29 January 1966, NSF, NSC Meetings File, box 2, folder: Volume 3, Tab 38, LBJL.


67. Westmoreland Oral History, 7, MCHC.


70. Walt Rostow, April 1966, "Issues Hard to Learn From the Cables," NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, box 7, folder: Volume 1, April 1-30, 1966 [3 of 3], LBJL; Krulak to McNamara, 9 May 1966, Krulak Papers, box 2, folder: Correspondence, March-July 1966, MCHC; Valenti to Johnson, 3 April 1966, Reference File, box 1, folder: Aides' Memos on Vietnam, LBJL.


75. Westmoreland MAC 4081 to Wheeler and Sharp, 22 May 1966, Westmoreland v. CBS, LC, box 28, folder: Message, MAC 4081, WNRC.


78. See source cited in previous note.

79. See source cited in previous note.


82. Greene in Vietnam Comments File, 1966, MCHC.


84. Krulak to Greene, 7 October 1966, Krulak Papers, box 2, folder: Correspondence, August-December 1966, MCHC; Krulak in Vietnam Comments File, 1966, MCHC.

85. Krulak, First to Fight, 225-6.

86. Davidson, Vietnam at War, 410-11.

87. PROVN Report, used at CMH (courtesy of Graham Cosmas); P.P.-Gravel, 2: 501-2, 576-80.

88. See sources cited in previous note.

89. Perry, Four Stars, 157-8; Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 181; Davidson, Vietnam at War, 409-11; Beach to Westmoreland, n.d., Westmoreland Papers, folder 551: Personal Correspondence, WNRC.

90. Sorley, Thunderbolt, 192-3.


92. Notes of a meeting between Lyndon Johnson and William Westmoreland at the president’s ranch, 13 August 1966, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: August
13, 1966, President and General Westmoreland, Ranch, WNRC.


97. See source cited in previous note; see also Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 681-3.


99. See sources cited in previous note; Tom Johnson to Lyndon Johnson, 18 July 1966, "Minutes of the Meeting between the President and Bi-Partisan Leaders of House and Senate," Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: July 18, 1966, Meeting with Bipartisan Leaders, LBJL; see also Lyndon Johnson to McNamara, 28 June 1966, NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, box 8, folder: Volume 7, June 21-30, 1966 [1 of 2], LBJL.

100. Wheeler JCS 3086-66 to Sharp and Westmoreland, 2 June 1966, Westmoreland v. CBS, LC, box 15, folder: MACV Backchannel Messages to Westmoreland, 1-30 June 1966, WNRC; Rostow to Johnson, 5 July 1966, NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, box 9, folder: Volume 8, July 1-15, 1966 [2 of 2], LBJL; see also CIA and DIA assessments of ROLLING THUNDER in appendix to McNamara's 14 October memorandum to the president, NSC History--Manila Conference, UPA.


103. General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, 25 November 1966, Westmoreland Papers, folder 467: #11 History Files, 30 October-12 December 1966, WNRC.


105. "Congressional Statements Emphasizing the Importance of Pacification," NSF, Memos to the President, Walt Rostow, box 10, folder: Volume 13, September 15-30, 1966 [1 of 2], LBJL.

106. Rostow to Johnson, 28 November 1966, CF, ND 19/CO 312, box 72, folder: Situation in Vietnam (July-December 1965), LBJL.


January 1967, WNRC.


116. Palmer in Davidson, Vietnam at War, 354.
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CHAPTER IX


4. See sources cited in previous note; Sharp also believed that the United States should diminish its efforts to stem infiltration and focus on the war in the south; at the same time, he continued to encourage massive bombing above the seventeenth parallel. Sharp to JCS, 14 January 1967, in Sharp, Strategy for Defeat, Appendix C, 280-4.

5. Third Working Paper, Report by the J-3 to Joint Chiefs of Staff on Courses of Action for Southeast Asia, 13 January 1967, Westmoreland Papers, folder 579: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 13 January 1967, WNRC.


16. Wheeler CJCS 1594-67 to Westmoreland, 2 March 1967, Westmoreland Papers, folder 363: Chief of Staff Message File, WNRC. The chiefs delivered the requested report, "Results of the Air Campaign Against North Vietnam," to McNamara that very day, and he forwarded it to the president, see VN C.F., NSF, box 74-75, folder: 2 EE, 1965-1967, Primarily McNamara Recommendations re. Strategic Actions [1965-1966], WNRC.


23. Westmoreland in Miller, Lyndon, 572-3.

24. Rostow in Berman, Lyndon Johnson's War, 34.


27. Summary of Westmoreland visit to CINCPAC, in Krulak to Greene, 21 April 1967, HQMC Message File [Eyes Only Messages], 1966-1967, MCHC.

WNRC. Vann also scored American officers who were making sanguine predictions based on the ability of U.S. forces to kill large numbers of enemy soldiers in conventional engagements. Those claims, he asserted, only led American officials to have expectations "which cannot be supported by the hard facts of the actual security situation within most of South Vietnam." Such optimism, he added, was prevalent among the MACV's senior officers, but not sector, regiment, or battalion advisors, who rarely found the security situation adequate for pacification. John Paul Vann, Draft Working Paper, 2 April 1967, Vann Papers, folder: 1967, MHI.


31. Berman, Lyndon Johnson's War, 37; for a detailed explanation of McNamara's views, see his memo to the president of 19 May 1967, VN C.F., NSF, box 74-75, folder: 2 EE, 1965-1967, Primarily McNamara Recommendations re. Strategic Actions [1965-1966], LBJL.


36. JCSM-288-67, "Worldwide US Military Posture," NSF, Agency File, JCS, box 30, folder: Joint Chiefs of Staff [1 of 2], LBJL; Harold K. Johnson also pointed out the impact of Vietnam on America's worldwide commitments. The U.S. contribution to the NATO was still the country's principal priority, he asserted, but the Army "certainly 'shorted' Europe of company commanders at this time," due to Vietnam. Harold K. Johnson, MHI Oral History Program, 19, used at CMH.


44. Notes from Meeting of the President with Secretary McNamara to Review the Secretary's Findings During his Vietnam Trip, 12 July 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: July 12, 1967, Meeting on McNamara Trip, LBJL; Notes of Meeting of the President with Rusk, McNamara, etc., 12 July 1967, same source as above, folder: July 12, 1967, Tuesday Lunch Group; P.P.-Gravel, 4:511-28;
MACV FY 68 Force Structure, July 1968, Westmoreland papers, folder 475: #19 History Files, 6 July-3 August 1967, WNRC.


47. Notes of President’s Meeting with McNamara, etc, 14 July 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: July 14, 1967--12:50 p.m., LBJL; notes of the President’s Meeting with McNamara, etc, 8 August 1967, same source as above, folder: August 8, 1967--1:25 p.m.; Notes of the President’s Meeting with Democratic Congressmen, 8 August 1967, same source as above, folder: August 8, 1967--Democratic Congressmen, LBJL.


49. Notes of the President’s Meeting with Lester Maddox, 2 February 1967, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: February 2, 1967--Meeting with Lester Maddox, LBJL; Notes of Meeting with Senate Committee Chairmen, 25 July 1967, same source as above folder: July 25, 1967--6:10 p.m., LBJL.
50. See source cited in previous note; Rostow to Johnson, 1 August 1967, VN C.F., NSF, box 56 (initially found in DSDUF, Vietnam, box 2, folder: Country File Vietnam, box 56), LBJL; Notes of the President's Meeting with Clifford and Taylor, 5 August 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: August 5, 1967-1:49 p.m., LBJL; Clifford-Taylor Report to the President, 5 August 1967, VN C.F., NSF, box 85-91, folder: 5 D (1), 3/67-1/69, LBJL; Notes of President's Meeting with Harry Reasoner, CBS, 14 August 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: July 1967-May 1968--Meetings with Correspondents, LBJL; see also Notes of President's Meeting with Democratic Congressmen, 9 August 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: August 9, 1967-9:02 a.m., LBJL.

51. General John Chaisson Debriefing, 1 August 1967, in Chaisson Oral History Transcript, 61-3, MCHC.

52. Chaisson Debriefing, 63-65, MCHC.

53. McCutcheon to Col. M.R. Yunck, 7 February 1966, Keith McCutcheon Papers, box 20, MCHC.


55. Krulak to Don Neff, 25 October 1967, Krulak Papers, box 1, MCHC; Millett, Semper Fidelis, 579-80.

56. Sharp to Wheeler and Westmoreland, 3 August 1967, Westmoreland Papers, folder 372: Message File, WNRC.


60. Perry, Four Stars, 161-3; Clodfelter, Limits of Air Power, 106-7.

61. Perry, Four Stars, 163-5; Harold K. Johnson, MHI Oral History Program, 10, used at CMH; Wheeler, at a meeting with the president in November, denied that he or any other chief had considered resignation. Notes on NSC
Meeting, 29 November 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: November 29, 1967--12 Noon NSC Meeting, LBJL.


68. Westmoreland 36743 to MACV Officers, 9 November 1967, Westmoreland Papers, folder 437: COMUSMACV Signature File, 1967, WNRC.

69. Notes of the President’s Meeting with Rusk, McNamara, etc, 3 October 1967, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, box 1, folder October 3, 1967--6:10 p.m., LBJL; Meeting with Saigon Advisors, 21 November 1967, same source as above, folder: November 21, 1967--8:30 a.m.; San Antonio Formula in P.P.-Gravel, 4:678-80, and in Johnson, Vantage Point, 267.


74. Notes of the President’s Meeting with Rusk, McNamara, Wheeler, etc., 5 December 1967, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: December 5, 1967--6:02 p.m., LBJL.


76. Though Sharp’s warning seems prescient in light of the January 1968 Tet Offensive, the Admiral also believed that "the likelihood of a final effort in the Winter-Spring offensive somewhere after Tet cannot be discounted, but

77. Chaisson interview on WBOR, 1 January 1968, in Chaisson Oral History Transcript, 84-101, MCHC.

78. Chaisson presentation at HQMC, 2 January 1968, in Chaisson Oral History Transcript, 118-23, 141-2, MCHC.

79. Notes of the President's Meeting with Chalmers Roberts of the Washington Post, 13 October 1967, Tom Johnson's Meeting Notes, box 1, folder: July 1967-May 1968 --Meetings with Correspondents, LBJL.

80. The breakdown of morale among U.S. soldiers, and the concomitant increase in drug use, antiwar activity, and racial problems, was a critical factor in the brass's approach to the war by the later 1960s, with many generals wanting to get out of Vietnam simply to preserve the military as an institution. This subject clearly demands further attention. The best sources so far include Harry Haines, ed., "GI Resistance: Soldiers and Veterans Against the War," Vietnam Generation, vol. 2, no. 1; David Cortright, Soldiers in Revolt: The American Military Today (Garden City, N.J., 1975); Edward L. King, The Death of the Army: A Pre-Mortem (New York, 1972).
NOTES

CHAPTER X


5. On civil-military relations in general during the Vietnam War see Mark Perry, Four Stars (Boston, 1989); Robert Buzzanco, "Division, Dilemma, Dissent."


See also Westmoreland to Wheeler, 4 February 1968, DSDUF, Vietnam, box 4, folder: Vietnam, box 69, folder: 2C (4), LBJL, and NSC History--March 31st Speech, UPA.

13. Westmoreland cable, 8 February 1968, DDRS, 85, 001576.


16. See sources cited in previous note.

4, folder: 2d set [Memos on Vietnam: February 1968], LBJL; Notes of President's Meeting with Senior Foreign Policy Advisors, 11 February 1968, Clifford Papers, same as above.

21. Wheeler memo to the President, 12 February 1968, Clifford Papers, same as previous note; Wheeler to Westmoreland, 12 February 1968, NSC History--March 31st Speech, UPA, and in Westmoreland v. CBS, JX 664, card 758; PP-Gravel, 4:539.


20. Emphasis in original. Westmoreland added that the United States had yet to open Highway 1 from Danang and Highway 9 to Khe Sanh, two tasks which were "not unreasonable' if reinforcements were provided. But, the MACV Commander explained, even the redeployment of the 101st Airborne from III CTZ to the north "will put me in no better than a marginal posture to cope with the situation at hand." Expecting the enemy to "go for broke" in the Quang Tri-Thua Thien area, Westmoreland was confident that he could contain a Communist offensive. He warned Wheeler, however, that he would have to maintain the U.S. position in other CTZ, which was already a difficult task and was being exacerbated by lack of troops. Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, 12 February 1968, Papers of Clark Clifford, box 2, folder: the White House [Vietnamese War], Memos on Vietnam: February-August 1968, LBJL; NSC History--March 31st Speech, UPA; DDRS, 79, 369A.

In relating Westmoreland's report to the president, Wheeler told Johnson that, without reinforcements in I Corps, the MACV would have to take "unacceptably risky" courses such as diverting huge numbers of forces from elsewhere in the RVN. The JCS Chair moreover noted that it would be mandatory to open and keep open transportation in the north, and "that will cost troops." Wheeler memo for Johnson, 12 February 1968, NSC History--March 31st Speech, UPA; PP-Gravel, 4:539-40.

21. P.P.-Gravel, 4:539-40; Abrams PHB 154 to Westmoreland, 23 February 1968, Westmoreland Papers, folder 377a: COMUSMACV Message File, WNRC; though the enemy may have lost, through kill or capture, over 30,000 forces, it had nonetheless committed only about twenty-percent of its
northern forces, with those employed mainly as gap fillers where VC forces were not adequate to launch a full-scale offensive. The PAVN, which had added about 25 battalions in three months, might thus begin another round of attacks. Report of JCS (February 12, 1968), in Westmoreland v. CBS, JX 453, card 715; see also, Clarke, Advice and Support, 327-9; Kolko, Anatomy of a War, 259-60.

22. PP-Gravel, 4:539-40; Sharp to Wheeler, 12 February 1968, NSC History--March 31st Speech, UPA.


With regard to Khe Sanh, the president gave what appeared to be a rather backhanded vote of confidence to the MACV strategy when he asserted that "if General Westmoreland wishes to defend Khe Sanh he will be supported; if he wishes to avoid a major engagement in a fixed position which does not utilize the peculiar mobility of U.S. forces, he will also be supported." In Department of Defense Report, 15 February 1968, DDRS, 85, 000052.

Besides U.S. problems at Khe Sanh, the week of 10-17 February marked the worst U.S. casualty rates in the war, with 543 Americans killed and 2547 wounded.


26. Wheeler's February reports concerning his trip to Saigon can be found in several sources, including Lyndon Johnson, The Vantage Point, 390-3; Papers of Clark Clifford, box 2, folder: Memos on Vietnam: February-March 1968, LBJL; DDRS, 79, 382B and 383A; NSC History--March 31st Speech, UPA; PP-Gravel, 4:546ff; Pentagon Papers: NYT Edition, 615-21; Notes of President's Meeting to discuss General Wheeler's trip to Vietnam, 28 February 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes, box 2, folder: February 28, 1968--8:35 a.m., LBJL.

27. See sources cited in previous note; for criticism of the ARVN see Abrams PHB 154 to Westmoreland, 23 February 1968, Westmoreland Papers, folder 377a: COMUSMACV Message File, WNRC; on the impact of the refugee problem, see Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 712; John Paul Vann and


30. For interpretations of the reinforcement request, see, among others, Herring, America's Longest War, 194; Lewy, America in Vietnam, 127-9; Andrew Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 241; Schandler, Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, 115-6; Kolko, Anatomy of a War, 315; Clarke, Advice and Support, 291-337, passim.

Walt Rostow dismisses Wheeler’s February reports, virtually out-of-hand. Wheeler was ill, Johnson’s National Security Advisor asserted, and the reports from his visit to Vietnam were the only instance in which such pessimism was raised. Of course Wheeler’s reports prior to his visit and into March show that Rostow was wrong; on this issue, like most others dealing with Vietnam, he still refuses to confront reality. Personal Interview, 27 June 1988, Austin, TX.

31. Wheeler in Miller, Lyndon, 611; Palmer, Summons of the Trumpet, 261; Record of COMUSMACV Fonecon with General Palmer, 0850, 25 February 1968, Westmoreland Papers, folder 450: Fonecons, February 1968, WNRC.

32. Westmoreland added, disingenuously it would seem, that he and Wheeler "had developed our plans primarily from the military viewpoints, and we anticipated that other, nonmilitary considerations would be brought to bear on our proposals during an intensive period of calm and rational deliberation." Westmoreland paper, "The Origins of the Post-Tet 1968 Plans for Additional Forces in the Republic of Vietnam," April 1970, Westmoreland Papers, folder 493 [1 of 2]: #37 History Files, 1 January-31 June 1970, WNRC; Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 469. Ironically, both Westmoreland and Gabriel Kolko believe that Wheeler was trying to exploit the circumstances of Tet with his alarmist reports in order to get reinforcements and a reserve callup. In Kolko’s case, however, he argues that Wheeler was "conniving" for more troops principally to meet
U.S. needs elsewhere, see Anatomy of a War, 315.

33. Harold K. Johnson interview, MHI Senior Officer Debriefing Project, section 11, 14-5, used at CMH.

34. Notes of the President’s Meeting with Senior Foreign Policy Advisors, 9 February 1968, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, box 2, folder: February 9, 1968--10:15 p.m., LBJL.

35. Johnson in NYT, 2 February 1968; Notes of the President’s Meeting with Senior Foreign Affairs Advisory Council, 10 February 1968, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, Box 2, Folder: February 10, 1968--3:17 p.m., LBJL.


37. Clifford and Habib in Clifford, "The Vietnam Years," 54, 60; Roche in Miller, Lyndon, 611; Bunker in Sheehan, Bright Shining Lie, 720; see also PP-Gravel, 4: 239-43, 549-53.


41. Vann to LeRoy Wehrle, 7 March 1968, Vann Papers, folder: 1968, MHI.

42. Krulak to "Bill," March 1968 (Enclosures include cables to and from Westmoreland, Los Angeles Times article, and Krulak’s letter to publisher), Krulak Papers, box 2, MCHC.

43. Anderson to McCutcheon, 19 February 1968, McCutcheon Papers, box 20, MCHC; Similarly, Marine General Homer Hutchinson concluded that his complaints concerning
aviation control were an "empty exercise" because the Marine leadership offered little support. To Hutchinson's "utter amazement," Marine Commandant Leonard Chapman "folded completely" when discussing with Admiral John McCain, the CINCPAC, the return of fixed-wing assets to the Marines. Chapman's "cave in," Hutchinson suspected, resulted from continued threats from Westmoreland and the Army to "relieve or alter in a major way" Marine control in I Corps. Hutchinson to McCutcheon, July or August 1968, McCutcheon Papers, box 20, MCHC.

44. PP-Gravel, 4:575-85; Draft Memos of Clifford Group, Papers of Clark Clifford, box 2, folder: Draft Memo for the President--Alternative Strategies in Vietnam, 1 and 4 March 1968, LBJL; Notes of President's Meeting with Senior Foreign Policy Advisors, 4 March 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes, box 2, folder: March 4, 1968--5:33 p.m., LBJL.

45. For the president's views on the reinforcement debate, see The Vantage Point, especially 365-438; NYT, 10 March 1968; on public perception of Tet as an American failure see Clarke, Advice and Support, 291; on impact of New York Times story, see Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 471, and Clifford, "The Vietnam Years," 70.

46. For accounts of the Wise Men meetings see Johnson, The Vantage Point, 409-22; PP-Gravel, 4:592-3; Oberdorfer, TET!, 308-15; Schandler, Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, 256-65. Ridgway's suggestions during the Wise Men meetings formed the genesis of a 1971 article in which he lamented that American was continuing along the same paths in Vietnam after the shock of Tet, and he renewed calls for U.S. withdrawal. "Indochina: Disengaging," Foreign Affairs 49,4 (1971): 583-92. Shoup in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Present Situation in Vietnam, 90th cong., 2d. sess., 1968, 7-27; Shoup's associate, Marine Colonel James Donovan--past editor of the Armed Forces Journal--likewise complained to the Commandant that the "current news reports of the administration's lame attempts to white-wash the successes of the recent V.C. offensives is sickening." Donovan to Shoup, 19 February 1968, David Monroe Shoup Papers, box 26, Donovan Envelope, Hoover Institution; on Shoup's importance in the national debate over Vietnam, see Buzzanco, "The American Military's Rationale Against the Vietnam War."

v. CBS, JX 1611A, card 873; see memo of NSC meeting, 27 March 1968, DDRS, 82, 001267; Notes of President’s Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors, 26 March 1968, Tom Johnson’s Meeting Notes, box 2, folder: March 26, 1968--1:15 p.m., Foreign Policy Advisors Luncheon, LBJL; on enemy capability c. late March 1968 see Peers NHT 0305 to Westmoreland, 6 March 1968, Westmoreland Papers, folder 380: Eyes Only Message File, WNRC.


49. Westmoreland to Wheeler and Sharp, 28 March 1968, Papers of Clark Clifford, box 3, folder: Southeast Asia: Cables, LBJL, and in DDRS, 85, 000054; on enemy infiltration capabilities see Msg., Westmoreland MAC 04324 to Sharp, 30 March 1968, Westmoreland Papers, folder 382: COMUSMACV Message File, WNRC.

50. On Johnson’s 31 March decision, see The Vantage Point, 425-38.

51. Westmoreland in NYT, 7 April 1968; Notes of President’s Meeting with Westmoreland, 6 April 1968, Tom Johnson’s Notes, box 3, folder: April 6, 1968--1:30 p.m., LBJL. For the next two months Westmoreland, Wheeler and others would report that Communist infiltration into the south was continuing, and that the enemy retained the capacity to effectively wage war. The military’s public claims of decisive success simply do not stand up to the close scrutiny of such documents. See, for instance, Westmoreland to Wheeler, 16 April 1968, DDRS, 85, 001578; Honolulu Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors, 16 April 1968, Tom Johnson’s Notes, box 3, folder: April 16, 1968--10:25 a.m., LBJL; MACV estimate, 11 May, in DDRS, 86, 000669; Notes of Tuesday Luncheon Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisors, 21 and 28 May 1968, Tom Johnson’s Notes, box 3, LBJL; Department of Defense report, 11 June 1968, DDRS, 85, 000923.


NOTES

CHAPTER XI

1. Ralph Littauer and Norman Uphoff, eds, *The Air War in Indochina* (Boston, 1972). By the time the United States withdrew from Indochina in 1973, it had dropped 4.6 million tons of bombs on Vietnam and another 2 million tons on Cambodia and Laos (compared to a total of 3 million tons dropped by Allied forces in World War II). American forces additionally sprayed 11.2 million gallons of the dioxin-carrying herbicide Agent Orange, and dropped over 400,000 tons of napalm. The impact of such massive warfare was catastrophic. The United States destroyed over 9000, out of 15,000, southern Vietnamese hamlets, 25 million acres of farmland, and 12 million acres of forest, while creating over 25 million bomb craters. The human toll was worse. About 2 million Vietnamese, and another 300,000 Cambodians and Laotians, died in the war, while over 3 million Indochinese were wounded. By 1975 there were also nearly 15 million refugees in the area. See *The Nation*, 18 February 1991, 184.

2. Westmoreland Oral History (2), 4, LBJL; Raymond Murray Oral History, 22-3, MCHC.


7. Harold K. Johnson interview, Senior Officer Debriefing Project, section 10, 31-2, used at CMH.


10. Harold K. Johnson interview with MacDonald and von Luttichau, 64, CMH.


12. See Chomsky, Rethinking Camelot.


15. See Perry, Four Stars, especially his chapters on Vietnam.

16. Ridgway's comments on the Asprey paper, 1 December 1972, Ridgway Papers, box 34B, MHI.

17. Harold K. Johnson, Senior Officer Debriefing Project, section 11, 8, CMH.

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