A WINDOW INTO VICTORY: THE ABILITY OF THE UNITED STATES TO WIN THE VIETNAM WAR, 1964-1968

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Bachelor of Sciences in Secondary Education - Social Studies

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Stillwater, Oklahoma

2018

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
May, 2021

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THE UNITED STATES TO WIN THE VIETNAM WAR,

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, first and foremost, for their continued support during my studies. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to my professors at Oklahoma State University for challenging me and guiding me in the right direction, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student. Finally, I would like to thank the members of my Graduate Committee, Dr. Jennifer Murray, Dr. Douglas Miller, Dr. Justin Prince, and Dr. Matthew Schauer for their instrumental roles in helping me complete my research.

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Date of Degree: MAY, 2021

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Major Field: HISTORY

Abstract: Although many have argued otherwise, the United States could have won the Vietnam War, and they could have done it between 1964-1968. The US possessed the factors required to be victorious, but they were implemented incorrectly and thus led to defeat. Furthermore, the incorrect utilization of the American military's might does not rest solely at the feet of military commanders such as General William Westmoreland. Instead, those at fault are the men who felt obligated to attempt to run a war from the other side of the world, in Washington D.C. It was their decisions that led to the incorrect strategies and tactics being used, the combination of which resulted in the war's stalemate by 1969, America's defeat in 1973, and the fall of Saigon in 1975. Had the American military been utilized in the correct fashion, defeat could have been avoided and the war could have ended in 1968 with a victory for democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

In a televised address on the evening of March 31, 1968, just two months after the Tet Offensive, President Lyndon B. Johnson shocked the nation when he announced, "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."[1] Instead of focusing on a reelection campaign, he wanted to spend his final nine months in office devoting his attention to achieving peace in Vietnam. This effort, however, proved futile and the war would drag on for nearly five more years. The war effort under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford made even less progress than before. The goal of "peace with honor" resulted in troop withdrawals and the Vietnamization of the war while American leadership attempted to extricate itself from the conflict while saving face as best they could. On April 30, 1975, the day Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, fell and the eleven year conflict had come to an end, US citizens were provided with some of the war's most iconic images: Americans on rooftops, cramming into the final evacuation helicopters out of Saigon, and the crowds of South Vietnamese who were abandoned on those same rooftops because the helicopters had no more room.

[1] Kyle Longley, *LBJ's 1968: Power, Politics, and the Presidency in America's Year of Upheaval* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 101.

For the first time in its history, the United States had lost a war. To make matters worse, the US, one of only two superpowers to come out of World War II, had been defeated by the tiny, "backward," and worse still, communist, country of North Vietnam. While the Vietnamese communists did not repeat the bloodbath that had taken place following the communist triumph in Cambodia, many former South Vietnamese officials disappeared, sent off to reeducation camps or worse.[2] To a majority of Americans, "in the end, all the suffering, hopes, and sacrifices, all the blood and death, had been for nothing."[3] The thousands of American casualties seemed unnecessary. The 58,000 American dead appeared to have died in vain. And the death and destruction wreaked on Vietnam by the US, including estimates of as many as 3 million Vietnamese fatalities, seemed immoral.

Historiography

During the war itself and certainly in the years that have followed, diverse arguments regarding the conflict emerged and, as a result, scholars have offered a variety of arguments about America's role in Vietnam. There were the critics that argued America's intervention in Vietnam was unjustified, possibly even illegal, and that the war was unwinnable from its inception. Still the war's supporters disagreed. Some scholars addressed the entire war, while others have focused on one or more of the war's more specific components. The war's rich historiography ranges from numerous publications from US and South Vietnamese government officials who held office during the war, to accounts from officers and soldiers that served in the war, to historians who have spent much of their lives studying the conflict.

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[2] Edward P. Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War: Pacification in Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University, 1995), 189-190.
[3] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, 189.

The federal government generated a plethora of sourcdocumentses during the Vietnam War, creating the contemporary school of thought on the war. These files offer a window into the various points of assessment articulated by Wasington officials. These documents included such as meeting notes, various memorandums sent between numerous high-ranking officials, government departments, and embassies, as well as policy proposals, National Security Action Memorandums, and action assessments. These resources are, according to Vietnam War scholar George C. Herring, "an indispensable source for understanding why the United States intervened in Vietnam and why, ultimately, it failed to achieve its objectives."[4] While the government documents were often published in collections like *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, some contemporary sources were authored by eyewitnesses. David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire,* originally published in 1965, was essentially an account of what Halberstam witnessed as a war correspondent reporting on the war in Vietnam for the *New York Times*, although these kinds of sources also included some level of analysis. For instance, Halberstam, without plainly stating it, does make it apparent that the war in Vietnam was an unwinnable one, contrary to what was being reported by the government back home.[5]

The idea of the war in Vietnam being unwinnable became one of the foundational arguments made by the war's Orthodox school of thought, which developed a short time later. The end of the Vietnam War allowed a more in-depth analysis of the conflict to be completed by historians, government officials, veterans, and other intellectuals. For the

[4] George C. Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, Abridged Edition (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), xxii.
[5] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volumes I-VII (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008); Herring, *The Pentagon Papers*, xii.

most part, these writers fell into two broad categories known as the Orthodox school and the Revisionist school. Both arose soon after the war's end and continue to be the main interpretations of the war, but they were founded on premises that were near-complete opposites of each other. Orthodox thinkers offered harsh criticisms because they believed that Vietnam was immoral and "was a war that could not be won, no matter what."[6] Many of the Orthodox's leading thinkers, such as Stanley Karnow and George C. Herring, among others, openly placed the blame for starting the war at the feet of US politicians, exemplified by Larry Berman's argument that "Lyndon Johnson's political decisions were poorly conceived, frequently contradictory, and ultimately self-defeating."[7] They also stressed many of the same reasons for America's defeat, including flawed foundational attitudes and beliefs regarding Vietnam, assumptions of moral superiority, an incorrect war strategy, and America's extreme overconfidence in their technology and firepower.[8]

The Revisionist school gained influence in the 1980s and acknowledged that things had gone wrong in Vietnam, but they were not nearly as negative as Orthodoxy intellectuals were. General Alexander Haig, then-Major Barry McCaffrey, and then-Major Norman Schwarzkopf, all of which were military men during Vietnam, all exemplified the foundational premise of the Revisionist interpretation of the Vietnam War: that the war was winnable.[9] In their interviews with Gil Dorland, an experienced

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[6] Laura Palmer, "The General at Ease: An Interview with William C. Westmoreland," In *The Cold War: A Military History*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Random House, 2005), 309.
[7] Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 510; Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), xi.
[8] Hastings, *Vietnam*, 740-741; Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 45; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), ix; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 438.
[9] Gill Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2001), 157, 42, 204.

interviewer who served two tours of duty in Vietnam and received the Distinguished Service Cross, the three military commanders expressed the same sentiment that Gary R. Hess argued in his book *Vietnam and the United States*, "the United States should have carried the war fully and directly against North Vietnam."[10] Instead of blaming the politicians for getting into the war in the first place like Orthodoxy thinkers, the Revisionists blamed the politicians' decision to use the graduated pressure strategy. "The key to victory was in concentrating U.S. power against North Vietnam to prevent its infiltration of men and supplies into the South."[11] Not only was it winnable but, according to historian Norman Podhoretz, the war was "was a product of the Wilsonian side of the American character - the side that went to war in 1917 to 'make the world safe for democracy'... [and thus] there is no rationally defensible way in which it can be called immoral."[12]

As the Revisionist school gained traction, it overshadowed another school coming about at the time, the Pacification school. For the most part, many of the early publications covering pacification were government-sponsored studies like the one conducted by South Vietnamese Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, originally an eyewitness to the efforts, who concluded that pacification could have been successful.[13] In 1995 Richard A. Hunt provided an important work to the emerging Pacification school with his publication of *Pacification*.[14] The work marked a significant development in the historiography of the Vietnam War by attempting to fill a particularly large void, "the

[10] Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 174.
[11] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 174.
[12] Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 197.
[13] Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980).
[14] Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle For Vietnam's Hearts And Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

lack of a comprehensive study of American attempts to support the various South Vietnamese programs that composed pacification."[15] Hunt's *Pacification* began by acknowledging America's involvement in Vietnam during French colonial rule before moving into detailed analysis of nation-building efforts during John F. Kennedy's presidency. Most of Hunt's focus however, was on the pacification policies and actions undertaken during the Johnson administration. All the while, he sought to uncover whether or not full American control of pacification would have led to a different outcome to the war overall. In the end, Hunt concluded, it would not have mattered because America's defeat in Vietnam was not due to pacification's failure.

The 1990s saw a surge of autobiographies when some of those involved in the war decided to tell their stories, creating a Personal Experience school on the Vietnam War. These first-hand accounts provided readers the often overlooked "human aspects" associated with the policies and actions implemented in regards to the Vietnam War, thus offering the audience a glimpse into the real-life result of those decisions. For instance, the wartime diary of Frank Elkins, a carrier-based fighter pilot in the US Navy, was published in 1991 and provided a window into his wartime experiences until 1966, when he was shot down and killed.[16] In 1992, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, a war correspondent, published *We Were Soldiers Once*, which was their account of the battle for Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley.[17] Colonel Moore, the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), led his troops into the valley on November 14, 1965 in an attempt to draw the North Vietnamese forces there

[15] Hunt, *Pacification*, 2.
[16] Frank Elkins, *The Heart of a Man: A Naval Pilot's Vietnam Diary*, ed. Marilyn Elkins (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991).
[17] Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once… and Young: Ia Drang - The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

into a massive engagement. And they did. They found themselves in a two-day long battle during which seventy-nine Americans and at least 834 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers were killed.[18] The book provides a detailed account of those two days, and the following two days when the 2nd Battalion, the force that relieved Moore and his men, was ambushed and sustained massive casualties. Moore's account provided an important look into the strategy of US ground forces in Vietnam.

In 1995, Colonel Edward Metzner published his account of the eight years he spent in Vietnam as a pacification adviser in *More Than a Soldier's War*.[19] He detailed the problems he encountered, the solutions he helped implement, and the actions he took part in during his three tours of duty. As he reflected on his experiences, it is clear that he blamed both American and South Vietnamese military leaders for pacification's sluggish progress. The "other war," in his opinion, might have proceeded more successfully had there been more attention focused on the needs of the local population and less on military tactics. The fact that any progress at all was made in the pacification effort was, according to Metzner, "a tribute to the advisors' tenacity."[20] While his accounts added to the record of personal experiences, Metzner also contributed to the Pacification school of thought. Although he believed that those who took part "justly can take pride in the program's accomplishments," Metzner countered conclusions made by Pacification historians Richard Hunt and Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho when he concluded that pacification may have been ineffectual in the long run.[21] A look into another one of the lesser-known aspects of the war was provided by Gary R. Smith in *Death in the Jungle*.[22]

[18] Moore & Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 215-216.
[19] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*.
[20] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, 191.
[21] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, xi.
[22] Gary R. Smith and Alex Maki, *Death in the Jungle: Diary of a Navy SEAL* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

One of the first members of the famous SEAL (Navy Sea, Air, and Land) teams, he recounted many of the missions he was involved in as a member of SEAL Team 1, which operated in the Mekong Delta from 1967 to 1968.

Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense for both President John F. Kennedy and Johnson, published a memoir, *In Retrospect* (1996), in which he looks back at Vietnam "to show the full range of pressures and the lack of knowledge that existed at the time."[23] While they believed they were doing good, McNamara explained, in hindsight he believed that they were wrong to intervene in Vietnam and were presented with several opportunities to withdraw before 1965, one of which should have been taken.[24] Instead, America went to war and McNamara discussed the decisions made, how those decisions were made, and, in regards to those that failed, what should have been done. With the benefit of hindsight, McNamara identified eleven reasons for America's defeat, which included: the misjudgement and/or underestimation of the cultures, events, and people in North and South Vietnam; the implementation of decisions made and strategic failures; the overestimation of ourselves and our supposed power; and finally, the organizational failure that impeded our government and military leadership from being able to effectively deal with both the political and military issues.[25]

A similar, yet much shorter, work by the former chief of the South Vietnamese Air Force and Prime Minister of South Vietnam, Ngo Cao Ky, also evaluated the reasons for America's defeat.[26] *How We Lost The Vietnam War* was especially significant because it was from the point of view of a South Vietnamese government official. Ky used his

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[23] Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House International, 1996), xx.
[24] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, xx, 320.
[25] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 321-323.
[26] Ngo Cao Ky, *How We Lost The Vietnam War* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

experiences with the US during his time as both the Air Force chief and the Prime Minister and found three main reasons for the defeat. He identified a disastrous advisory campaign by the Americans as a critical reason for defeat.[27] America's failure to win South Vietnamese hearts and minds played a role as well, along with the US implementing their limited war strategy incorrectly.[28] Gil Dorland's *Legacy of Discord* is a collection of postwar interviews including two journalists, ten military members, two antiwar advocates, three government officials, and two South Vietnamese, one of which was a member of the VC and the other an ARVN colonel. It is apparent through the answers of interviewees (benefitting from hindsight) that there is a near-universal agreement that, since attrition, search-and-destroy, and graduated escalation continued to be used, the war was unwinnable. The only dissenters were three US military officers who served in Vietnam.

Vietnam veterans from all branches of the military continued publishing their wartime experiences into the twenty-first century. Although some of these contribute to the historiographical debate with their own arguments, the majority of these sources do more to provide readers with a window into the wartime experiences of these servicemembers. Insider glimpses into America's bombing campaigns were provided by those who had been in the cockpit, pilots like Jerry Cook, who flew fighter-bombers for the US Air Force in Vietnam and went on to become a brigadier general.[29] Jerry Childers provided a glimpse into a new style of aerial warfare used in Vietnam, helicopter warfare. In *Without Parachutes*, Childers recounted his training and a few dozen of the missions he flew in Vietnam, while also providing expert explanations of the strategies and tactics

[27] Ky, *How We Lost The Vietnam War*, 125.
[28] Ky, *How We Lost The Vietnam War*, 141, 143-144.
[29] Jerry Cook, *Once A Fighter Pilot* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2002).

involved in helicopter-based combat, having been one of the men who helped create it. The experiences of US Marines on the ground were explained by Jerome Doherty, a platoon commander while in Vietnam, and David Adams, a Lance Corporal stationed on Hill 55 in defense of the airbase located in nearby Danang.[30]

During the final decade of the 20th century, a new group of historians arose and claimed that involvement in Vietnam was unavoidable because of the nature of the Cold War.[31] Published in 1988, Lloyd C. Gardner's *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* argued that the Korean War was critical to American intervention in Vietnam. According to Gardner, "Truman now felt perfectly safe in recommending a 'military mission' for Indochina, to protect a valuable Cold War investment."[32] Gardner, along with Ted Gittinger, built on this idea of Vietnam as an investment nine years later in *Vietnam: The Early Decisions*. South Vietnam became more than just an investment in Southeast Asia for America, "it had become a Cold War symbol, a pawn in the larger struggle against Soviet expansionism."[33] Vietnam itself did not pose a threat to the United States, but the loss of any country, especially this pawn, to Communism was a disturbing thought for the American government.[34] It was due to these Cold War aspects, Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley explained, that President Johnson believed "it was in

[30] Jerry Childers, *Without Parachutes: How I Survived 1,000 Attack Helicopter Combat Missions In Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005); David Adams *Hill - 55: Just South of Danang Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2002).
[31] Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 256.
[32] Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II Through Dienbienphu* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 97.
[33] Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, *Vietnam: The Early Decisions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 14.
[34] Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938*, 9th edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), xiii-xiv.

America's self-interest - and it was her duty - to use military force to stop the spread of Communism."[35]

The Cold War was not the only lens through which the US intervention in Vietnam was viewed. Other historians at the turn of the century chose to focus on the civil leadership in charge of conducting the Vietnam War and, naturally, President Johnson received much of the attention. Doris Kearns Goodwin, who helped Johnson create a biographical work after his presidency, reminded audiences that when Johnson took office, behind him was a century of American involvement and concern with Asia. It was a century that witnessed three Pacific wars, two decades of Cold War and feared possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, and a widely held belief that the area of confrontation was shifting to the third world.[36] Regardless of all this, LBJ could have avoided war but there was the ever-pervasive "'Cold War consensus'... [which] dictated that commitment to South Vietnam had to be maintained, through major military escalation if necessary."[37] George Herring pointed out, however, that high-ranking civil officials neglected any methodical discussions of the war's fundamental issues, such as how the war should be fought, a clear military mission, or resource limitation for the war.[38] Even without a plan for victory, Johnson remained dedicated to his policy of doing enough to avoid defeat, but no more.[39] These kinds of policies have led historians like William Hosch and Robert

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[35] Ambrose & Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism*, 217.
[36] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2019), 391-392.
[37] Fredrik Logevall, "'There Ain't No Daylight': Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Escalation," in *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Mark Philip and Marilyn B. Young, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91, 98.
[38] George C. Herring and United States Air Force Academy, *"Cold Blooded": LBJ's Conduct of Limited War in Vietnam*, Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, No. 33 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Air Force Academy, 1990), 1-2.
[39] H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 297.

Curley to argue that "in retrospect, Johnson's… strategic conception was grounded in folly and hubris. He and advisers had no clear notion of what application of American force was supposed to achieve."[40] This seems to support H.R. McMaster's position that "the war in Vietnam was not lost in the field… It was lost in Washington, D.C."[41] There was yet another new interpretation, however, that flew in the face of that conclusion.

Yet another cohort of historians arrived with the new century and focused their attention on addressing specifics regarding military leadership during the Vietnam War. In *Working-Class War*, author Christian G. Appy shifted the focus away from policy makers and the war's generals and offered an examination of the experiences of US ground forces in Vietnam. He explained that, despite the massive amount of artillery and air power used by US forces, the Communist forces still maintained tactical and strategic control of the war.[42] American leadership made few changes though, instead believing they could bomb the North, and their Communist agents in South Vietnam, into submission. This strategy, born out of a severe overestimation of being able to pressure North Vietnam into bending to the Americans' will, represented one of America's fatal flaws in the war.[43] These kinds of flaws, according to Andrew J. Birtle, "contributed to America's defeat, but they were not in themselves responsible for the outcome."[44] For instance, it should be noted that some doctrine was extremely successful, such as that of the US Navy and the operations they conducted on the rivers of South Vietnam.[45]

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[40] William L. Hosch, Robert Curley, and Britannica Educational Publishing, *The Korean War and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Rosen Publishing Group, 2009), 202.
[41] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 333.
[42] Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 147.
[43] Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2007), 407.
[44] Birtle, *COIN*, 406.
[45] John D. Sherwood, *War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy Coastland and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam 1965-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2015), 324.

Gregory A. Daddis provided another factor that contributed to the US's defeat in Vietnam in his 2011 publication, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War*. Part of the problem, according to Daddis, was rooted in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) reports regarding the war's progress, most of which were inaccurate due to the incorrect metrics being used for progress measurements.[46] Due to their inaccuracies, the reports provided Washington with a vastly different picture of the war than its reality and thus there seemed to be no reason, at least in the eyes of America's leaders, to make any changes.

As demonstrated by the historiography, the war effort had its fair share of weaknesses, without a doubt, but the arguments that it was an unwinnable war are incorrect. The foundations for the successful prosecution of the war, and a much greater chance for victory, were present during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. At one point or another between the deployment of American troops in 1965 and the end of 1968, the United States had what it needed to win the Vietnam War, but failed to put the pieces together at once. Unfortunately, not every aspect of the Vietnam War can be addressed in the space provided. Some aspects remain to be discussed in the following pages, including a detailed account of ARVN's various contributions or of the Communists' many successes. The biggest issue, the one that needed to be addressed first, was the military strategy employed. One of the biggest failures of General William Westmoreland's decision to pursue a war of attrition was not the strategy itself but the government-imposed limitations regarding operational areas.

[46] Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 9-10.

The United States had the manpower, the firepower, and the mobility to win a war focused on the destruction of enemy forces, but only if they were allowed to fully pursue those forces back to their sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. The American government gave Westmoreland a significant amount of control over the war's strategic aspects but his forces were confined to South Vietnam when they should have been allowed to destroy the sanctuaries that provided constant respite to the enemy whenever necessary. The destruction of these sanctuaries would have severely hampered enemy operations. Military success was, however, still possible without allowing pursuit, but the government should have intervened further to steer Westmoreland and MACV away from attrition and towards a strategy that emphasized clear-and-hold actions. Capturing, holding, and reinforcing an area before advancing would have made guerrilla activities much tougher in the south and thus would have deprived the North Vietnamese of a valuable fighting force.

The United States boasted the world's largest and most sophisticated military. The US military itself was equipped to successfully pursue either option almost from the start, and their strength only grew over the near-four year period under examination. For example, by 1967, the US had 278 maneuver battalions, or around 486,000 boots on the ground in Vietnam and were thus able to continuously pressure the enemy by conducting large operations in previously enemy-controlled areas.[47] They also held a major advantage when it came to mobility, since they utilized helicopter transportation to move around quickly and to otherwise unreachable areas. The other part of the ground-based efforts was pacification, which struggled early on but made rather significant progress over the years and reached a peak in 1968. Although the US was not in sole control over

[47] Hunt, *Pacification*, 133.

the “other war,” they should have done more to ensure that their advisers fully understood their roles and responsibilities, coordinated with their ARVN counterparts more successfully, and eliminated the one-year tour of duty concept from the beginning. Additionally, the United States failed to effectively coordinate military and civil agencies and operations, for it was during those instances that pacification was at its most effective.

American airpower proved invaluable during close air support missions and such campaigns should have been emphasized over Rolling Thunder operations, especially if pursuit outside of South Vietnam was forbidden. More than likely, Rolling Thunder-type missions would only have shown effectiveness only if used to “soften up” enemy defenses ahead of US troops pursuing enemy forces across borders and into their sanctuaries. The US naval campaign in Vietnam was actually rather highly successful, especially with the formation of two riverine task forces. The change that most likely would have been most beneficial was the creation of those two task forces a couple years earlier than actually took place, which would have allowed for earlier American influence and control over the areas of the Mekong Delta, an area important to both sides. Although these ideas might only appear to be suggestions based on hindsight, most of these changes had been floated around civil or military leadership circles before being turned down or delayed. Had America been able to put these pieces together all at once during the time of their greatest strength, between 1965 and 1968, they would have achieved greater and longer-lasting successes, significantly increasing their chances of achieving their goal of keeping Communism out of South Vietnam.

CHAPTER I

SETTING THE STAGE

The United States' decision to intervene in Vietnam was not in response to one jarring event. There was no Pearl Harbor, no "date to live in infamy," or September 11, 2001. The decision to fight in Southeast Asia was much more drawn out, with nearly twenty years of catalysts, stemming from numerous incidents and individuals, building on one another. Some of these catalysts included the leadership's own ideologies, wartime experiences, and perceived threats to the nation's national security. Over this period of time, four presidential administrations accepted and advanced many of the same attitudes, ideas, and concerns as their predecessor. Meanwhile, the legacies of World War II, combined with Cold War confrontations around the globe and the end of French colonial rule created the stepping stones to the Vietnam War.

World War II

The roots of America's decision to get involved in Vietnam can be found in World War II's origins and one of its most influential lessons, known as the Munich analogy. During the 1938 Munich Conference Britain and France employed a policy of appeasement towards Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany and its rapid military and territorial expansion. Instead of confronting Hitler for breaking numerous terms of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, they hoped that providing leeway would halt German aggression short of war. The failure of appeasement, resulting in a second world war, was seen as proof that appeasement brought conflict, not peace. Thus, US leaders concluded, future aggression had to be confronted and stopped immediately. "Applied to Vietnam, the lesson of Munich suggested that if the United States sacrificed Indochina to the communist bloc, then the communist bloc," one Vietnam historian asserted, "would grow bolder in its attempt to subvert and intimidate the noncommunist world," as well as in its attempts to spread communism.[48]

The Cold War

Another crucial result of World War II was the Allied victory itself and, more specifically, the emergence of the United States as the only democratic superpower in the world. The United States now stood against the other superpower born of World War II, the communist Soviet Union, and the Cold War, an era of competition between the two nations and their ideological blocs, was suddenly at hand. This created a "vision of the United States as the defender against the perceived threat of monolithic communist

[48] Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 41.

expansion everywhere in the world."[49] This belief was a prime example of a lingering Wilsonian idealism that seemed to mesh seamlessly with Cold War attitudes. It also led many American officials to believe that theirs "was the only society capable of creating social justice and genuine democracy at home and abroad."[50] Such philosophy harkened all the way back to America's colonial days and the idea of the "city upon a hill."[51] These high-minded attitudes were essentially codified by the Truman Doctrine, promulgated on March 12, 1947, which stated the administration's commitment to a world-wide campaign of resistance against Soviet expansionism.[52] It concluded with what became known as the Domino Theory, which stated "It is important to United States security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia."[53]

President Harry Truman had reoriented the way that the nation would respond to world affairs that posed a threat to the country. The United States now displayed a new posture when it came to international affairs, a posture that managed to display a much more confrontational stance without being outright aggressive. The newfound willingness to confront international threats explained how America found itself, in one way or another, becoming involved in more and more tiny, "backwards" nations across the globe. The Cold War extended into the Third World because everywhere Communism appeared

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[49] Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xiii.
[50] Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 41.
[51] Baritz, *Backfire*, 26.
[52] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 22.
[53] "Perceptions of the Communist Threat to Southeast Asia and to Basic U.S. Interests," in *Pentagon Papers*, Part II: U.S. Involvement in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1950-1954, A-47.

became seen as a potential threat to the US and therefore needed to be confronted.[54] After all, America was the world's great defender now. That mentality seemed to be validated in 1949 when China fell to Communism, and created "a preoccupation [in the US] with 'drawing the line' in Southeast Asia."[55] Losing Southeast Asia to Communism would, according to many American officials, "seriously endanger in the short term, and critically endanger in the longer term, United States security interests."[56]

While America's involvement in South Vietnam was initially limited, it began growing rather continuously over the near-fifteen years and four presidential administrations spanning between 1950 and the introduction of American troops in 1965.[57] The American determination to commit significant amounts of aid to South Vietnam was closely related to another Asian country, Korea.[58] The outbreak of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, seemed to verify the fears of the Truman administration regarding Communist expansionism. President Truman realized that many of the other third-world nations of the Asian continent were at risk of communist uprisings and that something needed to be done. The French, for example, at that time the colonial ruler of South Vietnam, known as Indochina, were also engaged in a battle against communist forces. Truman saw an opportunity to undermine communist expansion efforts on the Asian continent by aiding the French forces. After all, a victory by any western bloc country in the fight against communism was a victory for them all. As a result, despite

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[54] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38.
[55] Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 14.
[56] "Perceptions of the Communist Threat to Southeast Asia and to Basic U.S. Interests," in *Pentagon Papers*, Part II: U.S. Involvement in the Franco-Viet Minh War, 1950-1954, A-47.
[57] Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle For Vietnam's Hearts And Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 12
[58] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40.

fighting their own war, 1950 also saw the beginning of an American campaign to support the French by sending military supplies. Some historians, namely George Herring, have argued that the Korean War itself, a three-year conflict, "sparked the US's fundamental goal of preserving 'an independent South Vietnam as a bulwark against further Communist penetration of Southeast Asia.'"[59]

The Americans emerged from Korea victorious but unfortunately their French counterparts did not fare nearly as well. After being routed by communist forces during a nearly-three-month- long siege at Dien Bien Phu, the French forces were decimated and would withdraw from Vietnam in May 1954. This prompted several important actions by Truman's successor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The new president believed that his nation's history "'authorized, if indeed it did not command, the United States to undertake nation building in Southeast Asia'" and thus expanded America's role in South Vietnam.[60] He created, in September of that year, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which "pledged Washington to the defense of southern Vietnam, thus deepening America's commitment to the regime."[61] The treaty would play a significant role eleven years later, as it helped form America's basis for providing military assistance to their Vietnamese allies.[62]

After witnessing the French, the region's only democratic representative, "lose" North Vietnam to Communism, Eisenhower and his successors were "determined to limit further Communist expansion."[63] This determination was further solidified by reports

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[59] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 56.
[60] Hunt, *Pacification*, 1.
[61] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 5.
[62] LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, "Folder, '[NSC Meeting on] Vietnam, 5/10/1966, Volume 3, Tab 39,' *National Security Council Meetings Files*, NSF, Box 2."
[63] Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 52.

from government agencies like the one provided by the National Security Council in 1952. In their assessment, if Southeast Asia fell under communist control, it "would render the U.S. position in the Pacific offshore island chain precarious and would seriously jeopardize fundamental U.S. security interests in the Far East."[64] The US, in turn, should do whatever it could to prevent that from happening, whilst ensuring that they did not overreact because that very possibly could have resulted in the involvement of the Soviet Union and/or the Chinese. Some of the NSC's suggested actions included the support of and coordination with defense efforts already in the area as well as, more significantly, for the government to strengthen the covert operations already in being conducted in Vietnam and to design them "to assist in the achievement of U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia."[65] Such operations were focused on training and aiding anti-Communist guerrilla forces fighting Communist China on the one hand, while also focusing on the interference with and disruption of Communist China's lines of communication and military supply.[66]

Two years later, as the emphasis on covert operations continued to grow, government officials created a special operations group that followed the NSC's advice in 1952: a group that was both stronger and more focused on how they could help achieve America's goals. Known as the Saigon Military Mission (SMM), it was tasked with entering Vietnam covertly and assisting South Vietnamese forces, not French forces as in the past, in unconventional warfare.[67] However, the 1954 Geneva Conference, which ended the First Indochina War and partitioned Vietnam, prompted the SMM to alter their

[64] "NSC 1952 Policy Study on Southeast Asia," in George C. Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 5
[65] "NSC 1952 Policy Study on Southeast Asia," in Herring, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, 7.
[66] "NSC 1952 Policy Study on Southeast Asia," in Herring, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, 10.
[67] "Edward Lansdale Report on CIA Operations in Vietnam, 1954-1955," in Herring, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, 24.

mission and prepare for more overt, paramilitary operations in case the North Vietnamese attempted a surprise offensive.[68] Another significant result of the Geneva Convention was its call for a presidential election in South Vietnam which resulted in President Ngo Dinh Diem's election. Although it was not immediately apparent, Diem's rule would pose serious obstacles to US-South Vietnamese relations and result in governmental instability and the population's negative attitudes towards their government. Quite possibly the most significant decision President Eisenhower made regarding American aid to Vietnam came in 1956 with the creation of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG), marking America's decision to assume the responsibilities for equipping and training the South Vietnamese Army.[69] MAAG was not a combat group like its successor would be, but instead it "was limited to provision of material assistance to the French forces and indirect provision of military aid to the forces of the Associated States."[70] It would continue this role until 1962, when it was incorporated into its successor, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV).

Doctrine Formation

It should be noted that, while America's politicians were the visible actors leading the country, step-by-step, into a conflict in Vietnam, there were also twenty years of military developments that were equally significant. The US Army began to pay more attention to guerrilla warfare following World War II, but they had next to nothing in their doctrine regarding these new forces. The military went about filling this doctrinal void towards the end of the 1940s by giving Lieutenant Colonel Russell W. Volckmann the

[68] "Edward Lansdale Report," in Herring, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, 24.
[69] H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 36.
[70] "Introduction: The U.S. and the French Colonial War," in *Pentagon Papers*, Part IV.A.2: Evolution of the War, U.S. Training of Vietnamese National Army, 1954-59, 11.

task of writing the Army's initial doctrine on guerrilla warfare, which he published in 1951.[71] There were three main sources from which Volckmann drew for information on counterguerrilla operations: past American experiences with counterguerrilla warfare, of which there was not much; the occupation duties during and just after World War II; and "perhaps most influential… were the precedents established by the Axis powers in combating Allied resistance movements."[72]

The initial doctrine on counterguerrilla warfare, written by Volckmann, was entitled FM 31-20, *Operations Against Guerrilla Forces*, and published in February 1951. According to FM 31-20, "the first step in any counterinsurgency program was to formulate 'a broad, realistic' politico-military plan that was 'based on a detailed analysis of a country, the national characteristics, and the customs, beliefs, cares, hopes, and desires of the people.'" Equally necessary, however, were intelligence, propaganda, and military force. Volckmann laid out three objectives for any counterguerrilla operation: first, isolate the guerrillas from the civilian population and the support they provided; second, deny the guerrillas support from external sources; third, destroy the guerrillas. These objectives could be achieved by conducting one of several different types of offensive operations. These actions were frequent small-unit patrols, encirclement, surprise attacks, or pursuit.[73]

The number of military doctrinal works focused on guerrilla warfare increased immensely between 1951 and the start of the war in Vietnam. In 1955, the two original counterinsurgency manuals, both published by Volckmann in 1951, were combined and

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[71] Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2007), 131-132.
[72] Birtle, *COIN*, 132.
[73] Birtle, *COIN*, 134-137, 140.

published under the title FM 31-21, *Guerrilla Warfare*. Although a consolidation of two previous publications, there were some updates, such as a greater emphasis on technology, in particular the use of helicopters for small-unit operations, foreshadowing the types of operations to be employed in Vietnam. Five years later, the Defense Department was directed by the National Security Council to develop a new counterinsurgency doctrine, which would come to include previous American doctrine as well as that of the British and the French.[74] The inclusion of British and French ideas marked a new trend in American military doctrine. These ideas came from Britain's counterguerrilla success in Malaya and, to a lesser extent, France's experiences in Algeria and Vietnam.[75]

The shift was fully reflected only a couple of months later in a paper produced by the Special Warfare Division of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations (ODCSOPS) and entitled "Counter Insurgency Operations: A Handbook for the Suppression of Communist Guerrilla/Terrorist Operations."[76] A combination of influences from America, Britain, and France, it called for the US to "work primarily through its military assistance groups and small teams of specialists" whilst arguing that military force alone could not win such a conflict and warning its readers against such a path. A four-phase operational plan was offered as well and it began with government forces arriving at the designated pacification area and establishing numerous local agencies, both civil and military. Next came offensive operations to destroy and/or repulse the larger guerrilla forces in the area, followed by the third phase, during which

[74] Birtle, *COIN*, 150, 161-162.
[75] Geoff Demarest, "Let's Take the French Experience in Algeria Out of U.S. Counterinsurgency Doctrine," *Military Review* (July-August 2010), 19.24.
[76] Birtle, *COIN*, 166.

those offensive operations were to be directed at the smaller and clandestine guerrilla bands and support structures. Finally, socio-economic reform programs would be implemented. Although continuous, aggressive action remained important, it discouraged the large-scale operations of the past and instead emphasized small-scale, and particularly heliborne, operations.[77]

The vast amount of new literature being produced by and for the military during these years was certainly the most prevalent source on counterinsurgency doctrine. Additionally, soldiers were also exposed to such ideas in classrooms and on training fields. The Army, in 1957, even published a manual on how to teach counterguerrilla concepts to soldiers. They went a step further in January 1961 with the creation of the first Army course solely focused on the subject of counterinsurgency, known "Counter-Guerrilla Operations and Tactics," and conducted at the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. It was the lessons they learned at these schools and in these manuals, among others, that advisers and soldiers alike would seek to implement as they shipped out in larger and larger numbers following the election of President John F. Kennedy. The United States had made significant progress in moving away from their Eisenhower-era reliance on nuclear weapons and towards Kennedy's vision of a "flexible response" strategy, one which allowed the US to respond to a conflict without using maximum force. However, it was not accepted immediately and, even by the time the US became combat-oriented in Vietnam, there were still a number of powerful military positions filled by men who would prioritized eliminating the enemy in a conventional way rather than "wasting their time" with counterinsurgency tactics.

[77] Birtle, *COIN*, 166-168.

The Kennedy Administration

Although neither President John F. Kennedy, nor his predecessor, outrightly expressed the preservation of a divided Vietnam as a goal of theirs, it did become an absolute necessity because, if it had been undertaken, the only group that could have accomplished the reunification was Ho Chi Minh's Workers Party of Vietnam.[78] After years of French colonial rule, the democratic South Vietnamese had little experience, if any, in establishing a government and the military forces they did possess had not fought the Communists alongside the French like they would with the Americans. They would have been crushed by the battle-hardened forces from the North and, furthermore, only the Communists had the experience needed to solidify military gains under a strong, effective, and lasting government. Thus, it was President Kennedy who, in his first year, "drastically increased U.S. aid to South Vietnam."[79]

The efforts undertaken by Kennedy were not a result of the reunification issue alone, but instead came as a result of the combination of a number of factors, all of which significantly influenced Kennedy's decisions. The first of these was the great deal of importance Kennedy placed on Vietnam itself, which dated back to his senatorial years and was exemplified by a speech then-Senator Kennedy made in June 1956. In it he stated that Vietnam "represented 'a proving ground for democracy in Asia…' [and] also represented 'a test of American responsibility and determination' there."[80] In the eyes of Kennedy and his administration, Vietnam came to represent what was to become the foundation of democracy in Southeast Asia.[81] Events much closer to home also

[78] Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 180.
[79] "John F. Kennedy and the Escalation of the War, 1961-1963," in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, , 42.
[80] Norman Podhoretz, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 19.
[81] Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 12.

influenced President Kennedy's choice to increase American aid to the region. This included the Bay of Pigs fiasco in mid-April 1961. The complete failure of an American-backed invasion of Cuba by Cuban exiles opposed to Fidel Castro was especially concerning not only because it was an international embarrassment, but also because it was, in Kennedy's eyes, a major and direct defeat. This was due to JFK's "zero-sum" outlook towards the Cold War, a viewpoint that equated any kind of success for Communism anywhere in the world, even if the US had no involvement whatsoever, as a direct defeat for America.[82] This outlook was emphasized when it came to Vietnam because of Kennedy's prior struggles in Southeast Asia because he had already failed to keep another country in the region, Laos, from falling to Communism. He could not let more of the region fall into that sphere.

The other crucial concept guiding the Kennedy administration, and especially the president, was a newfound emphasis on the idea of credibility. Both the allies and the enemies of the United States, even those countries indifferent to and uninvolved with the ongoing ideological struggle, all needed to know that the US meant what it said and would do whatever was deemed necessary to uphold its word. If America began shirking from its dedication to resist Communism by declarations like the Truman Doctrine, its allies might very well begin to lose trust in the US government and withdraw any of their own support efforts. The small, "neutral," usually underdeveloped nations in areas like southeast Asia were often forced to pick a side or be crushed in between the superpowers and, if America was seen as untrustworthy by such nations, it was feared they would join the Communist bloc, a worst-case scenario for the US. On the other hand, if the nation's enemies viewed the American government as being unwilling or unable to provide such

[82] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 71.

resistance efforts, they may become increasingly aggressive in their efforts to expand their influence around the world. Worse still, they may even become bold enough to act against the United States more directly. Therefore, Kennedy "considered it essential that Washington demonstrate the credibility of its commitments [which was] the keystone of peace in a dangerous and precarious world."[83]

The United States government, however, had talked itself into a corner by routinely emphasizing their determination to confront Communist aggression to such an extent that a belief arose that "they could not backtrack without jeopardizing the American government's credibility and prestige."[84] The emphasis on the country's credibility, according to one scholar, had "made disengagement tantamount to surrendering America's position of world leadership."[85] These beliefs prompted Kennedy to implement a program of actions on May 8, 1961, that were deemed necessary to help the South Vietnamese address their increasing security issues. Military concerns were to be addressed first by increasing the Military Assistance Advisory Group's ability and effectiveness when it came to training South Vietnamese troops, as well as support forces being sent for the GVN's (South Vietnam's) Junk Force in order to prevent the Viet Cong (VC), communist guerrillas who had remained in the South following the country's partition, from accomplishing clandestine infiltration and supply missions into the country via the rivers. Additional American support would be provided through actions that included the establishment of a center for the development of new military techniques to use against Viet Cong forces, assisting in health and public works projects

[83] Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, *Vietnam: The Early Decisions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 27.
[84] Gardner and Gittinger, *Vietnam*, 32.
[85] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 173.

for the civilians, and the deployment of a Special Operations group to facilitate the training of GVN SpecOps teams.[86] The United States also sought to provide assistance by helping create a long-term economic program to inspire confidence in the nation's future and by expanding the special operations efforts already being conducted by American operators.[87] Three days later, May 11, 1961, NSAM 52 "reaffirmed the continuing U.S. commitment to an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam" and provided the approvals necessary to conduct a somewhat numerous set of actions across America's military, psychological, and covert programs.[88]

Despite the flurry of actions undertaken to help South Vietnam during his first months in office, President Kennedy and his top advisers were still concerned with the continued level of Viet Cong activity. Kennedy decided to send a team of high-ranking officials, representing both military and civil components of the administration, to Saigon in October 1961 to assess the situation. Led by the State Department's planning staff head, Walt W. Rostow, and Kennedy's military representative, and an expert on flexible response doctrine, General Maxwell Taylor, the team spent nearly two weeks in-country while carrying out Kennedy's one order: to devise "a counterinsurgency plan to stop the deterioration in South Vietnam."[89] Known as the Taylor-Rostow mission, their report was completed in early November and advised President Kennedy to send more advisers to South Vietnam, as well as several battalions of Army engineer, signal, and medical troops, along with a combat force large enough to protect them.[90] The president continued to refuse assuming an overt combat role in South Vietnam but did approve the

[86] "Kennedy Task Force May 1961 'Program of Action,'" in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, 44-45.
[87] "Kennedy Task Force May 1961 'Program of Action,'" in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, 46-47.
[88] "NSAM 52 May 1961 Program," in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, 50.
[89] Hunt, *Pacification*, 14.
[90] Hunt, *Pacification*, 17.

deployment of yet another round of adviser reinforcements. The Viet Cong insurgency was flourishing in late 1961 and anything short of deploying combat forces overseas had to be done to help South Vietnam.[91]

The Taylor-Rostow report set the stage for "one of the most important decisions on Vietnam," the passage of National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 111 on November 22, 1961, which substantially increased the number of US advisors in Vietnam.[92] "Project Beefup," the name given to the process of actually carrying out the increases called for in NSAM 111, began in late November of 1961 and, by the time the expansion had been completed in 1962, the amount of assistance being provided to South Vietnam had more than doubled.[93] A more significant effect of Project Beefup, however, was the organization born out of the need for more effective management of the spike in American aid to Vietnam. Kennedy's solution was the establishment of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, or MACV, on February 8, 1962. This new headquarters was "responsible for American military policy, operations, and assistance as well as for advice to the South Vietnamese on security, organization, and the employment of military and paramilitary forces," along with being given control of the inflated advisory program.[94] President Kennedy, who repeatedly refused to send troops to Vietnam himself, had managed to put nearly everything in place that his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, would need to launch a military campaign just a few years later. However, in the last weeks of his life, President Kennedy and his administration could only watch as

[91] Hunt, *Pacification*, 16.
[92] Gardner & Gittinger, *Vietnam*, 161.
[93] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 72.
[94] Hunt, *Pacification*, 17.

years of frustration with the local government boiled over, putting the decades of US aid and objectives in South Vietnam, and Southeast Asia as a whole, in serious jeopardy.

Ngo Dinh Diem's Downfall

While the Americans were always determined to uphold their commitment in South Vietnam, US leadership did have some concerns regarding the strength and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government and the likelihood of its long-term success. Most of these questions centered on the ability of South Vietnam's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, to gain the public's support and successfully unify his country. He had been working to create popular support for his government in the countryside but the programs he implemented, which promised rural populations a much better lifestyle, quickly resulted in disappointment.[95] Making matters difficult was the Viet Cong insurgency and their focus on isolating the Diem government from its people both physically and politically.[96] Although the VC had only been around since their establishment in December 1960, they had already grown into a formidable threat to survival of the South Vietnamese government.

There were several nation-building programs attempted by Diem but none would succeed. Each would become an example of the failures associated with the improper conduct of such campaigns. One of the first was the agroville program, a relocation program designed to provide protection to peasants by moving them into rural settlements. It was launched in 1959 but the program's poor planning and mismanagement led to its downfall within two years.[97] Then, in 1961, a similar campaign known program was implemented, in which *defensible* villages were constructed

[95] Hunt, *Pacification*, 20.
[96] Hunt, *Pacification*, 8.
[97] Hunt, *Pacification*, 20.

throughout the South Vietnamese countryside. Another new component of the Strategic Hamlet plan was that it involved the relocation of all rural civilians, not just the peasants, but the problems that hindered the agroville program would also plague this one. The villagers had been forced to leave almost everything behind and, when the government began neglecting the hamlets, the villagers felt an even greater sense of alienation and anger.[98]

Two other programs were launched in 1963 that hoped to aid in national solidarity by eliminating the Viet Cong units terrorizing the villages and impeding the government's efforts. The programs utilized vastly different, carrot-and-stick methods to achieve their goals. The first of these, the "carrot" of the two efforts, was known as *Chieu Hoi*, a program that granted clemency to any insurgents who laid down their arms and surrendered.[99] The Diem pacification policy's "stick," on the other hand, was a series of organizations that were designed for one sole purpose: the dismantling of the Viet Cong's infrastructure, known as the VCI.[100] Special elements of South Vietnam's newly-established National Police force were tasked with capturing and interrogating suspected members of the VCI. However, brutal interrogation methods and untrained staff combined to impede any reforms or progress made towards the collection of intelligence that was needed to achieve their goals.

American leaders were also concerned with the Diem government's military establishment, which was deemed to be weak due to improper training and ineffective commanders. These concerns were not without cause, and they were best demonstrated at the Battle of Ap Bac on January 2, 1963. Although the focus of America's advisory

[98] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 74.
[99] Hunt, *Pacification*, 23.
[100] Hunt, *Pacification*, 24.

program was on training, US advisors would often accompany units on missions to assess and advise during the planning and execution of those missions. The South Vietnamese were still in charge of operations, however, and many commanders changed the battle plan mid-mission and refused to take the adviser's advice. Ap Bac demonstrated how several battlefield failures could compound each other and result in shocking defeats despite holding numerous advantages over the enemy.

Ap Bac was viewed as being "as close to a golden opportunity as there ever was in Vietnam."[101] When a large Viet Cong force gained control of Ap Bac, American advisers helped draw up a battle plan that should have resulted in a relatively easy victory. Three battalions were to be used, one attacking, two from the North and two from the South, while a company of armored personnel carriers (APCs) assaulted from the West. The eastern edge of the battlefield was a wide open rice paddy being covered by aircraft and an airborne battalion, which would be dropped off in the rice paddy if darkness fell or if otherwise needed.[102] The Viet Cong would be, for all intents and purposes, boxed in. Their only chance of escape would be surviving until nightfall and using the cover of darkness to sneak through rice paddy's canals. The South Vietnamese, however, would possess several tactical advantages such as assaulting by surprise, an encircled enemy who was unable to escape, a larger force, and better weaponry. Thus, the idea that any of the VC would manage to escape seemed impossible, much less the majority of them.

Ap Bac was a stunning failure. The Viet Cong demonstrated a desire and ability to stand and fight in a big-force engagement, unlike their reliance on hit-and-run tactics in

[101] David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008), 82.
[102] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 83.

the past, but even more significant was the level of incompetence demonstrated by the South Vietnamese.[103] Five ARVN helicopters were shot down by the Viet Cong, two of which while attempting to aid their downed comrades. Almost nothing else would go according to the plan. The APC commander ordered his company to stop at the crash sites to search for and rescue any survivors. Despite the pleading of the accompanying advisers, he remained there for much of the battle. The battalion to the North, and a reserve force placed just west of them, were suffering the brunt of the VC's firepower. Unable to assault the enemy position due to a lack of cover, they did their best to keep the VC pinned down. The force to the South, the two battalions whose numbers could overwhelm the VC position, had halted their advance in the face of enemy fire, allowed the VC to dig in, and lost the initiative. The final failure, the one that secured the South's defeat, was again the result of not following the original plan. The airborne battalion was called in as it got dark but the South Vietnamese commander overseeing the entire operation ordered them deployed on the western edge, not in the rice paddy to plug the gap to the East. Again, the arguments of the American advisers were ignored and, as soon as darkness fell, the majority of the VC force was able to escape via the rice paddy's canals.[104]

America's military advisers were furious about the blunder and routinely complained to their commanding officers of the inability of South Vietnam's fighting forces. No adviser was a more vocal critic of Ap Bac than John Paul Vann but many came to share his attitude towards ARVN forces.[105] "Ap Bac epitomized all the deficiencies of

[103] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 75.
[104] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 86-87.
[105] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

the system: lack of aggressiveness, hesitancy about taking casualties, lack of battlefield leadership, a nonexistent chain of command."[106] Under the Diem administration, few military promotions were based on experience or ability, they were given out as a political reward or by knowing a top government official. Thus, instead of men with military and tactical experience leading ARVN operations, they were led by men who were unqualified and more concerned with the status and benefits brought with being a commander. As these issues were made apparent, Ap Bac's most significant outcome was that it "kindle[d] new doubts in the US about the Diem regime."[107]

As the US unsuccessfully suggested reforms for ARVN, events in Saigon a few months after Ap Bac turned Washington's doubts to horror. In mid-1963, a protest over the government's Buddhist flag ban resulted in the deaths of nine unarmed civilians, and the beginning of the Buddhist crisis. Despite being the dominant religion in South Vietnam by far, the Catholic Diem regime had implemented biased policies that favored Catholic citizens and the violent end to the May 8 protest led to calls for reform. The civil resistance campaign, led by Buddhist monks, was met by an increasingly oppressive and violent Diem government and the self-immolation of one monk in Saigon in June that sparked international outrage and American involvement. The Americans demanded that Diem end his violent reactions to protests and address the concerns of his Buddhist citizens, threatening to withdraw aid from the country if he did not, which he ignored, creating serious animosities in Washington.[108] Kennedy and his advisors began considering the feasibility of replacing Diem while still achieving their desired objectives in South Vietnam. It was Kennedy's belief that the only way the war in Vietnam could be

[106] Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 90.
[107] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 75.
[108] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 77.

won was if South Vietnam had a government that was backed by the populace and that the Diem government had lost much of its popular support in the summer of 1963.[109]

On November 1 and 2, 1963, South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem, who had quickly lost popularity and support in South Vietnam and the US, was overthrown by leaders of the South's military. Prior to the coup, the American Ambassador in Saigon was asked by one of its masterminds what the US response would be to such an event. When Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge asked Washington how he should respond they replied with the following, "while we do not wish to stimulate coup, we also do not wish to leave impression that U.S. would thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing effectiveness of military effort, ensuring popular support to win war and improving working relations with U.S."[110] In light of their Cold War ideology and objectives, the US could not appear to have provided support to either side of a coup in an ostensibly democratic country but, due to their rising dissatisfaction with Diem's leadership and cooperation, America was certainly complicit in his overthrow.

As a result, America was now directly responsible for the government of South Vietnam but, unfortunately, Kennedy and his advisors "had failed to confront the basic issues in Vietnam that ultimately led to his overthrow."[111] Making matters worse was the political vacuum that was left by Diem, as the country was left with few others that had the requirements to run a country.[112] Although the US had gotten rid of an increasingly authoritarian government, they were left with a situation that looked even more dire than

[109] Cronkite Interview with President Kennedy, *CBS*, September 2, 1963, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOGWTEgta_w.
[110] "Generals Renew Coup Planning," in Herring, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, 72.
[111] Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. New York: Vintage* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 70.
[112] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 85.

before. The position of President of South Vietnam became a revolving door as the government's internal instability resulted in nearly ten different men obtaining office after Diem was assassinated.

Assessment

Although no American troops were in Vietnam yet, the years between World War II and the end of 1963 would play an important role in US decision making regarding the conflict in Vietnam. In several interviews with Vietnam-era government and military members, Gil Dorland sought to understand the thought processes that led the US down the road to Vietnam. In an interview with John Kerry, a naval officer during the war, explained that there were a variety of beliefs that led to escalation. In Kerry's assessment "there's hubris; there's myopia; there's ignorance; there's historical ignorance; there's Cold War mentality."[113] In a similar interview former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger cited triumphalism, or a feeling of national and/or ideological superiority, as another important factor.[114] In Max Hastings's analysis, the US's entire strategy in Vietnam was based on two false premises, the domino theory and the disposition of Asian communism.[115] "The American crusade, propelled as it was by [containment]... and the naive assumption that the entire region would collapse to the Communists if they won in Vietnam, disregarded the complex nationalistic diversity of Southeast Asia."[116]

Two slightly different premises formed the foundation for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' thoughts on Vietnam but unfortunately, as then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara has pointed out, they proved contradictory. The first of these

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[113] Gil Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era*, (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2001), 114.
[114] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 119.
[115] Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 261.
[116] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 43.

premises was the assumption "that the fall of South Vietnam to Communism would threaten the security of the United States and the Western world," meaning the US felt that it was their duty to protect the free world.[117] However, until early 1965, they performed a significantly restricted role due to the second premise, the belief that "only the South Vietnamese could defend their nation, and that America should limit its role to providing training and logistical support."[118] The attitudes and ideas that had led the US to get involved in Vietnam would continue to influence American leaders in regards to strategic decisions. The potential loss of a country to Communism was something that the United States could not overlook thanks to the anti-communist rhetoric and fear that had become almost second-nature during those twenty years of the Cold War. The idea of playing a limited role, on the other hand, should have seemed counterintuitive in light of historical evidence that suggested the need to squash an enemy uprising as soon as possible using overwhelming force and the American military's proven ability to do so. The continued focus on limited roles would prove to be a significant factor in the US losing a war that almost certainly could have been won.

[117] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 29.
[118] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect* 29.

CHAPTER II

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Similar to their reasons for intervening, the United States' objectives in Vietnam and the strategies they would employ to achieve those objectives, were products "of a series of trends that had been maturing since World War II."[119] These trends had resulted in "an all-powerful 'Cold War consensus'... [that] reigned supreme in American opinion and dictated that the commitment to South Vietnam had to be maintained, through major military escalation if necessary."[120] The way the US went about maintaining their commitment, however, would come back to haunt them. The roots of America's failure to capitalize on their military advantages and win a very "winnable" war can be found in the Johnson administration's strategy formation.

[119] William L. Hosch, Robert Curley, and Britannica Educational Publishing, *The Korean War and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Rosen Publishing Group, 2009), 198.
[120] Fredrik Logevall, "'There Ain't No Daylight': Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Escalation," in *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Mark Philip and Marilyn B. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91.

1964: Rise of "Gradual Pressure"

The American commitment under President Lyndon B. Johnson was focused on achieving one overarching objective, "the independence of South Vietnam, its freedom from attack, and a stable, democratic government in the South."[121] According to National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288, published on March 17, 1964, nothing short of that objective could be considered a victory.[122] It was not until December 1964 that the US expressed any semblance of a plan for achieving that victory, one which utilized reprisal actions and was referred to as "gradual escalation."[123] The foundational attitudes and ideas of such a plan, however, were flawed and resulted in an unbelievably weak attempt to achieve an objective that had been at the heart of decades of struggle. The result of such a half-hearted attempt at success is conveyed plainly and accurately in H. R. McMaster's conclusion that "the war in Vietnam was not lost in the field… It was lost in Washington, D.C."[124]

This idea of "graduated pressure" was first championed by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in mid-1964. In his conception of the strategy, the US would gradually increase its use of force as a way to communicate with the North Vietnamese, a way to "convey American resolve and thereby convince… [them] to alter [their] behavior."[125] It also allowed the US to act without having to immediately choose one extreme, invading Vietnam, or the other, withdrawing completely. This was the

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[121] Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), 25.
[122] George C. Herring, ed, *The Pentagon Papers*, abridged edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 93.
[123] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 1, Part XII, Vietnam, 1964, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 433.
[124] H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 333.
[125] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 62.

"intellectual foundation for deepening American involvement in Vietnam" but the problem with this foundation was that it "had been laid without the participation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS]."[126] The group of men tasked with formulating and advising the President on the best military strategy available for a situation had been effectively shut out of the decision making process.

The fact that the JCS was shut out of the war's decision making processes from the beginning was an example of the hierarchical structure that President Johnson operated in. "The final decisions on important matters of foreign policy were made by a small group of top officials,"[127] argued historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. This kind of decision-making structure significantly increased the influence of those in Johnson's "inner circle" while also reducing the likelihood and significance of any dissent by those below them. Being outside the circle even impeded one's ability to create or present a coherent argument or alternative to a decision because they did not have access to certain information that may be crucial to their idea. Before long, "the structure of decision-making had become so narrowed that Lyndon Johnson received the advice of only five or six men, consulting the National Security Council, the Congress, and the Cabinet only after the decision had been made."[128] This meant that the president was making wartime decisions based off the advice given by the same handful of men, some of whom were offering advice on topics that fell outside their realms of expertise and therefore had no business advising the president on. To make matters worse, the actual experts on most of the topics discussed were not even made aware of it until after the

[126] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 84.
[127] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2019), 262.
[128] Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 262, 281.

decision was settled upon, allowing the authority on that particular topic, such as the JCS when it came to undertaking military options, no opportunity to voice any of their expertise. This would contribute significantly to the government's failure to correctly utilize all of the factors it possessed that could have won the war.

Another key factor in this exclusionary environment was Secretary McNamara, the adviser that Johnson trusted most when it came to Vietnam.[129] Unfortunately, McNamara had a habit of overselling things to the president, like the near-certain success of his graduated force plan, despite warnings from more knowledgeable officials, in this case the Joint Chiefs, "that his program would be insufficient to 'turn the tide' against the Viet Cong."[130] However, there were several other factors that made President Johnson listen to McNamara more than others. The first of these was Johnson's knowledge that McNamara's "loyalty was unwavering, and [his] goals were consistent with [Johnson's]."[131] This trustworthiness facilitated the development of the strongest bonds of affection and mutual respect between the two men. Their bond ran so deep that the President "often asked for [McNamara's] advice and assistance on matters outside the secretary of defense's jurisdiction."[132] Such a relationship could prove problematic to winning the war if and when McNamara provided incorrect advice or an inadequate plan, or if McNamara was arguing against someone who was suggesting something that was ultimately a better option, because McNamara was the president's most trusted advisor and it was apparent that he valued trustworthiness over expertise in the decision-making process on Vietnam.

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[129] LBJ was notoriously distrustful of many of his advisors, including his military advisors, something that dated back to President Kennedy's administration.
[130] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 78.
[131] Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 99.
[132] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 99.

1965: America on the Offensive

In early February 1965, Communist forces launched two surprise attacks against US bases at Pleiku and Quinhon, resulting in rather significant damage and American casualties. These attacks also resulted in the rise of two other men who would become influential advocates for a strategy of graduated pressure. The first was National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy who, on February 7, sent President Johnson a memorandum titled "The Situation in South Vietnam." In it he provided the justification for applying mounting pressure to the enemy: begin with reprisal attacks in response to "specific VC attacks but gradually escalate into sustained attacks," thus pressuring the North Vietnamese to stop supporting the Viet Cong and, hopefully, force the North to agree to terms of surrender with the US.[133] The American Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam, Maxwell Taylor, added a critical component to the American strategy on February 12 when he sent a message to Washington, D.C., containing the specific objectives graduated pressure was to accomplish. In order of importance, these objectives were: "(1) to affect the will of Hanoi; (2) to bolster GVN morale; and (3) to physically damage the DRV and thereby reduce its ability to support the VC."[134] The strategy seemed to be further verified by an intelligence report on February 18, 1965, designated Special National Intelligence Estimate, or SNIE, 10-3/1-65. Intelligence analysts reported that, as American attacks continuously became more sustained, the North Vietnamese "would probably… seek a respite rather than to intensify the struggle in the South."[135]

[133] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 3.] Evolution of the War. ROLLING THUNDER Program Begins: January - June 1965," x.
[134] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 3.]," xi.
[135] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 3.]," xii.

The administration decided the best way to begin flexing their muscle was through the air, and an American bombing mission was directed to take out an enemy barracks in retaliation. This mission was, as had been suggested by Bundy, linked to the Pleiku attack. The Johnson administration also took advantage of the reprisal opportunity provided by the attack on Quinhon but, rather than linking the reprisal specifically to the VC's Quinhon attack, it was just one of a number of incidents that were provided as the justification for the US's bombing of two more enemy barracks.[136] Thus, the US was already beginning to make the transition from specific retaliations to sustained attack missions. Shortly after the process had begun, the first mission of the Rolling Thunder campaign was underway. The bombing operation would span three-and-a-half years, from its first day on March 2, 1965, to the beginning of November 1968, during which time the missions grew in terms of the number of sorties flown and the number of targets and the time in between the sorties shortened.

President Johnson, like his predecessors, stuck to a policy of doing just enough to save South Vietnam from defeat without doing much more so as not to upset Americans at home or prompt the intervention of the Soviet and/or Chinese allies of North Vietnam. This created a problem, however, as more and more American aircraft and personnel were sent to Vietnam. The South Vietnamese did not have the manpower, nor the skill, to adequately protect the numerous air bases that housed the planes and their crews and, since these were both inviting targets for the enemy, proper security could only be provided by the presence of American troops. In 1965, decision makers chose to deploy two Marine battalions overseas to provide air base security and, keeping with the reaction-based graduated pressure strategy, ordered them to remain within the base. The

[136] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 3.]," xi.

use of force was only permitted if the Marines found themselves and their base under attack. Still, these Marines were certainly better than nothing, recalled the commander of the US's Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General William Westmoreland. Had they "not committed American troops, it was just a matter of time till [the South Vietnamese] disintegrated."[137] It soon became clear, however, that the strategy of gradually applying military force would create its own set of problems, even for the world's superpower, the United States.

On April 6, 1965, just over a month after the Marines had landed in Vietnam, there was a significant change in US strategy. NSAM 328 approved the deployment of two additional Marine battalions and one Marine air squadron, along with another 18,000 to 20,000 to serve as reinforcements and logistics personnel.[138] More importantly, the original "defense-only" mission was replaced with orders that allowed US forces to take a more active role in combat.[139] Ambassador Taylor, formerly the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Westmoreland had quickly come to agree on a three-stage ground strategy in response to the influx of troops. After securing a base area during stage one, American troops would conduct offensive operations and deep patrols in support of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), and then would transition to the third stage, which consisted of search and destroy missions and reactionary operations.[140] However, the strategy was doomed from the start due to several inherent issues that would continue to plague the US war effort.

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[137] Laura Palmer, "The General at Ease: An Interview with William C. Westmoreland," in *The Cold War*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Random House, 2005), 315.
[138] LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, "Memorandum # 328, Presidential Decisions with Respect to Vietnam, 4/6/1965," Online Digital Archive, DiscoverLBJ, https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/nsf-nsam328.
[139] LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, Texas, "Memorandum # 328," https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/nsf-nsam328.
[140] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 5.] Evolution of the War. Phase I in the Build-up of U.S. Forces: March - July 1965," 23.

The troop increase and "green light" for offensive operations had been the Johnson administration's newest attempt to force a "settlement by demonstrating to the VC/DRV that the odds are against their winning."[141] The roughly twenty-five thousand troops sent into Vietnam between March and May were seen as a necessary contribution to the safety of South Vietnam but they worried that sending in any more than that would be overly provocative.[142] Had the RVNAF been adequately manned, equipped, and trained to deal with the type of enemy they faced, the twenty-five thousand American supporting cast might have been enough, but the US either were unaware of, or neglected, the fact that the RVNAF was none of these. Therefore, the US did not have the manpower it needed to conduct substantial and hard-hitting operations necessary to defeat their enemy but, at the time, achieving that objective looked slim since "the VC are winning now - largely because the ratio of guerrilla to anti-guerrilla forces is unfavorable to the government."[143] A dangerous trend was beginning to appear in America's strategic decisions: the initial objective of a democratic South Vietnam, "under the leadership of Lyndon Johnson… became one of stalemate based on the administration's unwillingness to commit the level of force necessary to impose a solution consistent with U.S. interests."[144] Yet, by the middle of the 1960s, the US found itself committed to an all-out war for South Vietnam.[145]

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[141] LBJ Presidential Library, "Folder, '[NSC Meeting on] Deployment of Additional U. S. Troops in Vietnam, 7/27/1965, Volume 3, Tab 35,' National Security Council Meetings Files, NSF, Box 1," Online Digital Archive, DiscoverLBJ, https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/nsf-nscm-b1-f38.
[142] LBJ Presidential Library, "Folder, '[NSC Meeting on] Deployment of Additional U. S. Troops in Vietnam, 7/27/1965," https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/nsf-nscm-b1-f38.
[143] LBJ Presidential Library, "Folder, '[NSC Meeting on] Deployment of Additional U. S. Troops in Vietnam, 7/27/1965," https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/nsf-nscm-b1-f38.
[144] Gil Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era* (Washington D.C.: Brassey's, 2001) 178.
[145] Herring, The *Pentagon Papers*, 107.

1965-1968: The Impact of William Westmoreland

General William Westmoreland was placed in charge in Vietnam in the middle of 1964 and he quickly obtained significant influence on the conduct of the war."[146] As the head of MACV, Westmoreland was the one who "formalized the strategic views that would guide American troop employment for the next three years."[147] He wanted to have a strategy that balanced several crucial objectives when it came to counterinsurgency warfare, such as detecting and intercepting enemy reinforcements and supplies that easily passed through the porous borders of South Vietnam. Westmoreland used American-led units of South Vietnamese irregulars to patrol these regions while he based most of his troops near the coast and around Saigon, locations from which they "would be positioned to protect the South Vietnamese people from attack and to isolate the guerrillas from the majority of the nation's resources."[148] These areas also served as the launching points for American offensive operations designed to destroy and push back Communist forces. Such efforts provided a "security blanket" of sorts for the South Vietnamese forces, which were tasked with "the internal war-fighting village guerrillas, establishing control over the nation's population and resources, and building new social institutions capable of withstanding the Communist onslaught."[149]

With these objectives in mind, Westmoreland issued a new three-phase plan for fighting the war on August 30, 1965, Phase I, lasting through the remainder of 1965, focused on "the commitment of forces 'necessary to halt the losing trend.'" The second

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[146] Loren Baritz, *Backfire:A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 158.
[147] Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 71.
[148] Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2007), 364.
[149] Birtle, *COIN*, 364-365.

phase would start with the new year and aimed at resuming the offensive, destroying enemy forces, and allowing pacification operations to expand, followed by Phase III, a twelve to eighteen-month push to achieve "the final 'defeat and destruction of remaining enemy forces and base areas.'"[150] Simply put, this was going to be a war of attrition, or "a military strategy… [focused on] wearing down or grinding down the enemy until the enemy lost its will to fight or the capacity to sustain its military effort."[151] The indicator of success was measured by body counts but it was difficult to severely weaken an enemy force that avoided pitched battles and used hit-and-run tactics instead. American forces would have to search for the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops down themselves if they wanted any chance at wiping out large numbers at once.

The attrition strategy had been based on the belief "that, if he could inflict sufficient casualties on the enemy, they would cease their aggression against South Vietnam."[152] It seemed only logical to Westmoreland that the North would have to surrender if the US could reach their "crossover point," or the point at which casualties occurred faster and at a higher rate than reinforcements could be deployed, an idea dating back to World War II. Reaching it "became the principal military goal for the next two years."[153] There were a few methods for trying to reach the crossover point, one of which was to take the fight to the enemy with search and destroy missions. These types of missions were "a series of large unit sweeps… frequently conducted in the deep jungle regions next to South Vietnam's western borders with Laos and Cambodia, designed to seek out enemy forces and engage them in decisive battle."[154] These missions relied on

[150] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 71.
[151] Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 20.
[152] Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 91.
[153] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 91.
[154] Sorely, *Westmoreland*, 92.

mobility, utilizing airmobile divisions that were airlifted into an area on helicopters, but also relied on "firepower to wear down the enemy by attrition at minimal cost in U.S. lives."[155] Such operations "would dominate U.S. actions in 1966, causing body counts, at least for a time, to dominate MACV's evaluation and reporting systems."[156] The other two types of operations crafted by Westmoreland, used much less frequently, were still important to achieving his objectives. One was the "clear and hold" operation, during which the subject area would be near-continuously patrolled by US forces until the enemy had been pushed out and the area deemed safe for pacification efforts. Finally there were "securing" operations that were similar to clear and hold missions, except for when an area was deemed safe, at which point control was gradually passed to South Vietnamese paramilitary and police forces.[157]

1966: America Goes on the Offensive

Strategic policies remained almost untouched into mid-1966 as American leaders, both civil and military, had a bad habit of neglecting strategy reassessments until it was too late. This had been largely due to the leadership's neglect of anything that suggested their policies were flawed or incorrect. Ironically, the assessment conducted in 1966, which should have cleared up concerns about strategic priorities and shifted US strategy in the right direction, seemed to be misunderstood by most of those who had the power to demand changes. In March 1966 General Harold K. Johnson, the US Army's Chief of Staff, commissioned a study on Army policy in Vietnam that provided both critiques and suggestions on how to improve on the problem areas. Entitled "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam," better known as PROVN,

[155] Hosch, Curly, and Britannica, *The Korean War and the Vietnam War*, 202.
[156] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 89.
[157] Birtle, *COIN*, 368-369.

it began with a rather straightforward assessment that the "hearts and minds" aspect of the war was most important to victory and that the reaffirmation of "Rural Construction [pacification] as the foremost US–GVN combined effort to solidify and extend GVN influence" was needed immediately.[158] Throughout much of the report, its authors "expressed concern that the United States was not doing enough to win the allegiance of the Vietnamese people," and suggested various strategies to adequately address the issues.[159]

Unfortunately, however, what most military officials seemed to focus on was the acknowledgement that "Rural Construction can progress significantly only in conjunction with the effective neutralization of major enemy forces."[160] The authors stressed that only a fraction of American personnel should be used to guard civilians while the majority of US forces should be focused on exerting "unrelenting pressure… upon… major enemy combat forces" since their primary role "was 'to isolate the battlefield by curtailing significant infiltration, demolishing the key war zones, and fully engaging PAVN-main force VC units.'" PROVN's assessment seemed to justify the strategy Westmoreland had chosen to implement. The fear of widening the war, thereby bringing China and/or the Soviet Union into the conflict, proved to be a significant influence on strategy formation and critically impeded the US military's ability to isolate the battlefield. Civilian policymakers refused to allow sanctuary-clearing, cross-border operations into Laos and southern North Vietnam, a decision that arguably cost them the war. The enemy could essentially come and go as it pleased in South Vietnam, and supply lines were constantly

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[158] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, "June 29–September 18," Vietnam, 1966, ed. David C. Humphrey (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1998) Document 216.
[159] Birtle, *COIN*, 371.
[160] *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, Document 216.

being utilized. Therefore, the US was never able to isolate the battlefield and quickly eliminate large North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units.[161]

Despite the continued focus on attrition and body counts, PROVN did manage to bring the "other war" back towards the front of General Westmoreland's mind and, a few months later, there was a shift in strategic emphasis. On August 26, 1966, Westmoreland sent a cable to the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) detailing his operational plan from mid-1966 to mid-1977. Between May 1, 1966 and November 1 of that year, Westmoreland's strategic focus had been mounting a tactical operation against Communist forces but shifted to a general offensive between November 1, 1966 and May 1, 1967 in order to provide "maximum practical support to area and population security in further support of revolutionary development."[162] American military strategy in late-1966 and early 1967 clearly placed more emphasis on pacification and large numbers of American battalions would be involved, but the focus on main force combat was never totally replaced.[163]

1967 and 1968: Pacification Efforts and the Tet Offensive

The growing emphasis on pacification, or gaining the support of the South Vietnamese peasantry, continued as 1966 drew to a close. On November 7, MACV and the RVNAF Joint General Staff (JGS), the South Vietnamese version of the US's Joint Chiefs of Staff, issued AB 142, Combined Campaign Plan, 1967.[164] This document set forth the joint US-RVNAF campaign plan for 1967 and it placed an increased emphasis on joint pacification efforts than before. The US government was also paying increased

[161] Birtle, *COIN*, 371, 363.
[162] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 6. a.] Evolution of the War. U.S. Ground Strategy and Force Deployments: 1965 - 1967. Volume I: Phase II, Program 3, Program 4," vii.
[163] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 6. A.]," vii.
[164] *Pentagon Papers*, "[Part IV. C. 6. a.]," xi.

attention to pacification efforts and looked to facilitate their success by eliminating as much of the interagency friction created by these efforts as possible. On May 9, 1967, NSAM 362 was issued, creating the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support office, uniting all pacification efforts under MACV.[165] Under the management of Robert Komer, designated the Deputy for Pacification to the Commander US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), the office combined the civil and military pacification efforts from both the US and South Vietnam into one structure. This greatly increased the cooperation between agencies and countries when it came to revolutionary development and it had positive effects on the success of the overall program. The details of pacification will be discussed in a subsequent chapter but these shifts in strategic emphasis marked rather significant occurrences.

President Johnson's final year in office, 1968, also saw the end of General Westmoreland's MACV command. In June 1968, he left Vietnam for Washington D.C. to serve as the Chief of Staff of the US Army and had been replaced as COMUSMACV by General Creighton W. Abrams. Although Westmoreland had begun paying more attention to the pacification element of the Vietnam War, Abrams had already been a heavy proponent of pacification's value and seemed to be much more successful at promoting that emphasis throughout the ranks. He championed "the notion that the conflict in Vietnam should be treated as "one war, in which military and pacification operations blended into a seamless tapestry." Soon nearly every unit in the Army was showing greater concern for pacification security and/or support missions compared to the previous three years. Part of this increased concern was a response to the Tet Offensive,

[165] LBJ Presidential Library, "Memorandum # 362, Responsibility for U. S. Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development), 5/9/1967."

after which the US scrambled to take advantage of the massive losses suffered by their Communist foes and secure as much of South Vietnam as possible. It also helped that the new MACV Commander, General Abrams, was much more vocal proponent of pacification-focused efforts. However, "Abrams' one-war campaign differed from Westmoreland's activities more in emphasis than in substance."[166]

1964-1968: A Strategic Assessment

Andrew J. Birtle's conclusion that "in Vietnam, America's most egregious errors lay in the realms of policy and strategy rather than military doctrine" is a near spot on assessment of what led to the US defeat in the Vietnam War.[167] To be even more specific, the worst errors were almost entirely the result of policy and strategy decisions made by America's civilian leaders. The problems began with President Johnson's "middle of the road" responses to nearly any war-related concern. Johnson "did not 'define a clear military mission for the military,'" leaving the advisors, members of covert operation teams, pilots, and all other military personnel in Vietnam unsure of what objective they should focus on working towards.[168] As a result, almost a year of advisory efforts and covert activities between November 1963 and the end of 1964 were wasted on activities that, in reality, did relatively nothing to combat their Communist enemy.

When Washington did, in fact, make a meaningful decision, it seemed to impede the efforts of the American military more than help, an argument that General Westmoreland had fervently espoused since the end of the war.[169] There were many officers, in fact, that argued "that the United States could have achieved a quick and

[166] Birtle, *COIN*, 367.
[167] Birtle, *COIN*, 407.
[168] George C. Herring, and United States Air Force Academy, *"Cold Blood": LBJ's Conduct of Limited War in Vietnam*, Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History, No. 33 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Air Force Academy, 1990), 2.
[169] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 232.

decisive victory in Indochina, if only the pusillanimous civilian policymakers of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations had not 'tied the hands' of the U.S. military and 'denied it permission to win.'"[170] It was the inherently noncommittal graduated response strategy that handcuffed the armed forces, effectively denying the world's strongest military the chance to unleash that strength "quickly, decisively, and without limit," a scenario that would have actually produced the desired results, if not an outright victory.[171] This was due to the other major fault of America's civilian leadership: the entirely incorrect assumption that allowing the war to widen, even slightly, would result in Chinese and/or Soviet intervention on behalf of the North Vietnamese. According to General Alexander Haig, these fears were totally unfounded, "a reflection of a total lack of strategic intelligence," and a result of paranoia.[172]

By choosing to escalate gradually, and oftentimes attacking only out of retaliation, the government "was in effect relinquishing the initiative to the other side" while also failing to demonstrate "that force, once applied, would be used as a precise and discriminating instrument of policy."[173] Instead of forcing the North Vietnamese to surrender, the strategy's intended effect, it created the kind of long, inconclusive, attrition-based conflict that best suited the Vietnamese Communists.[174] It was not until mid-1965, when General Westmoreland was given the go-ahead to begin conducting combat operations on the ground, that the US was able to make any kind of headway

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[170] Michael Lind, *Vietnam, The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999), xii-xiii.
[171] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 277.
[172] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 45.
[173] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 251-252.
[174] Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 89.

against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. There have been many critiques of Westmoreland's search and destroy tactics, and it was by no means the perfect solution, yet it allowed the US to finally take the initiative and take the fight to the Communists, but only to an extent. American ground forces were not allowed to leave South Vietnam, due to the fear about expanding the war, which allowed the major Communist sanctuaries and supply routes located in Laos and just across the DMZ to remain untouched by American firepower. This gave the enemy areas they could retreat to, rest and regroup in, and then resupply before launching another assault into South Vietnam. The Johnson administration's refusal to allow cross-border missions was a critical mistake because it made it nearly impossible for Westmoreland to achieve his objective of destroying enemy forces. The survival of the enemy sanctuaries just across South Vietnam's borders also contributed to the security concerns involved with pacification because VC and NVA forces could wait out American sweeps in safety then reinfiltrate those "cleared" areas behind US forces. It was a never-ending cycle that could only have been remedied by allowing cross-border search and destroy missions in which the US could bring its far superior firepower down upon their enemy, their major bases, and a large amount of supplies. Although such actions would not bring about an immediate end to the war, but it would have allowed for the total destruction of main enemy forces, significantly improving security concerns in South Vietnam, thereby facilitating the pacification efforts.

Although America's civilian leadership deserves much of the blame for creating and implementing a strategy as faulty as gradual escalation, it would be unfair and inaccurate to lay it all at their feet. There are some members of the military leadership

that should be held accountable as well. For instance, the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to do their most important job as the nation's top military advisers: providing the president with the most accurate advice possible when it came to military decisionmaking. They all believed a graduated pressure strategy was fundamentally flawed but none of them offered any real challenge to the assumptions that the strategy was based on.[175] Furthermore, none of them even bothered to come up with a viable strategic alternative, instead choosing to remain silent as the nation's military was incorrectly implemented. The JCS shoulder some blame for losing a winnable war because they failed to do their duty, plain and simple, and the nation and its military suffered for it. However, few Americans knew these men because they were rarely in the national spotlight and, unfortunately, those who did not know any better found others to blame instead.

When it came to the military, most people found it much easier to blame the war's most easily recognizable military leader, General Westmoreland. It had been his face they saw on their TVs at night, and he was the commander of MACV, so it was only natural for people to associate Westmoreland with the military's top brass. However, many seemed to forget that, despite being a general himself and serving as the Commander of MACV, he was not actually the "top man" that might have come across through media portrayals. The perception that the "buck stopped with him" when it came to making decisions about the war resulted in years of criticism from those who blamed him for American failures in Vietnam. Westmoreland certainly was not perfect, he made mistakes, but arguments like Sorley's, that Westmoreland wasted the war's first four

[175] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 180.

years, squandered whatever support Americans had initially, and essentially started the country down its path from stalemate to defeat, are overly harsh.[176]

The criticism surrounding Westmoreland focused on his choice to undertake a war of attrition. The strategy's core idea, and one of its major defects, was its assumption that the US could inflict intolerable losses upon their enemy.[177] However, "'if the United States ground troops could not "find" the enemy or "fix" him… they manifestly could not "fight" or "finish" him… and the United States could never do it.'"[178] Further complicating the objective was the simultaneous concern with keeping the number of American deaths within acceptable limits, which completely contradicted both the lessons learned from previous conflicts in Asia and the reality of the situation in Vietnam.[179] The US relied heavily on its superior firepower but its incorrect utilization created the significant, if unintended, issue of undermining of the pacification program and creation of South Vietnamese animosity towards the US and GVN forces.[180] American troops were shocked to find out that, despite their destructive capabilities, Communist forces maintained control of the war but, in reality, Communist control was aided by the US's destructiveness, and the animosity it created in civilians.[181]

There have been numerous critiques regarding Westmoreland's tactical decisions as well, namely the commonly used search and destroy mission. Complaints about these missions were common, even among high-ranking officers like General Alexander Haig,

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[176] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 107. See also: George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 154; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 464, 480.
[177] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 154.
[178] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 104.
[179] Herring, *America's Longest War*, 154.
[180] Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 243.
[181] Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 146-147.

who compared the missions to a deranged, bloody version of hide-and-seek, while more light-hearted comparisons included likening the missions to being unable to register a hit during a game of Whack-a-Mole game.[182] Early search and destroy missions were assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade and their commander, Brigadier General Ellis Williamson, described having to run around jungles without a true target as being energy-wasting, often ineffective operations.[183] Ignored by America's military leadership while they ordered forces to hunt down and kill the enemy was the importance of controlling an area and completely securing it, especially against an enemy of primarily guerrilla forces.[184]

Eliminating enemy troops was important in warfare but this had already proven difficult, due to the enemy's reluctance to stand their ground and fight against larger American units with superior firepower.[185] Instead of walking aimlessly and always being virtually one step away from a enemy ambush, the Army should have sent the large, multi-battalion search and destroy units into designated areas to clear and gain control of them. Then, one or two of the unit's battalions could conduct small-unit search and destroy missions to remove any enemy forces in the vicinity while the other battalion(s) could remain in the originally designated area to provide security and prevent the enemy's re-infiltration. A similar tactic, discussed in greater detail in a later chapter, was used rather successfully by the Marine Corps during their time in Vietnam. After securing the main area of focus, a village for instance, smaller detachments of the overall unit could be sent on short recon patrols or search and destroy missions while another

[182] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 92.
[183] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 92-93; Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 205.
[184] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 99.
[185] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 205.

detachment remained in the original target area as a security force to prevent the enemy from reentering the area. This provided a "best of both worlds" approach that facilitated securing an area to protect it from enemy control and/or operations while also providing the opportunity to conduct offensive operations and take the fight to any nearby enemy forces to further destroy and repel them. The more secure the area was, the greater the chance for pacification's success. It was military success against enemy forces, combined with security and pacification efforts that removed the Communist infrastructure from its social networks, that provided the best chance of winning the war.

Westmoreland's strategic decisions were the subject of several government studies, with one of the most effective critical analyses coming from the Office of Systems Analysis, located within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). Published by Dr. Alain Enthoven, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, and his coauthor K. Wayne Smith, the report faulted Westmoreland for fighting the war in a way that wasted resources on operations with a high-cost and low pay-off, as well as for being unable to make any real dent in enemy troop numbers, mainly because the enemy replaced their casualties almost daily.[186] Further impeding the US's efforts to destroy the enemy was the measure of control the VC possessed over their losses, simply by controlling the pace of action.[187] Westmoreland also failed in two crucial, interrelated, security-based war concerns of the war. By neglecting pacification and the upgrade program for the South Vietnamese military, Westmoreland had failed to provide for either civilian security or the RVNAF's self-defense ability.[188]

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[186] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 107.
[187] Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 82.
[188] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 107.

Westmoreland's strategy, which he had predicted would take off in 1966 and result in America's victory by the end of 1967, had failed and, according to Enthoven, the had "'reached a stalemate at a high commitment.'"[189] This was the exemplified by the fact that Westmoreland had been unable to make use of an immense military buildup that took place the first three years of the war which had included 500,000 troops, 1.2 million tons of bombs, and 400,000 attack sorties (aircraft attack missions), and contributed to 200,000 enemies killed in action. Despite the massive military might that he was provided with, 20,000 Americans had been killed and there had been little progress made in regards to Allied control over the countryside or the defense of urban areas.[190]

There was one operational decision for which Westmoreland was solely responsible, one that seemed somewhat irrelevant at the time, but turned out to be rather significant due to the struggles it created. As the troops flooded into South Vietnam during the build up, the seemingly basic and administrative question of tour length was brought up and Westmoreland decided that it should be on one year. He believed that there was no "alternative because of considerations of morale, and the necessity of sharing the burden of the war."[191] After one year, the now-experienced troops were replaced with fresh-faced, untested, and inexperienced replacements who filled numerous roles, from average grunt to unit commanders, and it became clear that the one-year tours of duty would be yet another source of concern for military leadership during the Vietnam War.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, General Westmoreland would admit that "the turnover of personnel that has evolved from the one-year tour has been our

[189] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 157.
[190] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 157.
[191] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 83.

greatest liability."[192] For starters, one-year tours were operationally corrosive because it resulted in "few really experienced American field soldiers."[193] Furthermore, the Army's policies for rotating its personnel almost never provided the time or the opportunity for the outgoing troops to share any valuable lessons or unit analysis with the new guys.[194] This information from battle-tested troops would have been immensely helpful for the fresh arrivals, most of whom were teenagers that had only recently finished their basic training. At the very least, such conversations would have helped prepare the new troops for their time in Vietnam and, more importantly, might have saved at least a few American lives. "'The 12-month rotation policy… touted for its benefits provided to the individual soldier, seems in fact to have been a significant element in causing greater numbers of men to lose their lives and may have increased neuropsychiatric casualties.'"[195]

As for the operational impacts of the one-year tour policy, staff officers would often explain that personnel turbulence was the greatest effect, that its shudder could be felt up and down the Army, but that it "had a decided adverse impact upon units, missions and individuals."[196] The lack of truly experienced Americans in the field had a corrosive impact on operations, especially when it came to advisory and pacification efforts since none of the new soldiers understood the social and/or cultural aspects that were so crucial to the success of these kinds of missions.[197] It could take the new soldier weeks just to earn the trust and cooperation of the RVNAF officials they were ordered to work with,

[192] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 88.
[193] Hastings, *Vietnam*, 288.
[194] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 13.
[195] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 87.
[196] Sorley, *Westmoreland*, 88.
[197] Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 288.; Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 119.

with no guarantee of ever earning those sentiments, but either way it was a serious and recurring impediment to succeeding in the joint efforts to secure the countryside and prepare South Vietnamese forces for independent fighting. The biggest operational impediment posed by the one-year tour was also its most tragic: the increased death rates of soldiers just beginning their tour.

Closely related to this was the higher death rates for troops under new unit commanders, many of whom served surprisingly short combat command tours. The officers in these positions, generally considered career military personnel who needed combat command experience for their career development and promotions, were oftentimes replaced around the six-month mark. This allowed the officer to get the "experience" he needed for a promotion but their actual inexperience from such a short rotation program was paid for with the lives of the men they led. For instance, the average length of a maneuver battalion commander was 5.6 months, but the battalions with a commander with more than six months experience only suffered two-thirds of the losses suffered by a battalion with a commander having less than six months experience. In a company, the average command was four months, which proved to be extremely dangerous for both the new commander and his troops. Four percent of company commanding officers were killed during their first four months in combat while only two-and-a-half percent were killed after four months, a two-thirds drop in their death rate.[198] Furthermore, the average number of US troops killed in action dropped by twenty-five percent in a company with a commander that possessed more than four

[198] Baritz, *Backfire*, 308.

months of experience when compared to a company commander with under four months experience.[199]

Conclusions

The faulty strategic concepts had ruined a stretch of approximately three years that represented the best chance the United States had to win the Vietnam War. General Westmoreland, the commander of MACV, certainly deserves some of the blame for his part in the implementation of incorrect strategic objectives and operations. His one-year tour of duty decision, designed to protect his troops by boosting their morale and sharing the war's burden on them, was, in reality, clearly detrimental to America's ability to carry out the war effort and should have been changed when its drawbacks were discovered. The security and pacification efforts did not receive the attention they should have early on, but the changes made in 1966 and 1967 were steps in the right direction. Westmoreland's decision to pursue a war of attrition and to utilize large-unit search and destroy missions did encounter problems but they were a strong foundation for success. They did, after all, more productive than the graduated escalation strategy that had been employed by those in the American government.

General Westmoreland's strategies and tactics may have needed adjustment, but they did allow the US to seize the initiative for a time, and facilitated operations that demonstrated the feasibility of military success between 1965 and 1968. In reality, the strategic faults that inhibited US military operations, led to a stalemate, and ended with America's defeat in Vietnam were not created by military men, they were created by President Johnson and a handful of his closest civil advisers, then forced on the military.

[199] Baritz, *Backfire*, 309.

When it came to his Vietnam strategy, President Lyndon B. Johnson spent the first nine months of his presidency following in the footsteps of John F. Kennedy. He "armored himself with… the still unfulfilled goals of the Kennedy administration," which allowed Johnson to argue "that his call to continue was in effect John Kennedy's call."[200] Like his predecessor, Johnson adhered to a plan of taking action only when it was absolutely necessary, and even then only choosing the "middle of the road" option.

President Johnson also chose to follow Kennedy's graduated pressure policy, which failed as a viable military strategy and did not accomplish anything during those first months of the war. Graduated pressure was, in reality, just another name for a limited war, a war in which restrictions were placed on its objectives and scope, but not necessarily on its commitment. It was not until Westmoreland drafted and implemented his three phase plan in 1965 that the US had a clear, definable objective and a strategy capable of producing success in combat. Still, the US military continued to be handcuffed by graduated pressure strategies and outlawed operations, like the cross-border missions to wipe out enemy sanctuaries. Had they been unrestrained and "turned loose," they almost certainly could have built on momentum from successful operations, like those discussed in the next chapter, and turned it into a full offensive against enemy forces which, more than likely, would result in military victory.

[200] Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, 173.

CHAPTER III

MILITARY OPERATIONS

President Lyndon B. Johnson had been propelled into the executive office suddenly in November 1963 following President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas. Although he was now in control, he intended to continue Kennedy's Vietnam policies, attempting to avoid further escalation while still providing South Vietnamese with the support necessary to defeat the Communist forces that threatened them. Unfortunately for Johnson, South Vietnam had become increasingly unstable politically since the ousting of President Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1 and 2, 1963. Coups had become commonplace and there would be eight more regime changes by the time President Johnson left office in January 1969.[201] By early 1964, President Johnson looked to strengthen the South Vietnamese and demonstrate American resilience to the North Vietnamese by, once again, following in the footsteps of President Kennedy, specifically his administration's NSAM 52, which had approved minor covert operations in May 1961.[202]

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[201] "Graduated Response," in George C. Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1983), 84.
[202] "NSAM 52 May 1961 Program," in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, 50-51.

However, when the Johnson administration's covert action plan failed, America's leaders realized they could either continue their policies that had achieved no progress, adopt a "fast squeeze" approach that involved rapidly-applied military pressures, or adopt a "progressive squeeze-and-talk" approach that allowed them to increase or decrease the level of pressure on the North Vietnamese as they deemed fit.[203] It was the choice to follow this third approach, known as "gradual escalation," that would critically hamstring the operations of a military that otherwise would have more than likely won the war.

1964: Retaliatory Actions

The Johnson administration, in an effort to achieve its two main goals, developed Operational Plan (OPLAN) 34A in February 1964. The Navy's task was to sail missions along the Vietnamese coast and gather intelligence about the air defense capabilities of the North Vietnamese. Officially known as DEHAVEN Special Operations off TsingtaO (DESOTO) patrols, the missions "were part of a system of global electronic reconnaissance carried out by specially equipped U.S. naval vessels."[204] They legally operated in international waters eleven miles off the coast but, on August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese gunboats attacked an American destroyer, the *USS Maddox*, engaging in one of these missions. After a short firefight in which the Communists were repelled, the *Maddox* concluded its patrol. Two days later the *Maddox* again reported being under attack, along with the destroyer *USS Turner Joy* and, "although doubts subsequently developed… as to whether this second alleged attack actually took place, the administration seized the opportunity to retaliate."[205] The foundation for the

[203] "McNaughton Proposals, November 1964," in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, 101.
[204] James W. Montgomery, "The First DESOTO Patrol," USS DeHaven Sailors Association, 2017, http://ussdehaven.org/first_desoto_patrol.htm.; Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 130.
[205] "Graduated Response, 1963-1965," in Herring, ed., *Pentagon Papers* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1983), 84.

Americanization of the war in Vietnam was significantly strengthened by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Passed on August 7, 1964, it "authorized LBJ to take 'all necessary measures' to resist aggression in Vietnam."[206] Johnson used the resolution like a declaration of war and quickly began to authorize a massive US military expansion in Vietnam.

Instead of halting the patrols after the attacks, Johnson instructed the Navy not only to continue them but to do so with an extra destroyer to each mission along with combat air patrol for added protection. He concluded by issuing orders "to the commanders of the combat aircraft and the two destroyers, (a) to attack any force which attacks them in international waters, and (b) to attack with the objective not only of driving off the force but of destroying it.'"[207] His orders formed the basis for NSAM 314, published on September 10, 1964. It stated that the patrols would "operate initially well beyond the 12-mile limit… comprise two to three destroyers and would have air cover from carriers; the destroyers will have their own ASW [anti-submarine warfare] capability."[208] With the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and NSAM 314, the US Navy was beginning its transition from a non-combat advisory and intelligence-gathering role to a combat role. As the frequency of the DESOTO patrols increased, and they included a greater contingent of combat-ready forces, the Navy transitioned away from their advisory role and became increasingly combat-oriented, but the changes did not stop

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[206] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86.
[207] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 1, Part VIII, Vietnam, 1964, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 265.
[208] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 1, Part X, Vietnam, 1964, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 345.

there. American air power would become critical in responding to what happened in the gulf.

Like their ground and naval counterparts, US Air Force advisors worked to provide their South Vietnamese counterparts with strategic and operational advice. For instance, some American pilots sent to advise the South Vietnamese Air Force served as copilots for South Vietnamese pilots on covert bombing raids. The attack on the *USS Maddox*, however, changed that when President Johnson and his advisers looked to the Air Force to help strike back at North Vietnam. The Johnson administration's strategy in Vietnam in late 1964 revolved around utilizing America's airpower in the hopes that no ground troops would be needed. Couched in retaliatory rhetoric so as not to appear to be appeasing the aggressors, the United States launched Operation Barrel Roll, a covert operation, on December 14, 1964. Tasked with striking the enemy's infiltration routes from Laos, it marked the beginning of American escalation. Barrel Roll laid the foundation for a similar retaliatory raid in February 1965 and for a three year bombing campaign launched shortly thereafter.

Another facet of the air war that appeared in 1964 was the 1st Air Cavalry Division, a unit that flew armed UH-1 Huey helicopters and was tasked with ferrying US Airborne Rangers to and from battlefields. Colonel Jerry Childers had been with the 1st Air Cav since its formation in Fort Benning, Georgia, where the unit had first tested the concept of the air assault.[209] After it had been proven to be a feasible concept, the unit was deployed to Vietnam and arrived in Bien Hoa at the end of November 1964. By the time their tour of duty had come to an end, on November 18, 1965, Childers's "unit had

[209] Jerry Childers, *Without Parachutes: How I Survived 1,000 Attack Helicopter Combat Missions In Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005), 19.

pioneered most of the armed helicopter tactics then in use in Vietnam."[210] Their successes had laid the groundwork for a highly effective, versatile tool that could be utilized by both the air and ground campaigns in the war against Communism in South Vietnam.

1965: From Advisors to Combatants

Six months after the Gulf of Tonkin incident solidified the LBJ administration's "tit-for-tat" approach to action, the North Vietnamese provided yet another justification for the use of increased force. On February 7, 1965, Viet Cong guerrillas rained mortar shells down on Camp Hollaway, the American air base at Pleiku. This incident destroyed five UH-1B "Huey" helicopters and damaged another nine, along with a reconnaissance plane and fifty-two American billets, leaving eight Americans dead and over one hundred wounded.[211] Three days later, on February 10, a U.S. army billet at Quinhon was bombed by the Viet Cong resulting in forty-four American casualties, including twenty-three dead and twenty-one wounded. Within twelve hours, North Vietnamese military barracks and storage facilities were under assault from American and South Vietnamese bombers.

Two Viet Cong attacks in three days, directed against Americans, led members of the Johnson administration and its military advisers to push for a more substantial increase in the graduated pressure strategy. President Johnson obliged them on February 13 with "a program of continuing air strikes against various targets in southern North Vietnam."[212] Sustained bombing operations began on February 15, 1965, with Operation Flaming Dart, "the name for the reprisal strikes against military barracks in the southern

[210] Childers, *Without Parachutes*, 22, 83.
[211] "Folder, '[NSC Meeting on] Situation in Vietnam, 2/8/1965, Volume 3, Tab 29,' National Security Council Meetings Files, NSF, Box 1," LBJ Library.
[212] Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 72.

portion of North Vietnam."[213] These joint American-South Vietnamese air raids opened with attacks on the North Vietnamese barracks at Chanh Hoa and Vu Con.[214] Flaming Dart represented the start of what would, a few weeks later, evolve into one of the biggest, longest-lasting, most well-known, and most controversial operations of the war, Operation Rolling Thunder.

As the US increased its sustained bombing campaign in an attempt to both hurt North Vietnam and convince them to stop supporting war in the South, American leaders needed to select targets they believed to be most important to the North. The selection process for bombing missions ranked potential targets based on four criteria. The first of the criteria was the military advantage of striking the target, second was the risks posed to US aircraft, third was the danger associated with widening the war if the target is struck, and fourth was the danger of inflicting heavy civilian casualties. The third item on the list, the risk of widening the war, was the most important of the four criteria. One of the most important documents regarding the United States' bombing strategy, however, was NSAM 328, which was published on April 6, 1965.[215] In essence it said that the US should continue to gradually increase Rolling Thunder operations at the pace it was going. However, they should still be "prepared to add strikes in response to a higher rate of VC operations, or conceivably to slow the pace in the unlikely event VC slacked off sharply for what appeared to be more than a temporary operational lull."[216] Rolling

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[213] H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 218.
[214] "Folder, '[February 10, 1965 - 2:10 p.m. National Security Council Meeting],' Meeting Notes Files, Box 1," LBJ Library.
[215] Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 203.
[216] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 2, Vietnam, January–June 1965, eds. David C. Humphrey, Ronald D. Landa, Louis J. Smith (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 242.

Thunder missions would continue to be carried out for the next three years "and [would] drop more bombs on Vietnam than had been dropped on all of Europe in World War II."[217]

Only two months into Operation Rolling Thunder, however, there arose plans to use bombing pauses as "'a path toward… peace or… increased military action, depending upon the reaction of the Communists.'"[218] In a memorandum to the president, McGeorge Bundy explained that McNamara believed "that a pause now has a bare chance of starting a chain reaction toward a settlement. Furthermore, the Secretary of Defense believes that, even if a pause does not produce the full result this time, it would contribute toward a settlement later."[219] Yet another interesting bombing-related development occurred on November 15, 1965, when the US launched Operation Arc Light. For the first time ever, B-52 strategic bombers, instead of the traditional fighter/bomber attack aircraft, "were… employed in a tactical role in support of American ground troops."[220] The significantly increased payload capacity of the B-52 was one of the biggest impacts such a move had on the battlefield since it meant that American troops on the ground had access to a much larger amount of air support ordnance, something that could prove lifesaving for American troops and prove costly for the enemy's.

Although the USAF had transitioned into a combat role and began significant operations remarkably quickly, the US Navy (USN) still found itself engaged in its

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[217] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 174.
[218] VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire*, 136.
[219] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 3, Vietnam, June–December 1965, eds. David C. Humphrey, Edward C. Keefer, Louis J. Smith (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 208.
[220] Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once… and Young: Ia Drang - The Battle That Changed the War in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 188.

advisory role. However, even with advisors from the world's most powerful navy, Vietnam's "Navy (VNN) failed to effectively stem the flow of supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam," which produced a feeling within the US Navy that they must intervene directly in order to fix the infiltration problem.[221] The USN's main goal from the war's start had been to improve the VNN fighting force but, by 1965, "when it failed to reach necessary operation benchmarks… the Navy began edging the VNN out of certain operations." This trend of progressively shutting the VNN out continued until a 1968 naval operation codenamed SEALORDS. Much like the course of the land war, "the naval war in South Vietnam consisted of many small unit actions punctuated by only a small number of larger operations."[222] As the Navy adapted to its new role, their experiences contributed to several significant operational adaptations between 1965 and 1968. For example, the Navy's interdiction campaign was expanded and two new river-based forces were created, a patrol force and an amphibious assault force. All of these developments were overseen by one man, Rear Admiral Norvell Gardiner.

Besides VNN's failings, there was one other key influence spurring the naval developments mentioned above: February 1965 saw the publication of the Buckalew Report. The report proved significant because it was solely concerned with fighting the naval campaign in Vietnam. Buckalew found that the communist supply system was quite extensive, stretching into three countries, operating along major rivers, and utilizing "a combination of man-carried and inland waterborne transfers.'" To combat the infiltration, Buckalew offered the following three-part strategy, the first part which was recognizing that "control of the rivers, especially the Mekong, Bassac, and related

[221] John D. Sherwood, *War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy Coastland and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam 1965-1968* (Washington D.C.: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2015), x.
[222] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 42, x.

waterways, was essential to stemming the flow of enemy supplies." Secondly, "a coastal surveillance force was also necessary to prevent seaborne infiltration." Finally, "to secure the rivers, he advocated a system of fixed and mobile check points on bridges, major canals, and waterway junctions manned by trained military or paramilitary personnel."[223]

On February 16, 1965, the US Navy discovered a steel-hulled supply trawler from North Vietnam at Vung Ro Bay in central Vietnam. The trawler, full of weapons, ammunition, and other supplies, was proof of the occurrence of seaborne infiltration and was a major motivation for the Navy's renewed interest in coastal interdiction operations. It also led to the creation of a "plan [that] called for a U.S. Navy sea and aircraft patrol that would concentrate on locating oceangoing shipping like the steel-hulled trawler discovered at Vung Ro." These forces, divided up between the seventeenth parallel and eight coastal patrol areas, were tasked with "track[ing] suspicious contacts and vector[ing] VNN ships to board and search them."[224] This coastal interdiction campaign, codenamed Operation Market Time, was the first significant naval operation toward stopping the kinds of enemy infiltration outlined in the Buckalew Report. As the Navy's role in Vietnam increased, so too did the number of craft deployed to them for use in coastal interdiction operations. Then, on July 31, 1965, the forces of Operation Market Time were transferred to Task Force 115, under the chief of the Naval Advisory Group [NAG], which "expanded the mission of the Naval Advisory Group from advising the VNN to planning, executing, and leading combined combat operations."[225]

Another interdiction operation, Game Warden, was, like Market Time, developed due to the failures of the VNN. However, Game Warden differed from Market Time in

[223] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 27-28.
[224] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 34.
[225] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 54.

that it focused on patrolling the rivers instead of the coast. On December 18, 1965, "the U.S. Navy established Task Force 116 (River Patrol Force) to participate in Operation Game Warden, a combined U.S. Navy-VNN operation to deny enemy movement and resupply on the major rivers of the Mekong Delta and the RSSZ."[226] While not as successful as Market Time in terms of interdiction, Game Warden did make important contributions to the war effort in terms of pacification efforts, their combat capabilities, and their influence in the creation of a third naval branch that played a major role in pushing back the Tet Offensive in 1968.

While the US aerial and naval campaigns were conducting combat-related missions by early 1965, President Johnson did not plan on sending American troops into Vietnam. However, he had seemingly failed to consider the security resources required by his increasing airstrike programs. A great majority of the US aircraft flying reprisal raids or Rolling Thunder missions were based out of American airfields in South Vietnam. These airfields had to have some sort of defense force to keep the facilities, personnel, equipment, and weaponry a running safely and smoothly and, even if ARVN forces had had a better reputation amongst American leadership, the US could not, for numerous political and military reasons, allow South Vietnamese forces to provide sole security for their bases. Thus, "because the start of the air war required ground troops to secure the air bases, President Johnson, perhaps unwittingly, authorized the start of the ground war simultaneously with Rolling Thunder."[227]

Roughly 3,500 US Marines became the first US combat troops in Vietnam when they landed near Da Nang, in South Vietnam, on March 8, 1965. However, they were

[226] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 96.
[227] Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 165.

restricted to the airfield, given orders to provide base security, and prohibited from any offensive operations.[228] Calls by military officials for a faster rate of increase in regards to the graduated pressure against the North Vietnamese also increased the pressure on Johnson to expand the ground war. On April 6, 1965, American ground forces were officially enlarged and their mission was changed with NSAM 328. This National Security Action Memorandum was the result of a number of strategic changes including the approval of 18,000-20,000 additional ground troops, and the approval of "a change of mission for all Marine Battalions deployed to Vietnam to permit their more active use under conditions to be established and approved by the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of State."[229]

Following the introduction of ground troops in Vietnam, American military officials made slight but important changes to the US Army's operational procedures. The changes were meant to increase the chances of conducting a successful offensive operation which had three requirements, the first of which being to find the enemy. "Patrolling was essential to finding the enemy" and it was often undertaken by ground operations utilizing large-unit sweeps.[230] While these usually led to the discovery of enemy supplies and the deaths of enemy troops, they hardly resulted in decisive battles. New units began appearing around 1966 which, in an attempt to facilitate the uncovering of enemy movements, combined "the combat power of U.S. soldiers with the invaluable local knowledge of Vietnamese personnel."[231] The Combined Reconnaissance

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[228] Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 90.
[229] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 2, Part "March 8-May 8," Vietnam, January-June 1965, eds. David C. Humphrey, Ronald D. Landa, Louis J. Smith (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 242.
[230] Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2007), 375-376.
[231] Birtle, *COIN*, 376.

Intelligence Platoon, one of these new mixed formations, proved how useful such units could be in finding the Communist's secret infrastructure.

The second requirement for a successful offensive operation is, after finding the enemy, fixing him in place. Encirclements had, in previous wars, proved effective in this endeavor and were employed in Vietnam but, due to troop shortages and the tough terrain, were somewhat porous. The helicopter proved not to be the cure-all that it was hoped to be due to a number of factors. They were expensive to maintain and operate and were initially in short supply. Although you could move much quicker by flying over the rough terrain, its noise often tipped off the enemy and allowed him to escape. Finally, their vulnerability to ground fire not only produced difficulties when trying to insert troops into an enemy-infested area, it also meant that it was extremely difficult to redeploy troops once inserted, meaning airmobile troops lost their mobility advantage over the enemy. Still, some type of encirclement, either on the ground or by helicopter, "remained the single best method available to the Army to compel a reluctant enemy to accept battle."[232]

After achieving the first two requirements, the operation had to end in the destruction of the enemy. However, the Communist forces were formidable foes and, while the US held obvious advantages in regards to ammunition supply, artillery, and air power, the firepower of the Communist's typical main force infantry battalion and that of the US's infantry battalion were about the same. Another problem was the ability of NVA and Viet Cong forces to remain so well concealed "that most contacts occurred at less than forty-six meters," which significantly impeded both the US soldiers' ability to successfully maneuver and their ability to call in artillery or air support without being hit

[232] Birtle, *COIN*, 378.

themselves. The Army's experiences soon led to modifications to combat tactics such as infantry assaults, while still integral, beginning to be overtaken in importance by the application of artillery and bombardment. This shift, occurring in late 1965 and early 1966, "became the basis for U.S. tactics for the rest of the war." Known as "pile on" tactics, infantry forces now utilized small patrols to find the enemy, called in airmobile reinforcements to encircle him, "then bury him under an avalanche of air- and artillery-delivered ordnance." Although there were many US advisers and military officials who saw the increasing reliance on firepower as having a deteriorating effect on the combat ability of the infantry, without "U.S. fire support, many a battle large and small would have been lost."[233]

As the US continued increasing its troop levels in Vietnam and sought to take the fight to the enemy, they were finally given their wish in mid-November 1965. The significance that would be placed on the first few days of a twelve-day campaign were the result of the fact that it was the first time that the US was engaged in a conventional contest with North Vietnamese regular forces. The American forces sent into the Ia Drang Valley on November 14, 1965 were those of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Airmobile Division commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore. [234] The ways in which Moore and his troopers utilized airmobile search-and-destroy warfare led Westmoreland to point to this battle to demonstrate two key components of his strategy. First, he emphasized that the body count would be used to keep track of progress in a war unconcerned with establishing, holding, and expanding a true front line and second "what fire and air power could achieve in support of 'search-and-destroy.'"[235]

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[233] Birtle, *COIN*, 378; 382.
[234] Albright, Cash, and Sandstrum, *Seven Firefights in Vietnam*, 3.
[235] Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 285.

The Battle of Ia Drang, which began on the morning of November 14, 1965, was the first Airmobile troopers arrived at Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray, whereupon the helicopters returned to the American base and brought in the next wave until all were in the valley. Lieutenant Moore recalled, "our intention with this bold helicopter assault into the clearing at the base of the Chu Pong massif had been to find the enemy, and we had obviously succeeded beyond our wildest expectations." Finding themselves vastly outnumbered, Moore and the 1st Cavalry faced such intense resistance that, in just two hours of fighting on November 15, Charlie Company alone had lost sixty-two men, forty-two of them dead and twenty wounded. The 1st Cavalry was relieved by reinforcements on November 16 and, by that time, they had sustained 79 fatalities and 121 men wounded.[236] The enemy, on the other hand, suffered 834 confirmed dead and six soldiers taken prisoner, but it was estimated that American air support killed another 1,215 NVA troops.[237] Although the engagement seemed to have come to a successful conclusion, fighting in the area would continue.

What made November 14-16, 1965 so important to Westmoreland? To begin with, Lieutenant Moore pointed out, Westmoreland "thought he had found the answer to the question of how to win this war: He would trade one American life for ten or eleven or twelve North Vietnamese lives, day after day, until Ho Chi Minh cried uncle." Just as important, however, was how the battle had "validated both the principle and the practice of airmobile warfare."[238] It is important to remember that one of the Huey pilots, Jerry Childers, whose tour ended just four days after the Battle of Ia Drang, had been with the unit in Fort Benning, Georgia, just one year before the battle as they finished testing out

[236] Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 100, 178-179, 216.
[237] Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 215-216.
[238] Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 374.

this brand-new concept in warfare. Only one year after developing an ultramodern attack style, sixteen helicopters, carrying a total of about eighty soldiers into the valley every thirty minutes, had flown an entire battalion of approximately 450 men into enemy-held territory on a search-and-destroy mission.

From 10:48 in the morning, when the first wave of troopers landed until 3:20 that afternoon, when the last wave arrived, the whole operation had been carried out in approximately four and one-half hours. The Airmobile pilots continued flying missions for another ten hours, despite taking enemy fire most of the day, and brought much-needed supplies and ammunition to keep Moore and his men in the fight then evacuating wounded and dead Americans back to their base. Along with the battalions near-seamless use of artillery and air support, nearly 450 Americans had defeated a force of approximately 1,600 North Vietnamese and inflicted at least four times as many casualties. A tactical demonstration such as the one put on by Moore's men in the Ia Drang Valley was a huge boost to the doctrines of both airmobile warfare and search-and-destroy tactics, albeit a "restricted" version, and they were often made prime examples of the strategy's success by their advocates, such as Westmoreland. It also demonstrated high levels of US military ingenuity and ability in regards to weaponry development and its tactical utilization. Although airmobile warfare would continue to prove beneficial to ground operations, no future search-and-destroy operation would achieve the success of Ia Drang.

1966: Going on the Offensive

The air campaign of 1966 looked very similar to its 1965 appearances. The progression of the new year's air missions can be seen through the accounts of those who

strapped themselves into a jet aircraft and rained down death and destruction on the enemy. One such man was Brigadier General Jerry Cook, a fighter pilot in the United States Air Force (USAF) whose first tour of duty lasted for much of 1966. Like many other fighter pilots, Cook was tasked with carrying out a variety of different types of missions. On some missions, Cook and his flight were tasked with anti-personnel strikes during which they would drop napalm on enemy forces in the target area.[239] Other missions required Cook and his wingman to fly into the Laotian Mountains in order to track down and destroy enemy cargo trucks that were attempting to resupply Communist forces in South Vietnam.[240] Pilots like Cook were also sometimes called upon to destroy enemy heavy weapons that had pinned down American forces in their camp or while out on patrol. Another important task conducted by fighter pilots was providing protection for the US's electronic-countermeasure aircraft and their fighter bombers on missions into North Vietnam. On these types of missions, US fighters hunted for and engaged enemy MiGs in air-to-air combat, a high-risk action that resulted in one American fighter jet lost for every two MiGs downed.[241]

The US Navy was also an important contributor to the air campaign with their carrier-based aircraft. Naval fighter pilots like Lieutenant Elkins faced the same amount of variability in their missions as their USAF counterparts. For the first week or so of their deployment, USN pilots conducted close air support missions as a way to help them transition into their new role and environment. There were also missions with the sole objective of setting Viet Cong rice fields on fire in order to deny them access to food. Elkins also took part in a two-flight day, the first of which focused on destroying a Viet

[239] Jerry Cook, *Once A Fighter Pilot* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2002), 140.
[240] Cook, *Once A Fighter Pilot*, 153-154.
[241] Cook, *Once A Fighter Pilot*, 155, 208, 210.

Cong headquarters and the second focused on destroying the enemy's billeting areas. He also flew missions in support of strategic bombing runs, during which he was tasked with suppressing enemy anti-aircraft weaponry, such as flak guns or Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs). Unfortunately, however, Lieutenant Elkins was shot down and killed on October 13, 1966, just five months into his tour, a tragic reminder of the extreme dangers that were faced, even above the battlefield.[242]

In 1966, American naval forces began to make significant impacts on strategic and operational aspects of the war. Two Market Time actions in the early months of 1966 proved to be significant to the overall campaign by revealing important limitations presented by the Swift boats used by forces in Task Force 115. The first of these occurred on Valentine's Day, 1966, when a mine was detonated underneath PCF-4, destroying the craft and killing four of its six crew.[243] The loss of PCF-4, along with the loss of a second PCF in March, demonstrated how vulnerable these unarmored patrol boats were to explosive weaponry. It would have been close to suicide for one of these vessels to attempt a trip up a river, where they could be ambushed at anytime by communists who mined the river or used RPGs. By the end of the year, PCFs were not allowed to cross into rivers unless they had special consent or were in pursuit of a vessel.

Despite these issues, Market Time proved to be effective against infiltration efforts by large, steel-hulled trawlers.[244] According to historian Mark Moyar, "Market Time swiftly brought Hanoi's maritime infiltration operations to ruin," but it "was much less successful in stemming the flow of supplies coming into the country [by river] on

[242] Frank Elkins, *The Heart of a Man: A Naval Pilot's Vietnam Diary*, ed. Marilyn Elkins (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 15, 17, 39-40, 119.
[243] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 75.
[244] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 79.

smaller wooden-hulled junks."[245] However, this realization actually served to strengthen naval efforts because it was perfectly handled by USN leaders. TF 115's strengths and weaknesses were considered and the force was tasked with operating solely along the Vietnamese coast, in waters that their craft were best-suited for, and opposing the enemy "forces" it was most effective against, in this case the steel-hulled trawlers. The proper utilization of TF 115 as a coastline interdiction force was so successful that the North Vietnamese all but gave up on coastal infiltration efforts.

Instead of forcing the TF 115's inadequate craft into environments of near-certain failure, the US Navy simply developed a new force geared towards riverine warfare. Task Force 116, also known as the River Patrol Force, was to carry out Operation Game Warden, the US Navy's river interdiction campaign. Game Warden's original mission, stated in its operation order of February 1966, "was to prevent Communist exploitation of the waterways by patrolling the major inland rivers." The other three components of the plan were "searching suspicious craft, enforcing curfews, [and] keeping the main shipping channel into Saigon open by patrolling and minesweeping in the Long Tau River."[246] Thus, TF 116 started out as a police force focused on "searching water traffic for contraband and checking papers of civilians traveling on the rivers but quickly evolved into a mobile strike force intent upon attacking Viet Cong (VC) positions and disrupting river crossings."[247] Their success in the latter types of operations helped spark interest in creating a naval group dedicated solely to searching for, responding quickly to, and raining destruction on the enemy. It would prove crucial in repulsing Tet Offensive attacks in their area of operation.

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[245] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 79.
[246] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 96.
[247] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, xi.

TF 116's most significant engagement of 1966 came as a result of a February 26 Viet Cong ambush of the Panamanian coastal freighter *SS Lorinda* in the Long Tau channel of the Run Sat swamp. Following the ambush, MACV called for a large-scale amphibious raid to ease and/or eliminate enemy pressure on the shipping channel. In the two-phased plan, codenamed Operation Jackstay, the first phase would be an amphibious-launched assault on the Long Thanh Peninsula by marines who were to secure it and cut off potential village support to the Viet Cong. Following that, Phase 2 would begin and focus on suspected VC base areas deep in the Rung Sat. Jackstay was launched on March 26 and Phase 2 of the operation began two days later. By the end of the operation, April 6, 1966, the enemy suffered 63 deaths while TF 116 suffered five dead and thirty-one wounded.

Operation Jackstay proved significant for several reasons, one of which being that it was the war's "first full-scale U.S. amphibious operation… carried out in a river delta."[248] It also garnered significance because it proved successful by starting a period of declining enemy activity and was furthered by Game Warden patrols launched on April 10. Furthermore, Jackstay "tested many concepts that would become standard for U.S. forces as the war progressed - namely river assaults, river patrol, and the integration of airpower, ground power, and naval power in a riverine environment."[249] Finally, Operation Jackstay demonstrated the Navy could challenge communist control of the rivers with technology and firepower. Such a result quickly made it clear that the US Navy could, and already was, achieving significant success in the war.

[248] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 102.
[249] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 103.

1966 also saw the formation of the third arm of America's naval campaign in Vietnam, the Mobile Riverine Force (MRF). The MRF was formed to search out and destroy the enemy in the Mekong Delta in support of General Westmoreland's strategy of searching out and destroying enemy formations and base areas throughout the country. The MRF's Navy component, also known as the River Assault Force, or Task Force 117, would work with the Army to conduct river assault missions. More specifically, TF 117 was "responsible for transporting elements of the U.S. Army's 9th Infantry Division to and from assault zones in the Mekong Delta and providing fire support for the troops while they operated in the rice paddies and jungles."[250] The creation of TF 117 was yet another stroke of genius by the US Navy. Instead of saddling Task Force 116 with every riverine mission that arose, whether it was designed for such an action or not, naval leadership saw TF 116's success in searching for enemy forces down but again refused to force a unit into missions they were not adequately prepared for. Instead, TF 116 would continue with its original mission while a new riverine hunter-killer unit could be developed specifically for the task. Had the other branches of the US military adopted approaches to their war campaigns like that of the Navy, the Vietnam War would almost certainly have been an overwhelming American victory.

Ground operations during 1966 continued to achieve their missions and defeat enemy forces, even as new issues began to be encountered. One such impediment was the one-year tour of duty decision discussed in the previous chapter, which resulted in having to replace a soldier around the time he became adequately experienced in combat with a new recruit that was fresh out of basic training. The experiences of David Adams, a Lance Corporal in the United States Marine Corps (USMC), provide a valuable insight

[250] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 165.

into how the ground war was progressing. A squad leader in the 1st Platoon's Alpha Company of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, Adams arrived in-country at the start of 1966 and was stationed on Hill 55. The hill was an important part of the US's defensive line protecting the crucial airbase in Da Nang and thus drew a significant amount of enemy attention. Adams described how his unit was involved in contact with enemy forces almost daily and the increasing number of casualties on both sides. In his eyes, there appeared to be no end to the insanity that he was faced with on a daily basis. The main role of the 1st Battalion was "to keep the VC off balance and guard against a major attack on the vital air base at Da Nang." They ran daily squad- and platoon-sized patrols from their battalion headquarters on Hill 55, which proved increasingly difficult due to the "constant incoming small arms fire, the ever present booby traps and trip-wires with the occasional land mines." However, after only a couple of months in South Vietnam, Adams's tour came to an early end when he was wounded on patrol, a fate that befell countless other American soldiers.[251]

Soldiers from other units faced experiences similar to David Adams's. In 1966 Jerome Doherty, a 2nd Lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion, Fifth Marines, was commanding his own rifle platoon in H Company. They were positioned on Hill 76, from which they conducted daily patrols like numerous other units stationed throughout the country but Doherty's unit differed from many others in the areas it found itself patrolling. Hill 76 was located near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), meaning that Doherty's unit was tasked with patrolling areas that were largely deemed to have been enemy sanctuaries. For instance, on one mission, H Company was ordered to patrol the Ben Hai River, located in

[251] David Adams, *Hill - 55: Just South of Danang Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2002), 39, 55, 60, 73-75.

the DMZ, and capture a prisoner.[252] Although they successfully captured an enemy, he died before they could return to base, succumbing to wounds suffered in the firefight prior to his capture. Doherty also experienced the increasing size and scope of the orders handed down by command. This was exemplified by Operation Tuscaloosa, a three-day patrol near the Thu Bon River, a well-known trouble area. American commanders tasked two companies with tracking down and destroying a North Vietnamese division that was believed to be in the area. H Company ran into the enemy head on and found itself outmanned but managed to break through the enemy's positions, sending them running in all directions. Despite their successes, the number of casualties in Doherty's company were a grim reminder of the realities of war, as they suffered "over two hundred killed and wounded in less than a year of combat."[253]

1967: American Military Might and Pacification

The importance of naval operations in Vietnam kept evolving in 1967 with significant duties being added to the primary missions of TF 115 and TF 116. One of their new responsibilities was conducting naval gunfire support (NGFS) missions. Such operations supplemented American airpower and artillery by providing yet another source of superior American firepower to help embattled American ground forces. Furthermore, according to naval scholar John Darrell Sherwood, by the summer of 1967, "psychological warfare had emerged as one of the most important secondary missions for Market Time forces."[254] The growth of naval operations continued with the arrival of TF 117.

[252] Jerome Doherty, *A Civilian in Green Clothes* (Raleigh, NC: Ivy House Publishing, 2007), 146.
[253] Doherty, *A Civilian in Green Clothes*, 147, 178, 188-189, 194.
[254] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 261.

Task Force 117 immediately set to work on their mission to take the fight to the enemy. Within a month of their arrival, the MRF launched River Raider [phase] I, "a series of company- and platoon-size search and destroy operations in areas along the upper Long Tau River" that lasted from February 16 to March 4, 1967. The second phase of River Raider took place from March 5 to March 19 and "included multi-company attacks against VC logistics facilities in the southwestern portion of the RSSZ." By the end of the operation, twenty-two enemy fighters had been killed compared to eight wounded US Army soldiers. Task Force 117 followed up River Raider with a similar operation in the RSSZ [Rung Sat Special Zone], codenamed Spearhead I, during which thirteen Viet Cong were killed. Next was Operation Coronado I, which lasted from June 1, 1967 to July 26, 1967, an operation that proved significant for being the first one which involved heavy contact with enemy forces. On June 19, Company A, 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry was ambushed by Viet Cong forces, resulting in the death or wounding of nearly every American in the company. By the end of the engagement, the US Army had suffered 200 casualties, fifty of which were killed and the remaining 150 having been wounded, while the Navy suffered fifteen wounded. It was reported that the Viet Cong suffered 170 killed in action. "Coronado I, in many respects, set the pattern for future MRF operations" by demonstrating "that the Viet Cong only intended to engage the MRF with large units at times and places of its choosing - usually in well-placed ambushes designed to inflict maximum casualties on the American side."[255] TF 117 launched several more of these types of operations in 1967, all of which had similar results. These operations demonstrated the strength and effectiveness of the US Navy and provided an example of what could happen when the US's military might was correctly utilized.

[255] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 200, 207.

Ground efforts of 1967 saw an increased emphasis on pacification efforts, which led to the creation of small outposts called Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camps. These camps were manned by local South Vietnamese troops who were advised by members of the United States' Special Forces. One such camp was located in the district of Dak To and the fighting that took place on its western outskirts proved to be one of the significant land engagements of 1967. On November 7, Lieutenant Colonel James Johnson, the 4th Battalion's commander, was ordered to take two battalions west of Dak To to confront North Vietnamese forces in the area. Skirmishes between elements on either side had occurred on November 3 and November 4, both of which were won by the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies thanks in large part to the supporting fire from US artillery and airstrikes. However, just three days later, as the companies of Colonel Johnson's 4th Battalion took up positions they were quickly confronted by enemy troops. As American troops continued to be heavily pressured by enemy forces, American airstrikes were, according to Captain Thomas H. Baird, "instrumental - perhaps decisive - in preventing a penetration of the perimeter." Despite being an opening round in a battle that would last two and a half weeks, the November 7 battle "had driven at least a portion of the North Vietnamese 66th Regiment back toward the Cambodian border and materially lessened the threat to Dak To."[256] This represented a significant American victory due to the fact that they had successfully attacked, overtaken, and held on to territory previously held by the enemy. Although fifteen Americans had been killed and another forty-eight had been wounded, 117 enemy troops had been killed, making the battle of Dak To a massive success in terms of body count. This alternative to the haphazard and wasteful search-and-destroy missions usually employed to find enemy

[256] Albright, Cash, and Sanstrum, *Seven Firefights in Vietnam*, 97, 108.

forces proved that there were better ways in which American ground troops could be utilized to achieve success. These operations proved, when conducted correctly, the war was winnable.

1968: The Tet Offensive

After spending the last months of 1967 engaged in a heavy bombing campaign in the northern border regions of South Vietnam, aerial units in the area were called on in January 1968 to conduct a similar mission, but this time in a much more concentrated spot: the besieged base of Khe Sanh. Westmoreland "understood that the key to successfully holding off enemy forces at Khe Sanh was allied air power" and "instructed General William Momyer, his Air Force deputy, to plan such defenses." The operation was code named Niagara "'to invoke an image of cascading shells and bombs.'" It was an apt codename, exemplified by "by one account [which stated that] over 24,000 fighter-bomber sorties and 2,700 [sorties] by B-52s [dropped] a total of 110,000 tons of bombs during the enemy's seventy-seven-day siege."[257] The aerial campaigns after the Tet Offensive were, more often than not, bombing missions in support of American forces bogged down as they tried to clean up the remnants of the Tet Offensive.

When thinking about the Tet Offensive, the surprise attack launched by the Communists in January 1968, most think of the images of urban battles raging in streets between ground forces that were released on the nightly news or by journalists and photographers. However, there was another branch that, although largely ignored in discussions regarding the Tet Offensive, performed just as impressive as, if not more than, those ground troops. Naval actions, especially those of the Mobile Reaction Force,

[257] Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 170.

proved instrumental in repulsing the Tet Offensive in the Mekong Delta, the defense of the major cities and towns in the area, and the prevention of a possible flanking maneuver against the American forces, occupied in northern locations, by the communists from the delta. The MRF helped "transform a potential defeat into a devastating blow for the Viet Cong." The ability of the Naval, the South Vietnamese, and the Army personnel making up the MRF to defend the major cities and towns in the delta whilst dealing with the simultaneous attacks of seven Viet Vong battalions, along with the countless local communist fighters, "remains one of the greatest triumphs of the war."[258] The significance of their actions can be seen by the way they turned the tide of battle, and how quickly they did it, in numerous cities and towns.

Within hours of the MRF's assault on My Tho, the Viet Cong were fleeing the positions they had fought so hard for. By the assault's end, the VC suffered as many as 400 casualties. Meanwhile, ARVN forces lost twenty-five killed and an undetermined number of wounded and the US suffered three killed and fifty-seven wounded. After arriving at Vinh Long on February 4, the MRF wasted little time fighting off the communists and were able to end their counterinsurgency efforts just eight days later. During that span, the MRF killed 269 VC while suffering only twelve deaths themselves. Operations at Can Tho, one of the biggest post-Tet mop-up operations, lasted from February 14 to February 28. Two American battalions landed on February 14 and quickly forced the enemy to withdraw. Then, on February 22, MRF and South Vietnamese troops conducted an operation near Can Tho to find the Viet Cong's Military Region III headquarters and destroy it. Sixty VC were quickly killed in a short engagement upon the Allies' arrival. The MRF and ARVN forces then established a perimeter and killed

[258] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 276.

another 68 VC troops, for a total of 129 enemies killed in action during the operation. The US also suffered 128 casualties but only 19 of them were dead, the rest merely wounded. The allied force's victory at Can Tho was most significant, however, because it "was the last major delta city to face a significant Viet Cong threat during the Tet Offensive."[259]

In late January 1968, the Marines stationed at their base in Khe Sanh were attacked by two NVA divisions who then began a prolonged offensive against the base. Westmoreland believed that Khe Sanh must be held because this battle would mark the turning point of the war in Vietnam by allowing the US to finally reach the long-sought-after crossover point and forcing the North to surrender. Holding the base was also of critical importance to Westmoreland because it provided a line of defense against an offensive Westmoreland believed the Communists were preparing to launch in the Quang Tri Province. The importance of holding the base was echoed by other military leaders, such as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Wheeler, who considered Khe Sanh tactically important for both offensive possibilities, like launching covert operations teams and for defensive reasons regarding flank security. Furthermore, Wheeler pointed out that giving up or losing the base would be a devastating blow for American public opinion and morale. Despite fighting for their lives and undergoing a siege of almost seven months, Khe Sanh turned out not to be the turning point after all, ending instead in the withdrawal of American troops from the base. More importantly, Khe Sanh became a distraction for the US military leadership, causing them to overlook intelligence that suggested a potential Communist offensive might extend beyond the Quang Tri Province in which Khe Sanh was located. With the US abandoning the base, it

[259] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 310.

appeared as though the Communists had achieved a significant victory in an offensive against a limited area.

The real blow was the Tet Offensive, which "marked a major turning point in the Vietnam War."[260] On January 31, 1968, during the agreed-upon Tet holiday ceasefire, sixty-seven thousand communist fighters launched attacks on thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals in South Vietnam, sixty-four of the country's 245 district capitals, and continued the so-called wilderness battles against bases like the one in Khe Sanh. The Americans and their South Vietnamese allies were caught off guard and the sizable communist forces initially made significant gains, even managing to breach the walls of the US Embassy in Saigon. However, the American forces and their allies were able to recover rather quickly and drive out the communists from most of the cities, towns, and villages, overtaken within an hour or two of the counterassault being launched. Part of the reason they were able to mount such a quick and successful recovery was the previously mentioned naval operations in the Mekong Delta.

Thanks to the impressive, MRF-powered response by the Navy's riverine forces, there was less of a need to deploy American ground forces to the region in an effort to counterassault and/or defend against any flanking maneuvers. Instead, more troops from the Army and USMC could be deployed to areas in the northern part of the country, creating an overpowering counterassault movement. The only major exception to this had been in the city of Hue, where brutal fighting took place for about a month after Tet. Not only did the Allied forces retake nearly all of the areas they had lost, they also inflicted a significant amount of casualties on the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. In fact, "the Vietcong was essentially wiped out during the battle[s]," and "from then on, the bulk

[260] "The Tet Offensive and the End of Escalation," in Herring, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, 208.

of the enemy consisted of North Vietnamese Regulars."[261] When viewed in terms of its tactical outcome, the Tet Offensive was unquestionably a landslide victory for the US and South Vietnamese. However, Americans back in the United States, stunned by the size of the enemy's attack after years of hearing about the progress being made in the war, struggled to view it in a tactical sense. Instead they were astonished by the unpreparedness of South Vietnam's defenders and transfixed by the news footage broadcast from South Vietnam of the vicious, bloody, close-quarter combat that engulfed the country. As a result, Tet made many Americans realize for the first time that they might not win in Vietnam. The near-total loss of support for the war at home essentially ensured that any aggressive push for victory would be a nonstarter and would most likely fail. Despite all of the military advantages possessed by the US in Vietnam, advantages that almost certainly would have led to victory if properly utilized, America's leaders had wasted nearly four years of opportunities and, beginning with the Tet Offensive, 1968 saw the deterioration of any real hope for an outright victory in Vietnam.

The best course of action in Vietnam would have been to emphasize controlling the area. Instead, Westmoreland focused on winning a war of attrition by tracking down and forcing the enemy into large engagements in which the US could destroy them. The problem was it required an immense amount of movement just to conduct the numerous search-and-destroy patrols that such a strategy required. Although the attrition strategy was designed to wear down the Communist forces, it proved equally wearisome on US forces.[262] Rather than focusing on controlling specific areas, Westmoreland's determination to defend all of South Vietnam also frustrated his troops.[263]

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[261] Childers, *Without Parachutes*, 112.
[262] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 464.
[263] Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 480.

A series of Department of Defense studies in 1967 revealed that enemy forces had some ability to control the amount of losses they suffered by controlling the pace of action.[264] This was partly a result of America's attrition strategy and its related tactics. Search-and-destroy operations not only wore out American troops, it also stretched them out over large areas, meaning there were gaps and pockets in American lines that the enemy could move through. The cross-border restrictions on US operations also provided the enemy with areas for them to escape to that they knew would be safe. In reality, "General Westmoreland's 'strategy' of attrition in South Vietnam was… the absence of a strategy." The military activities that resulted lacked a clearly defined objective to aim for.[265]

Lieutenant Colonel Moore, the leader of the 1st Air Cavalry unit made famous by the Battle of Ia Drang, viewed his 1966 campaign in Bong Son as an example of the incorrect approach to pursuing the Vietnam War on the ground. Moore was tasked with leading his men into the Bong Son plain to clear the enemy from the area, then turn it over to the South Vietnamese military to secure and allow their civil officials to administer to. There was vicious fighting "and, by the time the enemy had been routed, 82 of my men were dead and another 318 wounded." It had been a high price to pay but the region had been liberated, or so it seemed. Within a week of the US force's withdrawal, Communist forces had returned to Bong son. Moore's brigade would be sent back to the village twice more in 1966 and suffered many more killed and wounded.[266] It represented the folly and wastefulness of chasing around the enemy instead of ensuring firm control over important areas. Had the US kept control of the area, they could have

[264] Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 82.
[265] McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 333.
[266] Moore and Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 371-372.

avoided losing more troops to additional assaults and could have denied the enemy an important operational area.

The US placed a significant emphasis on the use of air power from the start, exemplified by Rolling Thunder, the strategic bombing program against North Vietnam. However, as with the land campaign, restrictions were implemented in regards to where missions could be flown and what targets could be struck. These had severely adverse effects on a crucial part of American military muscle. For example, the first target that John McCain had been given upon his arrival on the *USS Forrestal* in 1967 was a military barracks, but one that "had been bombed twenty-seven times before; it was just a pile of rubble."[267] These kinds of missions not only represented wasted resources and needless danger, they also represented wasted opportunities to inflict real damage on the enemy. In an October 1966 telegram to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Admiral Sharp, the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC), argued that "self-imposed controls on the use of air power against NVN [North Vietnam] have had an adverse impact upon the effectiveness of air power in reducing the capability of NVN to direct and support the insurgency in SVN [South Vietnam]."[268] Even decades after the war, many in the military, especially those in the Air Force, "blame the failure of air power to deliver the expected results on the decision to mount a campaign of graduated pressures instead of applying maximum available force from the start."[269]

The naval component of the Vietnam War was arguably the most consistent and most effective of America's three combat arms. The conflict "revealed that the U.S.

[267] Gil Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2001), 168.
[268] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, "September 19–November 27," Vietnam, 1966, ed. David C. Humphrey (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1998), Document 283.
[269] Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 374-375.

Navy, when pressed, can adapt rapidly to a shallow water environment and prevail." The coastline interdiction campaign known as Operation Market Time, conducted by Task Force 115, rapidly affected the Communist's resupply efforts and it represented the Navy's most successful interdiction program. Meanwhile, Task Force 116's riverine operations, known as Game Warden, was not as successful at interdiction but, as a direct action force, it proved very successful in disrupting Viet Cong operations and helping the US secure the delta's major rivers. Their "biggest successes involved attacks against VC troops crossing the large rivers and other types of attacks against VC combat troops, so much so that direct action emerged as a significant Game Warden mission by the end of 1968." Their abilities and effectiveness were made perfectly clear during the Tet Offensive, during which Game Warden forces proved to be a critical factor in the defense of many of the villages in the Mekong Delta. Finally, the Mobile Riverine Force, a heavily-armed reactionary unit codenamed Task Force 117, was able to operate in an environment inaccessible to all other means of transportation except helicopters. Their ability to transport reinforcements, assault teams, materials, and weaponry almost anywhere in the delta proved to be of significant benefit. Although heavier casualty numbers seemed to fall on this naval unit in particular, "the MRF as a whole killed more enemy soldiers than any other brown water unit deployed by the U.S. Navy in the Vietnam War, but it also took some of the heaviest losses."[270] Had the successes of the US's naval efforts been combined with the proper utilization of their ground and air power, America could have been victorious in Vietnam by the end of President Johnson's time in office.

[270] Sherwood, *War in the Shallows*, 324, xi, 319, 166, 220.

CHAPTER IV

PACIFICATION

The South Vietnamese government (GVN) needed to regain the trust and support of the rural peasantry, whom they had virtually ignored for years, while also preventing the Communists from entering rural areas and fomenting anymore issues. However, an over-militarized push would alienate those peasants they needed support from, while the lack of a military component would allow the enemy to disrupt the program and harm those involved. Thus, like with so many other aspects of the war, being victorious would find the correct balance of armed security operations and civic programs. The enemy needed to be driven out of the villages designated for civic action and kept out of the area to prevent any interference. The strategy of Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) designed by the US Marine Corps (USMC) proved it could be successful even with minimal manpower, and after a few slight changes it could have been expanded across Vietnam and proven very successful.

In South Vietnam, the government had been much more connected to and visible in urban areas, which meant that it was in these areas that anti-communist attitudes were strongest amongst the public. The South Vietnamese countryside, however, had been, for all intents and purposes, forgotten about by the country's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, and his administration. Therefore, the GVN scrambled to make its presence felt in its countryside and make up for the years of neglect by "improving" the lives of rural Vietnamese with revolutionary development programs. Thus, officials in Saigon hoped they could garner the rural population's support for the Diem's government, which those in the countryside viewed in a largely negative light. Meanwhile, Communist forces were focused on using the countryside to acquire the resources that would prove critical to their warmaking efforts. These resources came in two forms, manpower for reinforcements and food supplies to keep their forces fed.[271]

The Americans and the GVN were aware of the importance of the rural area to the Communists and the two nations worked together to create a "national strategy of 'Pacification and Development' [that] was designed to separate the Communists from it."[272] This was an important objective because the countryside was vital to both types of Communist forces in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong not only lived and worked in their villages, but also used them as Communist recruitment areas and even hiding places for fellow Communists, if necessary. Meanwhile, the countryside was critical to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units operating in the South because they depended on it for food and for its well-developed Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI), which could provide various forms of help during their missions. Thus, the US-GVN joined together in

[271] Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 4.
[272] Tho, *Pacification*, 4-5.

conducting pacification efforts. The US government recognized that the government of Saigon needed to make its own efforts to apologize to and regain the trust of the South Vietnamese countryside. The Strategic Hamlet program made it quickly and painfully apparent that letting the GSV take the public lead in this was a highly problematic decision.

The "Allied Pacification and Development" Program and Early Approaches

South Vietnamese General Tran Dinh Tho defined pacification as "the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people."[273] This included programs that stimulated economic growth, land reform, and greater political participation, as well as increased security through anti-insurgent operations by police and paramilitary forces.[274] The Allied Pacification and Development program, which began in 1961, had three national goals, the first of which being ending "the war, which implied eliminating Viet Cong infrastructure, defeating invasion forces and maintaining security."[275] The second pacification goal was "to develop democracy, which implied the establishment of elective government and democratic institutions and enlisting the participation of the people in national life," and the third was "to reform society by eliminating injustice and social vices, and providing every citizen equal opportunities for advancement and equal protection under the law."[276]

[273] Tho, *Pacification*, v.
[274] Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle For Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 3.
[275] Tho, *Pacification*, 8.
[276] Tho, *Pacification*, 8.

1962-1963: The Strategic Hamlet Program

The goals of the Pacification and Development campaign sparked a South Vietnamese initiative known as the Strategic Hamlet program. While the South Vietnamese were the ones in the forefront, travelling the countryside to implement its plan, Strategic Hamlets represented a joint effort, as American aid and funding made it possible. The program called for the development of a system of village defense that contributed to the nation's overall security.[277] There were five criteria that had to be met before a village could be declared a "Strategic Hamlet." These included a neutralized enemy infrastructure, a population that "had been organized for hamlet defense," the establishment of a defense system, the construction of "secret underground shelters for weapons and personnel… for the hamlet defense force," and the election of a functioning council and administrative body for the hamlet.[278]

Beginning in early 1962, the goal was to create a population that "would become the primary force in the fight against enemy guerrillas."[279] The government of South Vietnam constructed fortified settlements designed to allow local authorities to increase their control over the political activities of the peasantry and to resist communist attacks more effectively. By the end of 1962, over six hundred of these hamlets, ringed by moats and bamboo spikes, were complete, with hundreds more under construction.[280] However, the Strategic Hamlet program served to further alienate much of the peasantry from Diem's government because, to achieve program success, the peasants had to be uprooted from their ancestral homelands and failed to provide the material benefits that had been

[277] Tho, *Pacification*, 12.
[278] Tho, *Pacification*, 13.
[279] Tho, *Pacification*, 13.
[280] Lawrence, *Vietnam*, 73.

promised.[281] To make matters worse, upon arriving at the location of their new strategic hamlet, the peasants were forced to construct the defences themselves, all to protect themselves from the Viet Cong, who in reality threatened the government officials more than the peasantry.[282] This all but ensured the government's loss of countryside support, instead inspiring deep anger towards Saigon in the peasantry.

One of the most unbelievable aspects of this program, however, was that "frequently, strategic hamlets were thrown together in such slapdash fashion that Vietcong agents remained inside, acting as informants for their comrades."[283] It seems unfathomable that such a crucial mistake could be made in a campaign that was designed to prevent the enemy from having access to the South Vietnamese peasants, much less be made more than once, because it defeated the program's purpose in the first place. Diem and his government were clearly more interested in how other countries, namely the US, viewed viewed their anti-Communist efforts than how their own citizens viewed their country. This is a perfect example of local grievances that Communists exploited to win support in South Vietnam.[284] While attempting to win support for their own country, the South Vietnamese government had instead created Viet Cong sympathizers.[285] When President Diem had been overthrown in November 1963, the Strategic Hamlet program came to a halt and, in early 1964, was officially abandoned.

***1964: The Oil Spot and* Hop Tac**

The new South Vietnamese government was forced to find a new way to achieve US-GVN pacification goals, and the US showed a greater interest in the planning of these

[281] Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Vietnam: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73-75.
[282] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 257.
[283] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 257.
[284] Lawrence, *Vietnam*, 74.
[285] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 257.

new operations. In February 1964, General Nguyen Khanh published a new pacification plan that he had formulated with the aid of the American Embassy and MACV. Known as *Chien Thang*, or "Will to Victory," it introduced a significant new strategy towards achieving pacification by envisioning "the steady expansion of the government's presence like an oil spot spreading from secure to contested and insecure areas."[286] The idea of the oil spot would become a rather important component of future pacification efforts. *Chien Thang* also attempted "to avoid repeating the errors of the strategic hamlet program: forced relocation of people and an obsession with quantity."[287] As previously mentioned, the forced relocation was arguably the most crucial of the previous mistakes because the lands from which the peasants had been removed were the lands they had lived their whole lives, just as their parents had before them, and their parents before them. These truly were ancestral grounds in every sense of the term, as all ancestors of a family were buried on these lands as well. By removing the peasantry from their lands, the government had essentially removed them from the connections to their family.

Unfortunately, although the *Chien Thang* program addressed some of the previous pacification issues, new problems arose, most of which were related specifically to the execution efforts. The South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) failed to remain in an area for the amount of time necessary to provide for the continued protection for pacification missions already engaged in at the time.[288] It did, however, provide the basis for an American approach to pacification through the "oil spot" strategy, which had been laid out in a telegram from the embassy in Vietnam to the US Department of State. The Americans realized that, in order to counter the Viet Cong, economic and political factors

[286] Hunt, *Pacification*, 25.
[287] Hunt, *Pacification*, 25.
[288] Hunt, *Pacification*, 26.

were both important in achieving pacification.[289] Therefore, "as the armed forces clear[ed] the identified VC forces from an area, it [was] essential to follow up quickly with representatives of the civilian ministries of the government representing police, education, public works, interior, information, rural affairs, health and finance."[290] This formed the foundation for an oil spot strategy that would begin from Saigon.

By May 1964 the *Chien Thang* program was on the brink of failure and the American embassy in Saigon and MACV teamed up to propose a new initiative based on the oil spot concept. Known as *Hop Tac*, or "Victory," the program was designed to secure and pacify the areas immediately surrounding Saigon, then extending outward to secure and pacify additional areas. By starting close to the South Vietnamese capital, the area with the strongest anti-communist defenses, the program was provided with the most secure spot from which the *Hop Tac* program could spread, in accordance with the oil spot strategy. The major difference between the *Chien Thang* program and the *Hop Tac* program was that MACV was put in control of the US's support for the new program, setting an important precedent regarding American military involvement in pacification. Although the US was only involved in the program's strategy and planning, "*Hop Tac* foreshadowed the military's later role in pacification support."[291] Unfortunately, the program encountered several difficulties that led to its failure.

The first major difficulty that the *Hop Tac* program faced was the lack of police officers needed to maintain law and order in the hamlets after ARVN had cleared them and moved on. This meant that even though a hamlet had been cleared by South

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[289] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 1, Part VIII, Vietnam, 1964, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 306.
[290] *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Volume 1, Document 306.
[291] Hunt, *Pacification*, 26.

Vietnamese forces, there was likely to be little to no local security force guarding the area, which would allow an enemy force to enter or reenter the "cleared" hamlet. There was also a complete lack of guidance provided by the central government of South Vietnam. For example, "civilian development projects such as the construction of schools, market places, and maternity wards, were unable to make any progress due to political instability in the national capital."[292]

In an effort to aid pacification's success, President Lyndon B. Johnson provided Diem with a list of actions he needed to take in order to make progress in pacification. For instance, the numbers of ARVN troops and South Vietnamese police forces needed to be strengthened, while incompetent officers and commanders should be replaced, and police powers required clarification and strengthening. The authority of provincial chiefs also needed to be clarified and strengthened, while civic action programs needed to be broadened and intensified. However, despite this advice, the South Vietnamese plans for pacification had collapsed by early 1965.[293] The nearly five-year string of massive pacification failures at the hands of the South Vietnamese mission leaders, and something had to be done to shift pacification's momentum back to America's favor. The joint planning sessions were critical for establishing the objectives and tactics in such a campaign but it was time for the US forces to take charge and find the best strategy to win large-scale pacification efforts. The South Vietnamese forces would still be utilized, only now they would be a kind of support staff to facilitate the US's pacification missions.

[292] Tho, *Pacification*, 104.
[293] Hunt, *Pacification*, 29-30.

1965: Medical Aid & the CAP Approach

Beginning in 1965 American leaders were emphasizing civil actions in order to facilitate South Vietnamese pacification. These actions were mainly focused on providing medical aid and improvements in order to address "the necessity to reduce casualties and damage to the civilian population."[294] The growing concern, and subsequent increase in related actions, dated back to 1963, when American military doctors, corpsmen, nurses, and other medical personnel travelled the Vietnamese countryside with their South Vietnamese counterparts and provided medical and dental services free of charge.[295] These programs seem to have been among the few pacification programs that both the US leadership and the Vietnamese people welcomed and supported from the beginning. While the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) pushed for missions with an increased focus on medical aid, and therefore pacification efforts, in October of 1964, it was not until the US's military buildup in mid-1965 that others in the military seemed to have taken interest in improving America's pacification record.[296]

Arguably the "most realistically useful civic operation undertaken by US forces" in 1965, according to Brigadier General Tho, "was the Medical Civil Action Program (MEDCAP)." South Vietnamese citizens in rural parts of the country greatly appreciated the program since it provided them with desperately needed medical treatments and medicine. MEDCAP was conducted in conjunction with military operations, during which American troops organized dispensary services and sick calls for locals in the unit's area of operation. Furthermore, although they served primarily American troops,

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[294] Tho, *Pacification*, 63.
[295] Birtle, *COIN*, 397.
[296] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume I, Part XI "Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara)," Vietnam, 1964, eds. Edward C. Keefer and Charles S. Sampson (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), Document 388.

US medevac (medical evacuation) helicopters were often utilized in emergency civilian evacuations, like those that were caused by firefights with the enemy. A third invaluable service provided by America's armed forces came in the form of the *USS Hope*, a US Navy (USN) hospital ship that "succeeded in saving the lives of many Vietnamese whose illnesses or diseases could not be cured by local doctors or with local medical facilities and technology.[297] Thus, between mid-1965 and the end of 1968, American medical professionals distributed more than twenty-seven million medical treatments while establishing war casualty and provincial hospital programs to provide aid to citizens as well.[298] The emphasis on pacification efforts would continue to grow as the new year dawned, albeit in very differing ways.

1965-1968: The CAP Approach

After the arrival of ground forces in March 1965, both the US Army and the USMC attempted to understand how to best address the war's pacification problems. General Westmoreland and the Army decided to continue their top-down, large-scale, search-and-destroy operations, focusing on destroying the Communist main forces before it focused on pacification. The pacification efforts they did make were rather small in scope and focused mainly on intelligence gathering operations. Units in the Marine Corps were also searching for the best ways to approach the pacification campaign. This was made easier on USMC leaders, who could draw on the "wealth of experience in foreign interventions fighting guerrillas in Nicaragua, Haiti, and Santo Domingo" between 1915 and 1934.[299]

[297] Tho, *Pacification*, 65, 114.
[298] Birtle, *COIN*, 398.
[299] Keith F. Kopets, "The Combined Action Program: Vietnam," *Military Review* July-August (2002): 78.

The US Marine Corps' approach to pacification began as an experiment in 1965, following their arrival in South Vietnam. After reaching their assigned area of operations, I Corps, the USMC sought to occupy and defend three enclaves in the region: Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Li. It was in Phu Bai that the Combined Action Platoon experiment began, conducted by the 3rd Battalion of the 4th Marine Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) William W. Taylor. The three rifle companies under LTC Taylor's command posed a major obstacle in his objective to defend a ten-square-mile area that contained a critical airfield at Phu Bai. Knowing it was not enough manpower, Major Cullen C. Zimmerman, Taylor's second-in-command, suggested combining platoons of the local militia into the 3rd Battalion's defense efforts. Such an idea would become "an integral part of the Marine Corps' war in the I Corps area."[300]

Known as Combined Action Patrols (CAPs), the USMC seemed like it might have found one of the US's best approaches for achieving pacification. Although CAPs cleared South Vietnamese villages of enemy combatants, such as Army units did, CAPs differed because the Marines were "inserted… directly into the securing process."[301] Designed to strengthen local security, a thirteen-man USMC rifle squad, one US Navy hospital corpsman, and a thirty-five-man Vietnamese militia platoon from the recently-cleared, local village's Regional/Popular Force would be combined to form the platoon. The CAP itself was designed to protect the village from enemy re-infiltration from within as each Platoon "lived, worked, and fought in [the Regional/Popular force's] village until such time as the Vietnamese were capable of providing for their own

[300] Kopets, "The Combined Action Program," 78-79.
[301] Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2007), 399.

protection."[302] These interactions also helped to create stronger, friendlier, more trustworthy bonds between the US Marines and the civilians in the village, which was a further benefit to pacification programs. There were also regular Marine battalions stationed in the surrounding areas to support the CAP and its village through small-unit operations like patrols and short-range search-and-destroy missions.[303] CAPs showed promising results, as the Marines instilled an aggressive, offensive spirit in their [local force] counterparts," while also demonstrating how "winning fights against local enemy guerrillas… [the] combined unit upset the status quo by driving the communists out of the villages."[304]

Before any operational analysis of the Combined Action Patrols is discussed, there is some very important data that needs to be addressed first. Even at the peak of the CAPs program, there were only 2,220 Marines involved, representing "only 2.8 percent of the 79,000 Marines in Vietnam."[305] One of the main reasons for there being only 79,000 Marines in Vietnam in 1965 was because it was approximately half of the total number of Marines in the USMC. Only 2,220 of those in-country could be used on CAPs because there were many other missions that required Marines at various areas in their I Corps. According to critics of the Marines' CAP approach, there were three major operational failures that plagued the program.

The first, argued by General Westmoreland in order to support his attrition-first approach, was that it would be hard to achieve pacification without first inflicting significant damage on the NVA's big-unit forces.[306] This argument related to the second

[302] Birtle, *COIN*, 399.
[303] Birtle, *COIN*, 399.
[304] Kopets, "The Combined Action Program," 78-79.
[305] Kopets, "The Combined Action Program," 80.
[306] Birtle, *COIN*, 399-400.

failure, that no CAP villages, by the end of 1968, had reached the point deemed as the acceptable withdrawal point for the Marines stationed in the CAP villages.[307] The final failure was the most relevant reason that the Marines remained in CAP villages after three years. "One of the biggest factors causing such mixed results were the significant issues faced by the Vietnamese militia, issues that left them severely incapable of defending their villages without aid from American Marines."[308] The inability of local militia forces to provide for their own defense all but ensured Westmoreland's argument. However, if a reliable militia could be found and trained, the Viet Cong Infrastructure was kept from reestablishing itself, and Marine units were freed up, the NVA would be in a highly vulnerable state, in a foreign country, and under attack from an overwhelming military force.

Along with these obstacles, it is important to remember the shockingly small numbers of Marines available for I Corps overall and for CAPs more specifically, even into their third year of war. Although undermanned, when those CAP Marines were called in to clear and secure a village, the enemy stood little chance of stopping that train, and often chose to put up some light resistance before retreating. The enemy forces knew that it was much easier to re-infiltrate villages guarded by the local force units than repel an American attack. For instance, with just 2,220 Marines eligible for operations, "CAPs managed to secure over 800 hamlets and protect over 500,000 South Vietnamese civilians."[309] The ability of CAPs to clear out a village that US Marines would live in the

[307] Birtle, *COIN*, 400.
[308] Kopets, "The Combined Action Program," 79.
[309] Kopets, "The Combined Action Program," 80.

village alongside the citizenry for a certain period of time, demonstrated that the Platoons did improve village security.[310]

Despite these issues, "some analysts speculate there would have been a much different outcome to the war had the United States applied the Marines' strategy on a larger scale." There were many military officials who, having seen the benefits of CAPs firsthand, made similar statements. For instance, in his memoirs, USMC Lieutenant General (LTG) Lewis Walt argued that "'of all our innovations in Vietnam none was as successful, and lasting in effect, or as useful for the future as the Combined Action Program [CAP].'"[311] Tran Dinh Tho, a Brigadier General in the South Vietnamese Army, argued in his postwar pacification study that CAPs did indeed provide numerous realistic benefits to the overall war effort. Among the most significant of these benefits was that "the local population, living under permanent protection of these combined units, developed trust and confidence in the GVN" and that "the presence of the CAPs also denied the enemy infrastructure freedom of action."[312]

Clearly the US Marine Corps' Combined Action Patrol concept needed some work, but it was not far from being turned into a pacification campaign that would be capable of use throughout the entirety of South Vietnam. The US Marines were as effective a clearing force as the US Army, but the USMC made more of an impact in their acknowledgement of local security's importance and in their dedication to help hold the village. After the Marines joined the CAP, they are living and working alongside all of the village's citizens, while also teaching them valuable local military lessons. The impact of the Combined Action Patrols were clearly significant because they allowed the

[310] Birtle, *COIN*, 400.
[311] Kopets, "The Combined Action Program," 80, 78.
[312] Tho, *Pacification*, 101.

citizens to let down their walls and reversed their unease around these men, supposedly representing the Saigon government, who were now walking, working, waiting, and talking with all other village people. That would play a major opportunity for someone with a message that gave the rural citizenry a reason to begin trusting the South Vietnamese government again. With just a fraction of the manpower, CAP members were at least able to break down a barrier or two and start a conversation. Vietnam-wide pacification campaign that would destroy VCIs along with their Viet Cong guerrillas. Villages would be safe without needing a Marine Corps or CAP guard(s) to overwatch. Finally would come the chance to deny the NVA large-unit forces any sort of aid programs within South Vietnam. Between the program's combat effectiveness and its success in softening attitudes toward the South Vietnamese government, the CAP program demonstrated that progress could be, and was being, made towards pacification.

1966: The Honolulu Conference and PROVN

Much of 1965 had utilized civic action plans to facilitate pacification, such as the medical aid programs and the CAPs, and the progress made by those actions allowed soldiers to interact with other members of the villages and form relationships with them. Then, on December 6, 1965, McGeorge Bundy, the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, suggested "a strengthened political and economic program" to facilitate pacification.[313] There were eleven components to the pacification campaign that Bundy suggested to Johnson, including increased propaganda, efforts to improve health

[313] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 3, "November 27-December 31," Vietnam, June-December 1965, eds. David C. Humphrey, Edward C. Keefer and Louis J. Smith (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1996), Document 220.

and education, agricultural reforms, anti-inflation programs, and anti-Communist political organization.[314]

A focus on increased pacification was apparent early on with the convening of the Honolulu Conference from February 6-8, 1966. During these three days, Johnson met with South Vietnamese leaders General Nguyen Van Thieu and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky to discuss how to successfully achieve pacification in South Vietnam.[315] Agreements were reached between the three leaders that addressed pacification issues in four major areas: rural construction, health, education, and agriculture. In regards to rural construction, they agreed that "building democracy in rural areas is as important as military battles—rural construction is the central instrument in bringing about the social revolution on which Viet-Nam is now embarked."[316] When it came to health concerns, the GVN (South Vietnamese government) agreed to intensify its efforts to provide for the basic medical needs of its people while the US agreed to considerably expand its medical aid programs in an effort to achieve and exceed South Vietnamese medical needs. They agreed to emphasize vocational and technical education. Finally, to confront agricultural concerns, they determined that "increasing food production [was] a fundamental part of the GVN's effort to create a better life for its people, and U.S. assistance in this [was] a fundamental part of U.S. efforts to help the Vietnamese people build while they fight."[317]

While the leaders of the US and South Vietnam were working out the actions they intended to take in order to achieve pacification, known as winning the other war, some civilian officials attempted to bring about change by pointing out the flaws in the current

[314] *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Volume 3, Document 220.
[315] Hunt, *Pacification*, 70.
[316] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, "January 31–March 8," Vietnam, 1966, ed. David C. Humphrey (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1998), Document 83.
[317] *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, Document 83.

pacification policy and recommending alternative actions. The publication in March 1966 of a study entitled "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam" (PROVN), which had been authorized by the US Army Chief of Staff, represented a criticism of MACV's big-unit warfare strategy and their focus on body counts, after which it began "to lay the foundations for a greater emphasis on pacification in 1967."[318] The increasing pressure for greater pacification efforts sparked by reports such as PROVN recalled some attention back to the pacification issue, and civic action programs were established in Vietnam. As more thought was given to the "other war" in Vietnam, the war for the population's hearts and minds, officials called for an increased effort in national development projects which focused on "developing (a) national political parties and (b) a long range economic development plan."[319] These projects were to aid in pacification, or "winning over" the South Vietnamese populace thereby greatly reducing, if not eliminating, the communists' infiltration capabilities and providing the South Vietnamese government with a strong, unified foundation of public support. The US attempted to achieve this through civil service operations such as the construction and improvement of roads and bridges, railroads, canals, housing and schools, as well as operations that took American doctors into villages to administer medical treatment.

In a memorandum in August 1966, the Joint Chiefs provided their opinions on the PROVN Report, which they viewed as extremely significant for three main reasons, the first of which being that it presented "a conceptual approach to matters of major concern in the US effort in Vietnam." Secondly, it provided "a comprehensive digest of critical factors influencing the internal situation in South Vietnam." Finally, it was significant

[318] Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 93.
[319] *FRUS*, Volume 4, Document 288.

because it provided "background material for use in developing future concepts, policies, and actions to improve the US effort in Vietnam."[320] However, by the end of the year, it had become clear that, despite PROVN's benefits, much still needed to be done. On December 30, 1966, Foreign Service officer William Leonhart issued a memorandum to President Johnson concerning his recent trip to South Vietnam. In it Leonhart acknowledged that "the lack of progress in pacification remains the crux of the Vietnam problem, largely determining duration and extent of the war, persistence or fade-away of the NVA/VC forces, and the likelihood of negotiations."[321] The US, despite their substantial successes against the communist main forces in 1966, had been unable to successfully assist the South Vietnamese government in providing continual security at local levels. This, in turn, disproved Westmoreland's argument that by defeating the enemy's main forces first there would be much greater security information and a relatively easier pacification. According to Leonhart, that inability represented "the gap in our line" and "closing it [was] a major task for 1967."[322]

1967: CORDS, the CIA, and the Navy

Although the American combat strategy still looked the same, when it came to the land war, "what did change in early 1967, thanks to increased pressures for pacification efforts, was the sequential aspect of MACV's strategic concept."[323] Pacification efforts and combat operations would no longer be separate from each other but, instead, would now occur in coordination. This desire was codified May 1967 with the creation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) which

[320] *FRUS*, Volume 4, Document 216.
[321] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, "November 28-December 31," Vietnam, 1966, ed. David C. Humphrey (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1998), Document 353.
[322] *FRUS, 1964-1968*, Volume 4, "November 28-December 31," Document 353.
[323] Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 113.

unified American combat operations and pacification activities, those military-led as well as civilian-led, under the command of MACV.[324] Prior to this, all of the pacification efforts had been conducted separately from the others, implemented by various civil and military agencies, all of which acted independently from one another and oftentimes world at cross-purposes. CORDS, as laid out by National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 362, he was run by the Deputy for Pacification, Robert W. Komer, who, in turn, answered only to the Commander of MACV.[325] The government's main purpose in unifying combat and pacification efforts was "to permit logistic and administrative economies through consolidation and cross-servicing."[326] Why was the establishment of CORDS so significant?

According to Colonel Edward P. Metzner, a US pacification advisor to South Vietnamese district and provincial chiefs, "CORDS pulled together, under one undisputed authority, all the complex, competing, and often redundant U.S. civil and military pacification programs."[327] Arguably more important was its ability to use its influence to achieve some semblance of coordination from the South Vietnamese government whose efforts, up to that point, were fragmented and hardly effective. Metzner went so far as to argue that, "given the problems of the Vietnam War in general and of pacification in particular, it's difficult to see how any real progress was made toward pacification before CORDS was created." He cited several CORDS actions as playing important roles in his efforts to facilitate pacification at the local levels, including longer tours of duty for key

[324] Tho, *Pacification*, 56.
[325] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968*, Volume 5, "May-June," Vietnam, 1967, ed. Kent Sieg (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2002), Document 167.
[326] "Memorandum #362, Responsibility for U.S. Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development), 5/9/1967," 9 May 1967, National Security Action Memorandums, NSF, Box 9, LBJ Presidential Library.
[327] Edward P. Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War: Pacification in Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1995), 192.

personnel, the reintroduction of language training, and American superiors "who understood the interdependence of pacification and military action and who tried to influence policy accordingly."[328]

Another government program that has garnered attention since becoming public knowledge in 1970 and 1971 is the Infrastructure Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Structure (ICEX), better known as the Phoenix Program. Operating between 1967 and 1972, the program was proposed as "a means to consolidate and unify intelligence activities aimed at the destruction of the VCI."[329] Intelligence gathered through Hamlet Informant Programs and interrogations at PICs were utilized in sharply-focused attacks on the VCI by PRUs. In retrospect, according to Tho, "the Phoenix program can be termed a reasonable success." There were some internal problems with the program, most significantly an inadequate amount of capable intelligence personnel at the local levels. Another important problem was that "of identifying and prosecuting VCI members operating under cover and living mixed with the population."[330] Despite these obstacles, the program still managed to "neutralize" over 81,000 guerrillas, a euphemism for an enemy that had been captured, had surrendered, had defected, or had been killed.

In accordance with NSAM 362, pacification efforts by the US Navy (USN) also fell under the purview of CORDS. For instance, the US Navy made rather significant contributions to revitalized civic action efforts by distributing 217,000 pounds of food, 373,000 pounds of wood, and over 57,000 pounds of cement to South Vietnamese civilians during various pacification programs. Naval influence was at its highest in

[328] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, 192.
[329] Tho, *Pacification*, 66.
[330] Tho, *Pacification*, 74.

programs dealing with medicine and public health, such as in November 1967, naval medics "performed 36,514 medical exams, 3,428 dental treatments, and 1,254 immunizations."[331] Despite the increased focus on pacification throughout 1967, the new strategies and programs had yet to achieve the kinds of results desired. Although a village's VCI could be destroyed and the citizens' support could be won, pacification efforts alone failed to provide the equally important security factors that resulted from battlefield victories. This argument, one that a significant number of American military leaders continued to voice, seemed to be vindicated by the events of 1968.

1968: The Tet Offensive

When Communist forces launched the Tet Offensive on January 31, 1968, they successfully drew US-GVN forces away from the countryside. Once the Allied forces were distracted within the urban areas, Viet Cong guerrillas were sent back into the pacified areas and began wreaking havoc. That main Communist goal had been successful, and they quickly went to work to reestablish their VCIs before they were ordered to flee. Ironically, the speed and effectiveness with which the Allied forces put down the offensive prevented the Communists from reestablishing their VCIs to their former strength. North Vietnamese regular forces had been destroyed to such an extent that Viet Cong were called upon to support overt military activities and, as a result, the VCI ranks were dealt their most significant loss ever.[332]

After the Tet Offensive had been put down, Allied forces "followed up their victories by initiating a three-month pacification plan called the 'Accelerated Pacification

[331] John D. Sherwood, *War in the Shallows: U.S. Navy Coastland and Riverine Warfare in Vietnam 1965-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Heritage Command, 2015), 265.
[332] Tho, *Pacification*, 73.

Campaign (APC),' from November 1968 to January 1969."[333] The APC was facilitated by the fact that much of rural South Vietnam had been left to Allied control as the decimated Communist main forces withdrew to their base areas in border regions and, as a result, "pacification began its most promising period at the end of 1968."[334] When examining the Marine Corps' CAPs strategy, developed two years earlier, a well-trained, heavily armed military force assaulted an enemy area, combined with a local security force to clear and secure the area by living in new areas secure the local force in charge of protecting the area two years earlier.

Pacification Assessments and Conclusion

Pacification efforts were focused on addressing some of the underlying civic concerns that could affect the war, such as President Diem's need to make up for his years of neglect of the South Vietnamese peasantry. While South Vietnamese, anti-communist circles were strongest in the country's urban areas, the peasants harbored resentments toward their government, which Diem feared the Viet Cong would exploit through a coup or revolt. To try and win back the peasantry's support, Diem and his officials created the Pacification and Development campaign in 1962, sparking a South Vietnamese initiative known as the Strategic Hamlet program. This all but ensured the government's loss of countryside support, instead inspiring deep anger towards Saigon in the peasants, who had to be uprooted from their ancestral homelands, were forced to construct their own defenses, and protect themselves from the fierce Viet Cong and failed to provide the material benefits that had been promised.[335] To make matters worse, upon arriving at the location of their new strategic hamlet, the peasants were forced to

[333] Tho, *Pacification*, 16.
[334] Hunt, *Pacification*, 3.
[335] Lawrence, *Vietnam*, 74.

construct the defences themselves, all to protect themselves from the Viet Cong, who in reality threatened the government officials more than the peasantry.[336] In the end, the program had inspired deep anger towards Saigon in the peasantry. Even more indicative of the problems in Saigon was the fact "that 'frequently, strategic hamlets were thrown together in such slapdash fashion that Vietcong agents remained inside, acting as informants for their comrades.'"[337]

The historiography of the Vietnam War has offered readers with several other broad factors that plagued the war. For example, George C. Herring has pointed out that "the fundamental problem was the absence of security."[338] Such an obstacle factored into Brigadier General Tho's position that one of the most obvious patterns in pacification was that the campaign's progress depended almost entirely on the level of security provided by American and South Vietnamese forces.[339] As Andrew J. Birtle has pointed out, "the fruits of even the most successful pacification endeavor tended to be short lived, as South Vietnamese officials frequently proved incapable of maintaining the gains achieved by the departing Americans."[340] Another obstacle that became widespread, especially before the creation of CORDS, was the lack of coordination between the numerous US and South Vietnamese civil and military agencies. At the heart of the problem was the military and civilian agencies' separation of the responsibilities and authority regarding pacification programs. There were also significant coordination issues between the various civilian agencies that were involved. However, three weeks after

[336] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 257.
[337] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 257.
[338] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 158.
[339] Tho, *Pacification*, 163.
[340] Birtle, *COIN*, 388.

Edward Metzner's arrival, these coordination problems were ameliorated by NSAM 362 and the creation of CORDS.[341]

A lack of clarity in doctrine also proved detrimental to effective pacification programs.[342] American forces "did not always participate [or were ineffective] in pacification operations, their powerful combat support assets and intervention capabilities directly contributed to the clearing of several pacification areas."[343] They provided some of their most significant contributions by destroying the enemy with the most incredible demonstrations of firepower. It was the USMC's Combined Action Platoons, however, that did the most good when it came to pacification. By living and working within a village and providing security, the Marines were able to form good relations with the South Vietnamese peasantry, gain their support, and make significant strides in combating the Viet Cong.

[341] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, 31.
[342] Birtle, *COIN*, 389.
[343] Tho, *Pacification*, 166.

CONCLUSION

Between 1964-1968, America's efforts in South Vietnam were plagued by a variety of problems, but the Vietnam War was not unwinnable. The United States possessed the requirements necessary to defeat its communist foes during President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration. At one point or another during those four years, the US had the manpower, the superior weaponry, and the correct strategies to defeat the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong guerrillas, but only if it all came together at the same time. The problem had been that American leaders, both civil and military, failed to correctly and simultaneously piece their advantages together.

One of the most significant military failures was the government-imposed restrictions on potential areas of operation. While General William Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy was a feasible plan, it could only be successful if he had been allowed to fully pursue the enemy into their base areas in Laos, Cambodia, and southern North Vietnam. With the restrictions on cross-border operations, the US government should have forced Westmoreland to abandon his pursuit strategy and follow a clear-and-hold strategy. As the war demonstrated, a pursuit strategy stretched the US Army out over large areas as they chased the North Vietnamese main forces across the countryside, operations that ultimately failed to destroy the enemy before they reached the safety of their cross-border sanctuaries. Meanwhile, Viet Cong guerrillas were able to slip through the cracks and reinfiltrate areas that had already been cleared, rendering those operations a waste of time and effort.

The cross-border restrictions on ground operations rendered the air war's strategic bombing strategy, exemplified by Rolling Thunder operations, more-or-less meaningless. Such missions would have proven useful in softening up enemy defenses prior to ground assaults or as a way of destroying the morale and economic production capabilities of a more industrialized nation. However, since the former of these options had been rejected and the latter did not apply to North Vietnam, the air war should have stopped wasting its resources on strategic bombing missions and instead emphasized close air support actions that repeatedly proved invaluable to ground operations. The US's naval strategy proved to be of significant benefit to the war effort, resulting in a near-impregnable coastal blockade, a successful riverine interdiction campaign, and, most importantly, a heavily-armed quick-reaction force capable of striking almost anywhere along South

Vietnam's rivers at a moment's notice. The only improvements that could have been made were developing and introducing the two riverine components earlier, a move that would have potentially allowed for the US to gain an earlier, and possibly more complete, grip on the South Vietnamese river system.

When it came to the pacification campaign, the American leadership should have done more to ensure that their advisers understood their roles and responsibilities. Equally important, it should have been stressed to the civic and military leaders of the US's pacification efforts that a well-coordinated and effectively conducted pacification program was just as crucial as combat operations. The campaign would have further benefited from a more thorough pre-deployment training program for advisers in order to avoid the "learning through failure" situations depicted by Colonel Metzner's memoirs. If the US had made the necessary adjustments to align their strategies and tactics during the time of their greatest strength, between 1965 and 1968, much greater and more permanent success would have been achieved, significantly increasing their chances of victory and preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism. The US and their South Vietnamese allies, more than likely, would have been able to push the Communist forces out of South Vietnam completely and win the war outright.

LBJ's Decisions

As historian H. R. McMaster clearly stated, "the war in Vietnam was not lost in the field… It was lost in Washington, D.C."[344] Jerome Doherty made a similar argument but placed the blame specifically on Johnson's decision making which led to ill-conceived, often "contradictory, and ultimately self-defeating" strategies and

[344] H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 333.

actions.[345] Johnson always knew that he could have won the Vietnam War by unleashing the full power of the US military but, once self-limitations were decided on, the chances for victory were all but squashed.[346] Even those tasked with carrying out the war, such as Lieutenant Frank Elkins, a naval fighter pilot who "could not understand why we were not allowed to strike those targets and take those military actions that we knew were necessary to win the war."[347] In retrospect, the Vietnam War does appear to have been one of, if not the, worst-managed war in American history.[348]

McNamara's Key Factors

In an attempt to deal with the war's legacy, former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara did what many others involved in the Vietnam War did when he published an account of his wartime experiences. In his final assessment of the conflict he argued that the United States failed to win the Vietnam War because of eleven major factors, although several of them were inexorably linked to each other. For instance, McNamara argued that one factor was the US's misjudgement of their enemy and his motivations for fighting.[349] This was related to another of McNamara's key factors, the American misunderstanding of their South Vietnamese allies by viewing them "in terms of [American] experiences," and both factors combined to reflect the US's "profound ignorance of the… area."[350] However, it is the last of McNamara's eleven key factors that seemed to carry the most weight in his mind as he returned to it several times in his final assessment of the war. The eleventh factor was America's "failure to organize the top

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[345] Jerome Doherty, *A Civilian in Green Clothes* (Raleigh, NC: Ivy House Publishing, 2007), xi.
[346] Doherty, *A Civilian in Green Clothes*, 201.
[347] Frank Elkins, *The Heart of a Man: A Naval Pilot's Vietnam Diary*, ed. Marilyn Elkins (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), viii.
[348] Jerry Cook, *Once A Fighter Pilot* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2002), 215.
[349] Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 321-322.
[350] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 322.

echelons of the executive branch to deal effectively" with the war. As a result, the US was unable to analyze or debate their actions and unable to make adjustments when failure and the need to change course became apparent.[351]

On one hand, one must take his argument with a grain of salt because it represented a way for McNamara to shift blame for the American defeat elsewhere. However, such an argument is more than compelling when the decisions regarding America's strategy and tactics are reviewed. Had those levels of the US government and its military been properly organized, there likely would have been a much greater chance to make the necessary adjustments. Those adjustments might very well have facilitated the correct and simultaneous combination of the factors for victory, factors that the US possessed but were, at the time, inadequately utilizing.

Ky's Factors of Defeat

The idea of an incorrect course of action and the failure to make adjustments can also be found in another Allied official's assessment of why the US was defeated in Vietnam. South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky argued that "the way in which the Americans implemented the [limited war] theory lost the war for South Vietnam." The US war effort had been severely impeded, according to Ky, by their fundamental mistake of employing a juggernaut-style force to fight a conflict that required subtlety. He also addresses the issues regarding the US's self-imposed restrictions. Many of the actions originally restricted, Ky points out, eventually had to be taken but by then it was too late and the cost of the delayed decisions came at a much higher cost.[352] Despite the embarrassment of losing a winnable war, and being defeated

[351] McNamara and VanDeMark, *In Retrospect*, 323.
[352] Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost The Vietnam War* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 143-144, 148.

by a third-world country to boot, valuable lessons can be learned from America's Vietnam experience. John McCain summed it up best when he explained that the United States "tried to win the conflict on the cheap, with no clear strategy for success."[353] Instead, McNamara reduced the military's efforts to less-vigorous conflict alternatives, none of which were an adequate substitute for a winning strategy.[354]

Ky's argument is a valid one. It is true that many of the actions restricted during the Johnson administration had to be taken later and that they were taken too late. If the US wanted to use its juggernaut-style force, it should have allowed cross-border operations against Communist sanctuaries. If it had been decided that the restrictions be kept, bombing campaigns should have been focused on close air support missions while ground troops held the ground they cleared. The Communists could have been forced to retreat with one of these strategies or the other, but not both.

"Winnable" Analysis

Hindsight, of course, is twenty-twenty, and there is a chance that South Vietnam still could have fallen following America's departure. But as far as their intervention is concerned, the strategic and tactical shifts mentioned here certainly would have given the US and South Vietnam the greatest chance for success prior to 1968. According to General Fred Weyand, "the Vietnam War was not unwinnable… it was just not winnable Westmoreland's war."[355] Whether or not the United States could have won the Vietnam War has divided analysts between those who believe it was "winnable" and those who believe it was "unwinnable." To those of the winnable cohort, the war's outcome could

[353] Gil Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2001), 170.
[354] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 172.
[355] Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 197.

have been altered with a "more effective use of U.S. military power."[356] The belief that the war was winnable "reflects the frustration over a conflict in which the United States, through its superior firepower and mobility, seemingly won all of the war's battles, but lost the war."[357] Gradual escalation impeded American military efforts by depriving it of the chance to directly assault the enemy.

General Westmoreland's commitment to a strategy of search and destroy compounded American problems by squandering the time, energy, and manpower required to chase around the North Vietnamese main forces.[358] The problem of wasted resources was exacerbated by the fact that, as previously mentioned, US forces almost always failed to inflict any significant casualties upon the enemy before they reached the safety of their cross-border sanctuaries. Graduated force represented the worst American action in Vietnam.[359] "We didn't employ military power to achieve a defined purpose," Dorland concluded, "we just hung on in a meat-grinder engagement and fought our opponents in the arena of their greatest strength."[360] Instead of pursuing a strategy focused on search and destroy missions with operational limitations, "the United States should have carried the war fully and directly against North Vietnam."[361] America should have taken the war to the enemy in their cross-border bases and in Hanoi, with both airpower and ground forces. The limits placed on the air war as a result of gradualism caused the campaign's failure by preventing American "forces from waging the air

[356] Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 173.
[357] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 173.
[358] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 174.
[359] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 157.
[360] Dorland, *Legacy of Discord*, 158.
[361] Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, 174.

campaign to best calculate and achieve maximum results."[362] The US wasted over fifty thousand lives, and eventually lost a winnable war, by failing to employ its overwhelming military power.

[362] Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 73.

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