

Chapter III

DESTROYING THE COUNTRY TO SAVE IT:

THE U.S. WAR ON VIETNAM, 1960-1968

In the later 1960s and 1970s the Johnson and Nixon administrations would often justify the American war on Vietnam as an effort to defend an ally, the RVN, from an outside aggressor, the DRVN. The northern Vietnamese, they claimed, had “invaded” the country below the seventeenth parallel, thereby forcing the United States to intervene with advisors, material, and eventually combat troops. But, for several reasons, that justification falls short. Vietnam was historically one nation, albeit “temporarily” divided at Geneva; the RVN was a fictive state, conceived and carried by the United States; and perhaps most importantly, the opposition to Diem arose in the south *despite* Ho’s advice to be cautious and patient. Later claims that the north invaded the south notwithstanding, it was in fact southerners who led the struggle against the RVN.

Revolution from the Bottom Up

In 1954, as part of the Geneva settlement, Vietnamese on both sides of the partition line were allowed to travel north- or southward. Alarmed by government and church propaganda and afraid of Ho’s socialist doctrine, about a million Vietnamese, especially Catholics, moved from the north to the RVN. A smaller yet still significant number of Viet Minh supporters moved to the DRVN. The southern Catholics, American officials hoped, would provide popular support for Diem’s state; the Viet Minh in the north hoped to settle down and possibly return to the south after the 1956 reunification. In both cases, they were disappointed. The Diem regime never

developed any popular appeal, while many in the north finally did move below the seventeenth parallel, but as soldiers returning to take on the RVN. Thus, when the war began in earnest in 1960-1961, the RVN would have little native backing, while Viet Minh forces *in the south*, either those who had remained there or returnees, would fight against the southern military, now known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. In fact, Ho continued to oppose war in Vietnam.

Beginning in mid-1959 and continuing throughout the year, southern insurgents, alarmed by Diem's repression and especially Law 10/59, began a series of "spontaneous uprisings." In Quang Ngai, a coastal city in the northern RVN, about 16,000 local activists seized 16 villages in Tra Bong district and established a larger liberated zone of about 50 villages. By the end of the year, villagers and Viet Minh support personnel, with minimal and sometimes no involvement from Hanoi, had rebelled in various places throughout the central highlands and Mekong areas. In January 1960, uprisings began in Ben Tre, in the delta just outside Saigon. The Viet Minh had been strong there in the French period and had redistributed land to the peasantry, only to see the old French and Mandarin landlords return after 1954 and confiscate land from the new owners. Boiling with resentment, villagers and Viet Minh self-defense forces struck and liberated dozens of villages in Ben Tre. As Madame Nguyen Thi Dinh, a Communist insurgent, described it, "it was a night of terrifying thunder and lightning striking the enemy on their heads. Attacked by surprise, they were scared out of their wits and stayed put in the posts."¹ The ARVN ultimately cracked down at Ben Tre, but the rebellions continued into early 1960. Indeed, various southerners met to consider forming a united front against Diem as the uprisings had included all groups in Vietnamese society--landholders, civil servants, and intellectuals, as well as

Communists, workers, and peasants. But the northern leadership in Hanoi remained conservative and even critical of southern insurgents who, they believed, acted prematurely and whose tactics often bordered on terrorism against those who might be persuaded to join the cause. The “Committee for the South,” organized in Hanoi and led by Le Duan, believed that reunification could be achieved peacefully and insisted that “for the moment, our emphasis must remain on organizing our forces, propagandizing the masses, and preparing for the future general uprising.”²

The people were moving ahead of the northern leadership, however. While southern insurgency leaders had recognized the need for a political base, they were also deeply damaged by the Diemist attacks and decided to organize themselves for armed struggle. Thus, on 20 December 1960, at a meeting in Tay Ninh Province in northwest Saigon on the Cambodian border, representatives of various southern Vietnamese political, social, religious, and ethnic groups established the *National Liberation Front*, or the *NLF*. Almost all the delegates at Tay Ninh were native southerners, although a handful of old Viet Minh cadre were there as well. All agreed, as the founding communique put it, that “the immediate task of the revolution in the South is to achieve the unity of the whole people, to fight resolutely against the aggressive and war-mongering U.S. imperialists, to overthrow the dictatorial ruling Ngo Dinh Diem clique, lackeys of the U.S. imperialists, to form a national democratic coalition in south Viet Nam, to win national independence and to achieve national reunification.”³ By linking together the forces of imperialism [the United States] and feudalism [the Diem regime], as well as calling for a broad political spectrum and unification, the NLF could retain popular backing and emphasize the fundamentally nationalist, not Communist, nature of the struggle. To that end, the NLF both tried to lower rents and taxes for peasants while allowing all but the worst landlords and cronies

of the Ngos to maintain their property. The Front thus grew out of conditions in the south between 1954 and 1960 and, if anything, Ngo Dinh Diem was as responsible for its creation as Ho Chi Minh.

Kennedy and Vietnam: Hollywood vs. Reality

The establishment of the NLF amounted to a vital challenge to the Diem regime, one that, absent popular support, the RVN would not be able to meet. Just weeks after the Front was born, however, the new U.S. president essentially pledged to meet such challenges for them. John Fitzgerald Kennedy [JFK] of Massachusetts--young, handsome, and vigorous--took the oath of office on 20 January 1961 promising to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty.” Ironically, outgoing President Eisenhower, in his farewell address, had warned against the growing militarism in American society and such bellicose rhetoric, but JFK sent an opposite message. Though Kennedy had not specifically referred to Vietnam in his speech, the Diem regime could feel comfortable that their old friend would not let them down. In 1956, as a senator, Kennedy had called the RVN “the cornerstone of the free world in Asia”; it was, he admitted, “our offspring, we cannot abandon it.”⁴ As president, he would not.

In 1991, millions of Americans plunked down seven or eight dollars to see Oliver Stone’s epic film *JFK*. The young president, Stone suggested, had seen the futility of the Cold War and was ready to withdraw from Vietnam when the CIA, the military, and other representatives of the military-industrial complex, fearing that his new found pacifism was bad for business, had him assassinated. Such ideas may be a conspiracy theorist’s dream, but historically they are nightmarish. In truth, JFK, in less than three years, committed American treasure, men, and

credibility to the RVN and dramatically enlarged the American role there. By 22 November 1963, the United States, rather than pull out, was deeply involved in the civil war in Vietnam. Far from being a dove, Kennedy was the driving force behind the American intervention in Indochina.

Vietnam had not been crucial to JFK as he entered the White House; in fact, Eisenhower had warned him that events in Laos would be more difficult in 1961. But, just months into his presidency, Kennedy was beset with challenges and failure. In Laos, he had to agree to the formation of a government which included the Communist Pathet Lao. Worse, in Cuba the U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion was a fiasco. The leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, added to Kennedy's woes, pledging support for wars of liberation in the Third World, refusing to remove the Berlin Wall, and treating the American president with disdain at a summer meeting in Vienna. Kennedy thus believed that he had to make a stand somewhere-- "that son of a bitch [Khrushchev] won't pay any attention to words, he has to see you move," he told reporters--so why not Vietnam? Walt Whitman Rostow, one of his closest advisors, suggested that "clean-cut success in Vietnam" could erase the stain of disaster from the Bay of Pigs. In Saigon, the head of the American MAAG, General Lionel McGarr, likewise noted the White House's "strong determination" to stop the "deterioration of US prestige" in April 1961.⁵

Thus JFK, if not desperate at least anxious for a Cold War success, began to increase significantly the U.S. commitment to the RVN and eventually to conduct an aggressive war there. In January, he authorized the Counterinsurgency Plan for southern Vietnam, which called for training the southern army in anti-guerrilla tactics, not just conventional warfare. He then approved expanding the ARVN by 20,000 troops, to 170,000, and then by another 30,000, while

enlarging the Civil Guard from 32,000 to 68,000 troops. To pay for these reinforcements, the White House sent Diem an additional \$42 million in 1961, on top of the \$225 million per year he was receiving already. And in May, Kennedy sent Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson [LBJ] to Vietnam as a public relations measure. While in Saigon, Johnson told the media that Diem was “the Winston Churchill of Southeast Asia,” though he privately admitted later that “shit, man, he’s the only boy we got out there.”⁶

Recognition of Diem’s repression and America’s limited choices did not deter the White House. Indeed, JFK refused to even talk with Ho Chi Minh or the NLF, fearing that negotiations would lead to “a major crisis of nerve” in Vietnam. To the president, American *credibility*--appearing strong against Communist advance--would thus be a major factor driving his Indochina policy, and he would not back down. Nor would his Secretary of Defense, Robert Strange McNamara, who informed military officials that the administration “had made the decision to pursue the Vietnam affair with vigor and that all reasonable amounts of resources could be placed at the disposal of the commanders in the area.”⁷ And so, in 1962, it was done. In January, a new commander, Paul D. Harkins, arrived in Vietnam convinced that America’s technological superiority would reverse conditions there. The war was going badly, with the NLF’s political influence growing and the armed wing of the insurgency, the *Viet Cong*, or *VC*, holding the military initiative. To Harkins, and the White House, American tanks and aircraft could be used to flush out the VC and destroy them. In 1962, then, JFK deployed Army helicopter companies, fixed-wing aircraft, a troop carrier squadron, reconnaissance planes, air controllers, crop defoliants to destroy the VC’s jungle cover, Navy mine sweepers, CS gas and napalm--a gasoline gel that seared human flesh. He also authorized the development of *strategic*

hamlets in the RVN--a disastrous program in which Vietnamese peasants were removed from their homes and possessions and relocated to allegedly safe hamlets where they would be protected from the NLF, but which in fact alienated even more villagers from the government and helped VC recruiting efforts. At the same time, the number of U.S. "Advisors" in Vietnam, 800 in January 1961, rose to 3400 in April 1962 and over 11,000 by the end of the year, and would go up again to 16,700 by the time of Kennedy's assassination. The ARVN grew again too, to 219,000, while the Civil Guard increased to 77,000. That level of commitment and the introduction of American firepower had the desired impact. The VC fled in horror as U.S.-provided weapons and ammunition rained down on them. As Harkins put it, the napalm "really puts the fear of God into the Viet Cong . . . and that is what counts." McNamara was similarly pleased with the "tremendous progress" in 1962, and the American commander was assuring him that "there is no doubt we are on the winning side."⁸ The administration was so flush with success and optimistic that the war would be over quickly, it even approved the withdrawal of 1000 American troops. While it may not have been as pleasing as Marilyn Monroe's seductive rendition of "Happy Birthday Mr. President" at Madison Square Garden, events in Vietnam surely put a smile on Kennedy's face in 1962.

Breakdown 1963

The optimism of 1962 was short-lived. On 2 January 1963, the VC routed the ARVN, even though it had a 4 to 1 troop advantage, artillery, armor, and helicopters, at the village of Ap Bac, 35 miles southwest of Saigon in the Mekong. The enemy struck, eluded the southern army, and struck again, killing three Americans and downing five helicopters in the process. ARVN commanders, under orders from Diem not to lose troops, did not force their men to fight and so

allowed the VC to take the initiative and then escape from Ap Bac. For the NLF, Ap Bac marked a turnaround from the previous year, and its prospects would improve throughout the next twelve months, while Diem's took a corresponding downturn, militarily and politically. For the RVN, the biggest crisis in 1963 was religious turmoil. The Ngo family had favored Catholics in administrative and military matters since 1954, and began to repress the majority Buddhists-- which they saw, with reason, as a political enemy--more intensely in the spring, forbidding them from celebrating Buddha's birthday and even sending troops into their temples to attack and kill the faithful.

Then, on 10 June, a monk named Quang Duc sat down in the middle of a busy Saigon street, doused himself with gasoline, and lit himself on fire to protest the Diemist repression of his people. The world's media, tipped off by the Buddhists, were there and Quang Duc's story and photo were front page news worldwide. Madame Nhu, ever tactful, referred to the immolation as a "Buddhist barbecue" and offered to supply fuel for the next one. For his part, Diem continued to strike at the Buddhists. After nearly a decade of supporting the RVN and the Ngos, it was finally clear that Diem and his brother were beyond rehabilitation. The United States, which had followed a policy of "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem," finally accepted his overthrow on 1 November 1963 in a coup led by ARVN officers in which Diem and Nhu were both killed. Publicly, the Buddhist situation had become, so to speak, incendiary, and it was impossible to credibly claim that America was fighting for "democracy" in Vietnam so long as the Ngos were in power.

There was, however, a private yet probably more important reason behind the U.S. abandonment of Diem. His brother Nhu, also aware that the regime's days were numbered,

began to make overtures to the NLF about a negotiated settlement and the establishment of a coalition, neutral government in the south, with the Ngos and the Front both included. Killing Buddhists may have been awfully distasteful, but going behind American backs to discuss an end to the civil war was unforgivable. Afraid that peace might break out short of victory, Kennedy reiterated the American commitment to Vietnam in late 1963. In interviews with TV anchormen Chet Huntley and Walter Cronkite shortly before his death, JFK insisted that Vietnam was “a very important struggle” and that withdrawal “only makes it easy for the Communists. I think we should stay.”⁹ Despite recognizing the laundry list of military and political shortcomings and barriers to success in the RVN, and sending 16,000 advisors and billions of dollars to that point with little noticeable improvement, JFK was not retreating from his commitment in Vietnam. Contrary to apologists like Oliver Stone, Arthur Schlesinger, John Newman, and others who claim that he would have pulled out of Vietnam after the 1964 elections, Kennedy has to be judged on his actual deeds, and his record was one of constant reinforcement and escalation. As the noted historian Thomas Paterson observed, “he had his chance, and he failed.”¹⁰

“No More Coup Shit”

Lyndon Johnson of Texas became president in November 1963, dedicated to “seeing things through in Vietnam.” At his first meeting with diplomatic and military officials he told them to “tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word.”¹¹ To LBJ, a product of World War II and a congressman raised on the Cold War, there was really no thought of pulling away from Vietnam. Indeed, America’s biggest problem remained the absence of a legitimate government in the south to take on the NLF. If anything, instability and chaos in the RVN *worsened* after Diem’s removal. The new president, Duong Van “Big” Minh,

lost U.S. support when he, like the Ngos, considered a negotiated, neutralist settlement with the NLF. As George Ball, a state department official, observed, “nothing is further from [our] mind than ‘neutral solution for Vietnam.’ We intend to win.”¹²

For his heresy, “Big” Minh too was deposed. In another coup, directed by American officials, General Nguyen Khanh came to power in January 1964. Minh, however, remained in country and he and Khanh continued to feud, so Khanh was overthrown in the spring, returned in the summer, and was ousted again in September. At that point, Tran Van Huong became president, only to be removed under Buddhist pressure in December and replaced by Phan Huy Quat, who in turn was replaced by a government led by both Huong and Khanh in January 1965. The ARVN was overthrowing presidents and changing governments the way George Steinbrenner hired and fired Yankee managers--between the Diem coup and February 1965, there were over a dozen different governments in the RVN, with six between September 1964 and the following February alone. Amid such disarray, the ambassador in Saigon, General Maxwell D. Taylor, found it “impossible to foresee a stable and effective government under any name in anything like the near future.” LBJ, typically, was more blunt: “no more of this coup shit,” he ordered his aides.¹³

Ever since putting Ngo Dinh Diem in power, the United States had been looking for a popular and effective government in southern Vietnam, but was no closer in 1964 than a decade earlier. Still, this did not deter the American mission in Vietnam. For reasons of credibility and politics, the United States would stay the course in Indochina. As John McNaughton, a Pentagon official, described it, America had to intervene in Vietnam to prove its strength and conviction to allies and potential enemies alike. Only 10 percent of the reason for involvement, he believed,

was to help the people of Vietnam have a better life. To the president, the lessons of Harry Truman--who was blamed for “losing” China at the time of Mao’s victory--and the rise of McCarthyism was always present. If Ho won in Vietnam, LBJ feared a “mean and destructive debate . . . that would shatter my presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy.” Apparently in seriousness, he added that Truman’s problems with China “were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.”¹⁴ And so Johnson escalated.

A Streetcar Named Pleiku: Escalation and Americanization

Throughout 1964, the president sent more military personnel and arms to the RVN, and authorized a series of covert measures--called 34-A operations and DeSoto patrols--to undermine the DRVN. In August, two American destroyers, the *Maddox* and the *C. Turner Joy*, were in DRVN territorial waters as part of the 34-A operations when they were allegedly attacked by north Vietnamese torpedo boats in the *Gulf of Tonkin*. The attacks were never substantiated--Johnson himself laughed, “hell, those dumb stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish”--but the episode gave LBJ a convenient excuse to begin air strikes above the seventeenth parallel and to ask Congress for authority to “take all necessary measures” to defend the RVN. The so-called Gulf of Tonkin Resolution then passed 416-0 in the House of Representatives and 88-2 in the Senate [with Ernest Gruening of Alaska and Wayne Morse of Oregon dissenting]. The resolution was a blank check for the president to wage war in Vietnam, or, as he put it, “it was like Grandma’s nightshirt, it covered everything.”¹⁵ The Tonkin episode was indeed timely, for conditions in Vietnam were deteriorating. Despite receiving \$2 million *a day* in American aid, the RVN was still in chaos, and the ARVN’s desertion rates were rising as morale was sinking. Meanwhile, the NLF and VC were consistently impressive. The enemy, by McNamara’s

admission, controlled over 40 percent of all RVN territory, and had majority control in over 50 percent of all southern provinces, with over 90 percent control in five.¹⁶

The defense secretary and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, duly alarmed, thus visited the president on 27 January 1965 to tell him that “*our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat*” and to recommend that he “use our military power” to take on the NLF.¹⁷ Johnson agreed and in mid-February began to ratchet up the war, at first through the air. The immediate cause of this new escalation came when the VC mortared a U.S. army barracks at Pleiku in the central highlands, killing 9 Americans, wounding 109 others, and damaging or destroying 22 aircraft. The president thus began *Operation Rolling Thunder*, a series of sustained air attacks against the DRVN. Assuming that Ho was controlling the insurgency in the south, LBJ believed that Rolling Thunder would convince the north Vietnamese to stop the rebellion against the RVN. “Now I have Ho Chi Minh’s pecker in my pocket,” the president even boasted. Rolling Thunder began ostensibly in retaliation for the Pleiku attacks, but that was simply a rationale, an expedient excuse, for a policy decision that was already in the works. As Bundy, who was visiting the army base at the time of the VC strikes, admitted “Pleikus are like streetcars”--if you miss one, another will come along shortly.¹⁸

In time, Rolling Thunder would become the most massive air campaign in the history of warfare. Its impact never lived up to the hype, however, as the bombings did not affect the DRVN’s ability to support the insurgency or its resolve to liberate Vietnam on both sides of the seventeenth parallel. The Army’s Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, later observed that “if anything came out of Vietnam, it was that airpower couldn’t do the job.”¹⁹ It was thus clear in early 1965 that NLF victory was imminent short of a dramatic American response. So, on 8

March, American Marines landed at Da Nang, the first U.S. troops to enter Vietnam with a stated combat mission. By April, the United States had 33,000 troops in the RVN, with another 20,000 on the way, and they were engaging in offensive operations against the VC. Just months later, with conditions no better, Harkins's replacement as commander, General William Westmoreland, asked for an additional 44 battalions [125,000 troops] and authority to conduct operations in the RVN with even fewer restrictions. After weeks of agonizing debate, during which McNamara and the military made it clear that the situation in Vietnam was not promising, LBJ, on 28 July, approved the deployment of 50,000 troops to Vietnam, increased monthly draft calls to 35,000, and promised more soldiers to Westmoreland "as requested." That decision essentially *Americanized* the war in Vietnam. Johnson had signaled that the United States was ready to take over the responsibility of fighting the VC from the ARVN. At the same time, however, LBJ refused to activate the National Guard, put the economy on a war footing, or commit as many troops as the military had wanted. American officials, the historian Larry Berman has observed, had thus "decided to lose the war slowly."²⁰ But not everyone was so pessimistic. Shortly after the July decisions, LBJ received a telegram from the Hell's Angels Motorcycle Gang offering to go to Vietnam to kill Communists. At least someone wanted to.

Hell No, We Won't Go

U.S. military officials were ambivalent about the Americanization of the war in July 1965, in large measure because they remained opposed to war in Vietnam, as they had since the 1950s. Indeed, Ridgway's stand against intervention at Dien Bien Phu was fairly representative of the armed forces approach to Vietnam in the next decade as well. In 1960, a good number of officers, including Generals Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin, had publicly supported JFK's

candidacy, and in return the president and McNamara had substantially increased defense budgets once in office. The brass certainly appreciated the money, but did not share Kennedy's enthusiasm for involvement in Vietnam. The heads of the Air Force and Navy, which would fight at a distance and take far fewer casualties, were willing to consider a military role in Indochina, but they were not a majority. More typically, Marine Commandant David Shoup rejected calls for intervention while the Army Chief of Staff, General George Decker, thought that "there was no good place to fight" in Southeast Asia. The commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, Admiral Harry D. Felt, was also "strongly opposed" to troop deployments, especially because he anticipated that the ARVN would fight even less if American troops were there to bail them out. Felt, like most officers, believed that the United States should limit its role to training and supplying the south Vietnamese military to take on the VC by themselves. Perhaps no officer received as much publicity for his criticism as Colonel John Paul Vann, whose leaks to the New York Times revealed that the ARVN was avoiding battle and that the heavy use of American firepower and air strikes was killing huge numbers of civilian villagers--the very people that the Americans were trying to "save"--throughout the south. As one Army report from 1962 concluded, "the military and political situation in South Vietnam can be aptly described by four words, 'it is a mess.'"²¹

General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Shoup's replacement as Marine Commandant, was just as candid. "We're up to our knees in the quagmire" already, he said in 1963, and "frankly . . . we do not want to get any more involved in South Vietnam." He then warned fellow Marine officers, "you see what happened to the French? Well, maybe the same thing is going to happen to us." Throughout 1964 and 1965, as the Johnson administration repeatedly escalated the war in

Vietnam, the military remained unconvinced of the need for or value of intervention. Indeed, both Generals Taylor and Westmoreland, the ambassador and commander who are remembered as hawks on Vietnam, strongly opposed the introduction of combat troops in the crucial 1964-65 period. To Taylor, it was neither “reasonable or feasible” to expect Caucasian American soldiers to take on the duties of Asian guerrilla warfare. As soon as American troops entered the RVN, the Vietnamese would “seek to unload other ground force tasks upon us” and would perform even “worse in a mood of relaxation at passing the Viet Cong burden to the U.S.” Taylor even went so far as to suggest that LBJ reduce the U.S. role to sending in advisors, or maybe even “disengage and let the [RVN] stand alone.”²²

Westmoreland was likewise reluctant to fight in Vietnam. In September 1964, the commander “did not contemplate” putting U.S. troops into combat; that “would be a mistake,” he told Taylor, because “it is the Vietnamese’s war.” In December, again insisting that “a purely military solution is not possible,” Westmoreland did not even mention using ground troops in his reports to Washington. In probably his most prophetic analysis, in January 1965, just ten weeks before the Marine landings at Da Nang, he and his staff urged a continuation of the flawed advisory system, but no combat troops. The United States, they recognized, had spent vast amounts of time and money to develop the ARVN, with little luck, and “if that effort has not succeeded, there is even less reason to think that U.S. combat forces would have the desired effect.” The involvement of American troops in the RVN, the military staff in Saigon concluded, quite amazingly, “would at best buy time and would lead to ever increasing commitments until, like the French, we would be occupying an essentially hostile foreign country.”²³ LBJ was not pessimistic, however, so the military followed the civilian charge into a major war in Vietnam.

Perhaps had Taylor made a stand like Ridgway had in 1954, the president would have been more reluctant, but the ambassador and Westmoreland were good soldiers and accepted new and increasing commitments to the RVN. In fact, LBJ was so dedicated to “victory” in Indochina that, in truth, it was doubtful that anyone could have stopped him. As the president himself said in April 1965, “we will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw. . . We must stay in Southeast Asia.”²⁴ With the Commander-in-Chief thus focused on winning in Vietnam, for reasons of anti-communism and credibility, the military fell in line. But America’s problems were, in a very real sense, just beginning.

Home Front Vietnam

The major barrier to success would remain the relative strengths of the enemy and the weaknesses of the ally. Despite later claims of fighting with “hands tied behind their backs,” the American military always possessed resources vastly superior to the VC. The NLF, however, had popular backing and political appeal; the RVN did not. Ho’s strategic skills, developed in the French period, matured throughout the Second Indochina War. He always realized, unlike Diem and his successors, that the key to victory was gaining the support of the mass of peasants and workers of Vietnam. As Mao had described it, the people were “the water” and the guerrillas were “the fish.” Without popular support, then, the NLF would drown. Ho and the southern resistance were thus prepared to tread and float for as long as it took to gain liberation, per their doctrine of protracted war. At the birth of the NLF, it wisely established an organizational structure to take advantage of the Vietnamese people’s desires for independence and justice. The VC was organized at three levels: local, self-defense forces which were farmers by day and fighters by night; guerrilla, or Regional, forces which were better armed and under district

command; and Main Force units, organized into battalions and under the central control of Hanoi's authorities in the RVN.

But, still, the NLF insisted that politics, not war, was the key to victory. Ho always hoped to win without U.S. intervention and wanted to topple Diem without large-scale force, so that America would not be prompted to invade and “save” the RVN. Toward that end, the NLF established various support groups of youth, intellectuals, urban workers, and others to showcase the widespread appeal of its cause and the overwhelming rejection of the Diemist state. The largest of these groups was the Farmer's Liberation Association, with 1.8 million members by 1963, which consisted of poor peasants attracted to the “*land to the tiller*” promises of the Revolution. Another vital organization was the Women's Liberation Association, to harness the power of Vietnamese females in the fight for independence. In the war against the French, women had vital roles as spies, propaganda activists, transport workers, and guerrillas. Ho, contrary to patriarchal Confucian doctrine, stressed the equality of females. “Women are not only equal to men in society,” the NLF stressed, “they are also equal to their husbands. We will abolish inequality between husbands and wives . . . Family property is common property . . . Women are equal to men in standing for elections . . . women are to receive the same pay as men.”²⁵ Compared to the symbolism of Madame Nhu's women's movement in the RVN, or even to the role of women in the United States, such rhetoric quite clearly appealed to the women of the NLF.

Indeed, the NLF's popularity ran quite deep. As one peasant observed, “The Liberation had answers for all the most important problems that we all knew. . . [T]hey would give land to the poor people . . . They would spend taxes only for the people, and would collect them without

corruption. they also said they would help the poor, and this was something that made them very popular, because many people in the village were very poor.”²⁶ While land and taxes remained crucial wedge issues in recruiting for the NLF, many joined out of a sense of patriotism and disgust with Diem, whom they saw as a U.S. puppet. Others feared VC reprisal, for the guerrillas were not averse to attacking or even executing “local tyrants,” big landholders who remained loyal to the RVN. Once enlisted in the NLF, the Vietnamese were trained in *khiem thao*, or self-criticism, sessions in which they were taught the basic beliefs of the Revolution. From there they joined small groups, or cells, with 3 to 10 members, so that they could develop a sense of camaraderie and purpose, and they had daily indoctrination sessions. The broad appeal of the NLF, combined with the personal attention paid to recruits, made for a highly effective and dedicated politico-military organization, one which the RVN could never come close to creating.²⁷

Thus, by 1963, as the Buddhist crisis erupted, the NLF/VC had a huge political advantage and was, in fact, quite reluctant to see the Ngos removed, as Diem and his brother had alienated the mass of southerners. But the instability of 1964-65 continued to work in the Revolution’s favor. The VC actually slowed down its military activity to let the RVN self-destruct even more, and by the early months of 1965, NLF victory was imminent. The Americans too recognized that and thus intervened in mass, but the U.S. presence did not deter Ho. “Johnson and his clique should realize this,” he warned. “They may bring in 500,000 troops, 1 million, or even more to step up their war of aggression in South Viet-Nam. They may use thousands of aircraft for intensified attacks against North Viet-Nam. But never will they break the iron will of the heroic Vietnamese people to fight against U.S. aggression, for national salvation . . . The war may last

ten, twenty years, or longer . . . but the Vietnamese people will not be intimidated. Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom.”²⁸

In the south, a new regime led by Generals Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu emerged in mid-1965. Ky and Thieu would both serve as leaders of the RVN until the end of the war in 1975, thus bringing stability after the merry-go-round of governments after Diem’s death. While they received huge amounts of American aid and could be quite colorful--Ky’s usual attire consisted of a white silk jump suit and purple scarf--they could never match the levels of support of effective organization of the NLF. Nor was the southern military, the ARVN, a vigorous fighting force. Barely 10 percent of young men drafted ever reported for military service and, by early 1965, over 110,000 troops had deserted, a huge increase over previous years and a trend that would grow in the future. At the same time, allegations of corruption, bribes and kickbacks among government officials were rampant and haunted the RVN for the entire war. In addition, Ky and Navy officials were rumored to have a large stake in the lucrative Southeast Asia opium and heroin trades. Tensions between Catholics and Buddhists had worsened as well. In 1966, nine Buddhist leaders had immolated themselves to protest government policies. Then, Ky fired one of his commanders, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, provoking Buddhist troops loyal to Thi to take arms against other ARVN units. Finally, American troops had to intervene on behalf of Ky to stop the ARVN rebellion. Victor Krulak, a Marine general, was so disgusted by the episode that he wrote to a Navy official that “despite all our assertions to the contrary, the South Vietnamese are not--and never have been--a nation.”²⁹ Krulak’s confession was quite revealing, and disturbing. Since the United States had entered Vietnam, American officials had claimed that their responsibility was to build up the government and military in the south to exist on their

own and fight the VC. Despite billions of dollars in aid and over 300,000 American soldiers in country by 1966, success was as far off as ever.

Strategy for Defeat

Despite the political cesspool in the RVN and the proven endurance of the VC, the Americans continued to wage war throughout Vietnam, by air over the DRVN and by air and on the ground in the south. As commander, Westmoreland pursued a strategy of *attrition*: using America's huge advantage in weaponry to erode the VC to the point that southern recruiting and northern replacement could not make up for their losses. When that "crossover point"--more VC losses than recruits and replacements--was reached, U.S. success would be imminent. Westmoreland, during the war and since, has been stridently criticized for adopting that strategy, but attrition actually worked quite well--for the enemy. The VC in the south and Giap's conventional forces in the north, the PAVN, were far more capable of suffering big losses in manpower, replacing them, and keeping on fighting.

The Americans never quite understood or accepted this. Defense Secretary McNamara, the architect of the war, so firmly believed in technology, computers, and systems analysis that he could not conceive of the enemy holding out in the face of huge "body counts" caused by the lavish use of artillery and airpower. Indeed, in response to one aide who was pessimistic about Vietnam, McNamara yelled "where is your data? Give me something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry."³⁰ Based on this mindset, the Americans in Vietnam began conducting *search and destroy* operations in which they would deforest areas with herbicides, level villages with bombardments, and resettle the population. Such tactics did in fact seriously damage the enemy, causing tremendous numbers of VC wounded and killed throughout the war,

but did not bring victory. The VC always found a way to withstand the attacks and replace their losses. For instance, in a battle somewhat symbolic of the entire war, in November 1965, U.S. forces attached to the 7th Cavalry met PAVN troops in the *Ia Drang* Valley in the central highlands near the Cambodian border. In this conventional, set-piece battle the Americans killed perhaps 2000 to 2500 of the enemy, while losing about 300 U.S. soldiers. To Westmoreland, this proved the validity of attrition as American weaponry had been used to rout the enemy. But the PAVN did not see Ia Drang as a defeat. As General Chu Huy Man, one of its commanders there, noted, the PAVN wanted to provoke the Americans into a battle in order to learn how to fight them-- "We wanted to lure the tiger out of the mountain," he explained. Moreover, the PAVN retreat was not a concession but rather part of the plan: "We did not have any plans to liberate the land," General Man related, "only to destroy troops."³¹ General Giap had learned valuable lessons from Ia Drang as well, and thereafter avoided such big-unit engagements unless on terms preferable to the PAVN.

Westmoreland learned otherwise, however, and continued his war of attrition. Thus, in battles similar to Ia Drang, American units caused serious losses to the enemy in Operations Attleboro, Cedar Falls and Junction City in 1966 and early 1967, but without long-term impact. In Cedar Falls, for instance, American infantry, armored, and airborne units wanted to clear the "Iron Triangle" outside of Saigon of VC using a "hammer and anvil" tactic in which American units at one end of the war zone would drive the enemy into other units deployed on the other edge of the battlefield. The VC lost about 750 soldiers and had a huge complex of tunnels destroyed during the operation, but the victory was temporary at best. Before the operation, U.S. forces had to clear civilians out of the Iron Triangle so that they could establish a "free fire zone"

in which *all* Vietnamese were considered VC and potential targets of American firepower. By displacing and attacking the villagers in the area, the Americans alienated the very people they were there to help. Then, just six months after Cedar Falls, the VC returned in full strength, with even more support from the local population than before. Even Westmoreland's hawkish deputy, General William DePuy, admitted that in such battles the VC "just backed off and waited . . . They were more elusive. They controlled the battle better. They were the ones who decided whether there should be a fight."³²

The enemy was retaining its strength and deciding the nature of battle throughout 1966 and 1967. Despite massive air strikes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail--a supply route running from the DRVN, through Laos and Cambodia, and into the RVN--the enemy was monthly infiltrating nearly 10,000 men into the south, while recruiting about 3000 in the RVN. Westmoreland's Intelligence Chief, General George McChristian added that the enemy could infiltrate 175,000 new troops into the RVN, for a net gain in manpower of 65,000 for 1967. Such VC strength, on top of continued ARVN inactivity--south Vietnamese units only made contact with the enemy in 40 percent of engagements--led Westmoreland time and again to ask for more troops. With 470,000 American soldiers already in Vietnam in 1967, the commander requested 200,000 more, a request which LBJ met only partially, with 40,000 reinforcements. The commander needed additional men merely to keep up with the enemy. Between September 1966 and January 1967, the VC had initiated 87 engagements in Vietnam, numbers far in excess of the originally estimated five. The new figures shocked JCS Chair Earle Wheeler, who warned Westmoreland that "I cannot go to the President and tell him that contrary to my reports . . . we are not sure who has the initiative in South Vietnam." Duly alarmed, Wheeler ordered Westmoreland to suppress

the figures, for if they appeared in the media “they would, literally, blow the lid off of Washington.”³³

Westmoreland did not release the statistics, but neither did he reconsider his strategy. With elections a year off, the commander understood that LBJ wanted progress in Vietnam so that the war would not wreck his reelection campaign. So, with few options and little imagination, he kept asking for more troops. At the same time, he understood that reinforcements would have limited value. “Killing guerrillas is like killing termites with a screw driver,” he explained to the president, “where you have to kill them one by one and they’re inclined to multiply as rapidly as you kill them.”³⁴ While continuing the war with 470,000 troops would set up a “meat grinder,” Westmoreland and Wheeler could not guarantee success with even 200,000 more. Worse, as LBJ saw it, such reinforcements might provoke China to intervene in Vietnam as it had done in Korea, or the Soviet Union to commit aggression elsewhere while America was tied down in Vietnam. So Westmoreland, despite his admissions of trouble ahead, knew that the president wanted to hear good news. Accordingly, he claimed that U.S. and ARVN troops had met the “crossover point” in south Vietnam in the spring, and during a November public relations trip to Washington, he optimistically reported that the war was going well and that he could see “light at the end of the tunnel.” Westmoreland’s Army boss, Harold K. Johnson, was happy to hear such a bright forecast but anxious about the war all the same, hoping that the commander “has not dug a hole for himself with regard to his prognostications. The platform of false prophets is crowded.”³⁵

A Grindstone on Our Backs

Harold K. Johnson’s caution was not unusual. Beginning in the 1950s, there had been

serious interservice division over the nature of the war in Vietnam. Although American advisors were training the south Vietnamese for a conventional war, a good number of U.S. generals thought that guerrilla warfare should be emphasized. After American combat troops entered Vietnam in 1965, many ranking officers had continued criticizing the war, especially the way Westmoreland was conducting it. At no time did the armed services ever have the unity of purpose so necessary to the successful conduct of warfare. Within the military, no one attacked the war and Westmoreland as fiercely as did the Marines. Commandant Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Pacific Commander Victor H. Krulak, and other Marine leaders were appalled at the manner in which the war was being fought. They believed that the strategy of attrition and awesome use of firepower against south Vietnamese peasants and villages was counterproductive and had to be stopped. The Marines instead advocated an emphasis on *pacification*--also known at various times as counterinsurgency, enclaves, rural development, or nation-building. They believed that American forces should operate at the village level, providing security, health care, and economic development for the Vietnamese people. Once American forces "pacified" a hamlet, they would move out, like an oil blot slowly spreading, to another village and provide the same services. In this way, they would win the "hearts and minds" of the villagers, who would then turn against the VC. Attrition, however, was not only alienating the people--"grab 'em by their balls and their hearts and minds will follow" was a common slogan among U.S. troops--but could not succeed as a military policy either.

According to General Krulak, American forces could never erode the enemy to the point where it would give up. If losses in the south became too heavy, Hanoi had over 2.5 million young men in the north it could send into battle below the seventeenth parallel, and, should the

Chinese intervene as they had done in the Korean War, another 100 million. Thus the Marine commander considered Westmoreland's strategy "wasteful of American lives [and] promising a protracted, strength-sapping battle with small likelihood of a successful outcome." Even if U.S. troops killed ten VC for every one of their own lost, it would still require a tremendous sacrifice in American blood. At 1965-66 rates, Krulak estimated, it would cost 175,000 lives just to reduce the enemy's pool of young men by 20 percent. Manpower was Ho's "greatest strength," he concluded, and "we have no license and less reason to join battle with him on that ground."³⁶

General Greene agreed. The United States "could kill all [the] PAVN & VC [in the south] and still lose the war," he warned, unless a real effort at pacification was made because the enemy could replace its losses and retain the loyalty or fear of the people. To the Commandant, attrition was like "a grindstone that's being turned by the Communist side, and we're backing into it and having our skin taken off of . . . our entire body because they've got enough [men] to keep the old stone going." In the end, the VC's casualty rate "may be fifty times what ours is" but they will win anyway because of "their capability to wage a war of attrition." Body counts, the Marines believed, might look good on paper but brought no clear success. "This is not a strategy for victory," Krulak emphasized.³⁷

The Marines were not alone in criticizing Westmoreland and attrition. In 1966 Army Chief Harold K. Johnson directed his staff officers to analyze American strategy, and so they produced the "Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam," or *PROVN*, report. This study "forthrightly attacked the search-and-destroy" concept that Westmoreland was using, according to one Army general. The *PROVN* report conceded the NLF's political appeal and the VC's military skills, as well as the ARVN's corruption and

inefficiency. As a result, the officers who prepared the study could only conclude that “the situation in South Vietnam has seriously deteriorated [and] 1966 may well be the last chance to achieve eventual success.” To improve conditions, however, the United States would have to shift to a strategy of pacification. The village level “was where the war must be fought [and] won” and all American and ARVN resources should be focused on that, not on the escalating use of heavy weapons and air strikes. Westmoreland and others in power, however, simply ignored or dismissed the PROVN findings. Dissenters were not easily accepted in the military, even the Army Chief of Staff.³⁸

And perhaps no one was as unwelcome as John Paul Vann. Though a promising advisor in Vietnam in the early 1960s, the colonel’s military career was sidetracked when he was charged with statutory rape of a 15-year-old babysitter. He avoided conviction by beating a lie detector test, but his rise to general was derailed. In the later 1960s, Vann returned to Vietnam as a civilian advisor, and he continued to attack the heavy use of firepower and the ARVN’s reluctance to fight. Like the Marines and PROVN officers, Vann complained of the “widespread use of air and artillery as a substitute for getting into the countryside.” The emphasis on attrition, he added, had led to the destruction of villages and alienation of the local population and made political reform impossible. As conditions worsened, Vann developed a dark sense of humor about Vietnam: in 1967, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow asked him if he thought the war would be over within six months, and Vann replied “oh hell no, Mr. Rostow. I’m a born optimist. I think we can hold out longer than that.”³⁹ American troops would remain in Vietnam for many more years, but by 1968 it would be clear that they would not win there.

The “light at the end of the tunnel,” Westmoreland's critics later joked, was a train headed toward the general. And at the end of January 1968, it thundered through Vietnam. Taking advantage of a Tet New Year cease-fire, the VC and northern army struck virtually every military and political center of importance, even invading the U.S. embassy grounds. Within sixty days, Tet would bring down the president, finally force a reassessment of the war at the highest levels, and bring to a climax one of the gravest contemporary crises in U.S. history. Tet, as it were, became the U.S. obituary in Vietnam.

Since 1968, the Tet Offensive has attained mythic status, with analysts of virtually every ideological stripe agreeing that Tet was--as Westmoreland and Johnson publicly claimed at the time--a great U.S. military victory, but political and psychological defeat. Such observations, however, neglect the military's own outlook on the war in February and March 1968. Indeed, throughout the Tet crisis, military officials in Washington and Saigon as well as political leaders recognized America's perhaps-intractable dilemma in Vietnam. Just days after the attacks began, Westmoreland reported to Wheeler that, "from a realistic point of view, we must accept the fact that the enemy has dealt [South Vietnam] a severe blow," bringing the war to the people, inflicting heavy casualties and damage, and disrupting the economy. The Commander did end on an upbeat note, though, claiming that the enemy's own huge losses and failure to overthrow the southern government constituted the failure of the offensive. But he also recognized that the enemy's objectives "were primarily psychological and political." A week later Westmoreland would candidly explain, "we are now in a new Ball game where we face a determined, highly disciplined enemy, fully mobilized to achieve a quick victory." Such reports would continue throughout February 1968, leading an obviously-alarmed Lyndon Johnson to despatch Wheeler

to Saigon at the end of the month.⁴⁰

After the war, the JCS Chair would claim that Tet was a military defeat for the VC and DRVN but had become “a propaganda victory for [them] here in the United States, [which] I attribute primarily to the press coverage at that time and to the dissident groups here in the United States.” Among newsmen, the respected CBS anchor Walter Cronkite came in for special criticism for on 27 February--ironically the same day that Wheeler returned from Vietnam and reported to LBJ--he urged the United States to disengage from Vietnam. The attack on the media, however, was “incomplete and self-serving,” as Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford saw it, for Wheeler himself recognized and admitted the grave problems that Tet had caused.⁴¹ In his well-documented report, the JCS Chair found the enemy strong and capable of continuing its attacks. The ARVN meanwhile had lost about one-quarter of its pre-Tet strength. The pacification program had been badly undermined. And the government's effectiveness was obviously in question, especially as it confronted the massive problems of refugees and reconstruction. “In short,” Wheeler concluded, “it was a very near thing.” Harold K. Johnson did not resort to euphemism. “We suffered a loss,” he cabled Westmoreland, “there can be no doubt about it.” Clearly then, later claims that Tet was a great U.S. victory are essentially moot. American leaders in early 1968 did not have time for the dust to settle in Vietnam for a thorough analysis of the situation. With a barrage of candid and often pessimistic reports pelting Washington from Saigon, policymakers could do little more than seek an effective way to cut their losses in Vietnam.

And so they did. In early March, Clifford, who had just replaced McNamara, would reassess the war; Johnson's informal advisors, the so-called Wise Men, would finally urge de-

escalation; and U.S. military leaders would continue to provide candid evaluations of the enemy's capabilities and America's problems. By the end of March, the President would lament that "everybody is recommending surrender." But it was Johnson himself who surrendered, withdrawing from the 1968 presidential campaign at the end of a 31 March national address. Finally forced to confront his failure to determine a consistent policy on Vietnam by the shock of Tet, the president knew that time had run out on both his political career and the U.S. experience in Vietnam.

Johnson's decision came amid one of the more intense and tragic periods in modern history. Besides Tet, Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy had announced their candidacies for the White House, helping prompt LBJ's withdrawal from the race. In mid-March, European nations, alarmed by events in Vietnam and fearful of more escalation, began to exchange billions of American dollars for gold, leaving the United States with a serious shortage of hard currency and thereby triggering a world financial crisis that, LBJ and Wall Street feared, could lead to an economic crisis on par with 1929. On 4 April, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, setting off uprisings in many major urban areas. Two months later, Robert Kennedy was killed after winning the California primary, ending the dream of a new Camelot and giving Vice-President Hubert Humphrey a clear path to the Democratic nomination, though his candidacy was ruined by police-incited riots at the Democratic convention in Chicago that August. In 1968, the so-called American century--a celebration of unrivaled U.S. power after World War II--had come to an end.

Who's to Blame?

Tet signaled the failure of the American war on Vietnam. By conducting the nationwide

offensive, the enemy had exposed the false promises of success that the Johnson administration had been putting forth so often and for so long. When, in February, Westmoreland and Wheeler asked the president for a massive reinforcement of about 200,000 more troops and the activation of 280,000 reserves, he rejected the request. LBJ too now realized that additional soldiers and more firepower would not affect the outcome in Vietnam. Even when the military's reports out of Vietnam had been optimistic about future progress, such massive reinforcement was never realistically likely; amid the crisis of Tet, it was impossible. Westmoreland himself later admitted that he and the JCS Chair "both knew the grave political and economic implications of a major call-up of reserves." Nonetheless the military asked for a remarkable escalation of the war at the very moment it had descended to its nadir.

Within the context of civil-military relations during the Vietnam War, however, the reinforcement request had a certain logic. It was consistent with long-term White House and military patterns of behavior toward the war. By February and March 1968, military and civilian leaders understood that reinforcement, especially in such vast numbers, was not politically feasible or affordable--McNamara estimated that the Westmoreland request would cost an additional \$20-25 billion in the next two fiscal years. But the military, rather than change course after Tet, sent notice that it would continue its now-discredited war of attrition. In so doing, however, the service leaders forced Lyndon Johnson to finally take decisive action regarding Vietnam and bear responsibility for future failure.

The military realized that the request for more forces would cause a political firestorm. The Army's Pacific Commander, General Dwight Beach, when notified of Westmoreland's proposals, "had commented that it would shock" government officials. Indeed, the military had

reason to expect such a reaction from Washington. Not only had the White House rejected Westmoreland's previous proposals for such escalation, but the president himself on 2 February, had told reporters that he saw no reason to expand troop levels beyond the 525,000 then deployed to Vietnam. Johnson was also worried that the crisis of Tet might be politically devastating. At a meeting with his advisors, he charged that "all of you have counseled, advised, consulted and then--as usual--placed the monkey on my back again . . . I do not like what I am smelling from those cables from Vietnam."

Johnson's outburst may have been disingenuous but it was well-founded. The monkey in fact belonged squarely on his back, but it was true that his advisors had developed even more grave reservations about the Vietnam War as a result of Tet. Thus, the president feared that the military might be able to exploit White House division over Vietnam. "I don't want them [U.S. military leaders] to ask for something," Johnson worried aloud, "not get it, and have all the blame placed on me." Although not expecting such a huge reinforcement request, it was thus clear that the president understood the political implications of any future moves regarding Vietnam. Ambassador to Saigon Ellsworth Bunker understood as well, warning Westmoreland against asking for so many additional forces because reinforcement was now "politically impossible," even if Johnson had wanted it, which was also more unlikely than ever. LBJ's rejection of the request for more resources, then, was not a surprise, but it did enable the military to charge that they were forced to fight "with one hand tied behind their back."

Such feuding, maneuvering, and attempts to shift blame between civilian leaders and officers reached its peak during the Tet crisis, but had a long history up to that point as well. From the earliest days of the American intervention, the brass recognized the possibility, if not

likelihood, of failure in Vietnam and were worried that they would be blamed for any shortcomings there. As early as 1961, General McGarr concluded with striking honesty that “as I am jealous of the professional good name of our Army, I do not wish it to be placed in the position of fighting a losing battle and being charged with the loss.” In 1965, as combat forces arrived in Vietnam, the Pacific Commander, Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, warned Westmoreland of “grave political implications” if U.S. troops “are committed for the first time and suffer a defeat.” Admiral David McDonald, the Chief of Naval Operations, likewise feared that, after American defeat, “the only group left answerable for the war would be the military.” In 1967, Harold K. Johnson, expecting the worst, warned fellow officers that the military was going to “take the fall” for the impending disaster.⁴² By 1968, then, victory was less likely than ever so the chiefs, fearing blame for failure, more directly than ever tried to pin the White House with responsibility for the war, to make it clear that LBJ was making them fight short-handed. By turning down the request for reinforcement, the president essentially gave the military an alibi for the failure it had seen coming more than a decade earlier.

Charlie Meets GI Joe

While civilians and generals fought a political war over responsibility for the war in Washington D.C., young men fought a real war in Vietnam. There was, however, a marked difference between the opposing armies there. While soldiers on both sides displayed military skills and courage, the Viet Cong--or “Charlie,” as nicknamed by the Americans--and PAVN maintained discipline and morale throughout the war. American troops, on the other hand, were not committed to their cause like the enemy, and drug use, racial conflict, discipline problems, and antiwar activity were common experiences for the grunt in Vietnam.

The enemy in the south was well-armed--using both Soviet-made AK-47s and American M-14s and M-16s captured from the ARVN or purchased on the black market--and usually well-rested. The bigger VC units fought infrequently, only a couple of times a year, so that they could maintain strength and discipline. For those engaging the Americans and ARVN more often, the NLF continued to conduct khiem thao sessions to keep up their morale. Both northern and VC soldiers seemed willing to die for their cause as well. As one private, echoing the messages of Phan Boi Chau, Ho and other Vietnamese heroes, told the journalist Stanley Karnow, "I know that I might be killed, but I was committed to the sacred salvation of the nation." Tactically, the VC did well too. Often, the guerrillas would "cling to the enemy's belt," meaning that they would stay so close to the Americans that any artillery or air strike would endanger U.S. troops as much as the Vietnamese.⁴³ Soldiers in the north endured and succeeded despite huge losses as well. As the war wore on and Rolling Thunder intensified, North Vietnam developed one of the better air defense systems in the world. Using surface-to-air missiles [SAMs] from the Soviet Union, anti-aircraft guns, and, eventually, fighter jets, they caused huge losses for the U.S. Air Force. To protect the civilian population, the government built over 30,000 miles of trenches and 20 million bomb shelters. By 1968, most of the northern population had experienced an American air attack within kilometers of their homes.

American soldiers, 8000 miles from home and fighting for nebulous reasons in Asian jungles, could not have been as dedicated as the VC, fighting for its homeland, to begin with, and as the war dragged on inconclusively, their morale declined. The typical American soldier was young--late teens or early twenties--and poor. Christian Appy, who has analyzed the socio-economic backgrounds of American soldiers most closely, explained that "the institutions most

responsible for channeling men into the military--the draft, the schools, and the job market--directed working-class children to the armed forces and their wealthier peers toward college.”⁴⁴ For those with education or connections--Dan Quayle, Bill Clinton, Pat Buchanan, and thousands of others--it was relatively easy to avoid service by getting deferments or joining the Reserves. Those who could not pull strings, however, often served in Vietnam, and, once there, came to believe that the stated reasons for the war--anti-communism and bringing “democracy” to the Vietnamese--were lies; their disillusionment, as well as antagonism from the local population, grew and led to a breakdown in the military order.

While the army’s worst crises with drugs, racial tension, and discipline would occur after Tet, such problems were already apparent when American forces entered Vietnam in the earlier 1960s. The widespread use of drugs that had been common at home was, if anything, even worse in Vietnam. With RVN leaders and Laotian generals working with the CIA involved in the local drug traffic, and the United States thus reluctant to pressure them to end it, marijuana, opium, and heroin, among others, were available and cheap. Units often were divided between “juicers,” who preferred alcohol, and “heads,” those who took drugs and listened to the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, The Doors, or Jefferson Airplane. As the war progressed, American soldiers used drugs to express their disgust with the situation there. Dave Cline, an infantryman, explained that the nature of the fighting--bombing villages and killing peasants--became so repugnant that he “was involved with smoking marijuana. At the time that was like the symbolism of the antiwar movement in the service.”⁴⁵

In addition to growing drug use, racial conflict began to plague the armed forces. Many black soldiers saw the contradiction, or hypocrisy, of being sent to Vietnam to fight for

“democracy” while many American political leaders were fighting against civil rights at home. Leslie Whitfield, an African-American soldier, wondered “why can we be . . . fighting for this country . . . and then go back and we can’t take advantage of opportunities that were offered us by the Constitution?” Such sentiment became more common and black soldiers began to identify with each other along racial lines, wearing black arm bands, offering black power salutes, and giving the “dap” to other “bloods” in their unit. At the same time, racial tension between black and white soldiers was growing worse. Some units experienced de facto segregation as African-American and Caucasian troops would not communicate with each other. In the same way, Chicano and Puerto Rican soldiers began to identify and associate with each other. Miguel Lemus, who served in Vietnam in 1967, explained that “in my company we had to protect each other ‘cause no one else was going to protect us.”⁴⁶ Racial conflict in Vietnam was sharpened as various groups at home such as “black power” or “la raza” activists began to speak about and educate young men on the connection between race, discrimination at home, and service in Vietnam. By 1967, incoming black and Chicano soldiers could not avoid noticing the similarities between social conditions in Vietnam and the situation in American being highlighted by Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and others. And when the World Heavyweight Champion, Muhammad Ali, was stripped of his title for refusing induction into the army in 1967--saying “no Viet Cong ever called me ‘Nigger’”--racial antagonism jumped noticeably. In April 1968, at the time of King’s assassination, several units verged on civil war when Caucasian soldiers flew rebel flags to taunt the African-American troops.⁴⁷

With drugs and racial division prevalent, a breakdown in military discipline was inevitable. Again, the problem would become much worse in the later years of the war, but was

present from 1965 onward. Both active-duty servicemen and veterans actively criticized and opposed the war from the earliest days of intervention. In September 1965, Master Sergeant Donald Duncan, a Green Beret, gained national exposure when he publicly quit Vietnam, charging that American forces were using torture tactics there and that “the whole thing was a lie. We weren’t preserving freedom in South Vietnam. There was no freedom to preserve.”⁴⁸

Duncan may have gained notoriety, but many other soldiers dissented from the war as well. In 1965, a Special Forces officer, Richard Steinke, refused to go into combat to protect U.S. actions in Vietnam; Adam Weber, an infantryman, was sent to jail for a year for refusing to fight; and in 1966, the “Fort Hood Three”--David Samos, Dennis Mora, and James Johnson--were court-martialed after rejecting orders to serve in Vietnam. As they announced, “we have decided to take a stand against this war, which we consider immoral, illegal and unjust.” William Harvey, an African-American Marine who was a Muslim, spent two years in military prison for his activity against the war. To Harvey, the U.S. role in Vietnam was strikingly similar to American society’s treatment of blacks. “I feel that the black man’s attitude is that the war is one of genocide toward the colored people of the world in general,” he charged.⁴⁹

Such sentiments increased over time and soldiers and veterans began to organize and express their disdain for the war. In early 1966, about one hundred veterans marched on the White House, with many turning in their service medals and discharge papers to protest the growing war in Vietnam. Antiwar celebrities such as Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland, Holly Near and others played at GI “coffee houses” on various bases throughout the country, agitating and organizing against the war. An Army doctor, Howard Levy, became a national figure when he was court-martialed for refusing to train Special Forces soldiers, who to him were “murderers

of women and children.” More broadly, in 1966 and 1967 military personnel formed, among other groups, the Veterans for Peace, Veterans and Reservists to End the War in Vietnam, GIs United Against the War, the American Serviceman’s Union [ASU], Resist Inside the Army [RITA], and, most notably, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War [VVAW].

Such organized antiwar activity within the military translated into serious discipline problems. “Fraggings,” intentional attacks on a unit’s officers via fragmentation grenade or other weaponry, became common and were especially directed against commanders who were “gung ho” on fighting the VC. Many soldiers preferred “search and evade” operations, where they would go on patrol and make a point of staying away from the enemy, or shooting their rifles into the air and reporting it as an engagement. As one Marine Captain explained, he and the local VC commander had an “unwritten, informal agreement” to avoid contact with each other in the field. For many soldiers, evasion was not enough and a significant number simply bolted. According to Richard Moser’s figures, Army AWOL rates rose nearly 40 percent--from 57 to 78 per thousand-- between 1966 and 1967, while desertion rates grew almost 50 percent--from 15 to 21.4 per thousand--in the same period. The Marine desertion problem was worse, increasing from 16 to 27 per thousand. By mid-1967, over 40,000 servicemen, or about 10 percent of the troop total in Vietnam, were classified as deserters and had committed over 500,000 “incidents of desertion.” While the American numbers were smaller than the ARVN’s, there can be no doubt that the level of desertions and dissatisfaction with the war was substantially higher among U.S. troops than the enemy, making an already-difficult mission in Vietnam even harder.

One, Two, Three, Four, We Don’t Want Your Bloody War

Such dissent within the military emerged in conjunction with the antiwar movement at

home, which grew exponentially in the later 1960s. Despite the number of antiwar protesters, though, the movement against the war in Vietnam never represented a majority of Americans, and its impact is still open to debate today. The movement began on college campuses and in pacifist churches and ultimately spread to business groups, the political arena, and mainstream America. While the media often portrayed the antiwar protests as dominated by hippies and Communists, the typical demonstrator was probably a middle-class Caucasian American with strong political or moral reservations about the war. The Johnson, and even more so the Nixon, administrations were concerned with the growth of the movement, but it is not clear just what effect it had on the war in Indochina. Many participants and critics of the Vietnam-era peace protests tend to either credit or blame the public's opposition to the war for the U.S. failure there, but it was the VC, not the media or "Mustang Maoists" on the campuses, that caused America's undoing.

The anti-Vietnam War movement had various sources, especially in the "Ban the Bomb" campaign of the 1950s and 1960s, among the "Beats" in cafes, and in the Students for a Democratic Society [SDS] organization in the early 1960s. Nuclear disarmament advocates such as Bertrand Russell, Benjamin Spock, and A.J. Muste became stalwarts of the Vietnam peace movement as well, while SDS organized the first large-scale resistance to the war. In 1964, after the Tonkin incident, SDS issued a call for a national demonstration against the war in Washington in April 1965. Expecting a meager turnout, protest leaders were shocked when about 25,000 showed up to criticize the war. At around the same time, over 3000 students participated in the first "*teach-in*"--a series of debates and lectures about Vietnam with supporters and critics of the war--at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and in May 1965,

122 colleges and universities were linked by telephone to Washington D.C. and took part in the biggest teach-in to that point. Many young men began to protest more stridently, burning their draft cards or committing acts of civil disobedience against selective service offices or other government installations. For instance, protestors in Oakland blocked trains carrying troops to induction centers. Tragically, in early 1965, an 82-year old Holocaust survivor in Detroit, Alice Herz, immolated herself to protest the war. In time, at least six others--Norman Morrison, Roger LaPorte, J.D. Copping, Hiroko Hayashi, Florence Beaumont, and J.D. Winne--would burn themselves to death as well, with Morrison immolating himself in view of Robert McNamara's Pentagon office window.

Though few demonstrators made the ultimate sacrifice like Herz, the movement grew rapidly. Political, academic, and cultural figures such as Leonard Bernstein, Gregory Peck, Allen Ginsberg, William Appleman Williams, Noam Chomsky, and countless others began to speak out against the war. SDS leaders like Tom Hayden, Paul Potter, and Carl Oglesby became national antiwar leaders with their work in the resistance. But the movement was showing signs of strain too, and those would worsen over time. In November 1965, the anti-nuclear group SANE called a march on Washington to express "responsible criticism" of the war, but it was SDS President Oglesby who roused the crowd with his fiery oratory about not only about the war but the system of "corporate liberalism" that drove America into Vietnam.⁵⁰ Such rhetoric turned off old line liberals like Irving Howe, Michael Harrington, and Norman Thomas, giving the early movement somewhat of a leftist cast. To many older activists, SDS and other youth groups were not just antiwar but pro-VC, a charge raised more frequently as peace activists like Hayden, Staughton Lynd, Herbert Aptheker, Joan Baez, and Jane Fonda traveled to the DRVN to protest

the war and as young people marched on the White House chanting “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is gonna win” or, more sharply, “Hey, Hey, LBJ, How Many Kids Did You Kill Today?”

Despite tensions, the antiwar campaign accelerated from 1966 to 1968. In early 1966, many Establishment leaders began to take on the war as well. In February, the chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, J. William Fulbright, conducted hearings at which General James Gavin and diplomat George Frost Kennan strongly criticized U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Ex-Commandant David Shoup went further, excoriating the war publicly in a 1966 speech, asserting that “if we had and would keep our dirty, bloody, dollar-crooked fingers” out of Vietnamese affairs, the people there will determine their own fate, not have one “crammed down their throats by Americans.”⁵¹ Hans Morgenthau, a respected political scientist, began to speak out also, as did other academics such as George McT. Kahin, Howard Zinn, and Gabriel Kolko.

Among intellectuals, none matched the impact of MIT linguist Noam Chomsky, whose articles in the *New York Review of Books*, *Ramparts*, and elsewhere placed the war within the larger contexts of the Cold War, capitalism, and American political culture. In the most important essay of the Vietnam generation, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” Chomsky in particular attacked political and academic apologists for the war. “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions,” he explained, and it was “the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies.” For the most part, however, America’s educated elite bought into the war and supported it, while even critics saw it as a mistake or an aberration rather than a systemic condition. Chomsky thus concluded: “The question ‘What have I done?’ is one that we may well ask ourselves, as we read, each day, of fresh atrocities in Vietnam--as we create, or mouth, or

tolerate the deceptions that will be used to justify the next defense of freedom.”⁵² Others did “speak truth to power,” as a favorite slogan of the day suggested. David Dellinger and David McReynolds, peace veterans, tirelessly organized against the war, while Philip and Daniel Berrigan, Jesuit priests, counseled young men on avoiding military service and were arrested and convicted for destroying selective service records at a government office in Catonsville, Maryland. Even the well-known political scientist Hans Morgenthau, long a favorite of the Washington establishment, chastised the intellectual community for its acquiescence in the war. Accusing them of “political opportunism” and caving in to government pressure, Morgenthau lamented that “the intellectuals of America have indeed been raped; but many of them have looked forward to the experience and are enjoying it.”⁵³

The heart of the movement, however, was still in the streets. Demonstrations in most major cities continued throughout 1966 and 1967, and included millions of Americans of all age groups, religions, and classes. In April 1967, between 125,000 and 400,000 (depending on whether the police or the demonstrators were counting) people protested the war in New York, while at least 75,000 took to the streets for the same purpose in San Francisco. While gaining strength, the movement was also evolving, offering a harsh political condemnation of Vietnam but with some segments creating a sense of the absurd as well. In October 1967 in Washington, for instance, over 100,000 demonstrators listened to intellectual attacks on the war, burned their draft cards, or tried to levitate the Pentagon by chanting and meditating--and many participants to this day claim they saw the building leave the ground. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin became media stars--part Karl Marx and part Groucho Marx--as they brought guerrilla theater to the movement. Rubin once appeared before a government committee dressed as George

Washington, with silk stockings and powdered wig, and he and Hoffman went to Wall Street and threw dollar bills onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, causing a wild scramble for money among the traders in the pit. In 1968, Hoffman, Rubin, Allen Ginsberg, folk-protest singer Phil Ochs, and rock groups Country Joe and the Fish and The Fugs were founders of the Youth International Party, better known as the yippies. Though a small minority in the peace movement, the yippies received tremendous media coverage, especially for their plans to disrupt the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago with dancing bears and a pig--named "Pigasus"--that they would nominate for president and then eat. Among the yippies' demands besides an end to the war in Vietnam were the legalization of all drugs, the abolition of money, the disarmament of police, and free love in the streets.

The attention focused on the yippies, though sensational, did not reflect mainstream opposition to the war. After Tet, the government's reasons for fighting in Vietnam had been exposed as unwarranted optimism or lies. Many liberals who had still supported Johnson felt betrayed by the administration and, maybe most importantly, Wall Street turned against the war amid the dollar-gold crisis. Walter Wriston, the president of Citibank, told a group of financial leaders that it would be possible to stabilize the world economy but "the chances would be greater if the Vietnamese war ended." Likewise, in a report to investors, Goldman, Sachs economists simply explained that reduced spending in Vietnam "could contribute significantly to the solution of many of the problems currently plaguing the U.S. economy."⁵⁴ William McChesney Martin, the chair of the Federal Reserve Board, was likewise alarmed by the continuing costs of military intervention, fearing a repeat of the depression of 1929 and complaining that "I have been trying for the past two years to make the point on 'guns and butter'

and the cost of the Vietnam war, economically, without too much success but I think in due course the chickens will come home to roost.”⁵⁵

African-Americans, generally supportive of LBJ, also began to turn on him as Martin Luther King and other black leaders increasingly spoke out against a war in which blacks, though only about 12 percent of the population, were accounting for nearly a third of the casualties. Then, on top of Tet, King was killed in April, and the war and urban rebellion converged. In a real sense, the violence of Vietnam had come home as cities burned and the hopes of a generation seemed shattered. At The Ohio State University, a young history professor, David Green, burned his draft card in class the day after King’s death to protest the war and America’s racial dilemma. Businessmen, moms, and young radicals all protested the war together, posing a mainstream assault on the Johnson administration. Some younger activists gave up on the system and dropped out of society or joined militant groups. Some hoped to reform the political structure from within and worked on the other candidates’ campaigns, only to see Bobby Kennedy too assassinated and Eugene McCarthy lose the nomination. By mid-1968, the country was terribly divided over Vietnam and the war was about to come home.

In August, at the Democratic convention, tens of thousands of demonstrators fought street battles with local police forces. Chicago’s mayor, Richard Daley, in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had planted *provocateurs* in the crowd to incite the protestors. Then, on 25 August, 150 police, wielding tear gas and night sticks, attacked an encampment in Lincoln Park. The next day, the protestors struck back with rocks and bottles, and in turn 5000 army troops were sent into Chicago. After that, local cops stripped themselves of their badges and uniforms and went on a rampage with clubs and mace, injuring hundreds. By 29 August, all hell

broke loose as several thousand demonstrators marched on the convention headquarters at the Hilton. As officers charged into the crowd, some yelling “Kill, Kill,” young people chanted “the whole world is watching.” Inside the convention, Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff was attacking the “gestapo tactics” of the police in the streets, while Daley mouthed “sit down you fucking Jew” to him. Surveying the wreckage of Chicago, the radical journalist I.F. Stone could only lament that “the war is destroying our country as we are destroying Vietnam.” Johnson himself, writing after he left office, still did not take responsibility for the crisis, but poignantly observed that “the American people recoiled in anguish in 1968, as violence again struck down national leaders and lit flames in the skies above a dozen cities. We confronted the perils of inflation at home and the danger of the dollar’s decline abroad. The agony of an odious war, forced upon us so cruelly for so long, cut deep divisions across our national life. These, with all their shock and sorrow, are forever part of the fabric of that turbulent period.”⁵⁶

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