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14. ABSTRACT Some historians argue that America's involvement in Vietnam and subsequent defeat was a fait accompli. Others have argued that America's commitment was half hearted and its strategy barely discernible as a credible measure to deal with a complex counterinsurgency. Still others have argued that America could have achieved its policy goals if not for an incoherent strategy that did not bring to bear the full weight of the military to achieve decisive victory in the classic sense. America's involvement in Vietnam corresponded with its uncompromising pledge to contain communism but unclear policy priorities, poor strategy, and overly restrictive limitations throughout the Johnson administration created irreversible distrust that eroded political commitment and proved fatal to a potentially successful strategy under the Nixon administration.					
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TITLE:

VIETNAM: A FAILURE OF STRATEGY AND LEADERSHIP

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: VIETNAM: A FAILURE OF STRATEGY AND LEADERSHIP

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Thesis: America's involvement in Vietnam corresponded with its uncompromising pledge to contain communism but unclear policy priorities, poor strategy, and overly restrictive limitations throughout the Johnson administration created irreversible distrust that eroded political commitment and proved fatal to a potentially successful strategy under the Nixon administration.

Discussion: America's involvement in Vietnam from the end of World War II through 1973 is fraught with examples of heroic and abhorrent actions at the tactical level, fortune and misfortune at the operational level, and lost opportunities at the strategic level. Following World War II, the United States found itself at the pinnacle of post-war power both economically and militarily. However, by 1949, the Soviet Union and communist China emerged as serious challengers to democratic ideology and free market societies. Fearing the spread of communism, policy makers were forced to develop strategies that contained communism but avoided inciting a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. National Security Council (NSC) Resolution 68 solidified America's commitment to a policy of containment beginning in 1950. Eisenhower chose the one option threat of massive retaliation whereas Kennedy sought a flexible response strategy. Johnson chose to confront communism in Vietnam with a strategy of gradual pressure but his approach failed miserably and proved to be irreversibly detrimental to Nixon's aggressive attempts to extricate the United States while maintaining a commitment to containment. By the time Nixon and the military devised an effective diplomatic and military strategy, America and Congress were not willing to maintain a commitment to the mission.

Conclusion: Despite the prospect for success along the diplomatic and military fronts under Nixon, the negative effects from a failed Johnson strategy were too much to overcome. In the end, Nixon was forced to accept a peace agreement, not from a position of strength or under terms that were favorable to the U.S. policy of containment, but from a position that left South Vietnam vulnerable to a determined Hanoi. The War in Vietnam presents military professionals and policy makers a case study in the importance of coherent policy and strategic alignment within the boundaries set by civilian leadership. Likewise, it also presents a case study in the absolute necessity for military leaders to address policy limitations, even in the context of limited war, that risk mission accomplishment.

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Introduction

The lessons learned from America's involvement in Vietnam are numerous and, at times, incredibly difficult to fathom. Some historians argue that America's defeat was a *fait accompli*. After all, the French were unable to wrest control of the population from a determined enemy so how did America expect to achieve the same results only a short time after? Others have argued that America's commitment was half hearted and its strategy barely discernible as a credible measure to deal with a complex insurgency. Still others have argued that America could have achieved its policy goals if not for an incoherent strategy that did not bring to bear the full weight of the military to achieve decisive victory in the classic sense. America's involvement in Vietnam corresponded with its uncompromising pledge to contain communism but unclear policy priorities, poor strategy, and overly restrictive limitations throughout the Johnson administration created irreversible distrust that eroded political commitment and proved fatal to a potentially successful strategy under the Nixon administration.

Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy: Prelude to Vietnam

Following World War II, American military leaders found themselves at the forefront of an evolutionary change in the characteristics of warfare. America had entered the atomic age and politicians held the burden of devising policy that recognized this awesome power as both a deterrent to war and diplomatic weapon. The Soviet Union's dominance over Eastern Europe, its own atomic capability, and the growing influence of communism challenged America's global influence. By 1949, policy makers and military professionals were forced to develop strategies to confront the spread of communism without inciting a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.

National Security Council (NSC) Resolution 68 solidified America's commitment to a

policy of containment beginning in 1950.¹ As a matter of policy, the Truman administration sought to limit the scope of communism to its present borders through a combination of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure. NSC 68 emphasized a requirement to confront communism in all places either through direct or indirect means.² The first test of this relatively ambitious policy was on the Korean Peninsula where North Korea, backed largely by communist China and the Soviet Union, attempted to overrun the South to unify the country. The United States made good on its statements to confront the spread of communism and therefore committed itself to a three-year struggle that ultimately ended with the desired result; South Korea remained an independent, non-communist state.³ The Korean War demonstrated that military strategy was subordinate to civilian policy and that limited war was a viable way to contain communism.

Under the direction of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the United States adopted the “new look” national defense strategy that focused heavily on deterrence through threat of massive retaliation. As a consequence, the nuclear deterrent strategy justified a reduction in conventional forces.⁴ On paper, nuclear deterrence seemed logical, but in reality it was a “one option” strategy and offered very little flexibility to decision makers should the Soviet Union or Communist China not heed the threat. Additionally, it was unlikely the United States would resort to a nuclear option to defend one of its allies. Because the new look strategy significantly reduced the number of conventional forces and focused heavily on nuclear deterrence, America had few military options but to hope communism remained in check. When, in 1954, communist forces led by Ho Chi Minh defeated the French at Diem Bien Phu, America was faced with a problem of whether to confront communism or potentially let it spread into South Vietnam. By 1956, the United States had a clear policy regarding Vietnam. America would support and seek

to develop a viable South Vietnam with economic aid and military advisors to strengthen its defense against insurrection. The policy ultimately encouraged peaceful reunification of the entire country; however the United States government would not support reunification under communist rule. Therefore, when all indications pointed to a communist victory in a peaceful electoral process, the United States intervened and supported the status quo instead of risking a politically unpalatable unification.⁵ At this point, America was committed to confronting communist insurrection indirectly, mostly through economic aid and the question of direct confrontation through military force remained a closed issue because the new look defense strategy lacked flexibility and depth.

General Maxwell Taylor opposed the new look strategy and strongly advocated for a “balancing” force comparable in size and capability to that of the Soviet Union. General Taylor argued that a nuclear deterrent strategy would give leaders only one option in which to confront threats; that being nuclear retaliation. Therefore, he proposed an alternative doctrine that relied on a force structure capable of “flexible response” to give political leaders options when confronting low intensity as well as nuclear threats.⁶ Unable to convince Eisenhower, Taylor resigned himself to serve out his term as the Army’s Chief of Staff under a policy that he did not support and chose to retire before a new administration took over.⁷

It is possible that Taylor saw the developments in Vietnam as potential flash point between policy and the military’s ability to carry out the objectives contained in NSC 68 due to Eisenhower’s national defense strategy and force structure limitations. If Vietnam were to be the next containment battleground the United States needed both a strategy and a force structure capable of achieving policy objectives. Taylor’s flexible response was an alternative strategy that supported a symmetrical containment policy and the idea that peripheral hotspots could

rapidly become vital interests if some measures were not taken to confront its spread.

President John F. Kennedy held no such reverence for his predecessor's national defense policy and, before he took office, had read some of what Taylor espoused as flexible response. After meeting with Taylor and developing a warm relationship, Kennedy adopted many of his ideas on a scalable force that could be used to confront communism in peripheral arenas. In particular, Kennedy sought to develop a force structure that would align with his policy that America would stand ready to confront any aggressor with a force that was appropriate to the threat.⁸ By adopting Taylor's ideas on national defense, Kennedy eliminated the "one option" choice thereby giving him the ability to make good on his pledge to confront aggression without necessarily resorting to nuclear confrontation. Thus, in the context of limited war, Kennedy set the stage for America's direct military support to South Vietnam as they confronted an increasingly more intense communist insurgency. However, the question remained, why Vietnam?

South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were not economically vital to American interests. Combined, those three countries accounted for less than fraction of a percent of total trade with the United States. The region did not contain any vital natural resources and each was relatively free of their colonial masters.⁹ The simple fact of the matter was that no President wanted to be seen as "soft" on communism. Therefore, losing any of these countries to the forces of communism would mean domestic political suicide, especially after China, North Korea, North Vietnam, most of Eastern Europe and others had fallen. Despite there being few intelligence estimates suggesting that if South Vietnam fell to the communists then the rest of Southeast Asia would also fall, military actions in Southeast Asia were devised to support a policy of containment nonetheless.¹⁰ They were devised not for fear of the spread of communism to other

nations but out of fear that the United States would lose credibility elsewhere. After Kennedy was assassinated, the burden of confronting communism and maintaining America's credibility fell on the shoulders of Lyndon B. Johnson.

Johnson Years and a Strategy of Gradual Pressure

At the beginning of 1964, the situation on the ground in South Vietnam was complex at best. The Government of Vietnam (GVN) was fraught with corruption, nepotism, brutal toward its citizens, and lacked the ability to govern effectively much less defend itself against communist incursion.¹¹ The situation was rapidly deteriorating and, thus far, the U.S. had only proffered marginal solutions to address the stated policy to support the government of South Vietnam and contain communism in order to prevent a domino effect throughout Southeast Asia. As matters intensified, the focus of effort for the United States drifted toward a kinetic, conventional solution to what most national intelligence estimates at the time described as an "insurgency."

With the policy of containment thoroughly entrenched in the lexicon of most politicians, President Johnson sought a strategy to achieve a negotiated peace in Vietnam at the least possible political cost to his domestic political goals.¹² Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was successful in achieving a peaceful conclusion to the Cuban Missile Crisis through the use of gradual pressure against Soviet presence. As a form of communication, gradually intensifying military pressure would signal commitment and ultimately convince one's adversary that his course of action was futile thereby eliciting a favorable peace settlement.¹³ McNamara, and newly appointed Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Taylor, sold the idea of gradual pressure to Johnson despite reservations from the other service chiefs. McNamara's concept made perfect sense as long as North Vietnam understood their role in the calculus. As an advocate for flexible

response, Taylor no doubt saw Vietnam as a proving ground for his theory. However, the strategy was more “hope” than decisive action against a determined enemy. With gradual pressure in mind, the President and his advisors sought intelligence estimates to support their assumptions that this strategy would achieve their political objectives.

Submitted in May 1964, the National Intelligence Estimate painted a broad picture for the Johnson administration regarding the situation in Vietnam. The estimate concluded that limited U.S. intervention and actions against North Vietnam would yield only a moderate cessation of Hanoi’s support to the insurgency in the South. Hanoi would use the cessation of activity to bolster opinion in their favor for use as a bargaining chip in order to solicit a favorable peace settlement. The report concluded that Hanoi would “likely” intensify their actions “at a later date.” Furthermore, the report concluded that strong action, with “clear-cut achievement of U.S. objectives” would signal commitment that might deter Hanoi and bolster the morale of both the citizenry and military of South Vietnam. Evidence was inconclusive as to actual intent, but intelligence analysts saw only a low probability that China or the Soviet Union would become directly involved unless they themselves were directly engaged by U.S. or South Vietnamese forces.¹⁴ From the outset of Johnson’s administration, the idea that North Vietnam would negotiate from a threat of increasing military force seemed unlikely to intelligence analysts. Therefore, one can reasonably conclude that it was false to assume that a strategy of gradually increasing pressure against North Vietnam would compel Hanoi to the negotiating table. Likewise, the intelligence did not support the assumption that decisive action within Vietnam would evoke a similar response from China or the Soviet Union. However, given what Johnson saw the Truman and Eisenhower administrations go through when communist China intervened in Korea and his own role in Cuban Missile Crisis, it is reasonable to conclude that he embraced

gradual pressure because it worked against the Soviet Union and stood a reasonable chance of avoiding unnecessary escalation with a third country. Notably, the assumptions that China or the Soviet Union might become directly involved and that Hanoi would eventually succumb to gradual pressure remained significant factors that influenced decisions throughout the Johnson administration.

Graham Cosmas argues that it has been the perception of most historians that President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration failed to provide clear strategic guidance to military leaders and, in turn, military leaders, specifically the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), failed to provide adequate counsel and sound military strategy to achieve policy goals.¹⁵ Regardless, it is clear that there were major differences in how to attack the problem of Vietnam while balancing domestic opinions and international sensitivities.

John Alexander McCone, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCI) from November 1961 through April 1965, understood Vietnam and remarked, "...if you're gonna be in a war, you'd better win it."¹⁶ The context behind the DCI's statement, in retrospect, was a warning to policy makers in Washington. McCone fundamentally understood the situation and his analysis revealed that Hanoi was willing to endure a protracted campaign to achieve a unified Vietnam. Therefore, he advocated a robust, whole of government approach with options for massive military involvement to achieve policy objectives. However, his concern was that America would embroil itself in Vietnam for the wrong reasons, without a coherent strategy, and with few options once committed to the struggle.¹⁷ In a sense, McCone questioned whether the ends were attainable if the administration was not willing to go "all in" to achieve decisive victory from the outset. McCone was not alone in his thoughts that the problems in Vietnam required decisive action across a broad front. However, the JCS were unable to form a

consensus on a strategy.

Despite requesting clarification to the policy in Vietnam and advocating for more aggressive action, the JCS received only ambiguous responses promising future “escalations” of force and evidence shows that Taylor likely concealed their true positions from the President.¹⁸ The service chiefs wanted to know whether the President intended to seek “victory” or merely prevent South Vietnam from falling to the communists. In their view, decisive victory over North Vietnam was the key to defending South Vietnam. This meant aggressive, conventional military actions in order to drive the communists from the South and prevent North Vietnam from even considering future support to an insurgency. It is doubtful that any of the service chiefs wanted to embrace gradual pressure which was turning out to be inherently defensive and reactionary to enemy initiatives. Instead of being turned loose on the problem, the chiefs were held in check by an ambiguous Johnson and equally elusive McNamara.

Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis Lemay expressed his opinion that Vietnam represented a “showdown” moment if the United States were to confront the spread of communism Southeast Asia. He wanted a strong international policy statement that would send a clear message that the U.S. was determined to assist the government of South Vietnam in its efforts to defeat the communist insurgency within its recognized borders. Additionally, General Lemay wanted to lift any limitations preventing either U.S. or South Vietnamese forces from attacking communist sanctuaries in neighboring countries; specifically Cambodia and Laos. His statements on the matter appeared to support major military air actions and strategic bombing to both limit communist incursion and prevent similar events from happening in neighboring countries. As for ground forces, Lemay advocated only limited, covert ground actions against North Vietnam by using surrogate forces from Taiwan, Thailand, or the Philippines.¹⁹ His views

were not surprising given his background during World War II as a strategic bombing advocate and his recommendation to bomb Cuba in order to solve the Cuban missile crisis.

The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David L McDonald, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace M. Greene, both concurred with Lemay that a major military effort was required to defeat Hanoi's aspirations of a unified communist Vietnam. Admiral McDonald took General Lemay's comments a step further by advocating that U.S. ground forces take direct military action against North Vietnam. General Greene was candid about what kind of strategy was needed by calling for a clear policy statement that either the United States was going to "pull out of South Vietnam or stay there and win."²⁰ His solution to deter the spread of communism involved the full range of military options available, including the introduction of Marines to secure enclaves along the coast.²¹ Due in part to a murky policy from the administration and the JCS's inability to form a consensus behind a coherent strategy, the U.S. launched into strategy of gradual pressure on a faulty assumption that Hanoi would eventually be compelled to negotiate for peace.

In *Derelection of Duty*, H. R. McMaster argues that throughout President Johnson's administration a fixation on domestic political goals combined with poor relationships between principal civilian and military advisors created a toxic mix of mistrust that eventually allowed the United States to enter into a war without effective military advice and remained in the war without clear policy goals or strategic objectives.²² He cites multiple examples where the JCS were either completely removed from the decision making process or compelled to accept a specific courses of action through force of personality from more influential civilian advisors. An examination of the period gives credence to this thesis and further underscores the necessity for the nation's principal military advisors to assertively state their opinions when warfare is

chosen as a form of diplomatic communication. Instead of resolutely coming to consensus on a course of action, the JCS accepted a strategy of graduated pressure against North Vietnam in an effort to curtail a growing insurgency within South Vietnam. This strategy, while not explicitly endorsed by the JCS, was implemented and proved to be a dismal failure throughout Johnson's tenure. The full extent of this failure to implement sound strategy was exposed during the Tet Offensive despite tactical successes on the ground.

There is no doubt that the Tet Offensive set the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong back militarily at the tactical and operational level. The statistical numbers are rather staggering when one analyzes the data that suggests a lopsided victory in favor of the U.S. mission.²³ However, Hanoi was no closer to negotiating for peace thereby disproving the theory that gradual pressure would eventually compel them to the negotiating table. Ironically, though, domestic support for the mission rose slightly but within the circles closest to the President support waned.²⁴ The cost of the war, the credibility of a strategy that was not producing promised results, doubts that Vietnam was of "vital national interest," and a certain level of weariness were taking its toll on prospects for success.

Following the Tet Offensive, McNamara was replaced by Clark Clifford and Westmoreland "promoted" to Chief of Staff of the Army. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, submitted a report to the Johnson Administration that stated what was becoming quite obvious. Either the President should accept military defeat as a real possibility or initiate actions for national mobilization for full scale war.²⁵ In effect, General Wheeler wanted strategic direction and clarity to what was a murky policy in Vietnam. The new Secretary of Defense Clifford bluntly stated that the war was probably "unwinnable" and the strategic, economic, political, and social consequences were too great for the country to bear.²⁶

His calls for de-escalation and disengagement were the first real moves within senior policy making circles that would eventually gain momentum as the United States continued its involvement in Vietnam.

During the Johnson Administration, the JCS offered up their views on a myriad of issues. Considering how best to deter North Vietnam's objective of unification under communist rule, they supported increasingly heavy bombing of enemy installations in the North. For preventing North Vietnam from receiving outside material support they advocated for heavier bombing, aggressive interdiction, and mining operations. Responding to questions for more U.S. troops to seek and destroy large pockets of the enemy and pacify the countryside, they supported bombing and massive troop increases to the tune of 525,000 by the end of 1968. To deal with Laos and Cambodia, they supported a loosening of the rules of engagement in order to attack enemy sanctuaries despite international political concerns. In response to equipping and training the South Vietnamese to eventually take on the responsibility for their own security, they focused on building a force that mirrored that of the U.S. Clearly Johnson heard their voices but chose a different approach; a strategy of limited bombing, gradual troop build-up, limited to no cross border operations, and very little administrative emphasis on organizing, training, and equipping the South Vietnamese to take over the fight in the most expeditious manner possible.²⁷ He did not take the JCS's advice because he feared congressional funding for Vietnam would come at the expense of his domestic agenda.²⁸ Johnson did not want to risk escalation with either China or the Soviet Union. And, he was confident that Hanoi would succumb to gradual pressure much like the Soviets had during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

It was also evident that General William Westmoreland's lack of real interest in pacification and greater focus on operations that included large scale search and destroy

missions, massive area denial bombing, and only isolated air interdiction of enemy lines of communication did not contribute to the strategy of gradual pressure in an appreciable way. The flow of enemy supplies and personnel continued to fuel both a robust insurgency and, at times, a lethal conventional force.²⁹ Westmoreland bears much of the blame for not implementing a campaign strategy that linked strategic objectives with tactical operations within the confines of South Vietnam. Both Westmoreland and the administration share blame in not preventing North Vietnam from infiltrating men and materials that fueled the insurgency. U.S. forces in Vietnam did achieve significant tactical victories on the ground, but it was within Westmoreland's primary duties to ensure those tactical victories were synchronized with other government initiatives in order to achieve strategic objectives.

Other government initiatives included those that focused on pacification, economic development, and government reform. After the introduction of a sizeable U.S. ground forces in 1965, Westmoreland all but absolved Army of Vietnam (ARVN) forces from engaging the enemy directly and instead allowed them to take the lead in pacification; a program to regain control of the village areas from the Viet Cong.³⁰ Meanwhile, U.S. forces focused on conventional tactics to seek out and destroy regular forces from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and pockets of elusive Viet Cong insurgents. Between 1965 and 1967, the pacification program suffered from U.S. neglect. Westmoreland paid little attention to counterinsurgency and the battle to win the support of the population. He all but ignored attempts by his chief pacification advisor, Robert Komer, to coordinate the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State Department, the U.S. Information Agency, and the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office with military efforts.³¹ Even after Johnson unified the civilian and military pacification effort under a single command structure

called Civil Operations and Rural Development (CORDS), Westmoreland remained largely disinterested despite having authority over the program.³² Although it can be argued that CORDS initiatives were the first real signs of counterinsurgency progress, coordination was lacking as Westmoreland chose to fight the “main war” while Komer fought the “other war.”

It is reasonable to suggest that the policy the Johnson Administration adopted concerning the containment of communism and commitment to an independent South Vietnam was unclear. Paltry strategic guidance combined with overly restrictive limitations due to political concerns significantly contributed to an inadequate military solution that stood little chance of achieving strategic objectives. Intelligence estimates indicated the problem was properly framed, however, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were either incapable or simply too institutionalized in their World War II mindsets to devise a strategic plan that addressed the true context of the problem but was within limitations set by civilian leadership. Likewise it would have been incumbent upon General Westmoreland to analyze what he was seeing firsthand and candidly assess the effectiveness of his military solution to support strategic goals of the administration. However, as history would prove, from 1964 through 1968 Vietnam remained suspended between victory and catastrophe with no real solutions other than to continue to gradually apply pressure in the hope that Hanoi would eventually seek a negotiated peace.

The Nixon Years: Madman and Peace with Honor

At the beginning of President Richard M. Nixon’s first term in 1969, the United States military had been involved in direct combat operations in South Vietnam for nearly four years resulting in the loss of 30,614 lives at the cost of \$52.2 billion. The objectives for direct military confrontation up to this point were to eliminate communist Viet Cong and North Vietnamese aggression in order to support the growth of an independent GVN.³³ However, at the end of

Johnson's administration and the beginning of Nixon's, the United States was no closer to achieving its objectives as evidenced by the communist Tet Offensive in 1968 that saw Viet Cong and the PAVN mount simultaneous attacks against multiple targets across all of South Vietnam. The limited war that Johnson sought was not being met with the same limited approach by communist leadership in Hanoi where the stated objective was a unified Vietnam. Nixon and his team immediately initiated planning to change the course of the war in order to bring about resolution favorable to U.S. interests. Nixon was committed to a policy of containment and was convinced that the United States had the moral responsibility to support the people of South Vietnam. Furthermore, he wanted to avoid any perception of weakness that could possibly invite further aggression by the Soviet Union or communist China.³⁴

Nixon began his presidency with a promise to "bring peace with honor."³⁵ He sought to gradually withdraw U.S. forces, vigorously improve South Vietnam's capability to assume responsibility for fighting, and use the strength of the military to convince North Vietnam to enter into meaningful peace negotiations.³⁶ Continuing the mission was a matter of credibility and purpose. Nixon made it clear that the U.S. was not going to abandon the South Vietnamese people. He was going to confront the spread of communism in Vietnam to send a signal that America was committed to containment throughout all parts of the world.³⁷ Although Vietnam was not of vital national interest, Nixon was not willing to sacrifice international credibility and risk communist aggression in other parts of the world. Therefore, the overall policy of the United States did not change. How to defeat communism in South Vietnam and achieve a negotiated peace without provoking a larger war with either the Soviet Union or communist China begged for an answer that could only be found in a change to the military strategy and a much more aggressive diplomatic effort.

Nixon was a well known and virulent anti-communist and his persona lent itself to a certain level of volatility. To complement his diplomatic approach and more aggressive military strategy, Nixon sought to gain psychological advantage by playing up the notion that he would do anything to stop the war, including going nuclear on Hanoi or expanding the war into Cambodia and Laos. Whereas Johnson's gradual pressure strategy relied on rational actors, Nixon wanted Hanoi to believe he was irrational. As recounted by one of his closest aides during the campaign in 1968, Nixon remarked that, "We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry--and he has his hand on the nuclear button.'"³⁸ If Nixon could convince Hanoi that he really was mad enough to use nuclear weapons, then Hanoi would most certainly look to negotiate rather than risk the regime. Despite the rhetoric, there is little to suggest that Hanoi believed America would resort to nuclear weapons.³⁹ The risk of provoking a nuclear response from the Soviet Union was too great. In the end, the madman theory was something of a bluff and Hanoi called the bluff. However, Nixon would expand operations into Cambodia and Laos which improved the military situation in South Vietnam but the domestic fallout was significant.

As part of the review of the U.S. strategy in Vietnam, Secretary of Defense Laird wanted clarification to the mission statement. Laird felt the mission statement was not in alignment with Nixon's talking points to date and, therefore, required revision. Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan-70, issued in 1968 directed U.S. forces to assist the Republic of Vietnam to "defeat" communist forces in order to achieve a "stable and independent non-communist government." Specified tasks were to:

- (1) Make as difficult and costly as possible the continued support of the Viet Cong by North Vietnam, and cause North Vietnam to cease its direction of the Viet Cong insurgency...;

- (2) Defeat the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Armed Forces in South Vietnam and force withdrawal of the North Vietnamese Armed Forces;
- (3) Extend Government of Vietnam dominion, direction, and control over all of South Vietnam;
- (4) Deter Chinese People's Republic intervention and defeat such intervention if it occurred.⁴⁰

The JCS did not see a requirement to change the mission statement because neither belligerent had changed their objectives. The North Vietnamese still wanted to attack U.S. forces and destabilize the South Vietnamese government while the United States wanted to expel North Vietnamese forces and foster a viable South Vietnamese government. Secretary Laird forwarded a draft mission statement for approval offering that it "better reflected Presidential guidance and what U.S. forces were actually doing in Southeast Asia."⁴¹ The new mission statement that was approved was:

The objective is to allow the people of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to determine their future without outside interference. To that end, and as directed by the JCS, Commander in Chief Pacific, and Commander United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) should assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to take over an increasing share of combat operations. The tactical goal of the combat operations is to defeat the subversion and aggression which is intended to deny self-determination to the RVN people. The overall mission encompasses the following undertakings:

- (1) Provide maximum assistance in developing, training, and equipping the RVNAF as rapidly as possible.
- (2) Continue military support for accelerated pacification, civic action and security programs.
- (3) Conduct military operations designed to accelerate improvement in the RVNAF and to continue to provide security for U.S. forces.
- (4) Conduct military operations to reduce the flow of material and manpower support for enemy forces in South Vietnam.
- (5) Maintain plans for a comprehensive air and naval campaign in Vietnam.⁴²

Much of the language was similar to the previous, but the revised statement did have some differences that better reflected the administration's policy and provided clarity to the mission. There was no "qualifier" for one particular type of government over the other as long

as the government adopted was the expressed will of the people. Simply stated, there was no requirement for South Vietnam to be a democracy. Secondly, it emphasized training the South Vietnamese military in order for them to take over the burden of fighting. The new mission statement provided clarity to the nature of mission and its purpose while giving off a tone that placed greater emphasis on South Vietnam taking on greater responsibility in the war.

A key tenet to Nixon's strategy was the idea of Vietnamization; the progressive transfer of fighting from the U.S. troops to the South Vietnamese. Vietnamization called for greater economic development of the rural areas through land grants but it mostly hinged on the ability of the RVNAF to be a capable fighting force to defend itself against North Vietnamese aggression. As Vietnamization progressed and RVNAF assumed greater responsibility for military operations, U.S. troops could begin an equally progressive withdrawal. Vietnamization served other purposes as well. On the home front, the concept sought to quell fears from anti-war demonstrators and Congress that the war was a quagmire with no end in sight. Vietnamization, at the very least, called for South Vietnam to take ownership of the conflict but that the United States would not leave the country defenseless.⁴³ Again, this policy was clear, contributed to U.S. strategic objectives, and the administration made it a priority.

General Creighton Abrams, newly appointed COMUSMACV as of July 1968, understood the fundamental difference in the character of the conflict in Vietnam versus the character of a more conventional style of conflict. Vietnam was largely a counterinsurgency battle and multiple lines of operation, not just military action, needed to be executed in concert with one another in order to achieve success. The war was not about body counts and attrition warfare that his predecessor and members of the former administration adopted as the metric for success. It also was not all about bombing North Vietnam into submission. For the first time,

but arguably too late, coherent solutions to real military problems were implemented in concert with diplomatic and economic initiatives that stood a chance to meet strategic objectives under a policy of containment.⁴⁴ Abrams placed significant emphasis on pacification and supported small unit attacks on the Viet Cong infrastructure. Instead of chasing an elusive enemy on large unit operations, he instead ordered his commanders to devote their attention to small unit tactics and partnering with ARVN units to separate insurgents from the village areas.⁴⁵ Abrams placed equal emphasis on winning the support of the population through pacification and conventional military operations in a “one war” concept. After Tet, the Viet Cong infrastructure was severely damaged therefore Abram’s approach made logical, strategic sense. However, it would appear that due to the political disadvantage of a democracy during a particularly unpopular war, the United States still could not extricate itself while at the same time meeting strategic objectives. North Vietnam was not going to seriously negotiate a peace settlement while it maintained the ability to rest, refit, and regroup to fight another day.

Throughout the course of the entire Vietnam War, the Office of National Estimates produced multiple intelligence estimates that accurately depicted the political and military problems facing the United States. A common trend among these estimates was their depiction of North Vietnam’s goals for a unified Vietnam and a willingness to fight a protracted war to achieve its political objectives.⁴⁶ In order to sustain their efforts, North Vietnam absolutely required open lines of communication between the principal supplying nations of China and the Soviet Union and the lines of communication through Laos and Cambodia to infiltrate men and material into South Vietnam. As a military problem, this was apparent to the President, Secretary of Defense, the JCS, and MACV. Under Johnson, the political risk of potentially provoking a larger war far outweighed any military solution to the military problem that

continued to influence all lines of operation throughout South Vietnam.⁴⁷ With the appointment of General Creighton Abrams as MACV and a new administration that appeared to embrace more aggressive action, a new strategy to defeat the insurgency and stop infiltration appeared promising.

In the very first National Security Strategy Memorandum (NSSM 1) sent by Kissinger to applicable agencies now serving the new administration, questions were asked about the importance of Laos and Cambodia as conduits for North Vietnam's ability to command and control operations, provide safe havens for enemy troops to rest and refit, and provide logistical hubs for movement of materials along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴⁸ These were fundamentally military problems that required military solutions and were probably seen as "the same old questions we answered during the Johnson Administration." From a military standpoint, interdicting enemy strongholds in Cambodia and Laos through offensive action was logical, if not critical to achieving the basic goals as devised through Pacification. General Lemay had urged interdiction in 1964, General Westmoreland and the JCS requested authorities in 1967 through 1968, and as a result of the memorandum General Abrams and the JCS again renewed the authorities to initiate aggressive actions. In their view, the Laotian and Cambodian routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, along with the command and control and logistics hubs, were "vital" to the enemy and aggressively attacking them would have a significant impact on the enemy's ability to sustain operations in South Vietnam. The final piece that eventually would be the deciding factor to go ahead with the mission into Cambodia was the tacit approval-or lack of overt disapproval-that Cambodian Prince Sihanouk channeled through third parties.⁴⁹

Operation Menu, as the Cambodian bombing campaign from 1969 through 1970 was dubbed, along with a renewed bombing effort that lasted through 1973 did achieve measurable

results that appeared, at least quantitatively, beneficial on the tactical and operational front.⁵⁰ A major ground incursion of 29,000 ARVN and 19,300 U.S. troops significantly interrupted communist initiatives for South Vietnam and Cambodia. And, the incursion bought some time for Nixon's policy initiatives to take hold. These operations were in alignment with the overall strategy of a negotiated peace settlement from a position of strength.

By 1969, it was relatively well known in classified circles that the United States had been conducting limited bombing and ground operations in both Cambodia and Laos. These actions coupled with "defensive fires" were the only military solutions to the military problem of interdicting the enemy's vital lines of communication through South Vietnam's neighboring countries. These actions demonstrated that policy makers were willing to risk the international and domestic fallout that would inevitably occur with such an aggressive move to significantly expand operations into Cambodia. Nixon and Kissinger felt strongly they could strengthen their negotiating hand if only they could keep the campaign bottled up and out of the increasingly cynical press, disillusioned public, and off the radar of Congressional "doves."⁵¹ This, of course, is a matter of debate in that if the overall strategy were explained to key members of Congress and, likewise, if the American public were made aware of just why this particular approach was necessary in the greater context of ending the war in Vietnam then it is conceivable that more support would have been garnered. However, Nixon chose to keep the operation a secret and, shockingly, it remained relatively quiet for more than a year. After the covert actions were divulged, though, Congress sought greater oversight of the war through legislative action that would limit the scope of the war. These actions in Congress hampered further military operations to attack enemy enclaves in Cambodia and Laos that, if successful, could have contributed to a better military outcome had the political restraints not been pushed.

After discovery of the Cambodian Operations, the political fallout was swift and had a negative effect on military actions for the remainder of America's involvement in Vietnam. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield predicted that legislation would be initiated to limit funds for Southeast Asia operations.⁵² Senators John Sherman and Frank Church proposed legislation to cut off funds for cross border operations and Mark Hatfield and George McGovern sought to terminate all funding for the war by 31 December 1970.⁵³ President Nixon did as much damage control as possible, and in spite of the tactical and operational successes, could not garner any (very little at this point) support to justify his decision to enter into Cambodia. As a result, President Nixon back peddled and decided that after 30 June 1970, all U.S. troop activity in Cambodia would be terminated. Although South Vietnamese forces could do what they wished, the domestic political fallout from the discovery of the Cambodian incursions had a detrimental effect on Nixon's madman theory and overall strategy to end the war from a position of strength.⁵⁴ The political will to see the war to successful termination was on the brink of collapsing without some positive indication that South Vietnam was ready to stand on its own.

Despite its success, the political fallout from the Cambodian incursion had a significant impact on the final operation to sever North Vietnam's last viable line of communication into South Vietnam. Operation Lam Son 719, an ARVN led incursion in Laos, was conceived to support several objectives. First, a decisive victory against North Vietnamese forces would garner domestic support for Nixon's Vietnamization policy. Second, destruction of vital enemy supply bases and lines of communication would isolate South Vietnam thereby giving more time for Vietnamization initiatives. Finally, a decisive victory by an ARVN main effort would send a clear message to Hanoi that they would be facing a well trained and equipped fighting force that was capable of defending itself without the aid of U.S. forces.⁵⁵ This final objective would have

fit nicely into Nixon's objective of being able to negotiate a peace treaty from a position of strength if North Vietnamese forces were dealt a significant blow. However, due to the limitations set by Congress, no U.S. ground advisors were authorized to accompany their respective ARVN and Vietnamese Marine Corps units into Laos. The operation was highly dependent on U.S. air forces for rotary wing and fixed wing air support, but the limitations meant that all airborne insert/extract, close air support, medical evacuation, resupply, and indirect fire support would have to be coordinated by South Vietnamese forces while battling the enemy and language barriers. This was a corps level operation, the first of its kind for the RVNAF, and they had to go at it alone when serious questions remained as to their readiness to undertake such an endeavor. The risk was enormous and the results were far from successful. Although Nixon and others attempted to paint a positive spin on the operation, the RVNAF force of 20,000 absorbed a 45 percent casualty rate, over 100 U.S. helicopters were shot down, and another 600 took battle damage.⁵⁶ It was reasonable to claim that the operation was a success because it did delay PAVN offensives for the remainder of the year. However, there was no decisive victory by the ARVN and most reports painted a less than positive assessment of its outcome. It is reasonable to conclude that policy, specifically legislation that prevented U.S. forces from this operation outside South Vietnam, unduly limited the application of military force and thereby contributed to Hanoi's confidence that they could defeat the RVNAF in a conventional sense. Likewise, Nixon's unwillingness to confront Congress as the commander in chief demonstrated a lack of political will to see the mission to a successful conclusion.⁵⁷

Under President Nixon's guidance, the United States mission in Vietnam had the potential for success. However, at this point in the political game it was a mission to extricate themselves from Vietnam under conditions favorable to the United States. In order to do this,

President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, devised a dual pronged strategy that sought political advantage at the negotiating table through the effective use of military force along fronts not just in South Vietnam, but in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam as well. The diplomatic effort was a complex mission that sought to create a wedge between communist leadership from the Soviet Union, China, and North Vietnam.⁵⁸ Despite the prospect for success along the diplomatic and military fronts, the negative effects from a failed Johnson strategy were too much to overcome. These effects, along with Nixon's own domestic problems as investigations into the Watergate scandal intensified, combined to form a major consensus in support of ending the war regardless the outcome or consequences. In the end, Nixon was forced to accept a peace agreement, not from a position of strength or under terms that were favorable to the U.S. policy of containment, but from a position that left South Vietnam vulnerable to a determined Hanoi.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The unclear and restriction laden strategy of gradual pressure produced a disjointed military effort, eroded support for the war, and handicapped any subsequent strategy that might have achieved measurable success. Within the scope of limited war, aligning military strategy with civilian policy is challenging business. Limitations set by policy guidance require careful examination if they prevent military commanders from achieving strategic objectives. The most senior military members of our nation are required to give their very best advice as it pertains to military options to achieve diplomatic or policy ends. However, sound military advice must come with an understanding of the character of the war in which policy makers have chosen to embark. The lessons from Vietnam provide multiple examples for leaders to examine effective and ineffective civil-military integration into the strategic decision making process.

The character of the war during the United States' initial involvement in Vietnam was

unconventional, irregular, and frustratingly complex both on the military and political front. American forces faced irregular, guerilla tactics, and an enemy that would rarely commit itself to a conventional fight in a country that had porous borders with the nations of Laos and Cambodia. Furthermore, the government of South Vietnam was largely unpopular, without concern for the populace, and paralyzed by nepotism and corruption. The problem of Vietnam required much more than the hope that North Vietnam would recognize that they could not defeat America on the battlefield and negotiate a peace settlement. The problem required a strategy a “whole of government” approach from the outset.

Clear political guidance and leadership are keys to building an effective whole of government approach. A whole of government strategy in Vietnam would have placed equal emphasis on an integrated approach to diplomacy, pacification, government reform, economic development, and stability operations from the outset. Johnson's guidance was unclear, the JCS did not contribute to a coherent strategy, and coordination between Westmoreland and other government agencies was lacking. Pacification and government reform took a back seat to military action and the strategy stood little chance of achieving a diplomatic solution. It was a strategy based on hope instead of decisive action. Abrams and Ellsworth Bunker achieved considerable progress while working with other agencies in a “one war” strategy but it was too little too late. By the time tangible, and truthful, metrics of effectiveness were seen America had little trust in its leaders and even less will to continue the mission.

As complex and controversial as Vietnam was from the 1965 through 1973 due to factors that both policy makers and military commanders faced while attempting to execute a limited war to contain communism, much of this failure was simply a by-product of poor leadership and even worse alignment of purpose. It is conceivable that the United States may have reached an

acceptable end state in South Vietnam had the full force of the United States government devised a clear and balanced policy that incorporated effective diplomatic, informational, military, and economic plans to achieve strategic objectives from the outset.

The final aspect, or key takeaway, that should be underscored as a primary lesson from this period is the concept of military strategy alignment with political policy. This is a key tenet to what Carl Von Clausewitz theorizes in Book One of *On War*. He writes, "...military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purpose and symbolize it in the peace negotiations."⁶⁰ Furthermore, Clausewitz writes, "Policy, then, will permeate all military operations, and, in so far as their violent nature will admit, it will have a continuous influence on them."⁶¹ Clausewitz's foremost theory is that war is simply a continuation of political policy by use of military force. He cautions, though, that a commander who is tasked with developing a strategy must be presented with a policy that is within his military means of achieving.⁶² Once committed to military action, the policy that guides the action must not overly limit the application of military force. If the policy so restricts the use of force, then it would be wise to address the policy or attempt other means to achieve policy objectives. Vietnam underscores the necessity to find a balance between military solution and strategic objectives as they pertain to civilian policy.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ John Dumbrell, *Rethinking the Vietnam War*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6-7.
- ² John Lewis Gaddis, "Strategies of Containment, Past and Future," *Hoover Digest*, April 2001, 2. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/6724>.
- ³ Dumbrell, 6-7.
- ⁴ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harperperrenial, 1998, HarperCollins e-books), Kindle edition.
- ⁵ Dumbrell, 29.
- ⁶ McMaster
- ⁷ Despite retiring, President Kennedy brought Taylor back to active duty to serve as his personal advisor on military matters. This certainly created a rift with the Joint Chiefs. During the Johnson administration, Taylor assumed the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and finally Ambassador to South Vietnam. His influence on the strategy for Vietnam was profound.
- ⁸ McMaster
- ⁹ William F. Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 15.
- ¹⁰ David F. Gordon, ed., *Estimative Products on Vietnam 1948-1975*, (Pittsburgh, PA: The Government Printing Office, 2004), 218-223.
- ¹¹ Turley, 73-74.
- ¹² McMaster
- ¹³ McMaster
- ¹⁴ Gordon, 201-215.
- ¹⁵ Graham A. Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960-1968*, pt. 2. (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2009), 4.
- ¹⁶ Gordon, xxiii.
- ¹⁷ Gordon, xxii-xxiv.
- ¹⁸ McMaster
- ¹⁹ Cosmas, pt. 2, 26-27.
- ²⁰ Cosmas, pt. 2, 27.
- ²¹ Gordon, 236.
- ²² McMaster
- ²³ Casualties inflicted on regular and irregular communist forces were estimated to be 45,000 or roughly 20 percent of his total forces. Additionally, the Viet Cong forces never regained their overall strength and much of the population in the South were witness to atrocities the communist forces committed against innocent civilians. Lewis Sorley. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. (New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1999), 12-14.
- ²⁴ Turley, 151-154.
- ²⁵ Cosmas, pt. 3, 160.
- ²⁶ Cosmas, pt. 3, 163.
- ²⁷ Cosmas, pt. 3, 254-255.
- ²⁸ McMaster
- ²⁹ Cosmas, pt. 3, 115.
- ³⁰ Mark Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 6-7.
- ³¹ Moyer, 47-48.
- ³² Moyer, 49.
- ³³ Willard J. Webb, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1969-1970* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2002), 1.
- ³⁴ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1988), 88.
- ³⁵ Kimball, 40.
- ³⁶ Cosmas, pt. 3, 256.
- ³⁷ Kimball, 88.
- ³⁸ This particular conversation was recounted by Nixon's chief of staff Bob Haldeman from a conversation in 1967 during the Presidential campaign. Kimball, 76.

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- ³⁹ Turley, 169-170.
- ⁴⁰ Webb, 56-57.
- ⁴¹ Webb, 56-61.
- ⁴² Webb, 60-61
- ⁴³ Kimball, 241.
- ⁴⁴ Sorley, 18-24.
- ⁴⁵ Moyer, 200-201.
- ⁴⁶ Gordon, 433
- ⁴⁷ George C. Herring, *LBJ and VIETNAM: A Different Kind of War*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 54.
- ⁴⁸ Kimball, 125.
- ⁴⁹ Kimball, 125-132.
- ⁵⁰ Sorley, 204-206.
- ⁵¹ Kimball, 131-132.
- ⁵² Webb, 163.
- ⁵³ The Cooper-Church amendment restricted the use of U.S. ground troops from operating beyond the borders of South Vietnam but it did not restrain air interdiction operations. Kimball, 221.
- ⁵⁴ Author Jeffrey Kimball argues that Nixon's principal strategy was not détente but a madman theory which held that the combined actions in Cambodia, bombing Laos and North Vietnam, while making threats to the Soviet Union were all attempts to remain unpredictable thereby frightening the enemy into compliance. Kimball, 371.
- ⁵⁵ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 235.
- ⁵⁶ William Nolan, *Into Laos: The Story of Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719, Vietnam 1971* (New York: Dell, 1998), 367.
- ⁵⁷ Since the beginning of United States involvement in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were strategic safe havens used by the North Vietnamese for throughput of men and materials to sustain both insurgent and conventional operations in South Vietnam. On 7 January 1966, the JCS requested permission from Secretary of Defense McNamara to redefine theater rules of engagement to allow for "immediate pursuit of hostile land forces in Laos" in addition to the on-going Shining Brass clandestine cross-border operations. This particular request was similar to the one requested for operations within Cambodia to augment Daniel Boone Operations and similar to previous requests that only gave significantly stipulated approval to attack enemy sanctuaries in those countries that bordered South Vietnam. The military problem seemed simple; the vast majority of enemy forces and material were being infiltrated into South Vietnam from North Vietnam through a series of trail networks throughout Laos and Cambodia that were collectively known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Therefore, interdicting and shutting off this enemy line of communication would significantly reduce North Vietnam's ability to sustain military and insurgent activities that threatened security and stability operations. After much political wrangling with the ambassador to Laos, the government of Laos, risk estimates, and with more limitations than one can imagine the request was granted but approval for individual missions remained not at the tactical or operation level but at the strategic within the highest levels of government. Under these conditions, limited B-52 interdiction strikes and small unit, limited objective raids were conducted. These particular bombing attacks and raids had virtually no appreciable effect on the amount of supplies moving south and could be assessed as only "marginally successful" in re-routing North Vietnamese lines of communication. Cosmas, pt. 2, 76-79.
- ⁵⁸ Kimball, 122.
- ⁵⁹ Turley, 196.
- ⁶⁰ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 81.
- ⁶¹ Clausewitz, 87.
- ⁶² Clausewitz, 87.