SECOND INDOCHINA WAR SYMPOSIUM

PAPERS AND COMMENTARY

Edited by

JOHN SCHLIGHT



THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR

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Preface

What follows is a compilation of the papers, commentaries, and discussions of a symposium on the Second Indochina War held by the U.S. Army Center of Military History in November 1984 at Airlie House in Virginia. This conference was conceived and directed by Dr. Douglas Kinnard, the former Chief of Military History. His goal in selecting topics, papers, and conferees was to examine the current status of issues and scholarship relating to the war in Vietnam. The success of this conference, as reflected in this volume, was largely attributable to the validity of his original concept and his appreciation of the many factors surrounding that conflict.

Several observations flowed from these meetings. First, it was evident that the passions which accompanied similar gatherings in the past had abated, permitting more objective analyses of the many issues still unresolved about the war. Second, there was a pronounced tendency to consider the conflict in a much larger international and domestic context than had been the case only a few years ago. Such issues as the war's effect on America's armed forces and on the nation's credibility, as well as earlier premonitions of an American retreat from global responsibility and a diminution at home of national pride, looked quite different when viewed from this expanded background.

Third, there was a strongly expressed desire on the part of the scholars for more research on what Professor Walter LaFeber called the "bureaucratic engine room," namely, on those decisions below the presidential level that fueled the development of the commitment, the conduct of the war, and the eventual disengagement. Particularly needed, in the view of the conferees, are analyses of decisions made by the civilian leadership at the Pentagon, by the National Security Council, and by the armed services. This is a deficiency which the sponsors of the symposium, along with historians of the other armed services, are laboring to remedy.

As with any historical event as far-reaching as the Vietnam conflict, many issues on various levels remain to be explored. The attendees discussed a number of them, and some of their views are

included in the final section of this volume. It is hoped that the inclusion of these issues will serve to stimulate further historical examination.

Special thanks are due to these behind-the-scenes people whose work contributed to the success of the conference: Margaret Mauck, Lt. Col. Grady Smith, Arthur S. Hardyman, Sfc. Michael McManus, Sp5c. Bonnie Whicker, Bruce Hardcastle, and Stephen E. Everett.

Although the Center of Military History sponsored the symposium, the views expressed by the participants are not necessarily those of the Center or the Department of the Army.

Washington, D.C.
28 May 1985

JOHN SCHLIGHT

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THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR SYMPOSIUM

Introduction

Douglas Kinnard

On behalf of the secretary of the Army and the chief of staff, I wish to extend to each of you a very warm welcome to the Center of Military History's symposium on the Second Indochina War.

As anyone who has looked over the list of attendees can attest, we have gathered here four different, though complementary, groups of scholars. First, there are those who have made a specialty of the Second Indochina War and have published the results of their research. Secondly, there are those who have not focused on the war in particular but upon the times and the individuals who played major historical roles in decision making. Also present are some who participated in high-level decision making in Washington and Saigon. Finally, we have among us official historians, represented in the main by scholars from the U.S. Army Center of Military History. I would like to say a bit more about this final group and their approach.

Most official historians are not academics, but they do bring to their work the high standards of scholarly inquiry found in academe. Writing books for an internal governmental audience, for a general audience, and for scholars, they have a duty to both the general public and the professional audience. They must continually seek the fine line between court history and the irresponsible use of privileged information. Nowhere has this been more true than in the study of the American role in the Second Indochina War.

Selecting the agenda for a symposium is in itself a difficult and important matter, but select one must, and in so doing define the focus as to the period of time to be covered, the geographical area of major interest, aspects of the war to be covered, and finally the viewpoint from which the war is to be treated. Many combinations are possible, and no small determinant is the pool of available talent.

In the case of this symposium the agenda is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the question of how and why the

United States got involved in Vietnam, a question that still excites and divides scholars. Existing interpretations of the genesis of this involvement extend from the broadest to the narrowest, proposing causes that range from the more remote to the most proximate. In the first category, explanations see American involvement as the product of *realpolitik* as expressed in the policy of containment and as the inevitable result of the possession of immense power by the United States. More immediate causal theories emphasize the imperatives of domestic politics, the inherent tendency of decision makers to place excessive faith in the efficacy of power, America's misperception of Vietnam as a Western nation, or a misunderstanding of the motives of the Vietnamese. All of these views and others, individually and in combination, figure into presentations, discussions, and writings on the war.

Widely divergent opinions also persist over the strategy pursued in Vietnam, the subject of the second section. One major issue speaks to the general nature of the war. Was it an insurgency or a conventional war? A further set of issues addresses the manner in which the allied forces were employed. Some argue that allied military power was misused as a signal of our desires for negotiation rather than as an instrument for defeating the enemy. Restrictions on the use of military power figure prominently in these arguments. Some, particularly among those who fought in the war, pointed to an absence of clear political objectives that rendered futile the efforts to devise an effective strategy. Further, many questions remain concerning Vietnamization: the seriousness with which American decision makers viewed it, the possibility of its success, and the reasonableness of expecting the South Vietnamese to shoulder such a burden successfully. There even remains disagreement as to whether or not it actually did work. Finally, there is the overarching question of what went wrong (or, indeed, whether anything went wrong). One school of thought highlights the series of blunders purported to have spelled defeat for the allies. Another suggests that, on the contrary, the American decision-making system produced as it was supposed to. Perhaps we can shed some new light on these and other nagging but important questions.

The third section looks at the immediate results of the war. One issue of interest to Army historians is the conflict's impact on the United States Army. Near the war's end and on through the seventies, the Army experienced an "identity crisis" which, in the view of some, greatly impaired its effectiveness. The degree to which this

degradation resulted from Vietnam rather than from general societal developments remains a subject for inquiry. A further issue centers on the all-volunteer Army. The draft ended just as American participation in the war was winding down, and the resultant all-volunteer Army must be counted among the effects of Vietnam. The absence of conscription has had a pervasive impact on the Army and must be included in any postmortem on the war.

Vietnam's effect on American foreign policy is also open for reinterpretation. To what degree did the Southeast Asian experience alter America's approach to the rest of the world? Did the United States abandon its policy of containment or did it only shelve it temporarily? Did America's tarnished image impair its ability in the seventies to project its power and achieve satisfactory negotiations in other areas?

These and other unresolved issues form the basis for this symposium. It is my hope that this group might be stimulated toward new directions in their research and methodological approaches to the war.

SECTION I

The Evolution of the Commitment

The Legacy of the First Indochina War

George C. Herring

The First Indochina War laid the basis for, defined the contours of, and to a considerable degree influenced the outcome of the longer and more destructive conflict that followed. It also gave rise to the original U.S. commitment to South Vietnam. This paper will examine the legacy of the war of 1946–1954. It will focus on the Geneva Conference and its aftermath and will devote particular attention to the Eisenhower administration's commitment to South Vietnam in late 1954, a decision of major importance in the escalation of U.S. involvement and as yet relatively unstudied by scholars.

The fundamental consequence of the First Indochina War was that it did not resolve the basic issues over which the war had been fought. The French and Viet Minh had gone to war in 1946 because they could not resolve by diplomacy the questions of the political unity of Vietnam and the future French role in Indochina. Despite eight years of bloody fighting and the loss of thousands of lives, the First Indochina War did not settle these issues. The Geneva Accords paid lip service to the eventual reunification of Vietnam, calling for national elections in two years to decide the political fate of the country. It seems clear, however, that of the participants and interested bystanders at the Geneva Conference, only the Vietnamese were committed to unification, and they were divided among themselves on who should control the country once unified. The accords also contained a somewhat evasive French pledge to respect the independence and territorial integrity of the Indochinese states, but they did not specify any terms for French withdrawal, and it is clear that the French sought to play a continued role in their former colonies. Geneva, in Stanley Karnow's apt phrase, was a "military truce that awaited a political settlement, which never happened."[1]

During the debate of the 1960s, the failure of the Geneva Accords was usually blamed on North Vietnam or the United States. The

U.S. government contended that Geneva had permitted two separate governments in Vietnam and accused North Vietnam of subverting the agreements by trying to destroy South Vietnam. On the other hand, North Vietnam and American doves insisted that the Geneva mechanisms calling for a unified nation had been blatantly violated by South Vietnam and the United States.

Such arguments indicate, if nothing else, that the Geneva Accords were sufficiently ambiguous to lend themselves to different interpretations. The availability of new U.S. documents and scattered evidence from other parts of the world now make clear, moreover, that the failure of the Geneva Conference had much more complex roots.

The brilliance of the Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 has obscured the extent to which the persistence of military stalemate in Indochina shaped the indecisive peace settlement at Geneva. The French lost 1,500 dead, 4,000 wounded, and as many as 10,000 captured, and the Viet Minh victory was a devastating blow to French morale in Indochina and at home. The French position in the Tonkin Delta after Dien Bien Phu was especially precarious. General Henri Navarre pleaded for reinforcements, and the high command discussed the possibility of pulling back all French forces to a defensive line along the Hanoi-Haiphong axis.[2] On the other side, however, the Viet Minh paid an enormous price for their success. They may have invested as much as 25 percent of their assets at Dien Bien Phu, and French sources estimate their losses as high as 25,000—10,000 of these killed in action. The heavy losses and badly strained supply lines made it very difficult for the Viet Minh to capitalize on their victory. In the aftermath of Dien Bien Phu, the French thus retained a sizable army in Vietnam and still controlled the major cities. In the south, the Viet Minh controlled no more than one-half the territory and one-third of the population. The Viet Minh victory, although stunning, was incomplete.[3]

Even had the Viet Minh been capable of pressing their military advantage, they might not have been able to do so. By the spring of 1954, the Indochina War had become internationalized, and its eventual settlement owed more to the allies of the belligerents than the belligerents themselves.

The Viet Minh by this time were heavily dependent on the Soviet Union and China, who for their own reasons were eager for a settlement of the war. The Soviet leadership that had succeeded Stalin in 1953 apparently sought an easing of world tensions to consolidate its

position at home, and the Russians wanted to conciliate France to discourage French membership in the American-sponsored European Defense Community. The Soviets appear to have taken the lead in the late summer of 1953 in proposing and urging Viet Minh acceptance of a negotiated settlement of the war. During the Geneva Conference, Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov played the unusual role of conciliator and, along with British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, sponsored a compromise peace.

China's role was more important. Chinese aid to the Viet Minh had expanded from an estimated 2,000 tons per month in 1951 to 10,000 tons per month in late 1953, and the Chinese also provided sanctuary for and assisted in the training of Viet Minh soldiers. Chinese artillery and antiaircraft guns played an important part in the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and China had considerable leverage over the Viet Minh. Chinese interests seem to have dictated a compromise settlement. Only just having taken power, the Chinese Communists had suffered heavily in the Korean War, and they needed a period of peace to repair their losses and promote domestic development. They may have wished to wean themselves away from dependence on the Soviet Union and to this end sought increased trade with the Western nations. They seem most of all to have wanted recognition and admission to the United Nations as confirmation of their great power status, and thus they sought to conciliate the West. The Chinese seem especially to have feared that a French collapse in Indochina would leave a vacuum which the United States might fill. China therefore pushed the Viet Minh toward a compromise settlement that cost them some of the fruits of their military success.

The United States was not a formal party to the negotiations at Geneva, but it played a major role and its influence may have been decisive to the outcome. Certain that the Viet Minh were an instrument of the Soviet drive for world domination and that a Viet Minh victory would be intolerable to the "free world," the United States since 1950 had sustained France with ever-increasing quantities of military assistance. Equally certain that France's colonial goals were counterproductive, Washington had sought in vain to persuade Paris to promise the Indochinese complete independence. When the possibility of a Viet Minh victory at Dien Bien Phu in early 1954 seemed to increase the chances of the loss of Indochina to communism, the Eisenhower administration began seriously to contemplate U.S. military intervention. Admitting that he was "bitterly opposed" to

putting American military forces into the "jungles" of Indochina, Eisenhower went on to inform his National Security Council that the United States could not forget its vital interests there. Comparing Indochina to a "leaky dike," he warned that with such things "it is sometimes better to put a finger in than to let the whole structure be washed away."[4]

During the Dien Bien Phu crisis, the United States considered military intervention on several occasions. Eisenhower toyed with what he called a Flying Tiger operation, American pilots flying unmarked planes on bombing missions against the Viet Minh positions around the French fortress.[5] The administration rejected this idea, as well as Admiral Arthur Radford's proposals for a series of heavy American bombing attacks at Dien Bien Phu, perhaps even using atomic weapons. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles instead settled on a plan called United Action, which provided for the United States to intervene militarily in Indochina as part of a coalition including Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and a number of Pacific nations. The plan was designed to deter possible Chinese intervention in Indochina, to prevent a French defeat on the battlefield or at the conference table, or, if the latter occurred, to fill the vacuum in Indochina. Firmly opposed to putting U.S. ground troops in Indochina, the administration planned, in Dulles' words, to do those things "we can do better," using naval and air power and training Vietnamese troops. United Action might have been implemented had not congressional leaders insisted that British participation and French willingness to share direction of the war must precede a U.S. commitment and had not the British and French balked.[6]

With the failure of United Action and the fall of Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower and Dulles set out to block a settlement at Geneva. Dulles' refusal to participate directly in the talks and his bull-in-the-china-shop diplomacy at Geneva have become part of America's diplomatic folklore. More important and less well known, the administration for much of the first month of the conference attempted to negotiate with France arrangements for U.S. military intervention in Indochina. Sensing in the opening stages of Geneva a French willingness to "internationalize" the war, Dulles and Eisenhower drafted a set of conditions for U.S. intervention. The Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up detailed contingency plans for deploying U.S. forces, one provision of which was that nuclear weapons would be used if it were

militarily advantageous.[7] Administration officials drafted a joint congressional resolution authorizing the president to employ military forces in Indochina and worked out an elaborate scenario, even to the point of setting a date, for going to Congress with the request for authority to intervene.[8] Some scholars have suggested that these frantic activities were largely bluff, but the administration's close attention to detail, its apparent seriousness of intent, and its willingness to compromise important points to secure agreement with France would appear to suggest otherwise.[9]

As in April, however, the United States and France could not agree on the terms of intervention. Washington wanted Paris to commit itself to stay in the war indefinitely, share direction of military operations with the United States, and leave Indochina once victory had been attained. France hoped to use the threat of U.S. intervention as a bargaining lever at Geneva, and it wanted U.S. military assistance to be available should its position in Indochina appear on the verge of collapse. The French were determined to extricate themselves from the war on the most favorable terms, but they still wanted to salvage some influence in Indochina, and they were not at all eager to sell out their freedom of action to the United States. They agreed merely to "discuss" the American conditions and added conditions of their own. The talks dragged on inconclusively and broke down completely in mid-June when the government of Joseph Laniel was replaced by a government headed by Pierre Mendes-France and committed to a negotiated settlement.[10]

Although the United States, Great Britain, and France had worked at cross-purposes during the first phase of the Indochina crisis, the allies managed to orchestrate a coordinated approach in the final critical stages of the Geneva Conference. Mendes-France took office on condition that he would resign if a settlement were not reached by 21 July, a ploy that alarmed Washington but seems eventually to have worked to France's advantage. Desperately fearful of a breakdown of the negotiations and an expanded war, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden struggled tirelessly for a settlement, even to the point of working with the despised Dulles. Abandoning with some reluctance its hopes of blocking a settlement and continuing the war, the Eisenhower administration in mid-June shifted to a policy of salvaging as much of Indochina as possible. Dulles secured British and French agreement to a set of minimum acceptable terms that permitted Western influence in Laos, Cambodia, and the

southern part of Vietnam. Although there was little chance by this time that the United States would enter the war, the secretary's public bluster, his threats to pull the U.S. delegation out of Geneva entirely, and his well-timed and much publicized arrival in Paris on 13 July seemed to keep the possibility alive and impressed upon allies and adversaries alike the importance of negotiating a settlement.[11]

Under this kind of pressure, an agreement was hastily worked out in the frantic five days before the expiration of Mendes-France's deadline. Apparently concerned by the possible consequences of a breakdown of negotiations, the Soviet Union and especially China persuaded the Viet Minh to make concessions that made possible a settlement and served French and American interests admirably. The Viet Minh abandoned their untenable claims for influence in Laos and Cambodia, agreeing to governments that were likely to be pro-Western provided that no foreign bases were permitted. On the more important and difficult Vietnam settlement, French sources confirm that Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En-lai compelled the Vietnamese to accept a partition line at the 17th Parallel instead of the 13th, a concession which cost them several provinces where they had firm control and left in French hands the city of Hue, an air base at Tourane (Da Nang), and a key military road into Laos and Thailand. On the equally critical issue of elections, the Viet Minh under Chinese and Soviet pressure reluctantly accepted a two-year delay instead of the early elections they were certain would be more to their advantage.[12]

The reasons why the Soviets and Chinese forced their ally to accept less than it thought it was entitled to can probably never be established with precision. No doubt they both placed their own interests above those of the Viet Minh. Soviet indifference about Southeast Asia during these years is well known.[13] The Chinese seem to have been deeply concerned about the prospect of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia, or at least they played on such fears to persuade the Viet Minh to accept terms which suited China better. Both the Russians and the Chinese may have assumed complacently that the Viet Minh could easily prevail given the conditions in Vietnam and that they had done all that was required of an ally. Viet Minh delegate to Geneva, Pham Van Dong, complained then and later that Chou had "doubled-crossed" his Vietnamese ally, and the Hanoi government later minimized the threat of U.S. intervention and accused the Chinese of denying the Viet Minh a victory that was

within their reach.[14] Other evidence suggests, however, that the Viet Minh themselves were fearful of U.S. intervention and willingly accepted a settlement that seemed to keep the United States out of Vietnam and gave them a reasonable chance of prevailing by political means.[15]

Thus was consummated what Canadian diplomat John Holmes called "a nasty bargain accepted by all parties as the only way to avoid a dangerous confrontation."[16] The Geneva Agreements did not settle the essential issues over which the war had been fought. The terms were vague in critical places, and from the outset even those without a direct stake in the outcome viewed their meaning quite differently. Holmes had been present at Geneva and assumed that the essence of the deal was that Laos and Cambodia would be neutral while Vietnam would "be allowed to proceed in due course and by the most respectable methods into the Communist camp."[17] On the other hand, Australian Foreign Minister Richard Casey and some British officials, like the Eisenhower administration, saw the partition of Vietnam as a means to "save" at least part of that country for the West.[18] The manner in which the agreement was handled was unusual if not indeed unique in the annals of diplomacy and reflected the tenuous nature of the settlement itself. The United States and the non-Communist government of what would become South Vietnam refused to associate themselves with the formal agreements. The other parties signed only the cease-fire agreement and merely listed their names on the political "instruments."

It is now quite clear, moreover, that for the principals Geneva reversed Clausewitz's classic dictum, diplomacy representing in this case a continuation of the war by other means. Before the ink was dry on the Geneva Accords, indeed even before the terms had been agreed upon, the various parties were maneuvering to achieve their objectives. The outlines of future conflict were evident long before the conference ended.

Despite the concessions they had been forced to make, the Viet Minh seem to have believed that they had secured an agreement that would make possible attainment of their long-range goal of a unified Vietnam under their control. They preferred partition to a "leopard-spot" solution. Enclaves would restrict party operatives to isolated areas, making it difficult to protect and enlarge existing political networks, while partition would provide a solid base from which expansion could take place. Although obviously they would have

preferred better terms, party leaders seemed generally content with the Geneva Accords and may even have been complacent about future prospects. At the Sixth Plenum in July 1954, however, Viet Minh leaders made clear that if the political framework provided by Geneva failed to produce the desired results, force would be employed.[19]

China hinted at its willingness to accept a two-Vietnam policy even before the delegates had departed Geneva. At a dinner party on 22 July, Chou En-lai not only invited a representative of the non-Communist Vietnamese government but also suggested that his government open a diplomatic mission in Peking. Conceding aloud that China was closer to the Viet Minh ideologically, Chou went on to note that this should not preclude dealing with another Vietnamese government. "After all," he concluded, "aren't you both Vietnamese, and aren't we all Asians."[20]

The maneuvering on the non-Communist side is more easily documented and was quite intense. Despite the disaster at Dien Bien Phu, the French remained determined to salvage something in Vietnam. Foreign Minister Georges Bidault told U.S. Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith in the opening days of Geneva that France had not fought eight years simply to walk out of the country.[21] Taking into account the possibility that the Viet Minh at some point might gain control of the entire country, the French maintained diplomatic contact with their enemy and sought to promote influence with the Viet Minh leadership. At the same time, however, they carefully laid plans for building a non-Communist state which would be willing to accept a continued French role. Like the Viet Minh, France rejected a leopard-spot solution in favor of partition which would provide a defensible line beyond which there would be no enemy enclaves. The French grudgingly abandoned Hanoi and Haiphong, in part because they perceived that to remain there would require them to concede the Viet Minh a position in Saigon.[22] In any case, they privately made clear their intention to promote a non-Communist state in southern Vietnam. French diplomats held out for the longest possible delay in scheduling elections to ensure the best possible results. They urged the United States to assist them in mounting a "dramatic propaganda campaign" to persuade as many as one million Vietnamese to move below the partition line, at least one reason being so that their votes might be used.[23] A top French official told U.S. Ambassador C. Douglas Dillon shortly after Geneva

that Mendes-France "would use the devil himself" to win the elections.[24] Behind the scenes, French delegate to Geneva Jean Chauvel assured the Americans that Mendes-France's policy was to establish a "solid foundation on which to build a solid durable state," and he even spoke optimistically of the possibility at some future point "of regaining complete control of national territory from the Vietminh."[25]

The United States was moving along parallel lines—to a point. Having reluctantly acquiesced in the partition of Vietnam, Dulles set out to salvage as much of Indochina as possible. He bound Eden and Mendes-France to accept only an agreement that would permit economic and military assistance to Laos, Cambodia, and "free" Vietnam. The United States fully agreed with France on the necessity of delaying elections, because, as Dulles told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "as things stand now, it is probable that Ho Chi Minh would get a large vote."[26] It also held out for inclusion of a Western nation (eventually Canada) on the international body that would supervise the elections so that if necessary the United States would have the capacity to "block things."[27] Dulles was concerned about the partition arrangements because the "most virile" Vietnamese lived above the 17th Parallel. Like the French, however, he was attracted by the possibility of encouraging as many as a million Catholics to move south. Such a population shift might be enough to prevent Ho Chi Minh from winning the elections, or, if prospects appeared unfavorable, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam might not even want to go through with the elections.[28] In their most optimistic moments, the Americans, like the French, conjured up scenarios for ultimate bloodless victory. Smith commented on one occasion that if southern Vietnam could be built up politically and cleaned out of Viet Minh, and after the people of North Vietnam had had a taste of living under communism, "after two years there was hope that elections would turn out favorably."[29]

Leaving as little to chance as possible, the administration initiated in Vietnam the covert operations it had employed successfully in other areas. While Dien Bien Phu was still under siege, CIA agent Edward Lansdale had been appointed to head a special operations team in Vietnam. Lansdale had helped the government of the Philippines wage a successful counterinsurgency war against Huk insurgents, and his assignment in Vietnam included such things as establishing political contacts with the non-Communist Vietnamese,

instructing them in the art of unconventional warfare, and encouraging them to launch operations against the Viet Minh. Lansdale arrived in Saigon on 1 June. After Geneva, the size of his mission was enlarged, and he launched a wide range of activities including encouraging the shift of people from North to South Vietnam and sabotage operations against the North Vietnamese.[30]

For the short term, the United States and France agreed on the necessity of establishing a viable South Vietnam, but the two allies differed fundamentally on long-range goals. Throughout the First Indochina War, U.S. officials had been certain that Viet Minh successes were primarily a function of France's military ineptitude and reactionary political goals. Eisenhower and Dulles recognized the importance of France's remaining in Indochina temporarily to forestall a Viet Minh takeover. For the long run, however, their hope was to "salvage something" in Indochina "free of the taint of French colonialism." If a durable, non-Communist state was to be established, France must eventually leave Indochina and let the United States work with the "natives."[31]

Clinging for their very survival, the "natives" seem to have reached similar conclusions. Alternately suspicious that the French were going to sell them out to the Communists or revive their old plans for a French-dominated Cochinchinese state, the non-Communist Vietnamese struggled at Geneva to break free of their dependence on France. Using language he must have thought would be music to American ears, the Emperor Bao Dai affirmed that he was eager to "revitalize the Vietnamese struggle against Communism" and to substitute for French military caution a "fighting offensive army." Affirming his commitment to a "new policy of independence," he sent out not so subtle signals seeking U.S. support, and he even inquired under what circumstances the United States might intervene in the war.[32]

One apparent result of these maneuvers that Bao Dai would live to regret was the emergence to power of his old adversary Ngo Dinh Diem. The route Diem took to the premiership of South Vietnam remains unclear. The Catholic leader approached the United States as early as 1951, among other things attacking Bao Dai's government, making clear his own anticommunism and nationalism, and on one occasion speaking "somewhat wistfully" of his hope that U.S. troops might be used in Vietnam.[33] Diem's virulent francophobia seems to have been too much for Dean Acheson's State Department,

and U.S. officials felt that the self-exiled Vietnamese political figure was too rigid, too Catholic, and too monkish to be an effective leader of non-Communist Vietnam.[34] Diem did come to the attention of General William Donovan of OSS fame, however, and Donovan at this time was orchestrating from his Wall Street office a global network of anti-Communist operations of significant proportions. Donovan and the Catholic lobby in Washington with or without the support of the CIA may have forced Diem on a reluctant Bao Dai. Or the emperor may have turned to Diem as part of his broader strategy of enlisting American support to break free from French dominance. Whatever the case, Diem assumed the premiership of Bao Dai's government in the midst of the Geneva Conference.[35]

Once in power, Diem, with Bao Dai's blessing, did everything possible to block a settlement at Geneva. Eventually resigning himself to the harsh reality of some kind of partition, he pleaded with the Americans to prevent the French from abandoning Hanoi. Manifesting the disdain for southerners that would make his task of leadership extraordinarily difficult, he warned that it would be "practically impossible" to form a viable non-Communist state without Hanoi because the Cochinchinese were "too easy going either [to] become soldiers or to resist Communist subversion."[36] On numerous occasions in his first months in power, he echoed what would become a standard refrain—South Vietnam could not be saved without U.S. intervention. He disassociated the Bao Dai government from the Geneva settlement and vowed to fight it. The battle lines of the Second Indochina War had thus taken form before the First Indochina War had officially ended.

In the struggle that followed, the balance of forces from the outset would be markedly uneven, this also a central legacy of the First Indochina War. To be sure, Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) faced a formidable challenge in consolidating its position in the countryside, establishing control in the urban areas where its influence had been limited, and building a modern economy from a primitive, war-shattered base. The ten to fifteen thousand Viet Minh operatives left in the South to maintain the party apparatus and promote unification by legal and extralegal means were bitterly disillusioned by the Geneva settlement and extremely vulnerable to attacks from the South Vietnamese government and its French and American supporters.[37]

On the other hand, the new Hanoi government had numerous advantages. Fourteen million of an estimated population of twenty-five million lived above the 17th Parallel, and the northerners were generally conceded to be of a more vigorous disposition. North Vietnam had at its disposal a large, reasonably well equipped modern army whose performance in battle had mystified westerners and produced great victories against the French.[38] The party machinery had been constructed with painstaking care and functioned smoothly. Ho Chi Minh was the best known nationalist leader in all of Vietnam, and the Viet Minh had earned broad popular respect for having led the struggle against France. Many northerners were anti-Communist and the regime was not without internal opposition. Ironically, however, the emigration of as many as a million Catholics to the South probably did the DRV a favor by removing a large dissident group that might have complicated consolidation of its control.

In South Vietnam, chaos reigned from the outset. The economy was devastated by the war. Anti-Communists were dispirited by the Geneva settlement and uncertain as to American and French intentions. Among some southerners there was sentiment for unification even at the expense of Communist domination. Political fragmentation had been a way of life in southern Vietnam for years and had been deliberately cultivated by the French as a means to divide and conquer. It was perhaps the fundamental reality of post-Geneva South Vietnam. The Viet Minh retained pockets of control, even on the doorstep of Saigon. The so-called sects ruled the Mekong Delta and the suburbs of Saigon as fiefdoms and maintained their own private armies. Within weeks after Geneva, northern Catholics began pouring into predominantly Buddhist South Vietnam at the rate of 7,000 a day, adding new religious and ethnic tensions to an already volatile mix.[39]

The twin legacies of French colonialism and seven years of war brought problems that would have taxed the most effective leaders, but the rickety structure inherited from the French was a government in name only. During its brief existence it had been noted primarily for its Western orientation, its compliance with French wishes, and its ineffectuality. French General Henri Navarre contemptuously dismissed the Vietnamese leaders as a "band of marionettes."[40] Most of them had been to European schools; many had European wives. They spent much of their time and energy protecting their political

flanks against potential rivals and promoting their personal enrichment. The army had been created by the French out of desperation in the last stages of the war, and Navarre conceded that it was little more than a "rabble."[41] As many as half of the soldiers stationed in the North after Geneva deserted rather than regroup to the South. Presiding over the chaos, usually from afar, was the Emperor Bao Dai, whose reputation as a playboy was exceeded only by his notoriety for incompetence—"not by education or personality the stuff of which Churchills are made," U.S. Ambassador Donald Heath lamented with marvelous understatement.[42] Dulles readily conceded during Geneva that turning loose Bao Dai's government would be like "putting a baby in a cage of hungry lions."[43]

The arrival of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon offered little reason for encouragement. Indeed, what is striking in retrospect is the extent to which early estimates of Diem pointed toward the tragic denouement of 1 November 1963. Praising Diem's integrity and "fire," Walter Bedell Smith expressed hope at Geneva that he might be a "real 'find,'" even a "modern political Joan of Arc" who could "rally the country behind him."[44] Privately, however, American officials were universally pessimistic, even despairing. Ambassador Dillon conceded Diem's "apparent sincerity, patriotic fervor, and honesty," but felt that he was "too unworldly and unsophisticated" to cope wih South Vietnam's problems. Dillon eventually came around to what he admitted was the "seemingly ridiculous prospect" that this "Yogi-like mystic" should be given U.S. endorsement, but only, he quickly added, because the "standard set by his predecessors is so low."[45] Within weeks after Diem took office, Charge Robert McClintock in Saigon characterized him as a "messiah without a message," complained of his "narrowness of view," and commented scornfully that his only "formulated policy is to ask immediate American assistance in every form."[46]

Diem's first months in office did nothing to change these early unfavorable impressions. McClintock found the prime minister's only virtue to be his honesty and warned Washington that he was presiding calmly over the disintegration of South Vietnam.[47] Even friendly observers conceded that Diem's Western orientation, his "ascetic background," his lack of a political base in the South, and his rigidity complicated his already staggering tasks of leadership.[48] According to Leo Cherne, later a founder of the American Friends of Vietnam, the fact that Diem was a northern Catholic in Buddhist

South Vietnam was a liability that might be compared in American political terms to that of a "rigid, devout Roman Catholic antisegregationist Yankee opposing Herman Talmadge in Georgia."[49]

In the first six months after Geneva, therefore, official and unofficial estimates of South Vietnam's chances of survival were without exception pessimistic. U.S. intelligence estimates emphasized the existence of a "dangerous vacuum of leadership," and warned that adverse trends since the end of Geneva had increased the likelihood that the Communists would take over all of Vietnam by political means.[50] Top British civilian and military officials in Southeast Asia shared these appraisals.[51] On one occasion, Dulles estimated at no better than one in three the chances of saving South Vietnam. In his more pessimistic moments, the odds fell to one in ten.[52] Even the rabidly anti-Communist Cherne admitted that if a vote were held soon it would go heavily in favor of the Viet Minh. "There are two years to turn the tide," he warned Donovan. "The odds are heavily against freedom and this means that the effort must be gigantic."[53]

Although it was unwilling at this point to mount the sort of "gigantic effort" advocated by Cherne, the Eisenhower administration did nevertheless buck the overwhelming odds in October 1954, making a qualified and limited, but still significant, commitment to Diem and South Vietnam. Analysis of this important step on the road to large-scale involvement in Vietnam suggests a great deal about the assumptions and methods of operation of United States foreign policy in the mid-1950s.

Despite the dubious prospects, the administration felt compelled to do something because of the perceived importance of Vietnam. The manner in which an area of no significance to the United States before 1941 became a vital interest is the subject of a separate paper. Suffice it to say here that by 1954 Indochina and especially Vietnam were viewed as the key to critical interests throughout the world. Indeed, as early as March 1953 top U.S. policymakers agreed that it was "probably the top priority in foreign policy," in some ways more important even than Korea because the effects of its loss could not be localized.[54] Indochina had become by this time the keystone to the U.S. alliance system in the Far East and Western Europe. In the eyes of American policymakers, its fall might cause the loss of all mainland Southeast Asia and possibly Indonesia as well. Conquest of these areas rich in rice and raw materials would give an enormous economic advantage to the Communist "bloc." Equally important, it

would put tremendous pressure on Japan, which would lose a source of food supply and a major outlet for export development. "The situation of the Japanese is hard enough with China being Commie," Dulles affirmed in 1953, and with the loss of Southeast Asia too "the Japs would be thinking on how to get on the other side."[55] U.S. officials also feared the psychological effects the loss of Indochina might have on the Western European nations and especially on France, whose attachment to the Western alliance seemed especially tenuous.[56] Nothing happened over the next year to modify this assessment. Indeed, the crisis atmosphere created by Dien Bien Phu and Geneva heightened the perceived importance of the area.[57]

The administration may also have been tempted to defy overwhelming odds because it had recently achieved remarkable successes at low cost in manipulating political situations in other countries. In August 1953 with minimum effort the United States had helped to topple the government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran and ease into power a government headed by the shah and amenable to U.S. influence.[58] In late June 1954, while the Geneva talks were still in a critical stage, the administration had orchestrated a coup which unseated the leftist government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala.[59] Having succeeded with relative ease in these challenging ventures, the administration may have concluded that it could overcome the obstacles in Vietnam as well.

"The important thing from now on is not to mourn the past but to profit from the lessons of the past," Dulles cautioned Americans after Geneva, and the commitment in Vietnam was based squarely on the "lessons of the past," in this case the lessons of the First Indochina War.[60] The fundamental lesson, agreed upon by most American officials, was that the war had been lost primarily because of French ineptitude. American criticism of French military performance covered a great range of specifics and had grown louder as the war dragged on. Eisenhower himself expressed American contempt for French leadership, dismissing the generals in Indochina as a "poor lot."[61] American officials also repeatedly complained that the French Army was poorly organized, used the wrong tactics, and did a poor job training the Vietnamese.[62] French defeatism especially annoyed the chronically optimistic Americans. Lt. Gen. John W. "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, chief of the military assistance advisory group in Indochina, grew so tired of hearing the French talk about

how "difficult" everything was that he fined one dollar any member of his group who used the word.[63]

The principal American criticism, however, was that the French were too "conservative and cautious in their approach to warfare."[64] They "put their trust in barbed wire," one American complained, and another observed that "even their offensive measures are predicated in terms of 'defensive' concepts."[65] Throughout the four and one-half years of Franco-American partnership in Indochina, the main challenge for U.S. military leaders, as General J. Lawton Collins expressed it, was "to put the squeeze on the French to get them off their fannies," a challenge that by their own standards the Americans failed to meet.[66]

The unspoken assumption behind these complaints, of course, was that the United States could succeed where the French had failed. A marine colonel expressed openly what many U.S. officers felt when he proclaimed that "two good American divisions with the normal aggressive American spirit could clean up the situation in the Tonkin Delta in ten months."[67] Having succeeded splendidly in training South Koreans for modern warfare, U.S. Army officers were also certain that they could train the Vietnamese. Dulles pointed out that there was no real difference between the people in the Viet Minh and the non-Communist armies, just as there was no difference between the people of North and South Korea. Therefore, with "proper training and inspiration," the non-Communist Vietnamese would have the same "energy and will to victory."[68] Undersecretary of State Smith boasted to a Vietnamese leader that U.S. methods of mass production had "achieved results whether in producing automobiles or training troops."[69]

From the American standpoint, French political failures had been even more important to the outcome of the war. Americans generally agreed that the colonial goals for which the French were fighting had ensured their defeat. The French had "used weasel words in promising independence," Eisenhower wrote a friend on the eve of Geneva, "and through this reason as much as anything else have suffered reverses that have been inexcusable."[70] The administration perceived the complexity of the problem. Eisenhower conceded that regular troops could not win against guerrillas who enjoyed popular support and that the sort of spiritual force that had to be infused into the non-Communist Vietnamese could not easily be provided by an outside nation.[71] On one occasion, the president

pondered the use of religion to inject "dynamism" into the Vietnamese, raising the possibility of finding "some good Buddhist leader to whip up some fervor." Reminded that Buddha had been a "pacifist," Eisenhower expressed hope of rallying the Catholics with a Vietnamese Joan of Arc.[72] The administration remained uncertain precisely how to mobilize the South Vietnamese, but it was certain that the United States must try. "We must work with these people, and then they themselves will soon find out that we are their friends and that they can't live without us," the president affirmed.[73]

The commitment to Diem and South Vietnam did not go unopposed. The Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed doubt that an effective military force could be created in the absence of political stability. They were skeptical of French intentions and despaired of accomplishing anything in South Vietnam as long as France remained. Restrictions imposed by the Geneva Accords on the size of outside training groups seemed also to militate against effective work in this critical area.[74] Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson was especially outspoken against making a commitment in South Vietnam. Describing the situation there as "utterly hopeless," he warned that the "only sensible course" was for the United States to get out as "completely and as soon as possible," leaving the people to "stew in their own juice." In words that would take on the ring of prophecy in little more than a decade, Wilson indicated that he could "see nothing but grief in store for us if we remained in that area."[75]

Dulles and Eisenhower conceded some of the arguments, but they ignored the warnings. They too wanted the French out of Indochina, and increasingly they suspected that the French were secretly working out with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam a rapprochement that would result in the abandonment of South Vietnam. At the same time, they perceived that for France to depart Indochina prematurely could be "militarily disastrous." Dulles too feared committing U.S. prestige in an area "where we had little control and where the situation was by no means promising." Still, he felt that the United States must do something. Admitting that he was indulging in the "familiar hen and egg argument," he suggested to the Joint Chiefs that building an army in South Vietnam might help promote political stability. And even if the United States could accomplish nothing more than to create a situation in which North Vietnam would have to resort to "internal violence" to achieve its aims, it would at least have imposed on Hanoi a "serious dilemma."[76] To abandon

Southeast Asia without a struggle would be unthinkable, Eisenhower added, and for the United States to continue to retreat in that area could produce a "grave situation" for American security.[77] At a critical National Security Council meeting on 22 October 1954, Eisenhower resorted to aphorism, affirming "with conviction" that "in the lands of the blind, one-eyed men are kings," by which he apparently meant that despite the obstacles the United States had the resources and ingenuity to succeed. Thus the administration embarked on a fateful commitment, without enthusiasm or optimism but with a sense of resignation and an inner hope for success.[78]

Eisenhower and Dulles were careful to keep the initial commitment limited. They scaled down the original program of $500 million for a large army to $100 million to support a much smaller army whose central mission was to promote internal stability and combat subversion. There was no need for an army large enough to meet a Viet Minh assault across the 17th Parallel, Dulles observed. Such an attack would bring the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization into operation, possibly resulting in U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and perhaps even war with China. "Our concept envisages a fight with nuclear weapons rather than the commitment of ground forces," the secretary explained.[79] Aware that too close a connection with Diem would be a liability for him and would risk U.S. prestige, Eisenhower and Dulles approached the prime minister cautiously and made the commitment conditional on South Vietnamese performance. "We do not wish it [to] appear Ngo Dinh Diem is our protege or that we are irrevocably committed to him," Dulles emphasized.[80]

Eisenhower's commitment to South Vietnam was never subjected to formal public debate, but it appears to have enjoyed broad support among American opinion makers. To be sure, some pessimists, including conservative columnist Joseph Alsop and liberal Marquis Childs, wrote off Vietnam as already lost.[81] When consulted as a "matter of courtesy" by the administration, Democratic Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia expressed profound skepticism that the small initial commitment could be kept limited (but in the best spirit of bipartisanship, Russell indicated that he would not oppose the administration).[82] American observers conceded that Ho Chi Minh was a "legend" throughout all of Vietnam and that the weakness of South Vietnam made a nation-building effort there tantamount to "driving nails into rotten wood."[83] Like Dulles, opinion makers estimated the odds against success as very high—*Business*

Week toted them at five to one—and admitted that it would require a "near miracle" for the United States to prevail in Vietnam.[84]

Most opinion makers also agreed with the administration, however, that the United States must try. Some commentators saw a "silver lining" amidst the dark clouds in that the Geneva settlement provided "two years of grace" to construct a "viable self-supporting nation" capable of preventing a Communist takeover of all Vietnam. If the United States was to accomplish anything, observers noted, it must learn from the French experience. Political and economic instruments were more important than military power in defeating communism in the colonial areas, and, as one commentator put it, "you're half licked before you start if you go in under the flag of western colonialism."[85] Despite the obstacles, conservatives and liberals alike agreed that the stakes were sufficiently high to require that the effort be made. The white man's burden was still very much alive, *New York Times* columnist Hanson Baldwin warned, and if the West did not take it up the map of Asia "may eventually be shaded with the red of communism."[86] In a more positive if no more optimistic vein, scholar Rupert Emerson advised that the "distant hope of retrieving all of Vietnam should not be abandoned until it wholly vanishes."[87]

For a fleeting moment in the mid-1950s, the United States and Diem seemed to have defied the odds and pulled off the miracle experts had said would be required. With Dulles' steadfast backing and timely U.S. aid, Diem emerged out of the chaos of 1954–1955 virtually unchallenged in South Vietnam. He subdued the contentious sects and handily defeated Bao Dai in a hastily arranged election. With U.S. support, he refused to hold the elections called for by the Geneva Agreements and initiated a vigorous and effective campaign against the Viet Minh "stay-behinds" in South Vietnam. In the meantime, the United States engineered the departure of the French from Indochina. When Diem visited the United States in 1957, he was widely feted and hailed as the "miracle man" of Asia.

Ironically, Diem's very success helped to trigger the second round of war that led to his ultimate failure. Struggling for their very survival, the Viet Minh in South Vietnam began to mobilize to defend themselves and save the revolution. Authorities still disagree on the point at which North Vietnam took control of the southern insurgency, but it is clear that by 1959 the battle lines that had taken form at Geneva had been activated. The Diem regime, backed by the

United States, was engaged in war with the former southern Viet Minh, supported by North Vietnam. The Second Indochina War was under way.

The experience of the first war shaped in significant ways the manner in which the second was fought. Douglas Pike has emphasized that the French war more than any other single factor influenced the future thinking and methods of operation of the North Vietnamese leadership. During the first war, the Communist party consolidated its power, eliminated most of its potential rivals, and developed its organization. It pioneered new forms of warfare, and the strategy and tactics employed in the first war were used with refinements and modifications in the second. A strategy of protracted war was used against the Americans, as it had been against the French, the second time with somewhat greater emphasis on political struggle in the overall scheme of things. From the first war, the Vietnamese also learned the importance of psychological techniques to wear down and undermine the enemy and a theater-wide approach to disperse and weaken the enemy. Having failed to build an adequate political base in the south during the French war, the Communists in the American war constructed their political organization below the 17th Parallel with painstaking care. The experience of Geneva, in Pike's words, produced in the Viet Minh leadership "an almost reflexive distrust of the conference table." Lessons learned from the first war appear also to have misled the North Vietnamese. Vo Nguyen Giap's search for a second Dien Bien Phu, for example, was extremely costly and eventually went unrequited.[88]

The impact of the First Indochina War on U.S. military thinking appears to have been limited and essentially negative. In the immediate aftermath of Dien Bien Phu and Geneva, the war did stir a brief flurry of interest. The young French scholar Bernard Fall began to develop in military periodicals the analysis that would soon stamp him as the foremost authority on the war.[89] Even earlier, the veteran Asian correspondent Theodore H. White had advanced the heretical notion that Viet Minh skill had been as important in determining the outcome of the war as French ineptitude. White went on to warn that the Asian Communists were pioneering new forms of warfare while Western soldiers and statesmen continued to think in "the most parochial military terms."[90] Conceding that the defeat of a modern, well-equipped Western army by a "primitive" Asian infantry was a "shocking development," a U.S. Army officer with extensive

experience in Indochina admonished that the Viet Minh type of warfare could not be "dismissed as unique." Deploring the conservatism and heavy reliance on technology of the modern Western military profession, he advised that guerrilla armies like the Viet Minh would have to be "met and defeated in their own type warfare."[91]

Such warnings appear to have had little influence. Civilian and military interest in the First Indochina War diminished sharply even as the second war was taking form. The French war merited no more than a brief paragraph in Cyril Falls' *The Art of War* (1961) and not so much as a line in Theodore Ropp's classic *War in the Modern World* (2nd ed., 1962). In the military, interest increasingly focused on such topics as the pentomic division and the atomic battlefield.[92] Even when the outbreak of the Viet Cong insurgency in Vietnam and Fidel Castro's success in Cuba stimulated a faddish interest in guerrilla warfare in the early 1960s, the First Indochina War seems to have remained something of an anomaly, a subject not worthy of serious analysis because of France's gross mismanagement and pursuit of reactionary colonial goals.

The effects of America's ignorance of the First Indochina War are less clear. It has been argued that the failure of the U.S. military to understand the type of war in which it was engaged ensured its ultimate failure, but it is by no means clear that fighting the war a different way would have produced better results.[93] The more important consequence may have been a fatal underestimation of the enemy. By placing much of the blame on the French for defeat in the First Indochina War and ignoring the extent to which the Viet Minh earned their success, Americans went to war in 1965 with some rather casual and fallacious assumptions about themselves and their enemy. Americans in time developed an almost compulsive interest in the First Indochina War, but most of this came after the United States itself had become bogged down in a bloody stalemate in Vietnam. Bernard Fall's *Street Without Joy* in time became standard reading fare for the American officer corps in Vietnam, and *Hell in a Very Small Place* was on the required reading list at Khe Sanh in 1967–1968. After reading John McAlister's *The Origins of Revolution* in Vietnam, a U.S. Army officer in charge of Nixon's Vietnamization program found it "incomprehensible" that Americans could have thought that they could defeat the "Vietminh" with regular forces and could stabilize South Vietnam "short of outright occupation and conquest."[94]

The First Indochina War has thus cast a long shadow over recent history. At Geneva, the great powers imposed on the Vietnamese a settlement that settled nothing, and the outlines of the Second Indochina War were apparent even before the diplomats had departed the city of peace. The Franco–Viet Minh War created both the circumstances and mind-set that led to the initial U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, a commitment that was made despite general agreement that the odds against success were overwhelming. The perceived "lessons" of the first war influenced the way the second war was fought. Despite an investment of billions of dollars and thousands of lives, the United States was never able to redress at a cost that was politically acceptable at home the unfavorable balance of forces it inherited from the French. The origins and outcome of the American phase of the war cannot be understood therefore without full consideration of the legacy of the First Indochina War.

NOTES

1. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), p. 199.
2. For sober contemporary estimates of the French position, see Memorandum for the Record, 29 May 54, and Memo, F. W. Moorman for Matthew B. Ridgway, 29 Jul 54, Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.
3. For balanced assessments of the Viet Minh position after Dien Bien Phu, see William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, 1981), pp. 164–65; and James Pinckney Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York, 1982), pp. 124–26.
4. Record of NSC Meeting, 8 Jan 54, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952—1954*, vol. 13 (Washington, 1982), p. 952.
5. Ibid.; James Hagerty Diary, 1 Apr 54, James Hagerty Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.
6. George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984).
7. Stephen Jurika, Jr. (ed.), *From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: The Memoirs of Admiral Arthur Radford* (Stanford, 1980), pp. 417–31.
8. "Procedural Steps for Intervention in Indochina," n.d., in Subject series: Indochina May 1953–May 1954 (4), John Foster Dulles Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.
9. See especially Congressional Research Service, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, pt. 1 (Washington, 1984), pp. 228–41.
10. Herring and Immerman, "'Day We Didn't Go to War.'"

11. The most thorough account of the Geneva Conference is Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton, 1969), but Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a War: Indochina, 1954* (New York, 1969) is on some major points more insightful.

12. See especially Francois Joyaux, *La Chine et le reglement du premier conflit d'Indochine (Geneve 1954)* (Paris, 1979), pp. 273–86.

13. Nikita Khrushchev's personal indifference to and cynicism toward Vietnam may be reflected in his oft-cited advice to Chou En-lai to tell "Comrade Ho" a "white lie" by promising support that China was not prepared to give. Strobe Talbot, *Khrushchev Remembers* (New York, 1971), pp. 533–34.

14. Pham Van Dong quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 204; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *The Truth About Vietnam-Chinese Relations Over the Past Thirty Years* (Hanoi, 1979), pp. 21–25.

15. Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, pp. 164–65.

16. Quoted in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Indochina—Roots of Complicity* (Toronto, 1983), p. 225.

17. Ibid.

18. T. B. Millar (ed.), *Australian Foreign Minister: The Diaries of R. G. Casey, 1951–1960* (London, 1972), pp. 151–52, 163–64.

19. Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, pp. 164–72.

20. Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 204.

21. Walter Bedell Smith to State Department, 15 May 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 16:812.

22. Smith to Heath and Dillon, 18 Jun 54, ibid., pp. 1177–78.

23. Heath to State Department, 23 Jul 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1872.

24. Dillon to State Department, 30 Jul 54, ibid., p. 1896.

25. U. Alexis Johnson to State Department, 26 Jun 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 16:1253.

26. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Historical Series*, vol. 6 (Washington, 1977), p. 642.

27. Record of Phone Conversation, Eisenhower and Dulles, 20 Jul 54, Diary series, box 4, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library. Although the United States had originally favored Belgium over Canada as the "free world" representative on the control commission, Canada more than fulfilled that role, voluntarily providing intelligence to the United States on developments in Vietnam and defending positions espoused by South Vietnam and the United States. See Eayrs, *Roots of Complicity*, pp. 219, 242–44.

28. Record of NSC Meeting, 15 Jul 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1840.

29. Smith to State Department, 18 Jul 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 16:1427.

30. A brief record of the activities of Lansdale's mission is in Neil Sheehan et al. (eds.), *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York, 1971), pp. 53–66.

31. Records of NSC Meetings, 17 Jun 54 and 22 Jul 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1716, 1869–70.

32. Smith to State Department, 17 May 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 16:829–30; Memorandum of Conversation, 18 May 54, ibid., pp. 843–46; Memo by Bonsal, 19 May 54, ibid., pp. 848–49.

33. Memorandum of Conversation with Diem, 15 Jan 51, document #3051, box 8(a), William J. Donovan Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, (USAMHI), Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

34. Acheson to Legation, Saigon, 16 Jan 51, *FRUS, 1951*, 6:348; and Edmund Gullion to Secretary of State, 24 Jan 51, ibid., pp. 359–60.

35. Donovan's activities emerge quite clearly from his voluminous papers in the U.S. Army Military History Institute and are discussed briefly in Anthony Cave Brown, *The Last Hero: Wild Bill Donovan* (New York, 1984), pp. 820–22, 828. For the files on Diem, see boxes 8(a) and 11(b), Donovan Papers. For possible Catholic lobby and CIA involvement in Diem's rise to power, see Congressional Research Service, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, pt. 1, pp. 261–62.

36. Heath to State Department, 8 Jul 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1793.

37. Duiker, *Communist Road to Power*, pp. 172–73; Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley, 1972).

38. The French at one point conjectured that Viet Minh soldiers fought so fanatically because they were high on drugs, but autopsies dispelled this theory. Millar (ed.), *Casey Diaries*, p. 26.

39. For vivid descriptions of post-Geneva South Vietnam, see Memorandum by Acting Special Assistant for Intelligence, 10 Aug 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1934–35, and National Intelligence Estimate, 3 Aug 54, ibid., pp. 1905–14.

40. Robert McClintock to State Department, 8 May 54, ibid., p. 1519.

41. Ibid.

42. Heath to Dulles, 28 Apr 53, ibid., p. 523.

43. Memorandum of Conversation by Dulles, May 54, ibid., p. 1528.

44. Diary entry, 17 Jun 54, Millar (ed.), *Casey Diaries*, p. 159.

45. Dillon to State Department, 24 May 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1608–09.

46. McClintock to State Department, 4 Jul 54, ibid., pp. 1783–84.

47. McClintock to State Department, 12 Aug 54, ibid., p. 1937.

48. Leo Cherne to William J. Donovan, 23 Sep 54, document #4060, box 9(a), Donovan Papers.

49. Ibid.

50. National Intelligence Estimate, 3 Aug 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1905–14; and Special National Intelligence Estimate, 15 Sep 54, ibid., p. 2030.

51. Memo by Commissioner-General in Southeast Asia, 7 Aug 54, document #4086, box 9(b), Donovan Papers; and Eayrs, *Roots of Complicity*, p. 63.

52. James Lawton Collins, *Lightning Joe: An Autobiography* (Baton Rouge, 1983), p. 379.

53. Cherne to Donovan, 23 Sep 54, document #4060, box 9(a), Donovan Papers.

54. Memorandum of Conversation by Dulles, 24 Mar 53, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:419–20.

55. State Department–Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, 28 Jan 53, ibid., pp. 361–62.

56. State Department draft for National Security Council paper, 27 Mar 52, ibid., pp. 83–91.

57. See especially National Security Council, "Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East," Aug 54, U.S. Congress, Committee on Armed Services, *United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967*, 12 vols. (Washington, 1971), 10:731–41.

58. Stephen E. Ambrose with Richard H. Immerman, *Ike's Spies: Eisenhower and the Espionage Establishment* (New York, 1981), pp. 189–214.

59. Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala* (Austin, 1982).

60. Quoted in Rupert Emerson, "Indo-China," *Yale Review* 44 (Autumn 1954): 63.

61. NSC Meeting, 6 May 53, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:548.

62. Memo by Douglas MacArthur II, 18 Apr 53, ibid., pp. 473–74; McClintock to State Department, 13 Apr 53, ibid., pp. 465–68.

63. Record of JCS-State Department Meeting, 17 Jul 53, ibid., p. 684; Memo, n.d., John W. O'Daniel Papers, USAMHI.

64. Memo by General Thomas Trapnell, 31 Mar 53, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:452; Record of JCS–State Department Meeting, 4 Sep 53, ibid., p. 754.

65. Memo by Joint Staff, 22 Jan 52, ibid., pp. 368–69.

66. Record of Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, 24 Apr 53, ibid., p. 500.

67. Memorandum of Conversation, John W. Allison with Arthur Radford, 4 Feb 53, ibid., p. 385. This is not meant to imply that American military figures were eager to fight in Indochina. On the contrary, the Army in particular opposed such involvement because of the difficulties in fighting in that region and for fear that the same limitations that had been imposed in Korea would be imposed in an Indochina war. See Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, 1983), especially pp. 191–214.

68. Memorandum of Conversation, Dulles, Laniel, and Bidault, 14 Apr 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:1338.

69. Memorandum of Conversation, Smith with Cambodian leaders, 20 Jun 54, ibid., 16:1205; Memorandum of Conversation, Smith with Prince Buu Loc, 25 May 54, ibid., p. 915.

70. Eisenhower to E. E. Hazlett, 27 Apr 54, Diary series, box 4, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers. Army Chief of Staff Matthew B. Ridgway agreed. "Only if the French can galvanize the Vietnamese into enthusiastic all-out participation in military operations can there be any chance of decisive military success," he observed in the spring of 1954. Memorandum of Conversation by Ridgway, 20 Mar 54, box 30, Ridgway Papers.

71. Minutes of Meeting with Canadian officials, 7 May 53, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:552.

72. Record of NSC Meeting, 4 Feb 54, ibid., pp. 1014–15.

73. Hagerty Diary, 23 Jul 54, Hagerty Papers.

74. Vice-Admiral Arthur Davis to Dulles, 20 Oct 54, *FRUS, 1952–1954*, 13:2146.

75. Record of NSC Meeting, 26 Oct 54, ibid., pp. 2184–86.

76. Dulles Memorandum of Conversation with Eisenhower, 17 Aug 54, ibid., p. 1953; Dulles to Wilson, 18 Aug 54, ibid., pp. 1954–56.

77. Dulles Memorandum of Conversation with Eisenhower, 17 Aug 54, ibid., p. 1953.

78. Record of NSC Meeting, 22 Oct 54, ibid., p. 2154.

79. Record of Meeting in Dulles's office, 8 Oct 54, ibid., p. 2125.

80. Dulles Memorandum of Conversation with Eisenhower, 17 Aug 54, ibid., p. 1953. See also Dulles to J. L. Collins, 19 Nov 54, ibid., p. 2271.

81. Joseph and Stewart Alsop, "The New Munich," *Washington Post*, 23 Jul 54; Marquis Childs in ibid., 22 Jul 54.

82. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1972), p. 146.

83. See, for instance, Vincent S. Kearney, "Vietnam After Geneva," *America*, 11 September 1954, pp. 565–66; *Christian Century* 71 (10 November 1954): 1357.

84. "France Calls It Quits in Indochina," *Business Week*, 24 July 1954, pp. 110–11.

85. *Washington Post*, 24 Jul 54; Neal Stanford, "The Lessons of Geneva," *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, 1 September 1954, pp. 3, 8.

86. Hanson Baldwin in *New York Times*, 25 Jul 54.

87. Emerson, "Indo-China," *Yale Review* 44 (Autumn 1954): 62–63.

88. For persuasive analyses of the importance of the First Indochina War for the North Vietnamese, see Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism* (Stanford, 1978), pp. 72–91, and Timothy J. Lomperis, *The War Everyone Lost—and Won: America's Intervention in Viet Nam's Twin Struggles* (Baton Rouge, 1984), pp. 147–52, 170–73.

I am also indebted to William J. Duiker for information and documents that helped direct my thinking on this issue. Col. Paul Miles recalled on 9 November 1984 that North Vietnamese representatives assigned to implement the 1973 cease-fire agreements were extremely sensitive to their 1954 experiences with the French.

89. See, for example, Bernard B. Fall, "Indochina—The Last Years of the War," *Military Review* 36 (October 1956) and (December 1956).

90. Theodore H. White, "Indo-China—The Long Trail of Error," *The Reporter*, 22 June 1954, pp. 8–15.

91. Major Lamar McFadden Prosser, "The Bloody Lessons of Indochina," *The Army Combat Forces Journal* 5 (June 1955): 24–30.

92. This conclusion is based on a survey of writing in *Military Review*, *Army Digest*, and *The Army Combat Forces Journal*. Among the nearly 1,700 papers written by students at the Army War College between 1951 and 1960, only 4 dealt with the Indochina War, and only 1 of those examined the way the Viet Minh fought the war.

93. This argument is advanced in Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978).

94. Memo by Gen Arthur S. Collins, n.d., Arthur S. Collins Papers, USAMHI.

The Making and Unmaking of Ngo Dinh Diem

Herbert S. Parmet

Closer inspection of the Eisenhower and Kennedy involvement reveals some of the peculiarities of that inherited war in Indochina, a conflict that was far more complex than the "limited" action in Korea. For the political and diplomatic historian, the affair must be viewed in global terms, as part of the domestic and international cold war. In the end, that may be the only rational explanation for what most commentators have considered an irrational episode in modern American history.

American policy wavered along each step of the way, reassessed the situation periodically, and then wavered some more, always managing to steer directly along a course determined not by military prescriptions but by the exigencies of both domestic politics and perceptions of cold-war imperatives. An examination of the Eisenhower-Kennedy years must also necessarily recognize that Ngo Dinh Diem personified what was wrong with pursuing that enterprise. Thirty years after the origins of the American inheritance of French Indochinese hegemony, the installation, maintenance, and subsequent disposal of the Diem regime remains central to any understanding of what happened.

Recent critics have cited Kennedy's complicity in Diem's overthrow as sealing the American commitment, both morally and critically. A more dispassionate analysis might suggest that the most egregious blunder was Diem's initial investiture. In this view, the Eisenhower era may be recognized for its effort to employ Diem as part of a desperate search for stability, while the Kennedy years marked the often indecisive quest for means of coping with that inheritance. How we sank into the "big muddy" is at the heart of this present examination.

I should start by recalling that the condition of contemporary partisan politics was hardly lost on John Foster Dulles, who wrote the key foreign policy plank for the Republicans. It was also a fighting issue for the party's right wing, which not only gave its support to Joe McCarthy (often for the most cynical of reasons) but was still bruised after a convention that gave the nomination to an apolitical general rather than to "Mr. Republican," Senator Robert A. Taft. Even without all the strategic and ideological reasons, their need to demonstrate strength was inescapable, to succeed in a region where the Democrats had been castigated for cowardice, weakness, and even treason. Both matters were, as Dulles feared, closely related, with Moscow and Peking deftly capitalizing on the heritage of colonialism. In 1951, while still in Paris heading NATO forces, Eisenhower advised the French government that "you people are making one very bad error. You're letting the world, and particularly the people in Indo China believe that you're still fighting a colonial war. You've got to make this thing a matter between freedom and communism."[1]

That concept, which was implicit in Harry Truman's warning about the need for military aid to Greece and Turkey, was accepted with equal applicability to other regions of the world, especially the Far East. Dr. Walter Judd, the Minnesota congressman best known for his China Lobby connections, headed a 1953 study mission that stressed the importance of preserving Indochina as a safeguard for all of Southeast Asia.[2] Eisenhower himself gave the theory its greatest legitimacy during an explanation at a news conference on 7 April 1954, at the time of the Dien Bien Phu crisis: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."[3] Debates centered around the relative roles of communism, the quality and quantity of support given by the international movement, and the roles of nationalism and internal social and economic distress, but hardly anybody doubted that the contagion could poison an entire area of the world.

While the Soviets and Chinese Communists were assumed to be military allies, they were perceived as working together to compete for world markets even at the expense of undermining the economy of the Far East.[4] Indochina was the "rice bowl of Asia," invaluable for extending Communist economic control "into Japan and into India."[5] Moreover, there was little reason to doubt that Moscow and

Peking were equal backers of Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh forces, especially when the latter invaded Laos in the spring of 1953. When Dulles met Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov in Berlin during February of 1954, he noted that the Russian diplomat used every opportunity to press for recognition of Communist China. Nor did Dulles fail to appreciate Molotov's hints of a willingness to trade peace in the area for concessions on Germany and the European Defense Community, a virtual admission of Soviet complicity.[6]

Taking a hard line toward Peking also involved the delicacy of American relations with Japan. Eisenhower's "domino" theory comments on 7 April were followed by an elaboration that emphasized Japanese commercial interests in Southeast Asia.[7] On 21 June the president lectured Republican legislative leaders. "If we don't assist Japan, gentlemen, Japan is going Communist," he warned. "Then instead of the Pacific being an American lake, believe me it is going to be a Communist lake. If we do not let them trade with Red China, with Southeast Asia, then we are going to be in for trouble. Of course, we do not want to ruin our own industries to keep Japan on our side, but we must give them assistance. It is a delicate, difficult course we have to follow, but I am sure we can do it in the long run."[8] The Japanese, meanwhile, were on guard against any relaxation of the American attitude toward Peking.[9] Their needs, of course, constituted another aspect of the problem, part of the entire rationale for standing fast in Southeast Asia. All of this was emphasized in Eisenhower's first State of the Union message.

The president's policies toward the French were tied to two objectives. One called for a new program for victory on the battlefield, which produced the Navarre plan. That military scheme involved greater use of "native" forces, redeployment of military positions, and stepped-up American aid. The ultimate goal was supposed to drive the Viet Minh from its Red River Delta stronghold, but General Henri Navarre himself secretly warned that a draw was the most probable result.[10] The other objective concerned French membership in the European Defense Community (EDC). In Paris on 14 December 1953, Dulles delivered his dramatic warning that French rejection of the EDC might lead the U.S. to make an "agonizing reappraisal" of the alliance.[11]

American coercion against a negotiated political settlement, which Washington believed would open the door to Viet Minh domination, risked provoking French opposition to EDC.[12] Indeed, many Frenchmen manifested stronger antagonisms toward Washington

than toward Moscow. Until the government of Premier Rene Mayer was toppled by a no-confidence vote in May of 1953, the French government was also headed by leadership dependent on anti-EDC nationalists. Finally, Joseph Laniel, an independent, became premier in late June. Laniel, together with Foreign Minister Georges Bidault, was far more sympathetic to Washington's needs. But his hold was also precarious. Any likely opposition would press for a negotiated withdrawal without much regard for the consequences. At a meeting of the cabinet on 10 July Dulles observed that Laniel's might be the last French government that would try to hold on in Indochina.[13]

Accordingly, the incoming Eisenhower administration bolstered the French position. Immediately after his inauguration, additional political and military aid flowed toward Southeast Asia from Washington.[14] Some $385 million was aimed at achieving military stabilization, virtually financing the entire French operation.[15] American financial aid from fiscal year 1950 through fiscal year 1954 totaled nearly two and a half billion dollars.[16] In response to an invitation from ex-Premier Mayer, Lt. Gen. John W. O'Daniel headed a mission to Saigon to discuss with General Navarre how American material and financial support of the French and armed forces of the Associated States could realize the objective of defeating the Communist forces.[17] O'Daniel was also installed as head of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). Sixty U.S. Air Force officers arrived in Saigon in early July to train and advise French airmen.[18] Later that summer, the State Department reported that over 300 shiploads of military aid had been supplied to French and native forces.[19] Such enlarged aid paralleled a substantial increase in the level of support for the insurgents that was being supplied by the People's Republic of China. That December, the Viet Minh issued repeated offers, via radio, for truce talks. Laniel faced increased pressure to negotiate; but Washington, with Dulles expressing hopes for an end to the war by 1955, blocked any such movements.[20]

Meanwhile, the Eisenhower administration faced little concerted criticism of its goals, especially in view of repeated assurances that the ultimate objective was the disengagement of French forces and independence for a non-Communist Indochina. Whatever dissension may have been possible from Capitol Hill was also stymied by the lack of any strong doubts about the containment policy. The overwhelming desire was to accomplish the objective without direct military intervention.

As optimism about the Navarre plan inevitably vanished, the administration began 1954 with a multiple dilemma that may be summarized by asking the following questions: 1) How can the French be induced not to abandon Indochina before achieving sufficient military stability that would survive independence? 2) What sort of diplomacy can overcome their resistance to EDC? 3) How far would the United States be willing to commit its resources to prevent a Communist victory? Such were the stakes that preoccupied the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, and the White House. All were reflected in National Security Council (NSC) deliberations. NSC 162/2, with its "New Look" emphasis on air and nuclear power that could deliver decisive strikes while deemphasizing the role of ground forces, invariably helped to narrow the administration's options—unless we were truly prepared to fulfill the concept of massive retaliation. Meanwhile, the only feasible move consisted of materiel assistance to sustain the Navarre plan. In early February, that enhanced support consisted of forty B–26 bombers and two hundred technicians.[21]

At Berlin that February, Dulles was unable to prevent the inclusion of Indochina on the agenda of a conference originally targeted on finding a political solution for Korea. "If we succeed here in stopping French pressures for conference—which is by no means certain—and should thereafter also stop financial support or attach to it impossible conditions," the secretary explained to Eisenhower via cable, "the anti-American reaction in France would be very severe and almost certainly defeat European Defense Community."[22]

At the same time, the NSC, the Joint Chiefs, and the White House all accepted the need for *some kind* of military commitment to prop up the sagging French effort. The NSC reaffirmed the importance of Indochina to all of Southeast Asia.[23] Eisenhower's mood was clearly one of frustration, wanting to stem the rebel tide but, at the same time, acutely conscious of the political difficulties. He told Jim Hagerty that he would like to see Chiang Kai-shek's troops brought into Indochina but feared countermoves by the People's Republic.[24] Then, too, both he and Dulles were aware of the domestic sensitivities about using American personnel. When congressional leaders voiced concern about the deployment of technicians, the president reassured them that the French had been forewarned that the men would be withdrawn by 15 June 1954.[25] At the same time, Dulles came away from an appearance before the Foreign Relations Committee primed to anticipate domestic attacks for inadequate

preparedness for French reversals.[26] Paradoxically, the secretary's meeting with a bipartisan group of congressional leaders exposed him to Senator Knowland's warning that the administration would not only be accountable for any "slip" toward diplomatic recognition of China but for actions that might commit the United States in an Indochina war.[27] Fearful of "another Korea," Knowland was somewhat of a dove about new military intervention.[28]

The level of Washington's commitment behind the French effort, beyond participation in its share of the Navarre plan, had clearly become a major consideration. Still not totally settled is how much agreement there was about the Eisenhower-Dulles intentions. Was the administration sufficiently serious about salvaging the French position to justify unilateral intervention? Or was the preference merely for creating what might be seen as a tough bargaining position to establish some kind of diplomatic leverage at Geneva?

One report of a study group headed by retired Marine General G. B. Erskine (two had previously been published) that was submitted to Eisenhower's Operations Coordinating Board on 2 March 1954 made a series of recommendations. The Erskine findings called for Americanization of the effort in concert with simultaneously remedying the French failure to mitigate the colonialist approach. Emphasizing the need to avoid actions that might lead "to involuntary U.S. combat participation," it urged the development "of indigenous leadership which will be truly representative and symbolic of Indo-Chinese national aspirations and win the loyalty and support of the people." Should all that fail, "the U.S. may wish to consider direct military action in Southeast Asia to ensure the maintenance of our vital interests in the area."[29] The key words were "should all that fail." Without the potential of a credible military response, as in Western Europe, there could be no containment in Asia.

Much has since been written about General Paul Ely's March 1954 trip to Washington and pleas for American assistance. Particular attention has centered on Operation VULTURE, the plan outlined to Ely by Admiral Arthur Radford calling for an air strike at enemy positions around Dien Bien Phu with B–29 bombers equipped with three small atomic bombs.

Closer analysis of the consequences of that dramatic proposal, made possible by additional information, deemphasizes the imminence of intervention. It also illustrates what later became a characteristic of administration foreign policy, calculated uncertainty and bluff to protect strategic interests. Rather than actually desiring to

implement VULTURE, the process was one important step toward the realization of what Dulles had already been talking about, collective action. Collective action was but a small step to mutual security, and that, of course, ultimately led directly toward the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). One day after Radford's plan had been exposed to decidedly skeptical (and hostile) congressional leaders, Eisenhower had suggested to Churchill "the establishment of a new, ad hoc grouping or coalition composed of nations which have a vital concern in the checking of Communist expansion in the area. . . . the coalition must be strong and it must be willing to join the fight if necessary."[30] But the British held other exasperations for Dulles. They declined to participate in a joint military venture before the scheduled conference at Geneva, thereby scuttling the concept of "united action." Dulles, meeting with Sir Winston Churchill on 12 April 1954, heard the prime minister repeat "his usual line"—only the English-speaking peoples counted.[31]

Within the American military leadership far more of a consensus existed for believing that defeating the enemy could only be done by striking at the source of his power—in other words, China itself—rather than fighting on Vietnamese soil. During the Geneva Conference that spring, a JCS memorandum to Defense Secretary Wilson stressed that "from the point of view of the United States, with reference to the Far East as a whole, *Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token* U.S. armed forces in Indochina would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities."[32] The military was decidedly advisory, with less influence than popularly believed, often taking a back seat to political and diplomatic considerations.

Distaste for such an enterprise became unmistakable when Vice President Nixon made his "off-the-record" comments in mid-April before the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Nixon, responding to what was a hypothetical question about the use of American force to save Indochina, told the editors that "the United States as a leader of the free world cannot afford further retreat in Asia. It is hoped the United States will not have to send troops there, but if this Government cannot avoid it, the Administration must face up to the situation and dispatch forces."[33] The supposedly off-the-record statement, made to a roomful of journalists, hardly remained secret for long. The subsequent furor raised the specter of a new Korea.

Was Nixon's statement a trial balloon? Or was the vice president attempting to clear the way for a new military move? The passage of

years considerably dims either possibility. When interviewed on 5 June 1984, Nixon recalled that he had merely stated his own views but that they did reflect the administration's position. "This was a case of my sitting in the meetings with Eisenhower and having his views expressed," he said, adding that he had no doubt that the administration was not ready to countenance Admiral Radford's nuclear designs for Operation VULTURE.[34] Documentation now available substantiates his explanation. Even if they were more alarming than anything that had been intended, Nixon's comments were consistent with the administration's hard-line bluff.

Essential for all this was *clear evidence* of preparedness for action, and the United States mobilized its propaganda and military forces. When Premier Laniel informed Ambassador Dillon on 10 May about the urgency of American intervention, Eisenhower directed Dulles to prepare a resolution to present before a joint congressional meeting requesting authority to commit American troops.[35] Four days after the fall of the garrison at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May, Dulles and the president discussed sending a cable to Ambassador Dillon in Paris that would imply "that we might conceivably go ahead without the active participation of the United Kingdom."[36]

The "practicability of US intervention" was kept alive, although the French might not necessarily make such a request until "the Geneva game is played out." But, Dulles warned, American willingness to take that step would be canceled if there should be a "fait accompli" on the battlefields before the conference ended.[37] When, a few days later, the French asked for American ground forces, including some marines, Eisenhower refused.[38] The military and diplomatic situation had obviously deteriorated beyond the point where any benefit could come from American intervention. Everything pointed to the disintegration of the Vietnamese government, especially with the French contemplating a fallback that would leave virtually the entire Tonkin Delta population in hostile hands.[39]

In mid-June as military positions collapsed and, in conflict over both EDC and ending the war, the Laniel government was replaced by Pierre Mendes-France, who declared a self-imposed pledge to resign if he failed to reach a settlement by 21 July. The settlement at Geneva, from which the United States virtually disassociated itself, was, in effect, written off as an unavoidable evil. Even before the conference ended and agreements were reached, the U.S. position concentrated on two major objectives: increasing the resistance to the

Viet Minh, and, second, establishing an indigenous government that would function virtually as an American protectorate.

Eisenhower and Dulles could only try to minimize the diplomatic and political damage of Geneva. And when it was over, the denouement was a phased French withdrawal from the Associated States, independence for Laos and Cambodia, and the partition of Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. The South was left under the leadership of a Vietnamese nationalist, Ngo Dinh Diem, who was appointed as premier by Emperor Bao Dai in June. His ability to govern would be supported by an augmented MAAG headed by Colonel Edward Lansdale, whose success against the Huks in the Philippines had apparently left few doubts about his qualifications for the job. Also created for the long-term objective of containment in the Far East, as Dulles had contemplated many weeks before the fall of Dien Bien Phu, was the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. Such were the fateful steps that sealed Washington's stake in the region.

As Stanley Karnow has observed, the Geneva Agreement "postponed rather than achieved a settlement."[40] Still, the conference was far from a total loss. At least, Dulles reminded Eisenhower, the issue of colonialism should no longer confuse the Indochinese conflict. "The issue then will indeed be 'between Communism and liberty.'"[41] But the partition at the 17th Parallel was hardly something a Republican administration could cheer about, recognizing, as it did, the hegemony of Ho Chi Minh's Communist regime in the North. Little wonder the treaty failed to carry an American signature. At the same time, it provided for elections in 1956 to reunite the country.

Once Geneva was out of the way, the U.S. could proceed with its objectives. Each in turn, the installation of Ngo Dinh Diem as South Vietnam's prime minister, the creation of SEATO, standing by Diem through his great crisis against the sects in 1955 and supporting his decision to avoid elections in 1956, and, finally, the withdrawal of the French and full assumption of the American protectorate, firmly sealed the Eisenhower legacy to the next administration in Washington.

Diem was only one man, and, as events later showed, he could be and was replaced. Jean Lacouture, a French journalist who was an on-the-spot observer, later wrote about the inevitability that a military coup would have eventually unseated Diem.[42] As seen from Paris, the First Indochina War also "ended in the greatest military disaster in French colonial history since the eighteenth century."[43]

Speculation about Diem's initial sponsorship has obscured his role in Franco-American relations. Much attention has been given to certain other aspects of his support, at the cost of ignoring some elements that were essential to the entire process.

For France, Diem was the political equivalent of Dien Bien Phu. For South Vietnam, his reign guaranteed not efficiency or the advantages of his much-valued honesty, but prolonged instability. From the outset, his government was viewed as a puppet regime of the United States. He was widely regarded as "being in the American pocket."[44] The Americans were constantly suspected of simply trying to help themselves to the riches of France's colonial jewel.[45]

There can be no question about Dulles' sensitivity to all this. To a considerable degree, too, he was well aware of Diem as a problem-child. He was, in fact, less ardent than Eisenhower about keeping him in power. As he cautioned Ambassador Dillon, "We do not wish [to] make it appear Ngo Dinh Diem our protege or that we are irrevocably committed to him."[46] From Jean Daridan, French deputy commissioner-general in Indochina, Dulles heard that although Diem was "a man of good will, he is not a man of will."[47] Finally, in May of 1955, French Foreign Minister Edgar Faure showed his exasperation by blurting out that Diem was "not only incapable but mad. . . . France can no longer take risks with him."[48]

From the American point of view, then, Diem simply exacerbated persistent tensions. Throughout the period, in dealings with the Mayer, Laniel, or Mendes-France governments, annoyance with France was constantly evident. The U.S., and especially Dulles, were impatient with such policies that were regarded as breeding grounds for communism that fed on anticolonialism. In France itself, there was much apprehension, especially from the left, about the EDC commitment and a revived Germany. The potential "horrors" of a "red" Asia were minimized. Ironically, while emphasizing the need for stability in Southeast Asia, American officials were all too ready with barbed comments about political chaos in Paris. Nothing better illustrates this pique than Henry Cabot Lodge's letter to Dulles. Written from his post as U.N. ambassador on 11 June 1954, Lodge's comments may have been only partly jocular. "I cannot but believe," he wrote, "that Alger Hiss and a score of little Alger Hisses were at work helping the French communists get this Constitution when actually they should have been using the position of immense influence which the United States had in 1945 and '46 to get them a Constitution which would have given them a very strong

government . . . but [their] system of government puts such a premium on division that any kind of far-sighted strong action seems to be impossible."[49]

Much has been written about how Diem came to power.[50] Virtually all accounts mention the role of such American Catholics as Francis Cardinal Spellman, Mike Mansfield, Jack Kennedy, and the influence of the liberal Supreme Court Justice, William O. Douglas. Weight is also given to American economic leverage. By the time Dien Bien Phu fell, the U.S. was paying 80 percent of the French costs in Indochina, and there were promises of more money to come.[51] That clearly figured in persuading the French to accept a feudal aristocrat whose virulent francophobia could hardly have been deemed as potentially congenial to their interests. Indeed, as John W. Hanes, Jr., has testified, "Dulles' backing for Diem was rammed through single-handedly, through our intelligence and military communities, although the intelligence community had originally found him."[52] Richard Bissell, Allen Dulles' subordinate in the CIA, has recalled that support for the Diem regime was a move of desperation and "our agency was deeply involved at that time."[53] Eisenhower himself, at the time Diem was battling against a coalition of sects in Saigon and was nearly deposed, bluntly told a meeting of legislative leaders that Diem "was the man we had backed to bring order to that country" to prove "our disinterest in colonialism."[54]

All this ignores one vital aspect of the situation: Diem's appeal to the large Roman Catholic population of Tonkin in North Vietnam. "In Hue anti-Commies opposing national government still consider Ngo Dinh Diem, whom they continue to expect arrive in Vietnam, best candidate to head such a government," cabled Robert McClintock to Dulles on 11 June 1954, "and have continued activity to promote his advent to power, many trips to Saigon being made to propagandize with this objective in mind."[55]

More than humanitarianism was involved. As a CIA report of 23 August 1954 noted, "the results of the Geneva Conference and partition have put a premium on nationalist leaders and not on administrators."[56] Bissell, in his interview, cited Diem for one particular accomplishment: carrying out the resettlement from the North far more efficiently than anyone thought possible. Lacouture has written that the one triumph of Diem's regime was the integration of nearly a million refugees from the North.[57] As the French themselves understood, the presence of the refugees in the South was vital for

bolstering the government, and, ultimately, for helping to establish Diem's legitimacy despite the traditional animosities toward the Catholic minority.

Friction took place almost immediately, with rumors of Diem's impending resignation circulating as early as the summer of 1954, only weeks after Bao Dai had obligingly designated the prime minister on 17 June.[58] The French were suspected of plotting, hoping to replace the leader so disrespectful of their interests with someone more amenable, possibly the corrupt playboy emperor himself. Furthermore, French rejection of EDC later that month, one year after Dulles' "agonizing reappraisal" comment, hardly helped soothe relations between Washington and Paris. Still, Diem continued to enjoy strong support from such people as Mansfield. Even the French agreed to go along with the situation at a Washington conference that September in exchange for promises of continued U.S. assistance.[59]

For all the suspicions about French motivations, few were under any illusions that all Diem had going for him was honesty ("rare in Indochina," as Ambassador Donald Heath wrote from Saigon) and intense patriotism. The latter, it was widely recognized, suited American objectives but hardly accommodated the French. Beyond that, he was a poor administrator, a member of the historically despised Roman Catholic minority, feudal in outlook, and influenced by a limited coterie, notably his brother and sister-in-law, the notorious "Dragon-Lady," Madame Nhu.

Foster Dulles was clearly under pressure to make some sort of move; Diem's inability to handle the intrigues emanating from the various sects and factions was becoming scandalous. "He would need expert assistance that simply could not be found in Vietnam and probably could not be provided by France," advised Heath, adding that "he must endeavor to transfer Catholic and other anti-Communist elements from north to free zone of Vietnam." Heath also reported General Ely's belief that Diem would win the national elections if such a project of migration could succeed.[60] The CIA's report of 23 August was decidedly negative, suggesting that the French were trying to play off Vietnamese leaders and sects against the government to get as many concessions as possible.[61]

By then, Heath had already called attention to Diem's need for "a definite public assurance of American aid and support."[62] As a direct response to his precarious position, the South Vietnamese premier received lavish support. Differences of opinion over U.S. training of indigenous Vietnamese forces had also been worked out.

The Joint Chiefs had balked back in June, citing the necessary precondition of a "reasonably strong, stable, civil government in control."[63] Dulles, however, persisted, arguing that reorganization and retraining of the army was "one of the most efficient means of enabling the Vietnamese Government to become strong."[64] Action memorandum 5429/2 of the NSC then supported the secretary, although the actual program was slow in getting started.[65]

In October, Eisenhower told Diem that America would help South Vietnam "in its present hour of trial." He offered to "assist the Government . . . in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means." American money would also be given directly to Diem rather than through the French.[66] Finally, a Democrat, Mike Mansfield, in his first Senate term after having been a member of the House, made a quick trip to Saigon. Mansfield, whose views were most influential with Dulles, returned and declared that there was no alternative but to support Diem to the hilt. The senator could hardly have been more emphatic.[67]

But Diem was still to weather his greatest crisis, which followed a negative report by ex-Army Chief of Staff, General J. Lawton Collins, who, having been sent to Saigon, cabled that Diem had to go. At the moment, in early April, before Diem had become heavily embattled in his clash with the sects, Eisenhower stood firmly behind the American viceroy. He implored Dulles "not to give up on Diem until it is quite certain because we bet on him heavily." Furthermore, said the president, Collins was apt to be hasty and he should be cautioned to go slowly.[68] Then, as the situation in Saigon worsened, Dulles warmed to General Collins' arguments, and there is evidence that he was prepared to go far toward accepting his recommendations. On 11 April, when a coalition of sects counteracted Diem's efforts at stripping their power, the secretary authorized General Collins to go along with plans for Diem's replacement "in light of your reiterated conviction that Diem cannot gain adequate Vietnam support to establish an effective government." Most of all, Dulles wanted to avoid a civil war. That possibility was all too real if Diem continued a forceful attempt "to reassert his authority over the Binh Xuyen."[69]

By the 20th of the month, Dulles drew back, obviously under pressure from not only the president but Diem's other backers in Washington. He informed Collins that the Binh Xuyen insurgency was "minor" and that he had been meeting with a group of

congressmen. "I told them that this was just the opportunity we had been waiting for to find out whether Diem had the courage and determination to *act* and whether he had the loyalty of the Army, but the French prevented his acting and allowed the Binh Xuyen to defy him with impunity and to compel him to make a 'truce' which put the National Government on a parity with a bunch of gangsters." Then he added, "This is a matter not just for the Executive but for the Congress and those who have leadership in this matter, such as Mansfield in the Senate and Walter Judd in the House," and they were "very strongly opposed to any shift. As things now stand, they would, I think, throw their influence, perhaps decisively, against backing any substitute that now seems in sight."[70]

Almost miraculously, Diem regained the initiative. As far as Washington was concerned, the crisis had passed. Diem's National Army drove the Binh Xuyen back into Cholon, the "overseas" Chinese counterpart of Saigon.[71] The event brought immediate relief to Dulles and Eisenhower. Five months later, aided by some of Lansdale's ingenuity, Diem won a national referendum that dethroned Bao Dai and made him president. Although Diem had been persuaded to settle for 60 or 70 percent of the vote, he was able to claim 98.2 percent. Even before that triumph, Diem had signaled his intent to ignore the Geneva Accords' provision for a nationwide election in 1956 to achieve unification.

Despite some reservations, mostly pertaining to political legitimacy, Eisenhower and Dulles supported that decision. As early as 13 June 1955, in fact, the president had approved National Security Council recommendations that had the effect of upholding Diem's stand on the elections.[72] The move foreclosed a significant unfinished piece of business from Geneva. It also narrowed the options under which Ho Chi Minh might achieve his unification. Politically, it spared Washington from having to preside over the extension of communism below the 17th Parallel, which would have liabilities at home almost akin to the breaching of the Korean armistice line. Accordingly, the NSC recommendations also included the recommendation that the U.S. "take necessary military and other action to assist any state or dependent territory in the SEATO area willing to resist Communist resort to force."[73]

The regional mutual security pact had already been signed at Manila in September 1954. Its ratification by the Senate on the 8th of that month was reminiscent of strong bipartisan endorsement of such military security initiatives, ranging all the way to the Gulf of

Tonkin Resolution of 1964. Of course, it lacked the military apparatus of NATO, and so one might emphasize SEATO's symbolic importance. Robert Komer has been quoted as having said privately in 1961 that SEATO was a "millstone" directed against nonexistent dangers of overt aggression.[74]

But it was Dulles himself who had serious misgivings. He feared the removal of American options, of freedom to respond as he saw fit. The U.S. would also be vulnerable to British and French objections. They "are blocking everything we want to do," Dulles complained to Livingston Merchant during one of his frequent moments of exasperation. Finally, would it really be useful considering the mood of the participants? "The running away from the word Communist," Dulles complained, "—the unwillingness to allow unofficial observers to come from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and the objection to our having any military mission to Cambodia are examples. They seem to have no desire or intention to hold the balance of Indochina."[75] Yet, for all his doubts, he had helped to deepen the American stake in the area. And that stake seemed inescapable, militarily as well as politically. Crises that produced the Formosa Resolution of 1955 and anxiety over whether the Communists would overrun the tiny islands en route to the Pescadores and Taiwan helped to maintain the cold-war climate in the Pacific. Such circumstances only emphasized the importance of "containing" China.

Meanwhile, in South Vietnam, the French, having reached a total impasse with the United States, pulled out in 1956, leaving only a token liaison mission with the International Control Commission. Diem retained his feudal control, making but niggling land reforms, and Washington helped keep him alive with massive aid. The Communist opposition, now known as the Viet Cong, accelerated activities with aid from the North, and the South Vietnamese president barely escaped an attempted coup d'etat in November 1959. In August of 1960, a special intelligence estimate reported that deteriorating conditions and the ripeness of Vietnam for Communist-led guerrilla operations made conditions "adverse to the stability and effectiveness" of Diem's government.[76] At the end of that year, with the support of Ho Chi Minh, the National Liberation Front was organized to overthrow Diem.

The Eisenhower administration had by then begun to respond with counterinsurgency paramilitary programs. In early January 1961, two weeks before the new administration took over in Washington, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his famous exhortation in

behalf of "wars of national liberation." Just three days before the end of the Eisenhower presidency, Edward Lansdale warned that the "free Vietnamese, and their government, probably will be able to do no more than postpone eventual defeat—unless they find a Vietnamese way of mobilizing their total resources and then utilizing them with spirit."[77] Those final days of the Republican administration would have been distinctly inappropriate for an Indochinese collapse. Nixon, facing John F. Kennedy for the presidency, had more than his share of other Eisenhower administration liabilities to defend.

Just before leaving the White House, on 19 January 1961 Dwight Eisenhower briefed his successor in the Cabinet Room. Calmly, he underscored how the serious threat of communism in Laos was a potential threat to all of Southeast Asia. Thus, in marked contrast to 1954, the question was less one of Laos' importance than the urgency of preventing Pathet Lao control. So it went, from making the most out of a bad Laotian situation to the elusive search for stability in South Vietnam.

Kennedy had few options about maintaining cold-war initiatives. Even if they were not so limited, there is little evidence that he would have made striking new departures. If anything, it was even more important than under Eisenhower and Dulles to demonstrate the administration's firmness against the subversion of American interests. Few individuals within the New Frontier questioned the wisdom of Southeast Asian policies. Komer, of the NSC staff, just as Walt Rostow and Defense Secretary McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, was sold on the global implications. For example, Komer put it very plainly that first July, shortly after President Kennedy had returned from his Vienna confrontation with Khrushchev. "I believe," he wrote, "it is very important that this government have a major anti-Communist victory to its credit in the six months before the Berlin crisis is likely to get really hot."[78] At the same time, writing for the new president's benefit, Rostow urged Sorensen that "the buildup of our forces should be related to contingencies in Southeast Asia as well as in Central Europe—and perhaps to contingencies elsewhere as well."[79]

None of this differed very much from the analysis of the Eisenhower people. The major change was that, by the 1960s and with a new administration, fewer questions remained about what had to be done. Securing the investment was the major priority. A complete array of justifications, including the creation of SEATO, was firmly

imprinted both on paper and in the minds of those in positions of responsibility. As Sorensen later told an oral history interviewer, Kennedy "did feel strongly that for better or worse, enthusiastic or unenthusiastic, we had to stay there until we left on terms other than a retreat or abandonment of our commitment."[80]

In contrast to the leadership of the secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration, it was the secretary of defense, McNamara, who became a key player during the Kennedy years (as he would later under Johnson). He was convinced of the importance of a non-Communist Vietnam, just as he assumed its necessity for the maintenance of a strong anti-Soviet stance throughout the world. "We should be very clear as to the role of the United States in South Vietnam," he said in March 1962. "We are there at the request of the South Vietnamese Government. President Diem has asked that we supply training and logistical equipment to the South Vietnamese."[81]

The question was "How?" not "Should we?" What was more efficacious—getting the proud and stubborn Diem to agree to accept American troops, or merely providing him with advisers to build up the army of Vietnam? By 1961, an estimated five to seven hundred soldiers, supported by Chinese weapons, were infiltrating into the South, a clear violation of the Geneva Accords. Rejecting a reciprocal open abrogation of the agreement, the Kennedy administration nevertheless accelerated the counterinsurgency program.[82]

Over the Pentagon's objections, Kennedy created the elite command known as the Special Forces, members of which arrived in South Vietnam in civilian clothes. By November of 1961, 900 American military men were there.[83] The Kennedy role also involved importing the strategic hamlet concept of Sir Robert Thompson, and eventually raising the number of advisers to 16,500. Dealing with the Viet Cong and their support from the National Liberation Front, which operated so freely throughout the countryside of the South, from the Mekong Delta to the city of Saigon itself, was one thing. Contending with Diem and his closed government was quite another.

Confronting the crisis in Laos inevitably helped strengthen the support given to Diem. With a show of force in the China Sea and the Gulf of Siam, including 500 marines deployed into Thailand across the Mekong River from Vientiane, Kennedy demonstrated some muscle.[84] From SEATO, however, Kennedy received a weaker response, with France in the forefront blocking strong military intervention. Nevertheless, Kennedy increased U.S. aid to fight the

Pathet Lao guerrillas. By April, 300 American military advisers were in Laos, supported by $32 million in economic assistance, triple the annual rate of 1955–1959.[85] At least for the moment, Kennedy faced the inevitable solution for Laos: a coalition government headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma. The process of putting together that regime began in Geneva on 12 May and did not confirm creation of the new government until the summer of 1962.

Acceptance of coalition rule was widely regarded as a temporary solution. Assumptions were rife about aid from Moscow and North Vietnam, in particular, ultimately working to create a pro-Communist "neutralist" government in Vientiane. Surreptitiously, however, in an effort to safeguard against a "neutralist" government, the NSC approved and the president dispatched an enhanced MAAG force to counter North Vietnamese–supplied and equipped guerrillas. The Church committee later reported that the Laotian operation "eventually became the largest paramilitary effort in post-war history." The 9,000 Meo tribesmen outfitted for such guerrilla activities were virtually decimated.[86]

None of that was public knowledge at the time. What was known was that the youthful new American president had sustained serious setbacks. In April, the Bay of Pigs had resulted in a "perfect disaster." Then, with militants calling for a renewed offensive against Cuba and the political risks inherent in Laotian neutrality, Kennedy had to prepare for his meeting with Khrushchev. Berlin's future was the big issue, the potential flash point, the most dangerous point of conflict between East and West. No other symbol was comparable. On 5 May, the NSC accordingly urged "that efforts should be made to reassure Sarit [of Thailand] and Diem that we are not abandoning Southeast Asia."[87] As Komer advised McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, "We must seriously consider precautionary measures to 'seal off' South Vietnam in such a way as to deter another Laos."[88] The immediate move was sending Vice President Johnson to Saigon. Johnson, who hailed Diem as an Asian Churchill, also left no doubt that the choice was to save Diem and his country or lose the entire region to the Reds.[89] From Saigon, the vice president brought a request for more aid but not troops. Given the support from Washington, Diem insisted, the job could be done.

Once more, there was no doubt about the American mission. Kennedy himself, subscribing to the domino theory, addressed the Congress shortly after Johnson's return and declared that the battle

of "freedom versus tyranny" was being waged in Vietnam.[90] Diem then followed through with a letter to Kennedy requesting American personnel to train his air force "officers and technical specialists." He also wanted a considerable expansion of the MAAG.[91]

The biggest obstacle was Ngo Dinh Diem within the context of the society he was trying to govern. Dealing with him involved two approaches. The military, of course, took priority. Then there was the matter of his personal leadership. While his rejection of American troops could be appreciated and respected, there was the problem of keeping him in power and helping to turn the tide against the Viet Cong.

An upswing of Viet Cong attacks in September resulted in a spectacular raid on a provincial capital only fifty-five miles from Saigon, which included the public beheading of the local chief.[92] During the first half of 1961 alone, there were more than five hundred assassinations of officials and other civilians, in addition to one thousand kidnappings, according to a report from Rostow to the president.[93] A report by William J. Jorden, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, documented massive North Vietnamese violations of the Geneva Accords. The CIA, modifying some of the report's more unreliable pieces of evidence, nevertheless estimated that some 10 to 20 percent of the Viet Cong's full-time strength of 16,000 consisted of infiltrated cadres. Such intervention from the North inevitably led the United States to feel no longer bound by the Geneva restrictions on personnel and military equipment.[94] A direct response to Diem's obvious military needs was sending General Maxwell Taylor and Rostow to Saigon that fall.

The Taylor-Rostow mission marked another vital step in the Indochinese escalation. With a theme that called for the U.S. to become "a limited partner" in the war, avoiding formalized advice while trying to supervise the war, it called for an 8,000-man logistical task force, which would serve as a "visible symbol of the seriousness of American intentions."[95] Kennedy deliberated and then decided to go ahead. Action memorandum 493 of the NSC, dated 15 November 1961, shows that, contrary to other reports, Kennedy did not waste much time.[96]

Thus, the Kennedy buildup began. Less than one month later, two American helicopter companies, involving thirty-three H–21C's and 400 men, arrived in Vietnam. The *New York Times* then documented the new aid program by reporting a formal exchange of letters between Kennedy and Diem. The American president, noting

the Geneva violations, promised early increases in assistance.[97] Visiting Saigon in February, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy summoned an airport news conference and said, "We are going to win in Vietnam. We will remain here until we do win."Asked whether the U.S. was involved in a war, he replied, "We are involved in a struggle."[98] In Kennedy's mind, writes Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., were considerations involving "the truculence of Moscow, the Berlin crisis and the resumption of nuclear testing . . . [and] the President unquestionably felt that an American retreat in Asia might upset the whole world balance."[99] The effort initiated by the Taylor-Rostow mission continued to expand.[100] By the end of 1962, 222 American aircraft were in the country, including 149 helicopters, and that year 2,048 attack sorties (officially described as training missions) were flown by Amercian planes.[101]

The number of Americans killed and wounded had increased tenfold over the previous year. As he had often done before, Kennedy turned to Mike Mansfield. Mansfield, who became the Senate majority leader when Lyndon Johnson assumed the vice-presidency, went to Saigon at the president's request and confirmed the more downbeat reports being written by such correspondents as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan. Indeed, it was true, said the senator; there had not only been little progress since his last visit, but the United States was succumbing to the same kind of morass that had defeated the French. Undoubtedly, Mansfield's findings were the most troublesome words the president had yet heard. "If I tried to pull out completely now from Vietnam," Kennedy told him, "we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected. So we had better make damned sure that I *am* reelected."[102] "It wasn't a pleasant picture I depicted for him," Mansfield said afterward.[103]

Mansfield had learned for himself, as did Mike Forrestal and Roger Hilsman in a subsequent visit, that Diem was much of the problem. His intractability was crippling the war effort.[104] "The Viet Cong actively exploited the government's domestic political shortcomings," said a CIA intelligence memorandum in January.[105] Forrestal and Hilsman reported that the strategic hamlet program was mostly a sham, "inadequately equipped and defended," or "built prematurely in exposed areas." But their real concern was Diem's insistence on, in effect, governing through his family, especially "Brother Nhu and his wife, and Diem's reluctance to delegate is alienating the middle and higher level officials on whom the

government must depend to carry out its plans."[106] Sending advisers, enlarging MAAG (it then became MACV, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), and deploying equipment and materiel were all much easier than moving Diem himself.

Instead of sensitivity toward the Buddhist opposition, he held on like a feudal monarch. He spurned the kinds of social and economic reforms that had been urged since the Eisenhower years. A group of economic experts sent to Vietnam in 1961 under Dr. Eugene Staley of the Stanford Research Institute had urged the importance of such reforms and recommended a 12 percent increase in the economic and social program previously earmarked for Vietnam.[107] Rather than showing receptivity to such needs, Diem hardened his authority. A crowd in Hue, gathered on 8 May to celebrate the anniversary of Buddha's birth, was fired into by government troops, and hunger strikes followed. But the most dramatic protest, and, internationally, the most memorable, was the photographed self-immolation of a monk on 11 June. From that moment, George Herring has written, "the Buddhist protest emerged into a powerful, apparently deeply rooted political movement that threatened the very survival of the Diem government."[108] Additional grizzly suicides made for other effective dramatizations of the grievances. "More Bonzi burning will cause domestic US reaction," Forrestal wired Bundy. "Suggest a demarche to Diem insisting on removal of Nhu and his wife to a post outside South Vietnam."[109]

On 16 June, against the backdrop "of sharply-increased Buddhist tensions and United States pressure," the Diem government signed an agreement with Buddhist leaders granting all their demands. Foremost among them was an end to religious persecution. "This is, in reality," Secretary Rusk was advised, "a long-standing resentment by the Buddhist leaders of what they regard as the privileged position occupied by the minority Roman Catholic Church, of which President Diem and his family and a disproportionate number of civil and military officials are members. . . . Buddhist demonstrations, led by monks, nuns have spread to Saigon and other urban centers and the SVN government has felt compelled to impose extraordinary security measures." Moreover, the 16 June agreement was seen as a test of the Diem government's sincerity.[110]

Then, underscoring the dilemma, a memorandum from the Department of Intelligence and Research cautioned that removing the authoritarian government could lead to even more serious upheavals. The consequences could cripple the military effort. On the other

hand, "Our silence over any period or implications that we regarded the revolt as an internal problem which we hope to see quickly resolved would probably be taken as support for the rebels." To counter such dangers by obvious American assistance for Diem would undoubtedly reduce the numbers willing to take on the Viet Cong. A rebel success against Diem, however, despite our efforts to keep him going, could result in "considerable hostility toward the United States in the new administration."[111]

The memorandum, written by Thomas L. Hughes, was prophetic, and events moved to the inevitable solution. On 21 August, just as Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., was to arrive to replace Frederick Nolting as ambassador, South Vietnamese Special Forces, trained by the Americans and at the direction of Diem's brother, went on a rampage. Completely disregarding past assurances, they carried out massive raids in Hue, Saigon, and other cities. More than 1,400 Buddhists were arrested during the ransacking of pagodas, and President Diem refused to disavow Nhu's actions. Only three days later, Washington learned that Nhu, with the knowledge of the opposing South Vietnamese generals, was negotiating with the Communists.[112] That weekend, with Kennedy at Hyannis Port, an affirmative response to a cable from Lodge giving the green light for American acquiescence in a coup was vetoed. The effort to depose Diem, led from Washington in the president's absence by Averell Harriman, was killed by Kennedy's own indecision and opposition by his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, and McNamara. Both protested that the intended maneuver had been done behind their backs.[113]

After that hectic weekend, nothing conclusive resulted from the stormy White House meeting of 27 August. Kennedy, back from Cape Cod, confronted Nolting, just recently returned from Saigon. Under persistent questioning by the president, Nolting reiterated his confidence in the South Vietnamese leadership. But Nolting's most important point was that Nhu "can command people and the Vietnamese are respectful of those who can command." During the next few days, haste should be avoided. "If the smouldering resentment of the Vietnamese people grows and begins to show up in the Vietnamese military units to such an extent that the war effort is blocked, then we have an entirely different problem of creating an acceptable political base."[114]

Barely one week later, the president appeared on Walter Cronkite's CBS television program. Although his words have since

been repeatedly misrepresented to make them appear as an indication of future American withdrawal, what he actually said constituted a reaffirmation of the commitment. Asked about whether Diem would change his pattern, Kennedy replied: "We hope that he comes to see that, but in the final analysis it is the people and the government itself who have to win or lose this struggle. All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear, but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake."[115]

Even as the president was taking his public stand, a series of meetings in Saigon between Lodge and the anti-Diem plotters sealed the decision. Washington had only to give the word that aid would be cut off, and that would be the signal for the coup. Diem's supporter, CIA Station Chief John Richardson, had already been recalled. The situation in Saigon was only worsening, especially among the urban elite, which, Roger Hilsman explained, "supplies both the military and civil officers on whom the war effort depends."[116] From Saigon, at the same time, Lodge was pressing for action. "The demonstrations in the schools are to me extremely curious and impressive manifestations," he cabled on 11 September. "Out of nowhere apparently appears a banner and a plan to put up a roadblock or a scheme for conducting a parade. Perhaps this is the work of Communist agents, even though the students are undoubtedly not Communists. . . . The government is obviously cut off from reality. . . . The ship of state is slowly sinking." Aid should be suspended; then anti-American hatred might be lessened. We want to be careful lest we "substitute a Castro for a Batista." And, in a final warning, Lodge urged, "What is even more dangerous is that the situation here may not wait for us. The student demonstrations in Saigon, for example, are profoundly disturbing. At the very least, these reflect in a most unmistakable way the deep discontent of the middle and upper class population of Saigon. They're also the classic vehicle for communist action."[117] But Dean Rusk advised patience, urging that nothing be done to stimulate plotting of a coup "pending final decisions which are still being formulated here."[118]

In a series of cables, some of which have only recently been made available, Lodge continued to press the point. "Yet," as I have previously noted, "even at that point Kennedy wavered, suffering a recurrence of earlier doubts. He told Bundy that the U.S. should be in a position to blow the whistle if it looked as though the coup was failing."[119] But, as with so many situations, he was overtaken by events. General Taylor had already prepared a tabulation showing

the probable loyalties of key military units and commanders "in the event a coup d'etat is undertaken in South Vietnam in the near future."[120] Worried about Diem's personal safety, Kennedy urged the embattled president to seek refuge in the American embassy.[121]

Only three weeks before Kennedy's own assassination, on 1 November (Saigon time), Diem was forced to flee the presidential palace and go to a hideout in the Chinese quarter. The next day, after having been supposedly guaranteed his safe return, he and his brother were shot according to a prearranged plan. Kennedy's fury at hearing the news has been widely documented: a dead Diem was the last thing he had wanted. Ambassador Lodge soon afterward wired some cheerful news: a member of the British Advisory Mission in Saigon had told him that "the coup should help very much to win the war."[122]

What would have happened had Diem remained in power can only be speculated, although Lacouture's point about his inevitable downfall is as valid as any. We also know that Diem's death was followed by findings that his regime had systematically falsified military reports and the progress of the strategic hamlet program, which had developed into a most unfortunate undertaking. The military situation was far worse than anyone had imagined.[123] As a result of the rapid turnover of leadership in Saigon within the next few years, the conventional wisdom is that Washington, having acted as a handmaiden for the coup, had thereby deepened the American commitment far beyond anything in the past.[124]

Could Kennedy—at that moment—have responded by writing off the U.S. responsibility, disassociating himself from both the coup and South Vietnam's future? When viewed with the perspective of two decades, it hardly seems possible. American involvement in the coup was too transparent, almost like the Bay of Pigs. Retreat from a cold-war commitment was simply not regarded as a realistic option. Having undermined what Washington had underwritten, dismissal of the entire project was unthinkable, certainly not in 1963.

Then, too, with his own reelection campaign due the following year, Kennedy was not that secure at home. At no point in his presidency, including immediately after the Cuban fiasco, was his leadership so precarious. The administration was in a serious deadlock with the Congress over legislation, and that was in large part caused by its endorsement of significant civil rights legislation which, in turn, had lowered his national popularity. Conservatives, if not already agitated by such social changes and by Supreme Court

decisions that had the president's support, were also agitated by the ratification of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Agreement. During those weeks before Dallas, while the new situation in South Vietnam had yet to be resolved, Kennedy could only hope for the best—and for Barry Goldwater as his opponent in 1964.

Even then, only events like Diem's death were likely to place Vietnam on the front pages. Southeast Asia was important for what *might* happen, not for what *was* happening. Few doubted its international implications, and there was just enough evidence that Ho Chi Minh, through materiel assistance from both the Soviets and Communist China, was trying to extend Marxist rule throughout the area. Throughout the period, few people expected Ho Chi Minh to become another Tito, or that the People's Republic of China would follow the Yugoslavian precedent. What had happened in Cuba, and the path taken by Fidel Castro, were a far more prominent fear. Public opinion in the U.S. was sold on the need to stop Communists everywhere. Had any national political leadership failed to respond, their replacements were ready to come in from the bullpen. As Maj. Gen. Jack N. Merritt has noted in his introduction to Col. Harry S. Summers' study, *On Strategy,* military strategy was subordinated to the "national policy of containment of communist expansion."[125]

Finally, one decade of the Diem experience should have been sufficient to signal the fallacy of the enterprise. But, alas, Vietnam may have had to have been endured to make future Vietnams less likely. Presidents Johnson and Nixon, having inherited the quagmire, found that their fortunes, like those of Eisenhower and Kennedy, were irrevocably tied to popular perceptions of cold-war diplomacy. Replaying the record of the fifties and sixties will not produce a different tune.

NOTES

Key to Abbreviations

DDRS—Declassified Documents Research System
DDEL—Dwight D. Eisenhower Library
JFKL—John F. Kennedy Library

1. Eisenhower Oral History Interv, by Philip Crowell, 28 Jul 64, Dulles Papers, Princeton University.

2. Melvin Gurtov, *The United States Against the Third World: Anti-nationalism and Intervention* (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 26.

3. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower,* 8 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960–61), 2:383.

4. Memo from J. N. Greene, 19 Sep 53, Dulles Special Assistants Chronological series, box 5, DDEL.

5. Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1970), p. 64.

6. Dulles to Eisenhower, 1 Feb 54, Whitman file, Dulles-Herter series, box 2, DDEL.

7. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Eisenhower*, 2:383.

8. Hagerty Diary entries, box 1, Hagerty Papers, DDEL.

9. J. F. Dulles Telephone Conversations with Allen Dulles, 13 Aug 54, Telephone Conversations, box 2, Dulles Papers, DDEL.

10. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), p. 25.

11. Herbert S. Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 292.

12. J. F. Dulles to W. Bedell Smith, 9 Feb 54, Whitman file, Dulles-Herter series, box 2, DDEL.

13. Cabinet Mins, 10 Jul 53, Sherman Adams Papers, Baker Library, Dartmouth College.

14. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co, 1963), p. 109.

15. *New York Times,* 11 Sep 53; Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1979), p. 51.

16. "U.S. Assistance for Indochina," 26 Mar 54, White House Memorandum series, box 1, Dulles Papers, DDEL.

17. Department of State *Bulletin,* 29 June 1953, in Subject series, box 9, Dulles Papers, DDEL.

18. *New York Times,* 3 Jul 53.

19. Ibid., 19 Aug 53.

20. Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 28; *New York Times,* 14, 15, and 18 Dec 53.

21. *New York Times,* 4 Feb 54.

22. Dulles to Eisenhower, 9 Feb 54, Whitman file, Dulles-Herter series, box 2, DDEL.

23. *The Senator Gravel Edition of the Pentagon Papers*, 4 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 1:436.

24. Hagerty Diary entries, 8 February 1954, box 1, Hagerty Papers, DDEL.

25. Notes of President's Meeting with Congressional Leaders, 8 Feb 54, Sherman Adams Papers, Baker Library, Dartmouth College.

26. Dulles Memo, 24 Feb 54, White House Memorandum series, box 1, Dulles Papers, DDEL.

27. Randle, *Geneva,* p. 39.

28. Cf. J. F. Dulles, Memorandum of Conversation with the President, 19 May 54, White House Memorandum series, box 1, Dulles Papers, DDEL. There is reason to believe that Knowland's private apprehensions about the renewed use of American troops were in some contrast to his more public remarks, such as on the Senate floor.

29. General G. B. Erskine to The Executive Officer, Operations Coordinating Board, 2 Mar 54, Whitman file, Dulles-Herter series, box 2, DDEL.

30. Eisenhower, *Mandate,* pp. 346–47.

31. Memorandum of Dinner with Sir Winston Churchill, 12 Apr 54, White House Memorandum series, box 1, Dulles Papers, DDEL.
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Eight Decisions for War January 1965–February 1966

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I

From the point of view of American participation in the Second Indochina War, the period from January 1965 through February 1966 was a critical one. At the beginning of 1965, the major U.S. military headquarters in Vietnam was the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), whose main mission was to assist the South Vietnamese armed forces in their struggle against an insurgent foe, the Viet Cong. American military forces in Vietnam at that time numbered less than 24,000 personnel—15,000 Army, 7,000 Air Force, 1,000 Navy, and 900 Marine Corps. The only units involved in combat were the various Army helicopter companies, the small Army, Marine, and Special Forces detachments that advised and sometimes led Vietnamese units into combat, and some 222 Air Force aircraft, only 50 percent of which could be considered tactical. MACV's primary job was essentially to work itself out of a job through successful advice and assistance.[1] The overall concern was essentially "how to stop losing the war," and the primary means seemed to be by somehow holding the country together. In Saigon and Hawaii, military planners and strategists pondered the bewildering array of options to do so—continued or increased military assistance, direct or indirect application of American air power, limited

or massive introduction of American ground forces, and the proper emphasis on "the other war," pacification. And in Washington, policymakers watched with apparent detachment.

Fourteen months later, in February 1966, the U.S. military strength stood at over 175,000 troops with more projected. There were more than 116,000 Army personnel in U.S. Army, Vietnam—two plus divisions, consisting of twenty-two maneuver battalions. Strength of the Marine Amphibious Force stood at 40,000 troops—twelve maneuver battalions. The Air Force's 2d Air Division now numbered 19,000 officers and men with 780 tactical aircraft. MACV's objective was still to work its way out of a job, but advice and assistance were now supplemented by massive American military power to persuade the North Vietnamese government to cease its active participation in the war and to withdraw its support from the Viet Cong. The overall concern was now "how to win the war," and the only question was now where and how to apply American military power. During these fourteen months, MACV planners and their superiors in Hawaii had moved through the varied options posed earlier and were now embarked upon an aggressive ground and air war against both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. Officials in Washington were now involved in the day-to-day conduct of the war.[2]

This large increase in American military strength, rapid reorientation from an advisory to a combat role, the shift from how to stop losing the war to how to win it, and active participation by those in Washington were the results of eight decisions for war that significantly shaped and directed the nature of America's role in the remainder of that war. This paper analyzes these decisions, isolating them as they occurred, discussing their significance within the perspective of the time, and placing them in the broader context of the overall war. During these fourteen months, the nature of the war was dramatically altered, as was the degree of American participation. Events seemed to foreclose options for American decision makers, and the results of their deliberations shaped future strategy. At times, they withheld decisions, presumably to retain options. In these instances, recommendations from lower levels became decisions. And over the long haul, precision in policy and rigor in strategy were sacrificed for the sake of flexibility in options. It proved a disastrous way to conduct a war.

II

The first major decision for war in 1965 was actually a series of decisions made during February in Washington. Their origins grew from approval by President Lyndon B. Johnson in December 1964 of a two-phased program for the selective use of air power designed to force the North Vietnamese either to withdraw their support of the Viet Cong or to undertake discussions at the negotiation table.[3] Documentation now available implies that he selected this course of action because of a lack of agreement among his civilian and military national security advisers. Likewise, he was still conscious of his election promises for domestic priorities. Accordingly, he approved only Phase I, Operation BARREL ROLL, armed reconnaissance flights over infiltration routes in Laos, while leaving Phase II, air strikes on North Vietnam, approved in principle only. He continued this cautious stance through December after a Viet Cong terrorist attack on an officers' billet in Saigon, despite vigorous requests from Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor for retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam.[4]

Johnson altered this stance in January when the South Vietnamese government underwent yet another internal shuffling, again paralyzing the overall war effort, and when Buddhist riots broke out with heavy anti-American overtones. In early February, the Viet Cong—to this day, we still do not know if this was on local initiative or at North Vietnamese direction—struck American military installations, first at Pleiku and then at Qhi Nhon. The president's National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, was coincidentally in Vietnam on a fact-finding mission. Upon his return to Washington, he submitted a series of recommendations to Johnson, the major element of which was Phase II American air strikes on North Vietnamese targets.[5]

Bundy's recommendations set off a flurry of high-level deliberations in Washington and resulted in a series of decisions with considerable import.[6] The president ordered all American dependents in Vietnam home. This had long been a subject of vigorous debate between American officials in Vietnam, who feared how this might be seen by their Vietnamese counterparts, and the president, who was concerned about how any loss of American women and children's lives might be perceived on the domestic scene. In ordering the American dependents home, Johnson in effect put MACV on a "war footing." He approved air strikes over the North, initially as

limited Phase II reprisal strikes, but soon as Operation ROLLING THUNDER, a sustained air campaign. To military planners in Hawaii, Saigon, and Washington, these steps signaled a clear change in strategy. To date, air power had been employed sparingly against the North Vietnamese logistical network to encourage diplomatic negotiations. Now the president directed that it be applied to punish. Implicitly raised now was the question as to what the next step might be for the president after the accelerated air campaign. The president also agreed to what then appeared a minor military measure, the dispatch of a Marine HAWK air defense battalion to Da Nang, in order to counter a possible North Vietnamese reprisal in the form of air strikes against American air facilities.[7] This would soon prove to be "the nose of the camel," for there had been precious little thought in Washington or Saigon about security for this tiny force, which had only a limited self-defense capability. Within a month, this self-defense requirement would spawn not only a major commitment of American ground combat forces to the Da Nang area but also a major assessment of an American ground tactical role throughout Vietnam.[8]

By this series of decisions, the president sent powerful indications to his own advisers of his willingness to move past the domestic priorities established during his 1964 election campaign. He was a proud man when it came to "American honor," and, as he later recalled, "as we moved into 1965, my own concern grew steadily."[9] One indication was his willingness to support the South Vietnamese government regardless of its apparent shakiness. George Ball, an active dissenter to Vietnam policy throughout the period, later wrote that the "prevailing view [was] that we needed to bomb not in order to punish Hanoi but to pump adrenalin into South Vietnam."[10] Another indication was the use of American ground combat troops. Prior to dispatching Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission in early March, the president told his senior Army adviser, in no uncertain terms, that he was interested in some other military solution to Vietnam besides bombing.[11] General William C. Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, later learned that the president had told General Johnson flatly, "You get things bubbling, General!"[12] The message to officials in Washington, Hawaii, and Saigon was obvious. The South Vietnamese government had to be supported, and planners should now actively consider the commitment of American ground combat troops a viable option.[13]

The cumulative decisions of February 1965 were thus perceived in Washington, Hawaii, and Saigon as a major step towards American involvement in the ground war. In retrospect, it is now clear that little, if any, thought was given at this time to the option of withdrawing all American forces, no doubt because this implied defeat for the South Vietnamese forces. Neither were these decisions perceived as being a major step towards war. Rather the February decisions meant, as Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts have so descriptively suggested, "turn on the spigot, forge ahead, and hope for the best."[14]

The second major decision was made in Washington by President Johnson on 1 April 1965—National Security Action Memorandum Number 328.[15] This contained elements of earlier recommendations concerning Vietnam from Ambassador Taylor, USIS Director Carl Rowan, the CIA, and General Johnson.[16] Some specifically accelerated the American ground combat option. He approved an expansion of the mission assigned to the marines at Da Nang from a purely defensive role to more active counterinsurgency measures. General Westmoreland, the commandant of the Marine Corps, and Ambassador Taylor had pointed out that a certain amount of offensive action was necessary to preclude surprise attacks and to protect Da Nang from mortar attacks. Johnson also bowed to demands from Vietnam and the Joint Chiefs, ordering to Vietnam additional Marine units along with an "air squadron and associated headquarters and support elements." The marines were now ashore in force, changing their designation from "Expeditionary Force" to "Amphibious Force." The "nose of the camel" suddenly became a long neck. Additionally, he increased the scope of air strikes in the North, calling for the continuance of "the present slowly ascending tempo of ROLLING THUNDER." While it was becoming increasingly obvious that the tactic of air strikes to force negotiations was unlikely to succeed, he opted to continue the pressure. But, most significantly, he signaled a new direction in American military strategy. Shortly after General Johnson's visit to Vietnam, General Westmoreland had submitted to the Joint Chiefs a massive "Commander's Estimate of the Military Situation of South Vietnam" in which, for the first time, he expanded the concept of operations by American ground combat forces in Vietnam—thirty-two maneuver battalions—and outlined the necessary combat support and service support requirements for this multidivisional force.[17] As military planners knew, it was an easy matter to deploy the maneuver battalions, but it was another matter getting required logistical units into

position. The president laid the groundwork for logistical deployment by authorizing "an 18–20,000 man increase in U.S. military support forces to fill out existing units and supply needed logistical personnel."

With this April decision, President Johnson began to foreclose his options, presumably to retain his flexibility. Yet to his planners, he moved one step closer to committing American ground combat units to South Vietnam. As Gelb and Betts have observed, he "had decided to bite the bullet and take command."[18] But the full extent of these intentions still remained unclear in Saigon. General Westmoreland recalled, "Low key still was the watchword."[19] Clearly the president had narrowed his strategic options. As George Herring observed, at this point, "the options of withdrawal and a massive air war against North Vietnam had been firmly rejected. . . . Although the April decisions stopped short of the commitment urged by the military, it . . . marked a major step toward a large-scale involvement in the ground war."[20]

The third decision for war was made in Honolulu by the Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara. Shortly after the NSAM 328 decision in which the president had taken the extraordinary steps to "minimize any appearances of sudden change in policy," military planners from Saigon, Hawaii, and Washington met in Honolulu to hash out the steps necessary to comply with not only the actual decision but also to anticipate any further force requirements. They had to deal with the expanding mission assigned to Army and Marine ground combat battalions which went beyond simple enclave security, namely the identification, deployment, and disposition of additional logistical units approved by the president and a definition of strategy for the employment of American ground combat units. In late April, they were joined by Secretary McNamara, his assistant, John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earl Wheeler, Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, along with General Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor.

During this review, the president's advisers moved towards more clear delineation of a strategy for the expanding ground war in the South, as their report to the president indicated. They believed that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese would not "capitulate, or come to a position acceptable to us, in less than six months." They suggested that "it will take more than six months, perhaps a year or two, to demonstrate VC failure in the South." With respect to ROLLING

THUNDER, they stated "that the strike program is essential to our campaign—but it cannot be expected to do the job alone." And they suggested "a strategy for 'victory,' over time, . . . to break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory," while cautioning about "the critical importance of holding on and avoiding . . . a spectacular defeat of GVN or US forces." To carry this out, they recommended the deployment of 30,000 U.S. troops—nine additional combat battalions plus logistical troops already approved—bringing the total number of combat battalions in Vietnam to thirteen and raising the total troop strength to 82,000. They further suggested consideration be given to future deployment of an Army airmobile division to the Pleiku/Kontum area, an Army corps headquarters to Nha Trang, and three more Marine battalions to Da Nang.[21]

The decision by the key advisers to make this recommendation to President Johnson was significant for several reasons. It signaled a shift in the application of American military force from air power in the North to ground power in the South, though it avoided the question of how this was to be applied. It painted a dismal picture for any speedy resolution initially by suggesting at least six months and then cautiously revising that figure upwards to "a year or two" while warning of the impact of "a spectacular defeat." It offered "a strategy"—to win by denying victory. This was, in reality, more of a concept to ward off defeat, what one American commander in Vietnam would later describe as "trying to win a football game on your side of the 50 yard line."[22] And it discussed further deployments largely in terms of pure numbers of maneuver battalions and of dispositions in enclaves or bases. It was thus a plan based on numbers and locations, not missions or goals. By accepting such rationale from his planners and then passing it along as a recommendation to the president, McNamara established a dangerous precedent—recommendations based on quantitative factors rather than deductive reasoning.

The fourth decision came quickly when President Johnson chose to postpone a reaction to this recommendation for an expanded ground war in the South to try another tack, a bombing halt. He did so on his own in early May 1965. Though he later implied consultation among and agreement by his advisers, the available records do not bear this out.[23] Perhaps because he restricted knowledge of his decision to so few, it never had time to gain active support. Or perhaps because his decision was tied to Project MAYFLOWER, a top secret sounding out of Hanoi's intentions conducted in Moscow,

it never really had a chance.[24] Regardless, Johnson's bombing halt decision was unsuccessful and only served to convince him of North Vietnamese intractability on peace negotiations. As he later noted, "Once again we had tried to open the door; once again Hanoi had slammed it shut."[25]

In restrospect, the president may not have given the North Vietnamese enough time to respond to the bombing halt. George Ball later called the pause, "a hiccup."[26] Certainly the president's chosen route of communication through Moscow was tenuous at best, given Russian-Chinese tensions. But his own perceptions of the decision were clear. To the president, the North Vietnamese were not interested in the peace table. He had tested the option of peace negotiations and found it wanting. He now turned to his only remaining option, increased American ground combat power in the South.

The fifth decision for war came in late July 1965, one that George Herring has called "the closest thing to a formal decision for war in Vietnam."[27] The internal debate leading to President Johnson's decision of 28 July 1965 to deploy the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) plus other support troops to Vietnam has been extensively studied, thanks to *The Pentagon Papers* and a remarkable collection of National Security Council papers entitled "Troop Deployment of U.S. Forces" at the Johnson Library.[28] For this analysis, only a few comments are important. The July decision was based upon recommendations submitted to the president by McNamara after the Honolulu meetings of late April 1965 and, even more important, upon a new estimate submitted by General Westmoreland which dramatically revised upwards his March 1965 requirements for American ground forces because of declining South Vietnamese battlefield strength. He now concluded that "the South Vietnamese Armed Forces cannot stand up to [North Vietnamese reinforcements and a Viet Cong offensive] . . . without substantial U.S. combat support on the ground."[29] This report played to McNamara's earlier warning about a "spectacular defeat." Despite George Ball's protestation, the option of withdrawal was not seriously considered. The sheer inertia created by the earlier decisions proved overwhelming.

The July decisions to increase troop deployments were keyed to the numbers recommended by McNamara in April. In the midst of the July debates, the president had sent McNamara to Vietnam for a final assessment. The secretary of defense had wired Westmoreland before his arrival that he wanted his "recommendations for forces to year's end and beyond," thus indicating that Washington's interest

now went beyond 1965.[30] Westmoreland did just that, expanding his earlier March request, though, as he later candidly admitted, "it was virtually impossible to provide the Secretary with a meaningful figure."[31]

The significance of the July decisions was vast. The massive application of American ground combat power was now the key. ROLLING THUNDER, though strengthened, became secondary. Secondly, with the exception of calling up the reserves, President Johnson accepted McNamara's recommendations of quantitative numbers rather than military strategy. Thus the decision for war was based upon numbers, not strategy. As the senior MACV planner later observed, "the history of the buildup shows that each decision was made in Washington, not on the premise of some very persuasive message or analysis that anyone made but almost everytime something bad happened, we'd get more troops."[32] The fifth decision for war thus was a presidential one made in Washington with his supporting cast playing to the established theme.[33]

III

Almost without exception, those studying the decisions for war in 1965 have centered their analyses upon the 28 July 1965 decision, using the president's press announcement as a benchmark and then focusing upon the internal debate leading to that decision.[34] By concentrating on the substance of these debates and viewing the decision as the final step in American involvement, they have overlooked two unresolved issues—the strategy for the ground war and the future role to be played by Washington. Answers to these vital questions came in three decisions made during the next six months.

A reason that historians have not studied the post-July period closely is because the president appeared to turn his attention away from the conflict to other matters of state. As American troops began to arrive in Vietnam, the president began to receive optimistic weekly assessments from his new envoy to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge. Indeed, by late August, McGeorge Bundy was summarizing these for Johnson as "things go well in Vietnam [and] . . . this thing may end *without* formal negotiations."[35]

General Westmoreland felt otherwise. Lacking plans to accommodate and employ the ground troops that had begun to arrive, he

now turned his attention to military strategy. For McNamara's July visit, he had formulated a three-phased "concept of operations": Phase One, "'to halt the losing trend' by the end of 1965"; Phase Two, "During the first half of 1966 to take the offensive with American and Allied forces in 'high priority areas'"; and Phase Three, to defeat the enemy and destroy his base areas "during a period of a year to a year and a half following Phase Two."[36] This was not a strategy, but rather a series of goals. More significantly, these goals mirrored the vague outline of strategy contained in the two-year timetable discussed by McNamara and then proposed to the president after the Honolulu Conference of April 1965. Within the context of the subtle shift from how to stop losing the war to how to win it and in emphasis from convincing the North Vietnamese to withdraw support to defeating the enemy in detail, Westmoreland's planners quickly realized that an enclave strategy would not suffice. American troops would have to engage and defeat the enemy, a force that now included regular North Vietnamese troops.[37]

In a series of conferences during the fall of 1965 held in Honolulu, planners from Washington, Hawaii, and Saigon quickly realized the significance of the president's decision not to mobilize the reserves. Likewise, they saw that the 175,000 troop strength approved by the president did not accurately reflect logistical requirements. By October, they had concluded that "logistical support would become submarginal and sustained combat operations could not be conducted."[38] The original 175,000 figure was based upon a defensive enclave strategy by U.S. ground troops, and Westmoreland's strategy now envisioned offensive action by U.S. ground troops against the enemy, thus requiring additional combat forces.[39] To make things worse, General Westmoreland reported in November to Washington that "the VC/PAVN buildup rate is predicted to be double that of the U.S. forces" and now requested 48,000 more troops just to prevent further regression.[40]

McNamara again hurried off to Saigon, having earlier alerted the president to Westmoreland's increased requests for U.S. ground troops and suggesting that "no announcement be made this time of the decision."[41] After talks with MACV officials, the secretary of defense recommended to the president additional troop deployments, raising the total number of maneuver battalions to seventy-four and overall troop strength to 400,000 by the end of 1966. He warned of the possible requests for an additional 200,000 in 1967.[42]

This recommendation by McNamara, the sixth decision for war, followed the pattern that he had established in his April recommendations, of framing requests for more U.S. combat troops in terms of absolute numbers rather than strategic goals and justifying this by dismal projections for a prolonged war received from Vietnam. We have no evidence to date as to what the president's reaction at the time was; neither does the president provide any insight in his own memoirs.[43] However, we do know that CIA assessments for the president on the enemy buildup confirmed the gloomy MACV views.[44] He apparently decided not to act on the recommendations at the time, perhaps to retain flexibility. As with his earlier "non-decision," this merely encouraged his planners to continue their charted course.

A plausible reason for this was the seventh decision for war, the presidential determination to try another bombing pause in hopes of initiating peace negotiations. There had been another secret attempt, this time in Paris, but that had again failed.[45] In his memoirs, Johnson credits the idea for the pause to McNamara in the context of his recommendations for additional troop deployments. The president's own recollection was "one of deep skepticism."[46] However, available sources indicated that this had been an active consideration at the presidential level since early fall.[47] Regardless of whose idea it was or when the president decided to try another bombing pause, it was an important decision. Unlike his May decision for a bombing pause, this was widely known by his advisers.[48] His objectives were openly advertised throughout the world by presidential envoys. And Hanoi was given ample time to respond. In the midst of this, there was another secretive peace contact, this time in Rangoon, which again failed and only again emphasized the countries' differences.[49]

Pressure from his senior military advisers to call off the pause grew, and on 31 January 1966 Johnson decided to resume bombing of North Vietnam.[50] The lessons of this bombing pause decision were important. The president had once again tested the prospects for negotiations and, in his own words, "the net result . . . was zero, indeed less than zero because the enemy used the pause to strengthen his position."[51] CIA intelligence confirmed that the enemy had used the period to improve its own military posture in the South.[52] And in Saigon, where opinion had always been strongly opposed to the bombing pause, its end reemphasized the importance of the ground war. As one senior MACV planner later put it, "after the bombing pause failed, there was no doubt in our minds that we had to stick it

to the VC and North Vietnamese. This was out and out war!"[53] The "nose of the camel" that first appeared in March, grew to a neck in May, showed its first hump in July, and was fully in the tent by early 1966. It was now a question of what to do with the beast before he knocked the tent down.

The eighth and final decision for war followed swiftly—the decision for a summit meeting at Honolulu in early February 1966. The president followed another hunch and gave little advance warning to participants including his major advisers. General Westmoreland's diary for the month of January makes no mention of any MACV preparations.[54] He recalled only being prepared to present further troop deployment recommendations.[55] According to one NSC staffer, the president thought "that he'd been led down the garden path by doves on the bombing pause. Then he dreamed up the Honolulu Conference."[56]

Presidential personal disappointment over the bombing pause was not the only reason for the Honolulu Conference. In his State of the Union address on 12 January 1966, he had dwelt heavily on what he dubbed, "the other war," the South Vietnamese pacification program. He had sent the director of AID, David Bell, to Vietnam in early January, and Bell's report called for new high priority to this effort. Secretary of State Dean Rusk had visited Vietnam in mid-January and also returned recommending increased emphasis to the nonmilitary aspects of the war. Simultaneously with the decision to resume bombing, White House Adviser Jack Valenti suggested a trip to Honolulu to meet with Vietnamese leaders and General Westmoreland and to emphasize the political, economic, and social problems of the war.[57]

Johnson announced his decision for the conference on 4 February. The Saigon leaders agreed to the meeting on the 5th. The next day, the 6th, the conference began. Given the lack of lead time, participants had no time to prepare well-formulated positions. According to one observer, "the president used the technique of listening very long and hard."[58] But the emphasis of the meeting clearly was on this new dimension, the "other war." At the final session, the subject of military coordination arose. He frankly stated, "I want to put it off as long as I can, having to make these crucial decisions."[59]

The decisions made at Honolulu proved important ones to the future conduct of the war. The president confirmed support of the South Vietnamese government, though it was chafing from internal dissent and under attack from abroad. He broadened American

involvement in the war now to include social, economic, and political goals. He avoided coordination of military strategic goals with goals of the "other war" and passed on the question of further troop deployments. Thus he continued the strategy of mere numbers and vague objectives.

In this vacuum, some military guidance was forthcoming at Honolulu, in the form of a memorandum from McNamara and Rusk to Westmoreland. But even here strategy was defined in terms of goals: percentage goals in denying enemy base areas and percentage goals in securing populated areas, high-priority pacification areas. Military operations were to destroy enemy forces at a rate higher than enemy input.[60]

The final decision for war in February 1966 did several things. In both Washington and Saigon, it legitimized the concept of pacification as a major objective of American participation in the war, but with little forethought that would come back to haunt many. It continued to define military strategy in terms of quantified goals, not the result of detailed analysis, again a nightmare for the future. And lastly, it confirmed the trend of decisions since January of the previous year, that they were made by the president himself in lonely style and with lofty goals. In the end, this would humble the man.

IV

From an analytical perspective, these eight decisions for war indicate several very obvious points with respect to the future conduct of the war. Six of the eight were made in Washington and by the president, a trend that was to continue throughout the war. In each decision, the employment of American ground combat power was important. Sometimes this was only implicit, as during the bombing pauses where the viability of air power to force peace negotiations was being tested; yet the next option of escalation of the ground war was always an unmentioned component of the overall package. At other times, the role of American ground forces was more explicit, as with the decisions recommending or approving troop deployments where the clear message was the increased application of American ground power.

A trend was established by these decisions resulting in the perception, at least from Washington, that the best solution of the Vietnam problem was escalation of the ground war through the use of American ground combat troops. The decisions for the increased use of American ground power were made in the context of "the more, the better," and one that featured very little backward introspection. Curiously, presidential advisers and military planners never seemed to be aware of their steps towards war. Rather they operated with an almost Whiggish view of history, having little doubts about the inevitable victory. The question never seemed to be whether or not there would be success, but rather how this success could be achieved. In the end, the "how" was left largely to military planners in Saigon. At first it was how to stop losing; then it was how to start winning.

All eight decisions viewed within an overall context indicate a lack of strong direction from the national level in the search for the "how" and a viable strategy. The president gave little help here by constantly testing air power to force negotiations. McNamara and other top aides could only offer a strategy "to deny victory." Westmoreland and his MACV planners devised some time-phased goals. In reality what emerged was the methodical provision of facts and statistics from Vietnam to support concepts and plans from Washington. Thus the decisions really had no relation to a strategy. Col. Harry Summers in his book, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context,* has criticized the military for not having a viable strategy.[61] Indeed it would appear that this view may have a wider application. A precise strategy was never developed in Washington largely because the president sought flexibility. He thus sacrificed precision.

In addition, presidential desire for flexibility led him to postpone decisions. Recommendations from his subordinates—which, after all, are decisions at that level—for troop deployment in April and during fall of 1965 became decisions by default. In both instances, the president did not act for a substantive period of time, and the military planners continued to operate on their own premise, the necessity for American escalation of the ground war. General Johnson's visit to Saigon in March and Secretary McNamara's open-ended request to General Westmoreland in July encouraged this attitude. Never once did the president indicate that this premise was wrong. He again sacrificed precision.

Rigor was also sacrificed. Sadly lacking in all eight major decisions was any substantive consideration in Washington, Hawaii, or

Saigon of other strategies, withdrawal or "status quo." George Ball's protestations at the presidential level reflect only a "devil's advocate" role at best and a "court jester" function at worst. The compelling reason against withdrawal cited in Washington was the internal consequences for the United States of a possible defeat of South Vietnam. Neither did that other option of "status quo"—holding what you've got and doing the best you can—get much of an airing in Washington. There is some evidence that this course of action was considered by military planners during routine staff procedures and actually suggested by Ambassador Taylor. Still neither option got its fair day in court. Though there clearly were strategic doubts by many, to include the senior leadership in Vietnam, the alternatives never seemed to reach the top.[62] In the absence of viable strategic options, the eight decisions made in 1965 and 1966 established a trend that would not be altered until the rejection of General Westmoreland's request for additional troops after Tet 1968.

The decisions for war in this period were lonely ones made by one man, the president. Some of his closest advisers have sought to temper this judgment citing their own poor advice. U. Alexis Johnson said in 1969 that "I don't think we served the President well," while NSC staffer Benjamin Read observed in the same year that "I don't recall any profound prophecies on the part of the military or civilian advisers . . . No one was looking ahead much beyond the end of their own noses."[63] But this was by conscious personal design. Much like his admired predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson constructed a bureaucratic advisory system that gave him the information that he wanted to hear, that substantiated his own inclinations. At times, he relied upon his National Security Council system for advice or approval, as in February and July 1965. But he was not above acting purely on his own hunches as he demonstrated in May 1965 and February 1966. At other times, he would solicit recommendations and then leave them in abeyance as in April and September-November. One can only conclude that he doubted not only his own direction, but also that of his advisers. Perhaps symbolically, his National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, resigned shortly after the Honolulu Conference, but his strength lay in distilling recommendations, not in making them.[64] The real role of his secretary of defense is still not clear because of his refusal to discuss in any substance Vietnam decisions. Much like another predecessor, Harry Truman, Johnson was forced on the presidential scene with little background in foreign or military

affairs. He felt ill at ease among the Foggy Bottom elites and the Pentagon professionals. Consequently, he turned to himself for counsel, often sending misleading and probably unintended signals to his advisers.

In summary, the cumulative effect of these eight decisions was an open-ended commitment of American ground troops to an escalating war in Vietnam, with goals defined in quantitative terms rather than strategic intents. These decisions were made in Washington with little or no thought to an overall strategy, thus ceding that initiative to Saigon. They were made in quantitative terms and often based upon personal hunches, thus depreciating the value of judicious study. And they were made by one man whose own domestic priorities altered his own perceptions, thus skewing objective decision making. They set dangerous precedents for the future conduct of the war.

NOTES

I am indebted to my colleagues at the U.S. Army Center of Military History for their helpful comments and suggestions, particularly Vincent H. Demma, Jr., Robert L. Frank, Robert K. Griffith, Jr., and Morris J. MacGregor, Jr. The views expressed in this paper are mine alone, however, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Army, the U.S. Army Center of Military History, or any other U.S. government department or agency.

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26. Ball, *Past*, p. 404.

27. Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 142.

28. Deployment of Major U.S. Forces to Vietnam, Jul 65, National Security Council Histories, NSF, LBJL. The best treatment of this debate is Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), which is based extensively on the cited NSC history.

29. Westmoreland to Sharp, 14 Jun 64, in Porter, *Vietnam Documents*, pp. 378–82.

30. Sec Def to Am Emb, Saigon, Deftel 5319, 7 Jul 65, NSF, LBJL.

31. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 142.

32. General William E. DePuy Oral History, p. V–19, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

33. Recent research at the U.S. Army Center of Military History on the July deployment decision has revealed that the president made this decision several weeks before announcing it and passed this word to McNamara via Cyrus Vance while the secretary of defense was still in Saigon. See CMH files.

34. See in particular, Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 108–44; Gelb and Betts, *Irony of Vietnam*, pp. 130–43; and Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983), pp. 422–26.

35. Reports are found in box 4, MFP, Aides file, NSF, LBJL. Cited memo is Mr. President, 31 Aug 65, #6, in ibid. Also see Mr. President, 15 Sep 65, #53, ibid., "Another extraordinary optimistic report from Lodge."

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Commentary

Walter LaFeber

These three papers, all interesting and provocative, complement one another in that the Herring and Parmet analyses provide the historical background for Dr. Cochran's concise examination of the 1965–1966 decision making. All tend toward a "rational actor" view of that decision making; that is, the focus is on the president and his immediate advisers. John Foster Dulles plays a pivotal role in the mid-1950s, Dean Rusk a less important role a decade later perhaps because of his own personality, perhaps because of the way different presidents use different secretaries of state, perhaps because of the post-1961 change in the working of the National Security Council apparatus. In that regard, little attention is given to the military or civilian policy debates that percolated up from the bureaucracy and shaped the alternatives from which the president chose.

Dr. Cochran goes the farthest in elaborating a rational actor model by noting that six of the eight key decisions discussed in the paper "were made in Washington and by the president, a trend that was to continue throughout the war." His paper goes on to make the interesting point that like "his admired predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson constructed a bureaucratic advisory system that gave him the information he wanted to hear, that substantiated his own inclinations." In this sense, Dr. Cochran suggests that the system did not really work because the president would not allow it to work properly. George Ball was tolerated after February 1965, but there was no dissent where it really counted: at the top of the Pentagon and the president's immediate White House circle.

A focus on the bureaucratic engine room that moved the policy along in the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and especially Johnson administrations is absent from these papers, perhaps necessarily so given their brevity. Such an analysis will have to be a complex, detailed discussion, to say the least, and the most interesting part of that

story—the debate within the Pentagon and between the Pentagon, the NSC, and the military in Vietnam—may well become one of the most important contributions made by the U.S. Army in Vietnam series. When we can concentrate on understanding that story we shall probably modify our present attention on presidential decision making and debate whether he was not as much the captive as the captor of his own civilian bureaucracy, especially after February 1965.

This important bureaucratic dimension of the debate should be emphasized, however, only with the further hope that when such an analysis occurs it will not become so bogged down by an infatuation with tracing out labyrinthine organizational byways—an infatuation not unknown in parts of academe—that the larger policy map, the broad boundaries within which the debate had to be waged, is lost. In this regard all three papers begin to raise fundamental questions about the contradictions in American policy as early as 1953–1954 that become millstones around the policy a decade later. The Herring paper is outspoken in this regard: The Geneva Conference of 1954 did not so much clarify or, certainly, lessen the contradictions in U.S. policy as sharpen and worsen the contradictions until, like a broken compass, they led the United States into the policy quagmire of the mid-1960s. If the Herring-Parmet arguments are correct, then no "viable strategy," to use Dr. Cochran's term, was possible except possibly one of withdrawal. If the first two papers are accurate, and if their implications are correctly understood, then we must rephrase Dr. Cochran's central conclusion that the "presidential desire for flexibility led him to postpone decisions," to the conclusion that any postponement of decisions was due to the administration's understandable inability to reconcile the irreconcilable—to impose a supposedly responsible government on South Vietnam, to base policy in part on supposed representative elections in a situation where only "demonstration elections" were possible, to be more nationalistic than the North Vietnamese themselves, to remedy the problem of French colonialism by simply having Americans replace the French, to resolve Chinese involvement by not dealing politically or militarily with the Chinese. It all resembled Franklin D. Roosevelt's continual postponement of political decisions during World War II when he could not reconcile his own objectives with Stalin's in Europe. Unable to reconcile opposites, FDR stalled, then lost. Why U.S. officials made this mistake on the most fundamental of policy decisions twice in one generation probably has something to do with the officials'

optimistic belief in the power of the American example and the example of American power. John F. Kennedy, according to Dr. Parmet's quote from Theodore Sorensen's oral history interview, was no exception, despite the often-told story of how Kennedy planned to pull out of Vietnam after the 1964 elections. The Herring paper notes how some observers even saw a "'silver lining' amidst the dark clouds" of the Geneva settlement. Those observers, indeed the entire Vietnam experience until 1968, give point to a European's sardonic comment during these years that "in the long dark night of the American soul, it is always 7:00 in the morning." Since 1968 such remarks have been heard less frequently.

When the contradictions in U.S. policy are examined, when we change our search from a hunt for the reasons why an appropriate strategy was not devised to a hunt for the reasons why devising an appropriate strategy was so difficult, we shall probably begin to understand the problem, and will do so especially as we enlarge the context of our analysis. Such an enlargement requires not only going more deeply into the bureaucracy, but more broadly into the larger world arena. Two parts of this search in the wider international framework are suggested in the papers.

The first involves an understanding that a major reason for the initial United States appearance in Southeast Asia during 1949–1950 was not merely a concern for bilateral U.S.-Vietnam relations, or only a concern for U.S.-French relations, but a regional approach that revolved around rebuilding Japan and, particularly, keeping the Japanese away from Communist China by keeping Southeast Asia open for Japan's interests. Dulles repeatedly placed Vietnam within this regional context between 1950 and 1953, and as the Parmet paper indicates, the Japan factor in U.S. policy reappeared after 1953. One contradiction in this approach appeared relatively late—in 1964–1966, when it became clear that Japan would not go along with Washington's requests for increased military aid to Southeast Asia, and that Tokyo officials had their own agenda for dealing with the region. From the time of that realization in the mid-1960s—and it does seem in retrospect that 1965–1966 is a turning point in U.S.-Japanese postwar relations—the ties between the two countries declined until they reached their nadir in the early 1970s. A policy built on a regional approach thus lost its cornerstone, Japan, about the time the Johnson administration began its major military escalation.

A second way to understand the contradictions that made impossible a coherent strategy is to extend the search more fully to the role

of China. The PRC naturally appears in these papers when the Geneva discussions are analyzed, but it tends to disappear when the three papers move into the post-1961 years. It may be, however, that Walter Lippmann's description of the Bolshevik specter at Versailles in 1919 applies as well to United States policy discussions in the 1960s: China, like the Bolshevik, "was the huge black cloud that overhung every discussion." The China factor may be a (and perhaps the) major reason why President Johnson failed at this time to find a "coherent strategy." As the papers note, the PRC's intervention in Korea was a vivid memory, but in late 1965, just as U.S. officials were making the fifth, sixth, and seventh pivotal decisions analyzed in the Cochran paper, the Chinese danger became more than just a memory. According to Allen Whiting (who was in 1965–1966 the director of the Office of Research and Analysis–Far East in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research) the PRC began moving 50,000 Chinese troops into North Vietnam in September 1965 and completed the operation by the spring of 1966. They remained in North Vietnam until Johnson deescalated the bombing of the North in March 1968. The only change of any significance in their makeup occurred in 1967 when Johnson stepped up bombing on Hanoi and Haiphong; at that point, the number of Chinese antiaircraft divisions went up from two to three. The troops were moved into the North without public fanfare, but they marched using normal communications and wearing regular uniforms; they thus, in Whiting's view, greatly increased their credibility with U.S. intelligence. The Chinese forces, moreover, actually engaged in combat as they fired on United States planes and kept railroads functioning during bombings. They constructed a large base complex at Yen Bai whose purpose could be interpreted in several ways; Whiting and apparently other intelligence officers viewed it as a redoubt if the United States did invade the North. The Chinese Army was now pre-positioned for war, unlike 1950, and, in Whiting's words, "Their presence signaled to North Vietnamese and Americans alike a Chinese willingness to suffer casualties and risk retaliation in air attack or ground invasion." When Johnson repeatedly asked his advisers about possible Chinese response if the United States continued escalating, or when Secretary of Defense McNamara suggested to Senate critics that attacks on the Haiphong petroleum dumps could possibly "trigger Chinese intervention on the ground," an event "we wish to avoid," these officials were discussing restraints on United States policy that went beyond domestic politics.

As George Herring's work particularly notes, the China factor produced a special irony in American policy. As Dulles, Kennedy, and Johnson stressed, a major reason for United States commitment to Southeast Asia was to protect the region, especially to use Vietnam to contain Communist China. By 1971–1972 the Nixon administration was attempting to use Communist China to contain North Vietnam. The turn in this part of the policy apparently occurred in 1967, when, as the president's speech at San Antonio illustrated, the administration began to see that Chinese expansionism was not the danger. Another irony also appeared in this context. U.S. officials by now understood the extent of the Sino-Soviet break, but that very break acted as a restraint on American military policy because, as Llewellyn Thompson observed in 1966, if the United States struck into the North it might force the Soviets to reassess the break with China and move to try to repair the damage. Thompson even suggested that more extensive American bombing of the North might lead to such a reassessment. It is not difficult in restrospect to conclude that Thompson's fears were overstated, but it is difficult to discount the 50,000 Chinese troops in North Vietnam, the constant warnings from Chinese leaders about the dangers of United States military escalation in the North, or, overall, the importance of the China factor.

Other restraints also made the formulation of a coherent strategy difficult, but they are less important. One of them, the link between Johnson's quest for a Great Society at home and the containment of North Vietnam, began to appear in 1964–1965 as the two commitments began a shark-like struggle for the president's attention and budget lines. But the interaction played itself out beyond the scope of these papers—in 1967–1968 when resulting economic problems and political impact severely limited Johnson's policy alternatives. Historians who attempt to explain the administration's policy between 1964 and 1968 will, in my judgment, have to have as sure a grasp of the domestic arena as they do the international.

Overall these three papers do what they set out to do: provide at the start a large canvas so that we can understand the complex background—especially the Geneva Conference results—out of which the United States commitment in Vietnam emerged, then focus in by 1965 on the more precise decisions made by the president to escalate the military commitment. The major question is whether, if we are to understand that escalation and its denouement, we

should not keep the canvas much larger in terms of the bureaucratic decision making, regionalism, U.S.-China-Soviet relations, and the domestic factors.

Commentary

John Lewis Gaddis

The writing of history proceeds through a series of stages in which, as emotions subside, explanations become more elusive. Those who wrote about the Vietnam War while it was still going on had little difficulty in explaining why we were there, however much they may have disagreed with one another: It was, depending upon whom you read, to hold back the tide of international communism, maintain the credibility of our alliances, and preserve democratic institutions, or, alternatively, to defend the outer reaches of an overextended empire, safeguard critical raw materials, and provide continued gainful employment for the domestic military-industrial complex. There wasn't much ambiguity in these early accounts, but of course there wasn't much research either.

That research is now taking place, but its effect has been to qualify—and thus to blur—explanations. We know now, in great detail, how we got in, but we are much less clear as to why. Let me explain what I mean, using illustrations from the three papers presented here today. Herring argues persuasively that the United States failed to learn what it should have learned from the French experience in the First Indochina War: that American planners concentrated too much on the weaknesses of the French, and not enough upon strengths of the Viet Minh. Parmet, in contrast, documents a persistent pessimism on the part of American officials regarding Diem's ability to build a viable non-Communist nationalism in the South, an interpretation that would appear to indicate an all-too-vivid awareness of North Vietnamese capabilities. Cochran's paper demonstrates yet a third pattern, in which pessimism regarding prospects for success in Vietnam coexisted inexplicably with optimism that a direct and overwhelming American troop commitment would solve all problems. There are, in short, no clear and simple explanations.

Obviously we can't go back, now, to the sweeping but simple-minded generalizations that characterized earlier writings on this subject, nor should we seek to. But we need to guard as well against the tendency to lose sight of the larger picture; to become so fascinated by the process by which we became involved with, and fought, the Vietnam War, that we get out of touch with the larger historical framework in which that event took place. That framework can help us understand much that is otherwise puzzling about Vietnam; it is also essential to our understanding the lasting significance of that event. Let me give some examples of what I mean.

It is often said—indeed Parmet makes the point at the beginning of his paper—that Vietnam cannot be understood apart from the domestic and international context of the cold war. And yet it seems to me that these papers do not do all they could to develop that context. Take, for instance, the question of who the enemy was in Vietnam in the first place—was it international communism? Soviet or Chinese expansionism? North Vietnamese hegemonism? The papers are no more explicit on this point than policymakers were at the time, and yet the issue is of basic importance. How, for example, can one account for the persistence of the American commitment in Indochina over a quarter of a century when in fact Washington's overall perception of "threats" in Asia changed radically during that same period? In 1950, at the time the United States began giving military aid to the French in Indochina, belief in the Sino-Soviet monolith was alive and well. But surely, by 1960, no informed observer could still accept the view that the Soviet Union controlled all Communist movements in that part of the world. And surely, by 1970, few people could still regard China as the enemy she had once appeared to be, or North Vietnam as her subservient and dutiful puppet.

These were fundamental changes in Washington's understanding of the relationship between communism and nationalism in Asia, and yet, despite them, the proclaimed American interest in Vietnam remained unchanged—so much so that one is left with the impression that that interest may in fact have had little to do with perceived external threats at all, but rather reflected certain internal insecurities about ourselves. Notable among these was an obsession with "credibility": the belief that if we did not regularly and consistently demonstrate our willingness to defend even peripheral interests, all interests would be disastrously called into question.

We can see, today, how implausible that argument was. We have proven ourselves unable to defend interests once considered important, not just in Indochina, but in Afghanistan, Iran, Nicaragua, and Lebanon as well. And yet, can it be said today that our influence in the world at large is any less than it was, say, in 1965, or 1975, especially when balanced off against that of the Soviet Union? Influence in international relations—like success in the game of poker—derives from many things, not least of which is the ability to disengage from untenable positions when the costs of defending them exceed their value. Or, to quote Kenny Rogers, "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." Historians of the future, I suspect, will find in Washington's disregard of this elementary principle one of the most revealing explanations of its involvement in Indochina.

This brings me to a second problem of interpretive framework, which has to do with the issue of continuity. The papers presented here imply a gradual but steadily evolving American commitment in Vietnam that extended inexorably from the Truman through the Johnson administrations—the implication is that once we started down the slippery slope, total immersion in the Big Muddy was the only conceivable outcome. Perhaps so, but I wonder if we shouldn't take into account the differences in the approaches of the respective administrations involved, and the possibility that these might have produced different outcomes.

The Truman administration, for example, viewed the Indochina question as much in European as in Asian terms: The original decision to send economic and military aid in the spring of 1950 was a departure from the administration's overall strategy of disengagement from the Asian mainland, and was made in large part to take pressure off the French so that they could play a more substantial role in NATO. Korea, of course, changed that set of priorities, but this ought not to obscure the possibility that if Indochina had been an independent state instead of a French colony, the initial American commitment there might never have been made.

The Eisenhower administration, conversely, was only too eager to ease the French out and to build an anti-Communist nationalist regime in the South, but it is important to note as well the limits of its involvement. We still do not know, as Herring and Parmet point out, how serious Eisenhower really was about the possibility of American military intervention in Indochina in 1954. But one thing we do know is that the president adamantly and consistently rejected

the idea of committing ground forces under the constraints that had obtained in Korea and that would again a decade hence under Johnson in Vietnam. There was no more important principle of strategy, for Eisenhower, than retention of the initiative—the ability to control the circumstances, nature, and duration of one's military efforts. The Truman limited war strategy in Korea, he believed, had unwisely left these decisions to the other side; that he himself made no such military commitment in Vietnam, it seems to me, was no accident.

Kennedy, in contrast, regarded the limited use of military power—especially unconventional military power—as an integral part of his "flexible response" strategy, and clearly welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate it in Indochina. He was far more optimistic than Eisenhower about the possibility of using the military as a precisely calibrated and keenly responsive instrument of national policy; he was also less concerned about the danger that such gradualism might relinquish the initiative to the other side. Whether Kennedy would have shifted from the advisory to the actual use of military force is, of course, impossible to say. What we can say is that there was nothing in the "flexible response" strategy to preclude that possibility.

Johnson, too, believed in the limited and precisely calibrated use of military force. What he lacked was the capacity to monitor performance and to make changes when it became apparent that the existing strategy was not working. The series of decisions Cochran traces in his paper documents this pattern all too clearly: The effect of each decision was deeper involvement, and yet each was made without convincing evidence that it would produce success. Would Kennedy have handled things the same way? Perhaps. But the skepticism toward military advice he had developed as a result of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis, together with his demonstrated willingness to dump Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, suggests that he might have deferred less readily than Johnson to recommendations to "press on" once it became apparent that escalation was not producing desired results.

What I'm suggesting, in all of this, is that there were outcroppings and toeholds along the slippery slope that could be grasped to retard or to halt one's descent, and that in fact different administrations proceeded down the slope at different rates, and did, at times, take advantage of these opportunities to pause along the way. The fact that we eventually sank into the morass nonetheless does not mean that that outcome was the only possible one.

This brings me to a third and final interpretive point. One critical element that helped to determine each administration's approach to the Vietnam dilemma was its perception of means available. It obviously makes a difference, in shaping military strategy, if one perceives oneself as operating with limited or unlimited resources. There were fundamental differences in the attitudes of postwar adminstrations on this point, and these had important effects in shaping their respective strategies in Indochina.

Both the Truman and the Eisenhower administrations viewed their options in Indochina as constrained by limited resources, though for different reasons. For Truman, it was the competing demands of war in Korea and rearmament in Western Europe; for Eisenhower, the belief that the national economy could not support indefinite military expenditures at levels necessary to sustain large conventional forces. Both administrations, as a result, relied upon economic and military assistance to local forces, and upon the deterrent threat of American air and naval power, to achieve their objectives there. Both rejected the more costly option of committing American ground troops.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations operated under no such constraints. Instead they made a point of proclaiming that the world's most powerful nation could easily afford to fight limited wars wherever necessary without cutting back on needed social and economic programs at home. There was a sense, as Johnson put it in 1964, "that it was not necessary to spare the horses."

These contrasting perceptions of resources available, it seems to me, had two important effects. The framework of stringency within which the Truman and the Eisenhower administrations operated with respect to Indochina induced a sense of caution and restraint. Options for escalation might be considered, or even threatened, but they were also critically evaluated and ultimately ruled out in favor of less costly alternatives. The framework of abundance within which the Kennedy and Johnson administrations operated produced a much less critical attitude toward escalation options. Even more important, it provided little incentive to reconsider ineffective strategies once their deficiencies had become apparent.

This last point, I think, is worth underlining. Reconsiderations, always, are a painful process. We all know the barriers bureaucracies are capable of throwing up to discourage them. These barriers are all the more formidable when bureaucracies can draw upon essentially unlimited budgets, for then the opportunity exists to implement all

options rather than to distinguish the ones likely to work from those that are not. Eisenhower understood this clearly enough: There was more than just old-fashioned fiscal conservatism in the tight budgetary leash he imposed upon the military. Kennedy and especially Johnson imposed no such restraints on the military in Vietnam. The idea, as Johnson said many times, was to give General Westmoreland all he needed "to do the job." As a result, the "job"—the objective—was never clearly defined in the first place, with results of which we are all painfully aware.

SECTION II

The Conduct of the War

Conduct of the Vietnam War: Strategic Factors, 1965–1968

Douglas Pike

This paper is a reexamination of the early years of "big unit" warfare in the Vietnam War, the mid-1960s.[1] It sets down in some detail the major military events of the period, adding to the existing account that which we have learned in postwar years.[2] Primarily it concerns itself with what might be called the strategic environment of the time. It is not a paper about military strategy as such, although it deals with the strategic thinking on both sides and with strategic analysis efforts (or lack of them). This is an important subject that has received little attention from historians to date. The initial strategic environment—at the onset of deep American involvement in Vietnam—shaped and conditioned war planning on both sides throughout the remainder of the war and, to a considerable extent, dictated its outcome.[3]

Historians love to periodize history, to chop it up into time frames. There is always something artificial about attempts to reduce the chaos of history by dividing and confining it, because in truth history is a single great river of events. However, periodization does contribute to the management of history writing and to making it more comprehensible. And unarguably there are landmark moments of history that do have seminal quality, later seen as a beginning/end and therefore worthy of special attention. The fivefold periodization employed here, in keeping with our interest in the strategic environment as viewed by Hanoi, reflects distinguishable changes in the basic Hanoi strategy. The five are: Early 1958–late 1960: Incipient revolutionary war period (preparatory); 1961–late 1964: Revolutionary guerrilla war period; early 1965–mid-1968: Regular force strategy period; late 1968–Easter 1972: Neo-revolutionary guerrilla war period; and summer 1972–end of war: High technology regular force strategy period.[4]

Our primary attention is paid to the third period, the regular force strategy period. It is not a time slice of exceptional significance, although certainly it was an important link connecting that which went before to everything that followed. It begins with the arrival of American ground troops in 1965 (the decision for which was taken in February 1965) and continues into 1966. It ends with the Communists' 1967–1968 winter-spring campaign.

The paper is divided into three parts following this introduction. First comes an examination of the conflicting strategic perceptions that existed early in the war, within each of the two camps and between the two camps. While such a survey might seem a digression, it is necessary to set down the variety of strategic concepts existing at the time so as to provide a base for the subsequent discussion, indeed even to make what follows intelligible. The second part discusses strategic thinking in terms of unfolding events, concentrating on the Communist side. Finally there is a discussion of U.S. perspective and the meaning to us in retrospective terms.

Perceptional Prisons

The Vietnam War from the earliest days, and increasingly after the U.S. fully committed itself to combat, was marked by an astounding range of interpretation of unfolding events and explanation of what each side was doing, and why it was doing it. This condition, of vast disparity in interpretation, continues to this day in the form of newly produced histories of the war. Much of this interpretation is permeated by stereotype, factual error, social myth, gross oversimplification, historical fictions, and hyperbolic exaggeration. One root cause undoubtedly is the sheer complexity of the war, exacerbated by the passions which it generated; another, in no small measure, is the debasement of language that characterizes much writing of history in the last half of this century.

Essentially, however, the great variation in interpretation was and is the result of differing perspectives held by the participants and onlookers. The problem was, and still is, an entrenched condition of competing perceptions.[5] These existed between the two contending camps and within each camp, particularly within the American camp.

During the war neither side perceived the conflict in general or in most details as did the other side. Neither viewed the other as it saw

itself. Neither at the beginning of the war took accurate measure of the other. Neither anticipated the other's major moves during the struggle or often assessed correctly the other's probable response to any given development, proposal, or other stimulus. Neither saw in advance the course the war would take, the magnitude it would assume, or its duration. Each clung tenaciously to its own orientation, unwilling or unable—even momentarily for the sake of assessment purposes—to alter its view.

The Vietnam War then was a prison of competing perceptions.[6] That fact, perhaps, is the main heritage of the war for us today.

These differing perceptions existed simultaneously on several levels. First there were the differing perceptions of the nature of the war itself—that is, how it was seen in broad overall terms. There were three such major perceptions in the early years and they can be fairly easily delineated:

—The war seen as a more or less orthodox limited-scale, small-size, Korean-type conflict. It was to be fought by the standard application of mass and movement—incremental increases in force with firepower being central to all—and adapted as necessary to local terrain and conditions. There could be no substitute for victory; bomb 'em back to the Stone Age if necessary because once you are in a war you either win or lose.

—The war seen as a revolutionary guerrilla war, meaning it was revolutionary and thus broader in scope than ordinary wars (seeking fundamental social change for instance); it was conducted by guerrillas, meaning different strategy and tactics employed and an enemy of differing mentality than regular military.[7] Some held this revolutionary guerrilla war as having a third characteristic, that it was imported from North Vietnam (or from China) while others asserted it was essentially indigenous. It was a war fought for territory, but also for population, for resources, for "hearts and minds," and one requiring external support.

—The war seen as something new in history. Generally termed People's War (although it had other names) and described as the product of Mao Tse-tung and Vo Nguyen Giap's experience (not original with them as much as the refinement and ultimate extension of a developmental process that had begun with Napoleon), it erased the line between military and civilian, between war and politics, between combatant and noncombatant. Its essence was a trinity of organization, mobilization, and motivation in the context of

protracted conflict. It was not revolutionary in the orthodox sense (being a strategy, not an ideology), could be fought with guerrillas or a regular army, and, in fact, resembled a small-scale war of maneuver.

The second cluster of perceptions had to do with the purposes of the war. Why was it being fought and what did each side expect to get out of it? This is more difficult to delineate because a larger and more complex group of perceptions was involved.

In terms of purpose, the war could be and was perceived on two levels. One level was the moral imperative. Both sides (or all sides) defined the war in moral terms:

— To preserve the right of self-determination and to establish the freedom of the South Vietnamese people. The war is seen here as a contest between the open and the closed society, between freedom and tyranny in which the U.S. has an obligation—as part of its global interest in and commitment to the cause of individual liberty—to make a contribution. Most in this group agreed that South Vietnam was not a democracy but argued that if it could remain non-Communist and be given peace, a representative government might emerge, whereas total loss of personal liberty is certain and irreversible when a country goes Communist. This perception was held by most South Vietnamese and, at least in the early years, by most Americans.

—To unite North and South Vietnam under the Communist banner. For the North Vietnamese and the southern Communists, unification was no mere political goal—it was a holy crusade. Indigenous southern Vietnamese within the NLF ranks interpreted unification as a federated arrangement with the North in which the NLF would hold a monopoly of political power in the South. Thus they perceived the moral purpose of war in terms of justice, economic opportunity, absence of foreign influence, and similar values. Some in the South and some outsiders (particularly the French) perceived Hanoi willing to accept a federated arrangement with the South, but, as events proved, for the Northerners unification meant amalgamation.

Beneath the level of perception of the purposes of the war in moral terms was a second level viewing the struggle less abstractly and geared to national interests. Here the division between the U.S. and Hanoi was fairly stark. The official American perception, shared by all administrations from Franklin Roosevelt onwards saw the preservation of a non-Communist South Vietnam as important if not vital to U.S. interests in the Pacific. This was the *realpolitik* basis for

U.S. involvement. Over the years, it was variously perceived as the Munich syndrome (stop aggression early or stop it later at a higher price); as the lesson learned in the Korean War (discourage Communist piecemeal detachment of free Asia); and still later, as the equilibrium thesis, the so-called ideological balance of power (that an equilibrium exists in Asia, that it is in the interest of all that no single ideological construct—not capitalism, not socialism, not neutralism—dominate the scene), which largely explains the presence in Vietnam of troops from Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea. The North Vietnamese obviously saw it in their national interest that Hanoi control all of Vietnam.

Depending on one's view of the nature and purposes of the war, the course of battle was also perceived variously. One view, apparent even in the 1966–1967 period but more prominent later, was the perception that the Communist forces could not be militarily defeated in Vietnam—using guerrilla tactics of being everywhere and nowhere, they provided few targets for the enemy's vaunted firepower; Communist forces were particularly effective against the South Vietnamese armed forces; and when the Communists chose to stand and fight, as in the 1968 Tet offensive, they won decisively, as Lyndon Johnson acknowledged by in effect resigning his presidency. This perception has continued on in a postwar form, which is that in a broader sense the war demonstrated the failure of mass weapons when ranged against the human spirit. Regardless of the massive firepower which the U.S. could muster, in the end it proved ineffective. In any event, the U.S. converted the war into a high-technology war (having taught the South Vietnamese to fight a style of combat so technically advanced it was beyond their capability) and then walked out, unable to guarantee the South Vietnamese defenders even adequate future logistical support.

Standing against this, as the most common competing perception, was the view of overwhelming American military prowess. The American armed forces lost no important battles (a record maintained throughout the war). The South Vietnamese Army, after training and equipping efforts were completed, was successful in suppressing the guerrilla forces, which is the main reason why the entire North Vietnamese Army eventually was dispatched to the South. The 1968 Tet offensive, whatever it might have done to Lyndon Johnson's career, was a major military victory for South Vietnam. In the postwar years this perception has said that it is inaccurate to portray use of mass weapons and firepower in Vietnam

in terms of totality. Use actually was highly restricted, especially in North Vietnam, where bombings and air strikes were almost entirely confined to the transportation and communication matrix. The one test of full use of mass weapons was the so-called 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi, which almost overnight forced a reversal of the Communist position at the Paris talks. Also, it is said that incremental buildup of U.S. force was an error, part of a broader mistake which was to try to win a defensive war. Rather the U.S. should have struck the North or prepared the South Vietnamese Army to do so.

Varied perceptions of the course of battle also extended to the war's outcome, if it was to be short of outright military victory or defeat, that is, some form of negotiated settlement. One prominent perception, widespread among influential Americans, was that the Communists always wanted and actively sought a negotiated settlement, through peace talks or by other means. Only U.S. and GVN intransigence kept the war going. The agreement of 1973 could have been reached years earlier. When the peace settlement finally was achieved it was at once sabotaged by the South Vietnamese government, aided and abetted by the U.S., all of which is part of the long history of negotiations in Indochina. In a similar manner, the 1954 Geneva Conference worked out a peaceful settlement, only to see it destroyed by the South Vietnamese and the Americans.

The main competing perception was that the Communist objective from the start of the war was unification of Vietnam under its banner. The Communists looked on negotiations with the single criterion: will it move us closer to unification? A South Vietnam which remained independent (or even one run by the Provisional Revolutionary Government [PRG]) obviously did not fulfill the objective. Hence, from the Hanoi standpoint there was little to negotiate because what it wanted the other side regarded as total surrender. Further, the 1973 Paris Agreement was not a peace treaty or a negotiated settlement, only a cease-fire arrangement and a poor one at that, for it left the North Vietnamese Army in the South and called for an unworkable power-sharing arrangement among the contending forces. As a matter of record, the 1954 Geneva Conference did not produce a master plan for Indochina. It merely extricated the French and swept all serious political decisions under the rug, thus becoming a major contributor to the subsequent advent of the Vietnam War.

Finally there were competing perceptions of the other side. Some Americans, including a few officials, held the perception of the Vietnamese Communists as basically honorable, uncorrupted, idealistic

people fighting a just cause. They also were nationalists. They were implacable in their devotion, certain of victory because they believed they monopolized virtue. In dealing with outsiders, as for example in negotiations with the U.S., they were forthright and scrupulous in adhering to any agreement reached. They were perhaps authoritarian, but enlightened and seldom bloody handed. Further, they embraced the principle of independence, fighting their own battles, self-contained, dependent on no outsiders.

Standing against this, and more commonly held, was the view that the North Vietnamese, in terms of personality and behavior, differed little from the South Vietnamese and if they appeared more attractive, this was simply ignorance on the part of the viewer. If their performance was more determined, it was because they were better mobilized. Corruption in the North was only of a different kind which did not make Northerners more virtuous. Dealing with the U.S., they often lied or dissembled. In fact, the history of the war from the Communist side was an unrelieved record of duplicity and deceit. Vietnamese Communists used terror judiciously and selectively, but such a rational approach makes it more rather than less of an atrocity. Hanoi might proclaim its independence, but there were no arms factories in North Vietnam and the Vietnamese Communists were totally dependent on their Soviet and Chinese allies for military hardware.

Within American decision-making circles the disparity of perceptions was not as great as in the general population, but still was great enough. In combing through the records and documentation of the war, one is struck by the self-contained, insular quality of perceptions of the war as held in Washington among major governmental elements—the Pentagon, White House, State Department, and Capitol Hill. In Saigon there was, of course, an enormous disparity of view between the Americans and their Vietnamese allies and to a considerable extent among the other allied forces in the war.

This general American condition of competing perceptions meant that the U.S. was deprived of a unity of purpose and of consensus on war policy that would have been possible given a common perception. The result was that we never got past the point of disputation on the nature of the enemy and his strategy—never got to the point where true strategic analysis was possible. Debate on strategy devolved to the technical level and assessment to how best to deal with the enemy at the tactical level. This was particularly true of the period under examination here, the years 1966–1967, in which

the U.S. concentrated on finding ways to integrate itself into the struggle, the means whereby it could translate its admitted military prowess—much of it measured in terms of thermonuclear strength—into something that had relevance for Vietnam. This became largely a technological exercise.

As the war dragged on, perceptions changed, of course, influenced by what might be called the temporal syndrome. Changing circumstances changed perceptions; mostly it polarized them and drove them to the outer limits.

The end of the war did not alter this condition appreciably. Most of the wartime perceptions remain and now appear in postwar writings, retrospective accounts, and particularly in memoirs. The task of sorting out these competing perceptions and establishing truth remains still ahead for historians of the war.

Strategic Environment

We now proceed to explore the history of the war during the years of Hanoi's regular force strategy.

As the year 1965 dawned, the ruling Politburo in Hanoi made the assessment that victory in the South was very close, perhaps only weeks away. The U.S. announcement the following month—that it was sending ground troops to Vietnam and inaugurating air strikes in the North—did not alter this assessment at first. The Politburo reasoned that the American decision had come too late, that the rot in South Vietnam was too far gone and that as the North Vietnamese slogan of the moment put it: "The greater the American intervention, the greater the American defeat." It was not an unrealistic assessment.

Yet victory did not come in the next few weeks, and why this is so remains something of a mystery. February 1965 saw the Communists in Vietnam at the gates of victory. Neither the government forces of South Vietnam nor the U.S. forces were able in those first months to alter the hard strategic situation faced in South Vietnam; logically the PLAF should have been victorious. America's major contribution to the war in the spring of 1965 was to launch air strikes against North Vietnam's transportation/communication matrix, but this action can hardly be credited with preventing defeat of the Republic of Vietnam. U.S. efforts in the South meantime were largely confined to the desperate task of quick military buildup.

Some military hardware, most importantly helicopters, began arriving in mid-year, but the full flow through the pipeline did not come until the following year. American combat troops arrived in significant numbers only late in 1965, although by the end of the year their numbers had reached 183,000 as opposed to 23,000 at the end of 1964.

In the field, PLAF forces had been decimating ARVN battalions one after the other, and by early 1965 few reserve battalions were left. Had General Giap continued to press the war with the strategy he employed before the arrival of American ground troops he might well have triggered the kind of total confusion and collapse that marked ARVN at the end of the war, with the result that the war would have been over sometime in early 1965 before American forces could arrive in sufficient numbers to stem the tide. Instead, the ever-cautious Giap cut back his campaign so as to reassess the changed scene and devise a new strategy to deal with the Americans.

The change of strategy, however, was not due simply to the fact of the arriving Americans. Another major reason for the switch from revolutionary guerrilla war to regular force strategy was Hanoi politics in which various military doctrines served as political weapons; there was a particularly acute and long-lasting struggle between Le Duan and the big-unit war strategists versus Truong Chinh and the advocates of protracted conflict warfare. As became apparent later, moreover, strong doubts had developed among DRV and NLF military theoreticians as to whether actual victory could be achieved by revolutionary guerrilla war. That such warfare engendered social disruption there could be no dispute; but social disintegration in the South was not necessarily equatable with victory, defined as unification. Hence the belief grew that the time had come to shift to more orthodox warfare which would deliver the *coup de grace*. Finally, and most importantly, there was growing suspicion in the Politburo concerning the ultimate ambitions of indigenous NLF leaders, many of whom were regarded as "bourgeois" revolutionaries. The Politburo felt uncomfortable with a strategy which granted autonomy and freedom of action to unreliable Southerners. Thus with some urgency the order went out to select, train, and send south large units of PAVN. The motive behind this order was not military; rather, it was the Politburo's intention to have a completely loyal military force on the scene in the South when the end came. This force would ensure that the war was not won and the peace lost through NLF defection, i.e., through some settlement with the residual elements of the South

Vietnamese government and the Americans which would have the net effect, as in 1954, of betraying the cause of unification.

For these reasons and perhaps others, a new doctrine was devised, here termed regular force strategy. It developed slowly and in piecemeal fashion, and while it was on the drafting boards or being tested in the field from the spring of 1965 onwards and dominated PAVN-PLAF battlefield activities in 1966, it became fully operational only in the last half of 1967, with the 1967–1968 winter-spring campaign. Its chief architect was PAVN commander General Vo Nguyen Giap.[8]

Before discussing the strategy devised by General Giap for use against the Americans, it is necessary to put his thinking into context. His strategy rests on a broad set of military principles devised during the Viet Minh War (and owing much to Chinese thinking), then honed and developed in the Vietnam War. These principles are complex and difficult to deal with in abbreviated form. They are treated in full in the hundred page "Chapter V–Strategy" of my forthcoming work *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*. Very briefly, and in oversimplified terms, this basic PAVN military doctrine can be described thus: Its essence is *dau tranh* (struggle) of which there are two types: *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle: military action, violence programs) and *dau tranh chinh tri* (political struggle: politics with guns). PAVN cadres in conducting training use the metaphor of the enemy smashed by the hammer of armed struggle on the anvil of political struggle. The point is that *dau tranh* always is dualistic, the bedrock doctrine being that neither form of struggle can defeat the enemy alone. Only together—in the marriage of violence to politics—can victory be achieved. The political *dau tranh* consists of three *van* or action programs: *dan van* or action among the people; *dich van* or action among the enemy; *binh van* or action among the military. Collectively these three *van* programs comprise the entire matrix of political struggle, which, combined with armed struggle, encompasses the entire realm of warfare as the Vietnamese Communists seek to practice it. The doctrinal cement holding it all to together is called *khoi nghia* (general uprising), a social myth.

With this brief introduction to basic PAVN military science thinking, we are now ready to turn to General Giap's mid-1960s efforts to devise a strategic response to the arriving Americans. He faced an enemy with three advantages, all of them the result of the fact that American military technological development in the years since the end of the Viet Minh War had virtually revolutionized

warfare. What had worked against the French no longer would work against the Americans. The three advantages of the enemy were greater use of heavy long-range weapons (naval shelling); increased use of air power (B–52 raids); and greater mobility. These were purely military problems. The mass ranged against Giap's forces was superior both in terms of mass of men and mass of firepower. His enemy's mobility, provided chiefly by the ubiquitous helicopter—which in Vietnam revolutionized warfare—also was superior. The U.S./GVN had greater firepower—sheer ability to throw lead. American First Cavalry troops went into battle carrying 500 rounds of ammunition versus 30 to 50 shells by the PLAF-PAVN. Behind the Americans were recoilless rifles, artillery, air strikes, B–52s. Allied mobility permitted the sudden arrival of troops in areas previously valuable to Giap for their inaccessibility. It also permitted doubling up of troops; I talked to one U.S. Marine captain who, by accident, fought three skirmishes in three provinces between the rising and setting of one sun—he had been "tripled" by the helicopter.

Superior allied mass and movement had seriously concerned Giap since the arrival of the first U.S. ground troops, a concern that grew steadily more depressing from his viewpoint. Consider his situation in the summer of 1967. His troops in the South had not won a single battle of significance in nearly two years, when two years before they had been at the gates of victory. Now American firepower was eating deeply into PLAF/PAVN reserves of men and supplies. The desertion rate in the PLAF was doubling every six months. Logistics, always the ever-hungry monsters, were a nightmare as supplies were discovered and destroyed by the enemy. Morale was growing steadily worse, especially among the PLAF troops. The "liberation association" structure in the South was in disarray. The NLF financial system was under great stress. Most of all, the dogmas of the past were questioned openly by the true believers as being inadequate for the stormy present. A kind of doctrinal bankruptcy had developed and this was leading to a serious condition of cadre confusion and demoralization.

Giap's initial strategic response was twofold. First, he sought to match, as far as possible, allied mass of men and firepower. He sent troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail as fast as logistics permitted. And he vastly increased his firepower. The PAVN and PLAF in South Vietnam by 1966 were fighting with B–40 barrage rockets, 152-mm. artillery pieces, antiaircraft guns, flame throwers, tanks,

and a whole family of automatic weapons including the AK–47 assault rifle.

At the same time General Giap augmented North Vietnam's air defense system with the most advanced and sophisticated weapons the world has even seen in action, infinitely superior to anything employed by either side in World War II. The notion of a North Vietnam under American planes lying as helpless as Ethiopia in 1936 was as inaccurate as the picture of the Communist forces in South Vietnam armed only with crude homemade weapons or those captured from the enemy. In North and South Vietnam the Communist forces had the best weapons that the socialist camp could manufacture.

Essentially the regular force strategy devised and used in the 1965–1968 period held that victory—defined as unification—could best be achieved by altered forms of armed *dau tranh,* that is, military pressure applied intensively and quickly. This has been called the Quick Victory doctrine or Go-For-Broke strategy. In allocation of resources top priority goes to weaponry and logistic needs, to the fielding of the largest number of troops possible in the shortest time. Although new, doctrinally it was regarded as an extension of previous strategy of revolutionary guerrilla war. The chief difference between the two was that the ratio of armed to political *dau tranh* was reversed and the temporal dimension was redefined. Greater emphasis was put on armed struggle, and rather than a long war of attrition, proponents sought to compress events in time and press for a quicker outcome.

The most innovative elements of this strategy, and its essence, are what Giap calls "fighting methods" or basic tactics. There are two of these: the "coordinated fighting method" and the "independent fighting method."

The coordinated fighting method *(cach danh hop dong)* was the chief assignment of PAVN troops and PLAF main force units. It involved attacks by fairly large units against fairly important targets, but never so large an attack as to make the battle strategically decisive and always in favorable terrain. Ideally, the target would be in some wild, inaccessible region that would reduce the maneuverability of troops brought in as reinforcement. Also the initial assault was designed to bring the attackers under the umbrella of the no-strike zone over the installation, thus eliminating the danger from enemy air power. Then the target would be overrun and the attackers would vanish. Examples of coordinated fighting methods were the

PAVN-inaugurated battles at Con Thien (September–October 1967), Loc Ninh (October 1967) and Dak To (November 1967).

The independent fighting method *(cach danh doc lap)* based on "the principle of using a small number of troops to defeat a large number of troops who possess modern equipment," owes much to earlier guerrilla war tactics. It was normally the task of the PLAF regional and territorial guerrilla units, but on occasion could be assigned to PLAF main force or PAVN units. This tactic reduced to the minimum the enemy's superiority in manpower, firepower, and mobility. Its disadvantage was that in itself it could never become decisive. The classic example of the independent fighting method was the Tet offensive of 1968.

To achieve decisiveness, therefore, under regular force strategy, the two fighting methods were to be combined into what General Giap termed the comprehensive offensive. No comprehensive offensive as he envisioned it developed during the Vietnam War, since it could come only as a culmination of momentum generated by the independent and coordinated fighting methods. Sufficient momentum never developed.

The strategy's climax, and decisive test, came with the PAVN winter-spring campaign of 1967–1968. In all probability General Giap sold the campaign to the Politburo on the grounds that it would be decisive. Phase one of the campaign (October–December 1967) was marked by the coordinated fighting method battles noted above. DRV casualties were heavy in these—5,000 men were killed or permanently injured at Dak To alone—but the phase ended inconclusively. Phase two was marked by increased use of the independent fighting method. Its crescendo was the Tet offensive of 1968 in which thirty-two of South Vietnam's major population centers were attacked simultaneously by 70,000 of General Giap's best forces. While the Tet offensive had enormous psychological impact abroad, particularly in the United States where it was a major factor in President Lyndon Johnson's decision not to seek reelection, it was a disaster for General Giap. He had begun his winter-spring campaign with 195,000 men. At its conclusion he had lost (killed or permanently disabled) 85,000 of his best troops with virtually nothing militarily to show for it.

At this point the Politburo began a series of moves that had the net effect of changing grand strategy from the doctrine employed for the past three years to something resembling the pre-1965 days, here termed neo-revolutionary guerrilla war strategy. It too was destined

to fail and would then, once again, late in the war, give General Giap a second opportunity to return to the fray with a revised version of his regular force strategy.

Retrospective Meanings

Never between the two adversaries in the Vietnam War was there what could be called a transactional strategic great debate, and we were the poorer for it. The result was there never did emerge between the high command in Hanoi and its counterparts in the Pentagon and in Saigon any sort of a tacit agreement as to what exactly constituted the war between them, no consensus on a clear definition of victory and defeat. In this the Vietnam War was unique and quite unlike past wars—say, World War II in which the Allies and the Axis proceeded on the basis of a common assumption (either the Allies would succeed in invading and subduing Germany, Italy, and Japan in the name of unconditional surrender or would fall short of that goal). Both sides clearly understood the parameters of their struggle. In Vietnam strategic ambiguity existed from the earliest days and continued throughout the war.

The most important point to make about the U.S. in this respect probably is that we first committed ourselves to the war and then began to think about it comprehensively. The highest level leadership did not initially sit down and address in detailed and extended fashion its strategic position, did not discuss and analyze enemy strengths, weaknesses, and probable strategies, did not wrangle and argue and finally hammer out a fully articulated strategy.[9]

There was in this behavior a sense of enormous self-confidence, indeed a kind of unconscious arrogance on the part of the Americans. It was abundantly evident in Vietnam during the early period of the arriving American ground troops—particularly those American civilians who had been present in Vietnam in earlier years. It was manifested mainly toward ARVN, a syndrome of superior professionalism: step aside and let the big boys do it.

The second most important point to make in this respect is that we entered the war without fully appreciating the enemy's strategy. Worse, we never made a serious effort to correct this shortcoming. The highest leadership never devoted itself to systematically learning about Hanoi's strategic thinking and doctrine. Indeed there is not even today clear knowledge in the U.S. government as to what

exactly was the strategy employed by the Communist military forces in Vietnam.

We suffered from the worst kind of ignorance—what Aldous Huxley calls *vincible* ignorance: that which one does not know and realizes it, but does not regard as necessary to know. This vincible ignorance was worse in Washington than in Saigon, more common among civilians than military leaders, and at its worst in the White House under Lyndon Johnson.[10]

Much of this can be put down to the individual mindset of the principals involved—in the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department.

Of course there was expertise—individuals and governmental elements both in Washington and in Saigon, both military and civilian *apparat*—devoted to strategic analysis. Effort was mounted, as is noted below, but it failed, not because of ignorance (vincible or otherwise) but because it was so disparate and fragmented that no analytical consensus was ever possible. The villain in the piece thus was not individuals but the *system,* which was never able to address itself in a meaningful way to the enemy, to his thinking, to his leadership, to his strengths, weaknesses, and choices.

It is difficult to substantiate this charge in objective fashion because it is always hard to prove a negative. However, an examination of the documents of this period makes clear our sin of omission with respect to strategic analysis of the Vietnamese Communist war effort. No high-level permanent institution was created to analyze enemy strategic thinking—only ISA-level task forces, some defector interview programs by RAND in Vietnam, and a few ARPA studies.[11] No one, in or out of government, ever produced a history of PAVN, a PAVN guide, or any other full-scale study of PAVN and PLAF. No significant biographical studies of enemy leaders were done. We had 470,000 Americans in Vietnam at the height of the war, and one sociologist in the villages doing research on social organization. The number of analysts working on the Viet Cong (NLF) could be numbered on the fingers of one hand, and they started years after the organization was formed. One can search the voluminous *Pentagon Papers* in vain for extended discussion of the other side, any discussion at all. Unlike earlier wars in which research and analysis were both extensive and esoteric (Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,* or analysis of Hitler's astrological beliefs, for example), in Vietnam we allocated hardly any resources. Much tactical intelligence was generated that could have been exploited, but wasn't.

Work on order of battle generally was good; politics of the Politburo was hardly touched.

It was, it appears, a manifestation of unconscious arrogance. When a high-level official—such as Robert McNamara—wanted to know what Ho Chi Minh would think about a matter (prolonged heavy air strikes, for instance) he would interview himself, asking what *he* would think if *he* were Ho Chi Minh. Having answered the question, he would proceed on that basis, only later to discover that Ho Chi Minh, being Ho Chi Minh, had not shared his opinion (i.e., did not respond to the air strikes as assumed).

Nor was this shortcoming confined to the U.S. government. Equally scandalous, if not more so, was the total failure of the American academic community to contribute to knowledge and understanding of the enemy and his strategy. Scholars and academics energetically opposed the war, but did so in ignorance. With no basis of knowledge, their counsel was rooted in error; in the field their advice was dismissed, as it should have been, as worthless. During the Vietnam War, virtually nothing was produced by the American academic community on the strategic thinking of the Vietnamese Communists. There should have been a flood of such studies.

The reasons for this vincible ignorance are manifold. First and most obviously, we did not attend to Hanoi's strategic thinking in any serious analytical way because we saw no pressing requirement to do so. We did not know what General Giap thought and we didn't really care—we would call the tune. To the extent we did examine the matter, we did not think that General Giap and his high command possessed anything amounting to a full-scale strategy worthy of deep consideration. North Vietnamese military writings seemed only froth—hyperbolic verbiage with strange terms such as *dau tranh* (struggle) that were mere abstractions. We convinced ourselves that the enemy was all tactics, that there was no strategy there to analyze.

A second reason is that, at least during the period under examination here, we tended to believe (even though we insisted the opposite publicly) that Hanoi's involvement in the war in the South was confined largely to logistics. The war had a highly indigenous cast to it, and we assumed we were dealing with guerrilla mentality in which Hanoi's strategic thinking was only marginal. (One of the major postwar revelations has been just how extensive was Hanoi's involvement in strategic terms from the earliest days, extending back even into the mid-1950s.)

A third reason, self-imposed, was that we suffered from what might be called institutional compartmentalization. The enemy's strategy, by design, was total, a seamless web. It encompassed the entire range of military and nonmilitary action and was structured and directed as a single organ. We had no comparable institution (combining military and civilian elements) to deal with this opposing *apparat*. Our response was compartmentalized into orthodox military activities, diplomatic representation, manipulation of internal Vietnamese politics, and external mass communication efforts. Research and analysis were equally compartmentalized; our agencies independently analyzed the order of battle, world public opinion, political settlement efforts in Paris, U.S.-GVN relations, and the antiwar movement in the U.S. We met the enemy's single strategic assault with a clutch of uncoordinated strategic responses, in some instances with none at all. For the U.S., especially in its relations with the GVN, it was a problem of bureaucratic impasse. Much of the enemy's day-to-day activity, in consonance with his grand strategy, was what we considered nonmilitary and beyond the domain either of the U.S. military in Vietnam or ARVN. Presumably it would be met by some other institution—the U.S. embassy, AID, the CIA, GVN "nation-building" civil servants, or private Vietnamese institutions (such as trade unions, farm cooperatives, women's and youth organizations). The needed response, to use the parlance of the day, fell between the stools. The U.S./GVN had enormous difficulty in coping with this problem and never did solve it to the satisfaction of all. During the period under review here, 1965–1968, response was almost nonexistent. Not until later, with the advent of the CORDS concept, did any institutional mechanism at all exist to deal with the broadness of the enemy's strategy.

Finally we were deliberately misled, presented by the enemy with a strategy that was not what it seemed to be nor as officially portrayed. More correctly perhaps, we allowed ourselves to be misled; deception has been an integral part of all Vietnamese strategies for a thousand years. Hanoi worked long and hard during the war to camouflage its strategy, its nature, and its objective. This effort—intricately complex and of many dimensions—is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, it consisted of employing various communicational techniques to nullify the enemy's military, sociopolitical, and psychic strengths. It sought to debilitate the South Vietnamese war effort and to force the U.S. to impose upon itself military limitations. It sought to engender a crisis in perception in the enemy camp as a

means of confounding the enemy's strategic response. It was central to Vietnamese Communist strategy, both in the Viet Minh and Vietnam Wars.

This obfuscation of the nature and purpose of the war, on Hanoi's part, not only updated the long effective rule of divide and conquer, but also employed a judo principle and turned the weight of the enemy's philosophic system against him. It is a strategy that works best against a democracy of fair-minded people and least against barbarians or messianic fanatics. It agrees victory will go to the just because justice must triumph. But it does not claim that the enemy is *un*just in a way that tars all in the enemy camp. Rather, the enemy is an abstraction, consisting of the unjust and misled leadership, perhaps a few other selected individuals. Normal wartime polarization is denied. Again and again it asserts to the opposite camp, particularly to the vast civilian population at home, *we are not your enemy*. The enemy is the unjust person who wishes to pursue an unjust war and surely *you* are not among these. Hanoi stands not for victory but for justice. The struggle then becomes a test of virtue. The outsider, looking on, is presented, on the one hand, with the Communist's own idealized picture of himself (and denied objective inspection of the Communist camp); and on the other hand, he sees the errors, shortcomings, and follies of his own, very human side. Reality seldom stands a chance against image. The more distant the onlooker, or the less knowledge he has about the struggle (and such knowledge in the United States was generally close to nonexistent), the more apparently odious becomes the comparison.

Each side in every war in history, of course, has attempted to influence the thinking and morale of the other side or has sought external moral support. But until the Vietnam War this psychological dimension was considered adjunct. Earlier, as if by common agreement, it was acknowledged that victory would be decided by combat. The battle would be the payoff. The Vietnamese Communists were the first really to break with this idea that the ultimate test must be military. First dimly and then with increased clarity, they realized that it might be possible to achieve an *entire change of venue* and make the primary test take place *away from the battlefield*.

The strategy was not entirely successful in the sense of effecting a full change of venue. But it did succeed in subverting American war support at home, ruining much American diplomacy abroad, and delimiting and inhibiting American military response in Vietnam itself.

Finally, there is retrospective meaning. If further evidence is needed of our ignorance of Hanoi's grand strategy and the ambiguity of the outcome of the war, it is to be found in the perceived heritage of the war, the meaning that has come down to us, the lessons learned.

Here, once again, are a variety of perceptions. Some argue that a great global epidemic of violence was spawned by the Vietnam War, partly from the how-to-do-it *dau tranh* demonstrations by the Viet Cong of the success that could be achieved by these techniques. Unleashed is the notion that shooting, kneecapping, kidnapping, blackmail, armed robbery, anything is acceptable if it promises political change. Now such an ethic is almost taken for granted. This bodes ill for democracies. Personal freedom in a democracy is not a consequence of institutions, but an attitude of mind which respects the right of personal security for others. We now face the grim prospect that the price for defense against this political fanaticism must be loss of some of our own freedom.

A second perception of the meaning of the Vietnam War is that aggression pays, if it can be protracted. The genius of the Vietnamese Communist example is how to manipulate external perception by drawing events out in time, so that what is done is not seen as aggression but necessary social change. The Vietnamese Communists and others would agree to this statement but only in meaning, not the language used to describe it. Rather, they would say the meaning of the war was inducing great social progress, advancing the progressive forces and weakening the reactionaries; also that it demonstrated a powerful means for achieving still further victories for socialism. A concurrent meaning here is that a democracy probably cannot fight a protracted conflict. It can fight a quick war, even a dirty one, but not one that appears endless. A society facing a hostile force either internally or externally—a force sufficiently implacable to demonstrate its determination to prevail regardless of cost—will eventually surrender. There is enormous efficacy and potency in this fifty-year-war notion, if for no other reason than that no counterstrategy is known.

A third perception is that the war ruined the conduct of proper American foreign affairs. It poisoned the American world position in Asia, undercut American credibility with both friend and adversary. It generated a new force of isolationism in America. It eliminated the ability of the White House to deal with the world adequately, yet substituted no other mechanism.

A contrary perception holds that the war bought valuable time for non-Communist Asia—for instance, that Indonesia today would be Communist had it not been for the Vietnam War. This perception also holds that the war discredited the notion of revolutionary guerrilla war by stripping it of its romanticism, thus making it less appealing throughout the world.

Finally, there is the view that the Vietnam War had only limited meaning for the world and the future. It was a one-of-a-kind situation which will never develop again or repeat itself. Southern Africa, Central America, the insurgency in the Philippines bear no important parallel to Vietnam. It is a mistake to treat new or developing problems in terms of what was learned in Vietnam.

Hence we come full circle. The task of historians then is to determine what actually happened in the Vietnam War, and what is the true heritage for us today.

NOTES

1. Works consulted in the preparation for this paper include the writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap, principally *Big Victory, Great Task; The Military Art of People's War* and *Arm the Revolutionary Masses;* Gen. Van Tien Dung's *Our Great Spring Victory;* Gen. Tran Van Tra's *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theater, Vol. 5: Concluding the 30-Years War,* JPRS 82783, 2 February 1983 (Southeast Asia Report No. 1247); and *Vietnam: The Anti-U.S. Resistance War for National Salvation 1954–1975: Military Events* produced by the PAVN Publishing House (Hanoi) in 1980 and translated by JPRS 80968, 3 June 1982. Others are *Summons of the Trumpet* by David Richard Palmer; *Vietnam: A History* by Stanley Karnow; *Not With Guns Alone* by Denis Warner; *Tet* by Don Oberdorfer; *Strategy for Defeat* by U.S.G. Sharp; and *Strange War, Strange Strategy* by Lewis W. Walt.

2. In the last ten years there has been a flood of material out of Hanoi dealing with all phases of the early history of North Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist movement, and the war. See particularly the party journal *Tap Chi Cong San,* almost every issue of which contains articles that acknowledge what once was denied in Communist circles and debated outside of them concerning the conduct of the war, foreign relations, and the nature of the North Vietnamese armed forces.

3. This strategic environment is discussed in full in my forthcoming work, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam*.

4. For full detailing of these categories, see the Vietnam War entry in the comparative encyclopedia *Marxism, Communism and Western Society* (Bonn, 1972).

5. *Perception* in psychological terms exists on two levels. The first is to take cognizance of something, to "see" it. The second is a structuring process, the organizing

of phenomena into a single unified meaning, that is, a "way" of looking at something. Truth or error exist on the first level, termed *misperception,* but have little meaning on the second level, unless ignoring relevant information.

6. Another perceptional dimension is what might be called the parochial perception; that is, one's view of the war depended on where you were: in Vietnam or in the U.S.; if in the U.S., in Washington or elsewhere in the country; in college; or in Asia, Europe, or some other part of the world.

7. As a concept, this kind of war was largely unknown in America, and the description here may strike the reader as esoteric abstraction, due to lack of familiarity. The concept is real, vital, and entirely familiar to every Vietnamese Communist cadre, as well as to serious American students of the Vietnam War.

8. Outlined most clearly in General Giap's *Big Victory, Great Task*.

9. This is not to say that the other side had a very clear understanding of its enemy's concept of the nature of the war either, nor a clear understanding of the overall nature of the war. Rather, the Hanoi leadership had blind, implacable faith in its cause, to which it clung tenaciously. In other words, Hanoi officials did not see the course of the war in advance any more than anyone else did.

10. We had great capability on the battlefield, which came to obsess us. Indeed, one of the great traps in counterinsurgency warfare is the tendency to do what you are able to do and are prepared to do, rather than what needs to be done. Much U.S. activity in the Vietnam War was justified by the argument that we had the capability to accomplish it.

11. The first "roles and missions" task force was formed in August 1966; it was however a low-level effort rather than what it should have been, at least at the deputy undersecretary level. Operation BIG MACK circa 1968 was the first serious effort to gather data about the other side in a comprehensive manner. It was part of what was called the census grievance cadre system (which included the Phoenix program) and generated a good deal of valuable tactical intelligence but little strategic intelligence.

The Challenge of Counterinsurgency

Richard A. Hunt

During the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese, with American advice and financing, devised a succession of pacification programs to counteract the Viet Cong insurgency. Despite their various guises, these programs shared a common goal of providing sustained rural security for the Vietnamese people so that economic development programs could proceed without disruption. The term pacification can be viewed on one level as a strategy for bringing security and economic development to South Vietnam. On another level the term describes a number of specific programs carried out by South Vietnamese military forces and cadre teams to improve security and economic conditions. Pacification programs ran the gamut from police and intelligence work to advising farmers on how to raise pigs and grow rice. Consequently, a host of U.S. government agencies were involved in supporting the various elements of the pacification program during the war: the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the CIA, the Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Army. The roles of the Americans and the South Vietnamese, although related, remained distinct throughout the war. Vietnamese forces provided security, and the American government supplied arms and ammunition, helped develop training programs, and underwrote the costs. After the American support effort was unified under the single managership of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), in 1967, a step that made more funds, equipment, and advisers available for territorial security forces, pacification began to make headway only in late 1968 against the Communist insurgency. Improved American support and sustained rural security were necessary preconditions for gains in the

pacification program. The military defeat of Viet Cong forces during the Tet offensive of 1968 provided the opportunity, which the Americans and South Vietnamese exploited, to make gains by expanding the pacification program into previously contested areas.

This paper concentrates on two aspects and only two aspects of pacification: the requirement to provide sustained local security for the South Vietnamese and the organization of American support of the pacification program carried out by the Vietnamese. Owing to the limitations of space, other pacification-related topics of importance, such as economic development programs, refugee assistance, and specific military operations in support of pacification, are omitted. To develop my argument in detail, I have also been unable to acknowledge in this paper the significant contribution numerous American military and civilian officials made to the pacification program, contributions that did not generate publicity but that were essential to the operation of the program.

The nature of the fighting in Vietnam gave pacification a crucial role in the conflict. One former Defense Department analyst, Thomas Thayer, has characterized the struggle in Vietnam as a "War Without Fronts."[1] Unlike the two world wars and the Korean conflict, the opposing forces in Vietnam did not deploy in linear formations or operate in discrete areas. The Vietnam War was largely an atomized struggle of many small clashes, most of which were in or near rural settlements.

The objective of the war was political. The South Vietnamese fought the Viet Cong, politically and militarily, for control of the people of South Vietnam. The Americans and South Vietnamese thought of control mainly as the absence or expulsion of hostile forces, the presence of friendly ones, or the existence of a functioning local government loyal to Saigon. The Viet Cong concept of control encompassed a spectrum of possibilities from outright political domination in areas beyond the reach of Saigon's forces to the operation of shadow governments inside some villages the government considered contested or relatively secure. Viet Cong agents and sympathizers undermined the government's position in a number of ways—by killing or kidnapping officials, by betraying military plans and government programs, and by planting agents in South Vietnamese military units and offices. Under those conditions, the Viet Cong command found it unnecessary to station military forces in all the

hamlets it controlled or to assign soldiers to protect people. The VC concentrated military forces where their foe was vulnerable, namely the rural settlements. In contrast, the South Vietnamese found it imperative to provide sustained local security and to find a way of uncovering and disrupting the covert government run by the Viet Cong infrastructure, or risk Communist subversion or domination.

The goal was political, but American forces operated essentially as they had in earlier conventional wars. The introduction of American ground and air forces beginning in 1965 changed the complexion of the war. After 1965 a war of attrition fought by large American Army units was superimposed on the ongoing insurgency in Vietnam that continued until 1972 to be the centerpiece of the enemy's effort. Under attrition, American ground and air power was directed at nullifying the military strength of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. Attrition was not designed to achieve an outright military victory, nor to resolve the political issues of the war. It had two basic purposes: to prevent the military defeat of South Vietnam's forces; and to convince the Communists they could not win by diminishing their war-making capacity and making the costs of continuing the war prohibitive. Attrition's focus on wearing down the Viet Cong through conventional military operations meant that the underlying political issues of the war and the ongoing insurgency tended to be overlooked.

Washington's expenditure of funds for the war helps illustrate the strategic priorities of the Americans and the kind of war they actually fought. In fiscal year 1969, for example, (using data developed by Thayer and his colleagues) American ground, air, and naval actions in the Vietnam theater represented 82 percent of the costs. Expenditures for civil programs, including pacification, amounted to only 4 percent that year. The air war consumed the biggest share of the budget in fiscal year 1969, $9.5 billion or 47 percent of the total. At a cost of $6.1 billion, land forces took 30 percent of expenditures. Of the amount spent on ground combat, less than a billion dollars went to assist the territorial forces of South Vietnam—the Regional and Popular Forces—in fiscal year 1969. Even in fiscal year 1971, a period of less intense fighting and a changing mix of forces owing to the departure of American combat units, two-thirds of American outlays went to the main force war and the air interdiction campaign. Territorial forces and the police received a mere 2.5 percent of the funds that year. Clearly, in terms of the allocation of American

resources, the war of attrition through air and ground operations came first by a sizable margin. Pacification lagged far behind.[2] But expenditures for a war of attrition could not serve to advance the allied effort toward the goal of an independent South Vietnam as much as pacification did.

By 1967, some key members of the Johnson administration attacked the attrition strategy. Among others, Secretary of Defense McNamara and analysts in the Office of the Secretary of Defense concluded that attrition could not succeed in defeating the Communists. By their reasoning, despite heavy losses the enemy was willing and able to sustain heavy casualties into the foreseeable future. The system analysts concluded on the basis of an analysis of statistical data on casualties and the frequency of fighting that Communist forces to a great extent decided when and where to fight, controlled their own casualty rate, and thus kept losses at manageable levels. American and South Vietnamese military operations could not force them to fight or to quit fighting. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had no chance of defeating the allies by military force alone. The result was a stalemate on the battlefield, but continued government losses in the political war being fought in the villages of South Vietnam.

The Pattern of Enemy Operations

Enemy combat operations followed a pattern and were designed to wear down the internal security forces of South Vietnam. Heavy fighting occurred from February through June; there was a lull in July, with renewed combat in August and September and relatively low levels of activity until February. Most enemy actions were small in scale. Battalion-size attacks were a more serious military threat than small raids and political harassment, but they constituted only a small percentage (3.3) of all enemy engagements. When battalion-size attacks are examined in the context of the entire range of enemy actions—harassment by fire, indirect fire, political coercion, and terrorism—the enemy's unconventional style of warfare becomes unmistakable. Even in 1972, a year which saw unusually heavy conven-

tional fighting during the Easter offensive, ground assaults of all size units, a category that includes standoff attacks by indirect fire, amounted only to 21 percent of all enemy-initiated incidents. The preponderance of the enemy's effort throughout the war, as measured by the number of hostile actions (30,000–40,000 each year), was weighted in the direction of terrorism, sabotage, and attacks by indirect fire. These actions were often directed against civilians rather than military forces. As expected, 1968 witnessed the highest number of incidents, nearly 43,000 actions of all kinds. The large numbers, small size, and dispersed nature of enemy military activity indicated the enemy relied on insurgent tactics instead of conventional operations even in the year of the Tet offensive. The purpose of these tactics was to wear down the internal security forces of South Vietnam—its police, militia, and territorial forces providing population security.[3]

Casualty figures on friendly forces also support the contention that Communist strategy focused on the security forces of the Saigon government. With the exception of 1968, the Regional and Popular Forces providing security for the rural population had a higher combat death rate than the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) every year between 1967 and 1971. In 1968 the combat death rate for ARVN was 30 per 1,000 men compared to a rate of 29 per 1,000 for the RF/PF. When American forces began leaving South Vietnam in 1969, ARVN had to assume more of the burden of the main force war. Before that time many regular South Vietnamese Army battalions had the mission of supporting pacification and performed in a capacity similar to the RF/PF. The annual combat death rate for 1965–1972 was 1.8 percent for American soldiers, 2.3 percent ARVN, and 2.7 percent for the RF/PF, strongly suggesting it was more dangerous to serve in the territorial than the regular forces of the Americans or South Vietnamese.[4] The RF/PF also suffered the most combat deaths for the 1965–1972 period, 85,000 versus 75,000 for the ARVN. American combat deaths for those years came to approximately 45,000.[5] The higher casualty rates of the RF/PF indicate that the Communists consciously concentrated on attacking the relatively poorly armed and trained South Vietnamese forces that protected the villages. The Communists selected this target not just because it was vulnerable, but because their goal was to destroy Saigon's authority in the countryside and establish control over the rural population.

Failures in Pacification

If attrition had by 1967 produced little more than a stalemate on the battlefield, Saigon's attempts at pacification failed to stem the Viet Cong insurgency. Looking back to President Diem's agrovilles and strategic hamlets of the early sixties and the new life development, *Chien Thang*, and *Hop Tac* efforts of his successors is to review a record of failed pacification experiments sharing certain deficiencies. Those efforts were underfunded, inadequately supported by American and Vietnamese authorities, and never enjoyed the kind of sustained local security that they required for success. A serious defect of the agrovilles and strategic hamlets was the practice of relocating peasants into secure areas rather than moving government police and paramilitary forces to protect the villagers' homes. The programs of the early 1960s as well as the larger revolutionary development cadre program that began in 1966 depended on South Vietnamese forces (regulars, territorials, police, and paramilitary) to protect rural settlements and free government officials from military or political interference from the Viet Cong.

A fundamental shortcoming of the counterinsurgency effort of the late 1950s and early 1960s resulted from the American and South Vietnamese fixation on building up conventional forces while tending to neglect the forces responsible for protecting the villagers. In the late 1950s the United States perceived the threat to South Vietnam's security as primarily consisting of the sects that opposed Diem, remnants of the Viet Minh still in the South, and the regular forces of the North Vietnamese Army. Consequently, the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) emphasized the gathering of conventional military order-of-battle data on North Vietnam's army and did little to develop an intelligence capability to support counterinsurgency operations. The American intelligence effort neglected police type information or political intelligence on the Viet Cong organization at the level where South Vietnam's internal security forces confronted an emerging Viet Cong insurgency. MAAG's fixation upon the threat of overt invasion, one that was becoming less likely and immediate than insurgency, caused it to lavish aid on the regular army, supplying it with training and equipment appropriate for the task of halting an invasion, and molded the ARVN into the image of conventional U.S. forces. After 1956 ARVN withdrew from rural areas to reorganize and modernize under the tutelage of American advisers, leaving the poorly led and trained

Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps (CG/SDC), the predecessors of the RF/PF, to protect the rural population. The CG/SDC were an ineffectual counterinsurgent force that tended to alienate villagers and proved to be a source of weapons for the Viet Cong. Responsibility for training and equipping these paramilitary units was not vested in the MAAG but in other agencies of the American country team, who held differing views of the role and capability of those forces. The MAAG saw the CG/SDC as a kind of constabulary, whereas the civilians envisioned larger and better armed territorial forces. In 1957 and 1958 the Viet Cong began a campaign of terror aimed at destroying the central government's rural administration. By 1959, when the insurgency became too serious to ignore, the paramilitary were, in the judgment of the official Army history, "still unprepared, untrained, and unequipped to cope with it."[6] It was not until March 1960 that Admiral Harry Felt's staff at CINCPAC began to develop a counterinsurgency plan to help Saigon cope with the Viet Cong and improve the coordination of American assistance.[7]

For years disharmony and uncertainty persisted over how best to organize American support of pacification and hampered the effort in Vietnam. Although the American ambassador in Saigon was charged with overall responsibility for the activities of the U.S. mission there, he had to deal with an American military commander, who in reality was autonomous within his jurisdiction, as well as with the heads of three civilian agencies: the Agency for International Development, the United States Information Service, and the CIA. Each agency maintained staffs in South Vietnam substantially larger than that of the ambassador. Members of the military services outnumbered them all. Each agency used its own channels of communications to its headquarters in Washington, adhered to its own ideas of conducting the war, and enjoyed statutory authority and responsibilities set down by the U.S. Congress. The lack of central direction was also apparent in Washington. No one agency, task force, or individual short of the president himself had authority over American policy and operations in South Vietnam. American support of pacification epitomized this disunity, involving as it did more agencies of the U.S. government than any other program in Vietnam. Yet no one agency took pacification as its central responsibility or was willing to subordinate its interests to allow another to take full responsibility for the entire program. Ironically, each agency believed success in pacification, broadly defined, was necessary to defeat the Communists.[8]

The disunity of American support in Vietnam distressed officials at the highest level of the U.S. government. McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson's special assistant for national security, at the same time that he proposed bombing North Vietnam advised the president in February 1965 of the urgency of improving the pacification program, especially its nonmilitary elements. He advocated strengthening pacification support at what he called "the margin between military advice and economic development."[9] Bundy's assistant on Vietnam, Chester Cooper, made a more radical proposal in March 1965. Cooper judged the Vietnam Coordinating Committee, which tried to coordinate interagency support of pacification, to be a better forum for interagency discussion than for managing support operations or resolving sticky interagency problems. He saw the need for a high-level and high-powered expeditor in Washington, in his words, "a Lord High Needler and two, possibly three, additional disagreeable but able assistants" to push stalled programs, spark new ideas, and handle interagency disputes over programs, goals, or resources. In October 1965, Cooper suggested the president appoint a deputy special assistant to the president for Vietnamese affairs, who would report to his national security adviser and have a decisive voice in allocating funds for all nonmilitary activities, including intelligence.[10] President Johnson and Bundy continued to discuss the idea of a single manager for nonmilitary programs in December.[11] The lack of internal security in Vietnam and the imbalance of the American response, that is, too much reliance on military force and the comparative neglect of pacification, greatly concerned President Johnson and his national security adviser.

By late 1965 Secretary of Defense McNamara also made clear in several memorandums to the president his frustration with the pacification program. McNamara forcefully set forth his view that the effort to secure the countryside was stalled and successful pacification was the key to Saigon's long-term health.[12] Although the arrival of U.S. Army troops and the continuation of the ROLLING THUNDER air strikes against North Vietnam made unlikely the military defeat of South Vietnam, McNamara believed that bombing the North and ground operations in the South could never adequately substitute for an effective South Vietnamese government in the countryside. The president shared McNamara's concerns about the central role of the political struggle in winning the war. In addition, President Johnson was committed to improve social and economic conditions both in the United States and abroad, and he viewed the

economic development aspects of the pacification program as analogous to the plans for Great Society legislation at home. The president's personal interest in the other war was the prime force in its renewal in the late 1960s.[13] But by the end of 1965, the president had not taken steps to improve American organization for pacification support.

The Honolulu Conference of 7–9 February 1966, convoked by President Johnson, shoved pacification into the public spotlight. To promote the "other war" in South Vietnam, President Johnson hastily arranged a personal meeting with the South Vietnamese heads of state in Hawaii. The meeting, scheduled to occur right after the United States resumed the bombing of North Vietnam on 31 January and just before Senator Fulbright began Senate hearings on the war in Vietnam, emphasized South Vietnam's social, political, and economic problems. Johnson deliberately downplayed the military aspects, even to the extent of expressly not holding the sessions at the most convenient Hawaiian site, the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor.[14] Having repeatedly stressed that nonmilitary American activities were essential to U.S. goals, he personally orchestrated a campaign to emphasize pacification at the conference and afterwards.[15] The Honolulu Conference was the beginning of pacification's rejuvenation.

The declaration that emerged from the conference was a broadly phrased document that set the tone for future pacification efforts. Washington pledged to help the Saigon government strive to end social injustice, improve the economy and living standards, and build democracy throughout South Vietnam. The Vietnamese government also pledged to improve the health and education of its people, to provide greater military protection for pacification workers, and to care for and rehabilitate refugees.[16] On the American side, the president's impatience with the status of pacification was demonstrated in his desire to make organization for pacification support more cohesive. He assigned Ambassador William Porter, the deputy to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, the task of pulling together the Saigon mission's pacification effort.

Johnson gave Porter wide authority over all aspects of American support for the pacification program, but he was in an extremely difficult position, because Ambassadors Lodge and Porter did not envisage the president's charge in the same way Washington did. If Washington thought of Porter as a kind of single manager, he

thought of himself as more of a coordinator, someone who suggested rather than controlled or commanded. Lodge, while assuring Washington of his intention to tighten the organization for pacification support in Saigon, was reluctant to make a formal announcement of Porter's appointment as the top executive for U.S. support of pacification. Lodge considered that step unnecessary since the arrangement in his view was already working well.[17]

A more far-reaching step for U.S. support of pacification was taken in Washington. On 28 March President Johnson appointed Robert W. Komer, then a deputy special assistant for national security affairs, as special presidential assistant for supervising from the White House Washington's support of pacification. Komer had a broad mandate: authority to direct, coordinate, and supervise in Washington U.S. nonmilitary programs for peaceful construction in Vietnam—the entire "other war"—a purview wider than pacification. His authority extended to military affairs insofar as they affected the "other war," including responsibility for military resources in support of civil programs and for assuring that pacification efforts were fully coordinated with the deployment of combat forces and the conduct of military operations. Even the mission in Saigon had to support him. The president made clear that Komer's authority was not just *pro forma*, averring that Komer "will have direct access to me at all times."[18] As a measure of the president's interest, he challenged Komer to "keep those reports coming and let's list some achievements later."[19]

Komer became the most influential advocate of pacification as well as the catalyst for reorganizing the American advisory and support effort. With a highly visible style of operation and a notorious intolerance of bureaucratic delays, Komer earned the nickname "Blowtorch" from Lodge, who was not always appreciative of Komer's unorthodox tactics. While serving in the White House, Komer contributed to the improvement of pacification in two major ways. First, he wasted no time in directing his torch at a number of economic problems—notably inflation and port congestion—that while strictly speaking were not part of pacification, weakened it and hampered the South Vietnamese military and government. Komer's second major contribution was to help unify civilian and military support of pacification.[20]

In September Komer began an active campaign to have responsibility for pacification support given to the military. He stressed a

number of themes: the Army had the most assets and held in check the North Vietnamese military, and pacification required the provision of local security. Komer's campaign succeeded. In November the president informed Ambassador Lodge of his dissatisfaction with the pace and direction of the pacification effort. He told the civilians he was giving them one last chance to succeed, but made clear that the only remaining alternative was to give the responsibility to General Westmoreland.[21] Most importantly, he made equally clear his preference:

> Getting the U.S. military more heavily engaged in refocusing ARVN on the heart of the matter [pacification] is one reason why we have seriously considered charging MACV with pacification. I hope *you* will *ponder* whether this is not in the end the best way to achieve the aim you seek.
>
> I genuinely believe it is—However, I am willing to try out for a time a compromise solution.[22]

Johnson was as yet reluctant to override civilian objections (those of Dean Rusk and Henry Cabot Lodge in particular) to military control. The outcome of the president's decision was the Office of Civil Operations (OCO), an organization that served as a logical transition between multiple and single managerial control of pacification support.

The Office of Civil Operations, undeniably an improvement over previous organizations for pacification support, had no real chance to achieve the visible results that would have assuaged such important critics as McNamara, Komer, and the president. The problems that the pacification program sought to overcome—insecurity and political indifference to the Saigon government in the countryside—were not amenable to quick fixes, and Lyndon Johnson and his closest aides were aware of that. The Office of Civil Operations improved supervision of the civil side of pacification support, but it could not really manage efforts to provide military security. Hence it failed to stem the inexorable drift toward transferring responsibility for pacification to the military. About two months into OCO's trial period, Walt W. Rostow, the president's national security adviser, complained to Johnson about four unsolved problems: the absence of detailed planning for pacification, province by province; the lack of support for pacification from ARVN; the overemphasis of U.S. military operations on attacking enemy base areas; and the lack of coordination from Saigon down to the provinces between military and civil elements and between U.S. and South Vietnamese efforts. All four problems were as much in MACV's bailiwick as in OCO's.[23]

In May 1967, having given the civilians their chance, the president decided to unify American support of pacification under the military. Other changes accompanied that decision. Ellsworth Bunker replaced Lodge as ambassador and General Creighton Abrams became Westmoreland's military deputy with responsibility for improving South Vietnam's forces. The president intended that General Abrams help galvanize ARVN and enhance its ability to support pacification.[24] Johnson's long-standing fear was that the Vietnamese would allow the Americans to assume an even larger share of the war. It was difficult for the White House to accept Westmoreland's requests in the spring of 1967 for 100,000 to 200,000 more soldiers without, as Komer put it, "first making a crash effort to get more for our money out of the 650,000 Vietnamese Forces." The Abrams appointment was a clear sign that the president expected the Vietnamese to do more on their own behalf.[25] Komer was appointed Westmoreland's deputy for support of pacification.

In announcing the decision, Bunker stressed that the military was getting responsibility for pacification because it was essential to bring the U.S. military more fully into the advisory effort and pool civil and military resources to get the best results. He made clear that he would have full jurisdiction for resolving any interagency disputes arising from the change and would strive to see that neither the civilians nor the military dominated the new office.[26]

Despite the decisions of 1967, the question remains: Why did the administration not do more in late 1965 or early 1966 to boost the "other war" or to improve U.S. organization supporting pacification? Could LBJ have pushed for a CORDS-type organization in 1965 or 1966? Certainly some people on the NSC staff had that prospect in mind. The fact that the president waited until 1967 to remedy a basic organizational defect raises other questions. Does the lack of cohesive organization in Washington and Saigon indicate that Johnson had trouble achieving control of the conduct of the war and that he was reluctant to risk alienating the State Department or the CIA by putting pacification support under the military without the formality of a trial period for OCO? Was the president presiding over a precarious consensus within his administration over the conduct of the war, or was this system intended deliberately to enhance his power?

After the president made his decision, the initiative and focus passed to the field where programs were to be carried out. The first step was to devise a single chain of command that consolidated control of pacification support under General Westmoreland.

General Westmoreland made Komer responsible for "supervising the formulation and execution of all plans, policies, and programs, military and civilian, which support the government's Revolutionary Development program and related programs." The absence of limitations in the directive regarding Komer's role meant that this sphere of operations more or less depended on what he could carve out for himself. The new organization was named Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, CORDS.[27]

The unique feature of CORDS was having civilians operating fully and directly in a military chain of command. Indeed, Komer was the first ambassador in U.S. history serving in the chain of command under an American military commander and having command responsibility for military personnel and resources. CORDS interleaved civilian and military personnel throughout its hierarchy down to the province and district advisory teams so that civilians would write the performance reports of military people and vice versa. At each level pacification advice and support were placed under one man.

Another CORDS coup was to insist on a separate chain of command for pacification advisers in the provinces and districts. U.S. Army advisers serving with South Vietnamese Army divisions were removed from the pacification chain of command to eliminate the subordination of province advisers to combat advisers. CORDS considered the change necessary to get the Vietnamese to focus on territorial security through clear-and-hold operations and reduce the influence of the division advisers, who often pushed ARVN to conduct large conventional unit search-and-destroy sweeps. To ensure that the province adviser actually served as the single manager for pacification support in the province and responded only to CORDS' direction, CORDS excluded the division advisers from the new organization.[28]

CORDS won two additional skirmishes with the MACV staff that helped establish the new organization's authority and enhanced CORDS' ability to help improve South Vietnamese territorial security, thus addressing a fundamental shortcoming of previous pacification efforts.

One of CORDS' first achievements was to obtain advisory responsibility for the RF/PF from the J–3 of MACV, where it had been sorely neglected. To provide sustained local security for the villagers, Komer and his advisers wanted RF/PF under their tutelage. They saw the territorial forces as the key to local security for pacification,

and acted quickly to beef up the RF/PF by providing them with M–16's, increasing their training, and substantially adding to the number of American soldiers advising them. The Regional and Popular Forces were to Komer the most important and underutilized South Vietnamese military units. Involving them directly in pacification was to his mind an obvious way to obtain visible results by expanding the scope of pacification operations and Saigon's control over the population.[29]

In September, Komer won Westmoreland's approval for strengthening the RF/PF advisory structure by stationing U.S. Army advisers with those paramilitary units. According to Maj. Gen. George Forsythe, Komer's military deputy who advocated the concept, Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs) moving from unit to unit would be the quickest way to improve the RF/PF, provide material and moral support, and train the paramilitary on the spot.[30] The mobile advisory teams moved from one RF/PF unit to another, returning to a home base only to refit and rest. By constantly moving from one territorial forces unit to another, the MATs hoped to prevent them from becoming dependent on the presence of Americans, as appeared to be the case with the Combined Action Platoons run by the U.S. Marines. Mobility also permitted better utilization of manpower because individual teams could cover more than one village or unit.[31]

The second key victory of CORDS was winning Westmoreland's approval for a new effort to identify, expose, and dismantle the Viet Cong infrastructure, the Communist command and control organization within South Vietnam that provided political and military direction to the guerrilla war, engaged in recruiting, subversion, terrorism, propaganda, and intelligence gathering, and collected taxes and supplies. The infrastructure consisted of political organizers who operated at six basic levels—COSVN, region, province, district, village, and hamlet—and performed all governmental functions, including the provision of territorial security. Members of the infrastructure frequently served as heads of province guerrilla companies, district platoons, and hamlet squads. A highly structured, clandestine bureaucracy, the infrastructure sustained the Communists in their long struggle against the government of South Vietnam, and collectively constituted the People's Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam, the name since 1962 for the *Dang Lao Dong* or Communist Party of the South. The battle between the infrastructure on the one hand and the government's cadre and police on the other was

one for political control in South Vietnam. Since the beginning of the insurgency, South Vietnamese police and security services had tried to attack the infrastructure, but with little success. Although Diem had won some victories against the underground in the late 1950s, his successors had not.

Under a new concept advocated by CORDS, the South Vietnamese police took operational responsibility for the anti-infrastructure program. A CORDS official administered American advice and support to South Vietnamese police units, particularly the Police Field Forces, the Special Branch, and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units. They were to pool their intelligence and mount operations against the Communist underground.[32]

Despite the objections of his top intelligence officers, Westmoreland endorsed the CORDS plan, which was called Phoenix. In doing so he acknowledged that police forces could better generate intelligence and attack the Communist underground than could conventional military forces and that the CIA was more suited than MACV intelligence to handle the advisory aspect of the intelligence effort against the infrastructure.[33] The U.S. commander was willing to try an unorthodox approach in rooting out the infrastructure, and his decision also marked a significant point in CORDS history. Komer later remarked that Westmoreland's ruling did more than give the new organization an important role in the war, it put CORDS "in business."[34]

No CORDS-supported program came to generate as much controversy as Phoenix. Some, like Komer, criticized the program as a fiasco because it did not result in the capture or detention of key figures in the underground. Others in the U.S. government and the South Vietnamese National Assembly assailed Phoenix because of abuses they alleged had occurred in arresting, detaining, and interrogating suspects.

With the formation of CORDS, the Americans had taken a crucial step in resolving the management and organizational problems that had long plagued pacification support. By assuming responsibility for the improvement of the Regional and Popular Forces and by taking on the advisory and support role for a concerted attack on the infrastructure, CORDS was in a strong position to exert pressure on the Saigon government to improve local security and expand the pacification program into insecure and contested villages. With the establishment of CORDS and the additional funding and manpower that it made available for pacification, the strengthening of the

territorial forces, and the start of the anti-infrastructure effort, the South Vietnamese and the Americans had established the foundation of a program that could directly counteract the enemy's pattern of activity, and contest his attempt to establish control over the people of the countryside.

Pacification and the Tet Offensive

Before pacification could make any gains, the Communists launched a major offensive during Tet 1968 that set the program back. As a result, pacification cadres and security forces spent much of 1968 regaining the villages they left during the offensive, and a good deal of CORDS' efforts in the first half of 1968 was devoted to helping resettle the homeless and rebuild cities damaged by the Communist attacks of February and May.

The offensive had two important consequences for pacification. First, the forces of both sides were concentrated in the cities, the primary target of the Viet Cong attacks. Second, the offensive was a disastrous military undertaking for the Viet Cong. They suffered heavy losses, including some of their most seasoned regular forces. As a consequence, the Viet Cong were a gravely weakened fighting outfit. In 1968 enemy combat losses, including combat deaths, estimated deaths from wounds, prisoners, and defectors, were estimated at 262,000, the highest one-year total of the war. One hundred sixty-nine thousand enemy soldiers were believed to have died from hostile action that year. An estimated 60 percent of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam were killed in 1968. Even if, as is probable, those losses were overstated by a large margin, they would still be very high.[35] The significance of these developments, as Komer recognized in the spring of 1968, was that the pacification program now had a chance to make appreciable gains by rapidly expanding into the areas that the weakened Viet Cong could no longer hold. He perceived a vacuum in the countryside and was instrumental in persuading the South Vietnamese in the fall of 1968 to undertake a special offensive, the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC), of whose several goals the most prominent was to make 1,000 contested hamlets "relatively secure," a category measured by

the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) that CORDS used to gauge trends in population security.

Komer could advocate a special campaign because as the head of CORDS, an organization that subsumed military and civilian programs, he was the single manager of pacification support and could help ensure that a special effort did not founder because of insufficient technical or logistical assistance or from conflicting advice from American military and civilian officials. As the deputy to the American military commander and part of the military chain of command, he was in a position to obtain American support, which he did, for the accelerated campaign. Since it alone represented American interests in pacification support, CORDS also proved effective in getting the South Vietnamese to draft a national pacification plan for the special offensive that integrated all pacification programs and the activities of the various South Vietnamese ministries into a cohesive campaign. That document was a distinct improvement over previous pacification plans, which too often were vague and poorly coordinated. The Vietnamese could carry out the special campaign because, partly thanks to CORDS' efforts, they had enough territorial forces to enter and attempt to make secure the 1,000 hamlets.

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign represented a turning point for the pacification program. One key measurement, population security as reported by the Hamlet Evaluation System, illustrated the magnitude of the change. At the end of 1967, HES reported 42 percent of the people were living in areas considered secure. By the end of 1969, that figure had reached 71 percent, a gain of over 4 million additional people dwelling in territory controlled by the government. Even if the specific numbers are viewed with justifiable skepticism as being overstated, the direction and extent of the trend remains significant and favorable.[36] Improved security had other benefits for the pacification program. Roads, bridges, and canals were reopened and repaired and helped stimulate a rural economic revival. Food production and the amount of land under cultivation rose dramatically, reducing South Vietnam's reliance on rice imports and bringing new prosperity to farmers. The government encouraged families to return to their home villages, many previously under Viet Cong control. Improved security also allowed the government in 1970 to embark on a massive land reform effort that distributed 2.5 million acres of land to 800,000 tenant farm families between 1970 and 1973.[37]

The relationship between pacification and the Tet offensive raises two large issues. One is the effective application of leverage on the government of South Vietnam. Komer and his staff devised a plan for a counteroffensive, won the support of Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams, and the three of them persuaded President Thieu to embark on an expansion of pacification when his instincts previously were to consolidate his grip on what was already in his hands. The APC is an important example of American influence and illustrates the interplay of the American and South Vietnamese leadership.

A second issue is the problem of measuring results in pacification in a persuasive manner. Nearly all pacification statistics indicated that the APC was successful, but MACV's hope that a successful counteroffensive would dispel the notion of a stalemated war was not realized. The statistics did not persuade the public or even some government agencies, notably the CIA and the State Department. They conceded that pacification had made progress during the APC, but remained convinced that the gains were fragile and reversible. Pacification thus suffered from a critical credibility problem that dogged it until the end of the war. The statistical indices for the period 1969–1972 show steady progress in weakening the insurgents. That the North Vietnamese resorted to large-scale invasions in 1972 and 1975 to end the war instead of resuming the pattern of insurgent fighting used earlier can be viewed as evidence that pacification was effective at least in controlling the insurgency to the point where it was unable seriously to threaten the Saigon government. The final irony may be that proof of progress in pacification was not fully persuasive in the United States, but, judging from the behavior of Communist military forces in 1975, seemed real enough to the North Vietnamese.

The foundation for pacification's relative success after the 1968 Tet offensive was laid earlier. The dramatic improvement in the Saigon government's position in the countryside was the real payoff for the reorganized American support effort and the buildup of the South Vietnamese forces providing population security. Sir Robert Thompson, an astute student of counterinsurgency and a longtime observer of Vietnam, noted after a visit to South Vietnam in October 1969, "Not only was I able to visit areas and walk through villages which had been under Viet Cong control for years, but I had never felt so relaxed when travelling around the country."[38] Thompson's cautiously optimistic judgment would have been impossible without

the rejuvenation of pacification that was made attainable by the reorganization of and increase in American support as well as the buildup of South Vietnam's territorial forces.

NOTES

1. Thomas C. Thayer, "How to Analyze a War Without Fronts: Vietnam 1965–72," *Journal of Defense Research* 7B (Fall 1975), prepared by Batelle Columbus Laboratories for the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the Dept. of Defense (Washington: Government Printing Office).
2. Ibid., ch. 3.
3. Ibid., p. 807.
4. Ibid., pp. 850, 887.
5. Ibid., pp. 848, 850.
6. Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 378.
7. *United States–Vietnam Relations*, 12 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), vol. 2, pt. IV, secs. 4 and 5; Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 281, 289–93.
8. This section is based on Thomas W. Scoville, "United States Organization for Pacification Advice and Support in Vietnam," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1976, and on my extensive research in the voluminous archives of the LBJ Library. The Center of Military History published a condensed version of Scoville's work in a monograph entitled, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982). Unless otherwise cited, material in this section comes from this work. The history of the pacification program is treated in depth in my forthcoming work, Pacification: Managing the "Other War," the first of two volumes on the subject.
9. Memo, Bundy for the President, 7 Feb 65, sub: The Situation in Vietnam; Msg, Draft Joint State/Defense/AID/USIA/CIA to Saigon, 24 Feb 65, copies in CMH files.
10. Memo, Cooper for McGeorge Bundy, 29 Oct 65, sub: Organization Arrangements for Vietnam Affairs, w/attachment: Draft Memo, copy in CMH files.
11. Msg, Bundy to the President, 24 Dec 65, copy in CMH files.
12. Draft Memo, McNamara for the President, 4 Dec 65, sub: Military and Political Actions Recommended for South Vietnam, copy in CMH files; Draft Memo, McNamara for the President, 3 Nov 65, sub: Courses of Action in Vietnam; Memo, McNamara for the President, 30 Nov 65; Memo, McNamara for the President, 6 Dec 65, sub: Military and Political Action Recommended for South Vietnam, copies in CMH files.
13. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), pp. 249, 258–59; Memo, McGeorge Bundy for the President, 14 Jan 66, sub: Top Level Reorganization in Saigon, copy in CMH files.
14. Interv, Paige Mulholland with Chester Cooper, 17 Jul 69, Oral History Project, LBJ Library.

15. *The Senator Gravel Edition of the Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam*, 4 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 2: 543 (hereafter cited as *PPG*).

16. Memo, Bromley Smith, NSC Staff, for President Johnson, 15 Feb 66; Msg, Personal for Ambassador Lodge from the President, State 2368, 12 Feb 66; Memos, White House Press Secretary, 8 Feb 66, sub: Text of Joint Communique, and 8 Feb 66, sub: Declaration of Honolulu, copies in CMH files. *PPG*, 2: 552.

17. Msg, Lodge to the President, Saigon 2959, 15 Feb 66, in CMH files.

18. National Security Action Memorandum 343, drafted by Komer, cited in *PPG*, 2: 568. Komer was authorized to draw support from the secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, Agriculture, and Health Education and Welfare, the administrator of AID, and the directors of Central Intelligence and the U.S. Information Agency.

19. Memo, Komer for the President, 26 Mar 66, copy in CMH files. On Rusk's reluctance, see Memo, Komer for the President, 28 Mar 66, copy in CMH files.

20. Komer's voice was not the only one crying for better organization of the pacification effort. An Army study called PROVN, short for Program for the Pacification and Long Term Development of Vietnam, was another. That study, undertaken by a select group of officers at the behest of General Harold K. Johnson, the Army chief of staff, exhaustively analyzed the whole Vietnam situation. PROVN made a series of detailed and explicit recommendations on American organization: that a Washington executive agent coordinate Vietnam support activities in the United States; that the American ambassador become the single manager in Vietnam with two coequal deputies—one for U.S. military forces and the other for pacification support; and that there should be a single American representative or chief at each level in the field below those deputies. PROVN concluded that pacification should be designated as the major American and South Vietnamese effort. The study never received McNamara's endorsement and MACV also rejected it, but some of its recommendations were harbingers of future actions. Komer found a number of PROVN's recommendations sound, particularly unified management in the field and in Washington. These served as a source of some of the proposals he later carried out (*PPG*, 2: 576–580).

21. Msg, Rusk, McNamara, and Komer to Lodge, State 78865, 4 Nov 66, LBJ Library, NSF, Nodis, vol. 4.

22. Ltr, Johnson to Lodge, 16 Nov 66, copy in CMH files. Emphasis in original copy on which Johnson added a handwritten note to Lodge and instructed Komer in regard to the letter to "Rush Double Rush." Memo, Komer for the President, ibid.

23. Memo, Rostow for the President, 26 Jan 67, copy in CMH files.

24. Memo, Komer for Rostow, 3 Apr 67, Porter's msg attached, copy in CMH files.

25. Msg, Johnson to Lodge, State 179530, 21 Apr 67, Nodis, vol. 5; Msg, Johnson to Bunker, State 183042, 26 Apr 67, vol. 6; Msg, Komer to the President, 27 Apr 67. Copies in CMH files.

26. Memo, Komer for Bunker, 6 May 67, draft messages to the President are attached; Draft Memo, Bunker for Komer and Westmoreland, 6 May 67, Komer drafted this; Memo, Komer for Bunker, 5 May 67, copies in CMH files.

27. HQ MACV Directive 10–12, 28 May 67, sub: Organizations and Functions for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, copy in CMH files.

28. Interview with Robert Komer, Rand Limited Document, D(L)–20104–ARPA, 7 May 70, p. 62.

29. Ibid., p. 63.

30. MFR, MACCORDS PP-RDS, 28 Sep 67, sub: IV Corps Advisers, DepCORDS files.

31. Msg, COMUSMACV to Deputy COMUSMACV, 120613z Oct 67, sub: Requirements IV Corps; DF, MAC J–3 to Chief of Staff, 8 Nov 67, sub: Concept of Deployment of MATs; Msg, COMUSMACV to Commanding General USARV, MAC 38651, 280845z Nov 67, copies in CMH Chron files.

32. Memo, Komer for Kerwin, 5 Jun 67, sub: Attack on the VCI; Memo, Komer for J–2, 3 Jun 67, sub: Attack on the VCI, DepCORDS files.

33. Memo, Westmoreland for Komer, 16 Jun 67.

34. Scoville interview with Komer, 6 Nov 69, cited in Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification*, ch. 6.

35. Thayer, "How to Analyze a War Without Fronts," ch. 10, p. 851.

36. Ibid., p. 876.

37. Ibid., p. 882; Sir Robert Thompson, *Peace is Not at Hand* (New York: McKay, 1974), pp. 67, 72.

38. Thompson, *Peace is Not at Hand*, p. 71.

The Dual-Track Strategy of Vietnamization and Negotiation

Allan E. Goodman

I

One of the central lessons of Vietnam is the importance—and difficulty—of coordinating force with diplomacy during limited wars. The North Vietnamese did this by pursuing a strategy of (in their parlance) "fighting while negotiating," using diplomacy to protract the war, weaken the U.S. will, and demoralize the South Vietnamese government and army. Their purpose was to gain at the bargaining table what they could not achieve on the battlefield. This strategy worked brilliantly.

The U.S. pursued a dual-track strategy of Vietnamization and negotiations. This strategy was, according to Henry Kissinger, "what the President meant when he said he had a 'plan to end the war'" and was designed to offer the U.S. "a prospect of honorable disengagement that was not hostage to the other side's cooperation."[1] The Vietnamization component aimed at building up the South Vietnamese forces so that they would represent "a strong, independent fighting force capable of holding its own against the communists."[2] The prospect of facing such an army, Nixon and Kissinger reasoned, should cause the North Vietnamese to negotiate seriously; if it did not, then the U.S. would have given the Saigon government the means to win the war on its own. In terms of U.S. domestic politics, moreover, Vietnamization made it possible to withdraw American forces from combat. It not only thereby helped reduce pressure on the administration to get out altogether but also

corrected for the U.S. tendency during the Johnson administration to try to win the war ourselves "instead of recognizing that our mission should have been to help the South Vietnamese build up their forces so that they could win the war."[3]

U.S. strategy did not work well. The purpose of this essay is to review why this was the case and to discuss how a repeat performance can be avoided, especially as the U.S. deepens its involvement in limited wars in Central America and the Middle East.

II

Before I do this I wish to insert a note about the tone of the paper and much of what has been recently written looking back on Vietnam. Without being quite able to correct myself, I find what I have written too confidently pessimistic. The mood at the time covered in this paper (1969–1973) was indeed filled with pessimism but also laced with emotion and hope that somehow the South Vietnamese ally would pull itself together politically, reform its military, and prove viable once the U.S. completed withdrawing. And, as I will suggest later, there were grounds for such hopes. So it is essential to caveat historical writing on this period by confessing that while there was profound doubt about whether the dual-track strategy would work—and about whether either of its components would prove viable—most analysts were just a little bit less confident that our gloomy forecasts would prove correct.

III

Despite the publication of a large amount of hitherto secret material on the origins and rationale for the dual-track strategy of Vietnamization and negotiation, nothing new has yet come to light to contradict the official explanations given at the time or the doubts that most officials had about how well it would work.[4]

As President Nixon told Congress in November 1970, Vietnamization had a distinguished lineage and was a proper and natural

response to the situation in Vietnam. In asking for the funds to build up the South Vietnamese Army, Mr. Nixon said:

> The overwhelming evidence of the last twenty-five years—from the Marshall Plan to Vietnamization—is that a systematic program that helps other nations harness their own resources for defense and development enables them to take on the primary burden of their own defense.
>
> Helping countries that demonstrate the capability to help themselves enables us to reduce our direct overseas involvement; it eases our budgetary and balance of payments burdens; and it lessens the likelihood of the engagement of American forces.[5]

As such, Vietnamization was part of Nr. Nixon's overall plan to end the war. As he later reflected:

> Our goals were to:
> —Reverse the "Americanization" of the war that had occurred from 1965 to 1968 and concentrate instead on Vietnamization.
> — Give more priority to pacification so that the South Vietnamese could be better able to extend their control over the countryside.
> —Reduce the invasion threat by destroying enemy sanctuaries and supply lines in Cambodia and Laos.
> —Withdraw the half million American troops from Vietnam in a way that would not bring about a collapse in the south.
> —Negotiate a cease-fire and a peace treaty.
> —Demonstrate our willingness and determination to stand by our ally if the peace agreement was violated by Hanoi, and assure South Vietnam that it would continue to receive our military aid as Hanoi did from its allies, the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, China.[6]

Mr. Nixon hoped the elements of the strategy would interrelate in the following way: "If the enemy feels that we are going to stay there long enough for the South Vietnamese to be strong enough to handle their own defense, then I think they have a real incentive to negotiate, because if they have to negotiate with a strong, vigorous South Vietnamese government, the deal they make with them isn't going to be as good as the deal they might make now."[7]

There is no question today that Vietnamization de-Americanized the war. Within seven months of the adoption of the policy in 1969, some 115,000 U.S. troops had been withdrawn from combat in and then from South Vietnam itself. By the end of May 1971, more than 365,000 U.S. soldiers had left Vietnam and the casualty rate had dropped by a factor of five.[8] There is almost no question that it resulted in increased priority for pacification, and there is hardly any debate about whether the U.S. remained willing to attack the North Vietnamese—in the South or in Laos and Cambodia—wherever the

Saigon government needed help or faced overwhelming conventional threats which it was still too weak to handle. In virtually all that has been published during and since the war, I am in fact struck by the conclusion that Vietnamization was probably the correct and appropriate course under the circumstances for the U.S. to take short of a total and precipitate withdrawal without regard for its impact on the South Vietnamese ally. There is also no mystery about why it didn't work or work well in coordination with diplomacy.

IV

At the White House level there were no illusions about the difficulty or inherent riskiness at the time of adopting the dual-track strategy described above. This is made clear both in Kissinger's memoirs and, more importantly, in the memos he and others prepared on the risks and shortcomings of such a strategy.

The essence of their assessments is captured in one particular memo that Kissinger sent to the president in September 1971 "summing up where we stood on Vietnam diplomacy." Kissinger pointed out that Vietnamization "was inherently precarious."

> If it were played out to the end, a delicate point would inevitably be reached where our withdrawals would create uncertainty about South Vietnam's political future, jeopardizing the whole enterprise at the final hour. . . .
>
> But, my analysis continued, we now found ourselves with our negotiating assets wasting. Vietnamization, for all the anguish caused by protests, had bought time at home with the steady reduction of American forces, casualties, and expenses. And it had generated two pressures on Hanoi. First, the measured pace of our withdrawal conveyed to the North Vietnamese that if they wanted us to leave quickly or totally, they would have to pay a price. Second, it evoked the prospect that eventually a strengthened South Vietnamese government would be able to stand on its own. Unfortunately, I reasoned, our first asset had all but withered away. Domestic pressures and the indiscipline of the bureaucracy combined to assure the North Vietnamese in an almost daily and compulsive manner that we would be completely out of Vietnam soon. Why should they pay for what would fall into their laps?
>
> Until the autumn of 1971 it seemed that our second asset—the growing strength of Saigon—was still giving Hanoi serious pause. The South Vietnamese government had maintained a remarkable degree of stability. The irony was that this stability was now threatened because of the accident of

the four-year presidential term that Americans had helped write into the Constitution. In South Vietnam, the combination of presidential election, major U.S. withdrawals, and domestic dissidence was causing the currents of unrest to flow again. Some within the Thieu administration and the army were beginning to hedge their bets and burnish their credentials for the Viet Cong.[9]

With respect to the very strong doubts that negotiations would lead to a genuine and lasting political settlement, moreover, Dr. Kissinger's personal assistant, Peter Rodman, observed that at the time "Both sides [i.e., the U.S. and GVN versus the DRV and PRG] were gambling on the future and gambling that they would maintain enough control over their own instruments of power to shape it [a political settlement] or to prevent it from collapsing . . . .we were taking probably a bigger risk." Rodman and others believed, again at the time, that the Paris agreement would contribute to such a settlement, especially because it granted the U.S. the right of essentially unlimited resupply of the South Vietnamese and because the possibility of U.S. reintervention was real. In short, "The Paris agreement for all its risks we thought was sustainable."[10] The point here, of course, is that at the time there were no illusions about the risks inherent in the situation or about how central some form of continued U.S. presence and commitment was.

The perception in the field of the efficacy of Vietnamization, however, was another matter. Caution and pessimism faded the farther one traveled from Washington. In Saigon and especially among the American advisory corps in the countryside, Vietnamization was hailed as a success. The main proof of this was the ability of South Vietnamese armed forces to repel successive dry season offensives by regular Communist forces. Thus in the field, the adoption of Vietnamization led to a period of "new optimism"; by 1971, in fact, most U.S. officials believed that Saigon could win the war and that a negotiated settlement might not be necessary.

The case for the new optimism was based largely on fact. Security conditions had dramatically improved throughout South Vietnam and decidedly in the government's favor. The question was whether the South Vietnamese could sustain, especially in an environment of declining U.S. support, their preeminence once the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese recovered from the failure of the Tet offensive and the U.S. and South Vietnamese incursions into Cambodia and Laos.

To my mind then (and now) much depended on the army. And I was deeply pessimistic. The RVNAF was an army I had a chance

to study well. Through contacts in Saigon and under the auspices of the Rand Corporation, I did a detailed analysis of service records of the RVNAF officer corps with two questions in mind: What explained who got promoted? And did armed forces service and schooling actually predict who got what post when governments changed?[11] The overwhelming conclusion of such research was that the armed forces ran on corruption and favoritism rather than professionalism. This opinion was shared widely at working levels throughout the Pentagon, which concluded in its own assessment of the RVNAF: "Without major reforms within the RVNAF command and selection system. . .it is unlikely that the RVNAF as presently organized and led will ever constitute an effective political or military counter to the Viet Cong."[12]

But this assessment was staunchly disputed and dismissed in the field, where indications of progress abounded. And so we had a curious reversal of roles: The people in the field—by virtue of their proximity to the action—actually knew less about RVNAF capabilities over the long term than those at home who were less in touch with conditions and day-to-day performance.

Part of the illusion about the RVNAF stemmed from the fact that the U.S. advisers on the ground were on their second or third voluntary tours in Vietnam. They wanted the GVN to succeed, and RVNAF, in particular, did look and perform better as a fighting force compared to their first tours as advisers. As suggested before, moreover, the enemy was not by any means lying low during this time; and so, real improvement in capabilities against an unrelenting foe convinced many that Vietnamization was working and offered, if not military victory, the leverage to exact a political settlement from Hanoi.

What was illusion here was not what the U.S. advisers in the field saw, but the assumption that they and RVNAF generals made that the U.S. would (with everything from economic aid to bombs) back Saigon until the North Vietnamese withdrew, negotiated a political settlement, or were defeated. Once U.S. backing was withdrawn from the equation—i.e., in the wake of Watergate and with passage of the Cambodian bombing funds cutoff resolution—RVNAF effectiveness and confidence declined dramatically. That it did so at a time when the NVA and other Communist forces operating in the South were not particularly strong or by their own reckoning in position to deliver a final blow suggests just how significant the U.S. posture was to whether Vietnamization would work.

But of absolutely critical importance to the success or failure of Vietnamization was the degree to which the RVNAF could reform itself. In the various postmortems written by the South Vietnamese officers who fled to the U.S. it is the absence of such reform—as much as America's waning will to go on with funding the war—that is identified as the major cause of the failure of Vietnamization. In a most frank and succinct assessment, one South Vietnamese colonel put it this way:

> Vietnamization was more than modernization, and expansion of the RVNAF; it was essentially a strategy that would require the Vietnamese to survive with greatly reduced American participation. Had President Thieu and the Joint General Staff fully realized this fact, perhaps they would have begun then to build a strategy to cope with it. Instead, the RVNAF made no adjustments in doctrine, organization or training to compensate for the departure of American troops and firepower.[13]

That the North Vietnamese achieved victory with their 1975 offensive was a surprise even to them. But the inherent weaknesses in Saigon's army and political system and the ability and willingness of the North to keep fighting for unification made such a victory almost inevitable. While, therefore, the perception in 1975 that the end of U.S. support for the war was at hand hastened the demoralization of Saigon's army, it was only one of several proximate causes of the debacle. Hard and cruel as it may seem because of what followed, U.S. policy did not lose South Vietnam. The Saigon government did that itself.

V

Thus, it is still possible to argue that the approach of Vietnamization was not only politically expedient but also fundamentally correct. It was a necessary and reasonable adjustment to U.S. policy at the time.

The lesson here is that we cannot fight struggles on behalf of an ally incapable of doing the job. Even vast amounts of military aid, training, and on-the-spot advice cannot transform a politicized army into an effective fighting force. Hence, we should be sure that those armies we do support are committed to the same goals we are, and we should be prepared to cut our aid and support without hesitation

the moment the leadership shows any signs of wavering in that commitment.

This lesson has not sunk in.

It is hard, therefore, to observe the deepening U.S. involvement in Central America without a profound sense of *deja vu*. While the sources of the insurgencies are profoundly different in Central America as compared to Vietnam, the United States may be pursuing the same risky path to deal with the situation. We are following a dual-track strategy of El Salvadorizing the military struggle—a policy directly descended from Vietnamization and the Nixon doctrine—and simultaneously searching for a negotiated settlement. Our posture is credible neither to our allies nor to our adversaries. Having declared the outcome of the struggle in El Salvador a vital interest, we have allied ourselves with a cause that may be fundamentally flawed and may have piqued the interest of our Cuban and Soviet adversaries in trying to involve us once again in the kind of protracted war we are least likely to be able to sustain, fight, or bring to a settlement.

To say never again to such situations and conflicts is the wrong lesson to draw from the Vietnam experience. To choose carefully when, where, why, and how we become involved comes closer to the mark. We cannot isolate or insulate ourselves from third world conflicts, but we should think through our commitments and strategy. We should not adopt strategies like Vietnamization only to make the best of a bad situation, but we should assess *at the outset* of our involvement the potential for our ally to perform up to our expectations and requirements. If we are at odds with the ally about objectives at the outset, and then become committed, we lose much of our leverage to promote reform. For from that time onward, our ally can always argue that to do what we want (e.g., land reform or depoliticizing the army) would cause its political demise.

VI

Unfortunately, another lesson to be drawn from the Vietnam experience is that the U.S. appears particularly ill suited to follow dual-track strategies such as those which require us to fight and negotiate during a limited war. In the case of Vietnam, our adversary whipsawed us by negotiating while fighting, and domestic political

realities required a constant downward adjustment in our goals. Hence, military threats and even victories never could be translated into bargaining leverage. This is not to say that we are basically unable to use force. But this finding does highlight the fact that we are unable to sustain the use of force abroad for very long in less than world war circumstances and that its effect is greatly weakened if we are continually telling the adversary that we are ready to negotiate and then make unilateral concessions as a sign of good faith.

Much has been written that is critical of the military and its tactics in Vietnam; little has been written about our diplomats and their instincts. In 1984 it is important to remember that our military commanders from the generals on down told us we could not win using the strategy we did. The failure really lay in the successive administrations who asked the military to try anyway and in the American style of negotiation. Unilateral concessions, open-ended offers, and an almost automatic desire to talk rather than fight make us particularly vulnerable to adversaries who use negotiations to buy time and weaken our will and in situations where time is not on our side. Communist negotiators, especially, have come to play on these weaknesses and use them to advantage in not only diplomatic but economic and commercial bargaining as well.

What is also striking about the American approach to negotiations is its amateur quality. Despite the fact that U.S. foreign policy often employs the dual-track approach used in Vietnam, we expect our diplomats to learn negotiating largely on the job. Soldiers train for their jobs and constantly rehearse the use of tactics. Diplomats should be taught to do the same. Such professional training would not, of course, reduce the many domestic pressures and interests which constrain our foreign policy and the room for diplomats to maneuver, but it might make our diplomats even at the highest levels more sensitive to when and under what circumstances they should recommend negotiating rather than fighting or stonewalling. Some of this training is already being done at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute on an elective basis. Learning the fundamentals of the art of negotiating should, however, be a required component in the formation of all American diplomats.

In apportioning responsibilities for what went wrong with the dual-track strategy of Vietnamization and negotiation we have both ourselves and our ally to blame. The more that is published about the Vietnam experience, the stronger my conviction is that successive administrations did their best to salvage a bad situation. Illusions

were few, and none should be regarded now as the principal explanation for the outcome. But there were fundamental realities working against us that just could not be overcome, especially in terms of our capacity to sustain a negotiating-while-fighting strategy. The way to avoid a repeat performance is less apparent given all the interests that require our involvement in conflicts abroad. But this much is clear based on the Vietnam experience: to Sun Tzu's classic dictum on the art of war—know yourself, know your enemy; a thousand battles, a thousand victories—we should add: "know your ally." For if there is not a reasonable chance at the outset of a conflict that our ally can do the job, it is doubtful that our aid and commitment will last long enough to make it happen.

NOTES

1. Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), p. 306.
2. Richard M. Nixon, *The Real War* (Warner Books, 1980), p. 107.
3. Ibid., p. 106.
4. See for example, the treatment of Vietnamization in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1983); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979); and Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
5. Message to Congress Proposing Supplemental Foreign Assistance Appropriations, 18 Nov 70.
6. Nixon, *The Real War*, p. 106.
7. Richard M. Nixon, *A New Road for America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972) p. 681.
8. Richard M. Nixon, *Indochina Progress Report: An Assessment of Vietnamization* (Washington: The White House, April 1971), p. 2.
9. Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1038–39.
10. Quoted in "Discussion" in Peter Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as History* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981) pp. 66–67.
11. *An Institutional Profile of the South Vietnamese Officer Corps* (Santa Monica, Calif.: The Rand Corp., 1970).
12. Excerpted from the "Military Community" assessment of RVNAF in National Security Study Memorandum 1 (1969) as printed in the *New York Times*, 26 Apr 72.
13. Quoted in Col. Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Monterey, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 176. For additional comments on RVNAF performance, see Stephen T. Hosmer et al., *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1980), pp. 87–123, and General Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), pp. 154–55.

Commentary

Bruce Palmer, Jr.

Professor Pike's thoughtful paper on the strategic aspects of the Second Indochina War focuses on the 1965–1968 time frame but presents the subject in the strategic continuum of the entire war. Perhaps his principal conclusion is that the United States never reached the point of true strategic analysis, this being particularly pertinent with respect to the 1966–1967 period, when the United States committed its conventional military power in Vietnam but treated the war as largely a technological exercise. I support this judgment. Internal debate within the U.S. government at the time of the commitment of major American ground combat troops in July 1965 was intense but relatively brief and superficial. More importantly, it was inconclusive with respect to how precisely the United States would fight the war. There was no full-blown review by the Johnson administration of our strategic conduct of the war until the immediate aftermath of the enemy offensive during Tet 1968. This was followed later by another intense review in early 1969 by the new Nixon administration. By this time the U.S. had been directly involved in Indochina for almost two decades. But as a government we had not thought through the strategic implications of our commitment and had not hammered out the human and material cost we were willing to pay to achieve our stated objective.

In examining this conspicuous absence of thought—a failure of intellect—Professor Pike concludes that it stemmed from an unconscious arrogance: We Americans could accomplish anything we set out to do. It was also a matter of typical American idealism seeming to block out reality. Yet the truth is that the United States was basically ignorant about the enemy's character and strategy. A few intelligence analysts and thinkers like Pike understood the enemy and his strategic thinking, but very few U.S. leaders, military or civilian, fully grasped the significance of a distinctly different scheme

of warfare tailored to Vietnam. Further, Pike points out, the United States had no effective organization, no system to integrate all U.S. military, political, mass communications, and other efforts aimed towards the same objective and intermeshed with South Vietnamese governmental activities. Without such a system, our side was at a great disadvantage in opposing an *apparat* designed to support a totally integrated strategy encompassing all military and nonmilitary actions in one seamless web. In Saigon the U.S. side and the government of South Vietnam had continuous difficulty with the problem of coordinating allied efforts and never solved it satisfactorily, although the adoption of the CORDS concept within MACV's cognizance in 1967 made considerable progress in developing a coherent pacification program. But there were other areas of fundamental importance, such as intelligence, where we never achieved unity of effort. CIA and MACV intelligence in Vietnam were autonomous and consequently often competed with each other, causing friction, duplication, and sometimes confusion, particularly with respect to coordinated U.S.–South Vietnamese intelligence programs conducted concurrently within separate military and civilian structures.

The role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in this absence of strategic decision came up this morning. Recall that by statutory law one of their roles is strategic planning. But remember the chiefs do not make strategic decisions nor do they conduct the strategic direction of the war. This is a civilian prerogative of the commander in chief. I was operations deputy for the Army during the 1964–1965 period when these major decisions were being made. In terms of the decision on the air war, although you will find on the record that the Joint Chiefs were unanimously in agreement, in fact there was a very deep split. The Army did not agree that bombing North Vietnam would produce the desired results, and the Navy wasn't too sure about it. It was the Air Force and the Marine Corps that were the tough proponents of air power. It was General Wheeler who talked the other chiefs into submitting an agreed paper on the theory that if we submitted a split paper this would hand over a basic military judgment to the secretary of defense and put him in a difficult spot of having to make the decision, him and the president. A unanimous paper, he said, was better than a split one. I maintain that this was wrong on something as fundamental as this, and that the chiefs did basically a disservice to the president. I think that they should have pointed out what the split was and shown it very specifically. Now when we got into a debate among the chiefs on the question of

committing U.S. ground troops, this did not come to a head until February or March 1965 when a group of senior people including myself visited Vietnam and came back with the conclusion that the ARVN was demoralized and that if the United States did not intervene on the ground, South Vietnam would soon go down the tube. Remember now, they were not recommending that we should do this, they were simply stating the judgment that if the U.S. wanted to save South Vietnam it was going to have to go ahead and do it. It was after that that the chiefs made their first recommendation for a commitment of American ground forces. It was not until later that summer, around August or September, that the chiefs came in with their first comprehensive strategic concept on how to conduct the war. My problem with that concept was that it wrapped up everything you could possibly think of: it included a sustained strategic bombing offensive against North Vietnam; it contained a commitment to use U.S. forces to help the South Vietnamese handle the problem of local forces, guerrillas, etc., in South Vietnam; it included land and air actions in the Laotian panhandle and along the DMZ to interdict the flow of people and material down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It also included a mining blockade of Haiphong. This idea of physical blocking along the DMZ and extending into Laos was not proposed by the chiefs as an alternative strategy. It was part of a much larger strategy that included many other military actions. It wasn't the theater commander who was supposed to decide the strategy that the nation would follow. This was to be done by the commander in chief with heads of state in combined discussions with military chiefs as we did in World War II. They were to make the basic strategic decisions and then pass them on to the theater commanders to carry out. But in this instance Washington never made any basic decisions on the strategic concept. And that left Westmoreland in Vietnam to invent his own strategic concept, which he did. In effect, what he was doing was a war of attrition. Speaking frankly to President Johnson in Guam, he said, "Unless we can block this physical infiltration, this war of attrition could go on forever indefinitely."

Professor Pike describes the lack of a clear definition of what constituted victory or defeat that the two sides could tacitly agree on. The result was strategic ambiguity. This may be so, but there was nothing ambiguous, unfortunately, about President Johnson's intentions to make South Vietnam the decisive battlefield. He made it very clear to Hanoi from 1964 on that the United States would not invade

North Vietnam or attempt to bring down its government. This was a fatal error because it gave away the store politically, militarily, diplomatically, and psychologically. Moreover, it was clear that Hanoi's goal was a unified and communized Vietnam, as well as a communized Laos and Cambodia under Hanoi's domination. From 1965 on, it seemed perfectly clear that Hanoi directed the insurgency in the South and had no intention of giving the National Liberation Front and the Viet Cong any degree of autonomy.

It appears that there was a major element of the government, the CIA, that indeed did study and analyze the opposing strategies during the war and in fact was remarkably accurate in most of its judgments. Not long after the bombing offensive against North Vietnam got under way in early 1965, McNamara became dissatisfied with DIA and service assessments of the effects of the bombing and turned to the CIA. Thereafter, the agency gave McNamara independent appraisals of the bombing which, the secretary stressed, were not to be coordinated with DIA or any of the armed services. Later, at McNamara's request, CIA extended its assessment of the war to include such matters as an appraisal of the opposing strategies; North Vietnam's capacity to wage a prolonged war; the degree of Hanoi's dependence on the Soviet Union and China; and the prospects for survival of a free and independent South Vietnam. In mid-1966 the CIA did a special study that delved deeply into the nature of the enemy, his strategy, character, and the like, and in addition covered the more quantifiable aspects of the war and its effect on both sides. It judged that Hanoi's will to persist was strong and steady, that it had the manpower and material assets to fight indefinitely, and that it was unlikely that the United States could compel Hanoi to desist from its long-time goal of uniting and communizing Vietnam. By the end of 1966 McNamara recognized the open-ended nature of the U.S. commitment and persuaded the president to put a ceiling on U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam. Then in the latter part of 1967 McNamara told the president that the U.S. would probably fail to achieve its objectives and recommended reduced levels of U.S. military operations. As Dr. Hunt brings out in his paper on U.S. pacification efforts, Defense Department analysts had likewise concluded that the U.S. attrition strategy could not succeed. McNamara's disenchantment with the war was no doubt a major factor in the president's decision to replace him early in 1968.

Pike's final discussion of the retrospective meaning of the war is especially worthwhile. He concludes that it is the task of historians

to determine the true meaning of Vietnam. I agree that we can learn and benefit a great deal from our Vietnam experience, but alas the evidence suggests that people, especially Americans, rarely learn from the past.

Turning to Dr. Hunt's paper on the allied pacification efforts in the countryside between 1967 and 1972, I found this to be a good solid account of the subject, although somewhat incomplete and unbalanced. One of his major observations is that the American war of attrition, using both air power and ground forces, tended to overlook or underplay the underlying political issues of the war. To illustrate this he analyzes how U.S. funds were expended during the war. The air war came first by a large margin—50 to 60 percent of the total dollar costs. The ground war came second with about 25 percent of the dollars. Pacification expenditures, which included the cost of the Regional and Popular Forces, ran a distant last.

My feeling that Dr. Hunt's paper lacks balance stems from several factors. One is the picture he paints of unrelieved success in pacification with the advent of CORDS in May 1967. His account of CORDS achievements is not balanced by a discussion of difficulties not overcome, or of weaknesses, or of occasional failures. Secondly, the CORDS structure is given practically all the credit for success. There is little mention of the role and contributions of MACV, USARV, or the U.S. mission without whose unqualified support CORDS could not have gotten off the ground. Although he states that CORDS had to overcome stiff opposition from MACV to giving CORDS responsibility for Regional and Popular Forces as well as the assignment of U.S. Army advisers to the Regional and Popular Forces, my impression is quite different. I thought that the initiative for these important matters came from MACV.

Some questions still remain, of course, concerning the effectiveness of CORDS. Dr. Hunt cites the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) as a key measurement tool in determining pacification progress—yet the serious weaknesses of the HES, especially its susceptibility to gross misreading of the situation, are not discussed. Nor is there a discussion of whether the CORDS solution overall was the optimum organization. The availability of resources from the military services and the Defense Department was the overriding factor in the decision to place pacification efforts under MACV. But this does not necessarily mean that the decision was the right one, or even the best one. Many senior Americans, including Ellsworth Bunker, Abe Abrams, Bob Komer, and Bill Colby, believed that this side of

the war was essentially won in 1970–1971. There are other opinions, however. The CIA in Washington felt that the jury was still out, that many important areas were being strongly contested, and that it was too early to make any positive judgments. Others believed that Hanoi decided after the Tet offensive to rely primarily on the North Vietnamese Army to conquer the South and therefore put less emphasis on the war for control of the countryside. Moreover, the North was also busy recovering from the damage done by the allied incursion into Cambodia in May 1970 and by the South Vietnamese raid into Laos in February 1971, and thus was not in a position to help local efforts in the South. Still another school feels that Hanoi never intended to share power in the South with their southern cousins and deliberately misled the political cadres in the South to surface prematurely during Tet 1968. Such a thesis, that Hanoi wanted a weak political structure in the South, has been borne out by subsequent events since the fall of South Vietnam. Thus one can argue that progress in pacification in the 1970–1971 period might have been somewhat illusory.

Turning to Professor Allan Goodman's paper on Vietnamization and negotiations during the Nixon administration, 1969–1973, my first comment on this useful and interesting paper is that I do not believe one can have a meaningful discussion of U.S. negotiations with Hanoi using January 1969 as a starting point. Rather, one must go back to the first U.S. attempts to open talks with the North Vietnamese early in President Johnson's administration which began prematurely and set the wrong tone for years to come. Starting not long after the U.S. bombing offensive against the North in early 1965, Johnson made numerous peace initiatives and bombing "pauses" or halts. After announcing the 31 March 1968 bombing halt and his decision not to stand for reelection, the president finally got some peace talks going in Paris in May 1968. The allied position in Vietnam was not strong enough to warrant serious negotiations in 1968, and Hanoi took Johnson's initiatives as signs of weakness and a lack of self-confidence, thus encouraging Hanoi to remain intransigent in the firm belief that the regime's will was stronger than that of the United States. President Nixon, on the other hand, realized that the allied position had to be strengthened and decided to bring more and more pressure on Hanoi before negotiating in earnest. Thus the president's National Security Adviser, Dr. Henry Kissinger, did not really expect any success when he tried to open

talks in August 1969, and, although secret negotiations got started in February 1970, there was no significant progress until October 1972 when Hanoi finally recognized that its Easter offensive of 1972 had completely run out of steam. I would make the point that Professor Goodman's quite well taken view that Americans are not very good at the art of negotiating with Communists, while at the same time fighting, applies a good deal more to President Johnson and his approach than to President Nixon who had a very hard-nosed approach. Unfortunately the only thing that Hanoi was willing to negotiate was the withdrawal of U.S. power from the region and time was running out on the Americans.

With respect to Goodman's thesis about being more careful how we choose an ally, however, I have some reservations. The simple truth is that a nation cannot always choose the allies it would like to have. U.S. national interest and the situation at the time often dictate an unpleasant choice. A nation does not have permanent allies, only permanent interests. In World War II it became mandatory that we ally ourselves with Communist Russia against the Axis powers. There was no alternative.

I would prefer not to compare the situation today in El Salvador with Vietnam because I believe that the two situations are entirely different in virtually every respect—politically, economically, militarily, psychologically, and strategically. The alternatives for the U.S. in El Salvador are far more serious in their implications and therefore do not lend themselves to comparing the risk, cost, and benefit factors with those associated with Vietnam.

Finally, I agree with Allan Goodman's point that we Americans at times appear very amateurish in negotiating with hard-core Communist pros, but I'm not sure about his solution. After all, a U.S. negotiator operates within the guidelines and often specific guidance laid down by the secretary of state or the president, who are usually inhibited by domestic or international political factors over which they have little control. At any rate, secretaries of state and presidents often need such education and training, too, but it is a little late for on-the-job training for such senior personages. And so perhaps our nation needs to address a slightly different question: Today, where are the George Marshalls, the Dean Achesons, the Robert Murphys, and Bob Lovetts of yesteryear? How do we produce such men and women with the kind of background and experience the nation demands?

Commentary

Robert W. Komer

Despite the fact that this is a conference sponsored by the U.S. Army, I would like to say that it was not really a ground versus an air war. It was rather a strategy of win the war in the South using both ground and air power and whatever of the Navy we could steal, versus an extended war, extending it into the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia as well as into North Vietnam. It seems to me that these are the proper strategic divisions. Either you win the war in-country or you try to widen the war as MacArthur did so terribly successfully in Korea. Now the reason why we decided differently in both Korea and Vietnam after one rush of hubris to the head was that we had lived in a basically different strategic situation ever since the advent of the atomic bomb. Vietnam was the second U.S. limited war in the nuclear age. And by that time we had learned very clearly a lesson: Do not escalate out of country. Allow the other fellow sanctuaries and he in turn will allow you sanctuaries. Now this was a set of no-nos for my friend Colonel Harry Summers, whose book on Clausewitz as seen through the eyes of the Army War College is enjoying quite a trendy vogue these days. Harry Summers really thinks that the U.S. Army went off and fought the insurgency. Well, as a guy who was constantly complaining that the U.S. Army was not paying any attention to the insurgency, I will say that, Clausewitz or no, Colonel Summers had it backwards. He was a representative of a school of thought that did not understand either the constraints on limited war in the nuclear age or that what we were fighting was somewhat different from the conventional kind of war. Even though the three papers do not cover much of the conduct of the war, nonetheless all three are quite provocative and they do illuminate three crucial but underappreciated aspects of that war. Take Hunt's paper on counterinsurgency, for example. He says more about the counterinsurgency problem than there is in Stan Karnow's entire book. Now Bruce Palmer has just written a book and he is splendidly literate,

but even he hardly mentions pacification. Indeed, I have some small cause to be surprised. Bruce and I sat next to each other for sixteen months in the strategy conclaves in Saigon, and he never told me once that he did not believe in the HES or that CORDS was not the right way to go. We Americans still don't seem to understand, although Doug Pike I now understand has been telling us so since 1960, that Vietnam was at least three different, interwoven wars. There was the overarching political struggle over who had the mandate of heaven to unify the country; there was an armed insurgency which, as Pike brings out, was Hanoi's preferred strategy to unify the country to at least early 1965; and third, especially after U.S. entry in 1965, a quasi-conventional big-unit war which was superimposed on a genuine insurgency. Now Pike's paper breaks new ground, at least to me, by showing how it was not just the Americans who escalated to a big-unit war. It shows how Hanoi escalated to what he calls a regular force strategy of bringing in North Vietnamese Army battalions to frustrate the U.S. intervention. As he brings out, we never really grasped that there were at least three levels of war under way. Instead, from about 1960 on, really that's 1955 on, we focused on the conventional military threat of North Vietnamese attack across the 17th Parallel on the Korean model. Now why did a decade's worth of military advisers keep giving the wrong kind of advice to the Vietnamese and equip the Vietnamese for the wrong kind of war? Wrong tactics, wrong equipment, wrong everything else? It was because the only model we had to go on was Korea. And consequently we tried to do it on the Korean model.

Another paradox, it seems to me, is that the war finally ended the way the American military advisers thought it would begin, with a heavy, conventional North Vietnamese attack across the DMZ in 1975, against which the ARVN crumbled and during which the pacified areas were simply swept up in the rout. Hunt brings out another paradox, that is, if you read the policy documents, pacification was seen as essential by the French and the South Vietnamese as well as the Americans, but there is an enormous difference between policy and performance. Pacification was never seriously pursued as a major effort by the French, or by the Americans, or by the South Vietnamese, until after the Tet offensive. Now, arguably, pacification worked better than expected from 1969 through 1971. I would not amend Hunt's conclusion that the successes of pacification came about primarily through the application of greater resources and U.S. managerial reforms and finally Vietnamese responsiveness

after the Tet setback galvanized the South Vietnamese government, as Ambassador Bui Diem was telling me at luncheon, to finally take pacification seriously. And bear in mind pacification was always a Vietnamized program, quite unlike the big-unit war. So if there were any successes in pacification they were owing to the Vietnamese and not to the Americans.

There were other reasons why things seemed to go better in the countryside after the Tet offensives and the Viet Cong's own enormous losses in the Tet offensives, where they used mostly southern cadre, denuding the countryside to generate forces to attack the cities. They upgraded a lot of rural guerrillas and just tossed them willy-nilly into the outfits that were supposed to attack the province capitals. This created a rural vacuum into which, slow as we were, we managed to move faster than Hanoi, and using primarily the Regional and Popular Forces, which we had managed to create in that time. In short, it was the enemy's losses, perhaps, as much as CORDS and Vietnamese government efforts which led to the striking pacification expansion between 1969 and 1972.

Turning to Allan Goodman's dual-tracked strategy, I'm not so sure that the U.S. failed to mesh these two tracks of Vietnamization and negotiation as badly as Goodman suggests. Go back and read NSSM 1 and you will realize that President Nixon knew that he had to get out of Vietnam. Since we played the game of historical "ifs" this morning, let me say that I at least believe, and I spent a lot of time with him, that if Hubert Humphrey had been elected president in 1968 he would have been under the same compulsion to Vietnamize and disengage. Now Nixon conducted this strategic withdrawal with considerable skill. He turned and fought in mid-1972, when he also took advantage of Hanoi's 1972 offensive to blockade Haiphong, and at the end of the year when it looked as though Hanoi as going to pull back from the negotiated truce, he launched the end-of-the-year Christmas bombing. I'm not condoning those, I'm simply saying that they were part of the highly skillful strategic retreat. And in the end Nixon got what he wanted. He got the U.S. out without a catastrophic U.S. defeat. The trouble was it cost the Vietnamese a later catastrophic defeat, and the cost in blood and treasure was very high indeed. I'm not too sure of my figures but I think that both U.S. and Vietnamese losses and costs were higher in the 1969–1972 period than they had been in the 1965–1968 period. There was a high cost to the president in terms of domestic dissent rising as well.

Now it is true, Allan, that Hanoi outplayed us at the negotiating game. But in the end, the point is, it seems to me, that we did manage to disengage successfully, and the costs to our power position were more self-inflicted than in terms of a basic shift in the balance of power. I would also emphatically agree with Goodman that Vietnamization was a failure, as the 1975 debacle amply showed. We never operated on the RVNAF leadership the way we should have. Goodman is right that the failure of the RVNAF to reform itself was at least as important as the waning U.S. will to go on funding and approving it as a major cause of the failure of Vietnamization. Colby doesn't agree with me, but I think that the United States did not lose South Vietnam even though it contributed to the loss. Saigon's government and its army lost their own war, with some help from us. Now minor errors, Dr. Goodman, in your paper. It is wrong to say that Vietnamization allowed more resources to be given to pacification. Pacification resources went down *pari passu* after 1969 along with everything else. I would disagree that 1968–1972 saw successive dry season offensives by the VC and NVA, each of which was stronger in intensity than Tet. And I think you extended that to 1973 and 1974. I would frankly say that the figures show on the contrary, as Pike indeed brings out, that the Tet losses (and remember that Tet was three different offensive operations—January and February, the second attempt on the cities in May, and a third in August and September which really never got off the ground because by this time we knew what was going on)—forced Giap to revert to his own neo-guerrilla strategy from late 1968 to Easter 1972. It is interesting to me that it took four years for Hanoi to regenerate enough forces, the North Vietnamese this time, for the next major offensive, and four years despite U.S. gradual withdrawal from 1969 on. Finally I question how far you can carry Goodman's lesson that we Americans are ill suited to follow dual-track strategies in wartime—fight and talk. I'll admit this strategy did not work out terribly well in Vietnam. However, it did work rather better in Korea from 1950 to 1953.

I must say that of the three papers I found Doug Pike's the most striking. One can hardly disagree that there was very little U.S. grasp or strategic analysis of Hanoi's strategy. It's very hard to contest Pike's devastating critique of our failure to understand Hanoi and the VC. I found particularly interesting his point about bureaucratic compartmentalization preventing us from seeing the enemy whole. Like the blind man, each agency in Washington felt only its own part of the elephant, and the composite they came up with was not real.

Also this wide variety of competing American perceptions of the war and of the enemy did deprive us of a unity of purpose and consensus on a war policy, which in time, along with what appeared to be a stalemate, undermined the American ability to sustain the war politically. Professor Pike's most fascinating conclusion, at least to me, is about the period on which his paper chiefly focuses, what he calls the regular force strategy period, early 1965 to mid-1968. He says that Hanoi was on the verge of victory over Saigon before U.S. troops could arrive in strength. Instead of pursuing the strategy that was leading to imminent victory, Giap cut back the attacks to devise a new strategy to deal with the incoming Americans. And Pike sees this shift as also evolving from an argument between two factions in Hanoi. There were the advocates of protracted guerrilla conflict versus the big-unit war strategists like Le Duan. He sees it as resulting from a second factor, Hanoi's growing suspicions of the unreliability of the VC. Hence the desire to have a reliable North Vietnamese force in the South. This suggests to me that we were not the only ones who were confused about what strategy to pursue. Hanoi, too, opted for different things at different times and it, too, had its share of the failures. The thing is that, like the British, it won the last battle. Just as Washington altered the war by bringing in fresh American battalions and starting a massive bombing, Hanoi also changed it by bringing in an increasing number of North Vietnamese regular battalions. Pike stresses how massive American mobility and firepower led Giap increasingly to try to increase the tempo of the war, what you call a "go-for-broke" tempo instead of protracted conflict. Of course the culmination of that is the winter-spring campaign of 1967 and 1968 which peaked with the Tet offensive. And then the enormous Tet losses drove Hanoi back to a protracted war strategy until mid-1972—as I say a different conclusion from Goodman's. I think Pike is much more accurate in saying that Hanoi reverted, post-Tet, to a protracted war strategy because the failure of a general offensive and the general uprising plus the enormous Tet losses mainly deprived Hanoi of any other realistic alternative.

SECTION III

Afterward

The Vietnam War and the Army's Self-Image

Ronald H. Spector

"All of a sudden the stick-in-the mud dogface Army has come alive. It sits once again with the high and the mighty: its recovered elan is the envy of the Air Force and Navy whose nuclear weapon systems and other 'fancy Dan' technology had come to over-shadow the Army throughout the Eisenhower years and indeed through the first Kennedy year." So wrote *Fortune Magazine* in May 1966. "It can be said without exaggeration" continued the magazine, "that the Army had never entered a war situation as well led as it is today. All but a fraction of the serving general officers and colonels have seen action or done staff duty in one or another of the great campaigns of World War II or Korea."[1]

Operational experience in Vietnam during 1965 and 1966 seemed to bear out the truth of this confident appraisal. "You just can't understand how lucky we are to have soldiers like this," declared a captain with the 1st of the 26th Infantry. In 1967 "he fought as bravely, if not more so than his predecessors in World War I or II. . . . He had a knock down drag out infantry type battle close in, hand to hand fighting retook his position. . .above all performed with a mark of professionalism that I think some people don't attribute to our soldiers today."[2] "The amazing thing about our troops is that they fought with all they had, never complaining," observed a veteran infantryman. "The men out there were outstanding, and if I have to go into battle again I hope the same type men are with me."[3]

A battalion commander reported that "I saw slightly wounded [men], when the helicopters were going back with resupplies, lining up to get aboard and go back to their units. . . .I told them they couldn't make it, they said they could. Those who had severe limps, I asked to walk ten paces and when they couldn't walk ten paces they broke down and cried."[4]

Five years later a radically different picture emerges. In June 1971 a respected military correspondent published a widely reprinted article entitled "The Collapse of the Armed Forces" in which he declared "the morale, discipline and battle-worthiness of the U.S. Armed Forces" to be "lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly in the history of the United States."[5] He placed much of the responsibility for this situation "on leadership which is soft, inexperienced, and sometimes plain incompetent."[6] Other articles in a similar vein described the Army's morale as "skidding fast," soldiers freaking out on drugs, assaulting officers and NCOs, and refusing to fight.[7]

In a confidential message, the Commanding General, U.S. Army, Vietnam, General William McCaffrey, reported that "discipline within the command as a whole has eroded to a serious. . .degree" since mid-1969 and that "within the chain of command it is well known that communicaton has broken down."The problem, thought McCaffrey, "is soluble, but not on a short term basis."[8] Leading universities like Harvard, Dartmouth, and Yale closed down their ROTC programs and a West Point cadet confided to a reporter that, when on leave, he attempted to pass himself off as a civilian student.[9] Only about a third as many officers were continuing in the Army past their initial service obligation as in 1961, ten years before.[10]

Between its confident entry into the Vietnam conflict and the final withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1974 the Army underwent what one of its general officers described at the time as "an identity crisis."[11] It might be more accurate to call it a collective nervous breakdown. The Army of 1965 was an organization in which almost all the members, from the most unhappy draftee waiting out his two years to the highest ranking general officer, understood and accepted their roles and the roles of their fellow soldiers. It was an organzation in which the answers to all problems—recruitment, training, leadership, discipline, and conduct—were known and accepted. Rules and procedures for dealing with deviant behavior were well established and acknowledged, yet seldom needed to be invoked. Five years later the complex fabric of custom, law, discipline, esprit, and coercion which had held the Army together had disintegrated. In almost every area of the soldier's life, from recruitment to drug use, from kitchen police to race relations, there had been a breakdown of consensus and subsequent controversy and confusion.

What had happened? What caused this near collapse, this crisis of confidence? Contemporary observers had little trouble finding the

answer: Vietnam. Vietnam, said journalists and other civilians, had strained the Army almost to the breaking point. The endlessness of the war, reports of large-scale civilian casualties, apparently futile battles like Hamburger Hill, and the appalling My Lai incident had undermined the Army's prestige and saddled it with the onus of failure. "The war and its problems have caused a backlash of anti-military feeling in society," wrote one reporter.[12]

Whatever they might think, few career Army leaders, from "lifer" sergeants to three-star generals, doubted that the Vietnam War had been a disaster for the Army. "You can make a case for saying the Army accomplished its mission but now the price—the price has been a terrible one," observed General Michael S. Davison. "It has given the Army a very tough blow," agreed Maj. Gen. Howard S. Cooksey. "The longer the war goes on the more unpopular it [the Army] becomes." Even Army Chief of Staff General William Westmoreland, former top U.S. commander in Vietnam, agreed that "this six years of war has truly stretched the Army almost to its elastic limit. It has been a very traumatic experience for us."

Other officers were even less circumspect than Westmoreland. A former division commander in Vietnam concluded, "I can't justify it now that I see what the war has done to our country. It went on much too long. We have already lost more than we can ever gain no matter what happens. . ." "The young people know this war is wrong," observed another general. "They know we've killed more people than the North Vietnamese ever would have. We have to wait ten years now before we can regain the trust of the young."[13]

A significant feature of this deep pessimism in regard to the Army's Vietnam experience was that it was probably at its most intense during the 1970–1972 period, well before the final collapse of the Saigon regime. In those years most Americans, including Army leaders, believed that the U.S. had not checked the Communist attempt to conquer South Vietnam. A second significant feature of this climate of opinion was that few, if any, Army leaders or middle grade officers believed that the war could and should have been won. To the contrary, many commanders expressed the view that "the best thing for the Army to do would be to get out of Vietnam as fast as possible." They believed "that a continued presence provides little help for the Vietnamese but exacerbates the problems of drugs and disaffection." Even officers who disagreed like Lt. Gen. John H. Cushman, a veteran combat leader and adviser, talked more in terms

of saving face than of winning. "It would be disastrous for the Army's self-respect," Cushman told a reporter, "if people said we had to get out to save our skin."[14]

On the other hand, many military men tended to explain most of the Army's problems as a reflection of the larger problems of American society. If the Army faced widespread insubordination, social tensions, and drug abuse, then so too did civilian institutions. In a study appropriately titled *America's Army in Crisis,* Lt. Col. William L. Hauser suggested that the Army's troubles were due to the fact that it was experiencing "a delayed version" of the social transformation which armed forces in other countries had experienced following World War II.[15]

Still another explanation was that, as Heinl had suggested, the current crisis was the result of incompetent leadership. In April 1970 Army Chief of Staff General William Westmoreland directed the Army War College to undertake a study of "the moral and professional climate in the Army."[16] The study, labeled "The Army War College Professionalism Study," took the form of a detailed questionnaire, administered to over four hundred captains, majors, and colonels at various Army schools. The responses to these questionnaires revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the integrity and professional competence of the Army's leadership.

Officers repeatedly characterized the senior commanders of the Army as, in most cases, narrowly ambitious, preoccupied with pleasing superiors, too busy to pay attention to their subordinates, demanding only "good news," intolerant of even the smallest failures, and occupying their positions too briefly to actually master them.[17] One respondent observed, "Officers do not know their own jobs well enough and. . .they are afraid if they delegate authority to subordinates. . .they themselves will suffer. . . .The present day commander looks upon his command tour as a mechanism to help him get ahead." Another wrote of "endless Cover-Your-Ass exercises [which] create suspicion and distrust on the part of juniors for the integrity and competence of their superiors."[18]

The professionalism study later provided the starting point for an even broader indictment of Army leadership. *Crisis in Command*, by Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, published in 1978, charged that the officer corps, which had become bloated, careerist, and incompetent, bore a large measure of responsibility for what they characterized as the "collapse" of the Army in the later years of the Vietnam War.

In the present discussion I would like to reexamine some of these contemporary explanations for the Army's "identity crisis" from the perspective of the 1980s. Because our present discussions concern Vietnam, I propose to concentrate primarily on the impact of the Vietnam War and the issue of leadership. This is not meant to imply that the impact of larger changes in American society was unimportant. Indeed, any explanation which attributes all the Army's troubles to the Vietnam War fails to explain why some of the most severe problems, such as racial tensions, crime, and drug abuse, occurred in the U.S. and Europe.

Yet the view that the Army's crisis was simply an outgrowth of societal problems thrust on the Army is equally insufficient. The Army has had society's problems thrust on it before. In the 1950s and early sixties it carried through a complete and thorough integration of the entire force in a period when integration was still regarded by many as either a righteous crusade or a dangerous social experiment. Yet integration was accomplished with minimal interference with the Army's morale and cohesion, and probably improved it. Indeed, it might almost be argued that the Army, as a traditional employer of last resort, has always inherited society's problems in terms of receiving its most marginal members: immigrants, the very poor, minorities, petty criminals, and illiterates.[19] What changed in the late 1960s was that the Army's mechanisms for socializing and disciplining these elements had broken down.

As for leadership, there are persuasive indications that the quality of the Army's officers and NCOs declined as the Vietnam War went on. In 1970, the commander in chief U.S. Army, Pacific, observed a "lessening of pride and professionalism among our junior officers and men. . . .The requirements imposed by Vietnam and the rapid promotions that have occurred, have resulted in a general decline in the quality and consequently prestige of our junior officers."[20] A persistent complaint was that the quality of graduates of Officer Candidate Schools had declined under the demands of the war.[21]

Evidence concerning the attrition rates of officer candidates appears to support the conclusion that the Army had lowered its standards. In 1965, prior to the Vietnam buildup, the attrition rate at all Army Officer Candidate Schools was approximately 42 percent. By late 1967 the attrition rate had fallen to 28 percent. When one takes account of the fact that a much smaller number of candidates was admitted in 1965, the picture that emerges is one of less selective

admission standards and less "selecting out" of candidates during training.[22] Shortcomings among senior officers, highlighted in the professionalism study, have already been discussed.

Yet despite such facts, despite the persistent invidious comparisons between officers of the Vietnam era and the great captains of World War II, there is no solid evidence for the belief that U.S. Army commanders in 1965–1970 were any less capable, on the whole, than those of 1941–1945.[23] During World War II nine division commanders were relieved of their commands in combat in the Pacific theaters alone. Two of the most senior and respected U.S. commanders, General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Husband E. Kimmell, had their forces crippled in devastating surprise attacks for which they were utterly unprepared. One has only to compare the first large battle of the Vietnam conflict in the Ia Drang with the first battles of World War II at Kasserine Pass and Bataan, not to mention the appalling debacles at the onset of the Korean conflict, to gain a sense of perspective. The worst mistakes of Lang Vei, Kham Duc, and Hamburger Hill pale into insignificance beside such ill conceived campaigns as Buna, the Rapido, Pelilieu, and Schmidt. And yet even the darkest days of World War II and the Korean War did not lead to the kind of soul-searching among the Army's leadership which followed five years of ostensibly successful operations in Vietnam.

In order to move beyond the cliches and tautologies about the Army's nervous breakdown, it is necessary to take a closer look at the composition and leadership of the Army during the seven years of the Vietnam conflict. On 28 July 1965, in a nationally televised White House news conference, President Lyndon Johnson announced that he had ordered an additional 50,000 men including the Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to Vietnam and that "additional forces will be needed later and they will be sent as requested."[24] Although it was not immediately apparent, the president's statement marked the beginning of a major U.S. military buildup in South Vietnam and the commitment of large U.S. forces to extended combat operations there. The Defense Department and the Army had anticipated such a development for several months and the Army had prepared plans to deal with the new situation.

The basis of all Army planning was the assumption that substantial numbers of National Guard and reserve officers and men would be called to active duty in the event of a major military commitment such as Vietnam.[25] Army planners had received Secretary of Defense

Robert McNamara's approval for a program to call up approximately 100,000 reservists for two years' service and to extend enlistments of men already on active duty in the event the president decided to commit U.S. forces to combat operations in South Vietnam.[26] A few days before the president's speech, however, Secretary McNamara informed the Army that the president had decided that there would be no reserve call-up or extension of tour lengths.

The reasons for the president's decision have been debated at length.[27] Much discussion has also been devoted to its impact on the overall U.S. strategic posture and the readiness of U.S. Army forces in Germany and the U.S. What has not been much discussed is the impact of the president's decision on the composition of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Yet the impact in that regard was profound. Denied the opportunity to call reserves or extend personnel tours, the Army was obliged to depend upon the draft and recruiting, largely induced by threat of the draft, to meet its manpower requirements. Deprived of its sources of additional experienced officers and NCOs in the reserves, it was forced to create an entire new corps of junior officers and noncommissioned officers on a crash basis. In effect the U.S. would have to create a "Vietnam-only" army.

The problem of providing enlisted manpower was met mainly through the draft and stepped-up recruiting. As the Vietnam buildup continued, draft calls were revised dramatically upward. Total inductions during fiscal year 1965, the last year of peace, had totaled about 120,000. For fiscal year 1966 the Department of the Army projected a modest increase of about 15,000 men. President Johnson's commitment of major units to Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965 quickly rendered these plans obsolete. The actual number of inductions during fiscal year 1966 was over 317,000 men, a 250 percent increase over the previous year. Inductions for fiscal year 1967 (the last half of 1966 and first half of 1967) continued at the 300,000 level. During the following fiscal year inductions reached a new high of 334,000. By the last half of 1968 levels of inductions had begun to decrease, but induction still totaled two and one-half times what they had been in the "normal" years of the early 1960s. Even during the early 1970s draft calls remained at levels almost twice as high as those of 1964.[28]

In addition to the draft, the Army successfully increased its recruiting of non-prior-service men for three-year tours of duty. The great majority of these voluntary enlistments were draft motivated

and prompted by the desire to obtain a guarantee of some particular training, branch, or area of service. Such guarantees were available only to enlistees.[29]

The nature of these new accessions was exhaustively studied by critics of the draft and the war, who presented persuasive evidence that sons of the less well-to-do and minorities were overrepresented in the Army. White upper-middle-class men, they argued, largely escaped to the safety of college or occupational deferments or bogus medical disabilities. What few writers on this subject have taken the trouble to notice is that the characteristics of new accessions to the Army changed drastically after January 1968, when President Johnson ended student deferments for graduate work. Prior to 1968 college graduates constituted about 4.5 percent of new accessions to the enlisted ranks. During 1968 through 1971 they averaged over 11 percent.[30]

More significant still are the attitudes toward military discipline and authority which the recruits of 1968–1971 brought with them. In a survey of attitudes toward basic training 33.3 percent of high school graduates indicated that they had developed a more favorable attitude toward the Army as a result of basic training. Only 16.4 percent of college graduates felt that way, and 46 percent said their attitude had become less favorable. In contrast only 22.8 percent of high school graduates held a less favorable attitude. An even more important difference could be found in the effect of basic training on recruits' "willingness to receive and carry out orders." Fifty-two percent of high school graduates felt "more willing" after basic, whereas only 18 percent of college graduates did. Only 8 percent of high school graduates were "less willing" following basic training whereas 24 percent of college graduates emerged from basic with this attitude.[31]

The requirements for officers and noncommissioned officers created by the Vietnam War were proportionally even greater than the requirements for additional enlisted men. At the time of the buildup, ROTC had become the primary source of officers for the active Army.[32] With the Vietnam buildup the Army moved quickly to try to raise ROTC enrollments through a stepped-up advertising campaign and increased availability of scholarships. Eight additional ROTC units were also established at universities which had previously lacked them.[33] The U.S. Military Academy also increased the size of its classes by about 25 percent.

Yet neither expansion of ROTC nor growth in West Point class size could immediately relieve the severe shortage of officers. To deal with that problem the Army turned to another time-honored expedient for meeting requirements for quick expansion of the officer corps—Officer Candidate School.

During World War II the majority of officers in the Army Ground Forces had been commissioned through the officer candidate program.[34] In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Officer Candidate School was utilized by the Army as a vehicle to develop promising enlisted men, particularly those with some college training, as junior officers. With the demands of Vietnam the Army stepped up its efforts to recruit college men for Office Candidate School. Almost 6,500 OCS candidates were enlisted under the "college graduate option" during 1965.[35]

The Army's recruitment efforts, together with increased pressure of the draft, began gradually to change the character of officer candidate classes. During 1966 and early 1967 OCS classes contained about one college graduate to every three nongraduates. By the fall of 1967 this pattern had reversed itself with college graduates filling three out of every four places in class.[36]

Output of Army Officer Candidate Schools increased by a factor of six during the first year of the Vietnam buildup, from 300 candidates a month to over 1,800 per month. During the second year, July 1966 to July 1967, the monthly average increased still further to 3,500. During the first three quarters of fiscal year 1967 the output of Army Officer Candidate Schools was equal to the entire officer production of those same schools between 1958 and 1966.[37]

While the Army acquired its Vietnam-era junior officers from traditional sources (OCS, ROTC, and the military academy), its solution to the problem of providing the additional noncommissioned officers required for combat and combat support units in Vietnam was radical and unprecedented. The decision to wage the Vietnam conflict without drawing heavily on the reserve forces meant that critical shortages soon developed in the middle ranks of the noncommissioned officer corps, particularly in the grades of E–5, E–6 and E–7. In the peacetime Army, enlisted men normally took five years or longer to acquire the requisite experience and seniority to attain even the rank of E–5. With the demands of Vietnam, however, the Army could scarcely afford to wait five years for a new corps of middle-level NCOs to work their way up through the ranks. Instead

the Army was obliged to make a two-grade substitution of personnel by picking the most promising PFCs (E–3s) and making them acting sergeants (E–5) in command of a squad.

As an alternative to this approach, the Army in later 1967 established a Noncommissioned Officer Candidate program whereby enlisted men who had completed their basic combat and advanced individual training could qualify for immediate promotion to sergeant (E–5) upon completion of a rigorous, twelve-week course at one of four Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Schools. Those who ranked in the top 5 percent of the class were eligible for immediate promotion to staff sergeant (E–6). About 70 percent of each class successfully completed the course and were awarded their stripes. Within a week of completing their training, most graduates were on orders to Vietnam. Quickly labeled the "instant" or "Shake and Bake NCO" course, the new program was producing 13,000 NCOs a year by 1968.[38]

The cumulative result of the Army officer and noncommissioned officer procurement policies, together with the president's decision not to mobilize significant numbers of reserve personnel, was that the Vietnam War was fought by two armies, the relatively small regular army of career officers and noncommissioned officers who served in the worldwide Army as well as in Vietnam, and the larger, "Vietnam-only" army of draftees, one-term enlistees, instant NCOs, and OCS and ROTC graduates. Of course, the Army had also undergone drastic expansion during World War II and Korea, but in World War II the new formations had been leavened with experienced officers and NCOs from the regular and reserve forces, and in Korea the Army could call on a large number of leaders with experience in the recent world conflict.

During the Vietnam era, however, the Army was unable to fill the large requirements for junior officers and middle-level NCOs, which soon developed, with experienced personnel since such personnel were to be found only in the reserves. Neither could the Army employ the system of building new units around experienced cadres of officers and NCOs because these officers and NCOs were required to serve in the Army's active units in NATO and the continental U.S. and because the one-year limitation on tours of duty in Vietnam meant that a relatively small percentage of experienced men would be available at any one time. The Army was thus left with no choice but to create an entirely new army up through company grade officer

and it was this "new army" which carried the burden of fighting and dying in Vietnam.

A few statistics tell the story. During 1969 draftees comprised 88 percent of infantry riflemen in Vietnam. A further 10 percent were first-term enlistees with only 2 percent career Army men.[39] The officers and NCOs who led these men were themselves mostly first-termers—ROTC, OCS, and NCOC graduates. Career men were plentiful at battalion and higher headquarters, but most of the fighting was done by companies, platoons, and squads. It is probably exaggerating only a little to say that "the Army," in the sense of the long-term career force, did only a minor part of the fighting in Vietnam.

The "Vietnam-only" soldiers did well. Through 1969 U.S. soldiers performed as well as or better than soldiers of any previous wars, and morale remained high. Yet a force with a special composition of the Vietnam army was peculiarly vulnerable to the problems which beset the Army in the late 1960s. Composed largely of draftees and one-term volunteers, led by a young, inexperienced, and constantly changing body of junior officers and NCOs and an equally transitory group of senior officers, it lacked the hard professional ethic to shield it from long-term effects of change in public opinion and perceptions of the Vietnam War.

Soldiers in the early years of the Vietnam conflict could still believe that they were performing a meaningful task and one which would ultimately lead to success for the U.S. As one former company commander recalls, "Morale. . .was really, really super. In 65 we really felt we were winning, felt we were making great progress."[40] "Nobody wanted to be known as a coward, nobody wanted to be known as not carrying his share of the load," recalled another former company commander of the 1967–1968 period. "The war was young. It was the only war they knew."[41]

With the shock of the Tet offensive, the increasing unpopularity of the war, and Nixon's subsequent "winding down" of the conflict, morale and motivation plummeted. "There was no doubt that people didn't see a mission over there," recalled a company commander of the 1971–1972 period. "It led to not doing a lot of things that would put you in a dangerous light. At least our battalion C.O. indicated to us 'look, we didn't want to get committed.'"[42] "Like nobody had hopes of winning the war. Everybody knew that the war was a loss," recalled a former infantryman of that period. "Everybody felt like they were outcasts."[43]

Besides the loss of a sense of purpose, the Vietnam-only army's cohesion and morale were adversely affected by the high degree of personnel turbulence occasioned by the twelve-month tour and the system of sending soldiers to Vietnam as individual replacements rather than as members of units. The system produced constant personnel turnovers, broke down unit cohesion, and ensured that, at any given moment, a platoon or company "in the bush" would be made up largely of inexperienced newcomers. A former platoon sergeant recalls that "the makeup of my platoon changed almost weekly. . . .After only two months in Vietnam, I had more experience than half the men in my platoon."[44]

The twelve-month tour was probably the most important single factor affecting the behavior and attitudes of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, and there is insufficient space here to discuss its many ramifications.[45] Suffice it to say that when the war began to sour in late 1968, the twelve-month tour, in all likelihood, strongly reinforced the breakdown of morale and cohesion.

The career noncommissioned officer, the senior sergeants who, in past wars, had provided the experience, leadership, and continuity for new soldiers and inexperienced junior officers were, in this war, conspicuous by their scarcity in the field. Soldiers in Vietnam consistently commented on the fact that few E–7s, E–8s, and E–9s could be found with infantry units in the field. A high-ranking officer of USARV worried that "we are going to get properly criticized with all these 7s, 8s, and 9s back in a comfortable, safe area while the 'Shake'n Bake' NCOs, who are draftees, fight the war."[46]

A newly arrived infantryman recalled being told by a member of his unit "that the so-called cadre of the replacement company were all senior NCOs and had an in somewhere so they never went to the field and none of them were ever in combat. . . .He also said that some of these NCOs were on extended tours, some up to four years, all drawing combat pay. . . .Their hooches were all dry and clean as well as stocked with things like radios, refrigerators and comfortable beds."[47]

This phenomenon of "lifers" in the rear, draftees in the field, was far more prevalent during the later years of the war than during 1965–1967. By 1970 many career NCOs were in their third tour in Vietnam. Many had been wounded in earlier tours. It was an aging NCO corps which was not replicating itself either through the "Shake and Bakes" or normal promotions. "These individuals, E–7s and E–8s, are people who are over here right now, most probably on

their third tour. Certainly none of them are here on their second," observed one division commander. "They have been wounded and they have had other things occur to them. . . .If you are over forty years old there is no place for you in a platoon. . . .It is impossible to get those guys to hump about in the jungle."[48]

As rear areas swelled with senior NCOs in the later years, so they also began to fill up with the misfits, malcontents, and malingerers sent back by the steadily dwindling number of units with active missions. "It was a kind of disintegrated situation," an infantryman of 1970 recalled.

> In the infantry units that were in the field, and the units that had a real mission that required effort and energy and intelligence to accomplish, they didn't have time to deal with disciplinary problems. If somebody was a foulup, had a bad attitude, somebody was hurting the work effort of other people, you didn't take the time to discipline him. You didn't take time to do anything. You shipped him back to the rear. So the rear units became the dumping grounds for all the bad actors from other units. And some of the [rear area units] were really outrageous because the people that were least equipped to deal with these kinds of problems were the ones in charge of the rear units.[49]

The decline in morale and cohesion was aggravated by a virtual breakdown of the old system of discipline and military justice. By 1971 almost all senior NCOs and company grade officers appeared convinced "that the judicial machinery of the armed forces has totally collapsed and was unresponsive to their needs."[50] Actually, the machinery had not so much broken down as become clogged and stalled by the thousands of cases of AWOLs, suspected drug users, and general "bad attitude" types awaiting trial or appeal of their cases.

The long delays in processing court-martial cases had many causes. The Army was woefully short of qualified court reporters in Vietnam and inexperienced young clerks who prepared many trial transcripts were not only slow, but their work was of such poor quality that cases often had to be prepared a second time.[51] This situation was aggravated by the tendency in many commands to return completed cases to lower echelons for correction of minor administrative deficiencies, thus entailing further delay. In the case of drug-related charges, further delays were entailed by the requirement to obtain a chemical analysis of the suspect substance. In the case of Vietnam the substance had to be flown to Japan for testing, and in many instances the laboratory technician was required to

testify personally at the court-martial.[52] Throughout Vietnam there was also an acute shortage of trained judge advocates.[53]

The backlog of court-martial cases resulted in a large transient population of soldiers awaiting trial or appeal in rear areas. Most of these men were under no restraint since pretrial confinement was severely restricted by long-standing MACV policies and by lack of confinement facilities. Even convicted offenders rarely served much time in confinement. "Very frequently first offenders get a suspended sentence," reported one officer. "Usually a commanding officer's recommendation for a courtmartial is remanded to a lower court by the convening authority to the extent that it is nearly impossible to obtain a general courtmartial. The EM knows he will at worst receive six months, which will be suspended for first offenders."[54]

The effect on morale and discipline in rear areas is well described by a Department of the Army survey team which visited Vietnam in the spring of 1971. They described "brigade Fire Support Bases or rear areas where each company or battery's disciplinary cases who were pending trial, administrated discharge etc. could freely move throughout a large area and make contact with other hardcore cases. This factor, combined with ready access to drugs and with the NCO leadership partially intimidated by the threat of physical retaliation, produces a dangerous and volatile situation."[55]

Yet when all these factors are taken into account, it is still insufficient to blame the Army's identity crisis solely on the souring of the Vietnam War or the manpower policies adopted to support that war. Even had the U.S. Army in Vietnam been a long-service career force with high unit cohesion it is doubtful whether it would have escaped most of the problems which beset it in 1970–1972. Studies of the French Army in Algeria and the British Army in the Boer War both point up the existence of many of the same type of problems in these relatively professional (not to say mercenary) armed services. The Israeli Army, by any standard a highly professional and well-led force, reportedly experienced similar problems in its recent occupation of Lebanon.

The Army's identity crisis of the early 1970s and its subsequent self-examination reveal many shortcomings and inadequacies in the Vietnam-era Army, but if the Army's experience in Vietnam teaches any lesson it is that no armed service no matter how well trained, equipped, and led can continue indefinitely to fight a meaningless war for which it can perceive neither compelling necessity nor hope of success.

NOTES

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13. All quotations from "'Young People Know This War is Wrong,'" *Washington Post*, 15 Sep 71.

14. Peter A. Jay and Peter Osnos, "War Casualties: Leadership, Morale," *Washington Post*, 15 Sep 71.

15. Hauser, *America's Army in Crisis*, p. 63 and passim.

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42. Oral History Interv, Lt Col J. L., Company Command in Vietnam oral history series.

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Commentary

Edward M. Coffman

In Colorado Springs on a March evening in 1976, during dinner with three Air Force officers and an infantry major, I listened closely when the conversation turned to Vietnam. The Air Force major described the rotation policy which kept people in their jobs only six months. As he explained, a commanding officer had to take two months to become qualified to fly in the area while he also learned his job. At best, you could expect a commander to be on top of things a couple of months before his tour was over. The same was true for his staff. The blue-suiter concluded: "If you attempted to run a business like that, it would go under." The Army officer responded: "Ours did."

The purpose of this symposium is to determine what happened and why in the American intervention in Vietnam. Ronald Spector's paper "The Vietnam War and the Army's Self-Image" is a solid contribution to this inquiry. The author delineates the difference between the Army which went to war in the mid-sixties and that which fought in the post-Tet years. He ascribes much of the later Army's problem not to the turbulence of American society in those years nor to poor leadership but rather to the decisions not to mobilize reservists and the maintenance of a twelve-month tour. This, in turn, led to another division between what he calls the Vietnam-only army, which consisted predominantly of junior officers, NCOs, and men who were civilians turned soldiers just long enough to train for and then serve their combat tour, and the professional army which officered battalion and higher headquarters but whose officers and men also were distributed in the continental United States, Europe, and Korea as it carried out other missions. This lack of experienced officers and men to leaven the company-level units contributed

greatly to the breakdown in morale and discipline. He concludes with the combined diagnosis and admonition "that no armed service no matter how well trained, equipped, and led can continue indefinitely to fight a meaningless war for which it can perceive neither compelling necessity nor hope of success."

I have only two qualifications which I wish to raise after a careful reading of this well-reasoned and researched paper. Then, if I may, I wish to address briefly the subject of the youth society from which one really cannot separate the Army in this era.

The first has to do with the uniqueness of the unleavened Vietnam-only army. To be sure, there were a few reservists and a much more substantial number of guardsmen in World War I, albeit the latter were segregated in separate divisions, and in World War II there were sizable representations of both civilian components, but the expansion of the prewar Regular Army to a wartime host of one to twenty in the first and one to thirty in the second war should give one some idea of how unleavened those wartime armies were.[1] The problem was not so much the result of a failure to call up more or less experienced officers and NCOs from the reserve and the guard but the limitations imposed by the twelve-month tour which Professor Spector correctly terms "the most important single factor affecting the behavior and attitudes of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam." This prevented a natural leavening of experienced veterans. My qualification is the minor one that I assign more importance to the limited tour than to the decision not to use junior leaders from the civilian components.

As a second qualification, I wish to suggest that Professor Spector overlooked a factor which, I believe, contributed to the "collective nervous breakdown" of the Army in its last years in Vietnam. This is the overmanagement by higher levels of command and the corresponding limitation in power and decrease in authority of small unit leaders which, I think, sapped their positions among the men with whom they lived and had to lead. Technology, particularly in the form of the ubiquitous helicopter, was the obvious culprit. It afforded the opportunity to carry to extremes the close supervision and control which higher commanders began to exercise in the trench war stalemate of 1952–1953 in Korea. Of course, the perspective is different from the air. What appears deceptively clear up there takes on an entirely different hue when one is breaking bush. Several years ago, two majors (an infantryman and an artillerist), each with two tours

in-country, explained to me that no one above the level of battalion knew what was going on in Vietnam. While some may argue that their perception was too narrow, the fact remains that if the officers and men fighting the war in the companies and batteries held that view, it certainly exacerbated any doubts they had as to the overall conduct of the war.

Another aspect of this general problem is the tidal wave of over-administration that has swept over our society since World War II. Those of us who have survived the past quarter of a century in academe can testify to the tremendous growth of bureaucracies on campus. In the military, this helps to undermine the position of the commander. I recall a conversation with an Air Force officer who did an outstanding job as a tactical wing commander during the war. He told me that as a squadron leader in World War II he had much more authority and responsibility as to the care and conduct of his men than he did during the Vietnam War. In the intervening twenty years, staff agencies had usurped much of this power and authority. His success was in spite of rather than because of the institution. When problems of the magnitude suffered in the post-Tet period emerged, the leaders in direct contact day in and day out with their men did not have the institutional power to back up whatever personal leadership characteristics they had. Again, the abbreviated tour compounded their difficult situation.

Professor Spector does not consider the influence of social problems on the Army as particularly crucial. I understand his point that these were symptoms rather than causes of the crisis. Yet I think someone should address the singular phenomenon that gripped the nation in that period and helped shape its response to the war. The distinguished economist, Peter F. Drucker, published an article in *Harper's* in 1971 that helped me understand what I had been witnessing at the University of Wisconsin over the previous years. The thesis of the "The Surprising Seventies" was that the new decade would differ drastically from the sixties. For the first time in history, seventeen-year-olds became the largest age group in the country in 1964, and that group continued to increase in size each succeeding year until 1971. The characteristics of seventeen-year-olds, according to Drucker, are rebelliousness, a searching for identity, addiction to causes, and intoxication with ideas. Elders were unable to maintain traditional controls over this group; thus society was more affected by naive, yet aggressive, forceful youngsters than ever before.

As they matured into their thirties, their views and actions would also change. Hence the seventies, as he predicted correctly, were different from the sixties.[2]

The great issue when the post–World War II baby boom hit college campuses and the world was the Vietnam War, but the civil rights movement of the early sixties helped prepare them for their role in the antiwar movement. This generation was the first to have so many grow up in affluent, middle-class suburbs; thus they were shocked to see the poverty and the problems of blacks. It was even more shocking to discover that such a large segment of the white, middle-class establishment condoned this situation and even came out against the civil rights activists. Some of the young people became involved in the movement, while others identified with the activists who were fighting the good fight and making sacrifices up to, and including in a few cases, their lives in a good cause. In the course of affairs, they adopted as their creed Pogo's maxim that we have met the enemy and he is us—with this qualification: the "us" became their seniors, those in authority. Given another characteristic of seventeen-year-olds as well as a good many other people, namely, a lack of knowledge and enough sense of history to put matters in perspective, many in this generation did not understand the basic premise of the cold war—the need for containing the expansion of communism. For many of them, the U.S. was at best equal to Russia as a threat to peace while to others the United States, again with a nod to Pogo, was the enemy. I recall a phrase spray-painted on a billboard in Madison: "U.S. out of Amerika."

While most of the militants presumably never served in the Army, those men and women who did were of this generation. Most of them could not afford the luxuries of college and were in greater or lesser sympathy with their more prosperous contemporaries. However, they watched those people make their points against the war over and over again as network news cameras followed protests, marches, debates, and assorted other kinds of antiwar activities. This sensitized them and nourished a malaise which was not conducive to the development of military virtues. Such attitudes in such an atmosphere, combined with the overreaching political and strategical problems of this war, resulted in a situation unprecedented in our history.

In conclusion, again, I want to congratulate Professor Spector for a paper which helped me to understand better what happened to our Army and, in a sense, to all of us, in Vietnam.

NOTES

1. In 1917 there were 200,000 in the Regular Army and National Guard, while at the end of the war there were 4 million. Leonard P. Ayers, *The War with Germany: A Statistical Summary* (Washington, 1919), p. 16. In June 1940, 266,000 were in the Army with 8 million serving five years later. Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*, 4 vols. (Princeton, 1949), 1: 54.

2. Peter F. Drucker, "The Surprising Seventies," *Harper's*, July 1971, pp. 35–39.

American Foreign Policy After Vietnam

Norman A. Graebner

I

Ambassador Graham Martin's flight from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon in April 1975 symbolized the magnitude of the nation's long misadventure in Vietnam. Analysts and writers had predicted such an ending for a full decade; they now reminded the American people that the evidence of continuing disaster had been available no less to those in government who had carried the country into Vietnam. Still the administration in Washington assumed no responsibility for what it and previous administrations had done. In late April 1975, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained why the long Vietnam experience would sink into history without compensation even in the form of some public enlightenment. "I think this is not the occasion, when the last American has barely left Saigon," he told newsmen, "to make an assessment of a decade and a half of American foreign policy, because it could equally well be argued that if five Administrations that were staffed, after all, by serious people, dedicated to the welfare of their country, came to certain conclusions, that maybe there was something in their assessment, even if for a variety of reasons the effort did not succeed. . . .Special factors have operated in recent years. But I would think that what we need now in this country. . .is to heal the wounds and to put Viet-Nam behind us and to concentrate on the problems of the future."[1]

Throughout March and April, as South Vietnam stumbled from one disaster to another, Washington struggled to stave off the final catastrophe. After the truce of January 1973, President Richard Nixon had assured South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu that United States forces "would not stand idly by in the event of

renewed large-scale military action by Hanoi." President Gerald Ford, while refusing to publish the Nixon-Thieu correspondence, took its implied obligations seriously and battled Congress into March for a $300 million military aid appropriation to save South Vietnam and Cambodia. Kissinger reminded the nation that the Vietnamese people had relied on the United States, had believed its commitments.[2] What kind of country, he asked, would deliberately destroy an ally? On 26 March the secretary reinforced his appeal, informing a press conference that peace was indivisible. "The United States," he warned, "cannot pursue a policy of selective reliability. We cannot abandon friends in one part of the world without jeopardizing the security of friends everywhere."[3] Columnist James Kilpatrick declared that the United States dared not accept the premise that its commitment to freedom beyond its borders was limited unless it was prepared "to accept the decline of the West and the ascendancy of Communist power throughout the world."[4] Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller predicted the extermination of a million Vietnamese in a Communist takeover. If that were true, nothing less than a genuine, permanent victory for Saigon would prevent it. No one contemplated that any longer.

On 10 April the president asked Congress for a special appropriation of $722 million in military aid for South Vietnam; he wanted an answer, he said, within a week. At the same time he requested authority to send sufficient forces into South Vietnam to evacuate 6,000 Americans and perhaps 200,000 Vietnamese. "Fundamental decency," declared the president, "requires that we do everything in our power to ease the misery and pain of the monumental human crisis which has befallen the people of Vietnam."[5] Congress, reflecting the clear opinion of the American people, rejected the administration's appeal. The *New York Times* expressed its approval: "It is inconceivable that a grant of $722 million today—under political and military circumstances so different from those of even a few weeks ago—could now save the demoralized and shattered armies of Saigon."[6] Ford and Kissinger argued that the situation in South Vietnam was salvageable, that additional aid would enable Saigon to stabilize the country. Under no circumstances, Kissinger reminded the press, had the United States the right to determine whether South Vietnam should defend itself. The secretary informed the Senate Appropriations Committee on 15 April that the United States had a moral obligation to the Saigon regime that extended over many years. America's failure to act in accordance with that obligation, he

declared, would not only bring tragedy to the people of Vietnam but also "would invariably influence other nations' perceptions of our constancy and determination. American credibility would not collapse, and American honor would not be destroyed. But both would be weakened, to the detriment of this Nation and the peaceful world order we have sought to build."[7] President Ford, on the following day, complained that the country faced a human tragedy in Vietnam because Congress refused to make a commitment of military and economic aid small in comparison to the $150 billion which the nation had already spent. It was a shame, he said, "that at the last minute of the last quarter we don't make this special effort. . . .It just makes me sick."[8]

Even as the secretary described the fall of Saigon as an event of potentially cataclysmic significance, he neglected to recommend the commitment of a single American soldier to save it. Never had the chasm between words and policy been greater. Throughout the final crisis the administration hoped less to save Saigon than to effect a graceful escape from its self-imposed dilemma. The overriding task of April 1975 was that of assuring the world that whatever the outcome of the struggle for Vietnam, it would not be the fault of the United States. As one American official in Cambodia phrased it, "Sometimes you have to go through the motions. Sometimes the motions are more important than the substance." To the end, every move of the administration was designed to avoid a hard decision—either to save the Saigon regime or to declare the American commitment terminated. In Saigon President Thieu blamed his troubles on the United States. "The failure in [U.S.] military and economic aid over the past year," he said, "has. . .greatly influenced the spirit of our troops and sapped the confidence of our people." In Washington Vietnamese Ambassador Tran Kim Phuong observed bitterly, "It is safer to be an ally of the Communists, and it looks like it is fatal to be an ally of the U.S." Thieu resigned on 21 April under pressure from his political opponents and, he added, from the United States government. "I never thought a man like Mr. Kissinger," noted the departing president, "would deliver our people to such a disastrous fate."[9]

Meanwhile Ambassador Martin in Saigon hesitated to close the book on United States efforts in Southeast Asia. To terminate the American mission, he knew, would create panic throughout the city. Martin insisted that all Vietnamese associated with the Americans would leave Saigon before he did, but he had no plan to accomplish

this feat. Don Oberdorfer reported in the *Washington Post* on 13 April: "The contradiction between what is being said and what is being done leaves room for misunderstanding and mistrust. Hardly anybody knows what Martin is thinking."[10] Martin, a true proponent of the American cause, delayed the evacuation for another two weeks, until the North Vietnamese forces were streaming through the city. When word of the order leaked out, thousands of Vietnamese surged through the embassy compound, struggling to board the waiting helicopters. American marines used tear gas and rifle butts to beat off the frantic Vietnamese while the embassy staff scrambled aboard for their final flight to safety.[11] By then the struggle for Vietnam had receded to the fringes of American consciousness. The escape of the Americans from the embassy roof captured the headlines; it scarcely captured the emotions of the nation's citizens.

As Saigon fell Ford and Kissinger urged the American people not to look back. The secretary admitted in his address before the American Society of Newspaper Editors on 17 April that the cost of the American involvement in Vietnam had been stupendous. "Whether or not this enterprise was well conceived," he cautioned, "does not now change the nature of the problem. . . .The Viet-Nam debate has now run its course. The time has come for restraint and compassion."[12] The president expressed his convictions to Eric Sevareid on 21 April: "It seems to me that the American people are yearning for a fresh start. . . .A lot of blame can be shared by a good many people—Democrats as well as Republicans, Congress as well as Presidents. . . .It is my judgment, under these circumstances, we should look ahead and not concentrate on the problems of the past where a good bit of the blame can be shared by many." On 29 April, following the evacuation of American personnel from Saigon, the president issued the following statement: "This action closes a chapter in the American experience. I ask all Americans to close ranks, to avoid recrimination about the past, to look ahead to the many goals we share, and to work together on the great tasks that remain to be accomplished."[13] At President Ford's press conference on 6 May, Helen Thomas of United Press International asked the president if he favored a congressional inquiry into the war. "Miss Thomas," he replied, "the war in Vietnam is over. It was a sad and tragic affair in many respects. . . .We ought to look ahead, and I think a Congressional inquiry at this time would only be divisive, not helpful." To Thomas' question whether the country might learn from the past, the president retorted; "I think the lessons of the past in Vietnam have

already been learned—learned by Presidents, learned by Congress, learned by the American people. And we should have our focus on the future. As far as I am concerned, that is where we will concentrate."[14] If the American people would demand no explanation of a failed policy at the moment of its collapse, they would not do so thereafter. Most Americans had not been touched by the war. For them no less than for official Washington, Vietnam no longer mattered.

II

It required no official admission of error to know that the war had lessons to offer. Perhaps the most pervading was the discovery that a democratic government cannot conduct a long, debilitating war in some distant land unless it can build and maintain a broad public consensus in support of that war. Americans who are asked to die in war must understand clearly why their deaths contribute to the security and welfare of the United States. Officials anchored the war's necessity to the concept of falling dominoes—that the loss of South Vietnam would unleash a process of Communist expansion from country to country until the Soviet Union, the center of international communism, would threaten the United States directly. Thus the United States entered Vietnam both to prevent the Kremlin from extending its power across Asia and to prevent World War III. When it became clear by 1966 that the United States would not achieve a clear military victory in Vietnam, the rationale for involvement shifted to one of protecting the *reputation* of the United States as a guarantor of world peace and thereby sustaining the country's effectiveness elsewhere. That year President Lyndon B. Johnson informed a Japanese visitor: "If I tear up the treaty with Vietnam I tear up the one I have with you and 42 others. . . .If I go bankrupt in one place, I go bankrupt all over."[15] At the same time General Maxwell Taylor asserted that the United States would pay dearly for defeat in terms of its "worldwide position of leadership, of the political stability of Southeast Asia, and of the credibility of our pledges to friends and allies." For official Washington, Vietnam carried the final burden for establishing America's capacity to manage change peacefully and effectively everywhere. What fed the military escalation was not the president's desire to dispatch more and more forces to Southeast Asia, but his refusal to question the need of American success in Vietnam.[16]

Until the teachins began in the spring of 1965, opposition to the war remained statistically insignificant, assuring President Johnson broad public support for his initial decision to Americanize the war. Thereafter the criticism of the war kept pace with the military escalation as Walter Lippmann, Adlai Stevenson, and such members of the Senate as J. William Fulbright, Mike Mansfield, Frank Church, and George McGovern began to question the open-ended American involvement in Southeast Asia. None of these critics were pacifists; none denied that the United States should defend its security with war when necessary. But they argued that the official portrayals of danger, cast in the guise of falling dominoes, were inaccurate—that the loss of Vietnam would not automatically lead to the loss of any other region of Asia or the Pacific. They defined the struggle for Vietnam as largely an indigenous contest to be resolved by the Vietnamese people themselves, and therefore of little consequence to either Washington or Moscow.

To carry the day against their domestic critics, American officials anchored their policies to words and emotions—to high promises of success and dire warnings of the consequences of failure—and not to a body of clearly recognizable circumstances, such as those created by Hitler, which carried their own conviction and recommended their own responses. It was not strange that the country divided sharply between those who took the rhetoric and admonitions seriously and those who did not. To defend the Vietnam intervention with a half million men, Washington was compelled to exaggerate the importance of that region to the United States and the rest of the world until it had committed more in cost and destruction than the results could justify. Editors complained that the administration, in setting its goals too high, had ruptured the fabric of national unity and compromised other aspects of American life. "The citizens of a democratic republic," concluded one Virginia editor, "are properly unwilling simply to take the government's word that their national interest requires massive expenditures of lives and treasure unless they can clearly perceive the danger. They will not support a military operation half-way around the globe unless its need can be demonstrated in terms of its importance to [national] security."[17] General Frederick C. Weyand, the last American commander in Vietnam, phrased the problem in similar terms: "The Army must make the price of involvement clear before we get involved, so that Americans can weigh the probable costs of involvement against the dangers of noninvolvement. For there are worse things than war."[18] In time the

war in Vietnam produced far more division at home than victory in Asia. In the process it demonstrated that a democracy cannot make demands on the lives of its citizens except against dangers to national security obvious enough to require little explanation.

Having failed to create the desired pro-war consensus in the United States, both the Johnson and the Nixon adminstrations sought to override the opposition to the war with claims to executive primacy unprecedented in the nation's history. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach reminded the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in August 1967 that "the expression of declaring war is one that has become outmoded in the international arena." Under modern conditions, he said, it was for the president alone to determine when and how the armed forces of the United States should be used.[19] That same month President Johnson informed a news conference that his administration did not require congressional authorization to commit armed forces, but had asked for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of August 1964 because, he added, "if we were going to ask them to stay the whole route. . .we ought to ask them to be there at the takeoff."[20] When in 1969, by a vote of seventy to sixteen, the Senate passed the National Commitments Resolution designed to limit national commitments to actions taken by both the executive and legislative branches, the Nixon administration retorted: "As Commander-in-Chief the President has the sole authority to command our armed forces, whether they are in or outside the United States. And, although reasonable men may differ as to the circumstances in which he should do so, the President has the constitutional power to send U.S. military forces abroad without specific Congressional approval."[21]

Actually Congress permitted both administrations to conduct their executive war. Congressional majorities simply abdicated to the foreign policy managers, seemingly powerless to contest the executive's claims to superior knowledge, much of it kept secret. They, no more than members of the administration, moreover, cared to contemplate the price of failure. Even as the war in Southeast Asia escalated to a cost of $25 billion a year, its defenders still emerged triumphant in Congress. Time after time they won the struggle for additional appropriations hands down. A congressional majority underwrote the war in Vietnam from 1961 to 1973 through its power of the purse; that war always belonged to Congress as much as to the president. With its power of the purse Congress could have terminated the American war at any moment, but it succumbed both

to its own convictions and to the threats that it would carry the burden of failure should it refuse administration requests. When congressional majorities in the summer of 1973 voted to cut off all funds for the war in Southeast Asia, a reluctant Nixon administration capitulated and brought the lingering American war to an immediate halt.[22] Until then congressional behavior was no measure of public support. Even among the millions who favored the war there were few who cared to send their sons to fight it.

Karl von Clausewitz warned that war rests on the trinity of people, army, and government, "[A] theory that ignores any one of them," he wrote, ". . .would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless."[23] Shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, General Weyand issued the same injunction: "The American Army really is a people's army. . . .When the American people lose their commitment, it is futile to try to keep the Army committed. In the final analysis, the American Army is not so much an army of the Executive Branch as it is an arm of the American people."[24] Thus Vietnam demonstrated, as its second profound lesson, the futility, even the danger, in administrative efforts to push a questionable policy onto Congress and the public by relying on the special powers available to the executive as commander in chief in fashioning and defending the country's military policies.

Having fought in Vietnam to demonstrate the validity of the country's global containment policy, Washington faced the task of explaining that the United States, in defeat, need not anticipate the continued disasters predicted by the domino theory. Despite what occurred in Vietnam, the administration argued, the American position in international affairs remained largely unchanged. Throughout April 1975 President Ford put the best face on the failure of United States policy in Southeast Asia. To counter the fear of a general American retreat around the globe, the president acknowledged that the connection between what happened in Vietnam and the nation's position elsewhere was not as strong as Washington had insisted in the past.[25] To underscore the country's capacity and will to stand firm elsewhere, and thus eliminate the problem of falling dominoes, the president assured newsmen in early April: "We will stand by our allies and I specifically warn any adversaries they should not, under any circumstances, feel that the tragedy of Vietnam is an indication that the American people have lost their will or their desire to stand up for freedom any place in the world."

Thereafter the president simply banished the domino theory from his speeches.[26]

Throughout the Vietnam crisis Kissinger addressed the issue of United States credibility with caution. In an interview with Pierre Salinger of *L'Express* the secretary admitted that the American retreat from Vietnam "raises questions about wisdom, judgment, and effectiveness, and questions about the impact of that setback on the psyche of the country. . . .I believe we have to face the fact that the past decade has raised certain doubts about American leadership."[27] At his news conference on 29 April Kissinger again faced questions about the domino theory and its possible impact on Southeast Asia. "I think it is too early to make a final assessment," he responded. "There is no question that the outcome in Indochina will have consequences not only in Asia but in many other parts of the world. To deny these consequences is to miss the possibility of dealing with them. So, I believe there will be consequences." In his interview with Barbara Walters on 3 May, Kissinger admitted that the United States government had made an error in using Vietnam as a test case; it should have defined the challenge of Communist expansion in Vietnamese rather than global terms.[28] Again at his news conference at Kansas City on 13 May the secretary addressed the issue of falling dominoes: "I have always held the view that any action in foreign policy has consequences—that you cannot end these consequences simply by denying that they exist. So a certain domino effect is inherent in any action. . . .It is now important to face the facts that we now confront and to deal with them. I believe we can deal with them, and we will deal with them. But we can't deny that there have been consequences."[29]

Actually the countries of Asia no more than the European allies had taken the concept of falling dominoes seriously. Some governments inquired whether the United States intended to honor its security commitments to other regions, but the leaders of Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Burma did not regard the domino theory an accurate description of reality. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew especially declared that his country had never accepted the concept as valid. All members of the Association of South East Asian Nations regarded themselves stable; all believed that they had developed to the point where guerrillas would have no chance against them. Some worried about Thailand because of its short supply lines to Laos and its thousand-mile common border with Indochina.[30] European leaders agreed generally that Vietnam

had been an obsession which prevented the United States from placing its energies where its foreign policy interests really lay, namely in Europe. Maurice Couve de Murville, chairman of the French National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, explained: "It is always good to be dealing with a reality—and Viet Nam was not a reality."[31] The fall of Saigon had no effect on Washington's relations with Moscow and Peking at all. The reactions of both Communist states were restrained, both behaving as if they were neutrals. As Tass expressed it, "A most dangerous seat of international tension has been liquidated."[32]

For some American analysts as well the country's failure in Vietnam was no reflection of weakness or a measure of its international position. What had collapsed was the expectation that money and machines could solve the problems of Southeast Asia. "What is 'fading,'" wrote James Reston in April, "is not 'America,' but the illusions that we could control events on the continent of Asia, 10,000 miles from home, and close to the interior military supply lines of China and the Soviet Union; that the concept of collective security would work in the peasant societies of Southeast Asia as it had worked in the advanced industrial societies of Europe."[33] Bayless Manning, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, recognized the bankruptcy of America's global containment policy. As he recalled later:

> With each passing day, it becomes more difficult for the mind to grasp in retrospect the basic facts about the Vietnam chapter in our national history. For more than ten years we tried to shore up an inviable regime in a small, distant, developing country, and to that end spent $300 billion, gave up 55,000 American lives, suffered 300,000 casualties, killed and wounded millions of Vietnamese, and threatened to tear apart our own domestic body politic. We lost perspective on our national interests; we misassessed our power; we misunderstood the motivations of others; and we profoundly misread the political and social environment of the day.

Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana summarized the issue succinctly: "In my opinion the United States is not an Asian power but a Pacific power—there's a great difference—and it was that conceptual misjudgment which embroiled us so disastrously in Southeastern Asia."[34]

III

Undoubtedly the Vietnam disaster affected the global outlook of many Americans, and not merely the critics. Without some public education most could not analyze why the policy failed, but in the absence of any measurable decline in the nation's security, they could only conclude that successive administrations had exaggerated the dangers to the United States posed by the struggle for Vietnam. Vietnam had long shattered the older consensus that the country would pay any price or bear any burden in defense of liberty. During the war's final years public opinion surveys revealed a trend toward isolationism. Declining numbers of Americans recognized any need for larger defense expenditures or the sending of United States forces abroad. Support for the draft gave way to the demand for an all-volunteer army. Congress manifested its skepticism of global containment when it passed the Church Amendment in June 1973, which prohibited further American combat in Vietnam. In December of that year it enacted the War Powers Act over the President's veto. This measure sought to involve Congress in any future deployment of American forces abroad by limiting purely executive action to sixty days. Then in 1976 Congress voted to end covert American action in Angola. Meanwhile Congress imposed restrictions on the CIA. These measures did not contract the country's established obligations abroad, but they did convey a congressional determination to prevent a repetition of the Vietnam experience and that largely by curtailing executive dominance of the foreign policymaking process.

President Jimmy Carter responded to this Vietnam syndrome by acknowledging America's declining world role and, with that recognition, a diminution of the strategic importance of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His assumption that third world countries had interests of their own and the will to pursue them reinforced his determination to avoid simple anti-Soviet postures to perpetuate the status quo. In his Notre Dame University speech of May 1977, he rejected the traditional cold war assumption that American interests were global. "Being confident of our own future," he said, "we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear."[35] For Carter the political, economic, and ideological potential of the third world was sufficient to eliminate any serious Soviet threat. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance spelled out the Carter approach in a statement before the

House Foreign Affairs Committee. "To view U.S.–Soviet relations from the perspective of a single dimension," he observed, "is to run the risk of failing to identify our interests carefully and to act accordingly."[36] In deserting the former commitment to global containment the Carter administration accepted to growing Soviet presence in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia with general unconcern—if often to the dismay of those who accused it of assigning world primacy to the Soviet Union. If Soviet policy in Africa and the Arabian peninsula was regrettable, it did not, for Carter, endanger American security. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's assistant for national security affairs, attributed the public's widespread acceptance of the Carter policies to the fact that "the country, as a whole, fatigued by the Vietnam War," was not prepared to confront the Soviet Union.

In Central America the Carter administration, in emphasizing human rights, broke with the American tradition of consigning the defense of United States security interests to anti-Communist regimes. Downplaying national security interests in Nicaragua, as elsewhere in the third world, the President refused to commit the United States to the support of Anastasio Somoza although he knew that Somoza's enemies, the Sandinistas, received aid from Cuba. For Carter the Nicaraguan revolution was a legitimate exertion of force against a tyrannical regime and held greater promise than the Somoza government for a just and democratic society. Indeed, Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Panama helped to bring Somoza down and finally send him into exile in 1979. Carter's critics detected in the administration's pro-Sandinista behavior evidence of an ideological shift away from cold war concerns, a denial that United States interests in the third world required active support of anti-Communist elements, and an apparent conviction that the United States should employ its military might only with extreme reluctance.

In the vanguard of those who condemned the Carter administration for its inaction in countering unwanted changes in the international landscape was the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD). This committee, led by Eugene Rostow and Paul Nitze, comprised largely former generals, admirals, State Department officials, and academicians who were troubled by the persistent building of Soviet military power and the concomitant failure of the United States to oppose Russian activities in Africa and the Middle East especially. Going public in October 1976, the CPD argued that the Soviet drive for dominance, based on unprecedented military preparations,

required a much higher level of American defense expenditures. The CPD explained its position: "If Soviet dominance of the strategic nuclear level is allowed to persist, Soviet policymakers may—and almost certainly will—feel freer to use force at lower levels, confident that the U.S. will shy away from a threat of escalation." Nitze summarized the argument for American nuclear superiority: "To have the advantage at the utmost level of violence helps at every lesser level."[37] Even as the CPD launched its crusade for military expansion, a government panel, headed by Professor Richard E. Pipes of Harvard University, concluded an intelligence estimate of the U.S.S.R. with the warning that the Soviets based their planning on the assumption that they could win a limited nuclear war, destroying American society while losing no more than twenty million Russians. Clearly the United States required the power and determination to overcome the twin forces of Soviet power and third world nationalism as growing dangers to American security.

Ignored by President Carter in his advisory appointments, the CPD set out to mobilize the public against the administration's predictable passivity toward both the U.S.S.R. and the third world. Forced to the outside, CPD spokesmen, many of whom were former presidential advisers, held a press conference three days after Carter's victory in November 1976, to unveil the new Soviet threat. During subsequent weeks the committee criticized Carter's appointments and balked especially at the nomination of Paul Warnke as the new administration's chief arms negotiator. It condemned Carter's initial arms proposal for not protecting the country's security. Carter met the CPD's challenge by inviting a delegation of its members to the White House. The meeting only confirmed the depths of disagreement between the Carter administration and the CPD. To rekindle the necessary cold war atmosphere, the committee focused on the dangers facing the country, charging that they lay essentially in Washington where the administration's emphasis on nationalism and interdependence was destroying the country's will to act. The committee challenged Carter's central assumption—that in a world of triumphant nationalism American power had no legitimate or necessary use—by arguing that the Kremlin stood behind the assaults on international stability everywhere.[38] Thus for the CPD inaction was synonymous with weakness and retreat.

Amid the continuing domestic ruminations about the administration's failure of nerve, the expanding Soviet-Cuban presence in Africa could only embarrass the president. During the spring of 1978

State Department officials charged the Kremlin with maintaining 37,000 Cuban military personnel in twenty African countries. Unwilling to counter this Soviet-Cuban presence in Africa with a direct economic or military response, the administration searched in vain for some means to multiply the costs to the Kremlin. Finally the president, in his Annapolis address of June 1978, accused the Russian leaders of waging an "aggressive struggle for political advantage" in Africa. The challenge was blunt. "The Soviet Union," he declared, "can choose either confrontation or cooperation. The United States is adequately prepared to meet either choice."[39] Many in Washington scarcely concealed their satisfaction with the President's new toughness.

Some analysts challenged the fears that underwrote the administration's changing mood. They reminded the country that Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, and Spain had abandoned their respective possessions in Africa because they found them economically unprofitable and impossible to govern. How others could succeed where the Europeans had failed was not clear. It seemed incredible that African countries which had sought independence for so long would willingly become puppets of Cuba or the Soviet Union. Most Africans could detect nothing objectionable in Russian behavior, for the Russians and Cubans had gone only where they were invited. Nowhere had they broken international law. When New York Senator Daniel P. Moynihan and former Secretary Kissinger charged that the United States should not have permitted the Cubans to enter Ethiopia, the *New York Times* editorialized: "One man says threaten anything, no matter what the chances of making good on the threat. The other says never mind the particular stakes or possibilities, in geopolitics everything is tied to everything else. . . .There, we submit, walks the ghost of Vietnam. . . .Whatever the stakes on the ground, or the possibilities, for geopolitical reasons Hanoi had to be stopped. . . .To resurrect that logic against a President who seeks new techniques for applying American influence around the world is a dangerous game indeed."[40] Far better, said the *Times*, to portray the risks and costs to Moscow. Experience suggested that the Kremlin would be no more successful than Washington had been in converting Ethiopia into a bulwark against anything. Brzezinski defended the adminstration's policies of inaction by asserting that the fatigue of Vietnam prevented United States counteraction to ward off Soviet and Cuban assistance to Ethiopia; he never specified the nature of that counteraction. Perhaps Carter's mistake

lay less in his rejection of force than in his neglect of a confrontationist posture which might have maintained the illusion of power and will while cloaking the reality of limited intent. If any of his critics really wanted an American war in Africa, they never revealed it.

Strategically the Middle East was another matter, made so by its gigantic stores of oil, its central location astride the major routes to the Orient, and its proximity to the Soviet Union. After the Suez crisis of 1956 the United States displaced the British and French to become the protector of Middle Eastern stability. To limit Soviet influence in the region, Washington offered aid to pro-Western governments under the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957, supported Israel against the Arab world in an otherwise even-handed policy, and sought to transform Iran into a bastion of Middle Eastern security with heavy sales of sophisticated military equipment to the shah. America's Middle Eastern policy faced its initial test in early 1979 when a Moslem revolution overthrew the shah, an event which dramatized the vulnerability of American power in the Middle East. The Carter administration responded with a reassertion of this country's global interests. "The United States," declared Defense Secretary Harold Brown in late February, "is prepared to defend its vital interests with whatever means are appropriate, including military force where necessary, whether that's in the Middle East or elsewhere." Energy Secretary James Schlesinger added, "The United States has vital interests in the Persian Gulf. The United States must move in such a way that it protects those interests, even if that increases the use of military strength."[41] The president advocated additional arms sales to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel; otherwise he continued his policy of inaction. With the seizure of the American embassy in November 1979, Iran challenged American sensibilities but not American security. For Carter this again eliminated any resort to force. Some charged the president with softness, suggesting that other policies would have secured the immediate release of the embassy personnel.

Carter's apparent failures of 1979, which included, in addition to the events in Iran, his frustrated effort to remove a Russian brigade from Cuba and his acceptance of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, added impetus to the demands for tougher global policies. As early as June 1978, a CBS News–*New York Times* poll revealed that over half of the American people favored a firmer approach to the Soviet Union. In March 1979, *Business Week* devoted a

special issue to the decline of United States power. It suggested that the country had retreated from its former global posture because of its reluctance to flex its financial, military, and political muscles in accordance with its power and responsibilities.[42] During subsequent months polls recorded a surge in American opinion toward larger defense budgets. Harold Brown encouraged this trend with his observation that Soviet military spending "has shown no response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build; when we cut, they build." Kissinger, once the proponent of detente, now advocated new highs of strategic competition with the U.S.S.R.[43] Following the Iranian seizure of November 1979, an ABC News–Louis Harris poll revealed that 79 percent of Americans favored an expansion of CIA activities.[44] Amid such evidences of a changing national mood President Carter could mount no counteroffensive against the Committee on the Present Danger and the more and more strident spokesmen of the New Right. The President argued that the United States was not omnipotent, but that this did not mean the country had given up the power or the will to shape the future. It meant only that the challenges of 1979 lay far below the threshold of military action. For the Carter administration the lessons of Vietnam were tactical after all.

IV

Already facing open challenges to its alleged loss of will in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East, where Iran held some fifty Americans hostage, the administration reacted to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 with bewilderment and rage. Afghanistan was not a Western interest; nor did Soviet occupation alter the world's strategic balance. But for the first time since 1945 the Russians had used force outside Eastern Europe. The president admitted bitterly that the Soviets had taken him in. Unable to ignore the Soviet action, the president faced an unfortunate decision. He could either inform the American people that the Soviet invasion, while irresponsible, did not touch any vital American interest or declare Soviet behavior dangerous to all southwest Asia, thus demanding some form of retaliation. The administration could assume far greater public approval for the latter choice. Brzezinski argued that the Soviet Union now threatened American interests from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Japan, especially Pakistan and the states

bordering the Persian Gulf. On NBC's "Meet the Press" on 20 January the president instructed the nation: "This in my opinion is the most serious threat to world peace since the Second World War. . . . It's a threat to an area of the world where the interests of our country and those interests of our allies are deeply embedded."[45] The president set forth, accordingly, his Carter Doctrine. "An attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region," he declared in his State of the Union message, "will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States." He continued with the warning that such an assault "will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."[46] Still the president scarcely took his warning seriously. If he suspected that the Soviets had embarked on a program to control the oil and sea lanes of the Persian Gulf, he would have called, not for embargoes on grain, technology, and the Olympics, but for national mobilization.

What pushed American hawkishness to a new high was the common assumption that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan exposed all southwest Asia to further Soviet encroachment. Explanations of the Soviet action as a defense against Moslem extremism in Afghanistan and elsewhere seemed irrelevant when balanced against the fact that the Russians had gained a strategic position from which they could more easily threaten Pakistan, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. When asked in a *New York Times* interview of 10 February 1980 what evidence he had that the Soviets would go further, Professor Pipes replied: "No evidence except that it would make no sense to occupy Afghanistan for any other purpose. Afghanistan has no natural resources of importance, and the risk of antagonizing the West is very high for a bit of mountainous territory with a primitive economy, with a population that has never been subdued by any colonial power. To run all these risks for the sake of occupying this territory seems to make little sense—unless you have some ultimate, higher strategic objectives."[47]

This assumption that the Soviet drive into Afghanistan was merely the initial maneuver in a strategy to dominate the Middle East seemed at last to clarify Russian ambitions. Countless Americans agreed with the president that, as one Virginian phrased it, the United States had entered "the most dangerous period in world history. Let us make no mistake: the Soviet menace is real." Harry Schwartz, former *New York Times* writer on Soviet affairs, repeated the admonition: "The invasion of Afghanistan warns us again of what our future will be if this country does not permanently shed its

illusions about the goals of the Soviet dictatorship."[48] Arnaud de Borchgrave, *Newsweek* correspondent, wove the crises in Iran, Ethiopia, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan into one chilling pattern of Soviet advancement toward the Persian Gulf. The Russians, he related, planned to have the Gulf and more within two years. "The subversion of the Persian Gulf states," he wrote, "would be the swordthrust, simultaneously opening the Indian Ocean to Soviet sea power, the ancient dream of the czars, and strangling the industrial economies of the West through a shutoff of oil. . . .What is happening *now* is that the situation has become critical enough that it is impossible for us to ignore or wish it away."[49]

For many writers and public officials the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sounded the death knell of detente. Polls as well as reports of newspaper correspondents around the country revealed the return of an assertive, Cold War mentality. An editorial in the *Daily Progress* measured the impact of Afghanistan on the American mind:

> The Soviet Union, in its rape of Afghanistan, accomplished in a single blow what learned studies, measured warnings, and position papers could not attain—it shocked awake the American people and put to an end the post-Vietnam lethargy which this country suffered in the late 1970s. Perhaps the signs were there earlier in the decade when the Soviets sent their Cuban surrogates into Africa to organize armed insurrections in Angola and Ethiopia, but the numbness from Vietnam still governed. It took a direct, armed invasion of a nonaligned nation to get our attention.[50]

Indeed, to those who shared such reactions the Soviet invasion recalled, not the tragic misadventure in Vietnam, but rather the early aggressions of Nazi Germany; the United States, therefore, had no choice but to resist if it would prevent another Munich. At issue for many Americans in the Afghan crisis was not merely Russian aggressiveness or even Middle Eastern oil, but the alleged weakening of American power and the need to do something about it. For them the Kremlin's imperialistic behavior revealed not only a decline in the essential cautiousness of Soviet leaders but also a diminishing respect for American power. United States–Soviet relations, it seemed, were moving toward some form of confrontation which Washington was powerless to prevent. If the United States would resume its world role and protect the Middle East against further aggression it was essential that Russia and the world understand that Vietnam had not left the United States weak and lacking in determination.[51]

Congress quickly displayed its own adherence to the new nationalism. The president himself set the issues for debate in his State of

the Union message when he called for additional military outlays of 5 percent above inflation (an increase of $15.3 billion), a stronger United States military presence in the Indian Ocean, and a "registration" for a draft—all in addition to a boycott of the Moscow Olympics and a limit on the export of grain and technology to the Soviet Union. With few dissenting voices Congress backed the president's proposals for tightening American military facilities around the rim of the Indian Ocean, a region that Carter had once sought to demilitarize. "Even the most rational and most cautious members are going to ride this bandwagon no matter what their doubts about particular spending proposals," said Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine. "We've been aware all along that the Russians were close to the jugular of our oil supplies but practically no one thought they'd reach for the jugular. Now, there's the fear they might."[52] Congressional leaders argued that the CIA should be restored to its rightful place as the country's primary agency for dealing with the world of *realpolitik*. The president's reversal of attitude toward Vietnam and the U.S.S.R., placing him at last on the side of the congressional hawks, brought this retort from columnist William Safire: "Having lost the geopolitical lead in the fourth quarter, Carter sends in a new team to play catch-up ball. Hawks made themselves heard when hawkishness was out of style; now that the Soviet embrace of 'the war process' has caused even Carter to reassess his naive policies, it would be good for doves to speak out about Cold War II while hard decisions are being made."[53] Within the administration Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was the special victim of the new belligerency. His resignation in the spring of 1980 symbolized the decline of the Vietnam syndrome in American thought and emotions.

What characterized much of the reconsideration of the Vietnam War, both before and after the Afghan crisis, was the renewed insistence that there had been nothing wrong with the war's design or the assumptions that motivated it. The tide of human misery that swept across Southeast Asia after the fall of Saigon seemed to demonstrate the justice of the American cause. If the war was neither ignoble nor immoral and successive presidents had acted solely to protect the interests of the United States, the accusations that one or more had behaved unwisely were without foundation. As one former Foreign Service officer phrased it: "Our decision to intervene militarily in Vietnam was —in hindsight—bad judgment, but, given the political assumptions which we all shared a generation ago, it was both sound and honorable. Besides acting to protect our interests as we saw

them, we did our best to protect an unwarlike people, however corrupt and undeserving, from the fate which inevitably overtook them a couple of years after the withdrawal of our troops."[54] Guenter Lewy's massive study, *America in Vietnam* (1978), arrived at the same conclusion: "The commitment to aid South Vietnam was made by intelligent and reasonable men who tackled an intractable problem in the face of great uncertainties, including the future performance of an ally and the actions and reactions of an enemy. The fact that some of their judgments in retrospect can be shown to have been flawed and that the outcome has been a fiasco does not make them villains or fools." Had Hitler conquered Britain, Lewy continued, "this would not have proven wrong Churchill's belief in the possibility and moral worth of resistance to the Nazis."[55] The assumption that the threats posed by the North Vietnamese were comparable to those posed by Hitler demonstrated again that the central issue in the Vietnam War was not winning or losing but the character of the interests and dangers that gave the war its meaning.

If the postwar oppression of the Vietnamese people was predictable, its prevention required an American victory. Now for some that victory seemed possible. The United States had failed, not because of the ends that it pursued, but because of the insufficient and ineffective use of power. The lessons of the war were strategic; another war, fought with a different strategy, would end with success and honor. For some writers the United States lost the war, not on the battlefield, but on the home front. Writing in *Encounter*, journalist Robert Elegant argued that misreporting by a hostile press undermined a successful military effort. Elegant's judgment was severe:

> For the first time in modern history, the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield, but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen. Looking back coolly, I believe it can be said (surprising as it may still sound) that South Vietnamese and American forces actually won the limited military struggle. They virtually crushed the Viet Cong in the South . . .; and thereafter they threw back the invasion by regular North Vietnamese divisions. None the less, the War was finally lost to the invaders *after* the United States disengagement because the political pressures built up by the media had made it quite impossible for Washington to maintain even the minimal material and moral support that would have enabled the Saigon regime to continue effective resistance.[56]

Assuming that the West, but especially the United States, had been demoralized by the fall of Saigon, Elegant wondered whether "Angola, Afghanistan, and Iran would have occurred *if* Saigon had not fallen amid nearly universal odium—that is to say, *if* the 'Viet

Nam Syndrome,' for which the press. . .was largely responsible, had not afflicted the Carter Administration and paralyzed American will."[57] Others found the explanation for defeat in the antiwar movement in the United States. Lewy's judgment of the war critics was harsh, but typical of those who defended the war: "The opponents of the war had a constitutional right to express their views, but it was folly to ignore the consequences of this protest. American public opinion indeed turned out to be a crucial 'domino'; it influenced military morale in the field, the long-drawn-out negotiations in Paris, the settlement of 1973, and the cuts in aid to South Vietnam in 1974, a prelude to the final abandonment in 1975."[58]

That the loss of Vietnam had damaged the nation's security seemed clear from the apparent evidence of falling dominoes in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. State Department officer Lawrence S. Eagleburger declared in a *New York Times* interview: "I don't care what anybody says about the domino theory having been discredited in Southeast Asia. . . .If you were a Cambodian or a Laotian you might argue that there was something in the theory."[59] Actually, the Communist-led turmoil in Laos and Cambodia erupted during the war itself; the American failure to control Vietnam permitted no occasion for resolving the other conflicts *within* the borders of the former Indochina. Beyond Indochina the countries of Southeast Asia, the real dominoes of the Vietnam War because of their contiguity to Indochina and to each other, thrived in the war's aftermath as never before. Prosperous and confident of their future, they enjoyed an economic growth twice the global average. During the war Singapore's leaders had revealed their insecurity from time to time; after the fall of Saigon Singapore emerged as one of Asia's major success stories. Indeed, all of the countries of Southeast Asia fared far better than victorious Vietnam. The only unstable non-Communist government in the region was the American-backed Marcos regime in the Philippines.[60] Looking beyond Southeast Asia, those who questioned the suppositions of falling dominoes never argued that the Vietnamese conflict comprised the final assault on international stability. They argued only that instability elsewhere would result from indigenous forces that had no relationship to the Vietnam experience. Certainly the sources of the scattered upheavals in Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, and elsewhere did not lay in Vietnam.

Finally, the concept of falling dominoes assumed the existence of a Communist monolith, coordinated and directed by the Kremlin. Vietnam demonstrated that there was no monolith after all. Russia

and China had long been at odds throughout Asia. Following the fall of Saigon, China invaded Communist-led Vietnam, not the countries of Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese occupied portions of Cambodia, not to expand communism, but to challenge the Chinese presence. The Vietnamese government assigned Cam Ranh Bay to the Soviet Union as a military base, but even its ties to Russia were no guarantee of security against China. At the same time the Kremlin had little influence in the renamed Ho Chi Minh City. Torn by strife among its Communist factions, Southeast Asia emerged from the Vietnam War as one of the world's least troublesome regions.

Much of the new scholarship on the Vietnam War in the late 1970s reflected the country's changing mood by dwelling less on the ends of policy—evaluating the need of victory to prevent the losses in Asia and the Pacific that the theory of falling dominoes predicted—than on the failure of means to achieve the desired military successes. The new writings suggested that Lyndon Johnson was less fearful of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia than in the loss of his congressional support in Washington for his Great Society program. By prosecuting the war Johnson managed to protect his program from the right in Congress. Ultimately the Great Society became the victim of the war's mounting costs. Studies of the inner history of all the administrations from John F. Kennedy to Richard Nixon reveal that none of them were confident of success in Vietnam or developed any plan for victory. Each administration anticipated little more than the chance to pass the war on to the next administration. Nixon's Vietnamization program was never designed for victory; rather it de-Americanized the war under conditions that were satisfactory to most Americans. So limited was official strategy in Vietnam that military leaders suspected from the beginning that there would be no victory. As to the enemy, new research suggested that the Viet Cong guerrillas were not popular among the peasants and that the North Vietnamese forces were scarcely paragons of virtue. The wartime perceptions of Viet Cong success, it appears, were greatly exaggerated. The Tet offensive of early 1968 was such a disastrous defeat for the South Vietnamese insurgents that North Vietnamese regulars replaced them and turned the war finally into one between North and South.[61]

In focusing on strategy, administrative behavior, and the nature of the enemy, much of the new writing avoided the real issues of the war—why it was fought and why it had to be won. In upholding the war the new scholarship often took aim at the more romantic and

ideological elements in the antiwar movement. The main body of the war's opponents never believed the Viet Cong autonomous, virtuous, or popular. For them the strategic restraints of the successive administrations were clear from the war's record itself. What troubled the war critics was not the quality of the strategy or leadership but their doubts that the United States could ever win the war in Southeast Asia at a cost acceptable to the American public and compatible with other, more important, national interests.[62] Certainly the new scholarship corrected the record on matters of fact, but to the extent that much of it failed to examine the war's political and intellectual context it ran the risk of burying whatever lessons the war had to offer.

V

If President Carter's sense of betrayal over Soviet behavior created a catalyst for a near-revolution in the country's global outlook, the new mood did not capture all Americans. Many analysts rejected outright the official estimate that the Soviets had made a calculated move into Afghanistan to dominate the oil fields and sea lanes of the Middle East. Nor did they regard the Soviet move a threat to world peace. The Kremlin, it seemed, had long understood the limited possibilities of its strategic position in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany; similarly the occupation of Afghanistan, some argued, was no measure of Soviet intentions toward the regions beyond. It was doubtful that the Russians would run the risk of a direct Soviet-American conflict in the Persian Gulf. James Reston reminded his readers in the *New York Times* that Soviet leaders could remember the last war with its horrors for the Russian people; such men, he said, understood the need for avoiding war.[63] Few questioned the importance of the Persian Gulf region to the Western world. Still, the widespread addiction to Arab oil failed to eliminate doubts regarding the appropriateness of the American response to the Afghan crisis. In its commitment to the defense of Middle Eastern oil the country for the first time in its history created a vital interest beyond its control. Any regional war that involved the big powers would begin with the oil's destruction, either by the United States or by the Soviet Union. Even if it could be defended, was Arab oil of sufficient importance that a thermonuclear war fought to

determine its disposition was preferable to a reduction in the American standard of living?[64]

In a world of ill-defined interests and dangers it remained exceedingly difficult to know what particular challenges created issues worth the annihilation of much of the world. It was far easier to advocate a strong American position in the Indian Ocean than to envision a war in that region and to what it would lead. Lewis H. Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*, reminded those who saw threats to American security in such remote areas of the globe that a previous generation had gone to war over the murder of an Austrian archduke without evaluating either the necessities or the consequences: "In August, 1914, none of the Allied or Central Powers could explain its reasons for going off to the first world war. Four years later, after 20 million soldiers had died in the trenches, the governments in question still could not give a plausible reason for the killing. The best that anybody could do was to say that the war had been fought to end all wars, that its purpose had been to establish a world order free from the depredations of power politics. But who now expects another war in Asia to bring about a lasting peace or a better world?"[65]

Not once did the Carter administration explain why the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan endangered all of southwest Asia, much less how the United States intended to defend the region. State and Defense Department officials agreed that the United States could not confront the Soviets successfully along Russia's southern flank. Europe's refusal to respond to the Soviet invasion with any sense of alarm created additional impediments to the creation of an adequate defense in the Middle East.[66] The European allies, no less than some American observers, believed that the president had miscalculated the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; they assumed that the Russians acted to protect their borders, not to send their forces to the Persian Gulf. Some analysts wondered, moreover, how the United States could fashion an effective containment strategy for the Middle East when the dangers to regional stability lay less in Soviet expansionism than in the local and national animosities that existed within the region itself. United States power, whatever its magnitude, could not be the controlling element in the Middle East. Regional conflicts there, as the recent past had demonstrated again, lay far below the threshold of war. Indeed, the demand for greater preparedness rested less on its possible contribution to the management of Middle Eastern affairs than on the assumption that the U.S.S.R. was building its

military might to hold the United States and the world helpless in its power. The Carter Doctrine, in short, did not create a strategic policy for the Middle East. As the *New York Times* editorialized on 27 January 1980:

> There is no firm terrain on which to build Mr. Carter's new wall of containment. Military pacts and bases will not stand up well in the region's political, ethnic and religious storms. Importing American power will arouse as many radicals as it will reassure conservatives, without resolving their conflicts. . . .Stability in the region from Turkey to Pakistan is a long-term project that cannot be designed or paid for by Americans alone. The regimes that profit most from the area's oil, and the allies who crave it, need to be partners in defending that treasure. Less Western dependence on oil remains essential to any defense. And so, paradoxically, do relations with Moscow that could be used to induce future Soviet restraint.[67]

Such words of caution could not halt the continued demolition of the Vietnam syndrome. There was in 1980 a new militancy in the land, a renewed demand for national defense, attitudes toward war that would have been impossible five years earlier, and a heightened concern for the malevolent forces in the world. Obviously for countless Americans the lessons of Vietnam had faded, if indeed they had ever been recognized. Peter Marin questioned the wisdom of the country's outlook in *Harper's*:

> Whether it be the Nicaraguan revolution, the hostage crisis, the rise in OPEC prices, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, or the fighting in Iraq and Iran, our inability to control events and our inept response to them have demanded from us a rethinking of our political and moral relation to the world. But we neglect this crucial task. Instead, we have lapsed happily into the familiar attitudes that marked the Cold War in the Fifties and the Asian debacle of the Sixties: we clench our fists and mutter comforting platitudes to ourselves, cheerfully lost among the same illusions that proved so disastrous a decade ago.
>
> It is fashionable now, in some circles, to see this renewed military hubris as both inevitable and necessary. We are told that we are merely leaving behind, as we must, guilt that paralyzed us for a decade after the war in Vietnam. But that, I think, misstates the case. What paralyzed us was not simply the guilt felt about Vietnam, but our inability to confront and comprehend that guilt: our refusal to face squarely what happened and why, and our unwillingness to determine, in the light of the past, our moral obligations for the future.[68]

Lost in the effort to forget the war and thereby eliminate the guilt and restraint that inflicted the memory were the veterans, driven to silence by a country's refusal to listen, often to drug addiction and suicide. Lost as well was the war's cost to generations of Vietnamese.

But the ultimate significance of the perennial effort to erase the memory of Vietnam, a task eased by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was its failure to create a new national consensus. That failure left the country as divided in 1980 on matters of external policy as it had been at the height of the Vietnam War. Only the absence of fighting clouded the existing disagreements. Unfortunately a seriously divided nation, as the Vietnam War illustrated, cannot sustain a costly foreign policy over time. There were few circumstances and few issues around the world which would permit the United States to wage a major war with the full support of the American people. To that extent the disagreements that characterized the American outlook on world affairs were potentially dangerous to the country's welfare and security. What conceivable crisis would unify rather than further divide the country was not apparent. Experience should teach some basic truths about proper and promising approaches to external affairs; successes and failures alike are replete with the materials for instruction. The Vietnam War itself, so divisive and so damaging to the nation's interests both at home and abroad, should have furnished ample lessons upon which Americans could agree. Tragically, it did not do so. The public can learn from experience only to the extent that government leaders evaluate past decisions openly and offer the nation that education which alone can compensate it for the costs of mistaken policy. New challenges create new problems and the possibilities for new mistakes. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was such a challenge, unrelated to Vietnam because of the direct Soviet involvement. But that invasion, in rekindling the cold war, managed also to eliminate much of the remaining memory of Vietnam and the restraints which that costly experience once seemed to impose on the country's global outlook. Nations with the capacity to learn should not repeat the errors of the past. Such luxuries no people can afford.

NOTES

1. Kissinger's News Conference of 29 April 1975, in Department of State *Bulletin* 72 (19 May 1975): 631.

2. *Newsweek*, 10 March 1975, p. 22; Arlen J. Large in the *Wall Street Journal*, 4 Apr 75.

3. Kissinger's Press Conference, 26 March 1975, The Secretary of State Press

Conference, p. 1, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Media Services. For views that the United States keep its conscience clear, see Austin Scott in the *Washington Post*, 13 Apr 75.

4. Kilpatrick in the *Daily Progress* (Charlottesville, Va.), 9 Mar 75.

5. Address Before the Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on United States Foreign Policy, 10 April 1975, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford, 1975*, vol. 1 (Washington, 1977), p. 463.

6. Editorial, *New York Times*, 13 Apr 75.

7. Kissinger's Statement Before the Senate Committee on Appropriations, 15 April 1975, The Secretary of State Statement, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Media Services. For the view that the situation in South Vietnam was salvageable, see Kissinger's News Conference at Palm Springs, 5 April 1975, in Department of State *Bulletin* 72 (28 April 1975): 553; Ford's Remarks at the Annual Convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 16 April 1975, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ford, 1975*, p. 498.

8. See William Gaddis, "The Rush for Second Place," *Harper's* 262 (April 1981): 31; *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ford, 1975*, p. 504.

9. *Newsweek*, 14 April 1975, p. 19; the *Daily Progress*, 21 Apr 75.

10. Don Oberdorfer in the *Washington Post*, 13 Apr 75.

11. On the evacuation, see Dennis Troute, "Last Days in Saigon," *Harper's* 251 (July 1975): 45–60.

12. Kissinger's Address Before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 17 April 1975, in Department of State *Bulletin* 72 (5 May 1975): 558.

13. Interview with Walter Cronkite, Eric Sevareid, and Bob Schieffer of CBS News, 21 April 1975, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ford, 1975*, p. 545; Statement of 29 April 1975, in ibid., p. 605.

14. The President's News Conference, 6 May 1975, in ibid., p. 641.

15. Johnson quoted in *Life*, 60 (3 June 1966): 36B. Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton developed the theme that the United States should seek only to preserve its reputation in his noted memorandum of 17 January 1966, in Neil S. Sheehan et al. (eds.), *The Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York, 1971), p. 502.

16. Secretary of State Dean Rusk often argued for an American victory in Vietnam to sustain America's global position. His statement of February 1966, was typical: "What we face in Vietnam is. . .the need to check the extension of Communist power in order to maintain a reasonable stability in a precarious world." See "The News of the Week in Review," *New York Times*, 20 Feb 66.

17. Editorial, "The Lessons of Vietnam," the *Daily Progress*, 23 Apr 75.

18. Quoted in Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 February 1983, p. 54.

19. Katzenbach's Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 17 August 1967, in Department of State *Bulletin* 57 (11 September 1967): 333–36.

20. *New York Times*, 19 Aug 67.

21. Quoted in D. L. Robinson, "Presidential Autocracy and the Rule of Law," *Worldview* 16 (March 1973): 11.

22. For a detailed study of this episode, see Norman A. Graebner, "Presidential Power and Foreign Affairs," in Charles W. Dunn, ed., *The Future of the American Presidency* (Morristown, N.J., 1975), pp. 196–98.

23. On Clausewitz's view of the importance of popular will in war, see Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., "What is War?" *Harper's* 268 (May 1984): 75–78.

24. General Weyand quoted in Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 1981), p. 7.

25. Arlen J. Large in the *Wall Street Journal*, 4 Apr 75.

26. Editorial, "Mr. Ford's Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, 13 Apr 75.

27. Kissinger's Interview with Pierre Salinger, 12 April 1975, in Department of State *Bulletin* 72 (12 May 1975): 608.

28. Kissinger's News Conference of 29 April 1975, in ibid., 72 (19 May 1975): 626; Kissinger's Interview with Barbara Walters for the "Today" show, 3 May 1975, in ibid., 72 (26 May 1975): 669.

29. Kissinger's News Conference at Kansas City, 13 May 1975, in ibid., 72 (2 June 1975): 733–34.

30. "Southeast Asia Reacts," the *Daily Progress*, 2 May 75; *Washington Post*, 13 Apr 75.

31. *Time*, 19 May 1975, p. 29.

32. Joseph Kraft in the *Washington Post*, 4 May 75; James Reston in the *Daily Progress*, 3 May 75.

33. Reston in the *New York Times*, 13 Apr 75.

34. Mansfield quoted in *Parade*, 4 May 1975, p. 4.

35. "A Foreign Policy Based on America's Essential Character," Department of State *Bulletin* 76 (13 June 1977): 622.

36. Vance's Statement Before the House Committee on International Relations, 19 June 1978, in ibid., 78 (August 1978): 14.

37. These two quotations are taken from Jerry W. Sanders, "Para-Institutional Elites and Foreign Policy Consensus," a paper prepared for a conference at the White Burkett Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 28–29 September 1984, p. 11.

38. Ibid., pp. 19–21.

39. For Carter's Annapolis speech, see *New York Times*, 9 Jun 78; *Newsweek*, 19 June 1978, pp. 41–44; and *Time*, 19 June 1978, pp. 32–33.

40. "The Ghosts of Vietnam," *New York Times*, 4 Jun 78.

41. Brown and Schlesinger quoted in Donald E. Neuchterlein, "Persian Gulf Region Vital for National Interests," the *Daily Progress*, 25 Nov 79.

42. "The Decline of U.S. Power," *Business Week*, no. 2576 (12 March 1979): 39–42. The article blamed American weakness on policies set in motion by the American failure in Vietnam.

43. See George F. Will in *Newsweek*, 25 June 1979, p. 104; Kissinger's views noted in Stephen S. Rosenfeld in the *Washington Post*, 3 Aug 79.

44. For an excellent survey of American opinion, see Dave Gergen in the *Washington Star*, 6 Apr 80.

45. Interview on "Meet the Press," 20 January 1980, in Department of State *Bulletin* 80 (March 1980): 29.

46. See Leslie H. Gelb, "Beyond the Carter Doctrine," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 February 1980, pp. 18–19.

47. Interview with Richard E. Pipes in "The Week in Review," *New York Times*, 10 Feb 80.

48. Editorial page, the *Daily Progress*, 4 Jan 80; *Newsweek*, 28 January 1980, p. 8.

49. See Editorial, the *Daily Progress*, 18 May 80.

50. Editorial, ibid., 25 Feb 80.

51. Editorial, *New York Times*, 3 Feb 80.

52. See Hedrick Smith in "The Week in Review," ibid., 27 Jan 80.

53. Safire in the *Daily Progress*, 17 Jan 80.

54. See Emmett B. Ford, Jr., in ibid., 17 Jul 77.

55. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978), p. 440. Norman Podhoretz took this view in his book, *Why We Were in Vietnam* (New York, 1982).

56. Robert Elegant, "How to Lose a War: Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent," *Encounter* 57 (August 1981): 73.

57. Ibid.

58. Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 436.

59. Interview with David Binder and Bernard Gwertzman in "The Week in Review," *New York Times*, 22 Apr 84.

60. Don Oberdorfer, "Rather Than Fall After Vietnam, The 'Dominoes' Have Prospered," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 13 August 1984, p. 16.

61. For a valuable, but generally uncritical, survey of recent literature on the Vietnam War, see Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 February 1983, pp. 26–35, 45–62.

62. See letters to the editor, especially that of Stanley Hoffman, in ibid., 20 March 1983, p. 110.

63. See Reston in the *Daily Progress*, 26 May 80.

64. See George F. Kennan's criticism of the Carter response to the crisis in the *New York Times*, 1 Feb 80.

65. Lewis H. Lapham, "Voices Prophesying War," *Harper's* 260 (April 1980): 18.

66. For the European reaction, see Hedrick Smith in "The Week in Review," *New York Times*, 27 Jan 80.

67. Editorial, *New York Times*, 27 Jan 80.

68. Peter Marin, "Coming to Terms with Vietnam," *Harper's* 261 (December 1980): 41.

Commentary

Richard D. Challener

With Norman Graebner's paper on the foreign policy aftermath of Vietnam we are marching into a pockmarked landscape far different from the terrain that we traversed yesterday. There's something called the Vietnam syndrome which inhibits the actions and responses of presidents and administrations in the 1970s. It's a time when administrations also seem to want to bury the lessons of Vietnam, and when there's worry that the public response to Vietnam is beginning to turn America into a helpless, pitiful giant losing its credibility.

If I understand the paper properly, Dr. Graebner first focuses upon a few of the presumed lessons of Vietnam—the lesson, first, that a democracy cannot conduct a long, debilitating war in a distant land without a broad public consensus behind it. Second, since no administration ever established such a consensus—never succeeded in making a case that the national security was in danger—both the Johnson and Nixon administrations "sought to override the opposition. . .with claims to executive primacy unprecedented in the nation's history." Thus—and this is Norman's second salient lesson—the futility, the danger of administrative efforts to push questionable policies on the Congress and the public relying on the special powers of the president as commander in chief.

After a few comments about the attempts of the Ford administration to practice damage control, he launches into an extended and not very sympathetic critique of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy, noting how, in part due to the Vietnam syndrome, Carter started with inaction but eventually—spurred on both by Soviet actions abroad and the Committee on the Present Danger at home—moved ultimately to anti-Soviet militancy and posturing. Along the way he examines with some sympathy the so-called new scholarship on Vietnam, especially the arguments of those who now maintain that it

wasn't as immoral as many once argued, of those who argued that the system worked, that the U.S. could have won if it had used more of its power, and that it was the antiwar protestors who caused the American defeat.

He closes his paper by noting that, as of 1980, there was a new militancy in the land—a new militancy caused in part by this new Vietnamese scholarship, a new militancy that demanded more expenditures for national defense and was increasingly anti-Soviet. The lessons of Vietnam, he argues, had been forgotten, if they'd ever been recognized. But, worst of all, no new foreign policy consensus had emerged in America—that we're as far apart now as we were at the height of the Vietnam War. Vietnam, which should have provided lessons, had not done so—in part because of the long effort of the new Vietnamese scholarship to erase those lessons, in part also because successive administrations sought to put the war behind them, were unwilling to analyze and evaluate it, sought to bury it, failed to educate the American public about what had gone wrong and, instead, like Henry Kissinger, kept saying it is time to get ahead with the future.

This is a provocative thesis—and I certainly cannot quarrel with the several lessons he puts forth—though I do wish that he had mentioned Korea, because it was Korea which first raised the question of the ability of American democracy to wage an unpopular war in a distant area and, as I recall it, there was considerable literature in the 1950s about the problems of limited war. And certainly one of the reasons why Eisenhower did not intervene at the time of Dien Bien Phu was because of the Korean experience and the Republican desire to have no more wars like Korea. But it seems to me that Professor Graebner was too modest in compiling his list of lessons from Vietnam. Most of us in this room, I suspect, could readily pull from our own mental filing cabinets a considerable series of lessons whenever the subject turns to El Salvador or Lebanon. But I do wish that Professor Graebner had said a bit more about the war in Vietnam as a revolution, about the determined, implacable resolution of the North Vietnamese, and the unwillingness, or inability, of official Washington—with perhaps the exception of the CIA—to realize the full implications of these facts. If he had, he might, for example, not attribute Carter's inaction so much to the Vietnam syndrome but credit Carter, especially in Latin America and to some extent in Iran, for recognizing the problems, the dilemmas of trying to cope with

indigenous revolution by applications of American force and coercion.

I also feel—and here I confess to being totally unreconstructed—that Professor Graebner takes the new Vietnamese scholarship too seriously and at face value. I say this with full appreciation for Peter Braestrup's convincing arguments about the way in which the media misrepresented the Tet offensive. Professor Graebner, to be sure, does say "by failing to examine the political and intellectual content of the war, the new scholarship ran the risk of burying the issues of the war." And, as I just noted, he does blame this new scholarship for affecting the American memory of the war and contributing to the new militancy of the late 1970s. But I wish also that he had looked at some of the criticism of the new scholarship. Walter LaFeber, for example, has pointed out that the United States in Southeast Asia dropped three times the weight of all the bombs it had dropped in the entirety of World War II in both Europe and Asia. He pointed out that the use of additional power in Vietnam raised the specter of Chinese intervention. But above all is the very way in which Johnson and Nixon chose to prosecute the war and the way they chose to end it by corrupting American values at home, undermining some of our basic institutions, and destroying the faith of many in our political leadership, including, for a considerable period of time, faith in the presidency itself.

My principal problem with the paper arises out of Professor Graebner's statement that by 1980 "there was a new militancy in the land, a renewed demand for national defense, attitudes which would have been impossible five years earlier, and a heightened concern for the malevolent forces in the world." I'm just not sure—even granted the possible influence of the new Vietnamese scholarship and the Committee on the Present Danger—how he gets there from the War Powers Act of 1973 and even from Jimmy Carter's 1977 speech about America having outgrown its fears of communism.

Let me suggest, as a hypothesis, as a way of stirring up discussion, a slightly different scenario. I've always felt that there were two quite separable and distinct antiwar movements in the United States. One group was composed largely of academics, intellectuals, and, above all, alienated youth who opposed the war on moral and ethical grounds. The other wing of the antiwar movement—and, I'd argue, a larger and the more influential group—were those who opposed the war on pragmatic grounds, on the grounds simply that we couldn't win it and that it was costing too much. That group is

typified by Wall Street which by the late 1960s and early 1970s was rallying whenever there were rumors of peace. Moreover, this second group mistrusted, even hated, the student movement and the intellectuals, regarded them as scruffy, bearded examples of the counterculture which threatened their own value system.

The real point, though, is that Richard Nixon had a clear understanding of all of this. He knew he had to end the war and wanted to preserve as much as possible American credibility. His political genius was that he figured out how to co-opt most of the antiwar movement. He defused youth by ending the draft, and he appeased the American middle class—the pragmatic majority—by Vietnamization, by pulling out American troops, and by relying upon air power. Moreover, he succeeded not only in ending the war pretty much on his own terms but also almost succeeded as an overall foreign policy leader. He put together what I would call a working majority—not a great consensus, not the cold war consensus of the 1950s and 1960s—but a working majority behind his foreign policies. As Ambassador Komer reminded us—and rightly reminded us—he destroyed the peace candidate, George McGovern in 1972 and won, what was to date the biggest electoral triumph in our history.

Now if you accept this hypothesis, then it leads to a couple of conclusions:

First, it may be a mistake to exaggerate the impact of Vietnam by and of itself on American foreign policy. Given Nixon's ability to put together a working majority, it may well have been Watergate—the fact that Nixon got caught, tried to cover up, and thereby destroyed himself— that produced the ultimate disillusionment and fragmentation of American foreign policy. Not just Vietnam but Vietnam plus the all-important variable of Watergate. Without Watergate, Nixon just conceivably might have succeeded.

Second, if my hypothesis about the nature of the antiwar movement has any validity, it just may be that for many Americans—perhaps even a majority—the only real lesson of Vietnam was simply that we should not get involved in wars that we can't win. If that is so, then maybe the American people did not repudiate globalism, or interventionism, as much as some commentators thought in the 1970s. And if this is so, the road from the Nixon era to Carter's militant Persian Gulf doctrine is a bit easier to understand.

It is also worth recalling that, Vietnam or not, Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger—particularly the latter—did, as John Gaddis has pointed out, initiate some rather spectacular breakthroughs in foreign policy,

and provide a certain sense of purpose and coherence in American foreign policy. There was shuttle diplomacy, detente, SALT, the overtures to the Soviet Union, and the China card.

But it is also worth remembering that these achievements, mostly by Henry Kissinger, began to fall apart even before Kissinger left office at the end of the Ford era. Critics on the right had already begun to argue that detente did not work, that linkage did not affect Soviet conduct, and that the Soviets simply used detente as a smoke screen behind which to conduct adventures in other parts of the world. And conservative Democrats, men like the late Senator Scoop Jackson, men who felt their own position threatened within the Democratic party by the rise of people like McGovern, and later by Carter, men like this were already beginning to get together, say with the Jackson-Vanik amendment, with human rights advocates to limit the purposes of Kissinger's foreign policy and in particular to limit the key item of most-favored-nation treatment for the Soviet Union. At the same time liberals were beginning to see Kissinger as so infatuated with great power politics as being little more than a cynical manipulator of the balance of power, a kind of 20th century Metternich who cared little about the moral principle. Moreover—and Chile was the case in point—liberals argued that the Kissinger structure of peace was little more than an amoral attempt to achieve stability, and that to get stability he would go to bed with any right-wing dictator if that would advance the cause. And Kissinger of course also became vulnerable for his presumed involvement in the wiretaps of his own subordinates.

Now these perceptions, I would argue, lead directly to some of the things that Jimmy Carter did. His human rights program was specifically designed to show the world, and important segments of the American public, that the United States did care about principles and not just about stability and balance of power, cared also about issues other than the maintenance of American credibility as a great power. In this sense the appointment of Andy Young to the United Nations was a lot more than just a symbolic gesture.

Which is to say that Carter policies, such as human rights, flow not simply from the Vietnam syndrome but from the immediate practices and procedures of his predecessors. Similarly, on the way in which the new Vietnam scholarship may have dulled the lessons of Vietnam and contributed to the new militancy of the late Carter period, I am not sure that this scholarship really became influential until fairly recently. My hunch is that it accompanied and was

symptomatic of the new militancy of the swing back to the center and toward suspicion of the Soviets that was so evident by the late seventies. In any event I wish that Professor Graebner had looked a bit more at some of the conservative criticism of Kissinger's detente that was beginning to emerge even before the Committee on the Present Danger mounted its campaign, even before Kissinger left office. In short, I think his paper would have been somewhat more persuasive if he had focused a bit more on what actually happened in the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger years and how all of that related to the impact of Vietnam and to the Vietnam syndrome.

The Vietnam War and the Western Alliance[1]

Robert O'Neill

My theme is the relationship between the United States and her allies during the Vietnam War. I am not concerned to probe the conduct of the war itself nor its impact on the United States, save insofar as either of these factors were causes of significant allied reaction. Rather I wish to address two questions: why did the allies not feel a greater sense of common cause with the United States in the conflict, particularly in the escalatory phase of the mid-1960s; and what consequences did the war have for the Western alliance in general?

That there was a major gulf in perceptions between the United States and her allies over the Vietnam conflict was clear from the early 1960s onwards. From the perspective of the mid-1980s it is important to observe that the alliance weathered the storm of Vietnam, just as it has those of the Soviet gas pipeline and the *INF* twin-track decision. Whether this outcome will hold for the coming debates over President Reagan's strategic defense initiative or emerging technologies for conventional warfare remains to be seen. Perhaps there are a few indicators from the experience of the Vietnam debate within the alliance which might enlighten our expectations and guide the actions of policymakers in these new issues.

First may I make a note of clarification on who are meant by the term "allies." Primarily the term refers to America's NATO partners, particularly Britain, France, and Germany. Of all America's allies, they carried the greater weight in Washington, they had the major influence in alliance councils, and they tended to be more clearly identified with advice relating to U.S. conduct of the war than their other NATO partners, except Canada. Because Canadian-U.S. relations are so complex and *sui generis*, I shall make no attempt

to treat them in this brief overview. I shall not, however, omit discussion of Pacific allies of the United States, especially Australia and New Zealand, because their attitudes to the war were so different to those of the European allies.

In 1964 principal allied attitudes towards the Vietnam conflict were governed by two legacies of history. The first and broader of them was the dissolution of the great European empires during and after the Second World War. Britain, France, Italy, and the Netherlands had, by the mid-1950s, lost dominion over wide areas of the globe, either through war or voluntary surrender of control to indigenous forces. Independence was granted not least because it was too expensive to deny, but there was another motivation, dominant in Britain but more subdued in France and the Netherlands: the liberal beliefs that nations should govern themselves and, when they did not, they should be encouraged to claim the right to do so. Western experience in the cold war during the 1950s had compelled caution in how this philosophy was to be applied, but more so in the U.S. than amongst her allies. Although allied governments preferred anti-Communist successor states after the granting of independence, by the end of the 1950s they were also willing to accept nonaligned successors.

By the early 1960s there was a strengthening presumption in Western public opinion that intervention in the affairs of developing states required more justification than in the early postwar period. A corollary of this view was that those who were disposed to intervene—at least militarily—were, in some degree at least, morally and politically suspect. These inclinations were reinforced in some of the former European imperial powers by the pain of loss of dominion and the concern that the United States had become too widely committed around the world for the good of itself and its allies.

The second legacy of history for the European allies was the French experience in Indochina. They placed greater emphasis than did the U.S. on the continuity between the struggle which had been brought to an armistice by the 1954 Geneva Conference and that of the 1960s. Britain and the Soviet Union had been the cochairmen of the Geneva meeting and in the mid-1960s still retained those offices. The approach of the Wilson government, in power through the crucial period 1964–1969, was conditioned significantly by the possibilities for influence which the cochairmanship offered. Wilson and his ministers refused to adopt the stance advocated by the left wing of their party, namely to urge the United States to stop bombing the

North and negotiate directly with the Viet Cong, but they used Britain's cochairmanship of the Geneva Conference as one of several reasons for resisting the pressures for more positive commitment to the conflict. To some extent this motivation was tactical in that it kept Britain out of direct involvement while retaining a position of apparent if insubstantial influence in Washington. It was, however, more than tactics that kept Wilson to this path because many members of Parliament on both sides believed that in this way Britain could best use its accumulated diplomatic skills and political wisdom in the interests of a stronger Western position in the world and a more stable international order.

Another historical legacy with which the Wilson government had to contend was overextension of Britain's defense forces, and it was resolved to withdraw from Southeast Asia in the late 1960s. Hence Wilson was particularly resistive towards American attempts to persuade him to adopt a strongly supportive attitude towards the U.S. commitment to Vietnam, fearing that any major step in this direction might jeopardize his whole defense reorientation towards Europe.

In France, of course, memories of the 1945–1954 conflict were painful. There was not the least desire on the part of General de Gaulle to be a party to what he, and most other French leaders, regarded as American folly, committed on the basis of a mistaken belief that Americans were better at counterinsurgency than the French. In Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany, and several other Western European states, particularly in the north, memories of the French experience in Indochina during the early 1950s dampened conservative tendencies to support U.S. intervention and appeared to justify moderate and left-wing opposition to such policy.

Amongst America's Pacific allies these two legacies were of much less importance. Although sensitive to the point that nations should not be subject to external interference, the post-1945 experience of South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand led them to see communism as a more potent threat to independence than U.S. intervention. Each of these three had benefited from U.S. support against Communist insurgency or invasion experience, and this experience inclined them to favor greater U.S. intervention in Vietnam. In Japan, while public opinion reflected gratitude for having been led to democracy by the United States, it did not automatically approve of every American intervention. Furthermore, despite good relations at a government-to-government level, the Japanese public debate had evinced increasingly critical attitudes towards U.S. policies in the

late 1950s and early 1960s, and there was a strong predisposition on the left to require of others what had already been required of Japan, namely to abjure use of military force as an instrument of policy.

In Australia and New Zealand governmental and public attitudes lay between these bounds. There was a strong disposition, particularly within the Labour parties of both nations, to oppose intervention outright on moral and political grounds, unless it was done in the name of the United Nations. In the more conservative parties which formed their governments for most of the post-1945 period, the stronger historical force acting on them was U.S. unwillingness to accept any clearly defined responsibility for the security of Southeast Asia. This unwillingness had frustrated Australian and New Zealand attempts to plan for regional security. They could make little progress in developing their own contributions if they did not know how much, if any, U.S. assistance they could rely on. Confrontation by Indonesia made them all the more conscious of a need to strengthen regional security. Hence U.S. intervention in Vietnam was to be welcomed and encouraged, if necessary, by the provision of their own military forces. By 1965 tactical differences there were in plenty but strategic differences were few amongst the three ANZUS partners.

In the light of these historical influences it was not surprising that the European allies in particular had somewhat unsympathetic views on U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In grand strategic terms it seemed to be out of tune with the times. For the allies, particularly in Europe but also to a lesser extent in the Pacific, the cold war seemed by 1964 to be waning. The Soviet doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" was not to be taken at face value, but Nikita Khrushchev had proven more reasonable to deal with than had Stalin. The Cuban missile crisis, for all the tensions it had caused, had been resolved to Western satisfaction. Key European issues also seemed susceptible to resolution by more flexible diplomacy, backed of course by a strong military deterrent. Leonid Brezhnev seemed in some ways an improvement on Khrushchev in that he was not subject to the latter's impulsiveness and appeared more aware of Soviet limitations. While on the one hand armed confrontation continued between East and West, on the other negotiations became more promising and trade improved. The status of West Berlin appeared settled. Relations between the Federal Republic and the Soviet Union improved to the point at which some long-term optimism seemed to be justified. And contacts were developing, albeit from a low base level, between the states of Eastern

and Western Europe. There was hope in many quarters in Western Europe by the mid-1960s that a more normal relationship with the East was at last a practical possibility. Of course it was not an imminent one and would take many years of care if it were to be achieved. But hopes were rising that the Soviets might see increased cooperativeness as being in their interests, and there was growing disinclination to jeopardize the trend in its early stages. The mid-1960s did not seem to be the best time for supporting a major American bombing and naval offensive against a Soviet client in faraway Southeast Asia.

This is not to say that turbulence in Southeast Asia was disregarded in Western Europe as a source of significant disorder. The French-Indochina War, the Malayan emergency, and Indonesian confrontation of Malaysia had all aroused European concern about the wider implications of regional instability there. But European anxieties did not mirror those portrayed in the American domino theory, which tended to see all threats to the existing order in Southeast Asia as of common origin if not of identical form. Europeans had learned from their own experience that the principal threats to security in Southeast Asia were more local than region-wide, and tended to believe that individual solutions had to be devised for individual national problems. Fighting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in South Vietnam would not, of itself, solve the problems of the region and its constituent states. Indeed, some argued, it could prove a diversion from other more constructive ways of promoting regional security and give stronger justification for extension of Soviet and Chinese influence which could be used to the allies' disadvantage. The Republic of Vietnam, from the time of its inception, had not been perceived as other than perilously weak. Its unification with the North as a result of some kind of elections or military conflict appeared to many Europeans to be inevitable. There were few Europeans indeed who regarded the integration of South Vietnam into a wider communist state as a serious threat to any important allied security interest sufficient to justify the size of commitment likely to be required to prevent it.

When the allies looked more closely at what they were being asked to support, they became even more skeptical. The regime of Ngo Dinh Diem had been regarded as no model democracy, and the series of military strong men who came to the fore in Saigon after his assassination seemed even less capable than Diem of bringing South Vietnam's affairs into order. The notion that a strong, stable

democratic government could be produced in South Vietnam invited dissent, if not outright dismissal. Those allies with experience of counterinsurgency operations had the strongest ground for their skepticism. France and the Netherlands had been glad to cut their losses in Southeast Asia, having had no success in their more modest tasks. Britain had enjoyed in Malaya a much more favorable environment than the U.S. in Vietnam. Even so, the emergency had to be fought for thirteen years before something close to a democratic system could be said to have been firmly established in Malaya. Furthermore, the United States in justifying her intervention so much in terms of fostering democracy in Vietnam seemed in the light of European experience to be doubly unwise. Not only was the aim itself probably not likely to be fulfilled, but also the very fact that democratization was one of the early aims of the commitment complicated the task of defeating the insurgents quickly and increased the risks that the essential public support for a protracted commitment would be eroded as popular frustration with lack of political progress in Vietnam mounted. The Korean War had already demonstrated that an expensive conflict became increasingly unpopular in the space of a few years when military stalemate was accompanied by lack of political reform. Yet in Vietnam the U.S. was attempting a much more ambitious aim than in Korea or than the British had undertaken in Malaya.

The nature of the American military conduct of the Vietnam War also caused doubts to rise amongst the allies, particularly Britain and France. The early attempt by the Kennedy administration to come to grips with counterinsurgency as a special form of conflict was seen by allies as an interesting experiment, but later experience, particularly during the expansionary phase of 1964–1965, reinforced allied doubts. Allied advisers expressed concern that the Americans were too intent on the military aims of the conflict to see that they were undermining their political objectives. Search-and-destroy operations were sometimes very effective in terms of weakening the enemy militarily, but they usually left in their wake an alienated Vietnamese population and not infrequently a homeless one. The absence of a significant U.S. pacification effort in the period 1964–1966 was a further cause of skepticism on the part of those allied advisers who knew about counterinsurgency. Most importantly, the military-political critics of American methods simply doubted that the U.S. could stay the course for the long period required.

Quite apart from their concerns about American operational

methods, the allies were more deeply worried about the impact of the new undertaking on American capacities to maintain existing commitments and continue to develop defense strength in Europe. Although there were prospects of achieving a better relationship with the Soviet Union, the allies believed that the military balance had to be improved. A major American commitment in Vietnam for several years or more could not but result in reductions of U.S. force levels in Europe and elsewhere, deterioration in the quality of individual U.S. soldiers stationed in Europe, diminished reinforcement capability, and lower stocks of ammunition, spare parts, and other vital supplies. Furthermore it would prejudice the long-term development of U.S. military power. Given the European view of the relative unimportance of Vietnam in terms of the global balance, it is not surprising that allied governments preferred that the American commitment to the conflict should remain at a modest level, if it could not be dispensed with altogether. At all events the allies believed that they had more than enough to do to make some compensation for the diversion of American strength. To go further, as Britain had done in Korea, by contributing significant forces to Vietnam appeared to be unwise militarily. To contribute even token forces, as other NATO allies had done in Korea, seemed unwise politically.

An American-supported conflict confined to South Vietnam was one thing for the allies to contemplate; an expanded war throughout Indochina, with possible extension to include direct Chinese participation, was an altogether different prospect. Yet it was argued by some allied governments and their advisers that, given the role claimed of the North Vietnamese by the Johnson administration and the ineffectiveness of resistance by the South, escalation could not be avoided if the commitment was not to prove fruitless. These forebodings seemed to be confirmed by the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos in 1964 and, most importantly, by the initiating of Operation ROLLING THUNDER against the southern sector of North Vietnam in early 1965. Cambodia also assumed greater significance during 1965 both for the location of supply routes running south from Laos and east from the port of Sihanoukville and as a sanctuary for enemy headquarters and operational units. While Cambodia was spared bombing for another five years, the need to attack North Vietnamese and Viet Cong positions in both Cambodia and Laos by American infiltration groups further disturbed allied leaders about long-term prospects for keeping the conflict limited.

A more serious form of escalation was feared by allies after the

initiation of Operation ROLLING THUNDER, namely a direct clash between Soviet air defense units in North Vietnam and U.S. aircraft. Another concern was that increasing military pressure on North Vietnam might lead China and the Soviet Union to sink their differences and recommence effective strategic cooperation. While these fears had little substance (indeed the Sino-Soviet split worsened as the Chinese denounced the Soviets for attempting to initiate armistice negotiations), they figured prominently in allied public discussion on U.S. policy in Vietnam during the period of expansion of the U.S. war effort.

One of the most prominent demonstrations of opposition by British public opinion to U.S. policies in Vietnam during this period of escalation was provided by the Oxford Union teach-in of 16 June 1965. Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge encountered strong criticism when they attempted to defend President Johnson's policies. The arguments used by the critics, already in the majority, were not notably different from those already developed by the antiwar movement in the United States, as is only to be expected where opponents of government policy can easily make contact with each other across international boundaries. The origins of the war, the policies of the Diem government, the degree of North Vietnamese involvement in the war and the effectiveness of U.S. and South Vietnamese operations were all major points of disputation. According to the *Times* report on the day's discussions, Cabot Lodge "misjudged the nature of his audience completely with talk of lavish American aid and references to Sir Winston Churchill." It was, after all, an early event in the era of teach-ins (a term which the *Times* correspondent described as "an ugly new jargon name . . . a concept recently invented at Harvard, which has crossed the Atlantic)." Lodge, blazing a trail where many speakers of his belief were to follow with increasing counterproductiveness in the next few years, responded to the "contemptuous laughter or ugly hisses" which greeted his arguments with unconcealed surprise and impatience. "Why do you laugh?" he kept on asking. "Why don't you listen to me? Give me a chance; I flew from Boston today specially to talk to you." Nettled, he complained to the chairman, Christopher Hill, the newly appointed master of Balliol: "Will you keep order Mr. Chairman?—that's your job." Michael Stewart fared little better in spite of presenting a solid, moderate case which showed that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were not exactly eager to negotiate an end to hostilities.

Listening to proceedings by radio in a cottage ten miles away I was glad that I had not taken the day off from the urgent task of completing my thesis. Admittedly I was listening with one ear only as I typed a revised draft, but because I had begun to divine my posting order to Vietnam, the Union debate was worth that one ear to me. But the message which came through was disturbing and depressing. The war in which I was about to be involved promised not only to be protracted, but clearly it was going to be very divisive amongst one's friends and fellow countrymen. I found my apprehensions reinforced soon after arriving in Vietnam in May 1966 when I climbed Nui Ganh Rai, the hill overlooking Vung Tau, and inspected the remains of the massive French fortifications at the summit. I wrote to my wife a few days later: "Given over to the tenancy of rats and snakes, their whitewashed interior walls covered with the graffiti of Vietnamese lovers and their exteriors disappearing beneath an envelopment of softly coiling creepers, they seemed to hang a large, provocative question mark before our eyes. . . .They asked 'What do you newcomers think you can achieve?'"

European reluctance to participate was governed also by more immediate factors, such as the limitations on the size and cost of their defense forces, the greater priority accorded to deterring the Soviet Union in Europe, and the desire to reduce the span of their commitments outside Europe. But, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of broad strategic purpose, the undertaking looked too difficult, the means adopted looked to be inadequate, the dangers of escalation were formidable, and the time was wrong in terms of maintaining favorable movement in East-West relations.

In view of these factors, the question arises as to why the allies did not offer stronger opposition to the United States involvement in Vietnam. This question does not lend itself to a short answer. Fundamentally the commitment was seen as an American one and hence was primarily a matter on which America had to make up its own mind. A degree of justification for the American involvement was accepted by the allies, partly because there was seen to be not only a local Communist hand at work in South Vietnam but also Soviet and Chinese muscle behind it. The age of containment so typified by the Korean War was not so far away that its guidelines appeared to the allies to be totally inapplicable. American assistance to Vietnam had begun in 1950, at the most intensive phase of containment, and had grown slowly in the following decade. The commitment had acquired a degree of legitimacy and a trend had been set, again

making it difficult for the allies suddenly in 1964–1965 to tell the United States to withdraw. There were other, and to the Europeans more important, problems troubling the alliance as a whole. Stresses and strains had been created in the early 1960s by issues such as the Multilateral Force, France's dissatisfaction with reliance on U.S. nuclear guarantees, the future of the British deterrent, and the levels of European conventional forces available to the alliance. Although the conflict in Vietnam was the most serious clash of arms of the mid-1960s, allied attention was focused also on the Middle East, the Indo-Pakistani rivalry, and troubled areas of Africa, particularly after Ian Smith's unilateral declaration of independence from Britain. There were enough problems to cope with without provoking a major split with the United States on Vietnam.

It is therefore not surprising that of Western European leaders only General de Gaulle publicly addressed unsympathetic, critical words to President Johnson when the conflict was at the escalatory stage. It is impossible to tell at the present time how far allied governments made their reservations or objections known privately to the U.S. government, but contemporary press accounts indicate that there were, on many occasions, private transatlantic disputes about the conduct of the war. These notwithstanding, the degree of common interest represented by the alliance prevented these private arguments from becoming strident public confrontations.

Let me pass to the second of the two questions posed at the outset: what were the consequences of the war for the Western alliance? Perhaps the most serious was the erosion of allied confidence in the judgment of the United States as alliance leader. From the early 1960s onwards the course of U.S. policy in the conflict revealed a basic divergence of interests between America and her NATO partners. There remained agreement that the Soviet Union was the principal threat to Western security and could manifest its malign intentions in a variety of ways, many of which could cause acute concern. There was profound disagreement as to whether the war in Vietnam justified such concern. European governments and commentators tended to see the Soviet connection to Vietnam as of a limited, even marginal nature—an opportunistic union fostered on the Vietnamese side initially by anticolonialism and maintained in the 1960s by thwarted Vietnamese nationalism.

While the frequently used analogy between Ho Chi Minh and Tito was overdrawn, the Johnson and Nixon administrations had to cope constantly with allied critics who believed that a more

independent Vietnam would emerge once hostilities were ended. The allies had to deal with administrations which in the 1960s tended to cling to the domino theory type of approach, emphasizing that the alternative to preventing a Communist victory in South Vietnam was a dramatic increase in the level of Communist threat to Southeast Asia as a whole. At least fear of extension of Chinese control over Southeast Asia, which the Johnson administration had emphasized in the earlier stages of the conflict, waned in the late 1960s and early 1970s and appeared to have been dispelled by the time of Henry Kissinger's visit to Peking in 1971. Although American concern about Soviet intentions had not been assuaged, Kissinger and Nixon showed in dealing with the Soviet Union a greater degree of confidence that she could be constrained by means other than military force. The SALT I negotiations and agreement, the expansion of economic links between East and West, and the general notion of restraining the Soviet Union by giving it a stake in the existing world order all contributed to the regeneration of a degree of European confidence in the United States as leader, and seemed to argue more strongly for abandonment of the Vietnam commitment.

Major differences persisted. Apparent U.S. inflexibility regarding the peace negotiations, slowness to reduce the level of commitment in the 1970s, and readiness to reescalate as shown by the Hanoi Christmas bombing of 1972 fed an allied public debate which had long been anti-American in its thrust. True, Nixon and Kissinger had produced a significant reconciliation of interests within the alliance, but Vietnam, and later the memory of the conflict, remained as a reminder to the Europeans that the United States saw the world differently and was capable of serious misjudgments which damaged both American and allied interests.

Of course the situation might have been worse, leading to much more serious tensions in the mid and late 1970s. That it was not was due to several factors, probably the most important being commonality in the working of the democratic process. Europeans, unhappy with the direction of administration policies, were able to draw some reassurance from the growing weight of public and congressional disapproval of continued involvement in the war. While nobody expected grass roots opposition to be able to turn administration policies around in a short time, it was clear that, from 1968 onwards, the strength of domestic dissent would compel reduction of the commitment, save in the extremely improbable event of a major reduction in Communist Vietnamese aims. The real question for the allies

was how quickly would the president recognize this situation and cut his losses before they grew too great.

Those factors which led the allies in the mid-1960s to be moderate in their public criticisms of escalation remained operative in the 1970s. For as long as there was hope that the Americans would gradually extricate themselves, there were strong incentives to limit dissonance within the alliance. There was, after all, substantial agreement on fundamental security issues, and the allies did not wish to appear in greater disarray than was absolutely unavoidable. The Vietnam conflict was discussed frequently in alliance meetings and in bilateral consultations. These processes did not always spare the allies from shocks when major initiatives were undertaken by the United States, but they helped to ease allied frustration and provide opportunities for direct expression of criticisms and unease. Finally there was some allied sympathy for the American argument that in Vietnam the credibility of a protector was at stake. Would that that particular protection responsibility had not been accepted, allied critics argued, but given that it had, the U.S. could not be expected to go back on its word to the South Vietnamese in an instant. If it had, moreover, the implications for other guaranteed powers would have been most disturbing.

A related allied concern was the impact of the war on U.S. domestic attitudes generally. It was seen by many European commentators as early as the mid-1960s that an American defeat in Vietnam could well decrease American public support for extended commitments in other parts of the world. While the U.S. commitment to Europe was not as severely threatened by this kind of reaction as, for example, that to the Republic of Korea or the less formal support given to various African and Middle Eastern states, the direction of the trend caused concern. Insofar as this trend was seen to reemerge in the Carter years, when Chanceller Helmut Schmidt became anxious about possible decoupling of the United States from the defense of Western Europe, that particular legacy of the Vietnam War, or perhaps "perceived legacy" to be more accurate, was to have major consequences. It is an oversimplification to claim that European desires for the deployment of U.S. INF systems in Europe originated in the Vietnam War. Nonetheless that conflict played a part in electing Jimmy Carter, in shaping his policies on foreign commitments, and in shifting the center of gravity of the Congress in such a way that the essential closeness of coupling appeared to be threatened.

Alliance cohesion was strained further by the growth of the popular anti-Americanism which the war fostered. The war did not, of course, initiate anti-Americanism in Europe, but it swung into opposition large groups of young people who, in other times, would have been either inclined to approve of or at least be indifferent towards the United States and its policies. There were many other factors at work in producing the public disorders, student riots, and general upsurge of radicalism in the intellectual life of the Western democracies of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The war itself was the focal point of protest, however, and the United States was indicted on its record in Vietnam as imperialist, militarist, brutal, and simply inept. The charges made were, in most instances, well wide of the mark, but episodes such as the My Lai massacre, the one-man presidential election campaign of General Thieu, the revelation of the "Tiger Cages" of Con Son Island, the summary execution of prisoners in front of television cameras, the napalming of refugees, and many others proved a severe embarrassment, both to the Johnson and Nixon administrations and to allied leaders doing their best before a critical public opinion to maintain cohesion with their partners.

Furthermore, the media coverage of the war tended to show the American military to the allies as trigger-happy and obsessed with body-count statistics. There were other stories to be obtained of course–particularly those relating to the excitement that went with major operations. The most imporant element of the war in terms of winning and maintaining public support, namely the guiding politico-military strategy, the battle of wits between the opposing high commands, failed almost totally to come across, however. Of course briefing officers had their problems in dealing with assertive, incredulous, crusading pressmen, but not all correspondents wanted to portray simply the negative side of the war. The positive side tended to be communicated to them too much in terms of statistics and too little in terms of the ideas behind operations and the strategic objectives of counterinsurgency warfare. The overall result was a steady reinforcement of critical opinion inside and outside of the United States, with the difference that inside the U.S. it was directed at the administration or the "Establishment" whereas abroad it tended to be directed at the U.S. generally. Fortunately the situation has improved in the past decade, but anti-Americanism fostered in the Vietnam War remains a significant element on the left of major European labor and social democratic parties. The Vietnam image is still summoned up to castigate other more recent American interventions.

It is, in the allied view, salutary for United States leaders to feel the caution which the experience of failure in Vietnam naturally inspires. Military intervention is an increasingly serious undertaking in a world which is better informed and more critically disposed towards great powers and where developing nations or insurgent groups are increasingly well armed. Yet it is possible for there to be too much caution, too much preoccupation with the possible consequences of failure, too little attention to the need to come to the aid of friends in trouble, and too little sympathy from allies for the good of stability in the East-West relationship. The allies and the U.S. together have to do much more thinking about how to apply the lessons of one conflict to another.

What I have had to say in regard to the consequences of the Vietnam War for the Atlantic alliance applies to a large extent to America's Pacific allies also. Australian and New Zealand governmental enthusiasm for the American commitment to Vietnam waned somewhat in the late 1960s, particularly after the Tet offensive. Each government, however, believed that there was a serious threat to regional security as a result of possible Soviet or Chinese gains in Vietnam and, until Labour party governments came to power in both Australia and New Zealand in 1972, there were significant differences in perception between them and America's European allies. These Australasian concerns were based substantially on experience of the Malayan emergency, the shock of Indonesian confrontation, particularly in 1964–1965, when the Soviets appeared to have gained a foothold through supply of military equipment to Sukarno and links were consolidating between the Chinese and Indonesian Communist parties, and the fear that the United States might leave them in the lurch. The collapse of Sukarno and the development of the ASEAN group of states led Australia and New Zealand to be less nervous about the absence of a direct U.S. military ground commitment in Southeast Asia, provided that there remained a strong offshore U.S. presence. Regional dynamics have continued to play a major role in motivating public opinion in both nations to support the ANZUS alliance, the current bout of nuclear allergy in New Zealand notwithstanding.

Opinion in Japan tended more to take the same course as in Europe, although at the governmental level dissent was more muted in discussions with the United States. The Vietnam conflict had some economic benefits for Japan in that significant quantities of Japanese goods and materials were used for construction and

development projects in South Vietnam. Anti-Americanism, fed by several causes, was expressed vehemently by left-wing groups which, as in Europe, used the Vietnam War as a principal vehicle for protest. Also as in Europe, the Japanese government was hoping in the 1960s for a normalized relationship with the Soviet Union and, of course, it had a strong interest in removing obstacles in the way of a positive relationship with its near neighbor and huge potential market, China. The thrust of Kissinger's policy in the early 1970s thus did much to relieve Japanese official concerns, although lack of consultation on China, currency adjustments, and other issues strained the Tokyo-Washington relationship, particularly in 1971. But, like the nations of Western Europe, Japan sought to develop a close working relationship with the United States, assigning a subordinate priority to differences of view regarding Vietnam for the sake of wider interests.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the Vietnam War gave the cohesion of the Western alliance the most prolonged and serious test of its life, worse even than the sharp shock of Suez. Now that the test is a decade and further behind us, it may be concluded that the greater part of the damage caused was transient. The alliance has survived that stress and has weathered several more. It is obviously much more robust politically than its rival. One has only to contrast the freedom of America's allies to show their dissent with the inability of Soviet partners even to permit individual citizens to criticize Soviet policies in Afghanistan to see where real strength lies. The thought of Poland being permitted to act as a refuge for Soviet draft dodgers in the same way that Canada acted for Americans avoiding military service is ludicrous. The Vietnam War gave the Western alliance a maturing experience which the conformist Warsaw Pact could scarcely begin to comprehend.

Some consequences remain as problems for the West: greater awareness that the strategic interests of alliance partners do not always coincide; loss of allied public confidence in the judgment of American leaders; a sense of greater Western public unwillingness to support military intervention; more questioning public and political attitudes towards the proficiency of armed forces in general and those of United States forces in particular; a more assertive Congress and one which is likely to be more critical of allies; and wide allied concern about the worth of American guarantees, especially in a protracted conflict. Obviously these factors have their negative aspects, and they must be controlled or countered. We all learned a

great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of the alliance during the Vietnam War, and some of the right lessons have been drawn. Much more remains to be done on both sides of the Atlantic as recent episodes have shown. We all know the shibboleths of consultation before action, restraint in action and privacy in intraalliance debate. But they are more than shibboleths, and we have to do much more to iron out differences in perception of the Soviets and in approaches to burden sharing and regional crises. The allies will need a much more intimate knowledge and understanding of U.S. domestic politics, particularly in the next four years. We all must do more to provide economic recovery.

NOTE

1. This paper was delivered, without commentary, as the banquet address.

SECTION IV

Discussion Issues

Editor's Note: In the following pages, discussions following the presentations are grouped under major issues discussed. After each paragraph of transcribed discussion, the contributor's last name appears in brackets. Refer to the lists of symposium participants and attendees for full names and affiliations.

1
The Impact of China and Korea on the American Commitment to Southeast Asia

What intrigued me in looking at the 1950s, as one who was brought up on Dulles as the main expositor of the Sino-Soviet monolith, is his sensitivity to the Sino-Soviet split at the time. There are frequent references on the part of Dulles to the fact that the Chinese and Soviets are at odds with each other over any number of issues including Vietnam and a lot of this emerges out of the Geneva records. It is interesting to note the different approaches. Dulles' idea was to keep the pressure on the Chinese, in particular, as much as he possibly could with the idea that this would increase and aggravate the tensions within the Sino-Soviet alliance and perhaps leave the United States room to exploit. [Herring]

We never understood at all the historic animosity between China and Vietnam. Nor even that between China and all of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, which persists even until today. I cannot recall any time that we ever took that into account in policymaking. Also we underplay very much the role of the Korean War and the North Korean attack in 1950 on decisions about Vietnam. The 1950 attack was the reason why American attention shifted to Asia. At the same time as we attempted to do something about Korea we also started our aid program in Indochina. We generally regarded, as I recall, Asia as the more vulnerable Communist flank. It was also more volatile. Those reasons had a lot to do with not only our later policy but also with the military advice and aid we gave to South Vietnam during the period 1955–1956 and even after. The model which our military advisers had in mind was the North Korean attack across the 38th Parallel against the South. So we tried to build up the South Vietnamese Army to be able to cope with a North Vietnamese attack across the 17th Parallel against the South. We

were only ten years off. That's the way the war ended. Unfortunately, that's not the way it began. [Komer]

There is one particular episode that I think is worth mentioning—that is, the diplomacy of the China warning statement which was signed in Washington the day after the Korean War armistice. This was a diplomacy which we pursued for nearly two years and which involved all the allies on the U.N. side in Korea. It started off initially as simply a warning to China that retaliatory actions would be taken if there was any resumption of hostilities in Korea, but during those two years as the French position in Indochina continued to weaken, the emphasis of the whole policy shifted from Korea to Indochina. Now obviously this policy was not wholly convincing to the allies, as we saw when the discussion of some involvement at the time of Dien Bien Phu came up. I think it did create a momentum of its own and did help to undermine a certain unwillingness on the part of the Korean War allies to contemplate either recommitment of their forces to Korea or some degree of expanded U.S. commitment to Vietnam. This warning statement still continues nominally in effect. Every now and then the Koreans raise it in the context of northeast Asia and I think if we looked in the archives of foreign ministries around the world in 1954 and 1955 and through into the early sixties, as I have done in the Australian case, this particular policy comes up to the fore time after time. [O'Neill]

When we talk about the Geneva Conference it is important to remember that the Geneva Conference was about Korea, and that Korea, Vietnam, and Germany were divided countries. So when we talk about a settlement at Geneva we are talking about a deal between the great powers about the conditions under which divided countries can unify. And so Germany is as much a part of the agenda at Geneva as are Korea and Vietnam. I would also suggest that one of the reasons that the Russians in particular were willing to go along with the division in Indochina was that they were terribly unwilling or uninterested in setting up any formulas whereby countries that had been divided after the Second World War could be reunited; that they would much rather give up in any form half of Korea or half of Indochina, or all of Indochina, rather than risk any kind of reunification of Germany in Europe. [Popkin]

After President Johnson left the White House he wrote an essay for the *Encyclopedia Brittanica* in which he emphatically stated that he

felt himself constrained by the Chinese syndrome. He was very, very clear about that. [Parmet]

In 1951 I was attending the Army War College and one of the studies that the class addressed was the United States policy in Southeast Asia. We knew at the time that the French were in trouble. We knew that the Viet Minh had been recognized by China, and that put an entirely different picture on North Vietnam. From then on it meant that the North Vietnamese could reinforce the insurgency directly through the mountainous part of North Vietnam. Whoever in the west tried to oppose an advance into the south, whether by guerrillas or North Vietnamese or Chinese, would be faced with this situation, because any time the enemy liked they could escalate since they had this direct overland route from China. Almost every insurgency we have been involved in, this question of sanctuaries becomes absolutely key. We solved the Greek Civil War because we got Yugoslavia to stop the flow of supplies across the border. [At the college] I was on one of the committees that looked at U.S. policy in Southeast Asia and the consensus of the class—about one third of them had just come back from Korea, commanding regiments in combat, for example—said that the U.S. should not get involved other than materiel support. It was the wrong place for us to try to fight, any way you look at it, politically, psychologically, we would be stigmatized, as the French were, painted as colonial. Operationally you could not find a tougher part of the world, logistically a superhuman task. We said do not do it. It was ironic the way things turned out in terms of what kind of a Vietnamese army and armed forces we wanted against what threat. Back in the fifties the decision to shape the Vietnamese army in our own image was not the decision of American advisers. It was the decision of the president of the United States and of the National Security Council. Go back and read the National Intelligence Estimates beginning in 1950 when we formed the Board of National Estimates. The board was obsessed with the idea that the Chinese would intervene as they did in Korea and that this was the major threat. And so instructions to the Joint Chiefs and secretary of defense were to form an army that could stop the Chinese army. And you can argue that that was kind of dumb but if you're the Joint Chiefs what are you going to do? They did exactly what they were ordered to do. They didn't do too badly—they did a pretty good job. But a lot of water passed over the dam during the next two decades. It finally dawned on us that it was not the Chinese

threat, it was the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong and the insurgency threat. [B. Palmer]

2
The Role of the Military in the Evolution of the Commitment to Southeast Asia

I quite agree on the need for lower-level studies to indicate how options were shaped and what options were presented. The problem in doing this, of course, even for as early as 1954, is enormous and in most cases cannot be overcome. We get glimmers and hints from the *Foreign Relations* volumes of what is percolating down below, but it is impossible for anybody without special access to go much beyond this. Of necessity, at this point, even for thirty years ago, we have to concentrate on the top level and kind of guess what is happening below. [Herring]

Where were the Joint Chiefs during the January–July 1965 period in terms of alternative strategies? We have heard retrospectively from Schandler and others essentially the notion that the Joint Chiefs said that the only way you can win this war is to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, mine Haiphong, bomb a little more, and mobilize reserves.[1] Now I would like to know when that was put forth during this period. I wonder if anyone knows, because the alternatives stated in Cochran's paper were to continue doing what we were doing, withdrawing, or putting ground troops into the South. I think the paper was correct in saying that no one was asking where do we want to be five years from now. No strategy was involved, but troops were involved. We've heard since that General Westmoreland left that question of brokering the strategy to General Wheeler. His idea was to get the troops first and the strategy will follow. That whole notion of strategies being proposed by the Joint Chiefs and either rejected or ignored by the president is at the heart of a lot of the discussion that historically took place about that period. I'm getting at the alleged alternatives, and one alternative which is attributed retrospectively to the "military" was the option of going into Laos, going into Cambodia, mining Haiphong. A lot of these things did involve presidential decisions which according to Schandler and others he persistently rejected, or rejected sufficiently so that he never heard them again. [Braestrup]

1. Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1977).

Isn't the decision where to put troops, no matter who makes it, a geographical imperative? Isn't that the decision that really imposes the strategy on the war, and whether you talk about quantitative strategy or strategy expounded in more conventional military terms, isn't it a moot question that once your troops are on the ground—once you decide to put the troops in the highlands, for example, or in enclaves on the coast—that imposes an operational strategy on the war? And isn't that decision one that was made in Saigon rather than in Washington? The initiative, or at least the imperative, to define strategy in terms of where the troops are going and how they will operate is not really a presidential decision but one in which the president defers to his commander in the field. In the period between January and July 1965 the alternative of putting forces across Laos was not really considered a viable strategic alternative. It was talked about among the chiefs. It is my recollection, in fact, that Harold K. Johnson was an advocate of this sort of ground operation, of putting ground forces across the trail, at least as far as Tchepone. But the consensus of opinion among the chiefs was that this would get us involved in a strongpoint defense across Indochina similar to what the French had tried to do—which was not going to work because a strongpoint defense could be bypassed by the infiltrating North Vietnamese, and it involved certain diplomatic considerations with respect to Laos and numbers of troops and logistical support for a number of troops that was way beyond the number of ground forces that were then being considered. The alternative of bombing was considered even earlier, in 1964, in the tank, but the chiefs rejected that as a viable alternative at that time. [Demma]

The documents that are available show the other parts of that formula, that is, the much intensified air attack and the mining of Haiphong, as part of the recommendations that the chiefs attached to Westmoreland's 44-battalion request in the spring of 1965, and they were incorporated in McNamara's draft presidential memorandum, in the first version of it, and then soft-pedaled in the second version that actually went up to Johnson on the 1st of July. [May]

The thing that struck me in the papers was the difference in military influence between 1954 and 1964. In 1954 the president is an ex-supreme commander and the Department of Defense seems to be dominated solely by ex–World War II major commanders. By 1964 the World War II commanders were gone. There seems to be little

influence of the Joint Chiefs on this whole decision-making process. What I would like to know is was this accidental, was this a symptom of the personality of General Wheeler versus the personality of the civilians in charge, or had the structure of the Defense Department changed sufficiently by 1964 that it was almost institutionalized, that the basic military decisions were in the hands of the civilians? [Greenhut]

Why did the JCS role in 1965 seem to be significantly different from its role in the 1950s? First, there is obviously the structural explanation, the ramifications of the National Security Act of 1947. Those statutory provisions had by the early 1960s been joined by the particular managerial style of Secretary of Defense McNamara to have the effect of moving the president's senior military advisers farther away from his immediate presence. There was, of course, also the factor of personality. But I would like to emphasize that the role of the JCS during this period, like the roles of most agencies and personalities, changed over time. Within a year and a half of his becoming chairman, General Wheeler was attending meetings of the Tuesday luncheons. Within two years he was disagreeing publicly with Secretary McNamara in congressional hearings on air power and, indeed, on one occasion on "Meet the Press." So that particular bureaucratic context changed. [Miles]

What you find in 1954, particularly in the person of Ridgway and the people around him, is the instance of a "never again" sort of hangover from Korea and that we are not about to commit military power there unless we can go after China itself. No more limited war sort of thing. We cannot do it unless we do it on the larger scale and attack the larger enemy. By 1964 the "never again" people have apparently gone and the people who have come up do not put the same sort of constraints or raise the same sort of issues. [Herring]

I would like to . . . emphasize the legacy of strategic planning between 1952 and 1964 in the commitment of combat forces in 1965. The Joint Staff planners had, of course, for some time wrestled with the containment of Chinese communism. They considered intervention in Laos, and they planned for the establishment of a Southeast Asia Command which would be led by a theater commander in the tradition of a MacArthur or an Eisenhower. And those plans did, as we know, influence some of the decisions about specific missions in

1965. And I think there was another legacy, and that was the legacy for communication between the president and his principal military advisers. Notwithstanding hearing him say on a number of occasions in 1965 that there would be limits on that war, geographical limits and limits on the strategic bombing of North Vietnam, it is my impression that it was not until the final decision not to place the country on a kind of quasi-war footing at the end of the summer of 1965 that the JCS realized that the kind of war that they had anticipated, that they had been planning for, which had framed a lot of their earlier strategic proposals, a war in Southeast Asia at large, was not the war that Lyndon Johnson was planning to fight. [Miles]

3
The Reactions of Four Administrations to the Vietnam Dilemma

The initial Eisenhower commitment was quite limited because the administration had every expectation in late 1954 that at some point within a week, a month, maybe a year, it might have to back away and pull out and it was prepared to do this. Now certainly there are indications of this—Dulles makes it clear that we did not want to get too committed or attached to Diem. The irony here is that the unexpected success of Diem between October 1954 and the spring of 1955 tends over the long haul to tighten the commitment that the administration had started out with. [Herring]

I would like to underscore the point about the differentiation between Kennedy and Eisenhower. For a variety of political and intellectual reasons Kennedy felt himself under a greater compulsion than did Eisenhower to respond decisively, basically to employ that determination, while Eisenhower was able to afford a greater degree of caution. This is a very important and very essential difference. [Parmet]

Regarding the constraints on the Truman and Eisenhower administrations versus the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, I think at the level of the American effort in Vietnam the American advisers and technicians over there (in the fifties) would have been amazed and delighted to get the kind of open-ended commitment of

resources that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations later put into the country. In the Eisenhower period the main preoccupation of the advisers over there was that they were always afraid that their support was going to be cut, and they never had any idea of getting expanded resources. And I think at the national level Eisenhower and his advisers had a lot of confidence in what the United States could accomplish in the world and the ability of the United States to accomplish its aims in the world. But they also had a very, very modest idea of how much we could spend for defense purposes. People like Treasury Secretary Humphrey got up in the National Security Council and said things like: "We can't afford to take responsibility for every little country in the world. They have to stand on their own feet." [Spector]

[Based on] an assessment of how these respective administrations viewed the relationship between national strategy and national projects I think Eisenhower was quite clear on this. Truman was a little bit more complex—certainly NSC 68 is an argument for unlimited spending to defend national interests. However, it seems to me that once the Korean War got started, and once the priorities of Indochina had to be balanced against the priorities of Korea, Truman clearly operated in Indochina from a framework of limited resources. So I think it really is not until the Kennedy-Johnson period that you get administrations that can approach the Indochina question from a sense that they could spend pretty much whatever they needed to spend in this area. They don't have to worry about the bottom line. [Gaddis]

It was not just a sense of resource constraints, it was also a sense of political constraints that made the Kennedy and Johnson administrations cautious. I remember in the salad days of 1961 proposing to Kennedy that we shed the two Chinas policy. He never replied. I sent him a second memo because it seemed to me that that was long overdue. By 1960 we were perfectly clear about the Sino-Soviet strain. Finally, Kennedy sent me a message: "There are one million reasons why I am not going to try to change China policy in my first administration." That's the Committee of One Million which was at the time supporting Taiwan. He did say, however, that if he won by a substantial majority in 1964, then we could talk about changing China policy. That, it seems to me, was a serious political constraint. And Lyndon Johnson, too, of course, was the master politician,

always looking over his shoulder on too many openings toward China. [Komer]

4
The Role of the Individual and of Personality in Decision Making

I would stress the importance of seeing individuals as independent of the policy options and of the policy papers. I remember once in the White House, like others in this company, having the opportunity to talk to some of the principal actors. They said, and I had heard this again and again: "You know Johnson keeps General Wheeler on because he has sympathy for him. They both have bad hearts." A small matter. I don't know how this relates to how we judge policy and decisions. Another item: In talking to Dean Rusk on several occasions he said "Korea" when he meant "Vietnam." Is that just because, as assistant secretary, he had dealt with Korea, or does this tell us something about motivation and zeal to do in Vietnam what couldn't be done in Korea? I recall also talking to George Ball about his role as a dove, and asking him about the position he was taking, since he had been counsellor to the French embassy and knew the whole Vietnam story. Ball said to me: "I want to make one thing clear. I only present a contrary opinion when I am asked to." The public saw a dove who was champing at the bit to present a dovish view. Finally, I want to say a word about Lyndon Johnson. He ran his luncheons on Tuesdays at which targets were picked. And, as you know, Johnson would leave state dinners to find out how the bombing attacks came out. [Graff]

From what I have read and heard from people who worked with Johnson I get the picture of someone who was advised often but did not tell people very much about what was going on in his own mind. He carried into the White House the view he had on the hill that what people didn't know couldn't hurt him. As one of his senior advisers put it, it was his practice to make a decision and then to organize the process by which that decision was made, by which that decision became a matter of consensus. People quite close to him did not know when he made that decision; it became apparent to them as they saw the processes being organized. He brought himself to this

set of questions rather on personal impulse, that is, a personal impulse to not be defeated and that the U.S. would not have to turn around and be defeated. From the other side, it was his habit not to give Westmoreland everything he asked for, but never to have Westmoreland say that he had never been given what he asked for, which is a different proposition. Now if that is right and this picture of him affects the decisions made in this period, it really is a question of permanent forces versus individual forces. If you imagine someone different in that job—say Adlai Stevenson or Scoop Jackson—could anyone argue that they would have organized the processes differently, that the outcomes might have been different? And the same might have been true had Lyndon Johnson not been on the ticket and Kennedy not have carried Texas and Richard Nixon been president. [May]

With General Wheeler we are not dealing with a man who in January 1965 had, like George Marshall, wrestled with comparable issues of mobilization and the adjustment of American war plans after the fall of France or the invasion of Italy. We are talking of a man who had been chairman of the Joint Chiefs for less than six months, who was overshadowed in many negotiations by his former mentor, Maxwell Taylor, for whom he had served as assistant deputy chief of staff for operations. [Miles]

I think it is very important that we focus in on Lyndon Johnson since he was making the ultimate decisions. The thing I am a little concerned about is that we begin to look at Johnson and focus on the personality to the point where we miss the kind of options that are coming up to him. It is very easy to talk of Johnson in the most extreme form, as Wright Pattman did, to say that to understand him you have to understand that he is the last cowboy. But I think you have to go beyond that and ask questions. George Herring is finishing a book now on the U.S. in Vietnam and one of the things George is concluding is that throughout 1964 and 1965 Johnson was pushed very, very hard to escalate the war and Johnson was raising essentially the same types of questions in these months that Eisenhower was raising in 1954. In that sense Herring thinks that Johnson is playing a much more important role as a hurdle to the people who wanted to escalate the war. On the other hand, it does seem to me that Johnson is being presented with certain alternatives, that this is not a man who is particularly sophisticated or informed about what

is going on in Southeast Asia or in terms of military strategy. [LaFeber]

As I was going out of Thieu's office on January 30, 1975 we went down a back way and came to the famous sand table where he practiced his maneuvering and I said, "What is that?" He said, "That's my sand table and that is where I direct my troops from." I asked, "How can you do it from here?" and he said, "Well, my generals do not understand how to fight this war." And I think that was what worried me the most. Part of the responsibility [for the defeat] has to be the senior leadership of the [South Vietnamese] army which was not respected or trusted by its president, who was also a general, and which makes what happened in 1975 a double tragedy because it was utterly preventable, avoidable, but for better military leadership. [Goodman]

There is a sort of constant in writing about Vietnam. All the Vietnamese writings suggest we lost because we were not proud enough, or patriotic enough, or dedicated enough, and all the military writings blame everything on leadership. Instead of analyzing the policies or the organization or the institutions, they blame everything on leadership. There is never any consideration of the possibility that sometimes the right policies work with less leadership or the same real-life people that you have. [Popkin]

5
The Eurocentric Basis of America's Indochina Policy

Even though our attention shifted to Asia at the time of the North Korean attack, even though both limited wars Americans have fought in the nuclear age were conventional and both in the Far East, the bias of our policy was very consistently Eurocentric. And our Indochina policy, sometimes to the despair of our Far East experts, was basically oriented toward supporting France in the defense of Europe and therefore paying a much higher price in Indochina policy than perhaps we should have. [Komer]

A lot of the impetus for getting involved in Indochina after the Second World War was Eurocentric. We were in Indochina to move

France as a government to the right, to cool anti-Americanism, to weaken the position of the French Communist party. Somewhere there was a shift between 1950 and 1954 from being in Vietnam for the sake of France to being in Vietnam for the sake of dominoes or Asia. I'm not clear how that happened. [Popkin]

I trace the shift to the latter part of 1949 and the early part of 1950 with the new NSC document on Asia, with the fall of China, and all that comes with this, and then Korea really sort of confirms it and reinforces it. That is where I see Asian factors balancing or even exceeding the importance of Europe. Now European factors are still important—the EDC and in matters like this—but still the Asian factor is crucial from the latter part of 1949 on. [Herring]

6
The Effect of Public Opinion and Moral Factors on Decisions on the War

Public opinion did very much to color Johnson's attitude [about being in Vietnam]. I think what Johnson really worried more about was the backlash that he would get if he were to pull out of Indochina. Johnson was very much influenced by what had happened to the people who had lost China. Again, this Korea-China analogy is very important in this matter. He is on record as having said what he thought the consequences would be if he were perceived to have lost Indochina. The right-wing backlash, or at least the image of the right-wing backlash, whether it ever really existed or not, was very powerful in his mind throughout this period. I list that as being the single most important example of a perception of public opinion influencing him. [Gaddis]

There is a dichotomy here in public opinion as it existed from the fifties onward. On the one hand, they do not want to lose more Asian real estate, but on the other they do not want a big commitment that is going to be costly. That is what the president had to maneuver around. [Herring]

I believe that public opinion has been one of the underlying themes of the entire symposium. It seems to me that one of the great,

decisive failings of the American government during the war was its inability to explain the war persuasively to the American people. Changing policies over the years were one reason for this failure. Another may well have been the conflicting perceptions of the war. But also standing in the way of rational and basically honest explanations of the war were the moral and missionary ideals that still play such an important role in American society. As difficult and perhaps in the end even impossible though it would have been, more should have been done than the government did to educate public opinion. I do not mean propaganda but an honest effort to convey a sense that moral probity was not enough in foreign affairs, that moral probity must inspire but cannot take the place of realistic power politics to protect the national interest. That, of course, goes against the grain of an important segment of American public opinion. But if a more serious effort had been made in that direction, the Vietnam War might not have become the extremely difficult and painful learning experience that it was and that in some ways continues to be today. [Paret]

Ultimately, the Vietnam War and the commitment to it that we have been talking about became a moral and ethical issue in the country. Where, when, and how do questions of this sort become appropriate, or do they become appropriate, for historians some thirty years later? [Challener]

One thing that can be said about the relationship between issues and morality, not just in Vietnam but in the cold war in general, is that somewhere along in the early days of the cold war, let's say about the time of Korea, the idea got started within the U.S. government that in an all-out conflict almost anything is justified. Morality is a very flexible concept. And the kinds of things that in an earlier stage of our history we might not have contemplated, such as covert operations, became perfectly standard procedure as a consequence of the cold war. It seems to me that same framework obtains throughout the Vietnam War, even though it has been called into question from outside the government and even though it can be demonstrated that this kind of immorality has had an unfortunate effect on the American position in the world as well as on public support. But it seems to me this never really filters in at the policy level until Jimmy Carter comes in. I do not think we can say that Nixon and Kissinger, to any very great extent, took these considerations into

account in planning their policy. Although Kissinger made interesting speeches on the relationship between morality and foreign policy while he was secretary of state, it is really not until Carter that you begin to get a president who was looking at this not only in terms of what is required by the balance of power or other standard considerations, but also what is appropriate behavior for the United States. And certain constraints that develop within the Carter administration regarding intervention in the third world areas flow from this sense that Carter had that this is inappropriate behavior for the United States. That proved to be a rather tenuous thing as the Soviet Union became more active in this part of the world. [Gaddis]

I happen to think that the rhetoric about credibility in the world and dominoes [in 1965] was a way of trying to put realistic rhetoric around what was essentially a sentimental position, and that fundamentally what was pushing most if not all people was what was in a memorandum from Mr. Rusk to the president during this period of debate in the middle of 1965 where he said simply that as long as the South Vietnamese were fighting for themselves we cannot desert them. We cannot abandon a friend. I think that kind of sentimental sense of it was very powerful. That was one kind of moral position. There was another moral position which was represented briefly by Hubert Humphrey in a memorandum to the president (that then resulted in his being excluded from counsels on the question) in which he said it is more important to get the Great Society through. The higher morality involved service at home, he said, and the president was going to compromise that if he pursued this other moral objective outside. There was a third morality which was embodied in the movement which took to itself the name "antiwar" which was the morality that said that we are wrong and they are right. [May]

I do not accept the notion that there is something peculiar about the American people in terms of fighting or sustaining war. I think the issue is what are you fighting about, what are the issues, what are the dangers, are they salable, are they definable to the American people. If you can define a problem properly and make it clear that America has to fight for fifty years, the American people will fight a fifty-year war. It is up to you to define the war in terms that they are willing to fight for fifty years. If you can do that I do not see that the American people are in any way historically unique in their

behavior. The real task is to define the interests in ways that are very accurate, and if you can do that and do not always act unilaterally but assume that other nations also understand their interests and will behave accordingly, you have a lot of built-in, automatic support. [Graebner]

7
The Strategy for Fighting the War

We should always keep in mind the dualism of the Vietnam War. The war always existed on two levels, one military and one political. Such was its nature. The Communists understood this much better than we. Their strategy in fact rested upon the concept of *dau tranh*—armed struggle, political struggle. We did not understand the nature of the war as the other side perceived it. That is the primary reason it turned out the way it did. The Vietnam War was a very different kind of war. If we lost the battles we lost the war; if we won the battles we didn't necessarily win the war. The American military did everything that was expected of it and more. It was the system we were up against, in part our failure to understand the other side, a very understandable human failure. [Pike]

By what processes do societies decide in what manner they should apply their resources for war? I think one answer is that usually the process is a sloppy one, involving a great many kinds of people ranging from combat soldiers to technological experts, politicians, and even including a few theorists. Even heads of state who were true commanders in the field, such as Frederick the Great or Napoleon, devised their concepts and techniques from the experience and ideas of others, which they then shaped for their own purposes. Even for them the process was disjointed, the process of formulating strategic theory, operations doctrine. But the product of the process can usually be judged with a good deal of accuracy. A strategy is effective if it works against your particular opponent and if it suits the capabilities and ways of doing things of your own society. The war in Vietnam—already difficult because it demanded the closest cooperation with an ally whose interests and whose ways of doing things differed very considerably from ours—presented the American government and its forces with particularly harsh strategic problems.

Certain strategic decisions demanded far-reaching operational and tactical innovations. And these innovations had to be linked with changes in attitude. I am thinking, for instance, of counterinsurgency and the pacification programs which seem to have been more difficult for Americans to implement than were large-scale conventional operations. [Paret]

One thesis with which I find myself in some disagreement is that the war was fought without adequate understanding of the demands of the war. That seems to me a doubtful proposition. If you look at the documents that were moving around Washington in 1965 and at what people in MACV were saying, what people in the Pentagon were saying about the requirements of the war, the numbers are extraordinarily like the numbers that actually turned out to be required. Westmoreland was saying 175,000 now, at least 100,000 to follow, more later. By November 1965 the numbers they were talking about were approximately those actually there by 1968. McNamara was telling the president that there would be a thousand a month killed in action. The estimate from MACV was that it would take till the end of 1967 or the beginning of 1968 to achieve a level of stability on the ground in South Vietnam which would make possible offensive action. All of that seems to me to have been quite accurate, very much on the nose, in terms of resource requirements and what actually developed. Lots of misunderstanding of the situation on the ground, but if you look at other assessments, indeed if you even think about what the American chief of staff and British chiefs of staff were estimating in 1942 would be the requirements for fighting in 1944, they were much farther off the mark. And if you look at the assessments that all powers were making of one another and of the requirements of war for each of the two world wars, the performance of the American government in Vietnam was well, well above that. Where they went wrong was their appraisal of what the requirements were back home. [May]

For one reason or another the United States prepared the South Vietnamese Army for an across-the-border invasion like Korea and many have said that if we did things the other way, preparing for guerrillas, everything might have been all right. I think the essential point here is that the Communists had two weapons on their side, they had guerrillas and they had a main force. And they could choose which way to do it. We prepared for one so, not surprisingly, they did it the other way. [Popkin]

8
The Feelings of U.S. Decision Makers on Vietnamization

I find very early in 1970 neither Nixon nor Kissinger expected that there would be a mutual withdrawal. In fact, they were planning for a cease-fire in place. Yet Vietnamization is adopted with the expectation that the RVNAF will have to compete with the North Vietnamese and certainly with units occupying areas that they have traditionally occupied in I Corps and IV Corps and along the border, and that our objective should be that they will be strong enough by 1972 to live with the military situation which is essentially a cease-fire in place. So I do not think we deluded ourselves at the time by saying this would only work with mutual withdrawal. I think we expected there would not be a mutual withdrawal. I also do not think that they expected that it would work. One of the things that comes through clearly to me in 1969–1972, all the way up to Watergate, is the clear expectation that none of this will work, neither the negotiated agreement nor Vietnamization, nor both together, unless we retain the capability to put as much money into South Vietnam as it needed semiannually, and we had a credible threat that if the North Vietnamese built a thousand kilometer all-weather road into the South, if they moved three or four divisions into the South, we would respond by air. And so I think the whole assumption in part was underlain by the fact that we could provide a credible threat once we had left to return with aviation and we could be credible with respect to the kind of economic and military aid we could provide the South. So again I do not think we adopted the policy with an illusion as long as we set the limits on ourselves that people did not think we could fulfill. We did not anticipate, of course, Watergate and the Cambodian bombing congressional cutoff. [Goodman]

9
The Costs of the Nixon-Kissinger Policy

The Nixon policy has been characterized as a successful strategy or policy of disengagement. I might with all respect characterize it differently. It was a policy that did succeed. It took four years for the United States to disengage. Within that four years, it seems to me, one has also to total up the cost . . . in dead, in billions of dollars and,

more importantly, I think, in a worsening of the rending of the fabric internally in the United States which I think has had some more long-range effects. I do not know how to characterize the policy other than as costly and I do not know what other alternatives were available. [Kohn]

The costs of cut and run were horrendous. I would add another cost—it cost us about a decade of strategic modernization. I used to tell the JCS that if they wanted to know where all the planes and guns and tanks and missiles that they wanted had gone—and they were constantly complaining through the seventies—it had gone down the drain in Vietnam. Because it was the direct, the indirect, the political, and the psychological impact of Vietnam on the American psyche and the result on the American Congress's unwillingness to vote defense funding that really undercut American modernization of conventional forces as well as strategic. I would estimate it at half a trillion dollars. In other words, I would estimate the cost of Vietnam to us in strategic terms the greatest single cost—the loss of a decade of modernization. The incremental cost to us as Americans in fiscal 1984 dollars—in today's or last year's constant dollars—was on the order of 330 billion. That is not just an estimate. After all, we know *ex post facto* what we spent. That is just the incremental cost. To that I think one must add, again in fiscal 1984 dollars, the cuts in the defense programs by the Congress to make us expiate Vietnam. They run, again in fiscal 1984 dollars, on the order of 150 billion. Add those two figures together and I think we may lay aside the 57,000 men we lost and the infinitely larger number of people, South Vietnamese, killed, wounded, or now in slavery, the war cost us half a trillion dollars. Most of this half trillion came out of investment accounts, and that is one of the most important strategic consequences of the Vietnam War that has to be assessed by historians. I would like to point out, however, that the Korean War, which was also stalemated and from which we also disengaged, had exactly the opposite effect. It led to the rearmament of the West. It was the North Korean attack on the South that triggered the great U.S. rearmament. [Komer]

In 1973 I was giving a seminar in strategic intelligence and defense policy, and I stopped the seminar in the middle and asked how many of the students would favor the reenactment of the draft. There were eleven students in the seminar and one hand went up. I

then said, "Let me rephrase the question. How many of you would favor a draft if you did not have to serve?" Nine hands went up. That's the cost, not money. [Colvin]

It's not how many men you can produce in a replay of World War II—we mobilized, what, eleven million men—but how many you can get overseas in certain contingencies in the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours. That is what makes the difference. I don't want a draft. If I were secretary of defense I would not want a draft if it were offered to me. I could neither equip nor train the draftees—not if we drafted them on any equitable basis. [Komer]

It's perfectly obvious when you study the draft picture that in the early years of the war you were much more apt to be drafted if you were poor, disadvantaged, or black. If you were in one of those categories you were much more apt to go to Vietnam, and in Vietnam you were much more apt to be in the infantry and get yourself killed. That was not lost on the American youth. But I maintain that the ground swell of opinion turned against the war when middle-class families were starting to have their sons drafted and sent to Vietnam. So while the draft boards were drafting people who had no economic or political or social standing that was perfectly all right. But when their sons were drafted, that's when the dissent started. We can document that. We all knew it. President Nixon made a campaign promise to do away with the draft. Mel Laird told me later (this was after Nixon was inaugurated) that every member of Nixon's cabinet recommended against it, for different reasons. Some of the reasons were philosophical, plus the cost. The president said he was going to do it anyway and he did. As you recall, the president moved to a lottery system by the end of 1969. If we'd done that in 1967 we might have avoided the whole problem because if the system is a fair system, if it were based on a lottery system, I think the American youth would have accepted it a lot more. [B. Palmer]

10
The Impact of Vietnam on the U.S. Army

We have to attempt to keep separated the various social phenomena of our time, those which were Vietnam related and those which

were not. It was a time of worldwide cultural revolution; it affected race relations, the status of women, the concept of patriotism, length of hair, kinds of music we listened to, the environmental outlook, almost everything. The question is how much did Vietnam influence these? Or, on the other side of the coin, how much of this would there have been had there been no Vietnam at all? I think that is the most difficult sorting-out process that a historian has to do. [Pike]

It hasn't been brought out here what the war did to the strategic posture of the United States. It destroyed the U.S. 7th Army in Germany without the enemy firing a shot. It destroyed that army because we were so strategically out of balance we used the 7th Army as a replacement for Vietnam. [B. Palmer]

It seems to me that there is another issue that ought to be addressed, namely the impact of the Vietnam War on the Army's self-image as a part of the national defense establishment in terms of strategy, tactics, and doctrine. I think the impact was zilch. I think that the Army regarded Vietnam as an aberration, that having gone through this searing experience the Army concluded that Vietnam was something that was so outside the normal role, responsibility, and function of an army that it should be buried as quickly as possible. I doubt that there was much tactical innovation. The Army returned to what it regarded as its main mission, which was contributing to the defense of Europe as part of the NATO coalition. The Army rejected the idea that we should seriously study [the war]. In effect it went the opposite way in terms of its self-image of its role in Vietnam. It rejected the strategic and tactical aspects of Vietnam, the idea that it was going to be involved in future counterinsurgency operations, or even that it should analyze what counterinsurgency meant or analyze in somewhat greater depth what the insurgency in Southeast Asia was all about. I am not speaking as a historian but as one who went around and finally had to deal with an Army that regarded Vietnam as an aberration. So I would like to suggest to you that, utterly contrary to the impact on the Army's sociological image, the impact on the Army's self-image of what armies are for was practically nothing at all. [Komer]

It has often been suggested that the mood in America was in part because of Vietnam. Since there was the same mood in Japan, Germany, England, France, and China when there was the huge peer

boom, it would be more correct to say that Vietnam happened to occur at a time when this was going to happen whether or not there had been a Vietnam. Vietnam did not create the cultural revolution in any of these Western countries. It just coincided with it. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Army had bad morale in Vietnam, that the Army was not happy with its mission. Was this entirely attributable to the attitudes in America about the war and the Army, or could this have been changed if the Army had been told that they were there to defend the Vietnamese rather than to kill people so that the fighting was part of a defensive mission? Would it have made a difference, or was it simply impossible to give the American soldiers any kind of a positive identification with a culture and society so culturally and socially different from ours? [Popkin]

There were a lot of attempts between 1970 and 1973 on the part of the Army to give the soldier some kind of positive image of what he was doing but they were not very successful. The mission absolutely makes a difference on morale, even among allegedly professional forces. The marines who went to Lebanon in the early years, or even the marines who were in Lebanon when things got bad, their morale was helped tremendously by the knowledge that the public was behind them. And that made a tremendous difference even though they could not figure out what their mission was. The fact that the public was supporting them convinced them that they must be there for some good reason, and it kept their morale up very well. [Spector]

11
The Reciprocal Effects Between the War and American Credibility

Whether it was a fundamental motive or not is open to debate, but one of the things that people in government were talking about [during the war] was credibility, about the importance of fulfilling commitments in Vietnam, of standing fast in Vietnam, of holding the line, because of the reputation of the United States, because of the larger credibility of the United States in global competition with the Soviet Union and its associates. Now clearly in the period after Vietnam, partly affected by the war, the credibility of the United

States is diminished. What was hoped for by the managers of the war did not come about. A lot of things affected [foreign] estimates of American judgment in conducting the war. The greater consciousness in other countries, not only in Southeast Asia but around the world, of the existence of the second branch. We are reminded of the power of the legislative branch and the absence of complete independence on the part of the executive. We have seen the effects on capital investment in the defense sector of the United States, surely with effects on American credibility. I think it is fair to say that if you had been able to get consensus of expert judgment at the beginning of the 1960s, the American Army in Europe, the *Bundeswehr*, and the Israeli Defense Forces would have been rated as the three outstanding military forces in the world. By the end of the sixties the U.S. Army in Europe was certainly not in that company. I think it may be easier to trace causal connection through Soviet commentary on American forces when, for example, you look at what was written on the twentieth anniversary of the Normandy landing as compared to what was written on the thirtieth. There's a lot of difference. On the twentieth anniversary the emphasis was on the cunning that the United States was displaying in withholding its actions in Europe until Russia had been bled. By the thirtieth anniversary they are saying that it was evidence of ineptness and cowardice on the part of the Americans. I find it hard not to feel that this was affected by their observation of Vietnam. In any case, it is clear that there was a diminution in the credibility of the United States which the American policymakers had hoped to protect by their decisions regarding Vietnam. [May]

There is a problem of the United States' credibility abroad. When I get in touch with a lot of my friends in Asia or in some other small countries they are very much troubled by the spectacle, for instance, of having the U.S. administration, approved by the Congress, helping the Contras but within nine months saying there is nothing of this sort any more. And there is the problem of having the troops in Lebanon and approved by the Congress for ninety days, but after the bombing in Beirut the Congress returned and said no more ninety days, maybe two weeks. So it is quite perplexing for an observer from the outside world to see where the U.S. credibility is. [Bui Diem]

There were fundamental changes [during the war] in Washington's understanding of the relationship between communism and

nationalism in Asia, and yet, despite them, the proclaimed American interest in Vietnam remained unchanged—so much so that one is left with the impression that the interest may in fact have had little to do with perceived external threats at all but rather reflected certain internal insecurities about ourselves. Notable among these was an obsession with credibility, the belief that if we did not regularly and consistently demonstrate our willingness to defend even peripheral interests, all interests would be disastrously called into question. We can see today how implausible that argument was. We have proven ourselves unable to defend interests once considered important, not just in Indochina, but in Afghanistan, Iran, Nicaragua, and Lebanon as well. And yet, can it be said today that our influence in the world at large is any less than it was, say, in 1965, or 1975, especially when balanced off against that of the Soviet Union? [Gaddis]

12
The Status of Scholarship on the War

The war was a condition of competing perceptions, and the job of the historian is to work back through these perceptions to try to find the truth. My personal opinion is that we are not yet ready to do this, but should remain at the perception level for another period of time. We should not rush to judgment. We should bear in mind that much of the "truth" about the Vietnam War can be irrelevant because it was the untruths that had the impact, the meaning, that shaped the heritage. We live in an age of exaggeration: television commercials, media hype, the language of the young. The writers about Vietnam—fiction more than nonfiction, although I think this tends to extend over to nonfiction as well—the overriding characteristic about them is this hyperbolic exaggeration. It is made worse because it is a parochial condition, a very narrow view. These writers know something about Vietnam, about the map, but they know very little about other wars, about other places, about other times. Vietnam, they tell us, was the most horrible war, the most atrocity-ridden war, the most bloody and destructive war, the roughest war ever. The fact is that it was not. It was rough for some, but even then it was not the roughest. I would put up against anything I experienced in Vietnam the mind-destroying artillery shelling of World War I, the release of poison gas in which you die by drowning in your own blood. I would put up the savage island-hopping of the South Pacific

in World War II, the Anzio beachhead, the Battle of the Bulge, the Chosan Reservoir in Korea—Vietnam had no monopoly on rough warfare. But this hyperbole permeates all the writings on Vietnam. If they do write a serious book about the meaning of Vietnam, its theme will be that we lost the war because we did not understand it. The historian's primary task is to answer the question "Was it necessary?" in terms that have validity, in terms that have meaning, in terms that have relevance to what actually went on there and what did not. We are still at the level of perception, in a prison of competing perceptions with respect to Vietnam. With respect to the other side, we are now blessed with a vast amount of data that we did not have before. This is material from Hanoi. It is very candid, it is revealing (and also self-serving), but highly valuable in the hands of people who know how to read it, and for the first time serious scholarship about the other side is now possible. It was not really possible during the war and right after the war because of the paucity of materials. But we do not understand the war in a technical sense. That is a body of knowledge as to what the other side was doing, what they intended, what their strategy was, what their doctrine was. There was never any serious effort to address this within the American establishment. [Pike]

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