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“You Must Fight to Win”: The Media, State Department and Vietnam 1967-1968

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Senior Honors Thesis
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1. Preface- *Newsweek* 2009

“Doing what's right isn't the problem. It is knowing what's right.”

-Lyndon B. Johnson

There is a certain aura that surrounds historical works pertaining to the Vietnam war. There are two ideological camps that, generally, one can sit in: either that of a document crazy military-esq historian out to contextualize, validate and explain; or that of a former journalist, or friend of a journalist, turned anti-war advocate. Let's face it, we cannot all be Daniel Ellsberg and break the *Pentagon Papers* to the public. We also cannot – or should not – maliciously use circuitous logic to *justify* the Vietnam era and thus draw conclusions from it that stand upon weak foundations. As someone far removed from the era, I intend to find a middle ground.

Validation must be explained in somewhat different terms for the purposes of this examination. The generally accepted definition of the verb “to validate”, according to Merriam-Webster is, “to support or corroborate on a sound or authoritative basis”. Validation, as it were, is often associated with one condoning a given validation subject. In this case if one “validates” the position of say, McNamara, on a given issue, then frequently that individual is seen as condoning their actions. Validation need not imply condoning. The *validation* of many military historians for policies surrounding the Vietnam era is not necessarily rooted in a belief in the *correctness* of said policies. In fact the exact opposite could be said of many thorough examinations. The cult of personality

surrounding analyses of the Vietnam war often misinterprets alternate points of view, even when supported by substantial documentary evidence, to be one of two things: a crackpot theorist waxing poetic over how we could have won in Vietnam, or a disgruntled former journalist with a bone to pick with the administration.

As the character Alden Pyle would suggest in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, I intend to add a “third force” to the bevy of journalists and military historians analyzing the Vietnam era. The “third force” I present here is not from the perspective of a traditional historian nor from that of a controversy hungry journalist, but rather closer to that of a philosophic historians approach. Straight philosophic analysis is often downplayed due to the common view that philosophers are “so far stuck up their own ____” – fill in the blank – and that any analysis presented by them bears no resemblance to reality. There are some grains of truth to that view, however, a philosophic approach allows for an interesting combination of sociological group analysis, psychological individual analysis, political science theory framing, and traditional historical intrigue – as a devotion to factual and dispassionate analysis (albeit almost impossible to attain).

The period commonly referred to as the *Vietnam Era* has been defined in numerous sets including: only acknowledged, *direct* American troop involvement (1965-1973), expanded American advisory assistance (1959-1975), American military and economic aid including “*advisory*” roles (1945-1975), and an entire framed period of economic influx, military support, political chastising, indirect assistance and complete immersion (1919-1975). This expanded framed period extends back to Ho Chi Minh's attempt to meet with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson at Versailles to discuss the future of a potentially independent Vietnam. As American historian Robert Buzzanco put it,

“Wilson, despite his anti-imperialist rhetoric, had little interest in the non-white colonies...”, which was unfortunately the case, and Wilson refused to acknowledge Ho Chi Minh.¹ Some historians might argue that this shouldn't be considered to be the beginning of American involvement in Vietnam, however, it bears symbolic resemblance to many of the underlying attitudes of later American military involvement. A profound misunderstanding of culture, an ignorance of history, and a undue amount of hubris are the key points in America's debacle in Vietnam often cited by both historians and journalists. Both sides endeavor to explain *why?* – and some studies do a better job than others – yet the *why* manifests itself in distinct ways that often do not make full summations of direct or indirect *causality*.

By and large academic scholarship on the Vietnam war is thorough and falls into one of the aforementioned categories: Journalistic writing or Military-esq historical work. There is a disturbing third area of scholarship – if it can even be called that – on Vietnam that has been gaining credence: revisionary interpretation. The connotation of “revisionary”, in this case, is negative, in the sense that the revisions that are being posited are generally along the lines of a recent *Newsweek* article entitled “*How we (could have) Won in Vietnam*”, a scary position at best. *Newsweek* was undoubtedly trying to entice readers by exploiting the inherent controversies that surround the Vietnam era, the countless authoritative works on Vietnam, and the numerous pop-culture references and stigma's associated with the period. Despite that, however, there is no positive conclusion to be drawn from this title. Positing either winning or a plausible scenario for winning the war in Vietnam – even via the attempt at satirical prose that *Newsweek* was most likely

¹ Buzzanco, Robert. *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 26.

aiming for – is only damaging to the wealth of highly-researched, well written, and truly scholarly works on the antecedents, misgivings and conclusions of American involvement in Vietnam. Giving, or even hinting at giving, any credence or credibility to reinterpretations that view the Vietnam war as “A war fought on the cheap...” or; “If only we had _____” (insert typical argument here – 'used more air power', 'committed more troops', 'fought to win', etc...), only undermines historians and political scientists attempts to understand and explain the Vietnam era.

Newsweek's subtitle is no better: “*For Obama & Afghanistan, the Surprising Lessons of a Long-Ago war*”. For the purposes of this examination the Bush/Obama/Afghanistan/Iraq/Vietnam correlation is unnecessary and I am ill equipped to analyze that position, however, the secondary implication of *Newsweek's* subtitle, the “surprising conclusions”, is somewhat worrisome. Although new scholarship on the Vietnam war is still forthcoming and there are certainly 'new' conclusions – or rather expanded ones – to be drawn from Vietnam, the existing conclusions outlined in Evan Thomas and John Barry's article should not be *surprising*, per se. At this point it should not be *surprising*, in any sense of the word, that the Vietnam war was a blundering, egregious failure of our government on almost all accounts. The notable exception here is generally considered to be the tenacity, drive and devotion to duty that many American troops displayed, even in the face of a conflict that they ultimately did not understand.

What is surprising to this author, however, is the fact that here in 2010 (to be fair the article in question was published in 2009) there are still proponents of the theory that Vietnam, and wars like it, are winnable – if a government resists the temptation to fight them “on the cheap” or “halfway”. To quote *Newsweek's* Thomas and Barry: “The most

surprising guidance Vietnam may have to offer is not that wars of this kind are unwinnable – which is clearly the common wisdom in America – but that they can produce victories if presidents resist the temptation to fight wars halfway or on the cheap. As President Eisenhower liked to say, if you fight, “you must fight to win”.² There are at least a half dozen things wrong with this statement, most notably, that to say that the U.S. Government fought the Vietnam war “on the cheap” is an unbelievable abrogation of the truth. The article primarily cites the differences in strategy between Gen. Westmoreland up until 1968 and, subsequently, Gen. Creighton Abrams approaches post 1969. There is little evidence to suggest that Lyndon Johnson committed large numbers of ground troops to Vietnam with the expectation to fight the war “on the cheap”, monetarily speaking. It is the case that Johnson had begun to doubt the “winnability” of Vietnam by 1968, however, fiscal concerns were generally far removed from the top of the list of problems with Vietnam. By 1968 there were nearly 530,000 American troops in Vietnam, a number which, if you were in the of a mindset of someone with the expectation of “cheap”, should rightfully be much lower. Logically, one could come to the conclusion that the number of 530,000 troops was simply the accrued necessity of fighting a war in which holding actions were implemented, however, Johnson's refusal to send an additional 200,000 troops to Vietnam at the end of 1967 (see subsequent discussion for a more in-depth analysis of this period, specifically McNamara's recommendations) should not be construed as an inkling to fight the war “on the cheap”. Clearly the social upheaval at home in the U.S., general deteriorating world opinion, and the less than auspicious reports of progress from commanders at the front, couldn't have possibly been on Johnson's mind. Thank you, *Newsweek*, for once again propagating a highly narrowed,

2 *Newsweek*, “How We (could have) won in Vietnam.” November 16, 2009.

simplistic analysis of Vietnam that not only flat out ignores fact, but stands in contrast to a majority of the accepted scholarship on Vietnam – which, had you read – I would not have any basis for the introduction to this thesis.

2. The Screws Come Loose and the Gloves Come off...

“...a steady stream of misinformation about the war in Vietnam is reaching the American Public...”³

-correspondent Charlie Mohr, 26 Nov 1965.

In U.S. Cold War History there are generally considered to be three documents and “doctrines” that broadly defined the attitudes of American foreign policy surrounding containment. These include: George Kennan's “long telegram”, Truman's NSC-68, and Kennedy/Johnson's use of “flexible response”. Each one of these represents a greater ideological concern, respectively: Discussion, Diplomacy and Economic influx as a method of containment; Perimeter defense, expanded military presence, and expanded interests; and vastly expanded, almost unlimited means, paired with inconceivable ends that required seamless cooperation of the Administration, branches of the Military, and – ironically – the enemy combatants, to achieve intended goals. The latter of these engendered a thought process along the lines of: “Wont the good little heathen opponents cooperate and be defeated?” Not too soon, because this would suggest an overbearing use of force that could provoke reprisals by the Soviet Union and China. Not too protracted, because inevitably the American public would not support a war of insurrection for

³ William M. Hammond, *United States Army in Vietnam, Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988), 213-214.

decades. Rather, *just right*, such that the struggle seems to be one fostered by *nationalism*; supported through action, and suppressed by overwhelming technological and military advantage. The neat little war in the land of tigers and elephants – envisioned by some, and implemented by others – was, unfortunately, nowhere to be found on the battlefields of Vietnam by 1967.⁴ It was like a fairytale, a fable, something that you would tuck your children into at night reading how the benevolent giant America saved the little rabbit Vietnam from the big bad wolf of international Communism. Clearly a facetious exaggeration of the pure *concept* of the Vietnam war that is easy to see looking back more than 40 years, however, it has very real implications in analysis of the highly narrowed view of Vietnam that existed in the state department by the end of 1967.

The Credibility Gap was a phrase that many Americans came to understand by the beginning of 1968. The idea that the U.S. Government would lie to the public about affairs of state and dealings abroad was not new by this period, however, the “lie” portion of that statement was more often than not taken as implied: “in the best interest of our nation”. That lie – in and of itself – became vicious and misleading, in the minds of many, by 1968 through information about “progress” in Vietnam.

If there was any single group of individuals who understood the implications of a *credibility gap* it was the news media war correspondents. As early as 1962-63, many correspondents had seen the writing on the wall for American involvement in Vietnam. In the fairy tale of Vietnam these correspondents could take one of two roles: the benevolent older, wiser character who imparts to the main character necessary guiding knowledge; or the younger narrator of the story who hears the examples of old, refuses to heed their

⁴ William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War* (New York: Random House, 1995), 4.

lessons, but finds out later many of the same lessons from their own experiences. One must remember that in this case we are not dealing with characters in a fable, but rather *human beings* – some innocent, some deserving, some expecting – their fate. There is a single example that typifies this extrapolated, somewhat simplistic view, as described by William Prochnau, a journalist who served two reporting tours in Vietnam for *The Washington Post*.

Neil Sheehan is widely known as one of the few war correspondents who seemed to truly understand the frustrations of both reporters and the Military in Vietnam. As author and Professor Thomas A. Bass loosely put it, “of all the reporters in Vietnam, only Neil Sheehan got it right”.⁵ Who is less widely known however, is one of Sheehan's early influences in reporting from Vietnam, Homer Bigart. Bigart could be considered to be one of the greatest war correspondents of the previous era – World War Two to Korea – but had been frequently overshadowed by big name reporters such as Joseph Alsop and Walter Cronkite.⁶ Many of these “old guard” reporters, as Prochnau dubs them, attempted to transition to reporting the war in Vietnam, with varying degrees of success. Bigart was able to make this transformation because he tended to report on the *essence of battle*, incorporating subtle underlying themes into his work – which, unfortunately, was often hacked to pieces by the editors statewide. Prochnau describes Bigart best, “...a prominent establishment journalist who did not buy into all the catechisms of the Cold War...A doubter, a skeptic, an iconoclast who rejected the jingoistic simplicities of the day...”.⁷ Bigart became Sheehan's mentor, imparting to him the lessons of old, and most importantly a lesson that sums up almost the entire war;

5 Thomas A. Bass, Lecture to class, State University of New York at Albany, Spring 2009.

6 Prochnau, 32.

7 Ibid, 34.

Just before Bigart left for home, the newcomer followed him on a final ARVN mission in the delta. For two days they slogged through the muck. Not a shot was fired; not a guerrilla spotted despite adamant promises that their South Vietnamese battalion had a major Viet Cong force trapped...

“For God's sake, let's go home,” Sheehan complained. “We've been out for two days, we're exhausted, nothing happened. There's no story.”

“No story, kid?” Bigart leveled the young newcomer with a withering stare.

“No. Nothing happened. Let's get out of here.”

“It doesn't work,” Bigart growled. “*That's* the story, k-k-kid. **It doesn't work.**”⁸ (additional emphasis added)

If Bigart knew in mid-1962 that the war in Vietnam simply “*didn't work*”, then why did many other reporters, state department officials and even Presidents Kennedy and Johnson not understand this point? The answer here is not so cut and dry. It is a compound, systematic failure on numerous levels, and the product of an analysis that was squeezed through simplistic Cold War ideologies and harrowed by blanket assumptions across the board.

The Gloves come off...

By the end of 1967 it was becoming increasingly apparent to the Military apparatus in Saigon, and to analysts back home, that the concepts of progress originally defined by McNamara, Westmoreland, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) were potentially askew with reality. Up until this point the concept of progress was one measured in numbers; tonnes of bombs dropped, sorties flown per month, loss rates per

8 Ibid, 53-54.

campaign, and the most dubious of all statistics – “body counts”. It was widely known within the administration that the “body count” figures, especially those reported by ARVN units, were skewed to the point of double and triple counting, or in some cases flat out making up engagements. Even as early as 1966 McNamara admitted that there may have been some margin of error – ranging typically from 30 to 100 percent – in actual VC/NVA losses.⁹

If there is a policy planner and a document that typifies the Vietnam war by 1967 it is the recommendations for future action in Vietnam written by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. This memorandum, presented to Johnson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Walt Rostow, and other key advisers in June of 1967, captures the essence of McNamara's thought process. As a major architect of the Vietnam war, McNamara was running out of new strategic ideas and was beginning an ideological split with Johnson and Rostow by the middle of 1967. The courses of action outlined by McNamara – and supported to varying degrees by the JCS – also demonstrate a profound confusion, various misinterpretations, and a general lack of consensus amongst all levels of command in Vietnam and at home. Walt Rostow's subsequent response to Johnson enforces the fact that he was beginning to differ with McNamara's logic and ideas.

Alternative Military actions against North Vietnam, at face value, is simply another strategy outline in the long list of documents pertaining to the Vietnam war. When analyzed with a critical eye for underlying attitudes, specific details, and broad policy implications, it is possible to see that Johnson's various advisers vastly over-speculated when it came to individual *means* affixing desired *ends* in Vietnam. The ends

⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 255.

and means analysis can be applied to American policy in Vietnam on both micro and macro levels: from individual memorandum's such as McNamara's to full blown strategic policy – which, inevitably includes the *accrued* microcosmic analyses of individual policy suggestions and memorandum's that are the actual substance of “policy”.

As McNamara put it in his own, somewhat self-serving, memoirs, *In Retrospect* “My May 19, 1967, memorandum to the President unleashed a storm of controversy. It intensified already sharp debate within the administration...and it hastened my departure from the Pentagon”.¹⁰ At a cursory glance this is absolutely the case. Each division of the Joint Chiefs weighed in on what alternative strategy they preferred, Westmoreland got his say, and post-distribution, Walt Rostow penned his critique (the following day, May 20th 1967). Seeing as the Joint Chiefs, McNamara, Rostow and the CIA under director Richard Helms, were the core of Johnson's advisory staff by mid-1967, it is not surprising that LBJ had at best mixed reactions to the three alternatives presented in McNamara's memo. No one who reviewed McNamara's future alternatives could wholeheartedly agree on a satisfactory answer. Of the alternatives presented – quaintly labeled A, B, and C – McNamara, under-secretary of defense Cy Vance, and the Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze, recommended option B. This was as close to consensus as there was going to be on future policy in Vietnam, although it is somewhat misleading in its implications. It could be expected that McNamara's under-secretary, Cy Vance, would support his conclusions as it would be in his best interests to do so. The corroborating opinion of Secretary of the Navy Nitze, at surface level, appears to suggest that there was at least some substantial support for option B. There are two reasons why this is was not enough evidence for

¹⁰ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedies and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 273.

Johnson to have instantly put into motion option B. First, although Nitze had been a competent Secretary of the Navy for almost four years by the time of the memo, he was nearing the end of his time in that position. The next position that Nitze would take was under-secretary of defense after McNamara's resignation and Cy Vance's subsequent leave. Secondly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which included Chief of Naval Operations David L. McDonald, was against option B and for option A – a position that seemed to trump Nitze's recommendation and position as Secretary. Perhaps most damning of all to each option presented by McNamara was that CIA Director Dick Helms and his staff of analysts did not make a recommendation. “The Director of the CIA does not make a recommendation. The CIA judgment is that none of the alternatives is capable of decreasing Hanoi's determination to persist in the war or of reducing the flow of goods sufficiently to affect the war in the South.”¹¹ As much as the American public today tends to distrust reports from the administration and the CIA, the quality of the CIA's analytical division during the Vietnam era was generally second to none. More frequently than not however, their recommendations (or lack thereof) were not given enough attention. It has only been in recent years and through re-readings of many of the CIA course action memo's that their predictions for future action in Vietnam could be seen to correspond with how the Vietnam war actually played out.

There was some inkling that perhaps option B was the best of those presented in

¹¹ Memorandum McNamara to the President, *Alternative Military Actions Against North Vietnam*, 12 June 1967. Folder 2EE, Box 75, LBJ Library.

Interestingly enough there are two, nearly identical memos that I am referring to in this analysis segment. This particular memo is the revised draft version, later sent back to Johnson, of the original memo written by McNamara on 19 May 1967. The differences are revised and verified numerical counts that McNamara included in the original, unverified. The courses of action are also defined more clearly as A,B and C, than they were in the 19 May memo. This does not however detract from the analysis as the implications of the courses of action are almost identical. To be clear, the 19 May memo had not been passed by the JCS, Secretaries of the Navy and Air Force, or CIA director Richard Helms for course action approval. The approval action recommended by the 12 June revision is based on the text of the 19 May memo, and supported by the revision of the 12 June outline done by McNamara.

McNamara's memo, however, it did not help that the Joint Chiefs recommended option A and that Secretary of the Air Force, Harold Brown, recommended option C with a few modifications. It is clear that McNamara was not pleased with the dissent of his fellow advisers, especially those “in the know”, militarily speaking. The three courses of action as described by McNamara in the revised memo are as follows:

Alternative A “*Intensified attack on the Hanoi-Haiphong logistical base*”, basically included an expansion of “sustained effort” – i.e. bombing and interdiction – of air, land and sea lines of communication (frequently referred to with the abbreviation LOCs) out of or near the Hanoi-Haiphong corridor.¹² This option also included the direct bombing of Haiphong port and the mining of the harbor approach and harbor itself in an effort to, as McNamara put it, “shoulder out” any foreign shipping. This point has been examined time and again by historians and military experts as one of the courses of action that could have “won the war” by preventing North Vietnam from its primary lifeline of Soviet and Chinese shipping. McNamara also included in this option an expanded reconnaissance and bombing campaign on the railroad lines from China proper into North Vietnam to further isolate Hanoi from its sources of materiel. The Air Force would also be authorized to bomb the eight operational airfields for North Vietnamese planes in China and to mine the deep water ports of Cam Pha and Hon Gai.¹³ In McNamara's analysis of Alternative A he suggests that the expanded bombing campaign and mining of the harbors would not supply any additional “pressure” to the North Vietnamese and that such a course of action could prove to be counterproductive.¹⁴ In almost ironic fashion the basis for McNamara's reasoning comes from CIA analytical

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid, 5.

memorandum's, from which, McNamara compiled a list of the most pertinent points.

Including;

“Short of a major invasion or nuclear attack, there is probably *no level of air or naval action* against North Vietnam which Hanoi has determined in advance would be so intolerable that the war had to be stopped....”;

“[T]hey see themselves defending their homes and families against an aggressor – the attitude most likely to bring out the *greatest degree of courage and endurance.*”;

“Hostility over the bomb damage is turned *toward the attacker* and *not* toward the authorities.”¹⁵ (emphasis added)

The inherent irony to this assessment is that after McNamara's alternative options were passed by the JCS and CIA for action (theory) approval the CIA did not support any of the options. McNamara's use of CIA analysis reports to refute the ideas contained within *Alternative A*, provides somewhat of a logical fallacy to his overall line of reasoning. McNamara clarifies later in the memo that his support for *Alternative B* (discussed subsequently) is not wholehearted, as he saw that none of the options was likely to bring a swift military end to the war or to perhaps, bring Hanoi to the negotiating table.¹⁶

Alternative B, “*Emphasis on the infiltration routes south of the 20th Parallel*”, was intended to do exactly what the title implies; concentrate bombing and military action on the LOC's in between the 17th and 20th parallels to reduce the amount of men and materiel reaching VC/NVA troops in South Vietnam. In contrast to *Alternative A*, it changed

15 Ibid.

However, McNamara cites the CIA memo's individually in his quotation. Citation's by McNamara are as follows and respective to the order of quotes: (CIA No. 0646/67, 23 May 1967); (CIA No. 0647/67, 23 May 1967); (CIA No. 0647/67, 23 May 1967).

16 Draft Memorandum McNamara to the President, *Future Actions in Vietnam*, 19 May 1967. Folder 2EE, Box 75, LBJ Library.

emphasis from material flowing into North Vietnam from external sources – Soviet Union and China via the ports on inland railways – to concentrate on material flowing out of North Vietnam into South Vietnam via the former DMZ corridor, 17th to 20th degree parallels. By concentrating bombing in this region, McNamara postulated that the effort would be “intensive and sustained, designed especially to saturate choke points and to complement similar new intensive interdiction efforts in adjacent areas in Laos and near the 17th parallel inside South Vietnam”.¹⁷ The theory behind this alternative was that the outcome of the war was not likely to be changed by what happened in the North, but rather how the war was treated in the South. Essentially, this follows the line of thinking stemming from Alternative A, in which the CIA determined that a majority of the bombing efforts in North Vietnam were producing a *negative* impact coefficient, and that further intensification of bombing efforts across NVN would only lead to a hardened will and resolve on the part of Hanoi. *Alternative B* therefore, viewed the war as set in certain lines – namely that military victory might no longer be on the table – and that making any attempts to bring Hanoi to the negotiating table might be more fortuitous.

The positions taken in *Alternatives A and C* – and in many similar strategies proposed during the period – could risk expanding the war dangerously to the point of direct Soviet or Chinese intervention. McNamara labels *Alternative B* as “designed to improve the negotiating environment by continued progress in the South with a restrained program against the North.”¹⁸ What is interesting about Alternative B is that neither McNamara nor the Secretary of the Navy, Nitze, thought that concentrating the bombing efforts within the “southern neck of Vietnam” (i.e. between the 17th and 20th parallels)

17 Memo, *Alternative Military Actions*, 12 June 1967, 2.

18 Ibid, 12.

would effectively stop or “substantially reduce, the infiltration of materiel from the North.”¹⁹ This view extends back to McNamara's analysis of *Alternative A*, in which he stated that even with a significant reduction in the amount of men and materiel reaching South Vietnam, they would still be able to continue a sustained war effort on less than 0.5% of the imports to North Vietnam per day.²⁰ At this point Hanoi was receiving about 5,000 tons of supplies per day from various sources and given that the VC/NVA in South Vietnam could survive on 0.5% of that, they would only need to get approximately 250 tons of supplies through the “neck” corridor.²¹ Something which was very much doable even with an expanded bombing effort (due to the fact that even by bombing major roads, known infiltration routes and storage camps, 250 tons could realistically be transported in small quantities without the need of an extensive infiltration network or infrastructure).

McNamara also includes the *human factor* in analysis of *Alternative B*, something that fairly frequently was left out of official analyses and strategies – lost in the bureaucratic nonsense, inflated figures and dehumanizing, desensitizing terms such as “body counts”. The redirection of the bombing campaign to only the the “neck” of Vietnam would reduce civilian casualties, as only 20% of the North Vietnamese population lives there.²² The concentrated bombing initiative would not reduce the total number of sorties flown (bombing missions, hereafter referred to as sorties), rather it would simply redirect a majority of them to the 17th to 20th corridor. McNamara extrapolates figures from the 1966 tables on sorties and loss ratio – loss, downing, or otherwise incapacitation of planes or pilots – to predict what the loss rate would be for

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 7.

21 Ibid. McNamara's numbers were verified by the 12 June Memo as they were not in the 19 May memo. Also this estimate of general tonnage of supplies was in line with other state department estimates for sustained war effort in the South. See Ginsburgh memo to Rostow 4 August 1967.

22 Ibid, 13.

each of the three Alternatives. Alternatives A and C would see 5600 sorties south of the 20th and 2400 north of the 20th with almost identical loss rates of approximately 0.375% (32 and 30 losses per 8000 sorties respectively).²³ Alternative B, however would have a loss rate of only 0.1625% (13 per 8000), due to the refocusing of bombing efforts almost exclusively to the “neck” corridor (7760 south of the 20th and only 240 north of the 20th).²⁴

There is one large assumption made in this calculation however: that the North Vietnamese would not be likely to shift their anti-aircraft artillery batteries (referred to as AAA) to south of the 20th parallel. This would be a massive project and could possibly be countered by the actual intensification of the bombing south of 20 degrees, however in the long run the VC/NVA would probably be able to increase AAA efforts in that region. What is damning to McNamara's effort in this regards to Alternative B, is that the JCS and the Secretary of the Air Force believe that “this gain [reduction of loss rate] would probably be lost within a few months.”²⁵ Undoubtedly one of the reasons why the JCS rejected *Alternative B* in favor of *Alternative A*, and why the Secretary of the Air Force recommended *Alternative C*.

Alternative C, “*Extension of the current program*”, can be explained as simply as its name: an extension of current bombing efforts, that would continue to exclude the 10-mile area around Hanoi and the mining of the harbors, along with a more sustained and intense bombing and “heavy effort” on all other land, sea and air LOC's.²⁶ This proposal

23 Ibid, 14. The primary reason for a difference in loss rate between Alternatives A and C was that there would be a different emphasis for bombing efforts in the North with Alternative A, than with Alternative C, that could produce more casualties for the former.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid, 2.

would essentially be a compromise between Alternatives A and B, that would – in the words of McNamara – “not contain enough pressure to persuade Hanoi to settle the war...and some believe that it contains so much bombing that it will keep the North Vietnamese away from the conference table.”²⁷ *Alternative C* does have two things in its favor however: avoidance of the dangerous expansion of the war under *Alternative A*; and avoidance of the “risk” of *Alternative B* in “a conspicuous admission of failure of the bombing program.”²⁸ According to the CIA, as cited by McNamara, the latter point could already be considered to be a *moot point*. The bombing program was not producing the expected results nor did it reflect the optimism of 1965. It was becoming increasingly apparent to some that the North Vietnamese could not be bombed into submission.

McNamara's final recommendations are not particularly more uplifting than any of his individual analyses of Alternative strategies. He chooses to stick with two central points implicit to his earlier lines of analysis: 1) Strategic bombing seems to be “at best unproductive”²⁹; and 2) continued escalation – via either air, land or sea – including the mining of harbors in North Vietnam, would leave the administration “...frustrated and with no choice but to escalate further”, once implemented.³⁰ McNamara sums his arguments for recommending *Alternative B* best:

“Implicit in the recommendation is a conviction that nothing short of toppling the Hanoi regime will pressure North Vietnam to settle so long as they believe that they have a chance to win the “war of attrition” in the South, a judgment that actions sufficient to topple the Hanoi regime will put us into war with the Soviet Union and China, and a belief that a shift to

27 Memo, *Alternative Military Actions*, 12 June 1967, 16.

28 Ibid, 17.

29 Ibid, 17.

30 Ibid.

Alternative B can be timed and handled in such a way as to gain politically while not endangering the morale of our fighting men.”³¹

At this point a conflicting image of McNamara and his professional relationship with Johnson begins to emerge on paper. As McNamara states in *In Retrospect*, “Readers must wonder by now...how presumably intelligent, hardworking, and experienced officials – both civilian and military – failed to address systematically and thoroughly questions whose answers so deeply affected the lives of our citizens and the welfare of our nation.”³² The ideological split between reliance on systematic gathering of intelligence, and action based on assumptions, strategies and “doctrines”, had come to a head.³³ Perhaps McNamara was not the dispassionate, detached, furiously defensive pundit of American involvement in Vietnam...at least by 1967.

31 Ibid.

32 *In Retrospect*, 277.

33 Essentially the debate here would be directly between LBJ and McNamara, as proponents – potentially unintended proponents – of each line of thought and analysis. McNamara for systematic gathering of intelligence, LBJ for acting on assumptions.

3. “I’m Confused. What is our strategy again?”

*“Our objective is the independence of South Viet-Nam [sic] and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves – only that the people of south Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.”*³⁴

-Lyndon Johnson, Johns Hopkins Speech, April 7, 1965

If it was in the opinion of CIA intelligence analysts that “*no level of air or naval action*” was likely to affect Hanoi's will to fight, then why were there still proponents within the military chain of command and in the state department who thought that the “restrictions” in the bombing campaign were hindering their effectiveness? The answer here is somewhat convoluted, but results from a lack of consensus on what constituted “effectiveness”. The view of bombing “effectiveness” that was inherited from World War Two was that the bombing of strategic military locations, storage facilities and areas of industrial production were likely to reduce an enemies ability to sustain war efforts. Vietnam was different however, for several reasons. During World War Two, neither Nazi Germany nor Imperialist Japan was supplied – militarily, economically, or physically (soldiers) – by a major world power that the Allies (in this case we will limit analysis to the United States) did not wish to provoke into further conflict. The common cultural view is that a line was drawn in the sand – *ideologically* speaking – and that the interpretations of right and wrong, enemy and ally, were black and white. Thus, the “Greatest Generation” fought a war *for* the forces of good *against* the forces of evil (an

³⁴ State Dept Briefing book on Vietnam, *Why are we Fighting in Viet-Nam?*, Feb 1968., Box 44, LBJ Library, 1.

extrapolated generalization at best, but relevant contextually).

The difference during the Vietnam era was that there were *two* powers that provided supplies and assistance to the “enemy”, that the U.S *did not* wish to provoke into further conflict: The Soviet Union and Communist China. To prevent escalation of conflict beyond ideological concerns and economic influx, it was in the best interests of the U.S to fight a war under the overarching constraint of “just enough” action such that intervention by either the Soviet Union or China was unlikely. This line of thinking is one that is occasionally applied to the theory that overall the U.S went into Vietnam with the expectation to “fight the war with one hand tied behind its back” and that the Administration knowingly put American soldiers at risk for a war that it did not intend to win – or at least only provide backing for up to a certain point. When examined in micro (individual theorists within the administration) and macro (the entire flavor of American policy towards Vietnam) it is clear that up until the end of 1967 there was no level of economic commitment that would be too great a burden to bear to achieve the goals in Southeast Asia. It is also clear that there were theoretical limits to the amount of physical presence and military action (i.e. no use of Nuclear weapons) but that these limits were not uniform across advisers within the state department or the MACV. Through McNamara's analysis of three potential alternatives for action in Vietnam, mid 1967, it is possible to see that there were definitive lines *not* willing to be crossed by various departments – the JCS, CIA, Secretaries of defense and state, and various other advisers. This however, should not be considered to be a marker of the Administration's willingness to only fight the war “on the side...”.

In McNamara's recommendations pertaining to *Alternative A*, he generally agrees

with the CIA assessment of the effectiveness of the bombing campaign and that additional pressures on Hanoi – in terms of bombing the city and mining the ports – were costs that were “both unacceptable and unnecessary”.³⁵ In terms of the reaction of the Soviet Union, McNamara assesses that although the mining of the ports and increased bombing would put Moscow in a difficult position, they “probably would not, force a confrontation in Southeast Asia”³⁶, however it would be likely that Soviet volunteers would end up in NVN along with increased diplomatic pressures from Moscow.

This position on Moscow, that was implied by the initial 19 May memo and clearly defined by the 12 June revision, was confirmed in the interim by a Department of State telegram and analysis report on 31 May 1967. Written by a rarely cited – but very well informed and highly educated General – Robert N. Ginsburgh, provides a supplemental analysis to the prospect of Soviet action regarding escalation of U.S actions in Vietnam. Ginsburgh's view, supported by intelligence, was that it could reasonably be assumed that there were “upper limits” to U.S action in North Vietnam that could be accepted, as defined by the USSR.³⁷ Ginsburgh cites a speech delivered by Soviet Second Secretary M.A. Makarov before Aberdeen University Union Debating Society, in which Makarov denounced escalation of increased U.S “aggressive actions” against North Vietnam and stated that it would be policy of the Soviet Union to send in troops if, “...America persists in intensifying the war in the North, she must fight out troops...”.³⁸ To corroborate Makarov's position Ginsburgh cites a lunch discussion with Soviet First Secretary Yuri Loginov, who “spontaneously and without any reference...to Makarov

35 Memo, *Alternative Military Actions*, 12 June 1967, 11.

36 Ibid, 10.

37 Department of State Telegram Ginsburgh to Secretary of State, *Subject: Soviet Policy of Vietnam*, 31 May 1967, Box 44, LBJ Library.

38 Ibid, 2.

statement, took essentially the same line as Makarov had.”³⁹ Loginov also seemed grim about the prospects of a Naval confrontation between the U.S and the Soviet Union over a potential blockade and mining of harbors in North Vietnam. Ginsburgh's most thought provoking point however, is that both Makarov and Loginov phrased their statements *only* as pertaining to increased U.S action in *North* Vietnam and that they had explicitly stated that “the Soviet Union was not concerned with what happened in the South.”⁴⁰ This was generally in line with other theorists and Soviet opinion experts in the State Department. The interesting point here is that despite a general consensus on the actual tolerable limits of U.S action in Vietnam – as pertaining to the USSR and China – the public rhetoric (shtick in this case) still seemed to imply that the war in Vietnam vis-a-vis the Soviet Union was uncertain.

In the academic arena, Ginsburgh is not widely known for his analysis of U.S Military Strategy in the 1960's, a manuscript he wrote while on detached duty with the Council on Foreign Relations in 1965. With the bevy of tomes pertaining to the reasoning behind U.S intervention in Vietnam, it is not surprising that his work has been largely overlooked. If by this point you are as confused as I suspect you are on the basic tenets of American Military Strategy, then let us examine Ginsburgh's rundown of the “*game*” of military strategy in the 1960's and how it pertained to the thought process behind the Vietnam war.

Surely American military strategy by 1965 must have been derived from the lessons learned in the Revolutionary War, Civil War and World Wars I and II. Upon even a cursory analysis of the U.S. Military's experiences in those landmark conflicts one

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

might be scratching their head when looking at the state of alternative military actions in Vietnam by the end of 1967.⁴¹ Wars are fought by the benevolent United States to protect the unfortunate and the wronged against the forces of some overwhelming aggressor (or perhaps because they are “just” – i.e an argument that can be applied to the Civil War). Or so we are taught – not necessarily the case when examining Vietnam. In the hierarchy of military analysis there is a certain level of necessary detachment to viewing overall strategic policy. Hence why the view of American strategy as a “*game*” is not diminutive. This is reflected in Ginsburgh's rules as follows:

1. Anyone can play
2. The object of the game is to maximize our national interests
3. The strategists should communicate with each other
4. The participants should start with some appreciation of current strategy, friendly and unfriendly.
5. The participants should use the same reference frame in time
6. Also concerned with the time factor: the future
7. A good strategist will seek to preserve maximum freedom of action to cope with the enemy while restricting the choices available to him⁴²

It should be assumed that rules one through four consist mainly of basic knowledge and common sense (Ginsburgh assumes that those conditions would already be met with some clarification). **Rule three**, *the strategists should communicate with each other*, is basic common sense when dealing with any issue that requires multiple

41 For the purposes of this discussion I am using Robert S. McNamara's analysis of the state of the Vietnam war by 1967 and his somewhat bleak outlook for 1968 and beyond. I will provoke some controversy here by defending the claim that despite his early zealotry in championing the cause in Vietnam prior to 1967 – by the end of 1967 he absolutely ***had it right*** in terms of the real situation on the ground and the “Effectiveness” of American efforts *in toto*.

42 Robert N. Ginsburgh, *U.S. Military Strategy in the Sixties* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1965), 9-14.

inputs, however, in the case of Vietnam strategy debate by 1967, the communication had largely become bureaucratic bickering and illusory postulation based on assumptions made in 1965 and earlier. Let us examine Walt Rostow's May 20th 1967 response to McNamara's alternative actions memo.

Skipping the fluff, Rostow takes difference with two main points raised by McNamara's alternatives: redirection of bombing efforts and ground troop increases. As we will recall McNamara feared that any substantial increase in ground troops beyond the current levels (472,000 by Dec. 1967 – and up to the ceiling eventually set by Johnson at 525,000 by Feb. 1968) would produce negative effects in terms of public opinion – due to the necessity of a reserve call up and draft call increases – and would likely not hasten the war to an end. Rostow suggests two things to Johnson that are in contrast to McNamara's position: 1) “ [in terms of the reserve call up] Nothing you could do would more seriously impress Hanoi that the jig was up...”; 2) More troops for the support of the pacification program in stead of SVN troops (or in addition to).⁴³ In these points Rostow is falling victim to a clarification of *rule three* as set out by Ginsburgh: “The civilian analyst who refuses to listen to the professional military man should understand that he is merely substituting his judgment for military judgment – and that this will not necessarily produce a more objective scientific study.”⁴⁴ Rostow's judgment was that of a civilian analyst, one who in his own words was examining things “from a considerable distance.”⁴⁵ What makes this position painfully clear is Rostow's view of “our strategy”, ostensibly in Vietnam. He provides the same arguments and points that had been touted again and again by the MACV, General Westmoreland and even McNamara. To quote

43 Memorandum Rostow to the President, *Reaction to McNamara's Points*, 20 May 1967. Folder 2EE, Box 75, LBJ Library, 2-3.

44 Ginsburgh, 11.

45 *Reaction to McNamara's Points*, 3.

“We Shall: reduce to the maximum their illegal infiltration and impose a price for negotiation for aggression in the North, protect the 17th parallel from invasion, and encourage the movement to a constitutional government.”⁴⁶ These points sound *great on paper* or in one of Johnson's speeches, however, Rostow does not provide sufficient methods to achieve these goals. Rather he simply states *exactly* what McNamara feared most from the MACV: more troops will somehow get the job done. The purposes of Rostow's communication – in regards to this particular rebuff memo – was with Johnson, not McNamara. Thus, **rule three** has been circumvented and Rostow's line of communication promotes division, not consensus. The strategists are not communicating.

Rule seven, *A good strategist will seek to preserve maximum freedom of action to cope with the enemy while restricting the choices available to him*, is supported through Rostow's rebuttal. In terms of a redirection of bombing, McNamara's *Alternative B* proposed an increased concentration on efforts between the 17th and 20th parallels, with a reduction of bombing of targets within North Vietnam. This is at least at face value an alternative to simply restating the point that infiltration routes must be countered, but not actually providing support for a method of attack. Rostow suggests that pressure should not be taken off the Hanoi-Haiphong area without an “adequate return” and that targets in North Vietnam should be reexamined.⁴⁷ He also states that Johnson should leave “more room for the bombing of the Hanoi-Haiphong area...”⁴⁸ as a general conclusion in contrast to McNamara. The strategic issue here is being examined more thoroughly by Rostow than by McNamara for the following reasons: 1) Preserving *freedom of action* is better supported by a position that requires a concession on the part of the enemy rather

46 Ibid, 6.

47 Ibid, 2.

48 Ibid, 7.

than a redirection without such a promise (McNamara would shift the bombing to infiltration routes and off of NVN without such a concession according to Alternative B); 2) a removal of bombing pressure from North Vietnam with an adequate return such as reduction or cessation of Soviet shipping would *restrict the choices available* to Hanoi while supporting (in addition) point one (freedom of action).

Interestingly enough, Ginsburgh weighed in on this possibility in a memorandum to Rostow on 4 August 1967, concerning the Cessation of Bombing for Cessation of Soviet Imports. The interesting part of Ginsburgh's analysis is that he essentially proves both Rostow *and* McNamara right in certain regards. Ginsburgh cites that despite the fact that North Vietnam receives 90% of its supplies by sea, a cessation of Soviet imports via sea would not substantially reduce Hanoi's capability to wage war in the South⁴⁹. This is due to a fact that was elucidated by McNamara in his alternative strategy analysis, namely that “the supplies needed from the North by enemy forces in the South are but a fraction of one percent of what North Vietnam is capable of importing...”⁵⁰ a point which was supported by Ginsburgh via an extrapolation of the same argument: “If the bombing were stopped, NVN's minimum essential import requirements would go down.”⁵¹ Essentially here Ginsburgh is restating the fact that even with an “adequate return” from North Vietnam, the overall likelihood of a reduction in the capability of VC/NVA forces in South Vietnam to continue fighting would be negligible. Ginsburgh also concludes however, that “...our current position is sound in insisting that cessation of the bombing requires appropriate reciprocal action by the North Vietnamese.”⁵² In this regard

49 Memorandum Ginsburgh to Rostow, *Cessation of Bombing and Soviet Imports*, 4 August 1967. Box 56, LBJ Library, 1.

50 Memo, *Alternative Military Actions*, 12 June 1967, 6.

51 Memo, *Cessation of Bombing and Soviet Imports*, 4 August 1967, 1.

52 *Ibid*, 2.

Ginsburgh has proven Rostow correct in *proof of concept*, and McNamara correct in *intelligence analysis*. Had Ginsburgh's *rule three* been adhered to then this consensus would have been drawn via *constructive communication* between Rostow and McNamara.

Ginsburgh makes one final contribution that cannot be overlooked when considering national strategy or military strategy: “The success of national strategy, in the final analysis, depends on nongovernmental support – the public. Public support of national policy is, of course, especially important in a democratic society. Although the requirement of public support may sometimes be overemphasized, certainly public acquiescence is at least required.”⁵³

53 Ginsburgh, 51.

4. “Duplicity, *not* Foolishness...”: *The Media*

“Nothing succeeds like failure in the Administration's conduct of the Vietnam war. The less escalations accomplishes in Southeast Asia, the more convinced the White House seems to become that the answer is to escalate still further.”

-New York Times, August 6th 1967

If Neil Sheehan was the only reporter in Vietnam who “got it right”, then undoubtedly there were reporters who got it quite wrong. The purpose of this discussion is not to point fingers at individuals who might have incorrectly interpreted intelligence reports or were overzealous in their predictions, rather to elucidate a few examples of combined, faulted, logical interpretation in conjunction with the actual State Department's attitude⁵⁴. William Prochnau analyzes the general novitiate attitude of most foreign and domestic correspondence in Vietnam prior to 1965 as “Foolishness not Duplicity”⁵⁵. If there was a point at which a diametric shift occurred in this line of analysis, it was mid-1967. This duplicity, as it were, was not necessarily malicious on the part of the correspondents, rather it was – in some cases – a direct result of information *hand fed* to them by Johnson's staff (or indeed Johnson himself). To err is human, to love is foolishness, but to deceive is *national policy*. The point of divergence between erring, foolish proselytizing, and malicious deception is *ridiculousness*. There may have been a point in 1967 when the macro *ends and means* analysis (see John Lewis Gaddis) was

54 Obviously this is a perceived interpretation with a significant academic basis in documentary evidence.

55 Prochnau, 21.

applied to the micro (an individual instance), just as ineffectively as on the macro scale. *Strategy* – military, political, news media – must be the coherent intersection between intended *ends* and the practical *means* needed to achieve them.⁵⁶

Duplicity...

Johnson too was a ruthless political strategist. Although, of course, this point is almost *prerequisite* to being President of the United States. Ruthlessness and maliciousness are not necessarily bedfellows, however. Ruthless political strategy need not harm anyone, although it must be willing to use questionable and all available methods to affix desired outcomes. Thus, morality in this case – as in the entire political spectrum – is murky at best. So how does one apply ruthless political strategy to a war that is becoming increasingly unpopular? Lie to the media of course!

Unfortunately – and fortunately – its is not quite that easy. Carefully constructed events at which the media is present is not technically lying, although it is duplicitous. In this case let us examine a particular “meeting of the minds” that occurred in July of 1967, shortly after McNamara returned from his ninth trip to Vietnam to assess the situation militarily. Present at this meeting, in the White House second floor sitting room, were President Johnson, Chairman of the JCS Earle Wheeler, Commanding General Westmoreland and Secretary of Defense McNamara. In the article pertaining to what was discussed at this meeting, it was reported that Johnson asked all three men if they were in accordance and that the troops requested by Gen. Westmoreland, “as we feel it necessary”, would be supplied.⁵⁷ The responses were as constructed as they were

⁵⁶ As derived from the definition presented by John Lewis Gaddis in *Strategies of Containment*. No direct citation here, more of an intellectual salute to profound academic literature on the part of Gaddis.

⁵⁷ Max Frankel, *New York Times*, *Generals Agree With President on Buildup Issue*, 14 July 1967.

predictable – each man answered “Yes, Sir.”⁵⁸ These statements are not blatant, refutable lies, however they do not reflect the general attitudes of all three men as pertaining to future outcomes in Vietnam. Citing earlier explanation we see that McNamara had serious reservations about expanding either the troop commitments to South Vietnam or the air campaign over North Vietnam.

Westmoreland also was not in accordance with Johnson's position that the troops requested were “being provided”. As the article states, at the meeting Westmoreland denied “that he had requested any 'specific number of troops' above the 480,000 now authorized for his command.”⁵⁹ This is a 100% fabrication. Westmoreland, in conjunction with the JCS and Earle Wheeler, had produced a 51 page report in April of 1967 that outlined case scenarios and “specific requests” for 206,000 additional troops for the financial year 1968⁶⁰. The report, entitled “*Force Requirements for Southeast Asia FY 1968*” written 20 April 1967, outlines plausible scenarios for the use and disbursement of additional troops amongst the various Corps zones for financial years 1968 and 1969. It is interesting to note that the report also estimates an additional troop requirement of 115,800 for FY 1969. If we consider that Westmoreland had 480,000 troops under his command by the end of 1967, he had – in conjunction with the JCS – devised requests for a command of 686,000 troops by the end of FY 1968 (this is not including the additional 35,000 troops already scheduled for deployment by Feb. 1968, bringing the ceiling to nearly 525,000) and – if we take the extreme route – a total force of 801,800 by the end

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Memorandum from the JCS to McNamara, *Force Requirements for Southeast Asia FY 1968*, 20 April 1967. JCSM-218-67 available at (http://www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/reading_room/667.pdf). Note: This is a memo that I could not find in the national security file at the LBJ Library, it may exist there in another file. This particular version is from the Department of Defense reading room, declassified 31 October 1994.

of FY 1969.⁶¹

In addition to this particular door-stopper of a report prepared by Wheeler, Westmoreland and the JCS, former Chairman of the JCS Maxwell Taylor weighed in on the request for additional troops. Taylor, who had been Chair of the JCS from 1962-1964, was generally convinced of the need for approximately 80,000 more troops by the end of FY 1968, which would put the troop ceiling at 560,000 (only 35,000 more than the eventual ceiling imposed by Johnson). Taylor was not convinced however, of the purposes and uses of the troops requested by Westmoreland and the JCS: "...I am not convinced of the complete validity of the Concept of Operations upon which General Westmoreland and the JCS base their case for more forces."⁶² Taylor was worried that a majority of the forces would be going to support revolutionary development program – run and supported mainly by GVN/SVN troops – and that to achieve goals related to the RD program then “Westmoreland will be justified for asking for almost any figure in terms of future reinforcements.”⁶³ Was this not enough evidence to suggest that something was amiss in the war that was being “*won*” on paper back in Washington?

Maxwell Taylor's attitudes towards the Vietnam war by 1967 typified a certain aspect of American commitment in Southeast Asia. He was a walking contradiction when it came to analysis and interpretation of current policy (i.e. “effectiveness”) and his devotion to the purposes of the American military mission. As aforementioned, Taylor was uneasy with Westmoreland's outlined uses of requested troops as outlined in the *Force Requirements* memo, specifically in the area of support of the Revolutionary Development program. He was however, still committed to the “lie” of Vietnam, as Neil

61 Ibid, 31.

62 Memorandum Taylor to McNamara, *Subject: Force Requirements for Southeast Asia FY 1968*, 1 May 1967. Box 44, LBJ Library, 1.

63 Ibid. Taylor cites his own Memo to the President dated 30 August 1966.

Sheehan would say. To clarify, Vietnam was not necessarily just a “*Bright Shining Lie*” by 1967, however there were numerous inconsistencies in policy and the means used to justify future actions. A primary example of Taylor's walking contradiction was an editorial he wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* on October 15, 1967. Taylor's article, titled “*General Taylor says – The Cause in Vietnam is Being Won*”, runs down many of the same points that had been emphasized up until that point on the concepts of progress in Vietnam. The difference in Taylor's writing is that it was becoming increasingly clear that he could not justify or explain certain aspects of the war, without resorting to dubious facts or outright contradictions. This might have been because he was beginning to doubt the validity of the current direction of the war in Vietnam, while trying to remain committed to his duty as a major general and head of Institute for Defense Analysis.⁶⁴

One of Taylor's early points in the article harkens back to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of warfare in Vietnam by 1967. Taylor states that the efforts towards making infiltration from NVN to SVN costly and difficult were having an effect on the tempo of engagements in South Vietnam. To quote “...the enemy has been able to sustain his forces in South Vietnam, but at a relatively low tempo of combat activity. Whereas U.S. Battalions are in action on an average of five to six days a week, enemy battalions average about one day of combat per month.”⁶⁵ Would it not be wise to fight a war in which ones forces would only need to fight one day a month? Especially if you are planning on fighting a protracted war against an enemy likely to wear out after a period of time?

64 This position is an inference based on the wealth of data and analysis that Taylor must have had available to him on the current direction in Vietnam (1967) and on his doubts about Westmorelands use of troops and the RD program. For more see Memo Taylor to McNamara, *Subject: Force Requirements for Southeast Asia FY 1968*.

65 Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Cause in Vietnam is Being Won*, NYT Magazine, October 15, 1967. Box 44, LBJ Library.

There are two conclusions that Taylor is drawing from this statement: 1) that the VC/NVA are unable to sustain their war effort at a greater pace than one engagement per month as a direct result of either the bombing campaign or other increased action against the LOC's; and 2) that U.S. Troops are fighting hard and engaging the “enemy” at all possible instances. Honestly, the conclusion that this author draws from the fact that U.S. Battalions are engaging the enemy five to six days a week and that the enemy is only engaging the U.S. One day a month is that American troops are apparently happily blasting away at trees and not actually doing anything productive. This engagement differential also suggests the exact opposite of the actual troop levels: with this model of engagement – U.S 20 to 24 days per month vs. VC/NVA one day per month – suggests numerical superiority on the part of the VC/NVA or that something is seriously amiss here. Think about it, if this model were accurate then the VC/NVA would need to have an almost twenty to one battalion superiority to both sustain action at only one day per month per battalion while keeping the enemy at 20 days of action per month per battalion. Surprisingly this is actually the formula that McNamara proposed for how to fight guerrilla insurgencies (and how they had been fought effectively in the past): by securing a ten to one superiority or greater. So if Taylor was correct, then the VC/NVA would have had 9,600,000 soldiers at their disposal – or more than half the population of all of Vietnam. Clearly this is inaccurate and not supported by either the actual estimates of VC troop levels or by the amount of supplies reaching South Vietnam (or the amount needed to sustain action, by two estimates of McNamara 250 tonnes per day according to his 12 June 1967 estimates, or as low as 15 tonnes per day at his Senate sub-committee hearings in late 1967. Neither number could support 9 million troops, thus something is

amiss in the estimate model).

Taylor further contradicts his own conclusions by stating that “the evidence does not yet support a definite conclusion on the effect of the bombing.”⁶⁶ It was clear by October of 1967 that McNamara had come to a definite conclusion on the effects of the bombing campaign, but what of others? One of the reports that McNamara cites in his analysis was an exhaustive report done by the CIA analytical division on various courses of U.S. Action in Vietnam, compiled in May of 1967. The report outlines a course similar to McNamara Alternative actions plan, also labeled course C. “The US intensifies bombing of military, industrial, and transportation targets, except near the Chinese border. It does not attack population centers, seek to close ports, or attack dikes or airfields other than those already struck.”⁶⁷ This course of action is precisely what McNamara quotes from to refute the validity of his Alternative A, and the report has further implications. “There is not necessarily a close relationship between a given level of bombing and Hanoi's strategy and tactics or Peking or Moscow's responses. Material from captured documents suggests that long-range military planning in South Vietnam proceeds without much reference to US bombing of North Vietnam.”⁶⁸ The position that the US bombing of North Vietnam has little effect on the strategy in South Vietnam and that the position vis-a-vis the Soviet Union or China would not be greatly affected by a bombing increase is confirmed by Gen. Ginsburgh's report of 31 May 1967 on the Soviet Position (see aforementioned analysis). In essence the CIA's analytical division had come to a “definite conclusion” about the effectiveness of an *increase* in the bombing campaign. Therefore it can be logically inferred that if it was in the opinion of the CIA that a bombing *increase*

66 Ibid, 2.

67 CIA Report, *Reaction to Various US Courses of Action*, 23 May 1967. Box 44, LBJ Library, 5.

68 Ibid.

would have little positive effect on the outcome of the war, then the *current* bombing campaign was having at least the same negligible effect, or even less. Thus, a “definite conclusion” about the current status of bombing and information that was undoubtedly available to Gen. Taylor by October of 1967, if not earlier.

Taylor further contradicts his own statement that there was not a “definite conclusion” on the effectiveness of the bombing campaign by citing the “achievements” of the air war as being one of the US military strengths. “...I would point to the increased tempo of the air campaign in the North...In effect, the air war has obliged Hanoi to fight on a second front which causes a serious drain on manpower and a heavy consumption of ammunition, supplies and materiel far in excess of the requirements of the guerrilla warfare in the South.”⁶⁹ This statement is in direct contradiction to the CIA's conclusions on the effectiveness of the air campaign. They both cannot be correct. Both the CIA and McNamara were under the impression that even though an increased air war in the North might require more supplies for AAA (recall – anti-aircraft artillery batteries) counterattack, this would not necessarily impact Hanoi's considerations for the war in the South. There would be no need to transport cumbersome AAA equipment to South Vietnam (the same equipment supplied by the Soviets, ostensibly through railways in China or by sea). A majority of the “supplies” – men and materiel – were simple: small arms ammunition, grenades, rice, and of course new recruits. Taylor seemed to be assuming that the increased tempo of the air war in the North would require a diversion of policy in Hanoi to interdict the increasing number of sorties flown against “vital” targets in North Vietnam. Targets, which apparently were not actually all that “vital” to

69 Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Cause in Vietnam is Being Won*, NYT Magazine, October 15, 1967. Box 44, LBJ Library, 4.

continuing guerrilla activities in the South. Taylor must stick to his guns however and support the US military's current strategy, "Thus it [the bombing campaign] constitutes an indispensable part of the strategy directed at breaking the will of Hanoi and destroying their capability to continue the conflict."⁷⁰ Sounds like he had reached a "definite conclusion" on the effectiveness of the bombing campaign, despite his own reservations and a wealth of information supporting the opposite conclusion.

To extrapolate this argument further lets fast forward ahead to mid-1968 – Tet offensive and a change in advisers aside for the moment – to an analysis paper produced by American Historian Townsend Hoopes, who by 1968 was under-secretary of the Air Force. Generally, a reliable source for an analysis of the "effectiveness" of the Air campaign.⁷¹ Hoopes states that the report draws on an "increasing number of experienced analysts outside the ambit of direct operational responsibility..."⁷² and that it comes to some "firm if depressing conclusions."⁷³ The kicker here is that the very report that Hoopes is referring to was *commissioned and completed by the Institute for Defense Analyses* – the very organization that was headed by **none other than Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor** himself. Irony to the nth degree. It is damning to Taylor's arguments surrounding the bombing campaign that a study done by his own organization came to essentially the same conclusions that the CIA came to in May of 1967 and that they were in direct contradiction to what Taylor wrote in the NYT Magazine. Its conclusions are as follows:

70 Ibid.

71 Hoopes analysis paper takes into account the Air campaign from when McNamara commissioned the Air Force study in October of 1967 to mid-1968. Hoopes paper is basically a summation of argument and conclusions drawn from that very study, hence why it is relevant when discussing the situation at the end of 1967. Its analytical considerations are concluded from the actual situation starting in October of 1967, the same time Taylor was writing his analysis for the NYT Magazine. This provides a somewhat objective study, from another perspective, of the situation of the Air war and "progress" therein.

72 Memorandum from Townsend Hoopes for the Secretary of Defense, *Subject: Vietnam Personal memo to Clark M. Clifford*, 13 Feb. 1968, Box 83, LBJ Library, 2.

73 Ibid.

“Since the beginning of the air strikes in early 1965, the flow of men and materiel from NVN to SVN has definitely increased.”

“NVN has gone over to decentralized, dispersed and protected modes of producing and handling essential goods and safeguarding the people. It has made a durable adjustment to the bombing.”

“On balance, NVN is a stronger military power today than before the bombing began.”⁷⁴

This final point is the most startling of all – it was in the opinion of the Institute for Defense Analysis that by February 1968 North Vietnam was *stronger* than before the bombing began in 1965. Astonishing. The CIA and McNamara may have been right after all.

Taylor makes one final point that is surprisingly accurate: “One of the great obstacles to fair reporting of the situation in Vietnam has been the difficulty of making accurate generalizations which apply to most of the country at any one time. Many statements about Vietnam that are misleading are not necessarily untruthful.”⁷⁵ Taylor, Westmoreland, Walt Rostow and Admiral Sharp seemed quite apt to make generalizations that applied to most of Vietnam, at least as far as justifying current policy. Somehow McNamara and the CIA's analytical division “generalizations” were not as accurate, mainly because they stood in contrast to the accepted position on Vietnam – a position that McNamara had help to establish but was trying desperately to reverse by mid-1967. This duplicity was not malicious, nor inaccurate – but it was *misleading*. Homer Bigart's suspicions were confirmed. The war *didn't work*, just no one was capable of admitting it.

74 Ibid, 4.

75 Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Cause in Vietnam is Being Won*, NYT Magazine, October 15, 1967. Box 44, LBJ Library, 4.

Foolishness...

The disconnect between accurate analyses of the bombing campaign and interpretations by high ranking officers in the military continued throughout the remainder of 1967. Another key example of this came in a White House Memo that summarized Admiral Sharp's view of the bombing campaign by July of 1967. Not to doubt Admiral Sharp's ability as a Naval commander, however his “analysis” and conclusions about recent data (recent as of July 1967) surrounding the bombing campaign in the North is somewhat circumspect. Two of his conclusions are not necessarily supported by other analyses, particularly by the CIA report of 23 May 1967. Nor were they confirmed by the IDA independent analysis completed in February of 1968. Among other conclusions Admiral Sharp states that “[there is] a degraded capability for sustained large-scale operations in South Vietnam” and “[measurable results] imports in Haiphong piled high, stockpiles growing – difficulty distributing.”⁷⁶

It is not clear where Sharp got the idea that there was a degraded capability for sustained efforts in South Vietnam, perhaps this was just an inference based on a lull in VC activity in August. The “imports piled high” claim, however, suggests something more worrisome – or at least it should have. There are two alternate conclusions that can be drawn from an increase in stockpiles at Haiphong harbor, other than just “difficulty distributing”: 1) From the military analysts perspective – a buildup in supplies could signal that there is some problem in the transportation or disbursement, however it is just as likely that an amassing of goods could signal a major campaign or counteroffensive – much like the coordinated attacks that would occur during Tet just a few months later (perhaps a tenuous connection on my part); 2) From the civilian analyst perspective – An

⁷⁶ White House Memorandum Summary of Statements of Admiral Sharp, *Subject: Bombing Effort in North Vietnam – July*, 22 August 1967, Box 56, LBJ Library.

increase in stockpiles at the Haiphong harbor itself, could be due to the fact that the US Air Force was bombing the living snot out of every other place that they could possibly be stored in North Vietnam – with the exception of Hanoi, and Haiphong harbors (and a ten mile radius around Hanoi).

If Admiral Sharps conclusions were not foolish per se, then perhaps the idea of a strategic “defense barrier” – an idea proposed as early as 1965, but scrapped due to lack of support – was foolish, or desperate...or *misleading*. The idea, which was essentially an extension of a 200 yard wide strip plowed down by the Marines between the bases of Conthien and Camp Hill (about 7 miles), was met with less than enthusiastic support in the upper echelons of the US military command in Saigon. The idea briefly gained a revival in July and August of 1967 due to an endorsement of the plan by Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana as a complement to a bombing halt in North Vietnam – as a method of decreasing infiltration across the DMZ at the 17th parallel via a method other than bombing. The point of the “barrier” – rather barren zone – was not necessarily just “static defense”, but rather an area designated a “free fire zone” that would include mines, anti-personnel devices and other “electronic devices aimed against infiltrators”, where anything that moved would be considered “charlie.”⁷⁷

An undisclosed source within Johnson's advisory staff wrote a memorandum in response to Senator Mansfield's endorsement of the “barrier” idea as well as other concerns.⁷⁸ Much like the ridiculousness of the idea itself it contains some interesting, self-defeating points. To quote: “Senator Mansfield should know that we are working at

77 Hanson W. Balwin, *U.S. Adding 12 Miles to Vietnam Barrier Strip*, New York Times, 14 July 1967.

78 By “undisclosed source”, I am referring to the fact that the memorandum that I am citing does not state an author, nor its distribution or sources beyond LBJ. Merely labeled with “Top Secret”. Based on the authorial tone of voice it seems as if it was written by either Walt Rostow or Earle Wheeler, although this is just speculation.

absolute top priority to develop the technology for what is called a “barrier”. In fact, it will mainly consist of complex devices that will permit us to harass and attack infiltrators more efficiently.”⁷⁹ Unfortunately for both Senator Mansfield and the memo's author, one of the immediately preceding paragraphs sums up why the barrier idea was utterly useless: “The truth is that, with present methods, infiltration cannot be blocked at the 17th parallel, given the complex routes of infiltration via Laos, Cambodia, the western part of the DMZ and by sea.”⁸⁰ Essentially, the barrier would be totally ineffective due to already known methods of enemy subversion: routes through Laos and Cambodia – precisely where the barrier would not extend. Foolish, as foolish could be.

With foolishness abound, the office of the Secretary of the Air Force did something *highly rational*: they commissioned a study, completed in February of 1968, comparatively addressing the views of eight major newspapers and the State Departments division of Research and Analysis on Vietnam Policy. The eight papers studied included: *The Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, St. Louis Post Dispatch, New York Times, Denver Post, Washington Post, and the Washington Star*. The report analyzed several common areas across all eight papers: Pro/Con-Administration general attitude, general view of the US commitment in Vietnam, views of the bombing campaign and escalation or cessation of, and overall reservations about the US in Vietnam. Although the report itself does not draw any conclusions based on the analysis of all eight papers, conclusions can easily be drawn by looking comparatively at each one of the factors studied. What is clear through cursory analysis is that there was just as much confusion and lack of consensus in the newspapers as there were within Johnson's

79 Memorandum, *Response to Senator Mansfield's various points as reported in AP 92-93*, 7 Aug 1967, Box 56, LBJ Library.

80 Ibid.

advisory staff by the end of 1967, but for different reasons.

First and foremost, only *two* of the eight papers analyzed – the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Star* – expressed consistent support for either a continuation or escalation of the bombing campaign in Vietnam.⁸¹ Five of the remaining six papers expressed doubts about the current bombing campaign, lack of support for escalation, or positive attitudes towards a bombing cessation and increased talks with Hanoi. Only the *Los Angeles Times* was consistently sitting on the fence when it came to policy in Vietnam. As the report stated “Previous R&A analyses found its editorials changed from supporting the bombing to having no clear position...”⁸²; and “ We agree that this paper is caught between basic support of the Administration and doubts on certain tactics.”⁸³ It could be inferred that the *LA Times* actually reflected *accurately* the state of affairs pertaining to Vietnam by the end of 1967: a lack of consensus and wavering between support of various future alternatives.

The Air Force report also expressed some questions about the *New York Times* support for the Administration and the American commitment in Vietnam. The report found that the NYT was consistently opposed to the bombing campaign and in favor of increasing peace efforts, but what was of greater concern, was that the report doubted whether or not the NYT still supported the US commitment in Vietnam at all.⁸⁴ As a widely read and generally respected newspaper, the *New York Times* could captivate a significant audience. With ever increasing doubt in news reporting about the progress of the war, the Administration and military echelon needed to posit a general riposte.

81 Memorandum For Colonel Bowman, *Comparison of Boston Globe and R&A Newspaper Analyses on Vietnam Policy (Limited to eight major papers covered by R&A)*, 23 February 1968, Folder 7D, Box 98, LBJ Library.

82 Ibid, 2.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid, 4.

5. *Apprehension and Counterattack*

“We are becoming increasingly concerned with news media and Congressional attitudes regarding the progress of the war.”⁸⁵

- Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, 22 August 1967

As chief of the JCS, General Earle Wheeler had every right to be concerned about the attitudes surrounding portrayal of the “progress” of the war by the news media and in Congress at the end of August 1967. The war was not going well, or at least not as planned. Headlines such as “*Bottomless pit in Vietnam*”, *NYT* August 6th, “*Country not getting true facts about the Real enemy in Vietnam*”, *The Day* August 25th, “*Another opinion: Ford Argues for more bombing*”, *NYT* August 13th, suggested that maybe the media and Congress were on the same page about how the war was “progressing” – or at least it reflected some of the same confusions and discussions on strategies ongoing within Johnson's advisory staff.

Wheeler sent a cable to Generals Westmoreland and Harold Johnson in late August 1967 addressing some of his concerns about attitudes surrounding the progress of the war in news stories and in Congress. In the cable Wheeler suggests that they should go through and present a province by province analysis of how the war is progressing, including analyses of the revolutionary development program and reduced VC recruitment's and operational capabilities.⁸⁶ Wheeler wanted to make sure that the JCS, Westmoreland and H.K. Johnson were “in step” when answering questions from the press

85 SSO Cable Eyes Only, Wheeler to Westmoreland and H.K Johnson, Box 56, LBJ Library.

86 Ibid, 2.

pertaining to the war, both in Saigon and Washington.⁸⁷ His final point was “Forewarned is forearmed!”⁸⁸ Being prepared is by and large a good thing, however, it becomes suspect when the intention is possibly to *justify distorting facts* to the press. In response cable from General Westmoreland he generally agreed with Wheelers concerns, adding “Of course we must haste carefully in order to avoid charges that the military establishment is conducting an organized propaganda campaign, either over or covert.”⁸⁹ Not to say that either was the case, however, Westmoreland's tone seems defensive – as if one of the two was the case.

In Westmoreland's response cable he demonstrates an institutional misunderstanding of how the war was progressing and the nature of warfare from the point of view of the VC/NVA. Westmoreland affirms the claim that the war was not a “stalemate” by mid-1967 and denies that there was any “loss of initiative” on the part of the RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces).⁹⁰ His primary support for the former was “in step” with what Gen. Maxwell Taylor supplied to the NYT Magazine about two months later, namely, “...enemy units can feed and supply themselves enough for about one day of action in 30.”⁹¹ Westmoreland's conclusions based on this statement are slightly different than Taylors – and more accurate – although he essentially confirms that the VC strategy is effective: “The enemy is smart and economical, but basically defensive.”⁹² Unfortunately for Westmoreland, Taylor and the entire American Military commitment in Vietnam, this was exactly the strategy that the VC were aiming for. A defensive action, one which prolongs military involvement through harassment and

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Cable Westmoreland to Wheeler, August 1967, Box 56, LBJ Library, 1.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

interdiction, was the best strategy in the eyes of the VC and Hanoi. A sustained, defensive action is the perfect complement to an aggressive and temporary commitment. Regardless of the claims from Washington about an unlimited commitment to the defense of Southeast Asia, the American war machine was as temporary and fallible as the French were a decade earlier.

There are dual points to effective guerrilla warfare tactics: small scale harassment and interdiction, and reactionary warfare. In the case of the VC – fighting a defensive war on home turf – small scale engagements where the tempo of battle can be easily controlled due to surprise, tactical advantage (e.g. high ground) or duration of battle, was the most prudent and efficient course of action for sustaining their war effort on minimal resources. It is clearly not the case that every engagement would be at the behest or planning of the VC, therefore they must also be adaptive and reactionary in order to cope with American military patrols and full-scale campaigns. Westmoreland championed the point that the VC were primarily reactionary in areas that were not near the DMZ, the highlands, or along major lines of communication.⁹³ This however, *should not have been interpreted as a positive sign*. Taking the previous strategy discussion into account, doesn't it make sense that the VC would only undertake major engagements in areas that they were either well supplied – in terms of both material and intelligence – and where they could retain tactical advantage? In this case retaining tactical advantage was twofold: 1) the Highlands essentially negated the technological might of American helicopters and artillery while allowing the VC to retreat to strategic positions – predetermined, and 2) Areas near the DMZ or along major LOC's would allow for easy retreat or reinforcement from or into areas where US troops could not follow.

⁹³ Ibid, 2.

Westmoreland's plan by August of 1967 to correct many “stalemate” and “loss of initiative” claims was to hold several on-the-record news conferences to “adjust” the media's view of the current war effort and to prepare background papers on “subjects such as the air war North and the effectiveness of the RVNAF”, to be commissioned beginning in 1968.⁹⁴ Wheeler's concerns about the progress of the war, Westmoreland's analytical studies and the media interpretation of such would all come into question leading into 1968.

Wheeler had a point being concerned about Congressional views of the war. In Republican House minority leader Gerald R. Ford's August 13th travesty to Congress, subsequently reprinted in the *New York Times*, he advocated for an increased air power initiative over both North and South Vietnam. The only problem with Rep. Ford's suggestions were the *suggestions themselves*. Profoundly flawed, logically bereft, and lacking any adherence to either current US military policy in Vietnam or future proposed actions. Unfortunately, this man went on to become President of the United States in 1974, albeit unfairly. *Brilliant*. I regress...

In Rep. Ford's statements he poetically repeats the phrase “*Why are we still pulling our air power punch?*”⁹⁵, in apparently constant reference to the fact that Ford believed that for some unknown reason Washington was *restricting* our beautifully benevolent bombers from blasting away at all of those lovely “*vital*” military targets in North Vietnam. Ford could not have misunderstood the US bombing campaign any more than this.

Let us for a moment regress to Admiral Sharp's bombing effort memo drafted

⁹⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁹⁵ “*Another Opinion: Ford Argues for More Bombing*”, *New York Times*, 13 August 1967.

about a week after Ford's rant to Congress. Despite Admiral Sharp's lack of exhaustive reasoning when drawing conclusions from data, the data itself was fairly accurate. Ford asks “Would the American people believe that 60 percent of the key targets that make up North Vietnam's transportation network were immune from our air attacks?”⁹⁶ They shouldn't believe that, because it was not true. As Sharp states in his memo of the 11,000 sorties flown *just in the month of July 1967*, 33 percent were “main efforts against transportation systems.”⁹⁷ This means 3,630 sorties were flown against targets of at least marginal importance to NVN's transportation network with a destruction of useful capacity – in summation terms for all of North Vietnam – that amounted to 39 percent of all capabilities (regarding transportation of supplies).⁹⁸ If this is the figure – as cited in other memo's and state department studies – that Ford is extracting “60 percent” of “key” targets from then he profoundly misunderstood the nature of that statistic.

It is the case that North Vietnam's transportation networks still had a 61 percent functional capability, however Ford does not take into account two factors: 1) the 61 percent functional capabilities *included* the ports of Haiphong and Hanoi, where we had restricted bombing, *not* because of incompetence in identifying them as major military targets but rather due to the potential of involving the Soviet Union and/or China in an expanded conflict if we were to accidentally strike one of there ships (see earlier analysis of McNamara's Alternatives); 2) Ford also makes the assumption that the targets included in the 40 percent of targets struck were of little to no importance or that they were not within currently “restricted” zones (such as the ten mile radius around Hanoi). Again this is not necessarily the case. In McNamara's Alternative actions memo he cites “Important”

96 Ibid.

97 White House Memorandum Summary of Statements of Admiral Sharp, *Subject: Bombing Effort in North Vietnam – July*, 22 August 1967, Box 56, LBJ Library.

98 Ibid.

transportation targets such as the Hanoi Railroad Repair Shops, Ha Dong Supply Depot, and Yen Vien RR yards, that were *all* “within 10 miles of Hanoi center”, *had been struck* at least three times with some measurable destructive effect, and would require Washington re-approval for re-strike.⁹⁹ Ford seemed to fixate on the railroads in particular, “...that only about one fourth of these priority transportation targets, one third of his railroad facilities and bridges had even been attacked?”¹⁰⁰ I would hope that not long after Ford's statements that someone from Johnson's advisory staff, the MACV or even practically any correspondent in Vietnam, would have reminded Rep. Ford that the infamous “Ho Chi Minh Trail” was *not equivalent to the Union Pacific Railroad* that we had somehow failed to identify leading into South Vietnam. Why didn't the Air Force seek to bomb more bridges and railroad depots? Because they were *not important to infiltration across the DMZ*.¹⁰¹ You try to find a bicycle in the woods from a B-52 bomber at 30,000 feet. I dare you.

⁹⁹ Memo, *Alternative Military Actions*, 12 June 1967, Appendix, 19.

¹⁰⁰“*Another Opinion: Ford Argues for More Bombing*”, New York Times, 13 August 1967.

¹⁰¹See earlier analysis of McNamara's Alternative actions to clarify specific amounts of materiel needed to reach South Vietnam to sustain the war effort.

6. A Long Road Home: 1968

“It should be recognized that General Westmoreland's proposal does not purport to provide any really satisfactory answer to the problem in Vietnam. There can be no assurance that this very substantial additional deployment would us a year from today in an more favorable military position.”¹⁰²

-Clark Clifford to Walt Rostow, early 1968.

By December of 1967 the scene in Washington had changed dramatically. Johnson's advisory staff had a few new faces and the military echelon was undergoing changes of its own. Robert McNamara had either resigned or been fired, he wasn't sure.¹⁰³ General Westmoreland was in the process of moving from MACV Commanding General to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to be replaced by Gen. Creighton Abrams. David McDonald (JCS- Navy), Paul Neitze, Wallace Greene (USMC) were all on their way out. Walt Rostow, Dean Acheson, Retired Gen. Robert Komer, and Maxwell Taylor would also all soon leave service. Walt Rostow would keep his convictions about Vietnam until his death, as David G. Armstrong put it, he was a “true believer.”¹⁰⁴ Robert McNamara would move onto stewardship of the World Bank and would remain deeply conflicted about the Vietnam war for years. Lyndon Johnson was mulling over the turmoil in Vietnam and how it would affect his Administration in an election year. Despite the changes in Washington, the war dragged on.

At the end of 1967 the press in Vietnam was reflecting the general division in

¹⁰²Clark Clifford, *Necessity for In-depth study of Vietnam Policy and Strategic Guidance*, 4 March 1968, Box 75, LBJ Library, 1.

¹⁰³ *In Retrospect*, 311.

¹⁰⁴ David G. Armstrong, *The true believer: Walt Whitman Rostow and the path to Vietnam* (Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2000)

attitudes that were occurring in Washington, and as Robert McNamara would put it years later, it was the beginning of the “argument without end”. There have been few conflicts in American History in which individuals were so divided on the basis of nearly identical information.¹⁰⁵ Three such reports in December of 1967 capture the various attitudes towards Vietnam in the public sphere. The first, from a somewhat objective source, Swedish reporter Sven Oste reporting from North Vietnam confirmed some of the findings of McNamara and the CIA, and posed some new and interesting questions about policy in Vietnam. The second and third examples were diametrically opposed, one from journalist Stan Carter and the other by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist David Halberstam. The former was a staunch supporter of the American military commitment in Vietnam and the latter was a Pro-Administration reporter turned anti-war activist and opponent to the Vietnam war, by 1967.

Sven Oste's report from North Vietnam essentially confirmed the assessment of general attitudes in North Vietnam in terms of morale and bombing. The report summary stated “...Oste sensed a feeling of greater confidence in North Vietnam than last May, in spite of the bombing. He believed people has become somewhat more inured to the bombing, and that it had a positive effect on their morale, as was the case in May.”¹⁰⁶ The report draws some greater conclusions based on Oste's findings:

“Talking about effectiveness of bombing, he repeated his feeling (expressed last May) that it had a positive and beneficial effect on maintaining NVN morale. It is not hampering transport to a degree which prevents movement, and there are huge fleets of trucks moving goods at night; the bombing has meant only a change from shipping in the daytime to shipping at

105 Only perhaps the concurrent Civil Rights Movement evoked equivalent controversy and stark division in attitudes in America. In the case of the Vietnam war the divisions were based on largely concrete information from various sources, and not just on bigotry and hatred from the ignorant and intolerant.

106 Department of State Airgram, *Subject: Newsman Revisits North Vietnam*, 12 December 1967, Box 98, LBJ Library, 1.

night. Of course many large bridges are out, but this causes no real problem, he felt.”¹⁰⁷

There are three important conclusions to be drawn from this: 1) In general terms, the bombing was producing a *negative* correlation coefficient – i.e. an increase in morale in NVN instead of the postulated decrease; 2) McNamara and the CIA were correct in expressing their pessimism towards the current bombing campaign or escalation thereof, and that they were also correct in their position that the bombing was likely to bring about “*the greatest degree of courage and endurance*” on the part of the North Vietnamese; 3) The bombing of targets of “importance” was not significantly hampering NVN ability to export materiel to SVN . Oste also essentially destroys Rep. Ford's arguments about “not pulling our air power punch”; clearly it didn't matter. Oste also expressed the concern that almost all the Vietnamese in Hanoi believed that the harbor at Haiphong would be bombed eventually.¹⁰⁸

Stan Carter's *New York News* report from South Vietnam three days earlier (December 9th) was in stark contrast to the findings and attitudes described by Sven Oste. The differences stemmed from the fact that Carter was reporting from South Vietnam – interviewing South Vietnamese officials and talking to American Military representatives in the MACV information office – and Oste was talking to North Vietnamese civilians and making inferences based on the official statements of personnel within the military hierarchy in Hanoi (no doubt propagandist, although the official line in Hanoi would influence morale overall in the NVA/VC). Carter's opening line typifies his entire argument: “We are winning this war. It is slow and costly in both money and men – perhaps too costly. But the only thing that can beat us in the end is for the American

107 Ibid, 2.

108 Ibid, 3.

people to buckle.”¹⁰⁹ Carter cites that he was *talking* to various MACV officials in Vietnam, South Vietnamese officials and Communist defectors, wondering how anyone could think that the war was not being won. Unfortunately for Carter, all that he was doing – and all that those he talked to were doing – was just that: *talking*. Westmoreland, Taylor and Ellsworth Bunker could ramble on for hours about how all the signs pointed towards assured American victory, and South Vietnamese officials could cite improvements in ARVN's effectiveness and lower desertion rates, but that did not address the real issues of the spotty effectiveness of the pacification program, decreasing gains from the bombing campaign in terms of interdiction, improvements in VC morale, and mounting American casualties.

As Stan Carter stated in his article “the South Vietnamese forces are improving”¹¹⁰, comparing their feeble signs of “progress” to experiences of South Korean troops under American instruction during the Korean War. Amongst the proposals made by Westmoreland to Wheeler in August of 1967 to address the mounting publicity concerns about progress in the war was just such a study that analyzed the improved effectiveness of ARVN. The study, completed in August of 1968, looked comparatively at overall ARVN performance as compared to US Battalion performance – generally in terms of VC/NVA killed and large and small unit operations. The main conclusions of the MACV study were that US Battalions were still, on average, 3.2 times as effective as ARVN Battalions, and that gains in ARVN efficiency were equivalent to adding 16 US Battalions – 200,000 men – to the American force in South Vietnam.¹¹¹ The MACV study

109 Stan Carter, “Reporter on the Scene Finds We Are Winning the War”, *New York News*, 9 December 1967.

110 Ibid.

111 MACV Analytical Study, *RVNAF Effectiveness: An Update*, 31 August 1968, Folder 2G, Box 75, LBJ Library, 36-39.

also confirmed that ARVN was tending to focus on small scale unit operations as opposed to the US tendency towards larger, longer duration operations – on average 5-11 days per operation for ARVN and 55-105 for US forces.¹¹² ARVN was also engaging in 89% more operations between August 1967 to August 1968, effectively complementing the reduced days per operation statistic.

From Stan Carter's view in December of 1967 he was basing the conclusion of increased ARVN effectiveness largely on inference from a few select campaigns in which ARVN showed promise, which was not necessarily an indicator of overall capability. Based on the MACV report, even by August of 1968, ARVN was still 3.2 times *less effective* than comparable levels of US troops. If this was extrapolated to encompass a situation in which ARVN would need to stand on its own in South Vietnam, then they would need more than 1.5 million troops to equal the effectiveness of US forces (taken at the end of 1967 US troop levels – 480,000).¹¹³ This would be in addition to the almost 700,000 ARVN forces in service by the end of 1967 – not exactly the most encouraging figure. Carter also was fairly overzealous in championing VC/NVA desertions, citing a recent “mass defection” of “communist soldiers” that when all tallied totaled only 37 soldiers and a 15 year old female nurse.¹¹⁴ As Carter and the MACV viewed it this was a big deal, unfortunately a loss of 37 soldiers was not actually significant enough to be classified as a “mass defection.”

It is not surprising that Carter's report only appeared in the *New York Daily News*, a paper considered by the *Boston Globe's* analysis of 39 major newspapers in February

112 Ibid, 40.

113 This is an extrapolated argument, based on multiplicative factors outlined in the August 1968 MACV report, not a specifically stated troop estimate. It illustrates the overall quality of ARVN troops as compared to US troops, however.

114 Stan Carter, “Reporter on the Scene Finds We Are Winning the War”, *New York News*, 9 December 1967.

1968 to be in the war hawk and “calling for and all out win”, category.¹¹⁵ Carter's simplistic view of information dissemination in South Vietnam was typical of Pro-Administration proponents. *Why would the government or the MACV lie?* It isn't so much that they *would lie*, it is more that they were willing to carefully censor the information given to correspondents and the public. As Homer Bigart learned through his profound distrust for the administration, simplistic, repeatable questions about the most basic of issues were more likely to produce useful information – a trade colloquially known as “Homer's All American Dummy Act”.¹¹⁶ Administration officials, MACV officers, and the South Vietnamese Government in Saigon were likely to have prepared constructed answers to complicated questions – such that they would not be caught by surprise and say something not “in step” with official policy. The simple and predictable, however, might provide for basic contradictions to more complicated issues, such as the bombing effectiveness and efforts against interdiction across the DMZ. The lessons learned by Bigart and Sheehan were also learned – in trial by fire fashion – by fellow journalist David Halberstam.

Halberstam's first tour in Vietnam was prior to official US troop commitments (aside from “advisers”), between 1962-1963, and he would unknowingly continue in the footsteps of Bigart. As fellow reporter William Prochnau put it, “What Bigart had reported with almost melancholic disdain, Halberstam would report with youthfully energetic outrage.”¹¹⁷ As Halberstam would find out Bigart was *right*, the war didn't work, and his subsequent outspoken lambasting of the war effort and the Administration would earn him a Pulitzer Prize in 1964. In 1967 Halberstam returned for another reporting expo

115 Min S. Yee, “The U.S. Press and its agony of appraisal”, *Boston Globe*, 18 February 1968, 3.

116 Prochnau, 38.

117 Prochnau, 133.

in Vietnam, and produced an article for *Harper's magazine* that echoed many of the concerns that he had expressed in 1963. Halberstam's concerns were fundamental in nature: did we have the capacity to win the war? Was ARVN ever going to be effective enough to stand on its own? Did the American technological might actually make a difference? Simple questions with complicated answers.

Halberstam specifically stated that he was originally in the camp of reporters who thought that the war might be winnable, but that by the end of his 1967 tour he doubted the American capacity to win.¹¹⁸ This was not because American soldiers had not fought well, quite the contrary actually. Halberstam was taken aback by the amount of firepower that any given infantry company had at its disposal. Nearly immediate Air-power and artillery, high rate accurate machine guns, grenades and mortars, and napalm, all capable of annihilating any enemy – that could be found. Any amount of firepower would prove useless however, against an enemy that could set the tone and tempo of an engagement and then retreat into predetermined and pre-defended locations that, occasionally, Americans could not follow them into (Laos, Cambodia, across the DMZ). Halberstam had a succinct and clear mode of analysis that summed up the actual underlying problems with Vietnam by 1967 – mainly along the lines of problems with pacification and the blasé attitude of the general population (possibly an ignorant view of the South Vietnamese peasantry). “Progress at a given moment is a fleeting experience unless it is brought about by the deep-rooted desire of the Vietnamese peasants themselves.”¹¹⁹ This observation was undoubtedly true, although a bit short sighted and essentially suggesting that the South Vietnamese peasants were lazy – not that they were more concerned with

118 David Halberstam, “Return To Vietnam”, *Harper's Magazine*, December 1967, 2.

119 Ibid.

sustaining their livelihood, instead of pandering nicely to the expectations of Washington.

Despite the occasionally slanted tone, Halberstam was essentially correct in his concerns for the future of Vietnam, citing the poor motivation and leadership in ARVN and the lack of a program of true *nation building*.¹²⁰ In this case *nation building* should have included several key areas: **1)** a sustainable economy – one based in agriculture or industrial production, or both, not one that relies essentially on the *tourism* factor of American GI's and monetary backing from Washington and that can produce enough rice to feed its population (not the case in Vietnam, even by 1966 large amounts of rice were being imported from Louisiana).¹²¹ **2)** An effective military force (ARVN) capable of standing on its own – as previously cited even by the *end* of 1968 an ARVN battalion was still 3.2 times *less effective* than a US Military Battalion. **3)** A government that has the support of its constituents – not the one that Halberstam observed in the fall of 1967; “The government of Vietnam is largely meaningless to its citizens.”¹²² Clearly these were the ideological concerns that were to be followed *in theory*. Practice often brings about changes to theoretical plans. The only problem was that *practically nothing had really changed in theory or practice in Vietnam since the beginning of 1967* (or since 1962 as far as Halberstam was concerned). 1968 did not look too rosy, despite the across the board optimism in Washington.

“So is the war being won? The answer is yes it is, an no it isn't.”¹²³ A question posed, and answered, by Halberstam in December of 1967, that could have just as easily been asked in January of 1967 with the same result. By comparison, Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett posed similar questions to DRV foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh in

120 Ibid.

121 Background Paper on Postwar Reconstruction, *Vietnam Rice Situation*, Box 58, LBJ Library.

122 David Halberstam, “Return To Vietnam”, *Harper's Magazine*, December 1967, 4.

123 Ibid, 2.

January of 1967. Burchett's interview reflected the same types of fundamental issues surrounding the nature of the VC/NVA war effort and American involvement. The interview took place in Hanoi and Burchett posed questions to the DRV foreign minister that were simple in nature, complex in scope.

“Mr. Minister, what in your view are the most significant recent developments in the Vietnam war, and what are the prospects for the immediate future?”¹²⁴

Trinh's answers were along the same lines as what was heard in 1965 and by 1968: “The Vietnamese people will win. The U.S. Imperialist aggressors will be defeated.”¹²⁵ That was the *blunt truth*. Trinh consistently referred to the US as “imperialists” and as violating the sovereign will of a nation that was fighting for its independence – specifically in violation of the 1954 Geneva agreements. Again Trinh was basically correct. As much as Washington claimed to be fighting in favor of the sovereign will of South Vietnam, its interests were primarily political and diplomatic. If diplomacy is essentially discussion, compromise and constructive debate, then the American mission in Vietnam by 1967 was distorted to the point of completing the exact opposite of that – imperialism, intransigence, and hegemonic control.

Burchett also expressed the Administration's want for increased dialogue between the US and the DRV, and once again he was met with a blunt answer. In order for diplomatic talks to ensue, officially, between the DRV and the US, the US would need to unconditionally halt the bombing of North Vietnam and “all other acts of war against the DRV.”¹²⁶ Basically stop all aspects of the war, and we will talk about stopping the war. Fallible logic at best, but what else did Hanoi have to bargain with? Accepting a

124 Q&A Hanoi VNA International Service Cable text, *Foreign Ministers interview with Wilfred Burchett*, 30 January 1967, Box 157, LBJ Library.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

conditional halt to the bombing would essentially confirm its effectiveness – something that by all accurate assessments was untrue (McNamara, the CIA, and the IDA all concurred on this point). The DRV needed to take a hard line such as to not appear weak at the eventual bargaining table and so that they could continue to inspire – (again) what the CIA dubbed as – the *greatest degree of courage and determination* amongst its people. The bombing had limited effectiveness and conventional ground operations were easily thwarted by guerrilla strategy. ARVN was shaky at best and the whole facade was likely to fall apart with greater domestic pressure in the US and from abroad.

Considering these points and assuming that the American commitment was finite, then Hanoi had nothing to lose – or possibly just more to gain – by taking a hard line against talks or conditional agreements. They had a trump card and they knew it, and the US knew it. Bigart knew it. Halberstam knew it. Sheehan knew it. The MACV didn't understand it. McNamara had frustratedly tried to reverse his ignorance, to no avail. Johnson was divided and committed. John Lewis Gaddis summed it up best, “[the Administration] found itself ensnared inextricably in a war it did not understand, could not win, but would not leave.”¹²⁷

Burchett's interview at the beginning of 1967 engendered the same attitudes and problems that still existed by the end of 1967. The year was not entirely wasted, however. McNamara had raised very good points about the potential outcomes in Vietnam, for which he was possibly fired, and then promptly ignored. His successor, Clark Clifford, would quickly come to nearly the same conclusions, compounded even further by the implications of the Tet Offensive in January of 1968. Also thousands of US soldiers and countless Vietnamese had died over the course of the year. Johnson would not seek re-

127 Gaddis, 262.

election in 1969. American optimism had not failed in Vietnam, rather it had just shifted focus. The optimism itself was still prevalent, there was just *no discernible reason for it*. **1968** would prove to be the pivotal year in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive would destroy the Administration's external credibility and confirm the validity of arguments that had taken place during 1967 within Johnson's advisory staff; social unrest and upheaval at home would continue to chip away at the facade of the “noble” American commitment to save Southeast Asia; and more and more pre-war proponents of American policy in Vietnam would jump ship, generally citing *good reason* and *moral responsibility*. The same reasons ostensibly used to get us into the war in the first place.

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Reference Appendix

Command Structure and Important Individuals: Vietnam 1964-69

President: Lyndon B. Johnson

Secretary of Defense: Robert S. McNamara (1961-68)
Clark Clifford (1968-69)

Secretary of State: Dean Rusk (1961-69)

Joint Chiefs of Staff:

- *Chairman:* Maxwell Taylor (1962-64), Earle G. Wheeler (1964-70)
- *Air Force:* Curtis E. LeMay (1961-65), John P. McConnell (1965-69)
- *Army:* Earle G. Wheeler (1962-64), Harold K. Johnson (1964-68), William C. Westmoreland (1968-72)
- *USMC:* Wallace M. Greene Jr. (1964-Dec 31 1967), Leonard F. Chapman Jr. (1968-Dec 31 1971)
- *Navy:* David L. McDonald (1963-Aug 1 1967), Thomas H. Moorer (1967-70)

National Security Advisers: McGeorge Bundy (1961-65)
Walt W. Rostow (1966-69)

Important advisers:

Dean Acheson (Fmr. Sec. of State 1949-53)
Robert Komer
Edward Lansdale
Henry Cabot Lodge
Fredrick Nolting
Gen. Robert N. Ginsburgh
Paul D. Harkins
Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor

Relevant Secretaries^{128.}

- **Secretary of the Navy**
PAUL H. NITZE. Served in various government capacities before becoming assistant secretary of defense (international security affairs), 1961 -1 963. **Secretary of the Navy, 29 November 1963-30 June 1967.** Became deputy secretary of defense on 1 July 1967.

PAUL R. IGNATIUS. U.S. Navy, 1943-1946. Assistant secretary of the Army (installations and logistics), 1961 -1 964. Under secretary of the Army, 1964; assistant secretary of defense (installations and logistics), 1964-1967. **Secretary of the Navy, 1 September 1967-24**

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January 1969. Subsequently president of the Washington Post

- **Secretary of the Air Force**

HAROLD BROWN. Staff member, Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, 1952-1960, president, 1960-1961. Director, defense research and engineering, 8 May 1961 - 1 October 1965. **Secretary of the Air Force, 1 October 1965-15 February 1969.** Subsequently secretary of defense.