

VIỆT NAM WAR NARRATIVE AND ANALYSIS - A New Mexican Perspective

Compiled and edited by Lou Hoffman with material reliance on *The U.S. Army in Vietnam* by Vincent H. Demma, Center of Military History, United States Army and *On Strategy - A critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* by Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr.



DUTY, HONOR, SACRIFICE

IT IS SOMETIMES SAID THAT HEROES ARE HARD TO FIND.
PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF DUTY, HONOR
AND COUNTRY NEED TO LOOK NO FURTHER THAN THOSE WHO
FIGHT FOR FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY.

Tuấn Nguyễn

Việt Nam War Memorial in Sid Goldstein Freedom Park in Westminster, California,
USA.

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/29026438@N07/3967701227/>

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BACKGROUND

It was the longest war in American history and the most unpopular American war of the twentieth century. Many Americans asked whether the American effort in Việt Nam was a sin, a blunder, a necessary war, or a noble cause, or an idealistic, if failed, effort to protect the South Việt Nameese from totalitarian government.

3,403,100 personnel, including 514,300 offshore, served in the broader Southeast Asia Theater, which included Việt Nam, Laos, Cambodia, flight crews based in Thailand and sailors in adjacent South China Sea waters.

2,709,918 Americans served in Việt Nam. This number represents 9.7% of their generation.

Between 1-1.6 million, 40-60%, either fought in combat, provided close support or were exposed to enemy attack on occasion.

Peak troop strength in Việt Nam: 543,482, 30 April 1968.

Between 1945 and 1954, the Việt Nameese waged an anti-colonial war against the French. By 1952 the United States (U.S.) was bearing roughly one third of the cost of the war because the French repeatedly warned that they could not furnish troops for European defense without continued generous American support in Indochina.

The French defeat at the Điện Biên Phủ was followed by a peace conference in Geneva, in which Laos, Cambodia, and Việt Nam received their independence and Việt Nam was temporarily divided between an anti-Communist South and a Communist North. In 1956, South Việt Nam, with American backing, refused to hold the unification elections. By 1958, Communist-led National Liberation Front guerrillas known as the Việt công had begun to battle the South Việt Nameese government.

To support the South's government, the U.S. sent in 2,000 military advisors, a number that grew to 16,300 in 1963. The military condition deteriorated, and by 1963 South Việt Nam had lost the fertile Mekong Delta to the Việt công.

The critical state of rural security that came to light after South Việt Nam premier Ngô Đình Diệm's death in November 1963 again prompted the United States to expand its military aid to Sài Gòn. 50,000 Americans served in Việt Nam between 1960 and 1964.

General Harkins, Commander Military Assistance Command, Việt Nam (MACV), and his successor General William C. Westmoreland urgently strove to revitalize pacification and counterinsurgency. Army advisers helped their Việt Nameese counterparts to revise national and provincial pacification plans. They retained the

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concept of fortified hamlets as the heart of a new national counterinsurgency program. To help implement the program, Army advisers were assigned to the subsector (district) level for the first time, becoming more intimately involved in local pacification efforts and in paramilitary operations. Additional advisers were assigned to units and training centers, especially those of the Regional and Popular Forces (formerly called the Civil Guard and Self-Defense of Corps). All Army activities, from aviation support to Special Forces, were strengthened in a concerted effort to undo the effects of years of Diệm's mismanagement.

At the same time, American officials in Washington, Hawaii, and Sài Gòn began to explore ways to increase military pressure against North Việt Nam. In 1964 the South Việt Nameese launched covert raids under MACV's auspices. Some military leaders, however, believed that only direct air strikes against North Việt Nam would induce a change in Hà Nội's policies by demonstrating American determination to defend South Việt Nam's independence. The interest in using air power reflected lingering sentiment in the United States against involving American ground forces once again in a land war on the Asian continent. Many of President Lyndon B. Johnson's advisers - among them General Maxwell D. Taylor, who was appointed Ambassador to Sài Gòn in mid-1964 believed that a carefully calibrated air campaign would be the most effective means of exerting pressure against the North and, at the same time, the method least likely to provoke intervention by China. Taylor thought conventional Army ground forces ill-suited to engage in day-to-day counterinsurgency operations against the Việt công in hamlets and villages. Ground forces might, however, be used to protect vital air bases in the South and to repel any North Việt Nameese attack across the demilitarized zone (DMZ), which separated North from South Việt Nam. Together, a more vigorous counterinsurgency effort in the South and military pressure against the North might buy time for Sài Gòn to put its political house in order, boost flagging military and civilian morale, and strengthen its military position in the event of a negotiated peace. Taylor and Westmoreland, the senior U.S. officials in South Việt Nam, agreed that Hà Nội was unlikely to change its course unless convinced that it could not succeed in the South. Both recognized that air strikes were neither a panacea nor a substitute for military efforts in the South.

As each side undertook more provocative military actions, the likelihood of a direct military confrontation between North Việt Nam and the United States increased. The crisis came in early August 1964 in the international waters of the Gulf of Tonkin.

GULF OF TONKIN

The official story on 2 August 1964 was that North Việt Nameese torpedo (PT) boats launched an "unprovoked attack" against a U.S. destroyer on "routine patrol" in the Tonkin Gulf and that North Việt Nameese PT boats followed up with a "deliberate attack" on a pair of U.S. ships two days later.

The truth was very different.

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Rather than being on a routine patrol, the U.S. destroyer Maddox in sync with coordinated attacks on North Việt Nam by the South Việt Nameese navy and the Laotian air force was actually engaged in aggressive intelligence-gathering maneuvers known as Operation Desoto.

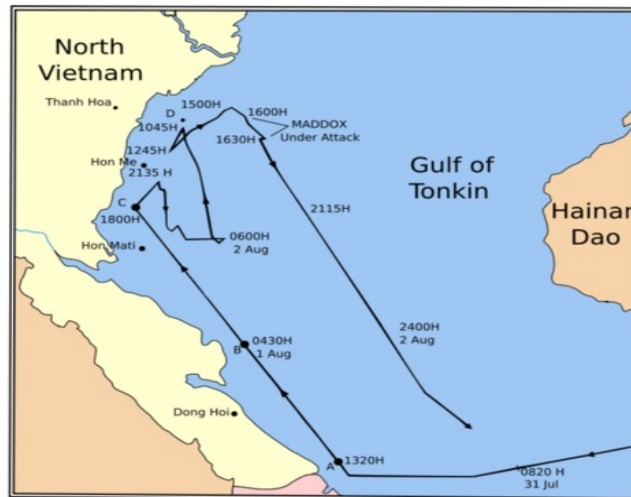
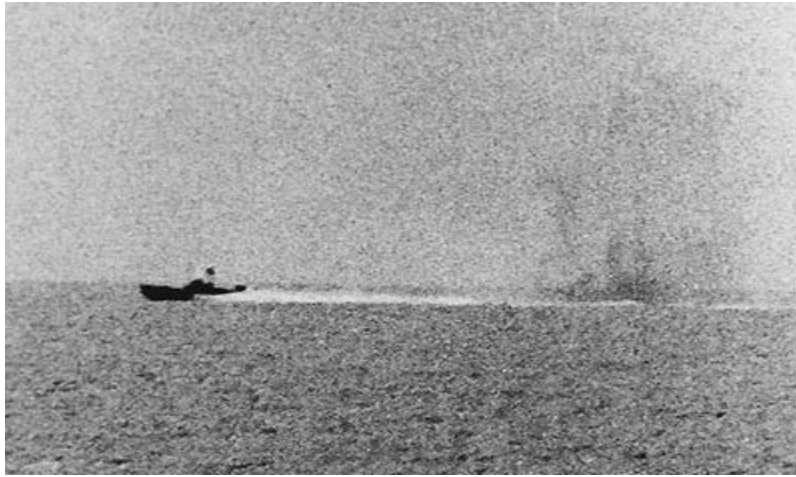


Chart Showing the Course of the U.S. Destroyer Maddox From 31 July - 2 August 1964
Image Source: wapedia.mobi/en/Gulf_of_Tonkin_Incident

During the nights of 30 & 31 July 1964, two North Việt Nameese islands, Hòn Mê and Hòn Ngư, were attacked. On 31 July 1964, the U.S. destroyer Maddox began a reconnaissance patrol off the coast of North Việt Nam collecting radio and radar signals from North Việt Nam and China. The mission included observing coastal defense operations, which were expected to be active, as covert attacks were being carried out by the South Việt Nameese patrol boats. On 2 August 1964, the Maddox was not far from Hòn Mê, when, shortly after 2:00 p.m., North Việt Nameese PT boats came from the island, speeding toward the Maddox. The Maddox fired three warning shots, but the torpedo boats continued to advance, firing torpedoes. The Maddox then opened fire on the approaching North Việt Nameese boats that, after being strafed by supporting naval air elements, were damaged and returned to shore; one single 14.5 millimeter machine gun round had hit the Maddox.

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North Vietnamese motor torpedo boat attacking the *USS Maddox*, August 2, 1964. Photograph taken from *USS Maddox* (DD-731) during her engagement with three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin, 2 August 1964. The view shows one of the boats racing by, with what appears to be smoke from Maddox' shells in its wake. Official U.S. Navy Photograph. Presented by [Naval Historical Center](#).

In Washington, President Lyndon B. Johnson concerned that the assault might have been a local commander's caprice in response to U.S. backed covert operations at first did not retaliate. His instincts were subsequently affirmed by General Nguyễn Đình Vồc, director of the Institute of Military History in Hà Nội in a 10 August 1997 [New York Times Magazine](#) article.

Then Ambassador Maxwell Taylor complained from Sài Gòn on 3 August to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that failure to respond to an unprovoked attack on a U.S. destroyer in international waters would be taken as a sign "that the U.S. flinches from direct confrontation with the North Việt Nameese." Additionally, it was clear in a 3 August White House telephone conversation with Robert Anderson, President Eisenhower's Secretary of the Navy (1953-1954), Deputy Secretary of Defense (1954-1955) and Secretary of the Treasury in 1957, that Johnson was also feeling political pressure from Republican presidential candidate Berry Goldwater who asserted in his San Francisco acceptance speech that, " We are at war in Việt Nam. And yet the President...refuses to say...whether or not the objective over there is victory, and his Secretary of Defense continues to mislead and misinform the American people."

On the night of 4 August, the Pentagon proclaimed that a second attack by North Việt Nameese PT boats had occurred earlier that day in the Tonkin Gulf - a report cited by President Johnson as he went on national TV that evening to announce a momentous escalation in the war: air strikes against North Việt Nam.

But Johnson ordered U.S. bombers to "retaliate" for a North Việt Nameese torpedo attack that never happened; even though top officials in Washington had sufficient

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reason in advance of Johnson's announcement to doubt that any attack by North Việt Nam had occurred on 4 August.

During an evening and early morning of rough weather and heavy seas, the destroyers received radar, sonar and radio signals that they believed signaled another attack by the North Việt Nameese navy. For some two hours the ships fired on radar targets and maneuvered vigorously amid electronic and visual reports of enemies. Then, at 0127 Washington time, Maddox commander Captain John J. Herrick sent a cable in which he admitted that the attack may never have happened and that there may actually have been no Việt Nameese craft in the area: "Review of action makes many reported contacts and torpedoes fired appear doubtful. Freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonarmen may account for many reports. No actual visual sightings by Maddox. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action taken."

Since then, accounts have supported the argument that there was no attack on 4 August, including one from commander in chief of the People's Army of Việt Nam Võ Nguyễn Giáp, who in 1995 admitted to the 2 August attack but asserted that the 4 August attack had never occurred.

One of the navy pilots flying overhead that night was squadron commander James Stockdale, who later received the Medal of Honor in recognition of his integrity and resistance as a prisoner of the North Việt Nameese. "I had the best seat in the house to watch that event, recalled Stockdale," and our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets - there were no PT boats there.... There was nothing there but black water and American fire power."

In 1965, President Johnson added: "For all I know, our Navy was shooting at whales out there."

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution — the closest thing there ever was to a declaration of war against North Việt Nam — sailed through Congress on 7 August 1964. The resolution authorized the president "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Despite the initial support for the resolution, it became increasingly controversial as Johnson used it to increase U.S. commitment to the war in Việt Nam.

Congress passed the resolution with the understanding that it would be consulted if the war escalated and particularly if ground troops were to be used in South Việt Nam. President Johnson had repeatedly said that he had no intention of sending troops into Việt Nam, believing that the South Việt Nameese should fight their own war. Additionally, Congress acted without knowledge of the 30 & 31 July 1964 raids or that the Maddox had been less than twelve miles off the coast of North Việt Nam. The United States recognized a three mile limit -not the twelve-mile limit claimed by the North Việt Nameese.

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Moreover, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara not only advanced the fiction of raids as a South Việt Nameese enterprise in a Foreign Relations Committee executive session, he repeated it at congressional hearings on the administration's requested use of force resolution. At a hearing held on August 6, McNamara declared, "Our Navy played absolutely no part in, was not associated with, was not aware of, any South Việt Nameese actions, if there were any."

In fact the raids, known as 34-A missions, were unilaterally controlled by the U.S., using boats procured and maintained by the U.S. Navy, attacking targets selected by the CIA, in an operation paid for by the United States. The only South Việt Nameese aspect of 34-A was the administrative responsibility borne by that government's Special Forces for their nationals recruited as the commandos for the missions - commandos who were nevertheless led by Americans. Some accounts by Americans who participated in such missions actually maintain that Americans were present and aboard the attack boats during the raids of August 2.

In any event, the Johnson administration had the authority it had sought to escalate military activity in Việt Nam. Johnson then subsequently used that authority without advising Congress as it had expected. The rest is tragic history.

JOHNSON'S WAR

After a Việt công attack on American barracks in Pleiku, President Johnson ordered reprisal bombings on North Việt Nam on 6 February 1965. This was later expanded on 21 February into a program of sustained bombing called "Rolling Thunder." In March deliberations led to the decision to escalate the ground war. In April a battalion of Marines landed in Đà Nang.



Marines Land at Đà Nang in April 1965
Source: <http://faculty.smu.edu/dsimon/Change-Việt2.html>

In June President Johnson gave General Westmoreland the authority to commit American troops to ground combat operations in Việt Nam. Westmoreland strove for unity within the American build-up. As forces began to deploy to South Việt Nam, the Army sought to elevate the U.S. Army, Việt Nam (USARV), to a full-fledged Army component command with responsibility for combat operations. But Westmoreland

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successfully warded off the challenge to his dual role as unified commander of Military Assistance Command Việt Nam (MACV) and Army commander. For the remainder of the war, USARV performed solely in a logistical and administrative capacity; unlike MACV's air and naval component commands, the Army component did not exercise operational control over combat forces, Special Forces, or field advisers. However, through its logistical, engineer, signal, medical, military police, and aviation commands, all established in the course of the build-up, USARV commanded and managed a support base of unprecedented size and scope. Despite this victory, unity of command over the ground war in South Việt Nam eluded Westmoreland, as did over-all control of U.S. military operations in support of the war. Most air and naval operations outside of South Việt Nam, including Rolling Thunder, were carried out by the Commander in Chief, Pacific, and his air and naval commanders from his headquarters thousands of miles away in Hawaii. This patchwork of command arrangements contributed to the lack of a unified strategy, the fragmentation of operations, and the pursuit of parochial service interests to the detriment of the war effort. No single American commander had complete authority or responsibility to fashion an over-all strategy or to co-ordinate all military aspects of the war in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Westmoreland labored under a variety of political and operational constraints on the use of the combat forces he did command. Like the Korean War, the struggle in South Việt Nam was complicated by enemy sanctuaries and by geographical and political restrictions on allied operations. Ground forces were barred from operating across South Việt Nam's borders into Cambodia, Laos, or North Việt Nam, although the border areas of those countries were vital to the enemy's war effort. These factors narrowed Westmoreland's freedom of action and detracted from his efforts to make effective use of American military power.

On 28 July 1965, President Johnson announced plans to deploy additional combat units and to increase American military strength in South Việt Nam to 175,000 by year's end. The Army already was preparing hundreds of units for duty in Southeast Asia, among them the newly activated 1st Cavalry Division. Other combat units - the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and all three brigades of the 1st Infantry Division - were either ready to go or already on their way to Việt Nam. Together with hundreds of support and logistical units, these combat units constituted the first phase of the build-up during the summer and fall of 1965.

At the same time, President Johnson decided not to mobilize any Reserve units. The President's decision profoundly affected the manner in which the Army supported and sustained the build-up. To meet the call for additional combat forces and to obtain manpower to enlarge its training base and to maintain a pool for rotation and replacement of soldiers in South Việt Nam, the Army had to increase its active strength, over the next three years, by nearly 1.5 million men. Necessarily, it relied on larger draft calls and voluntary enlistments, supplementing them with heavy drawdowns of experienced soldiers from units in Europe and South Korea and extensions of some tours of duty to retain specialists, technicians, and cadres who could train recruits or round out deploying units. Combat units assigned to the strategic reserve were used to meet a large portion of MACV's force requirements,

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and Reservists were not available to replace them. Mobilization could have eased the additional burden of providing noncommissioned officers (NCO's) and officers to man the Army's growing training bases. As matters stood, requirements for experienced cadres competed with the demands for seasoned leaders in units deploying to South Việt Nam.

Facing a deteriorating military situation, Westmoreland in the summer of 1965 planned to use his combat units to blunt the enemy's spring-summer offensive. As they arrived in the country, Westmoreland moved them into a defensive arc in III Corps around Sài Gòn and secured bases for the arrival of subsequent units. His initial aim was defensive - to stop losing the war and to build a structure that could support a later transition to an offensive campaign. As additional troops poured in, Westmoreland planned to seek out and defeat major enemy forces. Throughout both phases, the South Việt Nameese, relieved of major combat tasks, were to refurbish their forces and conduct an aggressive pacification program behind the American shield. In a third and final stage, as enemy main force units were driven into their secret zones and bases, Westmoreland hoped to achieve victory by destroying those sanctuaries and shifting the weight of the military effort to pacification, thereby at last subduing the Việt công throughout rural South Việt Nam.

Spearheaded by at least three North Việt Nameese Army (NVA) regiments, Communist forces mounted a strong offensive in South Việt Nam's Central Highlands during the summer of 1965, overrunning border camps and besieging some district towns. Here the enemy threatened to cut the nation in two. To meet the danger, Westmoreland proposed to introduce the newly organized Army airmobile division, the 1st Cavalry Division, with its large contingent of helicopters, directly into the highlands. Some of his superiors in Hawaii and Washington opposed this plan, preferring to secure coastal bases. Though Westmoreland contended that enclave security made poor use of U.S. mobility and offensive firepower, he was unable to overcome the fear of an American Điện Biên Phủ, if a unit in the highlands should be isolated and cut off from the sea.

On 3 August 1965 CBS-TV news showed pictures of men from the First Battalion, Ninth Marines setting fire to huts in the village of Cầm Nà, six miles west of Đà Nẵng, despite reports that the Việt công had already fled the area. The film report sparked indignation and condemnation of the U.S. policy in Việt Nam both at home and overseas. At the same time, the Department of Defense announced that it was increasing the monthly draft call from 17,000 in August to 27,400 in September and 36,000 in October. It also announced that the navy would require 4,600 draftees, the first such action since 1956.

In the end, the deployment of Army forces to II Corps in central Việt Nam reflected a compromise. As additional American and South Korean forces arrived during 1965 and 1966, they often reinforced South Việt Nameese efforts to secure coastal enclaves, usually centered on the most important cities and ports. At Phan Thiết, Tuy

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Hòa, Quy Nhơn, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh Bay, allied forces provided area security, not only protecting the ports and logistical complexes that developed in many of these locations, but also assisting Sài Gòn's forces to expand the pacified zone that extended from the urban cores to the countryside.



U.S. Corps Tactical Zones, Việt Nam

Source: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/5/56/SVN1.jpg>

There, as in III Corps, Westmoreland addressed two enemy threats. Local insurgents menaced populated areas along the coastal plain, while enemy main force units intermittently pushed forward in the western highlands. Between the two regions stretched the piedmont, a transitional area in whose lush valleys many South Việt Nameese lived. In the piedmont's craggy hills and jungle-covered uplands, local and main force Việt công units had long flourished by exacting food and taxes from the lowland population through a well-entrenched shadow government. Although the enemy's bases in the piedmont did not have the notoriety of the secret zones near Sài Gòn, they served similar purposes, harboring units, command centers, and training and logistical facilities. Extensions of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail ran from the highlands through the piedmont to the coast, facilitating the movement of enemy

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units and supplies from province to province. To be effective, allied operations on the coast had to uproot local units living amid the population and to eradicate the enemy base areas in the piedmont, together with the main force units that supported the village and hamlet guerrillas.

Despite their sparse population and limited economic resources, the highlands had a strategic importance equal to and perhaps greater than the coastal plain. Around the key highland towns - Pleiku, Kon Tum, Buôn Ma Thuột, and Đà Lạt - South Việt Nameese and U.S. forces had created enclaves. Allied forces protected the few roads that traversed the highlands, screened the border, and reinforced outposts and Montagnard settlements from which the irregulars and Army Special Forces sought to detect enemy cross-border movements and to strengthen tribal resistance to the Communists. Such border posts and tribal camps, rather than major towns, most often were the object of enemy attacks. Combined with road interdiction, such attacks enabled the Communists to disperse the limited number of defenders and to discourage the maintenance of outposts.

Such actions served a larger strategic objective. The enemy planned to develop the highlands into a major base area from which to mount or support operations in other areas. The Communist dominated highlands would be a strategic fulcrum, enabling the enemy to shift the weight of his operations to any part of South Việt Nam. The highlands also formed a "killing zone" where Communist forces could mass. Challenging American forces had become the principal objective of leaders in Hà Nội, who saw their plans to undermine Sài Gòn's military resistance thwarted by U.S. intervention. Salient victories against Americans, they believed, might deter a further build-up and weaken Washington's resolve to continue the war.

By 24 December 1965, President Johnson had declared a bombing halt over North Việt Nam to try to persuade Hà Nội to discuss a political settlement. It lasted until 30 January. This halt followed one of six days the preceding May that was ordered in an attempt to let the North Việt Nameese change their course without losing "face." Hà Nội responded to neither, but used the time to rebuild its strength, repair previous damage and send more troops and supplies southward. So, Rolling Thunder began again and U.S. aircrews not only had to attack new targets, but also those which had been rebuilt or repaired.

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Rolling Thunder: Escorted by EB-66 Pathfinder F-105 Thunderchiefs Dropping Bombs
<http://www.b66.info/EB-66-photos3.htm>

The execution of Rolling Thunder was characterized by the graduated application of military power over an unspecified period of time, micro-managed directly by President Johnson through geographic prohibitions, target denial, and stringent strike restrictions and rules of engagement. The former ignored principles of war such as mass and surprise and existing military doctrine regarding air power employment, calling instead for a phased campaign - the phases again undefined and un-established - of air power creeping north from the DMZ that separated North and South Việt Nam. Gradualism, rather than campaign objectives, was the first divisive point between the military and its civilian leadership. Gradualism provided no military benefits in the conduct of Rolling Thunder but had several adverse consequences. To the international community, it indicated a lack of capability on the part of the United States to halt blatant acts of aggression by a less-developed nation against its neighbor. It allowed communist-socialist elements in many nations the time to organize their opposition to the U.S. "imperialist aggression" against a nation portrayed as fighting for its survival, leading many nations traditionally friendly to the United States to withdraw their support of the U.S. war effort as the campaign dragged on. Gradualism enabled the North Việt Nameese to mobilize and organize a force of more than 500,000 civilians to handle damage and movement of supplies; mobilize an additional quarter-million civilians to man anti-aircraft defenses; organize and construct a sophisticated, highly integrated air defense system; disperse its military supplies to offset the bombing; and import essential stores to counter anticipated bombing effects (e.g., 2000 generators to offset the loss of power plants). To the North Việt Nameese, it manifested a lack of will on the part of the United States leadership.

In February 1966, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom attempted to get a peace dialog going between the U.S. and North Việt Nam, but were unable to do so since Johnson had resumed the air strikes. Acting against the advice of the Pentagon, the Johnson Administration chose not to escalate the Rolling Thunder

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attacks under the belief that the Communist Chinese and North Vietnamese would charge that the pause over the Tết holiday had just been a prelude to more drastic actions.

By May 1966 an ominous build-up of enemy forces, among them NVA regiments that had infiltrated south, was detected in Phước Long and Bình Long Provinces in northern III Corps. U.S. commanders viewed the build-up as a portent of the enemy's spring offensive, plans for which included an attack on the district town of Lộc Ninh and on a nearby Special Forces camp. The 1st Division responded, sending a brigade to secure Route 13. But the threat to Lộc Ninh heightened in early June, when regiments of the 9th Việt công Division took up positions around the town. The arrival of American reinforcements apparently prevented an assault. About a week later, however, an enemy regiment was spotted in fortified positions in a rubber plantation adjacent to Lộc Ninh. Battered by massive air and artillery strikes, the regiment was dislodged and its position overrun, ending the threat. Americans recorded other successes, trapping Việt công ambushers in a counter-ambush, securing Lộc Ninh, and spoiling the enemy's spring offensive. But if the enemy still underestimated the mobility and firepower that U.S. commanders could bring to bear, he had learned how easily Americans could be lured away from their base camps.

By the summer of 1966 Westmoreland believed he had stopped the losing trend of a year earlier and could begin the second phase of his general campaign strategy. In addition to continued efforts to improve security in the populated areas of III Corps this entailed aggressive operations to search out and destroy enemy main force units in War Zone C, a Vietnamese communist base area located in Tây Ninh province near the Cambodian border that was reportedly the general location of the headquarters for communist military and political activities in the southern half of Việt Nam (COSVN). In Operation Attleboro he sent the 196th Infantry Brigade and the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, to Tây Ninh Province to bolster the security of the province seat. Westmoreland's challenge prompted COSVN to send the 9th Việt công Division on a "counter sweep," the enemy's term for operations to counter allied search and destroy tactics. Moving deeper into the enemy's stronghold, the recently arrived and inexperienced 196th Infantry Brigade sparred with the enemy. Then an intense battle erupted, as elements of the brigade were isolated and surprised by a large enemy force. Operation Attleboro quickly grew to a multi-division struggle as American commanders sought to maintain contact with the Việt công and to aid their own surrounded forces. Within a matter of days, elements of the 1st and 25th Divisions, the 173d Airborne Brigade, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment had converged on the Cambodian border.

Control of Attleboro passed in turn from the 196th to the 1st Division and finally to the II Field Force, making it the first Army operation in South Việt Nam to be controlled by a corps-size headquarters. With over 22,000 U.S. troops participating, the battle had become the largest of the war. Yet combat occurred most often at the platoon and company levels, usually at night. As the number of American troops

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increased, the 9th Việt công Division shied away, withdrawing across the Cambodian border. Then Army forces departed, leaving to the Special Forces the task of detecting the enemy's inevitable return.

As the threat along the border abated, Westmoreland turned his attention to the enemy's secret zones near Sài Gòn, among them the so-called Iron Triangle in Bình Dương Province. Harboring the headquarters of Military Region IV, the Communist command that directed military and terrorist activity in and around the capital, this stronghold had gone undisturbed for several years. Westmoreland hoped to find the command center, disrupt Việt công activity in the capital region, and allow South Việt Nameese forces to accelerate pacification and uproot the stubborn Việt công political organization that flourished in many villages and hamlets.

Operation Cedar Falls began on 8 January 1967 with the objectives of destroying the headquarters, interdicting the movement of enemy forces into the major war zones in III Corps around Sài Gòn, and defeating Việt công units encamped there. Like Attleboro before it, Cedar Falls tapped the manpower and resources of nearly every major Army unit in the corps area. A series of preliminary maneuvers brought Army units into position. Several air assaults sealed off the Iron Triangle, exploiting the natural barriers of the rivers that formed two of its boundaries. Then American units began a series of sweeps to push the enemy toward the blocking forces. At the village of Bến Súc, long under the sway of the insurgents, sixty helicopters descended into seven landing zones in less than a minute. Bến Súc was surrounded, its entire population evacuated, and the village and its tunnel complex destroyed. But insurgent forces had fled before the heliborne assault. As Cedar Falls progressed, U.S. troops destroyed hundreds of enemy fortifications, captured large quantities of supplies and food, and evacuated other hamlets. Contact with the enemy was fleeting. Most of the Việt công, including the high-level cadre of the regional command, had escaped, sometimes infiltrating through allied lines.

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Airmobile Assault

Source: [http://www.traveltoVietNam.cc/Upload/tour/288200834634_Viêt Nam%20War2.jpg](http://www.traveltoVietNam.cc/Upload/tour/288200834634_Viêt%20Nam%20War2.jpg)

By the time Army units left the Iron Triangle, MACV had already received reports that Việt công and NVA regiments were returning to War Zone C in preparation for a spring offensive. This time Westmoreland hoped to prevent Communist forces from escaping into Cambodia, as they had done in Attleboro. From forward field positions established during earlier operations, elements of the 25th and 1st Divisions, the 196th Infantry Brigade, and the 9th Armored Cavalry Regiment launched Junction City, moving rapidly to establish a cordon around the war zone and to begin a new sweep of the base area. As airmobile and mechanized units moved into positions on the morning of 21 February 1967 elements of the 173d Airborne Brigade made the only parachute drop of the Việt Nam War - and the first combat airborne assault since the Korean War - to establish a blocking position near the Cambodian border. Then other U.S. units entered the horseshoe-shaped area of operations through its open end.

Despite the emphasis on speed and surprise, Army units did not encounter many enemy troops at the outset. As the operation entered its second phase, however, American forces concentrated their efforts in the eastern portion of War Zone C, close to Route 13. Here several violent battles erupted, as Communist forces tried to isolate and defeat individual units and possibly also to screen the retreat of their comrades into Cambodia. On 19 March a mechanized unit of the 9th Infantry Division was attacked and nearly overrun along Route 13 near the battered village of Bàu Bàng. The combined firepower of armored cavalry, supporting artillery, and close air support finally caused the enemy to break contact. A few days later, at Fire Support Base Gold, in the vicinity of Suối Tre, an infantry and artillery battalion of

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the 25th Infantry engaged the 272d Việt công Regiment. Behind an intense, walking mortar barrage, enemy troops breached Gold's defensive perimeter and rushed into the base. Man-to-man combat ensued. A complete disaster was averted when Army artillerymen lowered their howitzers and fired Beehive artillery rounds that contained hundreds of dart-like projectiles directly into the oncoming enemy. The last major encounter with enemy troops during Junction City occurred at the end of March, when elements of two Việt công regiments, the 271st and the 70th (the latter directly subordinate to COSVN) attacked a battalion of the 1st Infantry Division in a night defensive position deep in War Zone C, near the Cambodian border. The lopsided casualties - over 600 enemy killed in contrast to 10 Americans - forcefully illustrated once again the U.S. ability to call in overwhelmingly superior fire support by artillery, armed helicopters, and tactical aircraft.

Thereafter, Junction City became a pale shadow of the multi-division effort it had been at its outset. Most Army units were withdrawn, either to return to their bases or to participate in other operations. The 196th Infantry Brigade was transferred to I Corps to help replace Marine forces sent north to meet a growing enemy threat near the DMZ. Contacts with enemy forces in this final phase were meager. Again a planned Việt công offensive had been aborted; the enemy himself escaped, though not unscathed.

Early in 1967, Washington approved Rolling Thunder targets even closer to Hà Nội. In April, four of five MiG airfields were finally attacked as part of Operation Bolo, whose purpose was to destroy the North Việt Nameese Air Force.

In the wake of Junction City, MACV's attention reverted to the still critical security conditions around Sài Gòn. The 1st Infantry Division returned to War Zone D to the northwest of Sài Gòn to search for the 271st Việt công Regiment and to disrupt the insurgents' lines of communications between War Zones C and D. Despite two major contacts, the main body of the regiment eluded its American pursuers. Army units again returned to the Iron Triangle between April and July 1967, after enemy forces were detected in their old stronghold. Supplies and documents were found in quantities even larger than those discovered in Cedar falls. Once again, however, encounters with the Communists were fleeting. The enemy's reappearance in the Iron Triangle and War Zone D, combined with rocket and mortar attacks on U.S. bases around Sài Gòn, heightened Westmoreland's concern about the security of the capital. When the 1st Infantry Division's base at Phước Vĩnh and the Biên Hòa Air Base were attacked in mid-1967, the division mounted operations into the Ong Dong jungle and the Vĩnh Lợi woods. Other operations swept the jungles and villages of Biên Hòa Province and sought once again to support pacification in Hậu Nghĩa Province.

These actions pointed up a basic problem. The large, multidivisional operations into the enemy's war zones produced some benefits for the pacification campaign; by keeping enemy main force regiments at bay, Westmoreland impeded their access to heavily populated areas and prevented them from reinforcing Việt công

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provincial and district forces. Yet when American units were shifted to the border, the local Việt công units gained a measure of relief. Westmoreland faced a strategic dilemma: he could not afford to keep substantial forces away from their bases for more than a few months at a time without jeopardizing local security. Unless he received additional forces, Westmoreland would always be torn between two operational imperatives.

Several sharp firefights occurred immediately after the 1967 Tết truce, when the enemy took advantage of the cease-fire to move back among the population. This time units of the 1st Cavalry Division forced the enemy to leave the coastal communities and seek refuge in the piedmont. As the enemy moved across the boundary into southern I Corps, the northern most of the four Corps Tactical Zones in South Việt Nam, so too did units of the airmobile division. About a month later, the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, also moved to southern I Corps. Throughout the remainder of 1967, other Army units transferred to either I Corps to reinforce the Marines or to the highlands to meet renewed enemy threats. As the strength of American units committed to the Bình Định Pacification Campaign decreased during late 1967 and early 1968, enemy activity in the province quickened as the Việt công sought to reconstitute their weakened military forces and to regain a position of influence among the local population.

In many respects, the Bình Định campaign was a microcosm of Westmoreland's overall campaign strategy. It showed clearly the intimate relation between the war against enemy main force units and the fight for pacification waged by the South Việt Nameese, and it demonstrated the effectiveness of the airmobile concept. After two years of persistent pursuit of the NVA's Yellow Star Division, the 1st Cavalry Division had reduced the combat effectiveness of each of its three regiments. By the end of 1967, the threat to Bình Định Province posed by enemy main force units had been markedly reduced. The airmobile division's operations against the 3d North Việt Nameese Division, as well as its frequent role in operations directly in support of pacification, had weakened local guerrilla forces and created an environment favorable to pacification.

The campaign in Bình Định also exposed the vulnerabilities of Westmoreland's campaign strategy. Despite repeated defeats at the hands of the Americans, the three NVA regiments still existed. They contrived to find respite and a measure of rehabilitation, building their strength anew with recruits filtering down from the North, with others found in-country, and with Việt công units consolidated into their ranks. Although much weakened, Communist forces persistently returned to areas cleared by the 1st Cavalry Division. Even more threatening to the allied cause, Sài Gòn's pacification efforts languished as South Việt Nameese forces failed in many instances to provide security to the villages and effective police action to root out local Việt công cadres. And the government, dealing with a population already skeptical, failed to grant the political, social, and economic benefits it had promised.

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Moreover, the allies could not concentrate their efforts everywhere as they had in strategic Bình Định. The expanse of the highlands compelled Army operations there to be carried out with economy of force. During 1966 and 1967, the Americans engaged in a constant search for tactical concepts and techniques to maximize their advantages of firepower and mobility and to compensate for the constraints of time, distance, difficult terrain, and an inviolable border. Here the war was fought primarily to prevent the incursion of NVA units into South Việt Nam and to erode their combat strength. In the highlands, each side pursued a strategy of military confrontation, seeking to weaken the fighting forces and will of its opponent through attrition. Each sought military victories to convince opposing leaders of the futility of continuing the contest. For the North Việt Nameese, however, confrontation in the highlands had the additional purpose of relieving allied pressure in other areas, where pacification jeopardized their hold on the rural population. Of all the factors influencing operations in the highlands, the most significant may well have been the strength and success of pacification elsewhere.

For Americans, the most difficult problem was to locate the enemy. Yet Communist strategists sometimes created threats to draw in the Americans.

Recurrent menaces to Special Forces camps reflected the enemy's seasonal cycle of operations, his desire to harass and eliminate such camps, and his hope of luring allied forces into situations where he held the military advantages. Thus Army operations in the highlands during 1966 and 1967 were characterized by wide-ranging, often futile searches, punctuated by sporadic but intense battles fought usually at the enemy's initiative.

By the summer of 1967, MACV's likelihood of receiving more combat troops, beyond those scheduled to deploy during the latter half of the year and in early 1968, had become remote. In Washington the administration turned down his request for an additional 200,000 men.

Meanwhile, the war of main force units along the borders waxed and waned in relation to seasonal weather cycles, which affected the enemy's pattern of logistical activity, his ability to infiltrate men and supplies from North Việt Nam, and his penchant for meticulous preparation of the battlefield. By the fall of 1967, enemy activity had increased again in the base areas, and sizable forces began appearing along South Việt Nam's border from the demilitarized zone to III Corps. By the year's end, American forces had returned to War Zone C to screen the Cambodian border to prevent Communist forces from re-entering South Việt Nam. Units of the 25th Infantry Division that had been conducting operations in the vicinity of Sài Gòn moved to the border. Elements of the 1st Infantry Division had resumed road-clearing operations along Route 13, but the division soon faced another major enemy effort to capture Lộc Ninh. On 29 October Việt công units assaulted the Civilian Irregular Defense (CIDG) camp and the district Command post, breaching the defense perimeter. Intense air and artillery fire prevented its complete loss.

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Within a few hours, South Việt Nameese and U.S. reinforcements reached Lộc Ninh, their arrival made possible by the enemy's failure to capture the local airstrip.

When the build-up ended, ten Army battalions were positioned within Lộc Ninh and between the town and the Cambodian border. During the next two days allied units warded off repeated enemy attacks as Communist forces desperately tried to score a victory. Tactical air support and artillery fire prevented the enemy from massing though he outnumbered allied forces by about ten to one. At end of a ten-day battle, over 800 enemy were left on the battlefield, while allied deaths numbered only 50. Some 452 close air support sorties, 8 B-52 bomber strikes, and 30,125 rounds of artillery had been directed at the enemy. Once again, Lộc Ninh had served as a lightning rod to attract U.S. forces to the border. The pattern of two wars: one in the villages, one on the border continued without decision.

To the north, along the DMZ, Army heavy artillery engaged in almost daily duels with NVA guns to the north. In Quảng Trị Province, the Marines fought a hard twelve-day battle to prevent NVA forces from dominating the hills surrounding Khe Sanh. The enemy's heightened military activity along the DMZ, which included frontal attacks across it, prompted American officials to begin construction of a barrier consisting of highly sophisticated electronic and acoustical sensors and strong point defenses manned by allied forces. Known as the McNamara Line, after Secretary of Defense McNamara, who vigorously promoted the concept, the barrier was to extend across South Việt Nam and eventually into Laos. Westmoreland was not enthusiastic about the project, for he hesitated to commit large numbers of troops to man the strong points and doubted that the barrier would prevent the enemy from breaching the DMZ. Hence the McNamara Line was never completed.

Throughout the summer of 1967, Marine forces endured some of the most intense enemy artillery barrages of the war and fought several battles with NVA units that infiltrated across the 17th parallel. Their stubborn defense, supported by massive counter-battery fire, naval gunfire, and air attacks, ended the enemy's offensive in northern I Corps, but not before Westmoreland had to divert additional Army units as reinforcements. A brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division and South Korean units were deployed to southern I Corps to replace additional Marines who had been shifted further north. The depth of the Army's commitment in I Corps was shown by Task Force Oregon's reorganization as the 23d Infantry (Americal) Division. The only Army division to be formed in South Việt Nam, its name echoed a famous division of World War II that had also been organized in the Pacific. If the enemy's aim was to draw American forces to the north, he evidently was succeeding.

While allied forces were under pressure, the border battles of 1967 also led Hà Nội to reassess its strategy. Undeviating in their long-term aim of unification, the leaders of North Việt Nam recognized that their strategy of military confrontation had failed to stop the American military build-up in the South or to reduce U.S. military pressure on the North. The enemy's regular and main force units had failed

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to inflict a salient military defeat on American forces. Although the North Việt Nameese Army maintained the tactical initiative, Westmoreland had kept its units at bay and in some areas, like Bình Định Province, diminished their influence on the contest for control of the rural population. Many Communist military leaders perceived the war to be a stalemate and thought that continuing on their present course would bring diminishing returns, especially if their local forces were drastically weakened.

On the other side, Westmoreland could rightly point to some modest progress in improving South Việt Nam's security and to punishing defeats inflicted on several NVA regiments and divisions. Yet none of his successes were sufficient to turn the tide of the war. The Communists had matched the build-up of American combat forces, the number of enemy divisions in the South increasing from one in early 1965 to nine at the start of 1968. Against 320 allied combat battalions, the North Việt Nameese and Việt công could marshal 240. Despite heavy air attacks against enemy lines of infiltration, the flow of men from the North had continued unabated, even increasing toward the end of 1967.

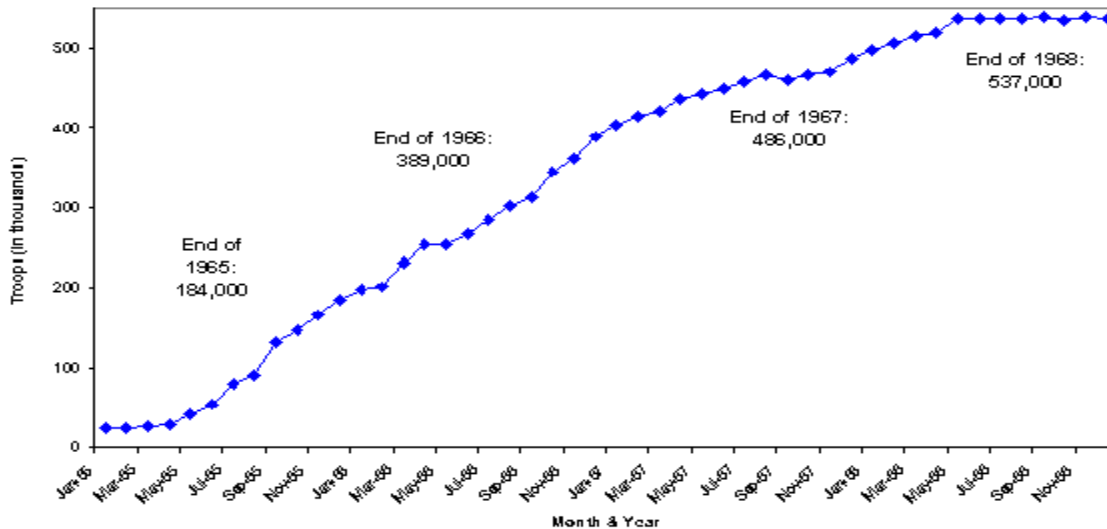
Writing to President Johnson in the spring of 1967, outgoing Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge warned that if the South Việt Nameese "dribble along and do not take advantage of the success which MACV has achieved against the main force and the Army of North Việt-Nam, we must expect that the enemy will lick his wounds, pull himself together and make another attack in '68." Westmoreland's achievements, he added, would be "judged not so much on the brilliant performance of the U.S. troops as on the success in getting ARVN, RF and PF quickly to function as a first-class ... counter-guerrilla force." Meanwhile the war appeared to be in a state of equilibrium. Only an extraordinary effort by one side or the other could bring about a decision.

1968 was the midpoint of the Việt Nam War. The American public was well informed about the ground war in South Việt Nam, but the air war in Laos, North Việt Nam and soon Cambodia was still in the background. By April 1968 President Johnson had committed 543,482 ground forces to the theater of operations.

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**The War in Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson & The Escalatory Phase
U.S. Troops Stationed in Vietnam (in 1000s)
June 1965-December 1968**



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generals, however, were not completely confident that the general offensive would succeed. Việt công forces, hastily reinforced with new recruits and part-time guerrillas, bore the brunt. Except in the Northern provinces, the North Việt Nameese Army stayed on the sidelines, poised to exploit success. While hoping to spur negotiations, Communist leaders probably had the more modest goals of reasserting Việt công influence and undermining Sài Gòn's authority so as to cast doubt on its credibility as the United States' ally. In this respect, the offensive was directed toward the U. S. and sought to weaken American confidence in the Sài Gòn government, discredit Westmoreland's claims of progress, and strengthen American antiwar sentiment. Here again, the larger purpose was to bring the U. S. to the negotiating table and hasten American disengagement from Việt Nam.

The Tết offensive began quietly in mid-January 1968 in the remote northwest corner of South Việt Nam. Elements of three NVA divisions began to mass near the Marine base at Khe Sanh. At first the ominous proportions of the build-up led the Military Assistance Command to expect a major offensive in the Northern provinces. To some observers the situation at Khe Sanh resembled Điện Biên Phủ, the isolated garrison where the Việt Minh had defeated French forces in 1954. Khe Sanh, however, was a diversion, an attempt to entice Westmoreland to defend yet another border post by withdrawing forces from the populated areas of the South.

While pressure around Khe Sanh increased, 85,000 Communist troops prepared for the Tết offensive. Since the fall of 1967, the enemy had been infiltrating arms, ammunition, and men, including entire units, into Sài Gòn and other cities and towns. Most of these meticulous preparations went undetected, although MACV received warnings of a major enemy action to take place in early 1968. The command did pull some Army units closer to Sài Gòn just before the attack. However, concern over the critical situation at Khe Sanh and preparations for the Tết holiday festivities preoccupied most Americans and South Việt Nameese. Even when Communist forces prematurely attacked Kon Tum, Quy Nhơn, Đà Nẵng, and other towns in the northern and central provinces on 29 January, Americans were unprepared for what followed.

On 31 January combat erupted throughout the entire country. Thirty-six of 44 provincial capitals and 64 of 242 district towns were attacked, as well as 5 of South Việt Nam's 6 autonomous cities, among them Huế and Sài Gòn. Once the shock and confusion wore off, most attacks were crushed in a few days. During those few days, however, the fighting was some of the most violent ever seen in the South or experienced by many South Việt Nameese Army units. Though the South Việt Nameese were the main target, American units were swept into the turmoil. All Army units in the vicinity of Sài Gòn helped to repel Việt công attacks there and at the nearby logistical base of Long Binh. In some American compounds, cooks, radiomen, and clerks took up arms in their own defense. Military police units helped root the Việt công out of Sài Gòn, and Army helicopter gunships were in the air almost continuously, assisting the allied forces.

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The most tenacious combat occurred in Huế, the ancient capital of Việt Nam, where the 1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne Divisions, together with Marines and South Việt Nameese forces, participated in the only extended urban combat of the war. Huế had a tradition of Buddhist activism, with overtones of neutralism, separatism, and anti-Americanism, and Hà Nội's strategists thought that here, if anywhere, the general offensive-general uprising might gain a political foothold. Hence they threw North Việt Nameese regulars into the battle, indicating that the stakes at Huế were higher than elsewhere in the South. House-to-house and street-to-street fighting caused enormous destruction, necessitating massive reconstruction and community assistance programs after the battle. The allies took three weeks to recapture the city. The slow, hard-won gains of 1967 vanished overnight as South Việt Nameese and Marine forces were pulled out of the countryside to reinforce the city. Yet throughout the country the South Việt Nameese forces acquitted themselves well, despite high casualties and many desertions. Stunned by the attacks, civilian support for the Thiệu government coalesced instead of weakening. Many Việt Nameese for whom the war had been an unpleasant abstraction were outraged. Capitalizing on the new feeling, South Việt Nam's leaders for the first time dared to enact general mobilization. The change from grudging toleration of the Việt công to active resistance provided an opportunity to create new local defense organizations and to attack the Communist infrastructure. Spurred by American advisers, the Việt Nameese began to revitalize pacification. Most important, the Việt công suffered a major military defeat, losing thousands of experienced combatants and seasoned political cadres, seriously weakening the insurgent base in the South.

Americans at home saw a different picture. Dramatic images of the Việt công storming the American Embassy in the heart of Sài Gòn and the North Việt Nameese Army clinging tenaciously to Huế obscured Westmoreland's assertion that the enemy had been defeated. Claims of progress in the war, already greeted with skepticism, lost more credibility in both public and official circles. The psychological jolt to President Johnson's Việt Nam policy was redoubled when the military requested an additional 206,000 troops. Most were intended to reconstitute the strategic reserve in the United States, exhausted by Westmoreland's appeals for combat units between 1965 and 1967. But the magnitude of the new request, at a time when almost a half-million U.S. troops were already in Việt Nam, cast doubts on the conduct of the war and prompted a reassessment of American policy and strategy.

Without mobilization, the United States was overcommitted. The Army could send few additional combat units to Việt Nam without making deep inroads on forces destined for NATO or South Korea. The dwindling strategic reserve left Johnson with fewer options in the spring of 1968 than in the summer of 1965. His problems were underscored by heightened international tensions when North Korea captured an American naval vessel, the USS Pueblo, a week before the Tết offensive; by Soviet armed intervention in Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968; and by chronic crises in the Mideast. In addition, Army units in the United States were needed often

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between 1965 and 1968 to enforce federal civil rights legislation and to restore public order in the wake of civil disturbances.

Again, as in 1967, Johnson refused to sanction a major troop levy, but he did give Westmoreland some modest reinforcements to bolster the Northern provinces. Again tapping the strategic reserve, the Army sent him the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, (Mechanized) - the last Army combat units to deploy to South Việt Nam. In addition, the President called to active duty a small number of Reserve units, totaling some 40,000 men, for duty in Southeast Asia and South Korea, the only use of Reserves during the Việt Nam War.

NEW MEXICO AIR NATIONAL GUARD IN VIỆT NAM

On 26 January 1968, President Johnson recalled the New Mexico Air National Guard (NMANG) to active duty due to increasing international tension and the seizing of the intelligence gathering ship, U.S.S Pueblo, by North Korea. In May 1968, the 150th Tactical Fighter Group (TFG) received its first order for movement. The 188th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS), with over 360 officers and airmen with 22 aircraft, was deployed to Tuy Hòa Air Base, Republic of Việt Nam. The U.S. Air Force airlifted all support personnel to Việt Nam on C-141s, while NMANG pilots required three days and 13 aerial refuelings to ferry their F-100s across the 11,000 miles between Albuquerque and Tuy Hòa Air Base.



F-100 Super Sabre - The "Hun"

Source: <http://www.af.mil/shared/media/ggallery/webgraphic/AFG-061108-010.jpg>

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While in Việt Nam, the NMANG lost one pilot, Capt. Michael T. Adams, and two pilots were listed as missing in action: Major Bobby Neeld and Lt. Michel S. Lane. During their twelve months in Việt Nam, the 188th TFS flew over 6000 sorties and accumulated the following decorations:

- ♦ 8 Silver Stars
- ♦ 29 Distinguished Flying Crosses
- ♦ 26 Bronze Stars
- ♦ 270 Air Medals
- ♦ 3 Purple Hearts
- ♦ The Air Force Outstanding Unit Award
- ♦ The Presidential Unit Citation
- ♦ The Việt Nameese Gallantry Cross with Palm
- ♦ 3 Việt Nameese Gallantry Crosses with Silver Stars
- ♦ Việt Nameese Air Service Medal, Honor Class
- ♦ 289 Air Force Commendation Medals
- ♦ Army Commendation Medal

NMANG personnel returned to Albuquerque during May/June 1969, the 188th TFS was officially deactivated on 4 June 1969.

BURDEN REVERTS TO THE ARVN

For Westmoreland, Johnson's decision meant that future operations would have to make the best possible use of American forces, and that the South Việt Nameese Army (ARVN) would have to shoulder a larger share of the war effort. The President also curtailed air strikes against North Việt Nam to spur negotiations. Finally, on 31 March Johnson announced his decision not to seek re-election in order to give his full attention to the goal of resolving the conflict. Hà Nội had suffered a military defeat, but had won a political and diplomatic victory by shifting American policy toward disengagement.

Energized by a growing credibility gap and increasing public skepticism about the outcome of the war the U.S. antiwar movement had begun to pick up steam. In conjunction with the 16 March 1968 Mỹ Lai "Massacre" servicemen were being seen as participants in the slaughter of innocents in Việt Nam. Some Việt Nam veterans began speaking out against America's role in Southeast Asia. Rifts were developing between the military and the vocal opponents of the war. However, the U.S. sought to minimize and prevent attacks on civilians while the North Việt Nameese made attacks on civilians a centerpiece of their strategy. For example, from 1957 to 1973, the Việt công assassinated 36,725 Việt Nameese and abducted another 58,499. The death squads focused on leaders at the village level and on anyone who improved the lives of the peasants such as medical personnel, social workers and school teachers.

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What happened at Mỹ Lai could have occurred in any Army unit in Việt Nam in the late 1960's and early 1970's. War crimes were born of a sense of frustration that also contributed to a host of morale and discipline problems, among enlisted men and officers alike. As American forces were withdrawn by a government eager to escape the war, the lack of a clear military objective contributed to a weakened sense of mission and a slackening of discipline. The short-timer syndrome, the reluctance to take risks in combat toward the end of a soldier's one-year tour, was compounded by the "last-casualty" syndrome. Knowing that all U.S. troops would soon leave Việt Nam, no soldier wanted to be the last to die. Meanwhile, in the United States harsh criticism of the war, the military, and traditional military values had become widespread. Heightened individualism, growing permissiveness, and a weakening of traditional bonds of authority pervaded American society and affected the Army's rank and file. The Army grappled with problems of drug abuse, racial tensions, weakened discipline, and lapses of leadership. While outright refusals to fight were few in number, incidents of murderous "fragging" attacks on officers and noncoms - occurred frequently enough to compel commands to institute a host of new security measures within their cantonments. All these problems were symptoms of larger social and political forces and underlined a growing disenchantment with the war among soldiers in the field.

On 31 March 1968, President Johnson ordered a bombing halt north of the 20th parallel that would persist for the next four years. He hoped once again to induce North Việt Nam's leaders to return to the peace table. Although Hà Nội agreed to begin discussions, it continued to pour 22,000 troops into South Việt Nam every month. So, the U.S. doubled its air operations south of the 20th parallel, concentrating on enemy troops and supplies crossing the DMZ.

For the Army the new policy meant a difficult time. In South Việt Nam, as in the United States, its forces were stretched thin. The Tết offensive had concentrated a large portion of the combat forces in I Corps, once a Marine preserve. A new command, the XXIV Corps, had to be activated at Đà Nẵng, and Army logistical support, previously confined to the three southern corps zones, extended to the five Northern provinces as well. While Army units reinforced Hue and the demilitarized zone, the Marines at Khe Sanh held fast. Enemy pressure on the besieged base increased daily, but the North Việt Nameese refrained from an all-out attack, still hoping to divert American forces from Hue. Recognizing that he could ill afford Khe Sanh's defense, Westmoreland decided to subject the enemy to the heaviest air and artillery bombardment of the war. His tactical gamble succeeded; the enemy withdrew, and the Communist offensive slackened. The enemy nevertheless persisted in his effort to weaken the Sài Gòn government, launching nationwide "mini-Tết" offensives in May and August. Pockets of heavy fighting occurred throughout the south, and Việt công forces again tried to infiltrate into Sài Gòn - the last gasps of the general uprising. Thereafter enemy forces generally dispersed and avoided contact with Americans. In turn, the allies withdrew from Khe Sanh itself in the summer of 1968. Its abandonment signaled the demise of the McNamara Line

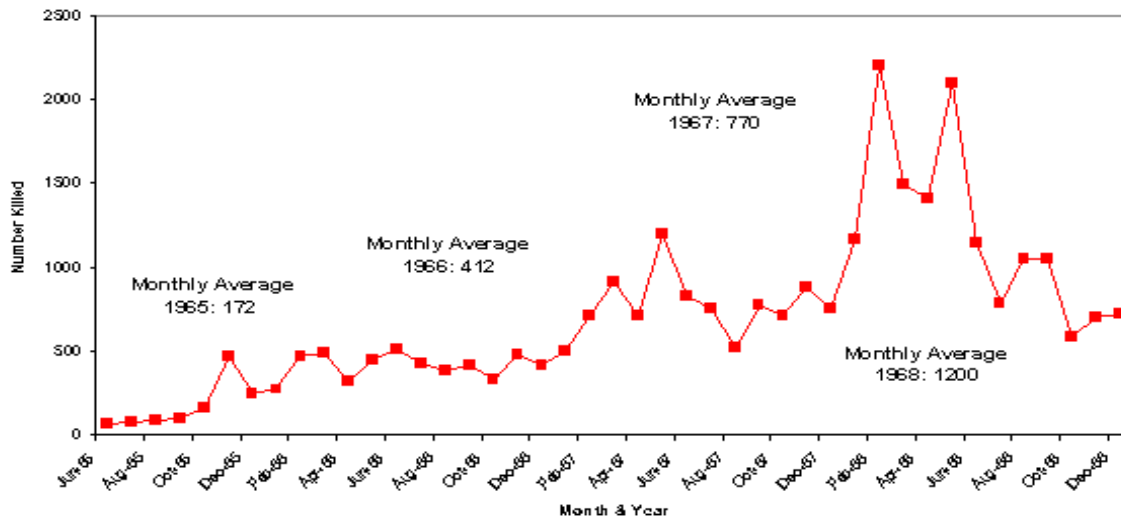
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and further postponement of MACV's hopes for large-scale American cross-border operations. For the remainder of 1968, Army units in I Corps were content to help restore security around Hue and other coastal areas, working closely with the Marines and the South Việt Nameese in support of pacification. North Việt Nameese and Việt công forces generally avoided offensive operations. Both sides prepared to enter a new phase of the war.

After several months of discussions at Paris, on 31 October 1968 President Johnson ordered a complete halt of all air, naval, and military artillery bombardment of North Việt Nam and the Rolling Thunder campaign came to an end.

The War in Vietnam & President Lyndon Johnson: U.S. Personnel Killed in Action, Monthly, June 1965-December 1968



Source: <http://faculty.smu.edu/dsimon/Change-Viet2.html>

America's entire political and military establishment was under harsh criticism on all fronts by the end of the year for being unable to produce a victory against a poor third-world country like North Việt Nam. The prevailing mood in the U.S. at the time of the November presidential election was to get out immediately and to cut our losses while we could.

NIXON'S WAR

The next president, Richard M. Nixon, advocated Việt Namization, withdrawing American troops and giving South Việt Nam greater responsibility for fighting the war. His attempt to slow the flow of North Việt Nameese soldiers and supplies into South Việt Nam by sending American forces to destroy Communist supply bases in Cambodia in 1970 in violation of Cambodian neutrality provoked antiwar protests on the nation's college campuses. Bloodshed during the Việt Nam War wasn't confined to the jungles of Southeast Asia.

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On Monday 4 May, as actress and anti-war activist Jane Fonda (a.k.a. Hà Nội Jane) spoke at the University of New Mexico (UNM), protests against the Cambodian incursion and the incident at Kent State began in earnest. Students at Kent State University in the city of Kent, Ohio, who were protesting against the American invasion of Cambodia that had been announced in a televised presidential address 5 days before were shot by members of the Ohio National Guard. Other students who had merely been walking nearby or observing the protest from a distance were also shot. The guardsmen fired 67 rounds over a period of 13 seconds, killing four students and wounding nine others, one of whom suffered permanent paralysis.

There was a significant national response to the shootings: hundreds of [universities](#), [colleges](#), and [high schools](#) closed throughout the United States due to a [student strike](#) of four million students, and the event further divided the country, at this already socially contentious time. Some protesters, like those at UNM, were met with more violence.



May 24, 1970 Việt Nam War Demonstration in Washington, D.C., for the students killed at Kent State
Source: <http://pro.corbis.com/Search/SearchResults.aspx?q=kent+state&ac=null>

That evening, as reported in the [Albuquerque Journal](#), hundreds of students took over the Student Union Building and held it until late that Friday after UNM regents obtained a court order to clear the union building. Events turned violent again when National Guardsmen, summoned by the State Police to act on the order, moved to clear the area outside the building. When they arrived, the guardsmen wore gas masks, rendering individuals unidentifiable. Bayonets were fixed to their rifles. The 70 men of the Guard unit, mostly from Socorro and Belen, formed a skirmish line and swept through the mall outside the student union in 10 minutes. At least 10 people were stabbed, many in the back and side as they tried to flee. None died. Five of the victims were newsmen

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or photographers and one of those was manager of the university's own news service. Those in the UNM Student Union ultimately surrendered to police.

In June 1970 Congress repealed the Tonkin resolution, but by then President Nixon argued that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was not necessary to continue the war. Displeasure with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution also led Congress to enact the War Powers Resolution of 1973, over Nixon's veto.

As the Americans withdrew, South Việt Nam's combat capability declined. The United States furnished its allies the heavier M48 tank to match the NVA's T54 tank and heavier artillery to counter North Việt Nameese 130-mm guns - though past experience suggested that additional arms and equipment could not compensate for poor skills and mediocre leadership. In fact, the weapons and equipment were insufficient to offset the reduction in U.S. combat strength. In mid-1969, for example, an aggregate of fifty-six allied combat battalions were present in South Việt Nam's two Northern provinces; in 1972, after the departure of most American units, only thirty battalions were in the same area. Artillery strength in the northern region declined from approximately 400 guns to 169 in the same period, and ammunition supply rates fell off as well. Similar reductions took place throughout South Việt Nam, causing decreases in mobility, firepower, intelligence, and air support. Five thousand American helicopters were replaced by about 500. American specialties: B-52 strikes, photo reconnaissance, and the use of sensors and other means of target acquisition-were drastically curtailed.

Such losses were all the more serious because operations in Cambodia and Laos had illustrated how deeply ingrained the American style of warfare had become in the South Việt Nameese Army. Nearly two decades of U.S. military involvement exacted an unexpected price. As one ARVN division commander commented, "Trained as they were through combined action with U.S. units, the [South Việt Nameese] unit commander was used to the employment of massive firepower." That habit, he added, "was hard to relinquish."

From 1968 to 1973 efforts were made to end the conflict through diplomacy. In January 1973, an agreement known as the Paris Peace Accords was reached with North Việt Nam and U.S. forces were withdrawn from Việt Nam and U.S. prisoners of war were released.

The U.S. had promised South Việt Nameese President Thiệu that it would use airpower to support his government. However, Nixon was driven from office due to the Watergate scandal in 1974 and when the North Việt Nameese began their final offensive early in 1975, the United States Congress refused to appropriate funds needed by the South Việt Nameese, who collapsed completely. Thiệu resigned, accusing the U.S. of betrayal.

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North Việt Nameese entered Sài Gòn on 30 April 1975 after the evacuation of the last U.S. diplomatic, military and civilian personnel by helicopter had been announced early the previous morning.



ANALYSIS: TACTICAL SUCCESS, STRATEGIC FAILURE

A popular misconception encouraged by media accounts of the era was that the Việt Nam War ended with the Tết Offensive of 1968. As a result, the "common knowledge" was that America had lost a guerilla war in Asia - a loss caused by failure to appreciate the nuances of counterinsurgency war. But the truth was that the war continued for seven more years, and the latter phase had almost nothing to do with counterinsurgency or guerilla war. The threat came from the North Việt Nameese regular forces.

The final North Việt Nameese blitzkrieg in April 1975 had more to do with the fall of France in 1940 than it did with guerilla war. In fact, the North Việt Nameese commander, Senior General Văn Tiến Dũng, did not even mention the role of the Việt công in his account of his "Great Spring Victory."

As former CIA director William Colby noted in his book *Lost Victory*, Sài Gòn did not fall to barefoot black-pajama-clad guerillas. It fell to a 130,000-man 18-division

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force supported by tanks and artillery. The U.S. failure did not lie in counterinsurgency theory, but in long-since-discarded theories of conventional war.

As Colby stated, the U.S., without even noticing, had won the "people's war." One reason it didn't even notice is that Washington was more concerned with "signaling" than with war fighting.

Harvard University's Stephen Peter Rosen examined the war in terms of limited war theory. His 1982 analysis found two major reasons for the failure in Việt Nam.

First was the failure to factor the American people into the strategic equation. Political scientist Robert Osgood, among the most influential of the limited-war theorists at the time advocated, "that even though the American people will be hostile, because of their traditions and ideology, to the kind of strategy he proposes, that strategy must still be adopted."

Second, was the refusal to see Việt Nam as a war. As Rosen explained, "we had adopted a limited war signaling strategy." It was conceived by such academic limited-war theorists as Osgood and Thomas Schelling, who shared "the happy belief that the study of limited war in no way depended on any actual knowledge about war." According to Osgood, military problems were not a proper part of the theory of limited war because limited war is an essentially diplomatic instrument, a tool for bargaining with the enemy. Military forces were not for fighting but for signaling.

A prime disciple of such theorists was Defense Secretary McNamara who in his 1995 book, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, revealed the degree to which he consciously sabotaged President Johnson's orders to "Win the war!" Admitting that as early as 1965 he believed the war to be militarily unwinnable, he then set out to make it so by deliberately eschewing a war fighting strategy. Indeed, General Westmoreland noted that in 1965, Secretary of Defense McNamara defined the American military objective by asking Westmoreland "how many additional American and Allied troops would be required to convince the enemy he would be unable to win." In essence, the American military objective was not to defeat or destroy the enemy. Rather, the military objective was to persuade the enemy that he could not win - a far cry from defeating the enemy in any traditional sense.

McNamara wrote that in 1967 he "proposed a political-military strategy that raised the possibility of compromise... and [adoption of] a more flexible bargaining position while actively seeking political settlement." As the limited war theorists had prescribed, the U.S. was sending signals to the enemy. Unfortunately, the signal sent was that the U.S. was not serious about waging war. But the North Việt Nameese were playing by the old rules, where the very object of war is victory. And the old rules proved decisive.

In retrospect the entire approach to the Việt Nam War would have been different if at the beginning the U.S. could have foreseen the North Việt Nameese tanks

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rumbling through the streets of Sài Gòn on 1 May 1975. The North Korean conventional attack in June 1950 - and the North Korean tanks rumbling through Seoul - left no doubt as to the nature of that war and the nature of a proper U.S. response. But the North Việt Nameese, evidently learning from the Korean War that an overt attack could precipitate a massive U.S. military response, began the war on a different key. Unlike the North Koreans who had pulled their communist cadres out of South Korea in April 1948 and opted for a conventional attack, the North Việt Nameese opened their campaign with a guerrilla attack.

Judged by the results of the war, the basic mistake was that the U.S. saw the guerilla operations as a strategy in itself. Because we saw it as strategy, we attempted to understand it in terms of "peoples wars" theories of Mao Tse-tung, and devised elaborate theories of counterinsurgency. We attempted to counter it by using such models as the British model in Malaysia. Those theories and models had some relevance for the government of South Việt Nam which ultimately had to neutralize the internal threat to its existence, but they had only secondary relevance to the U.S. Ironically, we had seen this clearly in Korea. While we could protect them from external attack, internal security was a problem only they could solve. We could aide them with political advice and economic and military assistance, but the task was primarily theirs. It was not until near the end that we rediscovered that fact.

Where did the U.S. go wrong? It can be argued that from the French withdrawal in 1954 until President Diệm's assassination in 1963, the American response was essentially correct. The task at hand was one of assisting South Việt Nam to become a viable nation state, and U.S. advisors contributed to that end. In December 1963 the nature of that war began to change. The North Việt Nameese made a decision to intervene directly both with military assistance and guerilla cadres. In the late summer of 1964 the North Việt Nameese again escalated the war by sending regular North Việt Nameese Army forces south. Although it was not so dramatic, nor so obvious, as the North Korean invasion of South Korea, the North Việt Nameese had launched a strategic offensive to conquer South Việt Nam. As in Korea, the initial U.S. response was defensive, relying primarily on South Việt Nameese ground forces and limited U.S. air support. By mid-1965 it had become clear that this was not enough. U.S. combat troops were needed to stabilize the situation. In November 1965 the 32nd, 33rd and 66th regiments of the North Việt Nameese Army clashed head on with the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division in the Ia Trang Valley in central Việt Nam. After ten days of heavy fighting, the North Việt Nameese were in retreat.

Then was the time for the United States to take the offensive. Although, in theory, the best route to victory would have been a strategic offensive against North Việt Nam, such action was not in line with U.S. strategic policy which called for the *containment* rather than the destruction of communist power. This policy was based at least in part of fears of sparking nuclear war and fears of Chinese intervention.

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As Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson expanded the American commitment in Việt Nam, their deputies regularly insisted that the insurgency had Chinese support and backing. "Peiping," as Secretary of State Dean Rusk said in blatantly demeaning the Chinese, was to blame. If the U.S. government had had any historians with the courage to speak truth to power, they would have pointed to a millennium of historical enmity between the Chinese and the Việt Nameese. As if to prove the point, the Chinese launched war against the victorious Việt Nameese in 1975, only to suffer an embarrassing defeat.

While a strategic offensive against North Việt Nam may not have been politically feasible, the U.S. could have taken the tactical offensive to isolate the battlefield. But, instead of orienting on North Việt Nam, the source of the war, the U.S. turned its attention to the symptom - the guerilla war in the south. The Army's new "strategy" of counterinsurgency blinded it to the fact that the guerilla war was tactical and not strategic. It was a kind of economy of force operation on the part of the North Việt Nam to buy time and to wear down superior U.S. military forces. As Norman Hannah, a career State Department Foreign Service Officer with long experience in Southeast Asia wrote in 1975, "In South Việt Nam we responded mainly to Hà Nội's simulated insurgency rather than to its real, but controlled aggression, as a bull charges the toreador's cape, not the toreador."

We thought we were pursuing a new strategy in pursuit of a negative aim - a strategy familiar to military theorist Carl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz in the early nineteenth century. The negative aim, he said, is the "the natural formula for outlasting the enemy, for wearing him down." Clausewitz also considered the relationship between the negative aim and the strategic defensive. "The aim of the defense must embody the idea of waiting," he said. "The idea implies...that the situation...may improve... gaining time is the only way [the defender] can achieve his aim." Basic to the success of a strategic defensive in pursuit of the negative aim, therefore, is the assumption that time is on your side. But the longer the war progressed the more obvious it became that time was not on the side of the U.S. It was American rather than North Việt Nameese will that was being eroded.

How could have the U.S. done so well in tactics but failed so miserably in strategy? The answer: a failure in strategic military doctrine manifest itself on the battlefield because it did not focus on the political aim to be achieved, i.e., containment of North Việt Nameese expansion. The so called U.S. strategy was never a strategy at all. At best it could be called a collection of grand tactics.

As a tactic it was extremely effective. None of the people's wars of the sixties did very well, including the one in Việt Nam. Võ Nguyên Giáp himself admitted losing 600,000 men in fighting between 1965 and 1968. Moreover, by about 1970 at least 80 percent of the day-to-day combat in South Việt Nam was being carried on by regular People's Army of Việt Nam troops. Genuine black-pajama southern guerillas had been decimated and amounted to no more than 20 percent of the communist fighting force.

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As far as logistics and tactics were concerned the U.S. succeeded in everything it set out to do. At the height of the war the Army was able to move almost a million soldiers a year in and out of Việt Nam, feed them, clothe them, house them, supply them with arms and ammunition and generally sustain them better than any Army had ever been sustained in the field. To project an army of that size half way around the world was a logistics and management task of enormous magnitude, and the U.S. had been more than equal to the task. On the battlefield itself, the Army was unbeatable. In engagement after engagement the forces of the Việt công and of the North Việt Nameese Army were thrown back with terrible losses. Yet, in the end, it was North Việt Nam, not the United States that emerged victorious.

Tactical success is not necessarily strategic success, and tactical failure is not necessarily strategic failure. Clausewitz had written 150 years earlier that military victory is only an end when it leads directly to peace or the political objective of war.

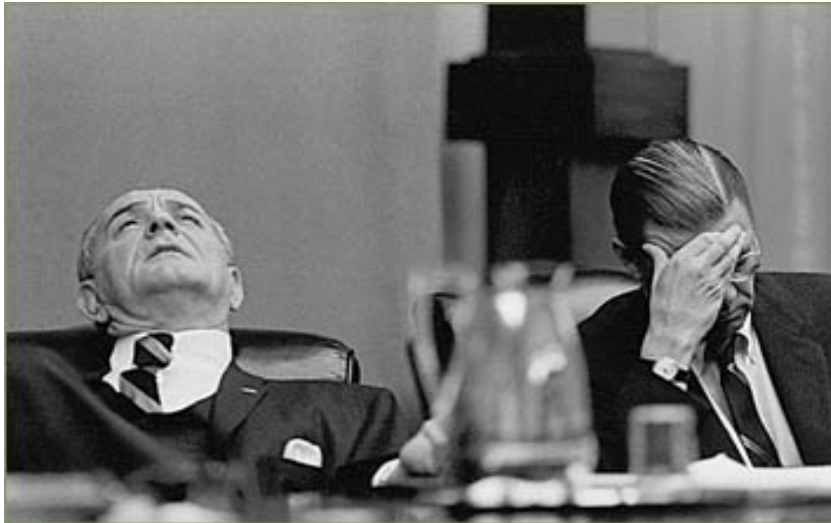
In strategic terms, people's war was a success. It caused the U.S. to deploy against a secondary force and exhaust itself in the effort. It also caused the Army of South Việt Nam to deploy in such a manner that it could not be massed to meet a conventional North Việt Nameese cross-border attack.

Questions lingered about the true nature of the war. Clausewitz warned about the "vividness of transient impressions," and most American military experience was during 1965-1970 when the U.S. was supposedly pursuing "counterinsurgency." Few experienced the North Việt Nameese conventional attacks in 1972 and 1975. Much of the writing on the war also missed its true nature. Analysis after analysis condemned the U.S. for its overreliance on conventional methods. Yet those conventional tactics were militarily successful in destroying guerilla forces. They were so successful that, the North Việt Nameese imitated those same tactics to suppress the insurgent movement in Cambodia, which erupted in 1977. From bitter experience they knew that such tactics worked. The reason for the confusion was that the announced American strategy was counterinsurgency. But, since insurgency itself was a tactical screen masking North Việt Nam's real objective (the conquest of South Việt Nam) U.S. counterinsurgency operations could only be tactical, no matter what they were called.

The failure of American policy makers to judge the true nature of the Việt Nam War had a profound effect. It resulted in confusion throughout the national security establishment over tactics, grand tactics and strategy. The President, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and field commanders all had different views.

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LBJ and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara - photo: NARA
Source: <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/prestapes/d1.html>

Consequently, Defense Secretary McNamara was free to dither with his 'off-again, on-again' limited-war signaling strategy while President Johnson who, because of his mistrust of the military, occupied himself with approving not only which specific targets would be bombed on a given day, but also with the scope of the total air war.

In the leadership vacuum that ensued, it was not until 16 April 1972, in an effort to help blunt the ongoing North Việt Nameese Nguyễn Huệ Offensive, that the United States resumed the bombing of Hà Nội and Hải Phòng after a four-year lull that began during President Johnson's last year in office, 1968. The North Việt Nameese had launched a massive invasion designed to strike the knockout blow, more commonly known to Americans as the "Easter Offensive," that would win the war for the communists. The attacking force of North Việt Nameese included 14 infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments, with more than 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles. The main North Việt Nameese objectives, in addition to Quảng Trị in the north, were Kon Tum in the Central Highlands, and An Lộc farther to the south. The fighting, which continued into the fall, was some of the most desperate of the war as the South Việt Nameese fought for their very survival. They prevailed against the invaders with the help of U.S. advisors and massive American airpower.

In the end, it was President Nixon's uncompromising 18 December 1972 Linebacker II air offensive over the Hà Nội and Hải Phòng areas along with mining Hải Phòng port that finally persuaded the North Việt Nameese to at least temporarily accept a political solution by signing the Paris Peace Accords.

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By August 1973, B-52s Had Flown 126,615 Combat Sorties with 17 Aircraft Lost to Enemy Action
Source: <http://www.war-stories.com/aspprotect/b52-poss-arflight-guam-to-svn-1965-2.asp>

CONSEQUENCES

The U.S. paid a high price for its long involvement in South Việt Nam because of the failure of American policy makers to judge the true nature of the Việt Nam war, which was compounded by a blind commitment to an academically inspired political-military pseudo-strategy intended to "raise the possibility of compromise:" American military deaths exceeded 58,000, and of these about two thirds were soldiers. The majority of the dead were low-ranking enlisted men (E-2 and E-3), young men twenty-three years old or younger, of whom approximately 13 percent were black. Most deaths were caused by small-arms fire and gunshot, but a significant portion, almost 30 percent, stemmed from mines, booby traps, and grenades. Artillery, rockets, and bombs accounted for only a small portion of the total fatalities. More than a decade after the end of the war, 1,761 American soldiers were listed as missing in action.

Three hundred ninety-seven New Mexicans either died or were counted among the missing.

If not for the unprecedented medical care that the Army provided in South Việt Nam, the death toll could have been higher yet. Nearly 300,000 Americans were

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wounded, of whom half required hospitalization. But some who served in South Việt Nam suffered more insidious damage from the adverse psychological effects of combat or the long-term effects of exposure to chemical agents.

The war-ravaged Việt Nameese, north and south, incurred the greatest losses. South Việt Nameese military deaths exceeded 200,000. War-related civilian deaths in the South approached a half-million, while the injured and maimed numbered many more. Accurate estimates of enemy casualties run afoul of the difficulty in distinguishing between civilians and combatants, imprecise body counts, and the difficulty of verifying casualties in areas controlled by the enemy. Nevertheless, nearly a million Việt công and North Việt Nameese soldiers are believed to have perished in combat through the spring of 1975.

People connected to the defeated South Việt Nam regime were sent to concentration camps for "reeducation," often for years at a time or to so-called "new economic zones" to develop the undeveloped land. Persecution and poverty prompted an additional 2 million people to flee Việt Nam as "boat people" over the 20 years following reunification. The problem was so severe that during the 1980s and 1990s the UN established refugee camps in neighboring countries to process them. Many of these refugees resettled in the U.S., forming Việt Nameese-American emigrant communities - such as those that chose to live in the neighborhood that hosts the New Mexico Veterans Memorial, which is adjacent to Kirtland Air Force Base in southeast Albuquerque, New Mexico.

And in an act of genocide indigenous, highland Montagnard tribes of Việt Nam were punished for their long term opposition to Hà Nội and for their cooperation with the U.S. during the war. Between 1975 and 1978 nearly all the prominent highland tribal leaders were imprisoned or executed; and fertile tribal lands were confiscated for coffee plantations.

NEW MEXICANS LOST IN THE VIỆT NAM WAR

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