



**STRATEGY  
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**THE ROLE OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF  
IN THE UNITED STATES INVOLVEMENT  
IN THE VIETNAM CONFLICT**

**BY**

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**The Role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the United  
States Involvement in the Vietnam Conflict**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Reasons for the United States' entrance into the Vietnam War are many and varied. The U.S. feared a spread of Communism throughout the world. The Bay of Pigs invasion was a military embarrassment. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations lacked a closeness with the military. Secretary of Defense McNamara chose to run the defense department as a business. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) constantly bickered and displayed service parochialism that blocked consensus in advice to the President and Secretary of Defense. However, the JCS had a duty to properly advise the National Command Authorities (NCA) on how to best support the national interests and how to best use the military arm of national power. For reasons cited here and personalities of senior officials, military and civilian, both failed in their duties. Had the JCS and the NCA focused on national interests, the national security strategy and the national military strategy before 1965, the Vietnam War may not have been one of the worst periods in American history.



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## PART I -- A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### EXTENT OF RESEARCH

I began my research on this project by studying Ho Chi Minh and the people of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was quite aloof, however, several French diplomats, notably Jean Lacouture and Jean Sainteny, recorded the life of Ho in a personal memoir and a biography. Both were very insightful and helped to understand Vietnam's struggle for freedom and the oppression it witnessed at the hands of the French. It is important not to condemn the Vietnamese because they are a Communist nation. Their struggle for independence in many instances parallels that of the United States struggling for independence from Great Britain.

I made no attempt to examine the method of fighting the war. Instead, I critically examined the history leading to the U.S. entrance into the war, especially the President, Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Of particular concern were the personalities of these positions, the domestic situation in the United States and several fateful events that contributed to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Research into these areas included an examination of the duties of the JCS at that time, several books written on the Vietnam War, both from the political and military standpoint.

Two books in particular addressed the role of the JCS and the Secretary of Defense and were extremely helpful in developing a true picture of events that occurred in the early 1960s. Those

books were The Joint Chiefs of Staff: The First Twenty-Five Years by Lawrence J. Korb and Dereliction of Duty by H. R. McMaster. Two other books, On Strategy by Harry G. Summers, Jr. and The Twenty-Five Year War by General Bruce Palmer, Jr., provided background and perspective from a student of Clausewitz and war fighter. In recent years, the release of documents recording events in and around the Pentagon helped paint an accurate accounting of the events before U.S. entry into the Vietnam War.

#### THE ROLE OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

This paper will focus on the advice the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) provides through the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) to the Secretary of Defense and the President. It is this function that I will examine to determine if during the years leading to and including the years of the Vietnam Conflict, the JCS acted in accordance with their charter.

The Vietnam Conflict received, and continues to receive, comments critical to the roles of the President, the Secretary of Defense and the JCS. I will not attempt to place the blame on any person or office or solve the questionable entrance into the conflict. I will, however, examine how the JCS performed in their advisory role to the Secretary of Defense and the President and the influences that played a major role in those events.

To understand the decisions of the JCS leading up to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, one must have an appreciation of the

thoughts of the administration and the American people. One must also understand the people of Vietnam since they were going to become our enemy. Other political and domestic events occurred in the 1950s and 1960s that played a major role in the actions of the JCS. Personalities also played a major role in those events. I will cite pertinent instances that influenced the decision makers to better understand why the United States became involved with such a seemingly small, insignificant country and what our national interests were.

#### U.S. CONCERNS AFTER WORLD WAR II

The nuclear age, using weapons of mass destruction, begun at the end of World War II with the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The Warsaw Pact nations were also developing similar devices in the Cold War years. These developments caused a dooms day defense centered on nuclear weapons and defense systems against such weapons. Everyone seemingly felt that the next war would end in nuclear holocaust. The chiefs of the Air Force and the Navy echoed this fear in their attempt to procure strategic weapons of mass destruction. The Army and the Marines, more conventional in their war design, found themselves in a struggle for procurement dollars since strategic weapons were so costly. This situation began, or continued, service rivalries that caused a rift in the JCS. This rift would become more profound when Secretary of Defense McNamara introduced his military spending

reduction program, the planning-programming-budgeting system (PPBS) in 1961.

To return to the years after World War II, in May, 1950, one month prior to the Korean War, Secretary of State Dean Acheson decided to assist the French forces in Indochina as a means of encouraging French support in the European defense.<sup>1</sup> This was the beginning of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. The Korean War would put Vietnam on the back burner. However, on March 3, 1952, the JCS sent a letter to Secretary of Defense Marshall stating their position that a Communist victory in Southeast Asia would be a direct loss for the Western world. At that time they did not recommend military involvement in that region.<sup>2</sup>

#### KOREA, A LIMITED WAR FAILURE

After the Korean War, where America failed to achieve victory in a limited war, the military was hesitant to jump back into another conflict without a victory to be had. The threat in Vietnam was greater than appeared on the surface. One of the main reasons for not achieving victory in Korea was the entrance of Communist China. The American people were ever fearful that Communism would take over the world if not kept in check. However, were they willing to enter into a conflict in Southeast Asia to possibly prevent the spread of Communism? A simple study of the geographical region showed that Russia, China, North Korea and North Vietnam had all converted to Communist governments.

Would the government of South Vietnam be the domino that would further promote the spread of Communism? This possibility weighed heavy on the decisions of the presidency to involve the United States in the region to defend Democracy.

Prior to the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the U.S. contemplated sending American forces to aid the French based on Secretary of State Dulles' and CJCS Admiral Radford's recommendation. President Eisenhower determined, however, that it was too late to help the failing French effort. Fellow JCS members, especially Army Chief of Staff Ridgway, argued that we had no military objectives in Vietnam and deployment of forces would further drain our limited forces. The JCS wanted to avoid another limited war with the Korean War fresh on their minds. Therefore, they did not recommend commitment of U.S. forces into the region. If forced to do so, the JCS recommended that we do it with atomic weapons.<sup>3</sup>

At the Geneva Accords in July 1954, the Eisenhower administration pledged to support South Vietnam's President Diem with economic and military aid. The numbers were very few to accomplish such a task, and the JCS argued that the Diem government needed to be more stable for the advisors to succeed in their mission.<sup>4</sup> Not until Kennedy became President did the JCS again argue for an increase in the military advisors.

## THE KENNEDY YEARS

New service chiefs in 1961 argued that the "Domino Theory" might prove correct if South Vietnam fell to Communism. This JCS was eager to show a stand against Communism on the heels of the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation in Cuba in April of that year. Although a CIA operation, the military was held partially to blame for failing to recommend against such a plan. This blame came from the newly appointed "Military Representative to the President" Maxwell Taylor, who charged the JCS for not being proactive enough to discourage the invasion.<sup>5</sup> To demonstrate their stand against Communism, the JCS felt that opening a logistical base in Vietnam would provide a platform from which to launch contingency operations, should they be required.

President Kennedy requested more troops and a bilateral treaty between the U.S. and South Vietnam to help clean up the Viet Cong in the South. Maxwell Taylor advised President Kennedy to send five to eight thousand logisticians and some combat forces to protect the logistic base. Secretary of Defense McNamara and the JCS concurred and further advised the President to establish a clear objective in South Vietnam to prevent it from falling to Communism. President Kennedy agreed on November 22, 1961 to send 16,000 advisors and logisticians, but no combat forces would accompany them.<sup>6</sup>

By 1962, the JCS felt that more assistance to South Vietnam was needed. President Kennedy sent advisors to assess the

situation. They reported back that by 1965 everything should be under control. Unfortunately, the CJCS, General Wheeler instructed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) chief, General Harkins to be optimistic in his portrayal of the success of the advisors.<sup>7</sup> To cover himself, he reported that the advisors were in fact successful. What he failed to report was the deterioration of the government under Diem.

Buddhist demonstrations in the South, in protest to Diem's declarations, began to further erode the government. The U.S. advised Diem to meet some of their demands as a humanitarian gesture. At the same time, the South Vietnamese military was conspiring to overthrow Diem and requested U.S. assistance to do so. Although the U.S. did not assist directly, Diem had to be removed from power. Diem was overthrown and assassinated November 1, 1963, just three weeks before President Kennedy would also be assassinated.

With South Vietnam in upheaval, Ambassador Lodge decided to travel to Washington to brief the President on the situation. As fate would have it, President Kennedy was assassinated before plans for future involvement in Vietnam could be discussed. The new President, Lyndon Johnson, would have to decide the extent of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

## THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE

A brief look at the Vietnamese people and their political strife at the hands of French colonialists is necessary to understand why the United States could never win in Vietnam. The French had interests in Vietnam as early as the 17th century to convert its people to Catholicism. Vietnam continued under French rule until the defeat of the French Army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The Geneva Accords following Dien Bien Phu temporarily divided the country into North and South Vietnam and called for general elections in 1956 to decide the future of Vietnam. Those elections never occurred.

The Vietnamese worked for the French, with favoritism given to those who converted to Catholicism. Very little resistance existed against French rule because the Vietnamese began to believe in the French white supremacy. Ho Chi Minh, a working class Vietminh, fought for the freedom of his people from French rule as early as 1930. Ho had a successful following from the oppressed peasants because he was one of them and retained eternal Vietnamese values: respect for old people, disdain for money and affection for children.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, Ho was a chief critic of colonialism and in the 1950s was responsible for bringing together peasants both politically and militarily to revolt against Western dominance. Communism provided him the avenue to freedom, after Socialism failed, as demonstrated both in the 1917 Russian

Revolution and in China's bid for Communist rule. Many factions existed in Vietnam, but none advocated national unity as did Ho.

In 1941, Ho, along with General Giap, formed the Vietminh faction based on patriotism to the nation as a whole rather than independent factions.<sup>9</sup> His following was united for freedom and formed the remarkable trinity described by Clausewitz as the combination of government, the army and the people. Their goal was to achieve the unification of a free Vietnam, no matter how long it took. The perfection of guerrilla warfare was so successful because his people had a desire to win their freedom and would sacrifice all to achieve it.

Guerrilla warfare was chosen because it provided a steady and cheap means to reach Vietnam's desired end state. What the people lacked in weapons and equipment, they made up for in determination and perseverance. Never did the Vietnamese doubt that the French and later the Americans would abandon their attempts to rule the Vietnamese people. It is truly unfortunate that the leaders of the United States blindly underestimated this enemy. Unlike the United States, the Vietnamese had a vision that was clear and unwavering, to achieve the end state of a free nation. Had the United States examined the Vietnamese people more closely, it may have seen similarities of our own oppressed country in 1775.

## PART II -- ENTRANCE INTO THE WAR

### U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM, 1960-1964

With the assassinations of both Presidents from Vietnam and the United States involvement in Vietnam was in question. The JCS at that time recommended sending ground forces to the South, bombing the North and direct action against North Vietnam as necessary. President Johnson, not wanting to be quickly identified as a war monger, chose instead covert actions prescribed by JCS Operation Plan 34A. This plan called for sabotage against the North, U-2 spy plane missions, kidnapping citizens to gain intelligence and naval bombardment of North Vietnam installations.<sup>10</sup>

This all began in February 1964 at the direction of the JCS. Secretary of Defense McNamara initially made the proposals, but the JCS warned that these actions would have little effect on the Viet Cong in the South. By March 1964, conditions in the South had only gotten worse as the Viet Cong numbers continued to increase. President Johnson, in reaction to the news, directed the JCS to aggressively proceed with the plan for airstrikes into North Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

In June 1964, the JCS met at Pacific Headquarters in Hawaii to assess the situation. The majority, not a consensus, were against further escalation. However, General Taylor, CJCS, did not want to sit by when the military could influence the

situation. Secretary McNamara briefed the President that no immediate action was necessary. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 involving alleged North Vietnamese gun boat attacks on U.S. destroyers, gave the administration carte blanche for military action as a reprisal against the North. This approval for action was granted by Congressional vote in the way of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

#### THE ROLE OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

The JCS was hesitant to get involved in Vietnam and only recommended escalation in the years after entry into the war. Never was there a clear objective of the outcome of the war. The JCS listened to the ground commander, General Westmoreland, more than they did their own rational thoughts, thus allowing an escalation in some hope of achieving a victory. For the U.S. military, second place was clearly no option, especially on the heels of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Korean War. To achieve that victory, the American people would have to support the decision to win the war in Vietnam.

The role of the JCS was to provide the military advice before, during and after conflict to ensure a civil-military balance in the orchestration of war and peace. They also designed and executed the nation's wars. President Johnson and Secretary McNamara chose to execute that role themselves and leave the JCS out of the recommendation/decision process. Not

until the JCS threatened resignation did the President take action to bring into balance those civil-military relationships.<sup>12</sup>

A failure of trust threatening this delicate civil-military balance occurred when military officials, against administration directives, introduced combat troops into South Vietnam to protect U.S. logisticians. This could have been the spark that lit the fire of mistrust of the military by Johnson and McNamara. From that point the JCS sought escalation to achieve victory.

This escalation was a departure from the earlier (1954) recommendation of noninvolvement in Southeast Asia by then CJCS General Ridgway. The JCS thought involvement in 1954 would cause a further drain on scarce military resources remaining from post-Korean War down sizing. With no clearly defined military objective in 1964, the JCS still recommended escalation of U.S. involvement in the war.<sup>13</sup> I feel this is when the JCS failed to perform their function as military advisors to the Secretary of Defense and the President, and perhaps the Nation.

The JCS had an option of recommending no Americanization of the war in Vietnam. All subsequent debates and writings condemning U.S. involvement may then have taken place in 1964-65 rather than 10 years later. The JCS was duty bound to recommend no involvement into Vietnam with the flawed national military strategy of "gradual pressure." This is obviously hind sight, but the JCS knew this strategy would not result in victory for the

United States. The thought of the world turning to Communism if Vietnam fell was a powerful influence on military and administration officials and definitely in the National Interest. The perceived thought of China and Russia entering the war on the side of North Vietnam drove the U.S. operational strategy to pursue a limited war.<sup>14</sup> This perception never gave the military a chance for victory, if one was to be had.

However, an inappropriate national security strategy from which to derive a military strategy prolonged the war to a long and inconclusive ending. The U.S. may have had a national security policy of preventing the spread of Communism, but no complementary military strategy, other than strategic nuclear, followed to bring an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The JCS provides advice to the National Command Authorities (NCA) and resources the combatant commanders to wage war. Elected officials, especially the NCA and Congress, are ultimately responsible for the decision to use the military. In the case of the Vietnam War, the NCA chose not to take the advice of the JCS for reasons to be discussed later.

#### POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The New Frontiersmen, President Kennedy's chief defense advisors, came to the Department of Defense with impressive business and educational credentials. All were revered by the President because they were similar in age and backgrounds.

These New Frontiersmen, Secretary McNamara and the "Whiz Kids" found the JCS to be slow to react and when reacting, doing so inappropriately to the situation.<sup>15</sup>

The "Whiz Kids" had little confidence in the military leaders and the JCS as managers of defense matters. Their military experience, other than Secretary McNamara's, was limited to defense study organizations or think tanks. All were eager to please their analytical, autocratic Secretary of Defense and the President. They had no use for recommendations of the JCS based on their (the JCS's) experiences when business models and analytical approaches could solve any problem.

The JCS could have presented a united effort for Secretary McNamara and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. However, too much service parochialism abounded, and they presented themselves instead as children fighting over cookies. The infighting resulted from the introduction of Secretary McNamara's Programming, Planning and Budget System (PPBS) that placed constraints on defense spending. The JCS became separated and parochial, defending each service's expenditures on new systems, which rendered unsound, service biased advice in defense matters.

President Kennedy began to replace the JCS to one of his liking. The Eisenhower JCS lacked the youth of his other defense advisors. His first move was to eliminate the CJCS, General Lemnitzer by moving him to Europe and bringing General Maxwell Taylor out of retirement as the new chairman. This eliminated

the "Military Advisor to the President" position that General Taylor held.<sup>16</sup>

The appointment of Taylor as chairman and his close relationship with Secretary McNamara, created a dead end for advice from the service chiefs. Taylor and McNamara sought to reduce the service rivalries and inefficiencies by centralizing the power of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). Evolving out of that centralization was Kennedy's military strategy of "flexible response" rather than the former JCS position of preparation for full military response. Several recent incidents including the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Laotian settlement and the Cold War standoff persuaded Kennedy to make U.S. military might credible again. Vietnam was the place of Kennedy's choice to demonstrate that might.<sup>17</sup>

The JCS recommendation for a solution to the Cuban Missile Crisis was to bomb the missile sites followed by an invasion of Cuba. This advice again met with ill favor in the eyes of the NCA. Unbeknownst to the JCS, negotiations were being made with Soviet officials to have U.S. missiles in Turkey removed in exchange for the removal of Cuban missiles. The objective was to regain that credibility for military might, but dialog between the JCS and the NCA was not open. President Kennedy's desire was simply to have the missiles removed, not invade Cuba. This further contributed to the lack of credibility between the NCA and the JCS. In November, 1962, President Kennedy voiced his

feelings of military advisors by stating that "the first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they were military men their opinion[s] on military matters were worth a damn."<sup>18</sup>

By the time Johnson assumed the position of the Presidency, the relationship between the administration and the JCS had diminished to one of mistrust. The government in South Vietnam was in chaos. The Diem government had just been ousted in a bloody coup, and North Vietnam, through the Viet Cong in the South, chose to exploit the state of chaos in the South. What would be the new administration's position on U.S. involvement in Vietnam? McNamara and Taylor were principle defense advisors to the President. The JCS, however, was not in the inner circle to provide advice. The decision of what to do about Vietnam would be made without militarily experienced advisors. That decision would result from a political point of view rather than a military one.

The issue of flexible response, supported by McNamara and Taylor, led them to believe that a limited war in Vietnam could influence the government to fight Communist insurgency. Air Force Chief, General Curtis LeMay, felt that massive bombing was the appropriate response. However, LeMay was already thought of as a somewhat reckless advisor to the Kennedy administration. The Marine Corps Commandant, General David Shoup, felt that the U.S. should "not under any circumstances, get involved in land

warfare in Southeast Asia." The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David McDonald, was preoccupied more with global naval dominance than Southeast Asia and therefore remained relatively silent on the issue. Finally, the Army Chief, General Wheeler, was a smooth, politically sensitive advisor who supported both Taylor and McNamara, knowing the personal consequences of dissidence.<sup>19</sup>

The various opinions on the JCS of what to do in Vietnam caused a diluting of the military advice from the JCS to the NCA. Had the JCS achieved consensus early and so advised President Johnson, U.S. history may have taken a dramatic turn. Although it is only speculation, the point to be taken here is that the NCA would be more prone to support the advice of the JCS if they had spoken with one voice. However, at this time the opinion of the JCS was held in low esteem. At a meeting of advisors shortly after taking office, President Johnson remarked that he was "not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."<sup>20</sup>

The U.S. formal declaration to support South Vietnam came in November 1963 as National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273. The NSAM called for U.S. support to South Vietnam against Communism, submission of covert plans into North Vietnam and a unity of effort, silencing discontent among departments and offices of the government. President Johnson disliked

discontent, and little doubt was left concerning his stand on U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Some contradiction in policy arises here. On one hand, Johnson supports U.S. involvement in Vietnam. On the other hand, McNamara and Johnson support vast defense spending reductions, the savings from which will be used to finance domestic programs, especially Johnson's "Great Society" program of domestic improvement.

The JCS advice for substantial military involvement or other actions in the past was seen by McNamara, as well as Kennedy and Johnson, as a means of bolstering defense spending. The reason McNamara was hired by Kennedy in the first place was to oppose such spending and develop a budget process (PPBS) to control it. When General Harkins, MACV Chief, gave his assessment of support needed in Vietnam, McNamara saw it as a request for more defense spending rather than support for the policy to stop the spread of Communism. McNamara, against MACV's protest, decided to plot weekly progress in Vietnam using quantitative methodology to measure progress.<sup>21</sup> McNamara's analytical approach disregarded the will in the North and lack thereof in the South.

McNamara could find little use for military advice. He learned well during the Cuban Missile Crisis that diplomacy could solve a crisis. His diplomacy differed from the advice he received from the JCS to bomb and invade Cuba. Another dislike of the military held by McNamara was their inability to make

timely decisions. Issues would go from the NCA level to an action officer who worked the issue and presented recommendations to a council of colonels. From there, the issue would slowly make its way back to the NCA through the JCS. By that time the issue had been decided upon. McNamara's Harvard Business School type of analysis was much quicker and to his liking.<sup>22</sup>

McNamara therefore had many decisions made well before the JCS came to him with their recommendations. The JCS position was then rarely a united one. Each service had to protect its turf lest they lose precious defense dollars to another service. These opinions, and truths, of the military and the JCS prevented joint decision making at the JCS/NCA level.

The greatest dissension occurred after McNamara and Taylor visited Vietnam in March 1964 to evaluate how the Khanh (Diem's replacement) government was progressing.<sup>23</sup> What they found was that the two recent coups had taken their toll on the fragile unity in the South. In addition, the North was using this weakness to exploit its recruiting of Viet Cong and actions against the Khanh government.

Secretary McNamara drafted a memorandum for the President assessing the Khanh government and provided recommendations for military action. The JCS received the memorandum and discussed the "graduated pressure" to force the North to negotiate. This approach resulted from the successful pressure placed on Russia to remove missiles from Cuba. The JCS did not feel that pressure

applied to the North would result in any success in the South. They gave their response through the CJCS to Secretary McNamara. During a meeting with the NSC and the President in March 1964, McNamara told Johnson that the JCS supported the graduated pressure approach. McNamara also blocked a memorandum from Chairman Taylor to the President containing the JCS' recommendations concerning military action.<sup>24</sup> In misleading the President, McNamara had three results in mind.

First, McNamara had been touted by Johnson as his number one advisor, and McNamara certainly didn't want to disappoint the President. Second, Johnson was in an election year and was determined to be elected to the Presidency in his own right. The military response suggested by the JCS conflicted with Johnson's plans for the "Great Society". And third, the President was emphatic about his administration speaking as one with no allowance for dissidence. These reasons led McNamara to mask the military advice given by the JCS to the President. The only military official at the meeting was the CJCS, General Taylor.

The JCS did have an opportunity to respond as grumbling over what was briefed to the President reached the service chiefs. However, McNamara made it quite clear that the administration wanted no dissidence among the offices and agencies of the administration. When pressed by the CJCS for specific plans to take to McNamara, the service chiefs backed down.

The events of March 1964 demonstrated the weakness of the JCS to properly advise the NCA. Sometimes the recommendations of the military to the NCA cross politically undesired lines. The JCS charter is to advise the NCA on that action that best supports the national interests of the United States. Further, the Secretary of Defense must consider such advice when he, along with the National Security Council and the President, makes the decision to employ military power.

Deceptions of our involvement in Vietnam to the American people and Congress accompanied McNamara's graduated response plan. This plan provided an excellent mask to remain indecisive in Vietnam and keep our involvement quiet until after the elections. General Taylor even participated in misrepresenting the opinions of the service chiefs by backing McNamara's plan. Although the JCS had advised to either allow South Vietnam to go it alone or escalate for a victory, General Taylor did not relay this message to the President or Congressional leaders when given the chance. The position of the JCS was that graduated pressure placed the United States in a no win position where nothing was gained and lives continued to be lost.

As pressure grew on the administration to make a decision one way (involved) or another (not involved), President Johnson sought political and military advice from the State Department, the NSC and two other top advisory groups.<sup>25</sup> All recommended directly to the President without consulting the JCS. The JCS

found themselves reacting to proposed plans for military action in Vietnam that they had not previously seen. These recommendations were similar because all knew the desired answer and that the President disliked dissension.

Now President Johnson could justify his decision. His Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, NSC representative, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other close advisors had all supported action against North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. That action was one of graduated pressure to force negotiations by the North Vietnamese.

The JCS had recommended that the graduated pressure response was insufficient to bring the North to the negotiations table. Their voice and opinions fell silent to the political goals of the President and Secretary of Defense McNamara. The CJCS responded to the President's desire for no dissension. The JCS had much dissension that resulted in the Chairman advising the NCA without the consensus of the service chiefs, a power that would be formally granted by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.

A further weakening of the JCS occurred when Ambassador Lodge decided to run for the Presidency. Once he won the New Hampshire Presidential primary, President Johnson appointed General Taylor as the new ambassador. General Wheeler then was selected to move to the chairman's position.<sup>26</sup> Now President Johnson was surrounded with close advisors, both civil and military, who

supported him unquestionably. Their loyalty also ensured that they would not do anything that would jeopardize Johnson's campaign bid. This left the JCS as the advisory body that could not come to consensus on issues and was therefore rarely asked for advice. This included not only Vietnam involvement, but also budgetary input. Secretary McNamara had taken total control of all military advice that reached the President. He and the President alone would decide how to wage the war in Vietnam.

### **PART III -- CONCLUDING ARGUMENTS**

#### **DUTIES OF THE PRESIDENCY**

The President and the Secretary of Defense must determine a National Security Policy and further a National Security Strategy. From these, the military can develop the National Military Strategy. Once these policies and strategies are in place, the President and Congress can determine what element of national power is best to achieve goals and objectives of the National Security Policy.

To this point in Vietnam, limited diplomatic and military powers were applied using an unclear National Security Strategy with an inappropriate military strategy. To appropriately develop a military strategy, the President must clearly define a security strategy. That, along with public support, was missing

in the formula for success in the U.S. response to North Vietnamese aggression.

President Johnson had the keen ability to get results from his advisors. The President placed undue pressure on his advisors to avoid dissension. This led his advisors to tell him what he wanted to hear rather than the truth.

The President also failed to address the seriousness of Vietnam until the situation was out of control. Two primary reasons stand out for this failure. One was President Johnson's personal desire to be elected by popular vote. His overwhelming goal was to be elected on his own merit even at the expense of allowing his nation to creep into an unnecessary war. The other was his focused desire to develop the "Great Society" as a domestic achievement that would be a legacy to his name. Increased domestic problems resulted in a focus to fix the problems in the U.S. rather than in Vietnam.

#### DUTIES OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Secretary of Defense McNamara placed his analytical problem solving techniques and blind loyalty to President Johnson above his duties and loyalty to the Nation. He applied business strategy to the problems associated with waging and winning wars. He did this without regard to the experience and art required to win a war. In addition, he failed to accept the advice of the JCS because they were slower in decision, older in age and unable

to reach consensus. He also failed to develop a security strategy that applied to Vietnam and accepted the diplomatic victory in Cuba as the answer to all conflict termination.

Above all, McNamara misled the President and covered up critical information about the state of South Vietnam because the President did not like conflict in his advisors. He ensured the President's desires were met to keep any news of Vietnam quiet until after the election in November, 1964.

#### DUTIES OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

The JCS failed in their duties as principle advisors to the NCA in several ways. First, they failed to gain consensus on their method of fighting with Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. Second, they failed to get into the minds of the administration, especially President Johnson, in that his desire was no dissension of opinion among his advisors. The JCS rarely agreed on any issue. That caused the administration to not seek their advice. Third, they failed to act promptly again and again. The bureaucracy of the military system proved cumbersome, indecisive and slow for the likes of Secretary McNamara and President Johnson. And finally, their constant parochial bickering over military responses in Vietnam and service appropriations resulted in repeated indecisiveness.

The probable reason why the JCS wasn't replaced by those who could provide appropriate advice to the NCA lies in fact that

Presidential elections were around the corner. Both the Marine Corps Commandant, General Green and the Air Force Chief, General LeMay would retire to civilian life and possibly lash out at the administration. Keeping them on active duty would bind them to support their commander in chief. Since the advice of the JCS was not sought anyway, their presence on the JCS was the best means to keep them quiet.

#### COULD ANOTHER VIETNAM OCCUR?

The numerous factors cited that propelled the United States into the Vietnam War have the potential of recurring given several external stimuli. In 1963-64, the President focused on domestic issues and personal political interests. The Vietnam issues were secondary to solving domestic problems. The Secretary of Defense used his business and analytical problem solving techniques to wage a war. The JCS were more concerned with service parochialism than the national military interests. All three players failed to effectively evaluate their enemy and gain the support of the American people before entering the war.

The chance of similar circumstances happening simultaneously again is small. However, each of these players is duty bound to develop out of national interests, a national security strategy and a national military strategy to apply to unrest throughout the world. Without these elements, the United States could find

itself in a protracted military conflict without a clear strategy.

It is incumbent upon the NCA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Congress to only deploy American forces with a solid plan developed from consensus in support of national interests. The possibility of recurrence does exist. Senior military leaders must place the interests of the Nation paramount in their advice to the NCA to prevent such recurrence.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Lawrence J. Korb, The Joint Chiefs of Staff: The First Twenty-Five Years (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 149.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 150.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 151.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 153.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 154.
- <sup>8</sup> David Halberstam, HO (New York: Random House, 1971), 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Jean Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography, trans. Peter Wiles (New York: Random House, 1968), 74-75.
- <sup>10</sup> Korb, 156.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 175.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 176.
- <sup>14</sup> Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1984), 92.
- <sup>15</sup> H. R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 19-21.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>18</sup> Benjamin C. Bradlee, Conversations with Kennedy (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 122.
- <sup>19</sup> McMaster, 42-45.
- <sup>20</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, The Vantage Point (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 43.
- <sup>21</sup> McMaster, 58-59.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 74-75.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 75-78.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 77.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 98.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 104.



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