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American Military Strategy in the Vietnam War, 1965-1973

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Summary and Keywords

For nearly a decade, American combat soldiers fought in South Vietnam to help sustain an independent, noncommunist nation in Southeast Asia. After U.S. troops departed in 1973, the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 prompted a lasting search to explain the United States' first lost war. Historians of the conflict and participants alike have since critiqued the ways in which civilian policymakers and uniformed leaders applied—some argued misapplied—military power that led to such an undesirable political outcome. While some claimed U.S. politicians failed to commit their nation's full military might to a limited war, others contended that most officers fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the war they were fighting. Still others argued “winning” was essentially impossible given the true nature of a struggle over Vietnamese national identity in the postcolonial era. On their own, none of these arguments fully satisfy. Contemporary policymakers clearly understood the difficulties of waging a war in Southeast Asia against an enemy committed to national liberation. Yet the faith of these Americans in their power to resolve deep-seated local and regional sociopolitical problems eclipsed the possibility there might be limits to that power. By asking military strategists to simultaneously fight a war and build a nation, senior U.S. policymakers had asked too much of those crafting military strategy to deliver on overly ambitious political objectives. In the end, the Vietnam War exposed the limits of what American military power could achieve in the Cold War era.

Keywords: Abrams, Creighton, attrition, Cold War, counterinsurgency, Johnson, Lyndon, limited war, Nixon, Richard, strategy, Vietnam War, Westmoreland, William

Introduction

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By mid-June 1951, the Korean War had settled into an uneasy, yet conspicuous stalemate. Having blunted North Korean and Chinese offensives that killed thousands of soldiers and civilians, the United Nations forces, now under command of General Matthew B. Ridgway, dug in as both sides agreed to open negotiations. Though the enemy had suffered heavily under the weight of allied ground and air power, Washington and its partners had little stomach to press northward. As the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff declared, the objective was to effect “an end to the fighting . . . and a return to the status quo.”¹ Thus, President Harry Truman’s decision in April to relieve General Douglas MacArthur—who in Ridgway’s words “envisaged no less than the global defeat of communism”—suggested that political limitations were now an intrinsic part of developing and implementing strategy in a time of war. Yet what was the purpose of war and strategy if not the complete destruction of enemy forces? In a time when men had “control of machines capable of laying a world to waste,” Ridgway believed escalation without restraint would lead to disaster. Civilian and military authorities had to set attainable goals and work closely in selecting the means to achieve them.²

Ridgway’s admonitions forecast inherent problems in a Cold War period increasingly dubbed an era of “limited war.” In short, the very definition of wartime victory seemed in flux. An uncertain end to the fighting in Korea implied there were, in fact, substitutes to winning outright on the field of battle. Even if Korea demonstrated the successful application of communist containment, at least one student of strategy lamented that limited war connoted “a deliberate hobbling of tremendous power.”³ A Manichean view of the Cold War, however, presented knotty problems for those seeking to confront seemingly expansion-minded communists without unintentionally escalating beyond some nuclear threshold. How could one fight a national war for survival against communism yet agree to negotiate an end to a stalemated war? Political scientist Robert Osgood, writing in 1957, judged there were few alternatives to contesting communists who themselves were limiting military force to “minimize the risk of precipitating total war.” For Osgood, the challenge was to think about contemporary war as more than simply a physical contest between opposing armies. “The problem of limited war is not just a problem of military strategy but is, more broadly, the problem of combining military power with diplomacy and with the economic and psychological instruments of power within a coherent national strategy that is capable of supporting the United States’ political objectives abroad.”⁴

If Osgood was correct in suggesting that war required more than just an application of military power, then strategy—as a problem to be solved—entailed more than just battlefield expertise. Thus, the post-World War II generation of U.S. Army officers was forced to think about war more broadly. And they did. Far from being slaves to conventional operations, officers ascending the ranks in the 1950s to command in Vietnam understood the rising importance of local insurgency movements. As Andrew Birtle has persuasively argued, by 1965 the army had “succeeded in integrating counterinsurgency and counter guerrilla warfare in substantive ways into its doctrinal, educational, and training systems.”⁵ An examination of contemporary professional journals such as *Military Review* reveals a military establishment wrestling with the

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problems of local economic and social development, the importance of community politics, and the role played by indigenous security forces. In truth, officers of the day, echoing the recommendations of Harvard professor Henry Kissinger, did not define limited wars in purely military terms. Rather, they perceived strategic problems as those involving changes in technologies, societies, and, perhaps most importantly, political ideas.⁶

These same officers labored to devise a coherent strategy for a limited contest in Southeast Asia within the larger construct of the Cold War. In an important sense, the development of strategy for all combatants necessitated attention to multiple layers, all interlaced. As Lyndon Johnson recalled of Vietnam in his 1971 memoir, "It was a political war, an economic war, and a fighting war—all at the same time."⁷ Moreover, American political and military leaders found that Cold War calculations mattered just as much as the fighting inside South Vietnam. Fears of appearing weak against communism compelled the Johnson White House to escalate in 1965 when it looked like Hanoi was making its final bid for Indochinese domination. As Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara told a journalist in April, if the United States withdrew from Vietnam "there would be a complete shift of world power. Asia goes Red, our prestige and integrity damaged, allies everywhere shaken." Thus, paraphrasing military theorist Basil Liddell Hart, policy imperatives at the level of grand strategy would set the foundations for—and later circumscribe—the application of military strategy on a lower plane.⁸

Liddell Hart's council that strategy involved more than "fighting power" would lead American officers in Vietnam into a near insolvable dilemma. Clearly, the civil war inside Vietnam was more than just a military problem. Yet in the quest to broaden their conception of war, to consider political and social issues as much as military ones, senior leaders developed a strategy that was so wide-ranging as to be unmanageable. Rather than a narrow focus on enemy attrition, sheer comprehensiveness proved to be a crucial factor undermining American strategy in Vietnam. In attempting to both destroy an adversary and build a nation, uniformed leaders overestimated their capacity to manage a conflict that had long preceded American involvement. A near unquestioning faith in the capacity to do everything overshadowed any unease with entanglement in a civil war rooted in competing notions of national liberation and identity.⁹ In the end, senior U.S. policymakers had asked too much of those crafting military strategy to deliver on overly ambitious political objectives.

Devising Strategy for a New Kind of War

By June 1965, General William C. Westmoreland had been serving in the Republic of Vietnam for eighteen months. As the newly appointed commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the former West Point superintendent was heir to a legacy of varied strategic initiatives aimed at sustaining an independent, noncommunist foothold in Southeast Asia. Since the division of Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel in 1954, an American military assistance and advisory group (MAAG) had been training local forces for a threat both externally military and internally political.¹⁰ The image of North Korean forces streaming across an international boundary in 1950 surely weighed heavily on U.S. officers. Yet these same men understood the importance of a steady economy and secure social structure in combating the growing insurgent threat inside South Vietnam. Consequently, the U.S. advisory group focused on more than just advising the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) for conventional operations against the North Vietnam Army (NVA).¹¹

As advisers, however, the Americans could not dictate strategy to their Vietnamese allies. President Ngo Dinh Diem, struggling to gain popular support for his own social revolution, equally sought ways to secure the population—through programs like *agrovilles* and strategic hamlets—from a rising communist insurgency. Yet achieving consensus with (and between) Americans proved difficult. Staff officers debated how best to balance economic and political development with population security and the training of South Vietnamese forces.¹² Was the threat more military or political, more external or internal? Were local paramilitary forces or the conventional army better suited to dealing with these threats? All the while, a shadow government competed for influence within the countryside. When MACV was established in February 1962, its chief, Paul D. Harkins, received the mission to “assist and support the Government of South Vietnam in its efforts to provide for its internal security, defeat Communist insurgency, and resist overt aggression.”¹³ Here was a tall order. Moreover, as military operations required a solid political footing for ultimate success, an unstable Saigon government further complicated American strategic planning. Following Diem’s overthrow and death in November 1963, the foundations on which the U.S. presence in South Vietnam rested appeared shaky at best. Hanoi’s own escalation in 1964 did little to assuage concern.¹⁴

Though cognizant of the difficulties ahead, American leaders felt they had little choice but to persevere in South Vietnam. By early 1965, with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing him to “take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force” to assist South Vietnam, President Johnson believed he had little alternative but to escalate. He was in a difficult position. Hoping to preserve his domestic agenda but stand strong against communist aggression, Johnson initially hesitated on committing ground troops. Instead, he turned to airpower. Operation Rolling Thunder, launched in early March 1965, aimed at eliminating Hanoi’s support of the southern insurgency. Concurrently, Johnson hoped, in Michael Hunt’s words, to “bring a better life to the people of Vietnam—on

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American terms.”¹⁵ The president would be disappointed on both counts. The punitive bombing of North Vietnam did little to interfere with Hanoi’s support of the insurgents and nothing to resolve the internal political problems of South Vietnam. Moreover, military leaders complained that the president’s gradual response, of limiting the tempo and ferocity of the air campaign, unduly limited American military might. (Few worried as restlessly as Johnson about full-blown Chinese or Soviet intervention.) By the spring, it became clear the president’s policies in South Vietnam were failing. In June, Westmoreland officially requested additional troops “as a stop-gap measure to save the ARVN from defeat.”¹⁶

The decision to escalate in Vietnam persists as one of the most controversial in twentieth-century American foreign policy. Competing interpretations revolve around the question of purpose. Was escalation chosen as a matter of policy, of containing communism abroad? Was it used as a way to test American capacity in nation-building, of expanding democracy overseas? Or did escalation flow from concerns about prestige and credibility, both national and political? Clearly Johnson considered all these matters in the critical months of early 1965, and it is plausible to argue that the president *believed* he had few alternatives given reports of South Vietnam being on the verge of collapse. Yet ultimately intervention was a matter of choice.¹⁷ Johnson feared the political ramifications and personal consequences of “losing” Vietnam just as Truman had “lost” China. Thus, when Westmoreland sent a cable to the Pentagon in early June requesting 40,000 combat troops immediately and more than 50,000 later, hasty deliberations in the White House led to support for MACV’s appeal. As McNamara later recalled, “South Vietnam seemed to be crumbling, with the only apparent antidote a massive injection of US troops.”¹⁸

The task now fell to Westmoreland to devise an offensive strategy to use these troops. Realizing Hanoi had committed regular army regiments and battalions to South Vietnam, the MACV commander believed he had no choice but to contest this conventional threat. But he also had to provide security “from the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer.”¹⁹ MACV’s chief intelligence officer drew attention to these diverse undertakings. As Phillip B. Davidson recalled, Westmoreland “had not one battle, but three to fight: first, to contain a growing enemy conventional threat; second, to develop the Republic of Vietnam’s Armed Forces (RVNAF); and third, to pacify and protect the peasants in the South Vietnamese countryside. Each was a monumental task.”²⁰ Far from being wedded to a battle-centric strategy aimed at racking up high body counts, Westmoreland developed a comprehensive campaign plan for employing his forces that factored in more than just killing the enemy.

Stabilization and security of South Vietnam formed the bedrock of Westmoreland’s “three-phase sustained campaign.” Phase I visualized the commitment of U.S. and allied forces “necessary to halt the losing trend by 1965.” Tasks included securing allied military bases, defending major political and population centers, and strengthening the RVNAF. In Phase II, Westmoreland sought to resume the offensive to “destroy enemy forces” and reinstitute “rural construction activities.” In this phase, aimed to begin in 1966, American forces would “participate in clearing, securing, reserve reaction and

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offensive operations as required to support and sustain the resumption of pacification.” Finally, in Phase III, MACV would oversee the “defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas.” It is important to note that Westmoreland’s plan included the term “sustained campaign.”²¹ The general was under no illusions that U.S. forces were engaged in a war of annihilation aimed at the rapid destruction of the enemy. Attrition suggested that a stable South Vietnam, capable of resisting the military and political pressures of both internal and external aggressors, would not arise in a matter of months or even a few years.

Hanoi’s political and military leaders equally debated the strategic concerns of time, resources, and capabilities. Johnson’s decision to commit U.S. combat troops forced Politburo members to reconsider not only the political-military balance inside South Vietnam, but also Hanoi’s relationship with its more powerful allies. To be sure, national communists like Vo Nguyen Giap had discussed the role of a “long-term revolutionary war” strategy and the importance of political education in military training.²² By 1965, however, the massive American buildup complicated strategic deliberations. In December, Hanoi’s leadership, increasingly under the sway of First Secretary Le Duan, promulgated Lao Dong Party Resolution 12, which outlined a basic strategy to defeat the Americans “under any circumstances.” The resolution placed greater emphasis on the military struggle as domestic priorities in the North receded into the background. As a result, Le Duan battled with senior military officials like Giap over the pace of military operations and the building of forces for a general offensive against the southern “puppets.” Escalation proved challenging for both sides.²³

The strategic decision making leading to American intervention in Vietnam illustrates the difficulties of developing and implementing strategy for a postcolonial conflict in the nuclear era. Even from Hanoi’s perspective, strategy was not a straightforward process. A sense of contingency, of choices, and of action and reaction permeate the critical years leading to 1965. Why Johnson chose war, and the restrictions he imposed on the conduct of that war, remain contentious questions. So too do inquiries into the nature of the threat that both Americans and their South Vietnamese allies faced. Finally, the relationship between political objectives and the strategy devised to accomplish those objectives offers valuable instruction to those researching the faith in, and limitations of, American power abroad during the Cold War.²⁴

From Escalation to Stalemate

In March 1965, the first contingent of U.S. Marines landed at Da Nang in Quang Nam province. Their mission, to defend American airbases supporting the bombing campaign against North Vietnam, called for setting up three defensive “enclaves” at Phu Bai, Da Nang, and Chu Lai. As the summer progressed and additional army units arrived in country, Westmoreland sought authorization to expand beyond his airfield security mission. If South Vietnam was to survive, the general needed to have “a substantial and hard-hitting offensive capability . . . with troops that could be maneuvered freely.”²⁵ With the growing recognition that Rolling Thunder was not achieving desired results, the Pentagon gave Westmoreland the green light. The MACV commander’s desires stemmed largely from his perception of the enemy. To the general, the greatest threat to South Vietnam came not from the National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgency but rather from main force units, both NLF and NVA. Westmoreland appreciated the long-term threat insurgents posed to Saigon, but he worried that since the enemy had committed larger combat units to battle, he ignored them at his peril.²⁶

The Americans thus undertook offensive operations to provide a shield for the population, one behind which ARVN could promote pacification in the countryside. By early October, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division had expanded its operations into the Central Highlands, hoping to defeat the enemy and reestablish governmental control in the NLF-dominated countryside. Hanoi, however, had continued its own buildup and three North Vietnam Army regiments had joined local forces in Pleiku province near the Cambodian border. In mid-November, the cavalry’s lead battalion, using new techniques of helicopter insertion onto the battlefield, collided with the NVA. For two days the battle raged. Only the employment of B-52 strategic bombers, called in for close air support, staved off defeat. The battle of Ia Drang clearly demonstrated the necessity of conventional operations—Westmoreland could not risk NVA regiments controlling the critical Highway 19 and thus cutting South Vietnam in two. But the clash raised important questions as well. Was Ia Drang an American victory? Would such battles truly impact Hanoi’s will? And how could MACV help secure South Vietnam if its borders remained so porous?²⁷

Despite the attention Ia Drang drew—Westmoreland publicly called it an “unprecedented victory”—revolutionary development and nonmilitary programs never strayed far from MACV’s sights. Westmoreland continued to stress psychological operations and civic action, even in the aftermath of Ia Drang. In December, he wrote the 1st Infantry Division’s commander detailing how the buildup of forces should allow for an increased emphasis on pacification: “I am inviting this matter to your personal attention since I feel that an effective rural construction program is essential to the success of our mission.”²⁸ Unfortunately, these early pacification efforts seemed to be making little progress as Hanoi continued infiltrating troops into South Vietnam and desertions from the South Vietnamese armed forces rose sharply.²⁹ Accordingly, Westmoreland requested an additional 41,500 troops. Further deployments might be necessary. The request

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staggered the secretary of defense, who now realized there would be no rapid conclusion to the war. "The U.S. presence rested on a bowl of jelly," McNamara recalled. His doubts, however, were not forceful enough to derail the president's commitment to a secure, stable, and noncommunist South Vietnam.³⁰

When American and South Vietnamese leaders met at Honolulu in early February 1966, Johnson publicly reaffirmed that commitment. While Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky and Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu pledged a "social revolution" in Vietnam, Johnson urged an expansion of the "other war," a term increasingly used to describe allied pacification efforts.³¹ Concurrently, McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk defined Westmoreland's goals for the coming year. MACV would increase the South Vietnamese population living in secure areas by 10 percent, multiply critical roads and railroads by 20 percent, and increase the destruction of NLF and NVA base areas by 30 percent. To make sure the president's directives were not ignored, Westmoreland was to augment the pacified population by 235,000 and ensure the defense of political and population centers under government control. The final goal directed MACV to "attrite, by year's end, VC/PAVN forces at a rate as high as their capability to put men in the field."³²

The Honolulu conference is a critical episode for understanding American military strategy in Vietnam. The comprehensive list of strategic objectives presented by Rusk and McNamara forced American commanders to consider the war as an effort in both construction and destruction. The conference also reinforced the necessity of thinking about strategy in broader terms than simply battle. Attrition of enemy forces was only part of a much larger whole. In one sense, pacification of the countryside was a process of trying to create political space so the government of South Vietnam (GVN) could stabilize. (The *New York Times* reported in April that a "crisis in Saigon" was snagging U.S. efforts.) Yet MACV's own definition of pacification—"the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people"—seemed problematic.³³ Critics wondered how foreigners could build a local government responsive to its people. Furthermore, the expansive nature of pacification meant U.S. troops would be asked to fight an elusive enemy while implementing a whole host of nonmilitary programs. Thus, while Westmoreland and senior commanders emphasized the importance of winning both control over and support of the Vietnamese people, American soldiers wrestled with building a political community in a land long ravaged by war. That they themselves too often brought devastation to the countryside hardly furthered the goals of pacification.³⁴

In important ways, waging battle—a necessity given Le Duan's commitment to a general offensive in South Vietnam—undermined U.S. nation-building efforts in 1966 and underscored the difficulties of coordinating so many strategic actors. This management problem long had been a concern of counterinsurgency theorists. British adviser Sir Robert Thompson, a veteran of the Malayan campaign, articulated the need to find a "proper balance between the military and the civil effort, with complete coordination in all fields. Otherwise a situation will arise in which military operations produce no lasting results because they are unsupported by civil follow-up action."³⁵ The reality of South

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Vietnam bore out Thompson's claims. Worried about Saigon's political collapse, American war managers too often focused on short-term, military results. The decentralized nature of strategic implementation equally made it difficult to weave provincial franchises into a larger national effort.³⁶

This lack of coordination led to pressures for a "single-manager" to coordinate the increasingly vast American enterprise in South Vietnam. (By the end of 1966, more than 385,000 U.S. military personnel alone were serving in country.) In May, Westmoreland incorporated a new directorate into his headquarters—Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support. While ostensibly a South Vietnamese program, CORDS redefined the allied pacification mission.³⁷ The directorate's head, Ambassador Robert W. Komer, threw himself into the management problem and assigned each senior U.S. military adviser a civilian deputy for revolutionary development. MACV now provided oversight for all of the allied pacification-related programs: "territorial security forces, the whole RD effort, care and resettlement of refugees, the Chieu Hoi ("Open Arms," or amnesty) program to bring VC [Vietcong] to the GVN side, the police program, the attempts to stimulate rural economic revival, hamlet schools, and so on."³⁸ In short, CORDS assumed full responsibility for pacification.

If CORDS could be viewed as a microcosm of Westmoreland's comprehensive strategy, it also underscored the difficulties of implementing so many programs at once. Physically controlling the population did not guarantee allied forces were making inroads against the insurgency's political infrastructure. Improved security conditions did not necessarily win civilian "hearts and minds." Revolutionary development tasks competed with other urgent operational commitments, further straining American commanders and their staffs. More importantly, pacification required a deeper appreciation of Vietnamese culture than most Americans possessed.³⁹ Senior officers labored to balance the competing requirements of attacking enemy units and performing civic action in the hamlets and villages. On the ground, many American soldiers made few distinctions between friend and foe when operating in the countryside. The army's personnel rotation policy, under which individual soldiers served for twelve months before returning home, only exacerbated these problems. With some units experiencing a 90 percent personnel turnover within a three-month period, the pacification process was erratic at best.⁴⁰

As 1967 wore on, American journalists increasingly used words like "stalemate" and "quagmire" to describe the war in Vietnam. Early-year operations like Cedar Falls and Junction City, though inflicting heavy damage on the enemy, failed to break Hanoi's will. At most, pacification was yielding modest results. Political instability in Saigon continued to worry U.S. embassy officials. Both the White House and MACV thus found it ever more difficult to convince Americans at home that their sacrifices were generating results.⁴¹ Even Westmoreland struggled to assess how well his war was advancing. Body counts told only a fraction of the story. A lack of fighting in a certain district could either mean the area was pacified or the enemy was in such control that battle was unnecessary. Two years into the war, American soldiers remained unsure of their progress. (MACV and the CIA even debated the number of soldiers within the enemy's ranks.) President Johnson,

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however, watched the growing domestic dissent with concern and, given the war's ambiguities, called Westmoreland and Ambassador Bunker home in support of a public relations campaign. In three appearances in 1967 MACV's commander reported to national audiences his views on the ongoing war. Though guarded in his commentary, Westmoreland's tone nonetheless was optimistic given the president's desires to disprove claims of a stalemated war.⁴²

Hanoi's political and military leaders similarly deliberated their own progress in 1967. Because of the American imperialists' "aggressive nature," the Politburo acknowledged the southern insurgency campaign had stalemated in the countryside. Still, to Le Duan in particular, an opportunity existed. A strategic offensive might break the impasse by instigating a popular uprising in the South, thus weakening the South Vietnamese-American alliance and forcing the enemy to the negotiating table. A southern uprising might well convince the international community that the United States was unjustly fighting against an internally led popular revolution. More importantly, a military defeat of the Americans, real or perceived, might change the political context of the entire conflict.⁴³

During the plan's first phase, to be executed in late 1967, NVA units would conduct conventional operations along South Vietnam's borders to draw American forces away from urban areas and to facilitate NLF infiltration into the cities. Le Duan planned the second phase for early 1968, a coordinated offensive by insurgent and regular forces to attack allied troops and support popular uprisings in the cities and surrounding areas. Additional NVA units would reinforce the uprising in the plan's final phase by assaulting American forces and wearing down U.S. military strength in South Vietnam.⁴⁴

Though Le Duan's desired popular uprising failed to materialize, the general offensive launched in late January 1968 shocked most Americans, especially those watching the war at home. Commencing during the Tet holiday, communist forces attacked more than 200 cities, towns, and villages across South Vietnam. Though not completely surprised, Westmoreland had not anticipated the ability of Hanoi to coordinate an offensive of such size and scope. The allies, however, reacted quickly and the communists suffered mightily under the weight of American and South Vietnamese firepower. Yet the damage to the U.S. position in Vietnam, some argued irreparable, had been done. Even in the offensive's first hours, senior CIA analyst George Carver predicted that "the degree of success already achieved in Saigon and around the country will adversely affect the image of the GVN (and its powerful American allies as well) in the eyes of the people."⁴⁵ Indeed, Tet had taken a heavy psychological toll on the population. After years of U.S. assistance, the Saigon government appeared incapable of securing the country against a large-scale enemy attack. Any claims of progress seemed artificial at best, intentionally deceitful at worst.

News reports about Westmoreland's late-February request for an additional 206,000 men, followed soon after by the president's decision not to run for reelection, only reinforced perceptions of stalemate. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, who replaced McNamara in

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early March, wondered aloud how MACV was winning the war yet needed more troops. Public opinion mirrored growing doubts within Johnson's inner circle. A 10 March Gallup poll found only 33 percent of Americans believed the United States was making progress in the war. Thus, Johnson approved only 10,500 additional troops for Westmoreland and in late March suspended all air attacks over North Vietnam in hopes of opening talks with Hanoi. If the 1968 Tet offensive was not an outright turning point of the war—many historians still consider it to be—Hanoi's assault and Washington's response brought about a shift in American policy and strategic goals. Westmoreland, hoping for a change in strategy that would expand operations into the Cambodian and Laotian sanctuaries and thus shorten the war, instead received word in late spring that he would be leaving Vietnam to become the Chief of Staff of the Army. The best the general had been able to achieve was a long and bloody stalemate.⁴⁶

Historians have seized upon the Tet offensive and mid-1968 impasse as proof of a misguided military strategy crafted by a narrow-minded general who cared only for piling up high body counts. Such arguments should be considered with care. Far from being focused only on military operations against enemy main force units, Westmoreland instead crafted a strategy that took into account the issues of pacification, civic action, land reform, and the training of South Vietnamese units. If Tet illustrated anything, it was that battlefield successes—both military and nonmilitary—did not translate automatically into larger political outcomes. Despite the wealth of manpower and resources Americans brought to South Vietnam, they could not solve Saigon's underlying political, economic, and social problems. Moreover, Westmoreland's military strategy could not answer the basic questions over which the war was fought. In a contest over Vietnamese national identity in the postcolonial era, the U.S. mission in South Vietnam could only keep Saigon from falling to the communists. It could not convince the people a better future lay with an ally, rather than an enemy, of the United States.

From Stalemate to Withdrawal

In June 1968, Creighton W. Abrams, a West Point classmate of Westmoreland, assumed command of MACV. Only a month before, the enemy launched a series of new attacks in South Vietnam. Dubbed "mini-Tet," the offensive sputtered out quickly but produced 125,000 new refugees inside a society already heavily dislocated by years of fighting. Reporters were quick to highlight the differences between the outgoing and incoming commanders. But Abrams, in Andrew Birtle's words, differed from Westmoreland "more in emphasis than in substance." Stressing a "one war" concept that viewed the enemy as a political-military whole, the new commander confronted familiar problems. As one officer recalled, "By the time Abrams arrived on the scene, there were few options left for changing the character of the war."⁴⁷ Certainly, Abrams concerned himself more with pacification and ARVN training. These programs rose in importance, though, not because of some new strategic concept, but rather because the American phase of the war had

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largely run its course. From this point forward, the war's outcome would increasingly rest on the actions of the Vietnamese, both North and South. While U.S. officials remained committed to an independent, noncommunist Vietnam, peace had replaced military victory as Americans' principal national objective.⁴⁸

The inauguration of Richard M. Nixon in January 1969 underscored the diminishing role of South Vietnam in American foreign policy. The new president hoped to concentrate on his larger aim of improving relations with China and the Soviet Union. Such foreign policy designs hinged on reversing the "Americanization" of the war in Southeast Asia while fortifying South Vietnam to withstand future communist aggression. As Nixon's national security advisor Henry Kissinger recalled, the challenge was to withdraw American forces "as an expression of policy and not as a collapse."⁴⁹ Of course, Nixon, still the Cold War warrior, remained committed to opposing the expansion of communism. Withdrawal from Vietnam thus required maintaining an image of strength during peace negotiations if the United States was to retain credibility as a world power and a deterrent to communist expansion. Nixon's goal of "peace with honor" thus would hold crucial implications for military strategists inside Vietnam.⁵⁰

In truth, Nixon's larger policy goals complicated the process of de-Americanizing the war, soon dubbed "Vietnamization" by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. In shifting more of the war's burden to the South Vietnamese, the president was quietly redefining success. Realizing, in Nixon's words, that "total military victory was no longer possible," the new administration sought a "fair negotiated settlement that would preserve the independence of South Vietnam."⁵¹ (Both Nixon and Laird believed flagging domestic support was limiting their options, long a concern of senior policymakers.) Abrams would preside over an American war effort increasingly concerned with reducing casualties while arranging for U.S. troop withdrawals. Moreover, the impending American departure did little to settle unresolved questions over the most pressing threat to South Vietnam. In preparing to hand over the war, should Americans be training the ARVN to defeat conventional North Vietnamese forces or a battered yet resilient insurgency?⁵²

After a detailed examination of the war led by Kissinger, Nixon formulated a five-point strategy "to end the war and win the peace." The new policy depended first on pacification, redefined as "meaningful continuing security for the Vietnamese people." Nixon also sought diplomatic isolation of North Vietnam and placed increasing weight on negotiations in Paris. Gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces was the fourth aspect of Nixon's strategy. As the president recalled, "Americans needed tangible evidence that we were winding down the war, and the South Vietnamese needed to be given more responsibility for their defense." (Some ARVN officers balked at the insinuation that they hadn't been responsible for their nation's security.) The final element, Vietnamization, aimed at training and equipping South Vietnam's armed forces so they could defend the country on their own. Of note, political reform in Saigon, largely a task for Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, accompanied the military side of Vietnamization. "Our whole strategy," Nixon declared, "depended on whether this program succeeded."⁵³

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For Abrams, the problem now became one of synchronizing all facets of his “one war” approach. Back in August 1968, MACV had to fend off another enemy offensive, the third of the year. Without retreating from the conventional threat, Abrams turned increasing attention to pacification. Under the influence of the new CORDS chief William Colby, the GVN initiated an Accelerated Pacification Campaign at year’s end. The campaign endeavored to upgrade 1,000 contested hamlets to relatively secure ratings by the end of January 1969. To provide political space for the Saigon government, U.S. military operations increased dramatically to keep the enemy off balance, further depopulating the countryside and creating more refugees.⁵⁴ In truth, the war under Abrams was no less violent than under Westmoreland. Still, the new MACV chief hoped to cut into the NLF infrastructure by boosting the number of those who would rally to Saigon’s side under the Chieu Hoi amnesty program, reinvigorating local defense forces, and neutralizing the insurgency’s political cadre.⁵⁵ This last goal fell largely to “Phoenix,” an intelligence coordination program that targeted the NLF political organization for destruction by police and local militia forces. MACV believed the defeat of the enemy infrastructure “essential to preclude re-establishment of an operational or support base to which the VC can return.”⁵⁶

While media attention often focused on battles like the costly engagement at “Hamburger Hill” in May 1969, conventional combat operations overshadowed MACV’s larger efforts to improve and modernize South Vietnam’s armed forces. For Abrams, any successful American withdrawal was predicated on improvements in this key area of Vietnamization. In the field, U.S. advisers trained their counterparts on small-unit patrolling and coordinating artillery support with infantry and armor operations. In garrison, the Americans concentrated on improving the ARVN promotion system and building an effective maintenance program. Moreover, ARVN leadership and morale needed attention to help reduce desertion rates. So too did intelligence, logistic, and operational planning programs. Abrams also had to propose an optimal force structure and help develop an operational approach best suited to ARVN capabilities.⁵⁷

Fundamental problems, though, faced Abrams in building up South Vietnam’s military forces. After Nguyen Van Thieu, South Vietnam’s president since the September 1967 election, announced a national mobilization in mid-1968, the size of the regular army and popular and regional forces increased substantially. In two years, the total armed forces grew by 40 percent. Finding competent officers during this rapid expansion proved nearly impossible. Additionally, capable ARVN leaders, of which there were many, too often found themselves and their units still relegated to secondary roles during allied maneuvers.⁵⁸ These officers consequently lacked experience in coordinating multifaceted operations required for effective counterinsurgency. Problems within the enlisted ranks rivaled those among ARVN’s leadership. *Newsweek* offered a harsh appraisal of the typical South Vietnamese trooper who was “often dragooned into an army where he is poorly trained, badly paid, insufficiently indoctrinated about why he is fighting—and, for the most part, led by incompetent officers.”⁵⁹ Simply increasing the number of soldiers

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and supplying them with better weapons would not achieve the larger goals of Vietnamization.

Moreover, the ultimate success of Vietnamization depended on resolving perennial problems. Hanoi continued to send men and material into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. North Vietnamese units still found refuge in sanctuaries along the Cambodian and Laotian borders. Thus, expanding the war into Cambodia offered an opportunity to give the GVN the breathing space it needed. From his first day in office, Nixon sought to “quarantine” Cambodia. (Hanoi had taken advantage of the nominally neutral country by building base areas from which NVA units could infiltrate into South Vietnam.) To Nixon and Kissinger, improvements in ARVN readiness and pacification mattered only if South Vietnam’s borders were secure. On April 30, 1970, the president announced that U.S. troops were fighting in Cambodia. By expanding the war, Nixon was hoping to shorten it. While officials in Saigon and Washington heralded the operation’s accomplishments—Nixon stated that the “performance of the ARVN had demonstrated that Vietnamization was working”—the incursion into Cambodia left a mixed record. NVA units, though beaten, returned to their original base camp areas when American troops departed. By early June, the allies had searched only 5 percent of the 7,000 square miles of borderland despite having aimed to disrupt the enemy’s logistical bases. Additionally, the ARVN’s reliance on American firepower did not augur well for a future without U.S. air and artillery backing.⁶⁰

Worse, the Cambodian incursion set off a firestorm of political protest at home. After Ohio National Guardsmen fired into a demonstration at Kent State University on May 4, leaving four students dead, a wave of antiwar rallies swept the nation, closing nearly 450 colleges and universities. Less than four months earlier, the *New York Times* reported on the My Lai massacre. In March 1968, with the Tet offensive still raging, American soldiers on a search and destroy mission had summarily executed more than 300 unarmed civilians. Claims of civilian casualties prompted an informal inquiry, but army investigators covered up the story for nearly eighteen months.⁶¹ While most congressional leaders still supported Nixon, many began openly questioning the war’s conduct. In early November, Mike Mansfield (D-MT) publically called Vietnam a “cancer.” “It’s a tragedy,” argued the Montana senator. “It’s eating out the heart of America. It’s doing us no good.” Senator George McGovern (D-SD) joined the chorus of dissenters, imploring Nixon to “stop our participation in the horrible destruction of this tiny country and its people.” The loss of support incensed the president. Nixon insisted that the pace of Vietnamization, not the level of dissent, determine U.S. troop withdrawals. Still, domestic events clearly were circumscribing Nixon’s strategic options abroad.⁶²

The discord at home seemed matched by discontent within the ranks of U.S. troops remaining in South Vietnam. Though contemporary views of a disintegrating army now appear overblown, clearly the strategic withdrawal was taking its toll on American soldiers. By early 1970, with the first units already departed Vietnam and more scheduled to leave, officers worried how the withdrawal was affecting their soldiers’ capacity to fight. One journalist recounted how “talk of fragging, of hard drugs, of racial conflict,

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seems bitter, desperate, often dangerous.”⁶³ A company commander operating along the Cambodian border with the 1st Cavalry Division found declining motivation among his troops disrupting unit effectiveness. “The colonel wants to make contact with the enemy and so do I,” reported the young captain, “but the men flat don’t.”⁶⁴ Few draftees wanted to be fighting in Vietnam in the first place and even fewer wanted to risk being killed in a war clearly that was winding down. In addition, Abrams increasingly had to concern himself with racial polarization inside his army. Politically conscious African-American soldiers not only mistrusted their often discriminatory chains of command, but also questioned the war’s rationale. Many blacks denounced the ideal of bringing democracy to South Vietnam when they were denied many freedoms at home. In short, the U.S. Army in Vietnam seemed to be unraveling.⁶⁵

By the end of 1970, U.S. strength dropped to some 254,800 soldiers remaining in country. Kissinger warned that unilateral withdrawals were weakening the bargaining position of the United States in Paris, but Nixon continued with the redeployments to prove Vietnamization was on track.⁶⁶ With the new year, however, came the realization that NVA logistical bases remained intact. While the Cambodian operation had denied Hanoi the use of the Sihanoukville port, the Ho Chi Minh Trail continued to serve as a major infiltration route into South Vietnam. “An invasion of the Laos Panhandle,” one ARVN officer recalled, thus “became an attractive idea.” Such an operation would “retain the initiative for the RVNAF, disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies to South Vietnam, and greatly reduce the enemy’s capability to launch an offensive in 1971.”⁶⁷ The ARVN’s spotty performance in the ensuing operation, Lam Son 719, further fueled speculations that Vietnamization might not be working as reported. Though Nixon declared the campaign had “assured” the next round of U.S. troop withdrawals, Kissinger worried that Lam Son had exposed “lingering deficiencies” that raised questions over South Vietnam’s ability to bear the full burden of the ongoing war.⁶⁸

If Kissinger agonized over the need to balance negotiations with troop withdrawals and offensive operations to keep the enemy off balance, he was not alone. Inside Hanoi’s Politburo, Le Duan equally pondered strategic alternatives in the aftermath of Lam Son 719. Though only sixteen U.S. maneuver battalions remained in South Vietnam by early 1972, on all fronts the war appeared deadlocked. Le Duan hoped a new invasion would “defeat the American ‘Vietnamization’ policy, gain a decisive victory in 1972, and force the U.S. imperialists to negotiate an end to the war from a position of defeat.”⁶⁹ Abrams remained unclear regarding enemy intentions. Was a large-scale invasion an act of desperation, as Nixon believed, or a way to gain leverage in negotiations by controlling South Vietnamese territory? North Vietnamese strategists certainly were taking risks but not out of desperation. The 1972 Nguyen-Hue campaign aimed for a collapse of South Vietnam’s armed forces, Thieu’s ouster, and the formation of a coalition government. Failing these ambitious goals, Le Duan envisioned the struggle continuing against a weakened ARVN. In either case, the Politburo believed its “actions would totally change the character of the war in South Vietnam.”⁷⁰

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The subsequent “Easter Offensive,” begun on March 30, 1972, unleashed three separate NVA thrusts into South Vietnam. In some areas, the ARVN fought bravely; in others, soldiers broke and ran. Abrams responded by throwing B-52 bombers into the battle as Nixon ordered resumption of bombing in the North and the mining of Haiphong harbor. Gradually, yet perceptibly, the offensive’s momentum began to slow. Although North Vietnam’s spring offensive had ended with no dramatic battlefield victory, it had met its goal of changing the character of the war.⁷¹ U.S. officials proclaimed Vietnamization a final success given that the ARVN had successfully blunted the enemy’s assault. Overwhelming U.S. air support, however, quite literally saved many units from being overrun and, more intangibly, helped sustain morale during hard months of fighting. Equally important, North Vietnamese leaders made several errors during the campaign. The separate offensives into South Vietnam dissipated combat strength while placing overwhelming strain on logistical support capabilities. Moreover, tactical commanders lacked experience in employing tanks and squandered infantry units in suicidal assaults.⁷²

By the end of June, only 49,000 U.S. troops remained in South Vietnam. Like his predecessor, Abrams was pulled to become the army’s chief of staff before the guns had fallen silent. Throughout the summer and fall, stalemated discussions in Paris mirrored the military standoff inside South Vietnam. In October, Kissinger reported to Nixon a breakthrough with the North Vietnamese delegation and announced an impending cease-fire. President Thieu fumed that Kissinger had conceded too much, allowing NVA units to remain in South Vietnam and refused to sign any agreement. The resulting diplomatic impasse, fueled by Thieu’s defiance and Hanoi’s intransigence, infuriated Nixon. By December, the president had reached his limits and ordered a massive air campaign against North Vietnam to break the deadlock. Nixon intended the bombing assault, codenamed Linebacker II, to induce both Hanoi and Saigon to return to the negotiating table. On December 26, the Politburo agreed to resume talks while Nixon pressed Thieu to support the armistice. The final settlement changed little from the principles outlined in October. One month later, on January 27, 1973, the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government signed the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.⁷³

Conclusions

In large sense, Nixon’s use of B-52 bombers during Linebacker II illustrated the limits of American military power in Vietnam. The press reacted strongly, referring to the bombing of urban targets in North Vietnam as “war by tantrum” and an act of “senseless terror.”⁷⁴ But by late 1972, B-52s were the only tools left in Nixon’s arsenal. Despite years of effort and sacrifice, the best the Americans could achieve was a stalemate only temporarily broken by strategic bombing. Many senior military officers, perhaps unsurprisingly, would point to Linebacker II as proof of a mismanaged war. They argued that if only

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civilian policymakers had been less restrictive in setting unnecessary boundaries, those in uniform could have won much earlier and at much less cost. Such arguments, however, tended to discount the larger political concerns of presidents and their advisers hoping to limit a war that had become the centerpiece of American foreign policy and one that had divided the nation.⁷⁵

Others advanced a different “if only” argument regarding U.S. military strategy for Vietnam. They posited that upon taking command of MACV, Abrams, deviating almost immediately from Westmoreland’s conventional methods, had changed the American approach to, and thus nature of, the war. This “better war” thesis found acceptance among many officers in whom a conviction endured that a better application of strategy could have yielded better political results. Yet senior American commanders, even before Westmoreland’s tenure at MACV, tended to see the war as a comprehensive whole and devised their strategy accordingly. Despite frequent heavy-handedness in applying military power inside South Vietnam, almost all officers recognized that the war ultimately was a contest for political power.

Comprehending the complexities of strategy and effectively implementing it, however, were not one and the same. Officers serving in Vietnam quickly found that strategy included much more than simply drafting a plan of political-military action. The complexity of the threat, both political and military, confounded U.S. analysts and staff officers. Westmoreland understood the important role played by southern insurgent forces but argued he could not stamp out these irregular “termites” without substantially eliminating the enemy’s main force units. Even ascertaining enemy motives proved difficult. Not long after Abrams took command, MACV still faced a “real problem, following the Tet offensive, trying to figure out” the enemy’s overall military strategy.⁷⁶

Perhaps most importantly, senior U.S. policymakers were asking too much of their military strategists. In the end, the war was a struggle between and among Vietnamese. For the United States, the foundation on which American forces waged a struggle—one that involved both construction of an effective host government and destruction of a committed communist-nationalist enemy—proved too fragile. Officers like Westmoreland and Abrams found that nation-building in a time of war was one of the most difficult tasks to ask of a military force. Yet American faith in the power to reconstruct, if not create, a South Vietnamese political community led to policies that did not address a fundamental issue—the internal contest to define and come to a consensus on Vietnamese nationalism and identity in the modern age.

More than any other conflict during the Cold War era, Vietnam exposed the limits of American military power overseas. It was a reality that many U.S. citizens found, and continue to find, discomfiting. Yet if a perspective is to be gained from the long American experience in Southeast Asia, it lies here. Not all problems can be solved by military force, even when that force is combined with political, economic, and social efforts. The capacity of Americans to reshape new political and social communities may not, in fact, be limitless. Writing of his own experiences in the Korean War, Matthew

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Ridgway offered an important conclusion while the war in Vietnam was still raging. In setting foreign policy objectives, the general advised that policymakers look “to define them with care and to make sure they lie within the range of our vital national interests and that their accomplishment is within our capabilities.”⁷⁷ For those seeking to understand the disappointments of American military strategy during the Vietnam War, Ridgway’s counsel seems a useful starting point.

Discussion of the Literature

The historiography on the American experience in Vietnam remains a contentious topic. For a starting point, the best surveys are George Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), which is more a diplomatic and political history, and Mark Atwood Lawrence's *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), which places the war in an international perspective. A solid textbook is George Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 6th edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009). An excellent collection of essays can be found in both David Anderson's *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huhnh, *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

The escalation of the war under Johnson is well covered. Among the most important works are Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995). Larry Berman has two very good works on LBJ: *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), and Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989). Brian VanDeMark's *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) is also useful. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), provides a balanced overview of the president's struggles with the war.

The topic of U.S. military strategy is hotly debated. Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), offers a reinterpretation of those works in suggesting Americans were blind to the realities of the war. Samples of these latter works include: Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Appraisal of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982); and Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998). More persuasive is Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006). Though Abrams left behind no written work on the war, Lewis Sorley, a staunch admirer of the general, provides insights in *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004). Mark Clodfelter takes on the air war in *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989). Thomas L. Ahern Jr. looks at the CIA in *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010). Finally, an often overlooked yet important work on senior military

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leaders is Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

On the war's final years, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993); and James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999) takes an overly sympathetic view of the Abrams's years.

For memoirs from senior leaders, students should consult William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971); Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986); Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995); Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978); Bruce, Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); and William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976). Among the best memoirs from junior officers and soldiers are: Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1977); David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King* (New York: Ballantine, 1986); Stuart A. Herrington, *Stalking the Vietcong: Inside Operation Phoenix: A Personal Account* (Navato, CA: Presidio, 2004); and Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). Less a memoir than an excellent collective biography of the enlisted soldier serving in Vietnam is Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993)

Journalists' accounts were important in covering the American experience and in setting a foundation for how the war has been outlined in popular memory. Among the most indispensable of this genre are David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, 1988); Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Doubleday, 1971); and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988). Also useful is Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977).

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The South Vietnamese perspective often gets lost in American-centric works on the war but should not be disregarded. Mark P. Bradley's *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) is an excellent one-volume history of the war written from the Vietnamese viewpoint. Both Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008) and Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), make an important contribution for understanding the U.S. Army's most important allies. Three provincial studies also delve into the war inside South Vietnam's villages: Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); and James Walker Trullinger Jr., *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 1980). For an argument on the cultural divide between allies, see Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

If the South Vietnamese perspective often is overlooked, the North Vietnamese also tends to get short shrift in American works. Relying on new research, the best among this group are Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002) and *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, translated by Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power*, 2d ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); and Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War against the U.S., 1965-1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011).

Finally, students should not overlook the value of novels in understanding the war from the soldiers' viewpoint. Among the best are Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (New York: Riverhead, 1996); Josiah Bunting, *The Lionheads* (New York: George Braziller, 1972); Karl Marlantes, *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2010); Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990); and Robert Roth, *Sand in the Wind* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

Primary Sources

Among the best documentary collections are Michael H. Hunt, *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: An International History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Also useful is Robert McMahon and Thomas Paterson, *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2007). For encyclopedias on the war, see Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social & Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Stanley I. Kutler, *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner, 2005).

Researchers should also consult two still useful collections of documents: *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision making on Vietnam*, ed. Mike Gravel, 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon, 1971-1972), and William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986-1995). The U.S. Department of State has collected a wonderful array of documents in the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series. These resources can be found online at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>.

For researchers delving into primary sources, the best place to begin is the Virtual Vietnam Archive run by Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. This online archive houses more than four million pages of materials and is located at <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/>. The physical archive has much more additional material for researchers. For higher level strategic insights, the presidential libraries in Boston, Massachusetts (Kennedy), Austin, Texas (Johnson), and Yorba Linda, California (Nixon) have important archival holdings. Those seeking insights into the U.S. Army will find excellent resources at the U.S. Army Military History Institute in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Army Center of Military History at Fort McNair, Washington, DC. The National Archives in College Park, Maryland, offers a vast amount of resources as well. Finally, for those wishing to focus on cultural issues within the region, researchers may wish to consult the John M. Echols Collection on Southeast Asia at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Researcher information can be found at <http://asia.library.cornell.edu/ac/Echols/index>.

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Notes:

(1.) JCS quoted in Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 229. Hastings argued that the "Korean War occupies a unique place in history, as the first superpower essay of the nuclear age in the employment of limited force to achieve limited objectives," p. 338. On the relationship of Korea to Europe, see Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 144.

(2.) Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 145, 232.

(3.) Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 311. For a broader context of this period, see Jonathan M. House, *A Military History of the Cold War, 1944-1962* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

(4.) Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Security* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 5, 7.

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(5.) Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 278. See also Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2103), 217. For a counterargument on how U.S. Army officers shunned learning and thus lost the war in Vietnam, see John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

(6.) Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 139. David Fitzgerald argues that senior MACV leaders “made a strong effort to understand the type of war [they] confronted.” *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2013), 38. On multiple dimensions of strategy, see Colin S. Gray, “Why strategy is difficult,” in *Strategic Studies: A Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Thomas G. Mahnken and Joseph A. Maiolo (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43.

(7.) Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives on the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 241. On larger Cold War issues, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 240.

(8.) McNamara quoted in Gerard J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2000), 135. On enemy escalation and its impact, see David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 346. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1954), 335-336.

(9.) Neil L. Jamieson argues that “Vietnamese clung to and fought over their own competing and incompatible visions of what Vietnam was and what it might and should become.” In Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), x.

(10.) Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 336. While early MAAG commanders realized the importance of economic development as part of an overall approach to strategy, Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr, who took over MAAG in August 1960, elevated the importance of counterinsurgency training within the ARVN ranks. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 365. See also Alexander S. Cochran Jr., “American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam: 1952-1965,” *Parameters* 14.2 (Summer 1984): 65.

(11.) Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 65, 72-73. While sympathetic to Ngo Dinh Diem, Mark Moyar covers the American participation during the advisory years in *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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(12.) *Agrovilles* were supposedly secure communities to which rural civilians were relocated in hopes of separating them from NLF insurgents. On Diem, development, and engineering a social revolution, see Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For a competing interpretation, see James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On training of South Vietnam forces, James Lawton Collins Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975).

(13.) Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 35.

(14.) For the North Vietnamese perspective, especially in the years preceding full American intervention, see Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), and William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power*, 2d ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996). For a perspective of Diem somewhat at odds with Miller, and especially Moyar, see Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

(15.) Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996), 94. On the air campaign, see Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989), and Lloyd C. Gardner, "Lyndon Johnson and the Bombing of Vietnam: Politics and Military Choices," in *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

(16.) Westmoreland quoted in Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 71. For an example of senior officers blaming civilians for limiting military means to achieve political ends, see U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1978).

(17.) On the contentious topic of escalation, see Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995). David L. Di Leo offers a treatment of a key dissenter inside the Johnson White House in *George Ball, Vietnam, and the Rethinking of Containment* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

(18.) Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 188.

(19.) Westmoreland's assessment in *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam*, vol. 4, ed. Mike Gravel. (Boston:

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Beacon Press, 1971-1972), 606. See also chapter 7, "Evolution of Strategy," in William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).

(20.) Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988), 354. On MACV guidance in implementing this broad strategy, see John M. Carland, "Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents," *Journal of Military History* 68.2 (April 2004): 553-574.

(21.) U. S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 100. *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 4, 296.

(22.) Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Công Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 46, 61. On the evolution of Hanoi's strategic thinking, see David W. P. Elliott, "Hanoi's Strategy in the Second Indochina War," in *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, ed. Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993).

(23.) The strategic debate is best outlined in Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 71. See also Nguyen Vu Tung, "Coping with the United States: Hanoi's Search for an Effective Strategy," in *The Vietnam War*, ed. Peter Lowe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 46-48; and Hanoi Assessment of Guerrilla War in South, November 1966, Folder 17, Box 06, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01-Assessment and Strategy, The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas (hereafter cited as TTUVA). Resolution 12 in Communist Strategy as Reflected in Lao Dong Party and COSVN Resolutions, Folder 26, Box 07, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06-Democratic Republic of Vietnam, TTUVA, p. 3.

(24.) For a useful historiographical sketch on the debates over intervention and American strategy, see Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), chapters 3 and 4.

(25.) Westmoreland quoted in Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 313. On early U.S. Army actions in Vietnam, see John M. Carland, *Stemming the Tide: May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2000), and Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1985).

(26.) Westmoreland explained his rationale for focusing on main force units in *A Soldier Reports*, 180. For a counterargument against this approach, see Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

(27.) The best monograph on the Ia Drang battles remains Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). For a

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perspective from the enemy side, see Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War against the U.S., 1965-1966* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), especially chapter 6.

(28.) COMUSMACV memorandum, "Increased Emphasis on Rural Construction," 8 December 1965, Correspondence, 1965-1966, Box 35, Jonathan O. Seaman Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania (hereafter cited as MHI).

(29.) Westmoreland highlighted Hanoi's continuing infiltration of forces into South Vietnam at the end of 1965. An evaluation of U.S. operations in early December underscored his concerns that "our attrition of their forces in South Vietnam is insufficient to offset this buildup." In Carland, "Winning the Vietnam War," 570. On the media's take on these early battles, see "G.I.'s Found Rising to Vietnam Test," *New York Times*, December 26, 1965.

(30.) Memorandum to President Lyndon B. Johnson from Robert S. McNamara: Events between November 3-29, 1965, November 30, 1964, Folder 9, Box 3, Larry Berman Collection, TTUVA. On McNamara being "shaken" by the meeting, see Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 579-580. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 221-222.

(31.) "Presidential Decisions: The Honolulu Conference, February 6-8, 1966," Folder 2, Box 4, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), TTUVA. John T. Wheeler, "Only a Fourth of South Viet Nam Is Under Control of Saigon Regime," *Washington Star*, January 25, 1966.

(32.) "1966 Program to Increase the Effectiveness of Military Operations and Anticipated Results Thereof," February 8, 1966, in *The War in Vietnam: The Papers of William C. Westmoreland*, ed. Robert E. Lester (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1993), Incl. 6, Folder 4, Reel 6. See also U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, vol. 5, *Vietnam, 1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 216-219 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*). Westmoreland took to heart the importance of rural construction. See MACV Commander's Conference, February 20, 1966, Counter VCI Folder, Historian's Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as CMH).

(33.) Pacification defined in "Handbook for Military Support of Pacification," February 1968, Folder 14, Box 5, United States Armed Forces Manual Collection, TTUVA. Seymour Topping, "Crisis in Saigon Snags U.S. Effort," *New York Times*, April 5, 1966. Martin G. Clemis, "Competing and Incompatible Visions: Revolution, Pacification, and the Political Organization of Space during the Second Indochina War," paper presented at the 81st Annual Meeting of the Society for Military History, April 2014, Kansas City, MO.

(34.) On Westmoreland's approach to pacification, see Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press,

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2014), chapter 5. For a counterargument that dismisses allied pacification efforts, see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).

(35.) Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 55. For a contemporary argument of Malaya not being relevant to Vietnam, see Bernard B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness: 1953-66* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 272.

(36.) Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 171-175.

(37.) The best monograph on pacification remains Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995). For a balanced treatment of Komer, see Frank L. Jones, *Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013). See also Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986). A partial impetus for an increased emphasis on pacification stemmed from a March 1966 report known as PROVN, shorthand for "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam." PROVN stressed nonmilitary means and argued that "victory" could be achieved only by "bringing the individual Vietnamese, typically a rural peasant, to support willingly the Government of South Vietnam (GVN)." Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (Department of the Army, March 1966), 1, 3. The best review of this still hotly debated document is Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72.4 (October 2008): 1213-1247.

(38.) Robert W. Komer, "Clear, Hold and Rebuild," *Army* 20.5 5 (May 1970): 19. On CORDS establishment, see National Security Action Memorandum No. 362, *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 5, 398-399. Though revolutionary development remained, at least nominally, a South Vietnamese program, many observers believed the inability of the ARVN to take over pacification in the countryside helped spur the establishment of CORDS. Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam, 1965-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 122. As of March 31, 1967, 53 ARVN infantry battalions were performing missions in direct support of pacification. MACV Monthly Evaluation Report, March 1967, MHI, 13.

(39.) For a contemporary discussion on the cultural divide between Americans and Vietnamese and how this impacted both military operations and the pacification program, see Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972). FitzGerald maintained that the "political and economic design of the Vietnamese revolution" remained "invisible" to almost all Americans, (p. 143).

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(40.) For competing tasks within CORDS, see Chester L. Cooper, et al., "The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, Volume III: History of Pacification," March 1972, Folder 65, U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, TTUVA, 271. Journalist Ward Just reported that the real yardsticks of pacification's progress were "the Vietnamese view of events, the Vietnamese mood, the Vietnamese will and the Vietnamese capability." See "Another Measure of Vietnam's War," *Washington Post*, October 15, 1967. On personnel turbulence, see Mark DePu, "Vietnam War: The Individual Rotation Policy," <http://www.historynet.com/vietnam-war-the-individual-rotation-policy.htm>.

(41.) As a sampling of contemporary journalist critiques of the war in 1967, see: Joseph Kraft, "The True Failure in Saigon—South Vietnam's Fighting Force," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1967; Ward Just, "This War May Be Unwinnable," *Washington Post*, June 4, 1967; and R. W. Apple, "Vietnam: The Signs of Stalemate," *New York Times*, August 7, 1967. On the war in 1967 being perceived as a stalemate, see Sir Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay, 1969), 67; and Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954-1975*, rev. ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 96. On military operations early in 1967, see Bernard W. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City: A Turning Point* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974, 2004).

(42.) On Johnson's salesmanship campaign, see Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), especially chapters 5-7. On the MACV-CIA debate, see James J. Wirtz, "Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy during the Vietnam War," *Political Science Quarterly* 106.2 (Summer 1991): 239-263.

(43.) On Hanoi's views and its policy for a decisive victory, see *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 206-207. On overriding political goals of Tet, see: Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 116-126; James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 10, 20-21; Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 70-71; and Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 303.

(44.) If successful, Hanoi's leaders also would be in a more advantageous position if forced into a "fighting while negotiating" phase of the war. Ford, *Tet 1968*, 93. See also Merle L. Pribbenow II, "General Võ Nguyên Giáp and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tết Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3 (Summer 2008): 1-33.

(45.) Carver quoted in Robert J. McMahon, "Turning Point: The Vietnam War's Pivotal Year, November 1967-November 1968," in Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 198. For a journalist's account, see Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Garden City, NY:

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Doubleday, 1971). For an accessible reference book, see William T. Allison, *The Tet Offensive: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

(46.) Gallup poll results in the aftermath of Tet in Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War*, 185. Background on LBJ's March 31 speech in Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Descent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 600-602; A. J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 492-493; and Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 320-321. Decision on troop levels in Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 576.

(47.) Zeb B. Bradford, "With Creighton Abrams during Tet," *Vietnam* (February 1998): 45. Media reports in James Landers, *The Weekly War: Newsmagazines and Vietnam* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 145-146. As examples arguing for a change in strategy, see A. J. Langguth, "General Abrams Listens to a Different Drum," *New York Times*, May 5, 1968, and "A 'Different' War Now, With Abrams in Command," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 26, 1968, 12. On Abrams's "one-war" concept, see Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 18. The Westmoreland-Abrams strategy debate remains contentious. In his admiration of Abrams, Lewis Sorley is most vocal in supporting a change in strategic concept. See as an example, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), xix. Others are less certain. Phillip Davidson served under both commanders, as did Robert W. Komer—neither subscribed to a change in strategy under Abrams. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 512, and Komer in *The Lessons of Vietnam*, ed. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), 79. Andrew Birtle's argument on the change being "more in emphasis than in substance" seems most compelling. "As MACV admitted in 1970, 'the basic concept and objectives of pacification, to defeat the VC/NVA and to provide the people with economic and social benefits, have changed little since the first comprehensive GVN plan was published in 1964.'" In *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 367.

(48.) Andrew J. Goodpaster, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, May 1976, MHI, p. 40. On peace replacing military victory, see Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 178.

(49.) On goals, see Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books 1980), 106, and *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House: 1985), 98. Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 298. See also Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 50. Jeffrey Kimball argues that de-Americanization "was a course made politically necessary by the American public's desire to wind down the war and doubts among key segments of the foreign-policy establishment about the possibility of winning the war." *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 12.

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(50.) On withdrawal not representing a defeat, see "Now: A Shift in Goals, Methods," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 6, 1969, 16. On global perspective, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 62. Michael Lind argues that Nixon had to withdraw "in a manner that preserved domestic support for the Cold War in other theaters." *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 106.

(51.) Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 349. On realizing limits to U.S. power, see Lawrence W. Serewicz, *America at the Brink of Empire: Rusk, Kissinger, and the Vietnam War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 10. On containing communism, see U.S. Embassy Statement, "Objectives and Courses of Action of the United States in South Viet-Nam," *FRUS*, 1964-1968, vol. 7, 719. See also Lloyd Gardner, "The Last Casualty? Richard Nixon and the End of the Vietnam War, 1969-75," in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 230.

(52.) On problems of different types of threats, see Viet-Nam Info Series 20: "The Armed Forces of the Republic of Viet Nam," from Vietnam Bulletin, 1969, Folder 09, Box 13, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02-Military Operations, TTUVA, ps. 8, 25. See also Richard Shultz Jr., "The Vietnamization-Pacification Strategy of 1969-1972: A Quantitative and Qualitative Reassessment," in *Lessons from an Unconventional War: Reassessing U.S. Strategies for Future Conflicts*, ed. Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Shultz Jr. (New York: Pergamon, 1982), 55-56. Loren Baritz argues that the "Nixon administration abandoned counterinsurgency" since it realized the NLF no longer was a significant threat. *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 279.

(53.) Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 104-107. Definition of pacification on p. 132.

(54.) Pacification Priority Area Summary, September 3, 1968, prepared by CORDS, Folder 65, US Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, TTUVA. Countryside depopulation in Charles Mohr, "Saigon Tries to Recover from the Blows," *New York Times*, May 10, 1968; and David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, concise ed. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 331, 336. On problems of measuring pacification security, see Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 118-122.

(55.) The Chieu Hoi ("Open Arms") program, begun in 1963, aimed to "rally" Vietcong defectors to the GVN side as part of a larger national reconciliation effort. The plan sought to give former insurgents "opportunities for defection, an alternative to the hardships and deprivations of guerrilla life, political pardon, and in some measure, though vocational training, a means of earning a livelihood." Jeanette A. Koch, *The Chieu Hoi Program in South Vietnam, 1963-1971* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1973), v.

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(56.) Vietnam Lessons Learned No. 73, "Defeat of VC Infrastructure," November 20, 1968, MACV Lessons Learned, Box 1, RG 472, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. See also Dale Andradé, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990); and Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997, 2007).

(57.) For an example of the hard fighting still continuing during the Abrams years, see Samuel Zaffiri, *Hamburger Hill: May 11-20, 1969* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988). On what U.S. advisers were doing as part of Vietnamization, see Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 342-343.

(58.) On ARVN increases, see in Larry A. Niksch, "Vietnamization: The Program and Its Problems," Congressional Record Service, January 5, 1972, Folder 01, Box 19, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02-Military Operations, TTUVA, p. CRS-21. The best work on the South Vietnamese Army is Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

(59.) "The Laird Plan," *Newsweek*, June 2, 1969, 44. On ARVN lacking experience, see James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 51; and Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 211.

(60.) Vietnamization working in Nixon, RN, 467. On enemy infiltration, see John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999). On the incursion, see John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), and Keith William Nolan, *Into Cambodia: Spring Campaign, Summer Offensive, 1970* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1990).

(61.) On My Lai, see Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking, 1992), and William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

(62.) Mansfield and McGovern (both Democrats) quoted in Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 645, 649. See also Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 76. For an introduction to the antiwar movement and its impact on Nixon, see Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002).

(63.) Donald Kirk, "Who Wants to Be the Last American Killed in Vietnam?" *New York Times*, September 19, 1971. See also "As Fighting Slows in Vietnam: Breakdown in GI Discipline" *U.S. News & World Report*, June 7, 1971, and George Lepre, *Fragging: Why U.S. Soldiers Assaulted Their Officers in Vietnam* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011). "Fragging," derived from fragmentation grenade, was the act of fratricide, usually against an officer in a soldier's chain of command. For counterarguments to the claims of

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army dysfunctionality, see William J. Shkurti, *Soldiering on in a Dying War: The True Story of the Firebase Pace Incidents and the Vietnam Drawdown* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), and Jeremy Kuzmarov, *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

(64.) Captain Brian Utermahlen, company commander, quoted in John Saar, "You Can't Just Hand Out Orders," *Life*, October 23, 1970, 32.

(65.) "The Troubled U.S. Army in Vietnam," *Newsweek*, January 11, 1971, 30, 34. On avoiding risks in a withdrawing army, see Saar, 31. James E. Westheider, *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

(66.) Troop strengths in Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to U.S. Army Combat and Support Forces in Vietnam, 1961-1973* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2003), 334. Kissinger's concerns in *The White House Years*, 971.

(67.) Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), 8. On Lam Son 719 being linked to continuing withdrawals, see Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 199.

(68.) Two new works cover the Lam Son 719 operation: James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), and Robert D. Sander, *Invasion of Laos, 1971: Lam Son 719* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

(69.) Politburo quoted in *Victory in Vietnam*, 283. On Hanoi's strategic motives, see Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 324; Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 28-29; and Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 157-158.

(70.) Politburo quoted in *Victory in Vietnam*, 283. On uncertainty over Hanoi's intentions, see Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, 124; Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 117-118; and Anthony T. Bouscaren, ed., *All Quiet on the Eastern Front: The Death of South Vietnam* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1977), 44. Nixon viewed the invasion "as a sign of desperation." In *RN*, 587.

(71.) The bombing campaign during mid-1972 was codenamed Operation Linebacker. On debates between the White House and MACV over the best use of B-52s, see Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 119-120; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 314-315; and H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G. P.

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Putnam's, 1994), 435. On the campaign ending with "no culminating battles and mass retreats, just the gradual erosion of NVA strength and the release of pressure against defending ARVN troops," see Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, 270.

(72.) James H. Willbanks argues that "the fact U.S. tactical leadership and firepower were the key ingredients . . . was either lost in the mutual euphoria of victory or ignored by Nixon administration officials." In *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 166.

(73.) Thieu's defiance and Hanoi's intransigence in Robert Dalleck, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 443. Paris agreement in Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 366-368. See also Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 276-277.

(74.) Linebacker II goals in Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 364-365. Press quoted in *ibid.*, 366.

(75.) Ronald B. Frankum Jr., "'Swatting Flies with a Sledgehammer': The Air War," in *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land: The Vietnam War Revisited*, ed. Andrew Wiest (New York: Osprey, 2006), 221-222.

(76.) Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 180-181. MACV staff in Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 9.

(77.) Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 247.

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