



Vietnamese governments. Some already were opposed, but others were provoked by the assaults on their villages. Thus, the U.S. military's own tactics were causing them to lose the important political battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

As the war dragged on, it became clear that U.S. strategy was stalemated by the enemy's clever and tenacious defense. As long as it was willing to stay the course, the U.S. could control militarily any area it chose. However, it could never establish sufficient political control over enough of the country to leave the fighting to the ARVN, let alone to neutralize the insurgency. The question was how long the American public and its representatives in Congress would tolerate the escalating costs of this stalemate.

North Vietnam could not conquer the South as long as it was defended by U.S. troops. However, its interest in the struggle was deeper and longer standing than that of the U.S. As Premier Pham Van Dong explained to Bernard Fall, they were willing to fight for decades, even centuries, as they had done against the Chinese. He predicted that the U.S. would become frustrated with the long, inconclusive war and eventually give up. Thus, the NVA/VC did not have to win, but merely to keep from losing.

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## The Air War: 1965-1967

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Most American leaders disputed Dong's prediction of eventual NVA/VC victory. They believed that their bombing campaign would make the war too costly for the North Vietnamese. The air war campaign, called "Rolling Thunder," had three related objectives: (1) to break the will of North Vietnamese leaders to support the Vietcong in the south, (2) to destroy North Vietnam's industrial base, and (3) to stop the flow of men and supplies to the south.

The unit of measurement for bombing missions is called the "sortie," one flight by one plane. Throughout 1965, the sortie rate climbed, from 3,600 in April to an average of 5,500 a month by the end of the year. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor explained that U.S. air attacks would escalate until leaders in the North came to see a "vision of inevitable, ultimate destruction if they do not change their ways!" Some 134 targets in North Vietnam were bombed in 1965, many of them more than once.

*Failure Leads to Escalation*

On the advice of Secretary of Defense McNamara, President Johnson stopped the bombing from December 1965 through January 1966. The purpose was to persuade the American public and world opinion that the U.S. was serious about peace and willing to “give North Vietnam a face-saving chance to stop the aggression.” However, when war planners assessed the campaign, they were forced to conclude, “the idea that destroying or threatening to destroy North Vietnam’s industry would pressure Hanoi into calling it quits

seems, in retrospect, a colossal misjudgment.”

In 1966, rather than abandon the air war, the U.S. developed a new plan for attacking North Vietnam’s petroleum-oil lubricants (POL) facilities, that is, gasoline supplies. According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, attacks on such facilities would damage the DRV “capability to move war supporting resources within the country and along the infiltration routes to SVN [South Vietnam]....” The air strikes wiped out 80 percent of the storage areas in Haiphong Harbor and completely destroyed the large “tank farm” in Hanoi. In August, the

**Corporal Charles Chungtu, U.S.M.C.**

This is what the war ended up being about:  
we would find a V.C. village,  
and if we could not capture it  
or clear it of Cong,  
we called for jets.  
The jets would come in, low and terrible,  
sweeping down, and screaming,  
in their first pass over the village.  
Then they would return, dropping their first bombs  
that flattened the huts to rubble and debris.  
And then the jets would sweep back again  
and drop more bombs  
that blew the rubble and debris  
to dust and ashes.  
And then the jets would come back once again,  
in a last pass, this time to drop napalm  
that burned the dust and ashes to just nothing.  
Then the village  
that was not a village any more  
was our village.

—Bryan Alec Floyd

U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency declared that 70 percent of North Vietnam's known bulk-storage capacity had been destroyed as well as seven percent of its smaller sites.

#### *More Failure: More Escalation*

Despite such widespread destruction, the CIA estimated that North Vietnam still had a POL storage capacity of about 90,000 tons, or almost three times the 32,000 tons it needed to sustain the war effort.

At McNamara's request, the Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA) evaluated the effectiveness of the air strikes on POL facilities. It concluded that "as of July 1966, the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the south at the current level."

The reason for this, quite simply, was that Vietcong and NVA forces in the south had little need for gasoline supplies. They did not have that many trucks, let alone armored divisions, airplanes or helicopters. Besides, the VC received relatively few supplies from the north. They got their money, dry goods and food from people in the south. Most of their weapons were either captured in ambushes or purchased on the black market. Even if you included all North Vietnamese regular troops operating in the south, the CIA estimated the total need for supplies to be no greater than 100 tons a day. This could be conveyed in just 50 truckloads. Supplies also were carried on bicycles and the backs of porters, and floated down streams in 55-gallon drums. In the analysis of Air Force Major Earl H. Tilford Jr., "a hundred tons of supplies proved to be too small a trickle for air power to shut off."

The IDA's analysis highlighted what it saw as the fundamental flaw in the U.S. air strategy: North Vietnam had "basically a subsistence agricultural economy" that presented "a difficult and unrewarding system for air attacks." There were few manufacturing plants and most regions were nearly self-sufficient in food and other basic goods. Finally, the study group concluded, "The indirect effects of the bombing on the will of the North Vietnamese to continue fighting...have not shown themselves in any tangible way."

Rejecting the basic logic of this analysis, Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that the only problem with the air war was that planners had restricted too many targets close to population centers.

They insisted that the U.S. should be less concerned with U.S. public and world opinion and impose only those minimum restraints necessary to avoid indiscriminate killing of the population.

President Johnson gave the green light to escalate the air war again. In October 1966 alone, 12,000 sorties were flown. For most of 1967, pilots were allowed to strike almost any target but Haiphong Harbor and parts of Hanoi. However, in August, McNamara had to admit to Congress that "the enemy operations in the south cannot, on the basis of any reports I have seen, be stopped by air bombardment—short, that is, of the virtual annihilation of North Vietnam and its people." Of course, U.S. leaders rejected such a course. All civilized nations agree that modern wars are to be fought for high principle or rational gain, not annihilation of a whole people.

#### *Failure Again*

As for the other objectives, Johnson's advisors were very negative. McGeorge Bundy concluded that "Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues simply are not going to change their policy on the basis of losses from the air in North Vietnam." In fact, he stated, no intelligence estimate over the last two years had even made such a claim. And Walt Rostow, another key Presidential advisor, was now saying, "We have never held the view that bombing could stop infiltration."

A second IDA study confirmed that, as of October 1967, U.S. bombing of North Vietnam still had not reduced the flow of men and supplies to the south nor "weakened the determination of the North Vietnamese leaders to continue to direct and support the insurgency in the south."

In sum, the U.S. command responded to reports that the bombing campaign was not effective in achieving its objectives by increasing the scope and intensity of the bombing. In 1965, 25,000 sorties dropped 63,000 tons of bombs; in 1966, 79,000 sorties dropped 136,000 tons; and in 1967, 108,000 sorties dropped 226,000 tons. It finally became clear that the problem was not one of scale but of basic concept.

According to Tilford, "The Air Force was hurt badly in Vietnam. We lost 2,257 aircraft. More than 2,700 airmen perished and many remain missing." The Rolling Thunder campaign itself "cost us \$10 for every \$1 worth of damage inflicted on North Vietnam."

Ironically, U.S. air losses were greater than neces-

sary precisely because the objectives of the campaign were unrealistic. In the absence of any confirmed strategic value, U.S. commanders concentrated on producing big numbers, in a manner similar to the body counts.

The monthly limits on bombing missions were transposed by the Air Force and Navy into "production quotas." Each commander was evaluated on whether or not his unit reached their "quota" of sorties. The pressure to keep flying sorties continued into the hazardous flying weather of December through mid-May. Pilots who complained that bad weather made bombing missions both futile and dangerous were confronted with arguments for bureaucratic self interest. One officer told Air Force Captain Richard S. Drury:

Obviously you don't understand the big picture, Captain. If you knew what was really going on, you'd see why you're going out there. It's simply a matter of dropping ordnance [bombs and rockets] and flying sorties. The more we drop the better we do and also the Defense Department looks at what we used during this time period and projects our future finances and allotments on that figure. If we cancel flights then we drop less ordnance, use less fuel and oil, and get less next time.

Early in the war, the competition between Air Force and Navy commanders over sortie rates led to many planes being sent on missions with very few bombs, thus risking more pilots and planes than necessary. Tilford concludes, "the large maintenance toil needed to support our sophisticated aircraft enforced a managerial mindset in which quantitative measures, like sortie-generation rates, in-commission rates, and bomb damage assessments became an end unto themselves."

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## Pacification: 1967

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In 1967, as confidence in the bombing strategy waned, the U.S. finally began to pay serious attention to pacification. McNamara persuaded the South Vietnamese to put up to 60 percent of ARVN infantry battalions into what was called Revolutionary Development operations. An Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development (CORDS) was created under Robert Komer, a hard-driving, outspoken manager nicknamed

"Blowtorch." Employing South Vietnamese, South Koreans and Thais, CORDS activities included resettling refugees, village security, local political participation, encouraging enemy defections, and other projects.

The training and successful operation of local paramilitary units was an important part of the village security program. Some American critics accused these regional forces (RF) and popular forces (PF), derisively called "Ruff-Puffs," of general ineptitude, cowardice and infiltration by the Vietcong. Clearly, the Ruff-Puffs had minimal training, poor leadership, and little combat support such as communication radios, mortars, artillery support, air resources, or even ammunition. Yet they were a prime target for communist attacks and suffered a large percentage of South Vietnamese casualties. It also should be acknowledged that they accounted for 30 percent of enemy kills. One observer called them the unsung heroes of the war.

The *Chieu Hoi* program to encourage defectors from the enemy was the most successful pacification effort. Between 1965-1972, 50 billion propaganda leaflets were distributed in the two Vietnams, Laos, and Cambodia. This program produced more than 200,000 defectors, including about 120,000 enemy combatants, without any loss of life. Comparatively inexpensive, the program had one of the best cost/benefit ratios of any activity undertaken.

Despite its success, the program provided many examples of American cultural ignorance. Many messages were written in literary Vietnamese rather than peasant vernacular. This conveyed an elitist tone and alienated the common people. Vietnamese interpreters often translated American phrases literally which distorted the message. One leaflet used a picture of a bikini-clad Vietnamese woman to appeal to communist soldiers. The Vietnamese just considered the whole thing to be in bad taste.

The most controversial pacification project was the Phoenix Program to eliminate the Vietcong infrastructure (VCI) who operated undercover in the government, military, and business communities as well as the villages. The program was run by the South Vietnamese with U.S. technical and logistical support coordinated by the CIA. Some 81,000 people were arrested and interrogated. Torture often was used to extract confessions. According to figures from the Saigon government, 33,000 were sentenced to prison, 26,000 were killed and 22,000 changed their allegiance to the South



North Vietnamese supplies moving south on bicycles.

Vietnamese government.

Unfortunately, the program often was subverted by other interests. Some South Vietnamese used Phoenix to settle family feuds, wipe out debts, or eliminate personal enemies. An intelligence officer in the U.S. Army attached to Phoenix reported: "When I arrived in the district I was given a list of 200 names of people who had to be killed. When I left after six months, we still hadn't killed anyone on the list. But we'd killed 260 other people."

Phoenix's record is mixed. In some provinces, it was very successful in virtually eliminating the VCI. In others, it accomplished nothing. Leadership, commitment, and local conditions varied tremendously. Post-war interviews with communist leaders revealed that they considered Phoenix a very devastating program. Whatever the program's flaws, it is clear that in a revolutionary war, targeting the hidden infrastructure—counterinsurgency—is an essential element of strategy.

### *Counting the Enemy*

By the middle of 1967, the number of NVA soldiers in the south was less than three percent of North Vietnam's available manpower. One study in late 1968 showed that if enemy forces continued to sustain the unusually high level of casualties inflicted in the first half of that year, it still would take a minimum of 15 1/2 years to eliminate the enemy. In summary, the attrition strategy was doomed to fail.

However, Lyndon Johnson did not accept this logic. He believed that the U.S. could make the costs so heavy for North Vietnam that in time they would abandon the Vietcong, and then the guerrillas could be eliminated. Johnson and military strategists failed fully to appreciate the revolutionary dimensions of the conflict and continued to underestimate the indigenous strength of the Vietcong.

In late 1966 and early 1967, a debate raged among the CIA, military intelligence, and the Joint Chiefs over who should be counted as Vietcong combatants. Should part-time personnel engaged in auxiliary tasks be included alongside trained, armed guerrillas? From his study of captured enemy documents, CIA analyst Sam Adams argued that the number of Vietcong was much higher, in fact, almost double what MACV listed. If these higher numbers were correct, most of the claims of progress were invalid. This would be politically

damaging to support for the war.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle Wheeler, did not want these higher estimates released to the press. General Westmoreland concurred. After the war, a television documentary accused Westmoreland of covering up the higher numbers even from the President. General Westmoreland brought suit, but later dropped it in the middle of a widely publicized trial. Both adversaries claimed that their positions had been upheld.

In the fall of 1967, CIA, military intelligence, the ambassador to South Vietnam, and others agreed to accept the MACV estimates as official. Soon afterward Westmoreland reported to President Johnson that the tide of the war was shifting to the U.S. In a speech to Congress and the American people, the General professed to "see the light at the end of the tunnel" and predicted that the U.S. would start to withdraw troops in the next couple of years.

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## The War Turns Bad: 1968

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Within a few weeks there were indications of a major communist build-up around Khe Sanh, an isolated Marine outpost 14 miles south of the DMZ and six miles from the Laotian border. The siege of Khe Sanh began in late January. It lasted for 77 days and was the most controversial battle of the war. Johnson feared an American Dienbienphu and got a written "guarantee" from each member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the base would be held. He had a model built in the war room in the White House basement and studied the situation daily. The media also watched developments closely. Walter Cronkite called the battle of Khe Sanh a "microcosm of the war."

When it was over, an estimated 10,000-15,000 North Vietnamese had been killed, as contrasted to fewer than 250 Americans. Westmoreland called Khe Sanh "one of the most damaging, one-sided defeats among many that the North Vietnamese incurred." General Lewis Walt called it "the most important battle of the war." Westmoreland added that Khe Sanh "discredited" the "myth of General Giap's military genius."

General Dave Palmer disagreed. He saw Khe Sanh as a diversionary tactic that "accomplished its purpose