

# Vietnam Revisioned: The Military Campaign against Civilian Control

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*When there is a threat of war, our military leaders deserve a stronger voice in policymaking. When our political leaders commit us to war, the military voice should be given priority consideration.*

— William C. Westmoreland, April 1978<sup>1</sup>

**H**istorically, one of the central tenets of American democracy has been the necessity for the elected political leaders of the nation to maintain absolute control of the military. Fear of professional military officers and standing armies, stemming from the role of the British army under the Crown in the days before independence, assured that the new nation would impose strong civilian control over the military. Such control continued to seem natural, logical, and sensible in the days of episodic, conventional wars—notwithstanding occasional strains, such as McLellan's agitation with Lincoln, when military leaders chafed under close civilian control; and America's record of success in war suggested that the system, if awkward, was working. Since the Second World War, however, with a state of perpetual cold war featuring intermittent, unconventional, limited military activities, major tension has appeared in the relations between American soldier and civilian. The Vietnam War, an unsuccessful, limited, unconventional war, brought the stress to the surface most pointedly. Professional military officers with Vietnam experience at best are disillusioned with the role civilians played in direction of the war, and at worst are prepared to challenge civilian domination of the military establishment—a move that would affect a profound transformation in the nature of civil-military relations in America.

<sup>1</sup> William C. Westmoreland, "Vietnam in Perspective," *Military Review* 59, no. 1 (January 1979): 42.

A meaningful proportion of American military officers may be prepared to accept a stab-in-the-back theory that would be the basis for challenging traditional civilian control of the military. Thus statements as Westmoreland's made in an address to faculty and students at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College—the Army's "finishing school" for future generals—must be taken seriously. The general's appearance at the college was no mere gesture. Westmoreland's reputation and experience as commander of American ground forces in Vietnam during the buildup and through some of the worst fighting of the war—and then Army Chief of Staff through the withdrawal—provided him with a perspective that young officers bound for high command would keenly seek. Westmoreland's credibility with the American public may have been destroyed with Tet in 1968, but his remarks were much more than the bitter rambling of a man whose reputation had become entwined with the Vietnam disaster. A measure of the importance of the general's words within the military is the publication of his speech in full in the Command and General Staff College's *Military Review*, a journal read widely within the ranks of the Army's officer corps. Indeed, it seems likely that Westmoreland's views—especially his criticism of the role of civilian leaders and American society in the conduct of the war—have found a ready reception among a significant segment of a professional officer corps jaded and disillusioned by the Vietnam experience.

**W**estmoreland's interpretation of the Vietnam War would please few serious students of the struggles. His suggestions for the future of civil-military relations in the country should alarm those who believe civilian control of the military is a crucial element in the future health and success of democracy. Westmoreland seeks to exploit the American defeat in Vietnam by attributing the blame to irresolute political leaders, a near-treasonous press, and an uncaring American public. In this view of the war the American military emerges as another victim—too hastily committed and too rapidly abandoned by the politicians, badly maligned by an irresponsible press, and unappreciated by the American public.

"Our erstwhile honorable country," stated Westmoreland, "betrayed and deserted the Republic of Vietnam after it had enticed it to our bosom. It was a shabby performance by America, a blemish on our history and a possible blight on our future." According to Westmoreland's analysis, this American action was caused by "vulnerabilities" in our system,<sup>2</sup> chief among them the failure of America's political leaders to understand the nature of the challenge in Vietnam and

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

their failure to take the steps necessary for meeting that challenge. Thus President John F. Kennedy, enamored by counterinsurgency warfare and convinced that he needed to make a demonstration of American will to the Soviet Union, committed increasing forces to Vietnam. But in his enthusiasm he made a "grievous mistake," one that "morally locked us in Vietnam": the approved overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem. By that act the United States lost its one chance to have "gracefully withdrawn our support in view of a demonstrated lack of unity" in Saigon.<sup>3</sup>

Westmoreland blamed President Lyndon B. Johnson for pursuing a piecemeal, gradualist approach during his term. Johnson became "obsessed" with the Great Society, Westmoreland said, and was unwilling to ask for the hard sacrifices the war required; as a result he made decisions "destined to drag the war on indefinitely."<sup>4</sup> He compelled the American forces to follow a defensive strategy on the ground, thereby giving the enemy the initiative, and he adopted a bombing policy more sensitive to political pressure at home than to the strategic needs of the struggle with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

In his comments on the air war, Westmoreland displayed his faith in the doctrine of the invincibility of air power. He ridiculed the gradualist approach (meant to provide Hanoi with a clear message of American intent while at the same time allowing them the opportunity to back down), arguing that the enemy got a message "not of resolve and strength but of political insecurity and weakness," a message the politicians communicated and the antiwar dissidents amplified.<sup>6</sup> He argued that air power, applied with determined intensity, could have crushed the enemy, especially in the period following the Tet offensive of 1968, which he characterized as a defeat so severe that it took the enemy four years to recover.<sup>7</sup> He reminded his audience that this was the lesson of the Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972 when Le Duc Tho, the negotiator for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, "came to the conference table and actually wept, saying that they could not take any more."<sup>8</sup>

Westmoreland was less critical of America's policy after 1969, perhaps because under President Nixon the Army finally won permission to invade the sanctuaries in Cambodia (1970) and in Laos (1971). He termed the Paris Agreement

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 38-39. I can find no confirmation of such behavior on the part of Le Duc Tho. From what is known of the DRV's negotiator, such a loss of control seems extremely unlikely.

of 1973 as "defective in many respects" but "thoroughly workable," saving his strongest criticism for the liberal coalition in Congress that enacted the Cooper-Church amendment cutting off all direct American military support in Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> This "instrument of surrender" in Vietnam, said Westmoreland, was a shameful abandonment of our allies in Saigon. Responsibility for the ultimate American defeat in Vietnam was assigned to the anarchy in American society produced by the antiwar movement, and to the American media, which, he charged, distorted the war in such a manner that it became a tool of Hanoi and Moscow.<sup>10</sup>

Westmoreland closed his analysis of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam by praising the loyalty, humanity (noting that a few exceptions, such as My Lai, were "overplayed" by the media), valor, and performance of the American military in Vietnam. More importantly, he also went on to draw "lessons" from the Vietnam War that he claimed would avoid problems in the future. He called for a "more convincing sense of responsibility" on the part of the media, which probably would mean censorship, and he warned against either using gradualist strategies ("It takes the full strength of a tiger to kill a rabbit"<sup>11</sup>), or engaging American forces in war without the total support of the nation. Further, he asserted that not only should military leaders be given control once war begins, but military officers should be given a more prominent role in the formulation of foreign policy in advance of the threat of war. Given the dynamics of the cold war, this advice would inevitably result in continuous military involvement in the formulation of policy. One of the major lessons of the Vietnam War, in Westmoreland's view, was the impracticality of a continued civilian monopoly over the foreign policymaking process.

Westmoreland's analyses are seriously flawed, and nowhere more than in his criticism of America's political leaders. One searches the documents unsuccessfully, for example, for evidence that any American military leader in the post-Diem period ever recommended or even seriously considered recommending withdrawal after Diem's death. Kennedy made his decisions largely on the basis of military recommendations to increase, not to stop and evaluate the American commitment.

The general's comments on the strategy of the ground war, too, are self-serving, since it was he who fashioned the American ground strategy of attrition. As Robert Gallucci has correctly observed, one of the curious quid pro quos of the war was the one struck between civilians in Washington and the military: the Army was given almost complete freedom in running the ground war in the South

9 Ibid., p. 40.

10 Ibid., p. 41.

11 Ibid., p. 42.

(barring the expansion of the war into the “sanctuaries”) in exchange for close civilian control over the air war in the North—that aspect of the struggle considered the most volatile and where a miscalculation might easily lead to Soviet or Chinese involvement.<sup>12</sup> His remarks also contrast sharply with his comments in his memoirs when he recalled that once Washington approved his strategy of attrition, he had “broad authority” to use the troops as he saw fit.<sup>13</sup> One can only speculate on why Westmoreland chose to alter his appraisal of the degree of independence of command he enjoyed in Vietnam, but the interpretation he offered the future generals fits more neatly with his larger message: The politicians in Washington were responsible for the failure in Vietnam.

**B**ecause a significant number of his fellow officers share them, Westmoreland's opinions deserve to be taken seriously. Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Westmoreland's contemporary as Commander in Chief, Pacific, during the war, is even more vehement in his condemnation of the Washington leaders. His memoir, titled *Strategy for Defeat*, has as its central thesis the betrayal of the American military by the civilians. It is probable that similar views are more widely held, although more guardedly, by a significant segment of the officer corps. There are, of course, many officers, usually those who served at the company and battalion level, who less readily accept Westmoreland's version of what went wrong. These officers recognize that the military entered the war with such inherent doctrinal and institutional flaws as excessive dependence on technology, conventional tactics, and firepower. They recognize the problems of rampant careerism, in the form of “ticket punching,” created when officers were more intent on filling their dossiers than on accomplishing the mission. And they are ashamed of the brute dishonesty that was displayed in exaggerated kill ratios and other measures of progress. But even having said that, they share Westmoreland's conviction that in Vietnam the Washington civilians exercised too much control over the armed forces and that this prevented the military from succeeding.<sup>14</sup>

One searches long and hard for empirical data that could shed light on the attitude of professional officers concerning the future of civil-military relations.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor: The Politics of American Military Policy in Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> Skeptics are invited to skim the pages of leading military journals such as *Parameters*, *Air University Review*, and *Military Review* for plentiful evidence of this sentiment.

But the few studies that do exist yield disturbing results.<sup>15</sup> They show that the Vietnam experience has resulted in serious tensions between professional military officers and the ideals and values of the larger society. The officers' attitudes can be summarized to include the belief that the traditional values of discipline, sacrifice, and patriotism have vanished from the larger society and remain intact only in the military; that the military was sent to Vietnam to fight a war that it was not permitted to win; and that the media was overwhelmingly biased against their effort. And yet it is a measure of the ambiguity of the military mind that when asked directly whether they agree that the principle of civilian control of the military was a "proper constitutional requirement to ensure preservation of democracy," they respond positively in an overwhelming manner.<sup>16</sup> This contradiction probably can be best explained by the ritualistic status the military academies accord the constitutional ideal, if not the operating reality, of civil-military relations.

Other evidence exists that professional military officers accept Westmoreland's thesis that the military should have a larger role in developing foreign policy. In recent years professional military journals have published a number of articles advancing a new model for the education and training of professional officers. Sometimes called the "soldier-statesman" model, these articles generally conclude that the nation should no longer leave the formulation of policy to civilians. For example, an article in *Military Review* in 1974 by Colonel Donald F. Bletz, who wrote frequently on the topic, gave Westmoreland's plea a more sophisticated dress. In the past, Bletz recalled, civilians were solely responsible for gauging the *intent* of the potential enemy; they developed policy accordingly, while the military concentrated on studying the enemy's *capability*. In the fast-paced modern world, argued the colonel, such a separation of responsibility would no longer suffice, because "undefinability replaces specificity in describing the threat," thus making intent more difficult to establish.<sup>17</sup> Bletz may not

15 The following general comments are summarized from John H. Moellering, "The Army Turns Inward," *Military Review* 53, no. 7 (July 1973): 68-83; and Franklin D. Margiotta, "A Military Elite in Transition: Air Force Leaders in the 1980s," *Armed Forces and Society* 2, no. 2 (winter 1976): 155-84. An interesting survey of the general officers who served in Vietnam was made by Douglas Kinnard, a former general, and published as *The War Managers* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977). The generals surveyed by Kinnard displayed the same bitterness over civilian interference in the war as does Westmoreland. A surprising feature of Kinnard's work is how many generals were thoroughly disgusted with the way the war was conducted (including the attrition strategy) and how few resigned in protest.

16 Moellering received a positive response to the question from 93 percent of the Army officers; Margiotta found that 89 percent of the Air Force officers agreed. Moellering, "The Army Turns Inward," p. 80; Margiotta, "A Military Elite in Transition," p. 173.

17 Donald F. Bletz, "How Much Force to Defend Against What?" *Military Review* 54, no. 1 (January 1974): 7.

have provided a remedy to the problem he describes, but his novel approach, involving military officers in measuring a potential enemy's intent, would certainly broaden the military's participation in the policy process. Enough such articles have appeared in military journals to cause one observer, Jerome Slater, to note that

The rhetoric and logic of a number of enthusiasts for military participation in the policy process are disquieting. The military journals are filled with calls for "partnership" between military men and civilian officials in the making of "national security" policy, often accompanied by a rather startling reversal of Clemenceau's famous epigram . . . sometimes justified, not on the basis of experience, expertise or education, but as a *right* because policies affect military institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Westmoreland's suggestions that officers become more involved in the formulation of foreign policy would seem to be less idiosyncratic than symptomatic and representational of a growing movement among military thinkers.

**T**hese remarks are not the isolated grumblings of the leader of a defeated army. Instead they are part of a pattern of military agitation over civilian control that is one of the unanticipated products of American cold-war foreign policy, which itself stems from inherent contradictions in the containment policy forged by American liberals in the early days of the cold war.<sup>19</sup> Seared by the effort at accommodation at Munich, educated by the events from 1939 to 1945, and anxious to assert American power, liberals in the administration of President Harry S. Truman rejected isolationism in favor of an American mission to reconstruct and dominate Western capitalism. Westmoreland's complaint should be understood within this context, as part of a continuing struggle between military officers that first emerged in the Truman-MacArthur controversy and climaxed in the Air War Hearings held in the U.S. Senate in the summer of 1967.

Containment became the heart of liberal orthodoxy. By establishing American hegemony in the West, it paved the way for continued domestic economic growth, fueled by expanded defense spending. By promising to thwart what the liberals believed to be innate Russian expansionism, it spared them from right-

18 Jerome Slater, "Apolitical Warrior or Soldier-Statesman: The Military and the Foreign Policy Process in the Post-Vietnam Era," *Armed Forces and Society* 4, no. 1 (fall 1977): 111. Emphasis in original.

19 Military officers have disagreed with their civilian superiors from time immemorial, but nowhere less so than in the United States. The difference, of course, is that before Korea the wars were successfully concluded, eliminating the need to establish blame for failure.

wing charges of appeasing communism. But contradictions in containment surfaced in Korea. Truman's decision to commit American forces to "halt aggression" in Korea, expressed in the language of the Munich analogy and voiced in unmistakably anti-Soviet tones, led military leaders to prepare to destroy the enemy just as they had in previous American crusades. In the case of Korea, moreover, Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson made it clear that the immediate enemy, North Korea, was only the puppet of Chinese and Soviet aggression. Accordingly, General MacArthur developed a strategy to engage the puppet, and if the opportunity arose, the puppeteers as well. But this was further than Truman was prepared to go, despite the anti-Soviet rhetoric and the aggressive signals he and his advisers were sending. The most important of these, late in the fall of 1950, was the decision to alter the mission of the American-dominated U.N. forces from "halting aggression" to "punishing aggression," by which the President meant to unify all of Korea under the American client, Syngman Rhee.

At the Wake Island Conference in October 1950, called expressly by the President to gain his commander's estimate of how the new policy would affect Chinese intentions, MacArthur did not rule out the possibility of Chinese intervention. He apparently believed the liberal cold warriors were prepared to take the risk should the conflict spread. But Truman was not willing to up the ante (something Truman neglected to tell MacArthur at Wake: the general was given no contingency orders to withdraw in the event of Chinese intervention). The quick success of the American military in the earlier stages of the conflict had emboldened the liberals to try to win in Korea as they had failed to win in China, but they meant to win on the cheap. At the first sign of massive Chinese intervention the liberals backed off, abandoning in the process some of the basic premises of containment, the Munich analogy, and, of course, the general. The result was the first serious military challenge to the limited-war strategy dictated by containment. Truman successfully diverted the challenge from a policy debate to the constitutional question of presidential powers, a debate that MacArthur could not and did not win. Through the debate the contradictions inherent in containment, at least in its military applications, remained obscure, troubling only the military as the officer corps assessed the last war in preparation for the next. These contradictions remained unresolved when a dozen years later America engaged in another limited war in the unlimited quest to contain communism.

**I**t did not take long for the tensions to appear in the Vietnam crisis. Westmoreland, Sharp, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and some civilian advisers to the President argued from the outset for an all-out military effort as the best means to defeat the enemy, buy time for the government of Vietnam to achieve stability, and

avoid a Korean-style stalemate. But Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and advisers such as McGeorge Bundy saw the war as part of a larger canvas, and they fashioned a policy that enhanced rather than diminished contradictions. They sought to build up American ground and air forces in Vietnam without shoving aside the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the Saigon government—moves that opened the United States to charges of colonialism. They sought to employ air power as a means of compelling the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to desist in its support of the war without ever understanding the depth of Vietnamese commitment to an independent, unified country. They sought to reassure the American people of the limited nature of the American commitment in Vietnam while they tried to convince our allies that an American commitment was total and unrelenting. They saw the war as a test of American credibility but they carefully avoided any overt military act that might compel the Chinese or Soviets to prove their credibility by joining the war. And they encouraged the greatest contradiction of all—that there was a military solution to what was essentially a political struggle and social revolution in Vietnam.

It was not that military officers were too obtuse to appreciate the multipurpose war the liberals were conducting. They merely sensed, as did many radicals in America (though for different reasons), that the liberal formula of containment was intellectually bankrupt, and Vietnam was proving it. They could also anticipate, with some understandable bitterness, that when the war was over, after the politicians had retired from office and their advisers had returned to the academy to write books on how it *should* have been done, the professional military officers would more than likely be saddled with the full blame for the results. Little wonder, then, that officers retreated to black humor:

I am not allowed to run the train  
the whistle I can't blow,  
I am not allowed to say how fast  
the railroad train can go,  
I am not allowed to shoot off steam  
nor even clang the bell,  
But let it jump the goddamn track  
and see who catches hell.<sup>20</sup>

The sentiments in the ditty reflected the frustration of professional military officers with what they saw as the impossible way in which the war was being conducted. Almost every military recommendation in the first two years of the war

20 Quoted in George Walton, *The Tarnished Shield* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1973), p. 31.

was scaled down by civilians who at the same time pressed the military for signs of progress and success.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, most of the recommendations deserved paring down since they were frequently exaggerated by the "can-do" enthusiasm of professional officers. But as the war ground on, and as Washington politicians continued to pursue a policy that seemed to exclude a military victory, military men acted to bring the controversy to a head. Having learned from MacArthur's experience the hazard of a direct test of the President's constitutional powers, military leaders selected a more oblique strategy. The divisions created in American society by the war had also divided the political elite, and in taking on Johnson and his chief military adviser, Secretary of Defense McNamara, military leaders exploited one of those divisions by enlisting the hawkish, promilitary members of the Senate's Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, chaired by Senator John Stennis of Mississippi. Enlisting members of the legislative branch in their conspiracy against the President's war policy, while neither innovative nor unique, proved to be an especially brilliant and effective strategy. Their criticism of the President's program in Vietnam was immediately transformed from insubordination into a time-honored and constitutionally legitimate contest under the separation of powers of the branches of government. A majority of the subcommittee, dedicated cordite-sniffers from way back, were already displeased with what they saw to be the President's reticent policy, and by 1967 were only too eager to expose that policy to the public. Thus military leaders and pro-war senators made common cause in seeking to embarrass the administration and compel the civilians to "unleash" the military in the air war.<sup>22</sup>

A principal target of the committee hearings was McNamara, who had begun to exhibit a certain skepticism over air power advocates' claims for the effect of bombing on the course of the war. For the secretary, the final straw had been the controversy over the petroleum, oil, and lubrication (POL) strikes in the spring of 1966. He had recommended approval of the raids to the President only after unrelenting pressure from the military and their repeated assurances that the raids would seriously cripple the North's ability to support the war in the

21 For example, in February 1968, at the height of the Tet offensive, President Johnson demanded and received from the Joint Chiefs of Staff a signed statement that the American base at Khe Sanh would not fall to the enemy. Dave Palmer calls this "one of the most humiliating gestures any political leader inflicted on his military aides." Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (San Raphael, Ca.: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 171.

22 Robert Gallucci reported that in prior communication between the Joint Chiefs and the subcommittee, "the military had made clear in advance what they wanted changed and how civilian decisions had hampered operations." Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor*, p. 103.

South.<sup>23</sup> The raids, conducted in late June of 1966, were an apparently spectacular success: the major POL tank farm in Hanoi was destroyed and a Haiphong facility reduced by 80 percent, all at the loss of a single aircraft.<sup>24</sup> The euphoria, however, was short-lived. Within a month the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that despite the success of the raids, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam retained sufficient stores in dispersed locations to continue the war without serious hindrance.<sup>25</sup> The POL raids had been a tactical success but a strategic failure. They confirmed that a largely agrarian nation could confound the intentions of a major industrial power.<sup>26</sup> McNamara seemed to have lost most of his confidence in air power through this episode and, following the POL strikes, began to give greater attention to the electronic barrier as an alternative form of controlling infiltration from the North.

It was in this charged atmosphere that the Stennis subcommittee held its hearings in the summer of 1967, listening sympathetically to the military chiefs as they testified that the restrictions Washington imposed had seriously diluted the effect of bombing on the North. Finally the subcommittee heard the testimony of McNamara, who, with his growing reservations concerning air power, probably sounded like a dove to the senators. He provided awesome statistics comparing the bombing of the North with the bombing in World War II (through December of 1966 the United States dropped on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam the equivalent of all the bombs dropped in Europe).<sup>27</sup> He defended the decision not to attack Phuc Yen airfield outside Hanoi, saying the North would probably have dispersed the MIGs to Chinese airfields, thereby inviting possible passage over another dangerous threshold in the war (and besides, Phuc Yen failed to meet his minimal standard for target selection: the value of the target had to exceed the projected losses of American aircraft.)<sup>28</sup> And he argued gener-

23 Senator Gravel edition, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), vol. 4, p. 61.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 110.

26 A tongue-in-cheek set of minutes of a White House meeting had a fictional Major Black report to the principals that the air war over the North "had knocked out 78 percent of North Vietnam's petroleum reserve; since we had knocked out 86 percent three days ago and 92 percent last week, we were doing exceptionally well." McNamara might have glimpsed the semblance of reality, if not the humor, in the spoof. James C. Thompson, Jr., "Minutes of a White House Meeting, Summer, 1967," *Who We Are: An Atlantic Chronicle of the United States and Vietnam*, ed. Robert Manning and Michael Janeway (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), pp. 43-44.

27 U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Military Preparedness, *Air War Against North Vietnam: Hearings*, 90th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967), p. 331.

28 Ibid., pp. 303, 333.

ally that the additional targets the military chiefs sought would not have been worth the cost of lost aircraft. Through his testimony, McNamara seemed to be hinting that not only had air power failed in Vietnam, but it could not succeed even if all the restraints were removed.

McNamara had apparently developed this heretical opinion when he discovered that the daily supply need of the enemy in the South was only fifteen tons of materials a day, exclusive of food, while the North had a capacity to import a staggering 5,800 tons a day.<sup>29</sup> Interdiction could not hope to succeed in this instance since the classic concept of interdiction assumed that the enemy had finite resources and that the continuous attrition of these resources would create shortages, hardships, and the incentive to negotiate. Such was not the case with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It was a vast funnel through which Russians and Chinese poured goods into the South, and whenever the United States increased its air effort the Russians and Chinese merely poured more in. Even if American air power were to succeed in halting 95 percent of the amount put into the top of the funnel, the 5 percent that escaped would meet the needs of the enemy forces in the South. The interdiction controversy provided a stark example of the flaw in the approach of air power advocates: the measurement of input (sorties flown, percentages of goods destroyed) bore only a slight relationship to the problems they were seeking to solve (the amount of goods needed to sustain the enemy in the South).

McNamara's attitude on bombing and his defense of the administration's policy of restraint received rough handling from the members of the subcommittee. Senator Strom Thurmond called McNamara's defense of the administration's policy "a statement placating the Communists. . . . It is a statement of no-win." "If we follow what you have recommended," he added, "we ought to get out of Vietnam at once, because we have no chance to win."<sup>30</sup>

If one of the objectives of the hearings was the desire of the military to "get Washington off their backs," then they were a success. In fact, the very announcement of the hearings apparently forced Johnson to yield. Shortly before they convened he expanded the target list and removed some of the restraints. This led one British source to observe that "Mr. Johnson's decision to strike new targets has little to do with any calculation about the course of the war in Vietnam itself. The President's target is in Washington."<sup>31</sup> Ironically, rather than limiting military actions for political reasons, as Westmoreland and Sharp claimed in retrospect, Johnson was being forced to expand the bombing and

29 Ibid., pp. 277, 281.

30 Ibid., p. 297.

31 *The Economist*, quoted in Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor*, p. 104.

thereby widen the American war effort because of pressure from civilian politicians who held the military's point of view.

Yet the air war hearings had a much greater significance. By successfully challenging the President and his chief civilian advisers on military policy, and by compelling the President to alter his policy on bombing, the military chiefs achieved what had eluded MacArthur in Korea. They were successful, where MacArthur had not been, in reversing the basic policy of restraints by which the President had sought to prevent the war from expanding. Whereas MacArthur had confronted the President directly, thereby allowing Truman to retreat behind constitutional issues, in 1967 the military approached the issue indirectly, exploited the divisions within the political elite, and focused on the seemingly mundane question of what and when to bomb. Through the oblique approach they achieved substantially what they sought while avoiding the constitutional issue that had sunk MacArthur. To be sure, McNamara seemed to be aware of the constitutional issue at stake in the hearings. But the Washington leadership apparently was not so confident it could afford a contest of the magnitude of the Truman-MacArthur controversy. Thus, when Senator Howard Cannon asked if the President's refusal to authorize a Joint Chiefs' recommendation to attack Phuc Yen in October 1965 represented a lack of confidence in them by the President, McNamara responded:

the Constitution gives the responsibility of Commander in Chief to a civilian, the President, and I am sure it didn't intend that he would exercise that by following blindly the recommendation of his military advisers, so you must assume that under the Constitution it was recognized that the President would act contrary to his advisors at times.<sup>32</sup>

Probably recognizing that the discussion was moving into distinctly perilous ground, Cannon quickly denied he was questioning the constitutional authority of the President. He said instead that he only wondered whether the President had confidence in his military advisers. This was to invert the real situation. It was not a question of the President's confidence in the military that had initiated the hearings; it was the military's lack of confidence in the President, his advisers, and his policy.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Congress, *Air War Against North Vietnam*, pp. 304-05.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that in October 1968 Johnson suspended the air war against Hanoi. When it resumed under Richard Nixon, it retained few of the close restraints that had been imposed from 1965 to 1968, as MENU (bombing of Cambodia in 1969), LINEBACKER I (mining of Haiphong in 1972), LINEBACKER II (bombing of Hanoi in December 1972) and the ongoing "protective reaction strikes" of 1969 to 1972 all attest. George J. Eade, "Reflections on Air Power in the Vietnam War," *Air University Review* 26 (November-December 1973): 6.

The hearings had a further result, one that was equally pleasing to the military leaders. Despite his persuasive mix of statistics and arguments casting serious doubts on the capability of air power in general and interdiction in particular, McNamara was unable to shake either the reputation or the myth of air power. Both survived not only the hearings, but the war as well. McNamara was not so fortunate. His performance before the Senate committee, especially his doubts concerning air power, apparently angered the President, who summoned the secretary to the Oval Office for a dose of his legendary rage. Shortly thereafter, McNamara departed the Pentagon.<sup>34</sup>

**T**he existence of a stab-in-the-back thesis, the belief that American political leaders betrayed the military, flows from the way the American military has chosen to remember the Vietnam War. Not surprisingly, the military has begun to construct an institutional memory of the war that almost parallels the mistakes it made in the course of the war. This becomes evident when one examines the Vietnam Studies Series, which Westmoreland commissioned while he was the Army Chief of Staff. One of the volumes in the series—neither the best nor the worst—*Cedar Falls—Junction City*, is especially useful since it details many of the same events observed and reported by journalist Jonathan Schell in *The Village of Ben Suc*.<sup>35</sup> The Army's volume, issued in 1974 and written by General Bernard Rogers, who was involved in the operation, denies any claim to being an official history of the events. It is supposedly meant only to provide insights into "future operational concepts."<sup>36</sup>

CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY were two operations that took place in the so-called Iron Triangle, thirty miles northwest of Saigon, in early 1967. The Army's account, although published seven years after Schell's critical report, elected to ignore completely the existence of the journalist's work. The two accounts are so different that one must wonder if Rogers and Schell reported on the same events, in the same war, in the same village, at the same time.<sup>37</sup>

34 David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Knopf, 1972), p. 645.

35 Lieutenant General Bernard W. Rogers, *Cedar Falls—Junction City: A Turning Point* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1974); Jonathan Schell, *The Village of Ben Suc* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

36 Rogers, *Cedar Falls*, p. iii.

37 A comparison of the two accounts recalls President Kennedy's comment after two officials from the Pentagon and State Department returned from Vietnam in 1963 and gave diametrically contrasting reports on the progress of the war. "You two did visit the same country, didn't you?" Kennedy is reported to have asked.

Schell described a military operation that encompassed an attack on the area with brutal efficiency and slight regard for the six thousand residents of Ben Suc. He reported the murder of unarmed civilians by nervous American soldiers, the brutal interrogation and torture of enemy suspects under the watchful eye of American advisers to the ARVN, and the sad transformation of the placid villagers into dazed, listless refugees. He was struck with the way the military had fashioned a strategy in Vietnam that, while rich in technology and impressively efficient, was nevertheless ruthless in result and almost completely counterproductive to the avowed purpose of the American presence in Vietnam. Schell theorized that the American operation probably transformed the villagers into active recruits to the other side in the war. For him, Ben Suc encapsulated the failure of the military's solution to what was at base a political problem.

The military's account, on the other hand, is a report of a brilliant military operation, using all the latest technology and tactics, planned in exquisite detail, and executed with panache. In the Army's judgment, Ben Suc was one of the most important and successful operations of the entire war. The initial helicopter assault (led, incidentally, by then-Lieutenant Colonel Alexander M. Haig) was a model of tactical surprise. The roundup of villagers is described as efficient, humane, and even at times humorous, and the movement of the six thousand peasants to a desolate refugee camp is portrayed as the modern equivalent of a barnraising in which all involved had a simply wonderful time. Once the villagers were removed, the Army account reported, "the village was leveled by huge 'Rome' plows, a large crater in the center of town was filled with ten thousand pounds of explosives and the charge was detonated . . . the village of Ben Suc no longer existed."<sup>38</sup>

Just as during the war the military dismissed its critics and insisted on imposing its own perception of reality on the Vietnamese politico-military landscape, now the Army chose to ignore not only Schell's charges but even the existence of his account. *Cedar Falls—Junction City* ignored as well contradictions within its own record of events—again, just as the Army had ignored the many contradictions of its own making during the war. The most outrageous of these was the Army's failure to draw logical conclusions from its own evidence. For example, the Army believed Ben Suc to be a hive of guerrilla activity and the base of the 7th battalion of the 165th NLF Liberation regiment; the major purpose of the operation was to engage and destroy this important force. Yet the Army admits that the main force unit eluded the Army, that only a handful of suspects was detained, and that within days the enemy was moving freely through the area. A month later the area around Ben Suc was "literally crawling with what

<sup>38</sup> Rogers, *Cedar Falls*, p. 41.

appeared to be Viet Cong.”<sup>39</sup> It requires a rich and fertile imagination to term such an operation one of the most successful of the war.<sup>40</sup> A second flagrant abuse of evidence probably explains why the operation might not have achieved the tactical surprise the Army desired. It is apparent that the enemy was tipped off to the operation long before Haig’s forces landed, chiefly because the Army telegraphed the operation in advance. This startling piece of information is contained in a chapter on logistics and support in which the Army records that two weeks prior to the beginning of the operation, Army engineers began construction of Bailey bridge (a prefabricated steel structure) across the Thi Tinh River on the rim of the Iron Triangle, scarcely ten miles from Ben Suc. It is likely that the construction of this structure and its purpose—the movement of heavy mechanized vehicles—did not escape the notice of local enemy commanders for long.<sup>41</sup>

*Cedar Falls–Junction City* tells more about why the Army did not succeed in Vietnam than it probably meant to. It is a foolishly conceived work, as filled with self-deceptions as was the Army’s strategy in Vietnam. Evident throughout the work is the malady that plagued the Army in Vietnam, the need to complete every assignment with “zero defects” despite any and all obstacles. Told to destroy the enemy in Ben Suc, military planners in Vietnam responded “can-do,” and Ben Suc ended up in dust as a result. Told to write an account of the operation, Army hacks responded with a “could-and-did” historical atrocity, worthy of the original operation but no more realistic. The Army has enshrined its account of the events at Ben Suc in its unique institutional memory, there to be studied and believed by future generations of soldiers.

**I**t is unlikely that in the near future the American military will initiate a *Seven Days in May*-style coup d’état, not because it would be unthinkable but because it may be unnecessary. If Westmoreland’s suggestions that military officers become more involved in the development of policy is realized (and the elevation of Haig to Secretary of State presages such activity); if the soldier-statesman becomes the model for military advancement for all the middle-level Major Sammy Glicks of the future; and if the military continues to be successful in convincing the American people that it was a victim, not a partner, in the Vietnam War, then it won’t have to. Booming defense budgets, equal to or surpassing those at the height of the war, are passed with large bipartisan majorities, and the only reservations expressed at the new militarism are economic, not moral or intellectual.

39 Ibid., p. 158.

40 Ibid., p. v.

41 Ibid., p. 61.

The revival of nearly every pet military project either delayed or killed in the immediate post-Vietnam period; the revival of the popularity of the draft, even among the members of the Vietnam generation who did all in their power to escape their turn; and the revival of the military in the popular imagination—all attest to the amazing recovery of the military from the nadir of Vietnam.

Liberals, who seemingly cannot bring themselves to abandon the fundamental notions of the containment of communism, seem unable to deal with this consequence of their Vietnam experience and instead weakly proclaim that, in Vietnam, “the system worked.” If the system worked, it worked for the American military. By refusing to face the truth about itself revealed by Vietnam, and by blaming the civilians for what went wrong, the military has manipulated Vietnam to its own advantage.

Having learned nothing from Vietnam, the military now speaks of “theater-level” nuclear war with all the confidence it once expressed in its ability to conduct a successful counterinsurgency war. The institutional flaws continue, and under a President who has proclaimed a Vietnam a noble crusade, the American military has emerged from the shadow of Vietnam with more status, influence, and power than it had at the beginning of the war. The stab-in-the-back thesis has allowed the military to flush Vietnam down the 1984 memory tube and construct its own version of events.

American society deserves more than assurances that its military officers are unlikely to seize power. Our democracy may well rest on having a military that can realistically assess the Vietnam tragedy. Failing that, the American military will never awaken from the Vietnam nightmare. Worse, its nightmare will become the waking reality for all Americans.

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