Book Review: Determined to Persist: General Earle Wheeler, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Military’s Foiled Pursuit of Victory in Vietnam

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Determined to Persist analyzes the leadership of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), the president, and others during the height of the Vietnam War. This is accomplished historian and retired US Army Colonel Mark Viney’s second book in a series on General Earle G. Wheeler. Many have written about the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Vietnam era, and some have accused the chiefs of “dereliction of duty.” In fact, many professional reading lists over the last generation have required officers to read H. R. McMaster’s Dereliction of Duty (Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), in which McMaster argues the Chiefs—or, as he calls them, the “Five Silent Men”—failed in their duty to provide guidance to win the Vietnam War. Nearly 60 years after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, with the release and analysis of recently declassified records, a more complete picture of the truth has emerged. Viney’s research provides a fresh perspective on the Vietnam War: he contends the chiefs did not create the president’s military strategy in Vietnam and consistently provided alternative—but disregarded—military strategies. He argues Wheeler opposed limited involvement in Vietnam and performed his duty with tenacity.
Determined to Persist examines President Lyndon B. Johnson and Wheeler’s roles. As advisers, the Joint Chiefs did not have directive authority for national policy or strategy for the prosecution of war. Many have written about each president’s cabinet composition and personal preferences for decision making, which shape the CJCS and service chiefs’ decision-making roles. The president’s preference for receiving information lies at the heart of this civil-military relationship. Viney explores the complexities of presidents adjusting their preferences as consequences, personalities involved, the political environment, and context change.

Wheeler became CJCS in 1964 and served for a record six years under two presidents. Johnson did not welcome the challenge war would pose to his domestic agenda. Wheeler advised Johnson a bombing campaign could compel the enemy in Vietnam to request a cease-fire, but Johnson preferred the Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara’s call for less involvement as a show of force. By February 1965, ground conditions deteriorated in Vietnam, and the chiefs recommended a robust combined air and ground campaign to achieve national objectives. Again, Johnson approved a smaller US military commitment than the chiefs recommended. McNamara supported limited engagement in Vietnam as secretary of defense. McNamara argued for the equal value of his advice compared to the service chiefs’ plans.

Viney shows Wheeler and the chiefs recommended heavier military involvement from 1965–68. Viney reviewed declassified top-secret plans from the service chiefs for Operation Muleshoe, a four-division invasion of logistical bases, and the removal of sanctuary areas in North Vietnam. Johnson did increase ground forces in Vietnam, but at levels far below the Joint Chiefs’ continued recommendations. By 1968, domestic political support for the war eroded, and Viney argues that Johnson disregarded much of the Joint Chiefs’ advice.

Consider the Joint Chiefs’ position: leaders at the pinnacle of military service careers whose professional military advice is disregarded, and the nation’s servicemen and women are ordered to combat without the resources required to win. Civil control of the military ensures accountability for elected officials—however, decision making requires great moral courage when one can envision the consequences of a flawed military strategy. One can imagine the chiefs’ professional discipline to continue to serve the president and provide one’s best military advice. The president alone can establish policy based on competing requirements and accept the risks of war. Viney argues Wheeler spoke truth to power and believed the military must remain subordinate and obedient to the president. At the strategic level, military advice, analysis, and an explanation of risk must be provided to civilian leaders. The Joint Chiefs of Staff remain, however, only one of the sources of advice available to the president.

Viney’s research, willingness to oppose current consensus, and fresh perspective deserve commendation. He contends Wheeler’s provision of advice and silence after the president made his decision secured civilian trust in senior military professionalism. Viney clarifies Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs’ efforts to perform faithful duties as senior military officers in national policy development. Senior leaders should add Determined to Persist to their professional reading lists to challenge their perspectives of Wheeler and the service chiefs during the Vietnam War.

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