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by

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A problem exists with current analyses of the Vietnam War, one that can be summed up best as a fascination with the "what if" theory. Many analysts assume that America's role in that unhappy conflict was reactive from its outset and they have developed the notion that this somehow explains why the United States "lost" the war. With guilt presumed, they then must simply present the corroborating evidence.[1]

The "what if" premise has also fostered a conceptualization that skews the analysis of the military planning that led to commitment of US ground combat troops to Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965. Relying upon the mass of evidence released in the wake of the publication of *The Pentagon Papers* plus that gained through Freedom of Information queries, scholars such as military historian David Palmer, diplomatic historian George Herring, and political scientist Larry Berman view the planning for and the deployment of US combat units as hasty and reactive. Their judgments suggest inadequate American military strategic planning, leading one to ponder, What if the United States had been better prepared? Might its army have prevailed in 1965, thus "winning" the war? Or perhaps more to the point, might the United States not have committed ground combat units in 1965, thereby avoiding the "loss"? While their theory provides a useful counter to Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, who imply that the whole matter can be understood best within the context of misguided bureaucracy, the "what if" questions suggested by Palmer, Herring, Berman, and others are serious enough to warrant a careful examination of their basic assumption.[2]

The origins of American military planning for the use of US combat troops in Vietnam can be traced to the days of American involvement in the Korean War and the French campaign against the Viet Minh. In 1952 the US Joint Chiefs of Staff gave serious thought to either aiding French units in the Red River Delta region or replacing them with eight American combat divisions to release the French to fight elsewhere in Indochina. The plan was vigorously opposed by Army Chief of Staff Matthew B. Ridgway, although not so much for its strategic implications as for its manpower ramifications. The proposed deployments would strip the active Army of all available resources and thus require partial mobilization of reserves if the Army were faced with another contingency. A major problem for Ridgway's planners at this stage was their reliance on the big-unit strategy that had been so successful on the northern European plains during the last year of World War II. That strategy ran counter to the New Look, a reliance upon nuclear weapons in lieu of large units ordered by President Dwight D. Eisenhower early in his administration. Ike, for diplomatic reasons, finally chose not to intervene in the Indochina War. Still, Army planners were painfully

aware that the New Look also meant a lack of flexibility to cope with small, localized conflicts such as that in Vietnam, or as they soon would be called, limited wars.[3]

Another factor modified American military planning for Southeast Asia in the mid-1950s. With the conclusion of the Geneva Accords, the French withdrew their army from Vietnam, and the country was partitioned. American military planners now projected a limited war in Vietnam, patterned on their experiences in Korea, and envisioned a parallel series of events. They anticipated a North Vietnamese invasion of South Vietnam that might also involve the Chinese communist forces. They assumed that the enemy's objective would be reunification of the two nations, or perhaps even the more ambitious goal of communist domination over all of mainland Southeast Asia.[4]

The planners identified three invasion routes, all terminating at the capital city of Saigon. The most direct—and the most restrictive because of geography—followed Route One from North Vietnam along the South Vietnamese coast through Hue, Da Nang, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, and Phan Thiet to Saigon. The second avenue passed through the Laotian panhandle into the Central Highlands via Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot and then cut south along Highway Fourteen to Saigon. The third route ran through northern Laos and then east into Cambodia and along the Mekong River into the "rice bowl" of Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese Delta. American contingency plans placed US divisions in critical blocking positions along these invasion routes. As most of these forces would be deployed to Vietnam by sea and a few by air, and all would be resupplied through coastal ports, the security of major sea and air facilities in the South was critical. Thus American plans called for bases at Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Vung Tau, Bien Hoa, and Tan Son Nhut.

Since two of the invasion routes involved neighboring countries, American military planners for the first time saw the threat to South Vietnam in a regional context. That realization led the United States to call for the establishment of a defense pact for the region, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). At the same time, the US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) persuaded the South Vietnamese to design their plans so that their forces would occupy these blocking positions prior to the arrival of US combat units.

During the first phase of operations, the defense, American forces were to secure the coastal and inland bases and then move forward to blocking positions in the Hue-Pleiku-Kontum region and in areas to the north and west of Saigon. The initial American units to deploy were to be forces already stationed in the Pacific Command—the Okinawa-based Marines plus an Army airborne battle group from the 25th Infantry Division (redesignated in 1963 as the 173d Airborne Brigade) and the remainder of the 25th Infantry Division. Follow-up combat units from the continental United States included the 101st Airborne Division (to be airlifted) and the 1st Infantry Division (to be moved by sea).

The next phase, the counteroffensive, was to begin after the blocking forces had contained the North Vietnamese invasion. Harking back to the Korean War and MacArthur's Inchon strategy when he flanked the enemy with amphibious landings, American plans envisioned pushing back the communist forces with an ambitious joint airborne, amphibious, and ground attack into North Vietnam to seize the strategic

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objective of the Hanoi-Haiphong area. The ultimate objective was reunification of the two Vietnams under pro-Western (presumably South Vietnamese) leadership.

This strategic scenario began to change during the last year of the Eisenhower Administration. American military planning at that stage represented a synthesis of the military realities of the New Look with the Cold War strategy of containment. The defense of Vietnam thus was to be fought along conventional lines, to include the use of nuclear weapons. Whatever considerations that planners gave to guerrilla tactics were rudimentary, based upon limited knowledge of partisan warfare during World War II and experience with the North Korean stay-behind operations during the Korean War. With the formation of SEATO and the worsening Laotian crisis, American military planners began to shift emphasis to regional defense against communist expansion, primarily in Thailand. Thus their contingency plans for Vietnam by the early 1960s had become oriented more toward regional containment than national reunification.[5]

A second factor affecting plans was the increasing Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam. Interest by Army strategists and planners in counterinsurgency doctrine came largely at the insistence of President John F. Kennedy and his civilian advisers and proved only a superficial distraction to the military. In general, they had difficulty translating doctrine and strategy into plans and tactics for the use of American combat forces in Southeast Asia. As they were unsure how to deal conventionally with an insurgency, they tentatively proposed to train indigenous forces for this mission. Under this scheme, American units would move into blocking positions to stop the invading North Vietnamese forces while the Vietnamese would take on the Viet Cong.[6]

A different approach came from the President's Special Military Adviser, General Maxwell D. Taylor. After returning from an inspection trip to Vietnam in late 1961, he proposed the introduction of a "military task force" of American infantrymen and engineers into the Delta for flood relief. Once there, the units "would conduct such combat operations as are necessary for self defense, . . . provide an emergency reserve to back up the Armed Force of GVN, . . . [and] act as an advance party for such additional forces as may be introduced."[7]

While this idea of introducing US combat troops into Vietnam under the guise of missions other than combat was novel neither in Saigon nor in Washington, it was a bit too much for the American President, and he rejected the notion of US combat troops being committed to what might well turn into another Asian war.[8] Though distracted by the Bay of Pigs failure and concerned with the Berlin Wall crisis, he remained alarmed over the increased hostilities in Laos. To increase his options, he directed planners to "prepare plans for the use of US combat forces in Vietnam under various contingencies." So while it appeared that the Vietnamese were to fight their own war, American planners were left with the baffling question of how to deal with the Vietnamese insurgency using conventional and limited-war methods.[9]

February 1962 brought a step in the direction of resolving the uncertainty with the establishment of a new military headquarters in Vietnam, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Its commander (COMUSMACV) now reported to the JCS through the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC). Previously senior military officials in Vietnam often had dealt with Washington through State Department channels. This had become difficult when differences emerged between the Army and the State Department over strategy regarding Vietnam; those at Foggy Bottom wanted to emphasize civilian measures, while Pentagon officials favored military steps. More importantly, planning responsibilities in Saigon, which previously had been handled by the assistance-oriented MAAG, were now assigned to the operations-oriented MACV. One reason why planners had established MACV was to have a command and control headquarters in Vietnam in the event that US combat forces were deployed. Thus one of the initial tasks for the MACV planners was

to update contingency plans.[10]

These plans were the multilateral SEATO schemes for the regional defense of Southeast Asia. A long-standing problem for American planners had been the unrealistic assumption that all SEATO countries would honor their commitments once the plan was implemented. To cope with this eventuality, they had developed a unilateral plan, OPLAN 32, in which the Americans shouldered the majority, if not all, of the responsibilities. One phase of this planning dealt with the defense of South Vietnam.

Though OPLAN 32 was new, the planning scenario for Vietnam was not. The same combat forces from the Pacific Command and the continental United States—a US Marine Expeditionary Force, the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 1st Infantry Division, and the 101st Airborne Division—were to deploy to the same entry points and areas of initial employment. However, their blocking missions were revised. US planners were now concerned with the escalating threat posed by the Viet Cong, who, with startling success, were exploiting the internal dissension that followed the assassination of South Vietnamese President Diem. Now MACV envisioned that US ground combat forces would take over internal security missions previously assigned to Vietnamese forces. Their assumption was that the Vietnamese forces would then devote full attention to the Viet Cong insurgency. Also implicit was the premise that the US forces would be available to occupy the old blocking positions. Gone forever, however, were notions of reunification.[11]

Several factors worked to refine further American plans for possible large-scale operations in Southeast Asia. One was the earlier decision by Kennedy to forgo military action in Laos, a policy that served to make Vietnam the focus of American interest in Southeast Asia. With the increased success of the Viet Cong in 1964, and at the urging of the new COMUSMACV, General William C. Westmoreland, President Lyndon B. Johnson approved the deployments of numerous logistical and support units to Vietnam. Although they were supposedly to assist the Vietnamese, it was more than coincidental that many also were forces included in OPLAN 32.

A second factor was Washington's preoccupation with the use of air power to persuade the North Vietnamese to withdraw their support of the insurgency. Planners had many cogent reasons for this interest. Air operations were flexible, as easily intensified as terminated. Also, air strategists were anxious to demonstrate air power's potential. Most important, in a presidential election year, the President viewed air operations as more palatable politically, and he frequently reminded the JCS of that point. But the determination at the national level to rely upon air power did little to help the military planners in Saigon with the nagging question of how to deploy conventional forces in an insurgency. This problem became painfully evident late in 1964 when the Viet Cong hit the air strip at Bien Hoa with mortar fire; despite this provocation, no one in Saigon, Hawaii, or Washington entertained serious notions about the commitment of US ground troops.[12]

The final factor in 1964 was reluctance on the part of General Westmoreland and his MACV staff to ask for US combat troops. Although they were concerned for the security of American dependents and US facilities, they wanted to provide this security with military police units. There were good reasons for hesitancy in Saigon over committing US combat troops. Ambassador Taylor had reservations that should there be another change in Vietnamese national leadership, the new chief of state might well "uninvite" any committed US combat forces. General Westmoreland was worried that the presence of US combat troops might create anti-American sentiment. Critical, however, was the concern of the MACV staff that committing US combat troops would slow the improvement of South Vietnamese combat effectiveness. Most American advisers agreed that the South Vietnamese army would become effective militarily only when it took the offensive against the Viet Cong. They were rightly concerned that any introduction of US combat units would allow the Vietnamese forces to sit back and leave the hard fighting to the American soldiers.

"After all," the MACV argument concluded, "we are supposed to be working our way out of business, not trying to win their war ourselves."[13]

Though the MACV staff harbored reservations on the wisdom of committing US combat units, Saigon planners still were responsible for updating plans for that contingency, especially in the wake of the Washington decision to implement the bombing campaign early in 1965. They now identified specific enclaves to be secured by American units. This enclave concept, as developed for Vietnam, was a refinement of existing contingency plans, which called for troops to deploy to critical ports of entry such as Da Nang, Bien Hoa, and Vung Tau, there to await further development of the military situation and the possible relief by Vietnamese army units. By early in 1965, MACV had identified 12 specific enclaves to be secured by American ground units. Contrary to the suggestions in *The Pentagon Papers*, these MACV plans did not represent a dramatic change in strategy but rather continuing refinement of existing plans. There was no bitter debate between enclavists at the embassy and the "search and destroyists" at MACV. What was involved was a dialogue between MACV planners who were still concerned at the possible adverse effect upon Vietnamese combat effectiveness and Ambassador Taylor, who, along with General Westmoreland, expressed reservations about the suitability of American troops for static security missions in Southeast Asia. If anything, reluctance from Saigon emphasized the continuing problem over the role of conventional forces in an insurgency situation.[14]

A major step in resolving this problem came when the first American combat troops, the US Marines, deployed to the Da Nang enclave. Soon after the commencement of the sustained US bombing campaign in February 1965, military planners expressed concern that the enemy might well retaliate with either North Vietnamese air strikes or Viet Cong ground attacks on the critical American facilities at the Da Nang airfield. President Johnson ordered a Marine surface-to-air missile battalion plus combat units to protect Da Nang. This action cannot be viewed as reactive since the Marine deployment to Da Nang had long been part of OPLAN 32 scenarios.

Events worked to change the Marines' initial mission as planners nervously eyed two developments. One was the obvious new direction in Viet Cong strategy, which they demonstrated in their attacks on American facilities at Pleiku and Qui Nhon. For the first time, the measures were directed solely against US military installations. The second was increasing intelligence that the North Vietnamese were infiltrating regular army units into the South. Now MACV planners had to consider their offensive capabilities. Rightly concerned for the security of the Da Nang base and the safety of the HAWK battalion, they, along with the Commandant of the Marine Corps in Washington, now proposed to change the strictly defensive mission of the Marines to a more aggressive offensive role. They argued that the gradual expansion of the Da Nang perimeter would assure better security by denying the enemy staging areas from which to launch mortar attacks. President Johnson approved the change in mission in early April. Thus the Marine story at Da Nang is not one of radical change from defensive to offensive planning but rather a logical and pragmatic attempt by planners in Washington and Saigon to employ conventional forces in an unconventional situation.[15]

Over the next two months, decisions were made in Washington for the deployment of more combat forces to Vietnam, additional Marine units and an Army brigade. The groundwork for these deployments was laid during a visit to Vietnam by the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Harold K. Johnson. Representing a President who had become increasingly impatient over the lack of substantive results from the bombing campaign, General Johnson was empowered to determine just what more General Westmoreland needed to improve the situation. If this involved additional deployment of US combat units, then the President

wanted to know how they would be used.[16]

Though General Johnson himself favored the deployment of three US Army divisions as a blocking force across northern South Vietnam and the Laotian panhandle, General Westmoreland's own views involved considerably less. In a Commander's Estimate of The Situation prepared by MACV planners for Washington, he concluded that US combat forces were required "to engage as necessary in the war against the Viet Cong in order to: a. Secure vital US installations and defeat Viet Cong efforts to control Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh regions, and b. Secure critical enclaves in the coastal region." This concept of coastal enclaves and highland security was not new, having been part of previous planning scenarios. Neither was Westmoreland's specific request for troop deployments—Marines to reinforce the existing enclaves in the Hue-Da Nang areas and Army infantrymen to secure bases in the Bien Hoa-Vung Tau enclave.[17]

The differences between General Johnson's aggressive plan and General Westmoreland's more modest suggestion were resolved at a series of hastily called planning meetings in Honolulu during April 1965. Initially limited to only CINCPAC and MACV planners, the talks eventually brought together Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, JCS Chairman General Earl Wheeler, CINCPAC Commander Admiral Ulysses Sharp, Presidential Special Assistant McGeorge Bundy, Ambassador Taylor, and General Westmoreland. From these deliberations emerged a series of recommendations for deployment of ground combat troops which were presented to the President by McNamara in late April. Also introduced was a new strategy, "to break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory." At stake here was "the critical importance of holding on and avoiding . . . a spectacular defeat of GVN or US Forces."[18] The scene was thus set for the final revision in strategic thinking.

It was several months before Washington decision-makers acted on the Honolulu proposals. Delays came from all quarters. In Saigon, Ambassador Taylor continued to preach caution with respect to American troop capabilities. In Hawaii, CINCPAC planners lobbied for more time to assess the efficiency of the bombing campaign. And in Washington, policymakers worried about strategic inflexibility once actual ground-unit deployments began. As a result, the units deployed sporadically, creating the illusion of hasty planning. Still, they were as familiar as their destinations—a US Marine task force to the Da Nang enclave, the 173d Airborne Brigade to the Saigon area, and the 2d Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division to the Cam Ranh Bay—Nha Trang complex. Nor had their missions been altered from those in OPLAN 32 development, as each unit was assigned the cautious task of enclave security, albeit with the expanded definition based upon the Marine experience at Da Nang.[19]

The major change in the planners' thinking came with the presidential decision in July 1965 to commit the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to Vietnam, a deployment which General Westmoreland had suggested in March as part of his Commander's Estimate of The Situation and which McNamara had seconded in April with the Honolulu recommendations. This deployment provided planners with an answer to their concern over conventional warfare in Vietnam. It also formed a distinct break in the continuity of their OPLAN 32 thinking. The division was ordered to An Khe, a base that had not figured in earlier contingency planning. It was to exploit the technology of organic airmobility, a concept which to date had received only limited application. But most importantly, its offensive mission was in the unpopulated Central Highlands where the enemy most likely to be encountered would be not main force Viet Cong units but regular North Vietnamese army regiments. (In fact, within a month of arrival, the division clashed with the North Vietnamese in the Ia Drang.) The planners' decision to deploy the 1st Cavalry Division to the Central Highlands was one designed to engage the North Vietnamese in a big-unit war of attrition. Thus they had come full circle in a route that began in the 1950s when they first pondered the problem of big-unit combat in war.[20]

In summary, the planning for the commitment of US ground combat troops to Vietnam in 1965 was not reactive. Those that were deployed had long been part of planners' existing contingencies, and their initial areas of operations had been specified the decade before. In retrospect, the most telling criticism against the planners was their necessity to come full circle on strategic thinking, in essence reinventing the wheel with respect to the big-unit war. What modifications they had made were the result of attempts to envision conventional combat in an insurgency. By the spring and summer of 1965, they had completed this task. Now it was up to the military troops deployed to be, in the words of General Westmoreland, "fire brigades."[21]

Centuries ago, Machiavelli counseled his prince "never to let his thoughts stray from the exercise of war: in peace he ought to practice it more than in war, which he can do two ways: by action and by study." With respect to planning for the use of US ground combat troops in Vietnam, the evidence shows that military planners did just that. Thus those who are still obsessed with the "whys" of a lost war must look elsewhere. But to those interested in analysis of complex planning, the period offers just what Machiavelli urged—a place to begin study.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society during the 1983 Southwestern Social Science Association Annual Meeting. I am indebted to my colleagues at the US Army Center of Military History for their comments and suggestions, in particular to Vincent H. Demma, David F. Trask, and Cathy A. Heerin.

2. David Richard Palmer, *Summons of The Trumpet* (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1978), pp. 45-90; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (New York: Wiley, 1979), pp. 108-44; Larry Berman, *Planning A Tragedy* (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 31-78; and Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: The Brookings Institute, 1979), pp. 227-45.

3. Ronald H. Spector, *Advise and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960, The United States Army in Vietnam* (Washington: GPO, 1983), ch. 11; and "Evolution of The War: US and France's Withdrawal From Vietnam, 1954-1956," *United States - Vietnamese Relations, 1945-1967*, VI. A. 3 (Washington: GPO, 1971) (hereinafter *US-VN Relations*), and *Foreign Relations of The United States, 1952-1954, Volume XIII: Indochina* (Washington: GPO, 1982).

4. Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and The War in Indochina: History of The Indochina Incident, 1940-1954, Volume I* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982).

5. "NATO and SEATO: A Comparison," *US-VN Relations*, VI. A. 1.

6. See, for instance, Oral History Interview with Joseph E. O'Connor, 9 February 1966, and General George H. Decker, 18 September 1968, both part of The John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass. (hereinafter JFKL). For difficulty in translating doctrine and strategy into plans and tactics, see Lesson Plan M 2300, "Introduction to Unconventional Warfare and Counterinsurgency Operations," Lesson Plans, School Years 1961 through 1965, on file at the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kans.

7. "Evolution of The War: The Kennedy Programs and Commitments, 1961," *US-VN Relations*, IV. V. 1.

8. Several months prior to the trip, military planners in Washington, at the urging of the senior military representatives in Vietnam, had considered the deployment of two Army divisions to the Pleiku area to assist in training Vietnamese troops. See Memorandum For The Vice President, Subject: Program for South Vietnam, 6 May 1961, and Memorandum to Members of Task Force on Vietnam, 29 April 1961, Box 193, Vietnam Country File, National Security File, JFKL; and Letter, General Lionel G. McGarr to General George C. Decker, 15 June 1961, on file at the US Center of Military History, Washington, D.C. (hereinafter CMH files).

9. Washington to Saigon, 06989, 14 November 1961, CMH files. Also see National Security Action Memorandum Number 111, 22 November 1961, CMH files.

10. George S. Eckhardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control, 1950-1969* (Washington: GPO, 1974), pp. 1-46.

11. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam. Volume V: Planning The War* (McLean, Va.: BDM Corp., 1980), pp. 3-1 through 3-29.

12. "Evolution of The War: Military Pressures Against North Vietnam, November-December 1964," *US-VN Relations*, VI. C. 2. (c).

13. "The Advisory Buildup, 1961-1967," in Ibid., IV. B. 3, especially pp. 37-69.

14. "Phase I In The Build-up of US Forces: The Debate, March-July 1965," in Ibid., IV. C. 5, especially pp. 1-10.

15. Jack Shulimson and Charles M. Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landings and The Buildup, 1965* (Washington: Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1978), pp. 1-35.

16. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 125-27.

17. Commander's Estimate of The Military Situation in South Vietnam (March 1965), 26 March 1965, CMH files.

18. "US Ground Strategy and Force Developments, 1965-1967, Volume I," *US-VN Relations*, IV. C. 6(a); and *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Volume VI: Conduct of The War, Book 1: Operational Analyses* (McLean, Va.: BDM Corp., 1980), chs. 2 and 3.

19. Memorandum For The President, Subject: Vietnam, 21 April 1965, National Security File, Vietnam, Volume 33, Box 16, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Tex.

20. John J. Tolson, *Vietnam Studies: Airmobility, 1961-1971* (Washington: GPO, 1973), pp. 51-85.

21. William C. Westmoreland, *Report on The War in Vietnam (As of 30 June 1968), Section II: Report on Operations in South Vietnam, January 1964-June 1968* (Washington: GPO, 1969), ch. III.