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SENIOR OFFICERS AND VIETNAM POLICYMAKING

by

MICHAEL W. DAVIDSON

Senior military officers carry many responsibilities within the broad arena of national security policymaking. Before the Vietnam era, one such responsibility had been to bring to the national security policymaking process an awareness of the inescapably high costs associated with go-to-war policy decisions. Confronting the costs of a proposed military commitment is a difficult task; it is an undertaking which requires a forceful advocate. Senior military officers formerly carried that advocacy, but by the early 1960s there was no properly positioned uniformed officer to compel a recognition of the high cost of a military solution in Vietnam. A gradual narrowing of the overall role of senior military officers as national security policymakers clouded that responsibility.

During his tenure as Chief of Staff of the Army from 1939 to 1945, General George C. Marshall established a role model for senior officers as national security policymakers. Marshall was one of Roosevelt's principal war policy advisers. In striking contrast to the position of Vietnam-era senior officers, Marshall was the direct agent of the President in the planning and conduct of military operations in World War II. He functioned without the numerous intermediary levels of civilian policymaking and coordination which by the time of the Vietnam War had become the norm.

Marshall's direct relationship with the President came about in the early stages of World War II as the enormity of the Army's wartime mission became apparent. Abandoning a horse-and-buggy organization

carried over from World War I, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson undertook a broad reorganization of the War Department in February 1942. The reorganization proposal was contained in a draft executive order sent by Stimson to President Roosevelt. The Stimson document specified duties for the Secretary of War and for several key military officers but was altogether silent on the role of the Army Chief of Staff.¹

Roosevelt approved the Stimson proposal as submitted with the single exception that "paragraph 6 be rephrased to make it very clear that the Commander in Chief exercises his command function in relation to strategy, tactics, and operations directly through the Army Chief of Staff."² Roosevelt's exact language was adopted in the executive order as finally signed. That order was the primary legal authority defining the role of the Army Chief of Staff throughout the Second World War.

The Marshall model for senior military officers as primary policymakers remained largely intact until overtaken by the postwar implementation of service unification. Various unification proposals, the subject of much interservice politicking, eventually resulted in the adoption of the National Security Act of 1947. The 1947 act did not establish a Department of Defense but rather fashioned a National Military Establishment, something of a grand federation of the existing and still independent-minded military services. In part as a legislative compromise, the existing War and Navy Departments, and the newly autonomous Air Force, were left substantially intact under an

additional coordinating level of civilian policymaking.

The federation approach of the National Military Establishment was not a notable success. To correct the shortcomings of the original legislation, Congress extended the responsibility and strengthened the authority of civilian policymakers at the renamed Department of Defense through legislative revisions to the original act in 1949, 1953, and 1958.³ The increased authority and activity of DOD-level decision-makers had the practical result of placing increasing distance between senior military officers and final policy formulations.

A part of that distancing occurred by sheer weight of numbers. In 1945, General Marshall was accountable for an army of over eight million men and women engaged in a multi-theater war fought by a multinational alliance. He did so in a War Department that contained a total of eight undersecretary, assistant secretary, and special assistant secretary positions. In 1965, the Army Chief of Staff had to answer for an army of one million, a portion of which was fighting a single-theater war without the intensely complicating factor of substantial allied forces. The 1965 effort required the services of 50 undersecretaries, deputy secretaries, assistant secretaries, deputy assistant secretaries, and deputy undersecretaries at the Department of Defense and the Department of the Army.⁴

The postwar implementation of service unification also included the statutory formalization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. During World War II, the Joint Chiefs were a loosely structured body established initially, in December 1941, as a protocol to facilitate combined planning with the British joint chiefs organization. In a bureaucratic oversight of monumental proportions, the wartime arrangement was apparently never reduced to writing. Operating under an informal structure, the wartime Chiefs dealt with the President as the responsible and accountable heads of relatively independent services. That relationship changed markedly after the statutory formalization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947 when the senior officers of each service came to deal with the

President primarily as members of an advisory corporate committee.

The legislative creation and revision of the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff further altered the policymaking base of senior military officers. The World War II forerunner was significantly different from the JCS chairmanship which has since evolved. During and after the war, Admiral William D. Leahy served as Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.⁵ As such, he functioned primarily as a conduit for information between the President and the service Chiefs. General Dwight D. Eisenhower served as Chief of Staff of the Army under the Leahy arrangement and in a confidential analysis at the end of his tour viewed Leahy as "the Presidential Chief of Staff," more an extension of the presidency than the head of the service Chiefs.⁶ As the Chairman's job developed after its statutory enactment in 1949, the officer occupying the chairmanship came to be the representative of the Joint Chiefs to the White House, meeting with the President most often without the other Chiefs present and expressing both the majority and minority views of the entire JCS.⁷ The JCS chairmanship has been neither fish nor fowl, a titular pinnacle of limited direct authority.

The postwar implementation of service unification—by placing growing levels of civilian policymaking between the President and the senior officers of each military service, by formalizing military advice in a joint committee, and by centering

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that advice in the Chairman, JCS—held the potential for diluting both the counsel and the counseling ability of senior military officers.

Due to an unusual set of circumstances during the Eisenhower Administration, the full impact of the postwar unification restructuring was delayed and perhaps camouflaged. The White House was then occupied by a former general, a defense expert of great stature. Before assuming the presidency, Eisenhower had thoroughly viewed the process from the uniformed perspective by serving both as Army Chief of Staff and informally as Chairman, JCS, while that position was being considered by Congress.⁸ As President, Eisenhower developed a committee-supported, staff-oriented National Security Council.⁹ That was a decision-making forum comfortable to senior officers. Even when Eisenhower made national security decisions outside the formal NSC structure, his inner circle for such matters included several general officers.¹⁰ Under those circumstances, it was unlikely that senior military officers and their counsel would be far removed from the Oval Office.

The features of the Eisenhower presidency which preserved a major policymaking role for senior officers were not present in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. During the Kennedy/Johnson period, the postwar statutory changes implementing service unification came to full effect and passed responsibility for the military aspects of national security policymaking to a civilian-dominated bureaucracy. In assessing the development of military strategy, a study conducted by the Congressional Research Service in 1982 concluded:

There was little competition from the OSD [Office, Secretary of Defense] staff for the first 14 years (1947-60), but skeptical civilians armed with new analytic tools began to advance alternatives soon after [Secretary of Defense] McNamara took office. They and their successors, more than the JCS, have been making U.S. military strategy ever since.¹¹

That shift in policymaking responsibility came about because, in addition to the

statutory changes which vested when Eisenhower departed the White House, the Kennedy Administration adopted a process for decision-making in national security matters which substantially excluded senior military officers. Kennedy was not himself expert in the defense area, nor was he particularly comfortable in dealing with senior military officers.¹² Kennedy moved away from the existing National Security Council structure in favor of multiple ad hoc decision-making forums.¹³ The increasingly aggressive White House staff and the activist management onslaught of Secretary McNamara within the Pentagon provided alternatives to the waning Marshall model for senior military officers as national security policy-makers.

President Kennedy's lack of enthusiasm for his uniformed counselors was evident in his recalling former Army Chief of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor to active duty to serve on the White House staff as the Military Representative of the President. The naming of a Military Representative at least initially caused concern among members of the Joint Chiefs who, with some justification, may have viewed themselves as already serving in that capacity.¹⁴

A harbinger of the Kennedy approach to national security matters was evident at a very early stage in the Administration's Vietnam policymaking. Barely a week after taking office, President Kennedy assembled an ad hoc group of counselors at the White House for a Saturday morning meeting to consider Vietnam. The only military officer present was an Air Force brigadier general who was in favor at the time with the New Frontiersmen of the Kennedy inner circle. The accuracy of the military counsel given the President, at least at that early meeting, is suspect. As justification for a proposed increase in the troop level of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the President was told that "a very high proportion of total Vietnam forces was now penned on the front facing a Viet Minh force of 300,000."¹⁵ More authoritative estimates later placed the Viet Cong force level at that time at 5500.¹⁶ There was, of course, no front for the ARVN to be penned on. While a single meeting does not

indict the Administration's overall Vietnam position, the practice of relying on civilian ad hoc committees for the development of detailed military policy alternatives remained the norm of the Kennedy presidency.

The trends which narrowed the role of senior military officers in national security policy formulation during the Kennedy Administration continued during the Johnson years. A further restriction of that role occurred as a result of a sharp reduction in the number of decision-makers privy to Vietnam policymaking. The US commitment in Southeast Asia hardened during the last half of 1964 and the first half of 1965 through the sustained bombing of North Vietnam and the decision to deploy conventional American combat forces to South Vietnam. That period also included a presidential election and a Johnson Administration initiative to pass Great Society legislation in Congress. To maintain confidentiality and control of the growing military crisis in Vietnam, President Johnson severely restricted the decision-making circle dealing with the war. The core group of decision-makers consisted primarily of the President, the Secretary of Defense, the President's National Security Adviser, and the Secretary of State.¹⁷

In both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, the policymaking role given senior officers was not one which was likely to foster the clear, direct counsel which Vietnam required. With the service Chiefs largely excluded from final policy deliberations, the JCS Chairman became the focal point of military counsel. The roles given the two Chairmen most concerned, Maxwell Taylor and Earle Wheeler, may in fact have lessened the likelihood of forceful, independent counsel.

Taylor started on Vietnam from the admittedly patchwork position of an active-duty general officer on the White House staff, put in place as an alternative to the Joint Chiefs. Taylor was there to bridge the chasm between the Kennedy New Frontiersmen and uniformed military officers. After becoming JCS Chairman, Taylor's role continued to require that he be a member in

good standing of each camp. Taylor's additional active policymaking involvement as Ambassador to Vietnam and as a special consultant to President Johnson had him counseling from all points of the compass, sometimes in uniform and sometimes not. Taylor's ability and expertise on Vietnam were clear and the varied assignments he undertook may have been necessary. But the bureaucratic straddling imposed on him did little to promote clear, singular military counsel on Vietnam.

The postwar legislative dimensions of the JCS chairmanship made that officer the emissary of the Joint Chiefs to the White House. During the Johnson presidency, General Wheeler also came to function as a peacemaker and consensus-builder for the White House among the Joint Chiefs.¹⁸ General Wheeler was called upon to function as a two-direction diplomat, keeping the bureaucratic process running.

The tasks which fell to Generals Taylor and Wheeler were difficult and, given the nature of Vietnam policymaking, probably necessary. Both officers brought unquestioned ability to their roles and, by and large, were successful in their assigned efforts. But the very roles given them, the most senior and influential military officers involved, diverted uniformed military policymakers from what arguably should have been their primary function, offering clear and accurate military counsel to the President. Having focused military counsel in the JCS chairmanship, that position became a bureaucratic centerpiece subject to the tugs and pulls of the surrounding bureaucracy.

The sustained crisis in Vietnam would have taxed the best of relationships among US civilian and military policymakers. The relationship between the Joint Chiefs and the civilian officials of the Johnson Administration may not have been up to the strain. At a meeting of the President with his senior civilian Vietnam policymakers in late 1965, a meeting attended by the President, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, George Ball, and Jack

Valenti, the advisability of a bombing pause was considered. According to notes of the meeting, the President reflected that "the Chiefs go through the roof when we mention this pause." Secretary McNamara responded,

I can take on the Chiefs The Chiefs will be totally opposed We decide what we want and impose it on them. They see this as a total military problem—nothing will change their views I know exactly what the arguments of the Chiefs are. Before you decide, I cannot deliver. After you decide, I can deliver.¹⁹

It would appear that, anticipating opposition from the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary favored excluding them until the President had reached a final decision. At a minimum, the Secretary's expressions suggest that the close give-and-take relationship which should exist between civilian and military policymakers on war and war-risk decisions did not exist on the Vietnam issue in 1965.

Whether this unfortunate state of affairs came about through a lack of ability on the part of the Joint Chiefs as policymakers or through a lack of perspective on the part of civilian officials is perhaps less important than the fact that such a state existed. That poor relationship eroded the independence and objectivity of the military counsel produced. General Harold K. Johnson, Army Chief of Staff from 1964 to 1968, recounts of Vietnam policymaking,

There was, I felt, an unfair, unreasonable, and illogical effort on the part of many of the assistants to Mr. McNamara to get the services—and this was especially so as far as the Army staff was concerned—to get the Army staff to submit recommendations that had been prepared in the office of the Secretary of Defense. I think this is wrong.²⁰

In the bureaucratic alternative which supplanted the Marshall model, the accountability which should accompany a decision to commit American combat power was blurred. Speaking of the legislative

change of 1958 which put the Secretary of Defense in the military chain of command, a change which fostered the active participation of a burgeoning number of civilian secretarial and staff assistants in military decision-making, General Johnson observed, "It created civilian command, but without an assumption of the intangible and abstract obligations and responsibilities that accompany command."²¹

Thus the broad role of Marshall-era military officers as policymakers had been sharply restricted by the early 1960s. The narrowing of that policymaking role impaired the United States' national security policy formulation process by removing from it a forceful recognition of the costs of the contemplated military commitment in Vietnam.

Under the Marshall model, and under its extended effect during the Eisenhower presidency, senior officers could and did make their views on the likely costs of proposed war policies forcefully known to the President. In 1954, serious consideration was given to a proposal to commit American combat units to Vietnam to aid the French colonial forces fighting there. Army Chief of Staff Matthew B. Ridgway bucked the New Look wave of policymakers, both military and civilian, and confronted President Eisenhower with the inevitably high costs of an American war in Vietnam. Ridgway's strong and continued pressing of that issue contributed to a rethinking and eventual abandonment of the proposed deployment.²²

By contrast, when similar issues concerning Vietnam arose in the mid-1960s, senior military officers occupied a significantly curtailed role in the process of national security policymaking. From that diminished position, senior officers were less likely to initiate the development of Ridgway-like cost assessments and less able to make such costs a part of final policy consideration.

Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts have written an analysis of US policymaking concerning Vietnam titled *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. Gelb and Betts argue that the policymaking process

worked approximately as intended and about as well as could be expected. They recognize a telling exception to their general proposition:

If the decision making system failed, it did so in ways that were not unique to the issue of Vietnam but only seem so because the consequences were so horrendous . . . Perhaps it is most significant that the system did not force a definitive early decision on what the tolerable limits of eventual total costs would be.²³

To the extent that military counsel was involved in addressing the costs of a proposed military solution in Vietnam before deploying major American combat units, such counsel appears to have been contained most directly in a memorandum prepared in 1961 in response to the Taylor study mission to Vietnam. A draft memorandum prepared for the President specifically represented the views of the Secretary of Defense, the Undersecretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the costs of the proposed commitment of American forces to Vietnam. The draft DOD memorandum was dated 8 November and argued for a recognition and acceptance of the high costs of sending combat forces to Vietnam prior to any such deployment. On 11 November the National Security Council adopted a redrafted joint memorandum offered by the Department of Defense and the State Department. The redrafted version of the memorandum sidestepped or deleted altogether the provisions regarding a recognition and acceptance of the eventual high costs of a war in Vietnam. The very difficult issue of the costs of a commitment was avoided, perhaps to reach a bureaucratic consensus.²⁴

As the decision to deploy American units to combat in Vietnam reached its final stage, the Joint Chiefs had an eleventh-hour opportunity to offer counsel. Several days before the deployment was to be announced to the public, Secretary of Defense McNamara tasked the JCS Chairman to form a study group to work with Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton to gauge the chances of success of a conventional force commitment. McNaughton sent a memoran-

dum to the study group which severely limited the scope of the inquiry and which, as a practical matter, largely determined its outcome. McNaughton excluded from consideration the issues of a reserve call-up, extended in-country tours beyond one year, and escalating the air war. He assumed that the government of South Vietnam could not raise additional forces in a timely manner and that it could not provide stable governmental leadership. He defined victory as not losing.²⁵ Thus constrained, it is not surprising that the Joint Chiefs endorsed the program that was already underway. The process of decision-making is illustrative. It was not a process likely to foster independent and objective counsel on the fundamental issue of whether Americans fighting a war in Vietnam would be successful. It is difficult to imagine an assistant secretary so constraining George Marshall or Matthew Ridgway.

One must ask why senior officers did not promote their views with a louder, more decisive voice. No officer upset the policy-making apple cart as General Ridgway had in 1954. In a system of government where the concept of civilian control of military policymaking is so deeply ingrained in both the civilian and military participants, it is difficult to fault military officers who follow civilian leads. Despite that fact, senior officers under the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations allowed themselves to be co-opted into a national security policymaking bureaucracy. When that occurred, the independence and objectivity of their counsel was lessened. Without forceful counsel on the costs of a war in Vietnam, the United States embarked on a military policy that eventually cost more than the American public was willing to pay.

Rather consistently, the opinion of the Joint Chiefs on the issue of sending troops to Southeast Asia was that, if the decision was for war, then the ultimate costs of that decision should be faced prior to deployment. Hindsight shows that to have been good counsel, but it was counsel neither forcefully offered nor seriously heeded.

Even the limited involvement of military officers which was a part of the process was ineffective. General Bruce Palmer, knowing

Maxwell Taylor's ability and influence, wonders: "The nagging question, though, remains—why was he not more successful in bringing about a sounder strategic approach to the war?"²⁶ The answer, and it applies equally to General Wheeler, lies in the attenuated position within a shifting bureaucracy from which senior officers operated.

If there was or is an imbalance in the role of military officers as policymakers, civilian officials must be the ones to recognize that imbalance and they must be the ones to take steps to correct it. There is no guarantee that senior officers could have met the additional burden of greater policymaking responsibility in the 1960s. What is clear is that senior civilian policymakers could have been better informed on the costs of a military solution in Vietnam.

The Joint Chiefs structure of the Vietnam era did not produce the clear, cogent counsel which was needed. That structure is with us still. The ability of the Joint Chiefs to offer military advice to the President, to the Secretary of Defense, and to the National Security Council has been seriously questioned by a series of reviews and studies. A consistent criticism has been the consensus-building, corporate tendencies of the JCS and its coordinating chairmanship. In a consensus, corporate environment, hard advocacy on difficult issues, such as the cost of going to war, is less likely. And officers who will go against the policymaking grain and forcefully bring bad news to the President become an endangered species.

The appraisals and reappraisals of the American experience in Vietnam have been largely and properly free of recriminations. Asking the question "Who lost Vietnam?" makes little sense. What does make great sense is to look to the policymaking structures and the Vietnam policies they produced to find areas for improvement. That is not a matter of affixing blame for the past but, rather, one of informing ourselves for the future.

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