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Wade Market

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# The Limits of American Generalship: The JCS's Strategic Advice in Early Cold War Crises

WADE MARKEL

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Last spring, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling reignited the perennial debate regarding American generalship with his article, "General Failure." He joined a number of critics in blaming America's senior military leadership, especially Army leaders, for the situation in Iraq. In his view, US generals failed the nation by not anticipating the nature of the war, thus failing to prepare the military for the war in which it is now engaged. Worse, he asserted that they failed to conduct counterinsurgency operations with competence, poorly integrating the political, military, economic, social, and information domains, if at all. In short, Yingling believed that America's generals had waged the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time.<sup>1</sup>

One may stipulate that everything Colonel Yingling says is true, however, and still note that generals who succeeded according to his criteria are indeed rare in American military history. Historiography reveres George C. Marshall, but if President Franklin D. Roosevelt had followed his advice, the United States would have curtailed Lend-Lease aid to Great Britain in favor of an American military buildup, and the Allies might have launched a cross-Channel attack in 1943 as the first major western offensive of the war. Ulysses S. Grant simply executed the military strategy President Abraham Lincoln had been urging on his reluctant generals since the fall of 1862, but when it became

his responsibility to deal with the challenges associated with post-Civil War Reconstruction he was unable to institute Lincoln's vision and left the social and political order of the American South essentially unchanged from the antebellum era. Whatever happens in Iraq, it is highly unlikely that a similar critique will be uttered. In fact, Iraq is not the first war America has fought in which a brilliant conventional campaign captured the enemy capital, only to be followed by stalemate. That distinction belongs to the Mexican-American War, in which Winfield Scott's campaign to seize Mexico City left American forces mired there for months until Nicholas Trist's freelance diplomacy saved the day.<sup>2</sup>

Given this record, it might be better to inquire as to what can reasonably be expected of American generals rather than lament their shortcomings. In that vein, this article will focus on the Joint Chiefs of Staff's (JCS) strategic advice in three crises: the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the decision to commit US forces to combat in Vietnam in 1964. The Joint Chiefs of Staff represent the pinnacle of America's military leadership. During the periods in question, they collectively served as the principal military advisers to the President, a role now held singly by the JCS's Chairman. Examining that advice permits us to examine the quality of strategic thought at the highest military levels. Moreover, collectively the Joint Chiefs were responsible for identifying the key military challenges to American security and preparing US forces to meet them. Finally, these three crises were the defining moments of the early Cold War, at first leading directly to the US decision to wage the Cold War and then, at the end, to a national desire to find another framework.

This examination illustrates both the utility and limitations of military advice. It also demonstrates the tendency to expand the military's jurisdiction. During the Korean War, the JCS generally confined their efforts to the overall management of US military resources in support of national objectives, keeping the Korean conflict in proper perspective within America's Cold War military strategy. By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, however, the JCS appeared to have expanded the definition of military advice to include all matters related to war and peace. They pressed President John F. Kennedy hard for an air strike against the deployed Soviet missiles, even though an attack carried with it a considerable risk of nuclear war by the JCS's own estimates. Still, they

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Dr. Wade Markel is a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, specializing in the effects of military institutions on operational effectiveness. He is a graduate of the US Military Academy, holds master's and doctoral degrees from Harvard University, and served for 20 years in the US Army, culminating his career as a strategic planner for the Army Capabilities Integration Center.

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provided the President with the critical information on military capabilities he needed to develop his own strategy. Afterwards, they apparently resolved not to make that same mistake again. When the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration was considering whether to commit US forces to combat in Vietnam, the JCS focused entirely on securing a US commitment to the survival of South Vietnam and abdicated their responsibility to spell out the military implications for policymakers. Thus President Johnson made the fateful decision to commit the US military and America's prestige in Vietnam, a decision that made the deployment of additional ground forces almost inevitable.

History seems to indicate that America's generals can provide important and valuable input to the formulation of strategy, when they formulate this advice grounded in their appreciation of the operational requirements and ramifications of such strategic decisions. When they seek to manipulate the strategic process to achieve a preferred policy outcome, as the JCS did in Vietnam, American generals' relatively limited appreciation of war's nonmilitary aspects severely compromises the strategic process. Generals, politicians, and the American public all need to understand and respect the ramifications of these capabilities and the limitations they place on the conduct of war.

### ***Korea: Limited Advice for a Limited War***

In many respects, the Joint Chiefs of Staff functioned most effectively during the Korean War, always keeping that conflict in its proper global context. Throughout the war, they balanced Korea's obvious and urgent needs with the no less urgent but less obvious need to establish a credible conventional deterrent in Europe and build a robust and capable strategic reserve. Ground strength in Europe went from one understrength Army division to five US divisions, forming the core of a 36-division NATO force. Of the four National Guard divisions mobilized at the onset of the war, only one went to Korea; one eventually went to Europe, while two remained stateside to augment the strategic reserve.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the JCS collectively developed and implemented a thoroughgoing modernization program whose results, such as the B-52 and C-130 airplanes, continue to perform yeoman service. In marked contrast to the Vietnam War, during the Korean conflict the JCS ensured that America's armed forces were stronger at the conflict's end than at its beginning.

The buildup of US forces required considerable discipline, given the war's many crises, ranging from Task Force Smith to the Chinese counteroffensive. Especially during the latter portions of the conflict in Korea, the Far East commander, General Douglas MacArthur, placed considerable pressure on Washington to escalate the war, with a concomitant diversion of military resources from Europe. In the wake of the Chinese offensive in the winter of 1950, General MacArthur publicly maintained that only an immediate, large-

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scale attack on Chinese bases in Manchuria could prevent the humiliating destruction of the Eighth Army. The JCS, however, were having none of it. If the situation in Korea were in fact as bad as General MacArthur was saying, the JCS favored evacuating US forces rather than throwing more resources into “the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong enemy,” as the Chairman of the JCS, General Omar Bradley, later told Congress. Only the Chairman’s innate caution, combined with his sense that General MacArthur was exaggerating, prevented the Chiefs from immediately recommending withdrawal. Instead, they dispatched Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins and Air Force Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg to evaluate the situation for themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The Chairman’s instincts were correct. When the JCS members arrived in Korea, they found the United Nations forces in good shape, far from the beaten and demoralized army General MacArthur had described in his press conferences. In fact, under the palpable and immediate influence of its hard-bitten commander, Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway, the Eighth Army was about to resume the offensive. The report from Generals Collins and Vandenberg steadied nerves in Washington, permitting President Harry S. Truman to steer the course between escalation and evacuation with confidence.<sup>5</sup>

That is not to say the JCS made no mistakes during the war. Indeed, they made several fairly significant ones. Before the war, they had approved remarks by both General MacArthur and Secretary of State Dean Acheson that implicitly placed South Korea outside of the United States’s “defensive perimeter.” Following the Inchon landing, they had drafted orders which allowed General MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel at his discretion and dispose his forces as he wished. The result was that he split his forces with Korea’s impassable mountains in the middle, inviting the surprise attack that eventually befell them. General Bradley regretted to the end of his life his acceptance of General MacArthur’s assurance that the Chinese would not intervene, noting that a general’s job is to base advice on the enemy’s capabilities, not his intentions.<sup>6</sup>

These errors, however, arose from the same source as the JCS's successes, a disciplined adherence to the national strategy approved by the President. American national strategy, as articulated in National Security Council documents, established the defense of Europe as the nation's top military priority. To the JCS, that meant that the nation should not hazard most of its military resources in a faraway land with little inherent geographical, economic, or military value; it also explains the Chiefs' approval of Secretary Acheson's remarks. The priority accorded to Europe provides the rationale for why the JCS planned and directed a balanced military buildup and resisted escalating the Korean War, with the concomitant diversion of America's military resources from Europe. This priority even explains the JCS's willingness to permit General MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel, based on the hoped-for destruction of the North Korean Army. If such a defeat were possible the JCS believed they might be able to liquidate an onerous and ongoing commitment of US forces to the Korean Peninsula, an aspiration fully shared by the rest of the Truman Administration.

While steadfastly obedient to the President's strategy, the Chiefs scrupulously refrained from trying to set it. Indeed, their unwillingness to so much as make assumptions was a source of mild amusement and considerable frustration to Secretary Acheson. While their reticence may have frustrated the Secretary of State, the JCS had it right. As distinguished as General Bradley and his fellow Chiefs were, none were qualified by experience to make the complex and critical judgments about international credibility, alliance relations, and domestic support. Nor were the services they represented organized or particularly well-qualified to conduct those sorts of analyses. What the JCS was qualified to do was assess what US strategy required of the American military and to what degree the military could meet its commitments. The key difference between the Korean War JCS and its successors was that the former understood and respected their capabilities and limitations.

### ***The Cuban Missile Crisis: Useful Analysis, Flawed Advice***

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, John F. Kennedy's Joint Chiefs of Staff provided the same sort of candid and conscientious military advice that their predecessors had given to President Truman. Ironically, their assessments proved instrumental in persuading President Kennedy to abandon his initial preference for an air strike. Ultimately, he adopted the strategy of publicly blockading Cuba, while privately trading the removal of US missiles in Turkey for the removal of Soviet missiles in Cuba. This was the very opposite result from what the Chiefs recommended. To a man, they urged the President to launch a surprise air strike. Even after Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had acceded to President Kennedy's ultimatum, the Chiefs were bitter at having been overruled. They

verged on insubordination in expressing their dissatisfaction to the President. President Kennedy had more than enough self-confidence, however, to set his own course during these fateful 13 days in October 1962.

When a U-2 spy plane discovered the missiles on 14 October, the challenge they posed seemed reasonably straightforward, and one for which the United States was well-prepared. It was quite clear that the missiles were a direct challenge to America and a personal affront to President Kennedy. On 4 August, he had announced that stationing Soviet offensive capabilities in Cuba would provoke “the gravest issues.” Still, during the past year, the US military had been developing and revising plans for the invasion of Cuba, in addition to plans for an air campaign directed at Soviet offensive capabilities. President Kennedy initially leaned toward a muscular response, most likely a surprise air attack, to neutralize the missiles and demonstrate America’s willingness to act decisively. The President, however, was quick to appreciate the greater dimensions of the problem, including the potential for nuclear escalation, linkage to the fate of Berlin, and the future of NATO, for starters. When General Maxwell Taylor, the newly minted Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, informed President Kennedy that an air strike could be neither surgical nor certain, the President’s thinking began to shift. The Chairman told the President that the proposed air strike would have to be massive, and even then had only about a 90 percent chance of succeeding.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to what Kennedy acolytes would later assert, neither the estimate of US chances nor the plan for eliminating the missiles themselves was haphazard. United States Atlantic Command, under Admiral Robert Dennison, had been continuously revising its operational plan since the later winter of 1962. Following the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba, General Walter C. Sweeney, commanding general of the Tactical Air Command (TAC), immediately began refining the already thorough and rigorous planning for air operations. His planners estimated the type and number of sorties, against which targets, that would be required to have reasonable assurance the missiles were destroyed. The analysis was really bomb-by-bomb, and drew upon test runs against mockups of Soviet shelters that TAC had conducted earlier that summer. Even today such an effort would be impressive, and it testifies to the professionalism and proficiency of Air Force planners of the 1960s. Thus when TAC estimated that 500 sorties, flying repeatedly against the same targets, would be required to destroy the missiles, it was the best possible estimate.<sup>8</sup>

Having concluded that the significant risk of nuclear war and near-certainty of strains on the NATO alliance virtually ruled out an air strike, President Kennedy’s thinking began to shift toward other options. The JCS’s thinking had not, however. In a 19 October meeting, they pressed the President to launch the surprise air strike. While they were concerned that

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the Soviets might be able to conceal the missiles and launchers, the Chiefs based their argument for the attack primarily on domestic and international political considerations that they were frankly not qualified to assess. They dismissed the possibility of a Soviet response against Berlin, posited a jingoistic domestic response to the discovery of missiles in Cuba, and ignored the likely response of allied governments. The JCS pressed their case even though they could not, according to Chief of Naval Operations Admiral George Anderson, “guarantee . . . that we could prevent damage and loss of life in the United States itself.”<sup>9</sup>

It must have required considerable self-confidence on the part of the President to resist this advice from such distinguished military leaders. General Taylor had commanded the 101st Airborne Division in World War II and United Nations forces in Korea during the armistice negotiation. President Kennedy had adopted the strategy of flexible response Maxwell Taylor had articulated in his book, *The Uncertain Trumpet*. Moreover, General Taylor had already had a showdown with one President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, over military policy. Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay’s counsel was almost as hard to dismiss. For all his bellicosity, few American commanders of any service have matched General LeMay’s record of operational success in war and peace. During WWII he led the Eighth Air Force against targets in Schweinfurt and Regensburg, firebombed Japan into impotence in his role as commander of the Twentieth Air Force, and commanded forces conducting the Berlin Airlift. For nearly a decade, he had been almost single-handedly responsible for building and maintaining America’s nuclear deterrent as commander of Strategic Air Command.

President Kennedy was neither easily intimidated nor was he more sensitive to domestic political considerations than to America’s international standing. The strategy that eventually emerged—a blockade combined with a public pledge not to invade Cuba and private assurances to Premier Khrushchev that America would withdraw comparable missiles

from Turkey—was the President’s alone. Indeed, except for President Kennedy, his brother Robert, and a few others, no one in the Kennedy Administration knew of the promise regarding Turkey. Nonetheless, President Kennedy’s strategy worked. He announced the “quarantine of Cuba” on 24 October, and the world held its breath. There followed an intense exchange of public, private, and secret communications between Moscow and Washington as the two leaders sought a formula that would permit the Soviets to salvage some prestige and the Americans to publicly avoid granting concessions. In a last-minute, secret deal, Robert Kennedy pledged that the United States would withdraw the missiles from Turkey a few months after the Soviets withdrew their missiles from Cuba. Presented with this offer and faced with evidence of US determination, and also unwilling to risk global nuclear war for Fidel Castro, Premier Khrushchev backed down.<sup>10</sup>

When Premier Khrushchev announced that the USSR was withdrawing the missiles, as well as any other weapon systems the United States considered “offensive,” both John F. Kennedy and the United States gained enormous stature. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more satisfactory outcome. Yet General LeMay considered the result “the greatest defeat in our history,” and said so to the President. Admiral Anderson seconded that sentiment. Years later, even General Taylor thought the JCS’s advocacy of an air strike was the correct strategy.

The Chiefs, however, had little grounds for their certainty. As Ernest May and Philip Zelikow point out in their conclusion to *The Kennedy Tapes*, the JCS missed the implicit and very real linkage between Cuba and events in Berlin. They lacked the President’s access to world leaders such as British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, and French President Charles de Gaulle. Additionally, they had never stood eyeball-to-eyeball with Nikita Khrushchev. From this perspective, the JCS’s confidence that they understood the full dimensions of the crisis better than the President is astonishing. Their position certainly shocked and dismayed the President. Astonishing or not, the JCS emerged from the Cuban Missile Crisis determined not to be again overruled in matters of war and peace.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Vietnam: Advice without Analysis***

The JCS participated in the deliberations regarding escalation in Vietnam with the Cuban Missile Crisis etched in their institutional memory. One book that captures the flawed decisionmaking process that led America into Vietnam is H. R. McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty*. The author describes a process so corrupted by the participants that none of the strategies under consideration were likely to achieve US objectives, even as the ways and means chosen continued to ensnare America more tightly in the war’s coils. The deliberations of No-

vember and December 1964 place the circumstances in sharp relief. With the 1964 presidential election behind them and a deteriorating situation in Vietnam ahead of them, Administration officials considered courses of action to salvage the situation. All participants, including the JCS, attempted to skew the debate in favor of their own preferred strategic concept, preventing any rigorous, thorough, or objective analysis. This corrupted process served to dissuade the development of mature, realistic strategies addressing not only the ways selected but also the likely costs and probability for success. The JCS in particular focused on opposing the concept of graduated pressure rather than advocating their preference for the relatively unconstrained application of military power. Mature strategies, with a concomitant assessment of costs and risk, might have clarified the nature of the war and forced President Johnson to reconsider his options. In the absence of such analysis, the President committed the United States to an active combat role in Vietnam based upon a fatally flawed strategy. Even though President Johnson soon discarded that strategy, the commitment remained.<sup>12</sup>

The problem was that the situation in Vietnam was rapidly deteriorating, due mainly to the political instability in Saigon. The American-backed coup of 1963 that overthrew South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem had deprived the government of Vietnam of residual legitimacy. It had disrupted the fragile institutions of Vietnamese government, leaving civil authorities and military leaders insecure, forced to conduct daily operations with at least one eye on Saigon at all times. In the field, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam had experienced a string of defeats and was hemorrhaging men and weapons almost twice as fast as the United States could help in providing them. Meanwhile, Hanoi was straining to achieve victory before America decisively intervened. To US officials in Saigon and Washington, it seemed clear that only direct American intervention could stave off defeat.<sup>13</sup>

The only question was what form that intervention would take. The Administration considered three options. Option A was to continue more of the same. It offered few prospects of achieving US objectives, but avoided deepening the American commitment. Option B, favored by the Joint Chiefs, was the "hard knock," a sudden and massive application of US airpower against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. A strategy which the Chiefs hoped would deter Hanoi from further support of the insurgency in the south. The plan's critics feared that it might, however, provoke a Chinese intervention. Option C was the concept of gradual escalation which enjoyed the support of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. It also seemed to offer the illusion of control and appeared to present the possibility of finding the point where the level of pain would be too much for North Vietnam to endure, without provoking Chinese intervention.<sup>14</sup>

While the JCS entered deliberations determined not to be disregarded again in the national strategic decisionmaking process, that was

exactly what Secretary McNamara intended. McMaster argues that the Secretary tried to sideline the Chiefs by focusing their attention on narrow, somewhat technical tasks such as how many sorties it would take to knock out a given target. For their part, the JCS were not any more interested in an open and honest dialogue than was the Secretary. Instead, their primary objective during discussions was to obtain a US national commitment to the defeat of communism in Southeast Asia. After America found itself committed to the conflict, then the JCS would work to ensure a viable strategy. During inter-agency discussions, Vice Admiral Lloyd Mustain, the Joint Staff's Director of Operations, chose to emphasize the geopolitical implications of a US defeat in Vietnam rather than the military implications of its defense. According to H. R. McMaster, the important thing for the Chiefs was to first get America committed, and then get the strategy right.<sup>15</sup>

The Chiefs certainly did not spend a great deal of effort defining the strategy before President Johnson made his decision regarding the conduct of the conflict. In fact, the JCS engaged in extended discussions for some time without defining specific military measures that would support any of the courses of action. JCS Chairman General Earle Wheeler finally drew up a list of measures on a legal pad just before a critical meeting in November. With limited revision, his handwritten notes became the basis for Option B, the "hard knock."<sup>16</sup>

In part, the JCS did not develop a workable plan because they could not reach agreement on the nature of the war or a strategy to win it. General LeMay wanted to use airpower to strike directly at the enemy's center of gravity, the will of the North Vietnamese Politburo to continue an "optional" war of aggression. Unfortunately, this particular strategy ignored the fact that the struggle for unification was a core pillar of Hanoi's legitimacy. Marine Commandant General Wallace Greene also supported the unrestricted application of airpower, but saw it as a complement to an invigorated pacification campaign designed to defeat an indigenous insurgency, a perspective that also ignored Hanoi's central role in the conflict. Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson was extremely skeptical of the utility of US combat forces in a Vietnamese war, the usefulness of airpower, and the judgment and professional biases of his colleagues. At the time decisions regarding US strategy were being made, he had little to offer in the way of alternatives. He would eventually propose deploying a large US combat force with the intent of preventing infiltration from the north, a concept that essentially ignored the scope and intensity of combat within South Vietnam. None of the JCS's strategic concepts bore more than a coincidental association with reality in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> In the final analysis, the JCS failed not only in failing to "speak up," but also in having so little of value to say.

While there was little actual planning being conducted, there was even less analysis. This bit of examination obscured the extent of the commitment the United States was undertaking. In 1954, following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the Army Staff had concluded that 500,000 or more American troops were required for an indefinite period of time to successfully intervene in Indochina, albeit in a significantly different war than later occurred.<sup>18</sup> In the spring of 1965, on his own initiative, General William Westmoreland directed the staff of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to conduct a classic estimate of the situation in an effort to discern what was needed to win, if the air campaign was maintained at its current level and the fighting remained restricted to South Vietnam. The answer was a lot. By June 1965, General Westmoreland had concluded that the situation in South Vietnam could not be retrieved without the commitment of substantial numbers of US forces. His initial request for 34 maneuver battalions simply represented the first installment; that number was the most the logistics infrastructure could support at the time. It was a floor rather than a ceiling.

Almost simultaneously, Lieutenant General Andrew Goodpaster had led a study predicated on maximum exertion in both the air and ground campaigns, essentially an analysis of the “hard knock.” The Goodpaster study concluded that at least 200,000 US forces, comprising 44 maneuver battalions, would be needed initially, followed by somewhere between seven and 35 additional battalions. Like MACV’s, this study promised little in the way of rapid success. While the price of victory was hard to predict, these analyses indicated that the price would be steep indeed and victory, long in coming. Yet in December 1964 neither analysis had been initiated. Thus President Johnson made the fateful decision to commit US forces in a combat role with no clear sense of the probable costs or the likelihood of success associated with any course of action.<sup>19</sup>

Operation Rolling Thunder, as the air campaign against the north became known, would eventually lead to the deployment of additional ground forces; the die had been cast. Having encouraged the President to follow this particular course of action, however, the JCS neglected to fully attend to the implications. In contrast to the Korean War, in which General Bradley and his fellow Chiefs had leveraged a war of choice in a secondary theater as a means of strengthening the US defense posture worldwide, General Wheeler and his fellow Chiefs gradually hollowed-out US forces, especially in Europe, to support a developing country far from America’s vital interests. Germany and the United States became mere holding areas for forces waiting for deployment to Vietnam. Conventional forces, especially the Army, essentially skipped a generation of modernization in order to sustain the war; a war whose probable cost President Johnson only dimly recognized and was exceedingly reluctant to share with the Congress.<sup>20</sup>

## *Conclusion*

The three cases presented illustrate the limits of American generalship, at least in the arena of national strategy. In the realm of military operations, the JCS, in conjunction with the vast military bureaucracy over which they presided, proved remarkably accurate in estimating the cost and probability of success of potential operations. It is at most a slight exaggeration to say that Lawton Collins and Hoyt Vandenberg's optimistic report in January 1951, combined with Matthew Ridgway's assumption of command, saved the situation in Korea. In October 1962, when Maxwell Taylor and Curtis LeMay were advising President Kennedy on his military options for dealing with Soviet missiles in Cuba, the rigor of their analysis and their candor in refusing to guarantee success helped the President make the correct decision, even against the JCS's recommendations. Even in Vietnam, the much-despised bureaucracy proved able to forecast the military requirements for holding the line, as well as the dubious prospects for short-term success, with a fair degree of accuracy.

It was when the JCS attempted to dictate national strategy, however, that their advice was not only ignored, it was dangerous. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Chiefs were willing to push beyond the risk of nuclear war to eliminate missiles in Cuba. Not only were they ill-equipped to comprehend the political dynamics of the crisis, they also proved incapable of placing Cuba in global perspective with the situation in Berlin. Instead of realizing that they were in over their heads, the Chiefs resolved to dominate the future of the strategic decisionmaking process. Generals Wheeler, LeMay, and Johnson got the decision they wanted in Vietnam, but unfortunately were not prepared to cope with its implications. It is instructive to note that the most politically and strategically experienced set of Chiefs, Generals Bradley, Collins, and Vandenberg, and Admiral Forrest Sherman, adamantly refused to go beyond the realm of military expertise during their tenure in the 1950s.

There is some evidence that today's generals have recovered that sense of strategic humility. While media reports have occasionally indicated some degree of tension regarding Iraq between the Central Command commander and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, such tensions inevitably are the result of competing requirements for scarce military resources. As frustrating as it appears to those opposed to the war, America's military leaders have properly refrained from commenting on the validity of US national objectives, instead concentrating on the military's role in obtaining them. The most telling such instance was when General David Petraeus respectfully, yet resolutely, declined to answer Senator John Warner's question regarding whether fighting in Iraq made the United States safer. Instead, the general limited himself to

what he knew, the situation and prognosis for Iraq, properly deferring to the political establishment regarding the question of the war's utility.

It makes sense for generals to express a certain degree of modesty in questions of national strategy. While America's generals have spent their lives studying, practicing, and experiencing warfare, there is more to war than military operations. According to Clausewitz's dictum, war is an extension of politics, and generals are not practiced politicians. That is not to say that they should remain silent in questions of national strategy. The Joint Chiefs of Staff hardly have less applicable knowledge and experience than their political brethren. It is to say, however, that a certain degree of professional modesty during public and private deliberations on matters of national strategy is in keeping with their charter.

Equally, it would behoove the rest of America to temper its expectations of those same generals. They are not oracles, who can pronounce authoritatively on the likelihood of success or failure. Thus, while the Army must continue to develop generals' political and strategic judgment in selecting and educating these individuals, it is highly unlikely that they will ever be able to replace the political direction and acumen so essential for success in times of conflict. America inevitably depends on the judgment of its political leaders for the collective, national understanding of war's dynamics.

#### NOTES

1. Paul Yingling, "General Failure: America's Military Leadership is in Crisis," *Armed Forces Journal* (May 2007), 17-23, 45.

2. While Marshall never opposed Lend-Lease aid to Britain outright, he undervalued Britain's chances of withstanding the Nazi onslaught and therefore argued in favor of hedging against their collapse. See Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Ordeal and Hope, 1939-1942* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 50-53. For his determined advocacy of a cross-Channel assault in 1943, see Pogue, 321-49. Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones credit Lincoln with perceiving that the most effective military strategy against the Confederacy lay in simultaneous advances; *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), 144. The assessment of post-Civil War Reconstruction as a failure follows that of Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Perennial Library, 1989), 602-12. K. Jack Bauer tells the story of the frustrating inadequacy of raw military power particularly during the last several months of Nicholas Trist's unauthorized negotiations, in *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: MacMillan, 1974), 380-88. The US Government did not pay Trist's salary for those efforts until 1871.

3. Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1950-1952*, Vol. 4 (Washington: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1998), 50-52. Chang-II Ohn, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Policy and Strategy Regarding Korea, 1945-1953* (Dissertation: Univ. of Kansas, 1983), 96-98. In "The 'Long Pull' Army: NSC 68, the Korean War, and the Creation of the Cold War U.S. Army," *Journal of Military History*, 61 (January 1997), 93-120, historian David Fautua demonstrates how the Army provided forces on a marginally higher priority to Europe than to Korea. The key difference was that while Korea had its needs met first, Europe had its needs met more thoroughly.

4. James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1950-1951: The Korean War*, Vol. 3, Part 1 (Washington: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1998), 179-80; Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography by General of the Army Omar N. Bradley* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 613-14.

5. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 834.

6. For Acheson's unfortunate remarks, their identity with earlier remarks made by MacArthur, and the JCS's approbation of same, see Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New

York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969), 355-57. For Bradley's acknowledgement of the JCS's error in permitting MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel, see Bradley and Blair, 561.

7. Timothy Naftali and Alexandr Fursenko, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997), 206, 235.

8. In the first edition of his classic *Essence of Decision: Understanding the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), Graham Allison uncritically passed along allegations that military planning had been hasty and slipshod, charges designed to insulate Kennedy from criticism that he had passed up a viable military option; see page 125. Later, when the declassification of the Kennedy tapes and other documents prompted Allison to update his account, he and his co-author Philip Zelikow corrected the record. See Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2d ed.; New York: Longman, 1999), 225-26. Naftali and Fursenko confirm the care and rigor with which Tactical Air Command and US Atlantic Command developed their plans for the air strike. See also Naftali and Fursenko, 149.

9. Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1997), 173-88.

10. The Kennedys would later leak that the massive size of the proposed air strike and its incomplete chances for success were the result of shoddy military planning, the slipshod revision of a existing plan. In fact, the opposite was true.

11. May and Zelikow also conclude that the JCS's failure to take a broader view reduced their credibility considerably with Kennedy. Presidential historian Michael Beschloss takes a similar view in *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, 1991), 544-45.

12. H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997). McMaster is explicit in condemning Johnson's and McNamara's apparently duplicitous tactics and the JCS's acquiescence in them. Additionally, while he withholds explicit judgment, he also describes in some detail how the JCS attempted to corrupt and subvert the strategic process themselves, trying to compel President Johnson to accept a more robust use of force after the United States had become irrevocably committed. The authors of the Pentagon Papers noted that by the time Johnson was considering whether to commit ground troops to combat in the spring of 1965, he faced two stark alternatives: withdrawing, or committing troops. *The Pentagon Papers: The Senator Gravel Edition*, Vol. 3 (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1971), 271, 393.

13. Ang Cheng Guan, "The Vietnam War, 1962-1964: The Vietnamese Communist Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (October 2000), 612.

14. *The Pentagon Papers*, 223-24.

15. McMaster, 163-70, 181-82.

16. Wheeler probably based his proposals on a series of measures the JCS had recommended to McNamara in a memo dated 27 October 1964, which can be found in John C. Glennon, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968: Vietnam 1964*, Vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), 847-57. It is important to note that these discrete military measures did not represent a comprehensive strategy, but rather the lowest common denominator elements that the JCS could agree upon.

17. In the words of the distinguished historian of executive decisionmaking in Vietnam, Herbert Schandler, military planners "had difficulty translating counterinsurgency doctrine and strategy into plans and tactics for the use of American combat forces in Southeast Asia." See Herbert Y. Schandler, "JCS Strategic Planning and Vietnam: The Search for an Objective," in *Military Planning in the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the Eleventh Military History Symposium 10-12 October 1984*, ed. Harry R. Borowski (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1986), 295-316. McMaster discusses the impact of differing service perspectives on counterinsurgency on pages 143-44.

18. Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), 275-79.

19. See "Summary of the July 14, 1965 Report of the JCS Ad Hoc Study Group, 'Intensification of the Military Operations in South Vietnam, Concept and Appraisal,'" Appendix II in William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships*, Part 3, January - July 1965 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988). For the origins of Westmoreland's analytical process, see William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1980), 161-65. For the fact that Westmoreland's estimates exceeded those of the JCS and constituted only a first installment, see "Phase I in the Build-Up of U.S. Forces, the Debate March-July 1965" in House Armed Services Committee, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Vol. 4 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1971), 8, 94, 117. For MACV's determination that the requirements of the situation within South Vietnam precluded H. K. Johnson's proposed anti-infiltration barrier, see General Westmoreland's History Note dated 29 August 1965 in *The War in Vietnam: Papers of William C. Westmoreland* (Bethesda, Md.: Univ. Publications of America, 1993).

20. Certainly Wheeler and his fellow Chiefs agitated for the mobilization of the reserves, but they never approached the clarity of their Korean War predecessors. Bradley and his compatriots were more than ready to abandon a secondary theater to preserve US capability worldwide.