Chapter 9

VIETNAM: GOING TO WAR

The scene was reminiscent of many amphibious operations of World War II. On the morning of March 8, 1965, with a light mist reducing visibility, elements of 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade landed on a sandy beach near Da Nang, South Vietnam. Wading ashore with their gear, they encountered reporters, photographers, the mayor of Da Nang, and their commander, Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch, whom local school girls had laden with garlands in celebration of the occasion. A cordial welcome, it belied the presence of Viet Cong guerrillas a few miles away. Climbing into waiting trucks, the Marines were transported to the nearby American air base to take up security duties. The vanguard of a larger U.S. presence yet to come, these Marines were the first American combat troops to arrive in Vietnam. "Americanization" of the Vietnam War had begun.[1] It was a policy the Joint Chiefs of Staff had helped to shape, but not one that gave them much satisfaction or sense of confidence. The war in Vietnam was entering a new phase, and with it came growing uncertainty among the JCS whether they would have the tools and resources at their disposal to make that policy succeed.

THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT

By the time U.S. combat troops began to deploy to Vietnam in 1965, the United States had been involved there fighting Communism for more than a decade and a half. With the escalation of Cold War tensions brought on by the Korean War, the Truman administration funneled massive support to the French effort in Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) against the Communist Viet Minh. In 1954, after the Viet Minh victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu, an international conference in Geneva agreed to a settlement that resulted in the division of Vietnam between a Communist regime in the North and a non-Communist one in the South. The Joint Chiefs of Staff viewed the Geneva accords as a major setback for U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. But given the American public's war-weariness in

the wake of the Korean conflict and the Eisenhower administration's reallocation of resources limiting the size and capabilities of general purpose forces, they ruled out recommending direct military involvement to change the outcome. Elections leading to unification were never held owing to chronic political instability in the South (much of it instigated by agents from the North) and the intransigence of South Vietnamese Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, a stalwart anti-Communist, whose rejection of the vote the United States fully supported.

After the French withdrawal in 1954–1955, the United States assumed major responsibility for South Vietnam's economic welfare, political stability, and military security. Expecting continuing pressure from the North, the Joint Chiefs saw a Korean War-style invasion, assisted by the Chinese, as the most serious threat that South Vietnam might face. Since the Joint Staff lacked the requisite personnel and resources at the time, the JCS relied on ad hoc fact-finding committees or the Army General Staff for assessments and recommendations. The results of one such inquiry in 1955 credited the South Vietnamese with a limited capacity for offering resistance and estimated that it would take up to eight U.S. divisions, two to three tactical air wings, a carrier task force, and a Marine landing force to defeat a full-scale North Vietnamese invasion.[2] The Eisenhower administration had no desire to become involved in Vietnam on such a scale and turned instead to heavy infusions of political, economic, and military assistance to buttress South Vietnam's position. But by the end of the decade an increase in assassinations, terrorism, and guerrilla activity by the Viet Cong (successor to the Viet Minh) pointed to the need for stronger measures to avert a Communist takeover. In April 1960, at JCS instigation, the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) assembled a group of senior U.S. officers on Okinawa to take a fresh look at the problem. Based on supposed lessons learned in the recent insurgencies in Malaya and the Philippines, the conference recommended a counterinsurgency plan (CIP) that included increases in military strength for the South Vietnamese armed forces and paramilitary units, and major political and administrative reforms in the Diem government.[3]

Action on the CIP was still pending when the Kennedy administration took office in January 1961. By then, insurgency and terrorism had grown into the most ubiquitous forms of conflict worldwide. In the aftermath of Khrushchev's speech of January 6, 1961, welcoming "wars of national liberation," the new President had all the more reason to be concerned. The development of countermeasures, however, was still in its infancy. Among the JCS and elsewhere within the military there was considerable debate over strategy and doctrine. One of the leading figures in counterinsurgency warfare was Brigadier General Edward G. Lansdale, USAF, who had been instrumental in defeating the Communist Hukbalahap in the Philippines

after World War II. Turning to Lansdale for advice and guidance, President Kennedy decided to expand the use of covert operations and to increase the size of U.S. Army Special Forces (the "Green Berets"). The JCS alternative for dealing with the crisis at the time in neighboring Laos seemed to be a costly and politically risky large-scale military buildup, the prelude to possible intervention. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, USA, lacked the President's confidence in special forces and disputed the notion that current programs in Vietnam were insufficient and ineffective against the guerrilla threat. But in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs episode, Kennedy paid little attention to JCS advice. In April-May 1961, he approved a series of counterinsurgency measures using the Green Berets to spearhead the effort.[4]

Along with increased military activity, Kennedy sought political and economic reforms from Diem to bolster his regime's credibility and popularity. This process of attempting to develop a "balanced" policy lasted, with mixed success, from Kennedy's Presidency into Lyndon Johnson's. But as early as the autumn of 1961 it was clear that without a major improvement in the security situation, efforts to achieve political and economic reform would fall short of the goal. Military power by itself might not determine the outcome of the struggle for Vietnam, but the side without it in preponderance was unlikely to prevail.

The catalyst for the rapid and sustained expansion of the American military presence in South Vietnam was the Taylor-Rostow report, the product of a fact-finding mission jointly headed by the President's MILREP, General Maxwell D. Taylor, USA (Ret.), and Walt W. Rostow, an economist on the NSC Staff who specialized in underdeveloped countries. Delivered to President Kennedy in early November 1961, the report painted a bleak picture of the situation in South Vietnam and recommended an "emergency program" of additional assistance, to include allowing U.S. trainers and advisors to "participate actively" in planning and executing operations against the Viet Cong. The most controversial part of the report was its call for the introduction of an 8,000-man "task force" to boost security while ostensibly assisting in flood repair and other civic action projects in the Mekong Delta. Later, as Ambassador to South Vietnam in 1964–1965, Taylor was apprehensive about the introduction of U.S. combat troops, arguing that it could undermine the government's commitment to the war. In 1961, however, he saw things differently and insisted that "there was a pressing need to do something to restore Vietnamese morale and to shore up confidence in the United States."[5]

The Joint Chiefs agreed that the situation was critical, but they believed that if the United States intervened, it should do so wholeheartedly and without illusion. In General Lemnitzer's view, the "8000-man force," once in place, would be too

thinned out to make much difference.[6] Working in collaboration with CINCPAC, the JCS came up with an alternative contingency "Win Plan" that would involve the use of up to six divisions and put heavy military pressure directly on North Vietnam with air and naval power.[7] Initially, McNamara seemed to prefer the JCS Win Plan to the limited course outlined in the Taylor-Rostow report. But upon further reflection, he and Secretary of State Dean Rusk concurred that even though the introduction of U.S. combat troops might someday become unavoidable, there was no immediate need to go quite so far, a conclusion Kennedy gladly embraced.[8] On November 15, 1961, leaving the question of combat troops in abeyance, Kennedy approved a revised Vietnamese assistance policy (characterized as a "first phase" program), which authorized an increase in the number of U.S. advisors and specialized support units and an expansion of their role.[9]

Kennedy's decision entirely reshaped the U.S. commitment in Vietnam. From a strength of around 1,000 advisors in 1961, the U.S. military advisory presence grew to over 5,000 by the end of the following year. To increase the mobility of government troops, the United States also sent nearly 300 helicopters and transport planes to Vietnam.[10] In February 1962, to oversee the expanded effort, President Kennedy authorized a new command structure—the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV)—a subordinate unified command which reported through CINCPAC to the Joint Chiefs, the Secretary of Defense, and the President.[11] Officially, U.S. policy drew the line at the direct involvement of American advisory personnel in combat operations. The reality, however, was different. Having previously served in rear echelon training areas and command posts, U.S. advisors now fanned out into the countryside, operating at the battalion level or lower. Some advisors actually fought alongside government troops; others flew combat missions.[12] But with Berlin, Cuba, and other hot spots capturing the headlines, Vietnam remained a remote and distant war for policymakers and the American public alike.

By the start of 1963 the surge of American advisors and assistance appeared to be having the desired effects of reinvigorating the South Vietnamese armed forces and placing the Viet Cong on the defensive. By now there were over 11,000 U.S. military personnel in Vietnam. Confident of ultimate success, McNamara told the JCS to plan on U.S. advisors being out of the country in 3 years.[13] But just as the war appeared to be looking up, it took a turn for the worse, owing to unexpected setbacks suffered by the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), increased political protests against Diem by the Buddhists and other noncommunist groups, and stepped up infiltration of men and supplies from the North. By the summer of 1963, the progress of the previous year was a fading memory. Knowing the President's aversion to

the use of combat troops, the Joint Chiefs, CINCPAC, and the CIA came up with a plan (later designated OPLAN 34A) to bring the war home to North Vietnam through a campaign of sabotage and covert operations.[14] However, it was too late for any improvement in the course of the war to save Diem's crumbling regime, which fell victim in early November 1963 to a bloody coup d'état fomented, with American encouragement, by disgruntled South Vietnamese generals. Weapons, tactics, and equipment meant to fight the Viet Cong were used instead to settle old scores and to prop up the new military junta.

Shortly before his death, President Kennedy said publicly that he was confident most U.S. advisors could leave Vietnam in the foreseeable future and turn the war over to the ARVN.[15] But he had no fall-back strategy in case he found withdrawal ill advised and remained averse to putting pressure on North Vietnam, other than through limited, indirect means, to cease and desist its support of the Viet Cong. Though the Joint Chiefs grudgingly accommodated themselves to the President's wishes, they had yet to be convinced that a policy of restraint would succeed. What they saw evolving was an ominous repetition of the stalemate in Korea—a remote war, offering no sign of early resolution, consuming precious resources, and diverting attention from larger threats. Hence their support for a more aggressive, immediate strategy to confront the enemy directly with strong, decisive force. Militarily, the chiefs' solution had much to recommend it. The United States still possessed overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority and could have used that power as an umbrella for large-scale conventional operations against North Vietnam. But it was a strategy fraught with enormous political risks that Kennedy was unwilling or unprepared to take. It would be up to his successor to try to find a more durable solution.

THE ROAD TO AN AMERICAN WAR

By the time Lyndon Johnson entered the Oval Office in November 1963, the situation in South Vietnam had clearly deteriorated to the point that a Communist takeover seemed more probable than ever. Remembering the backlash against Truman over the "loss" of China after World War II, Johnson was determined not to become tagged as the President who "lost" Vietnam. While professing continuity with Kennedy's policy, he quietly abandoned his predecessor's timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. advisors and told General Maxwell Taylor, the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to treat Vietnam as "our most critical military area right now." Identifying the problem as one of insufficient will and commitment, he exhorted Taylor and the JCS to pay close attention to the selection of personnel and to send only "our blue ribbon men" to Vietnam as advisors.[16]

By early 1964, it was apparent from the continuing political turmoil in Vietnam and a surge in Viet Cong activity that reducing the U.S. presence could have adverse consequences. General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, believed the situation had reached the point where the United States needed "a clear-cut decision either to pull out of South Vietnam or to stay there and win."[17] Embracing the latter course, the Joint Chiefs offered a ten-point program of "increasingly bolder actions in Southeast Asia" that amounted to a virtual take-over of the war. Among the recommended measures were overt and covert bombing of the North, increased reconnaissance, large-scale commando raids, the mining of North Vietnamese harbors, operations in Laos and Cambodia, and the commitment of U.S. forces "as necessary" in direct actions against North Vietnam.[18] An expansion of the war at this time, however, was the last thing President Johnson wanted. Meeting with the Joint Chiefs on March 4, 1964, he stated that he remained committed to keeping South Vietnam out of Communist hands, but would do nothing that might involve the country in a war before the November elections. "We haven't got any Congress that will go with us," he told them, "and we haven't got any mothers that will go with us in the war."[19]

Until the election, then, Johnson all but ignored JCS advice on Vietnam, finding it excessively focused on applying overwhelming military power.[20] Limiting his contacts with the chiefs, he saw only Taylor on a regular basis and turned to a small circle of civilian advisors for guidance on the war. Increasingly preeminent within this group was McNamara, who remained confident that the careful and selective application of military power (as opposed to the sweeping intervention favored by the JCS) could produce the desired results. Applying the lessons he had drawn from the Berlin and Cuban Missile crises, McNamara viewed a successful outcome in Vietnam in relatively narrow terms that involved applying precisely the right amount of pressure to achieve the withdrawal of North Vietnamese support for the Viet Cong without escalating the war into a superpower confrontation. With this strategy in mind, he returned from a fact-finding trip to Saigon around mid-March 1964, cautioning against large-scale U.S. military action against North Vietnam and favoring only a limited buildup of American airpower, "tit for tat" reprisal air strikes by the South Vietnamese, and stepped-up commando raids against the North.[21]

A key figure in developing the flexible response doctrine, Taylor shared McNamara's view that the graduated application of finely tuned military pressure would produce the desired results in Vietnam and avoid the need for large-scale intervention. Urging his JCS colleagues to support the Secretary's plan, Taylor defended it as a suitably aggressive, yet measured, response. But to the Service chiefs it smacked of more of the same and did not go nearly far enough to satisfy them.[22] "We are

swatting flies," complained Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay, "when we ought to be going after the manure pile."[23] Intelligence reports supported the Service chiefs' contention that North Vietnam would be largely impervious to the limited raids and retaliatory attacks McNamara had in mind. Yet despite the drawbacks, President Johnson preferred McNamara's plan over a full-blown war, and on March 17, 1964, he decided to put it into action.[24]

Shortly after the President's decision, in April 1964 the Joint Chiefs conducted a wargaming exercise (SIGMA I–64) to test McNamara's hypothesis that a strategy of graduated pressure against the enemy would turn the war around. Organized under the JCS Joint War Games Agency, SIGMA I involved military officers from the lieutenant colonel to the brigadier general level, their civilian equivalents, and representatives of the Intelligence Community. Described by historian H.R. McMaster as "eerily prophetic," the exercise's main finding was that steadily escalating military pressure failed to have any significant deterrent effect on North Vietnamese behavior.[25] On the contrary, as the game progressed, it led to both a stiffening of North Vietnamese resistance and a worsening of the political-military situation in the South that narrowed American options to two unappealing alternatives—a greatly expanded war against the North that risked Chinese intervention, or a humiliating withdrawal with a marked loss of U.S. credibility and prestige worldwide. As one participant in the game later observed: "The thesis of escalated punishment of North Vietnam had again been tested by interagency experts and found wanting."[26]

With their doubts about a strategy of graduated pressure steadily growing, the Joint Chiefs, less General Taylor, continued to urge the use of large-scale military force to thwart the North Vietnamese and to curb the insurgency. But without Taylor's support and endorsement, their ideas and recommendations stood little chance of having much impact.[27] On July 1, 1964, Taylor stepped down as Chairman to take up new duties as Ambassador to Saigon. His departure came as a relief to the Service chiefs who believed, almost without exception, that he could have done a more effective job representing them and conveying their views to the Secretary of Defense and the President.

Whether his successor, General Earle G. Wheeler, USA, would be a more forceful spokesman for JCS views remained to be seen. The third army officer in a row to serve as CJCS, Wheeler came to the job largely on Taylor's recommendation. Having once been Director of the Joint Staff, he knew the ins and outs of the JCS system as well as anyone. As Army Chief of Staff immediately prior to becoming Chairman, Wheeler had been critical of the administration's emerging strategy of graduated response in Vietnam, but he had been far less outspoken than the other chiefs.[28] Throughout his years at the Pentagon prior to becoming CJCS, he had

always gotten along well with his superiors. Though he might not always agree, they could count on him, once a decision was taken, to implement it without complaint. Perhaps the most obvious shortcoming in his otherwise distinguished résumé was his limited combat experience (confined to a few months as chief of staff to an infantry division in Europe in World War II), a drawback in the eyes of some of his peers, but not a great concern to either McNamara or President Johnson.[29]

THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH

Wheeler was still settling into his job as Chairman when in early August 1964 the fateful Gulf of Tonkin incident occurred. At the time, it seemed that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had launched two separate attacks 2 days apart against two U.S. destroyers operating in international waters off North Vietnam. The first attack, against USS *Maddox*, occurred August 2; the second, involving both the *Maddox* and USS *Turner Joy*, appeared to follow 2 days later. Both ships were part of the Desoto Patrol Program, a JCS-authorized effort conducted by the Seventh Fleet to collect intelligence on Sino-Soviet bloc electronic and naval activity. Since mid-December 1962, Desoto Patrols had paid regular visits to the Gulf of Tonkin. Despite a loose system of coordination, Desoto Patrols and the covert missions mounted by Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) against North Vietnam under OPLAN 34A were separate and independent of one another. Thus, the possibility of one set of operations overlapping or interfering with the other was ever-present. Matters came to a head in late July 1964 when South Vietnamese commandos, part of the 34A program, carried out a pair of raids along the North Vietnamese coast. Apparently in response to these raids, the North Vietnamese attacked the *Maddox*, mistaking it for part of the raiding force.[30]

The role of the Joint Chiefs in this episode was relatively minor and consisted mainly of drawing up a list of targets for retaliatory air strikes following reports of the second attack. As was increasingly the custom, the only member of the Joint Chiefs to attend face-to-face meetings with the President was the Chairman, General Wheeler. To expedite matters, McNamara at several critical points bypassed the Joint Chiefs and dealt directly with CINCPAC. On the morning of August 4, while McNamara was attending an emergency NSC meeting with the President, the JCS prepared their recommendations and forwarded them to the White House, urging severe retaliation against North Vietnamese naval bases and petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) storage in the Vinh area. That afternoon, McNamara returned to the Pentagon and told the JCS that the President had approved their recommendations, with several notable modifications. In a foretaste of the micromanagement of

the air war yet to come, the President had added two base areas to the target list but had decided that, except for striking the storage tanks, the U.S. attacks would be mounted against boats only, not against the bases or port facilities. The next day carrier-based aircraft executed the mission.[31]

Soon after the Tonkin Gulf incident, questions arose over whether the second attack had actually taken place. The issue was especially relevant since it was on the basis of the second attack that President Johnson had decided not only to order retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam, but to seek authorization from Congress for further military action in the event of additional provocations. Had there been only one attack, the President said, he was prepared to dismiss the incident with a diplomatic protest.[32] Years later, a reexamination of the evidence confirmed suspicions that the North Vietnamese never mounted a second attack, though it may have appeared so at the time to Sailors aboard the *Turner Joy*. According to a detailed study by Robert J. Hanyok, a historian for the National Security Agency, errors in the translation of North Vietnamese radio traffic and the Navy's mishandling of SIGINT led to the misidentification of a North Vietnamese salvage operation as a second attack. Hanyok found nothing to indicate that the Navy, the National Security Agency, or the White House had manipulated the data or acted improperly. But under the pressure of events, those monitoring the situation interpreted the evidence as pointing to two separate incidents.[33]

The most important long-term consequence of the Gulf of Tonkin episode was a joint congressional resolution giving the White House practically carte blanche in Southeast Asia. The idea of seeking such authority had apparently originated with Walt W. Rostow, then serving in the State Department, who began discussing the matter with members of the NSC Staff as early as December 1963. By June 1964, Rostow's suggestion had attracted the attention of McGeorge Bundy, the President's National Security Advisor, who felt that a congressional resolution would "give additional freedom to the Administration in choosing courses of action." President Johnson agreed, but with the election looming, he was reluctant to tarnish his image as the "peace" candidate unless the situation warranted.[34]

The Tonkin Gulf episode had a galvanizing effect on administration policy toward Vietnam. With the White House unsure how far it could go in Vietnam, it became the rallying point for testing support of the war and mobilizing congressional backing. Leading the charge in the Senate was J. William Fulbright, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Later, as the war degenerated into a stalemate, Fulbright became one of the administration's harshest critics and a key figure in the antiwar movement on Capitol Hill. But at the time of the Tonkin Gulf incident, he was still a strong advocate of taking firm action to curb the "aggressive and expansionist

ambitions" of the North Vietnamese. The upshot was a unanimous vote in the House and overwhelming support in the Senate to give the White House a free hand to retaliate—the closest the United States came to a formal declaration of war.[35]

Following the Gulf of Tonkin episode, the Johnson administration launched yet another review of its Vietnam policy. In light of the recent congressional resolution and the stepped-up pace of military activity, the Joint Chiefs now viewed direct U.S. intervention as inevitable, though they were split over the form it should take. Confident that airpower could be decisive, LeMay downplayed the need for large-scale troop deployments and urged an intensive bombing campaign against 94 high priority military and industrial targets across North Vietnam. "All of his experience," one of LeMay's colleagues recalled, "taught him that such a campaign would end the war."[36] The intent, as the Joint Chiefs described it to the Secretary of Defense, would be to deal the enemy "a sudden sharp blow." If it failed, the United States could reconsider whether to commit a large ground force.[37] However, the new Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, doubted whether the increased use of airpower, without accompanying increases on the ground, would have the desired impact on the insurgency in the South. In Johnson's view, expanding the war in the air and on the ground should go hand in hand.[38] Unable to achieve a full reconciliation of their differences, the chiefs papered them over and in late August recommended a program of "prompt and calculated responses" emphasizing "air strikes and other operations" against enemy targets in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.[39]

The JCS found their advice for expanding the scale and scope of the war no more welcome now than earlier. Having decided to cast his Republican Presidential opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, in the role of warmonger, Johnson often went out of his way to avoid making it appear that he was under the military's spell or influence. The result, however, was a policy that seemed to straddle two stools. "I haven't chosen to enlarge the war," the President declared publicly. "Nor have I chosen to retreat and turn [Vietnam] over to the Communists."[40] Gathering his key advisors at the White House on September 9, he heard a report by Ambassador Taylor on the unsettled political situation in Saigon and a reiteration of JCS views on the air campaign—"this bombing bullshit," the President called it.[41] The next day he approved increasing the military pressure against North Vietnam but limited it to low-profile activities that included the resumption of Desoto naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin and covert operations by the South Vietnamese against the North. He also approved discussions with the Laotian government to allow South Vietnamese air and ground operations in the Lao panhandle, and preparations for an "appropriate" response (i.e., a further build-up of air power in the South and off the coast) should the North Vietnamese resume attacks on U.S. forces.[42]

With "graduated response" becoming the accepted strategy, the Joint Chiefs decided to take another look at its probable effects. The upshot was a second round of war games known as SIGMA II–64. Conducted in mid-September 1964, SIGMA II–64 occurred at the same time the President was reviewing proposals to step up operations in Vietnam. Organized this time to include senior officials, SIGMA II produced about the same results as SIGMA I. Not only was the graduated application of military power, including bombing of the North, unlikely to stop the North Vietnamese; it was also apt to draw the United States more deeply into an inconclusive war. But despite the exercise's disturbing findings, McNamara paid little attention and later dismissed SIGMA II as further evidence that the JCS were looking for an excuse to ramp up the war. Interpreting the findings somewhat differently, he chose to see them as confirmation that an expanded and more intensified bombing effort would be a largely pointless waste of lives and resources.[43]

Increasingly frustrated and troubled, the Joint Chiefs made no attempt to conceal their dissatisfaction with the current policy or the limited influence of their advice. Soon, reports of "considerable unhappiness" among the JCS over their exclusion reached McGeorge Bundy and were a source of concern to the President's staff. In mid-November, with the election now out of the way, Jack J. Valenti, a White House aide who handled liaison with Congress, urged Johnson to have the Joint Chiefs "sign on" before taking further actions in Vietnam because their inclusion in presidential decisions would help to shield the administration from possible congressional recriminations. If the Joint Chiefs participated at pertinent NSC meetings, Valenti believed, "they could have their views expounded to the Commander-in-Chief face to face." He added, "That way, they will have been heard, they will have been part of the consensus, and our flank will have been covered in the event of some kind of flap or investigation later." Johnson agreed and at a November 19 White House meeting he informed his top civilian advisors that in the future no decisions on Vietnam "would be made without participation by the military."[44]

While the President was willing to give the chiefs the opportunity to say their piece, he was no more inclined than before to accept their advice that the strategy of graduated response was flawed. Johnson had no interest in a full-scale war. But as the situation in Vietnam deteriorated, with the Viet Cong escalating attacks against Americans, he knew it was only a matter of time before the United States moved in with more of its military power. Exactly when the President came to this realization is unclear, but between the election in November 1964 and the Viet Cong attack on Pleiku in early February 1965, deliberations with his top advisors were almost nonstop. What he wanted from them was a consensus recommendation. The options under consideration fell into three general categories: 1) continuation of the present policy

of support for counterinsurgency in the South and limited pressure on the North; 2) a graduated increase in military pressure on the North Vietnamese meshing at some point with negotiations; and 3) an intensive bombing campaign of the North as recommended earlier by the JCS, known variously as the "hard knock" or "fast, full squeeze" option, which might or might not include the use of nuclear weapons.

The ensuing debate followed the "Goldilocks principle" that if the first and third choices appeared either inadequate or too extreme, the middle course was just right.[45] Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy, an ardent advocate of graduated response, denounced the JCS position as an "almost reckless" invitation to Chinese intervention.[46] Arguing that it would keep the commitment of U.S. prestige and resources from getting out of hand, Bundy and likeminded others, including Walt Rostow, now director of State's Policy Planning Council, Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton (McNamara's most trusted advisor), and White House assistant Michael Forrestal, all insisted that the graduated application of military power would give the United States the flexibility to negotiate or withdraw should things go sour.[47] Anticipating the debate's outcome, McNamara ordered Wheeler to have the Joint Staff draw up a military plan to support a graduated bombing campaign. Wheeler complied, but in submitting the plan, the JCS expressed little confidence in it and urged the Secretary to develop a "clear set of military objectives before further military involvement in Southeast Asia is undertaken."[48]

McNamara refused the chiefs' request to pass their views to the President. The reason he gave at the time was that their recommendations would become known at the White House in due course as part of an interagency review.[49] Later, however, he acknowledged that he had lost confidence in JCS advice, feeling that it was too extreme. "The president and I were shocked," McNamara recalled, "by the almost cavalier way in which the chiefs . . . referred to, and accepted the risk of, the possible use of nuclear weapons."[50] Be that as it may, the inclusion of nuclear weapons in contingency planning, especially in connection with large-scale operations, was then still a well-known routine practice, so it seems odd that McNamara and the President were somehow surprised. The Joint Chiefs, as they saw it, were merely doing their job and presenting the available options.

Still, the Joint Chiefs must have known that they were engaged in a losing cause. Arrayed against them were the President's best and brightest senior advisors, nearly all of whom—McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Maxwell Taylor—favored some form of the graduated response option. So, too, did the COMUSMACV in Saigon, General William C. Westmoreland, USA. Unprepared to take on a full-scale war, Westmoreland hoped that with a modest increase in pressure, he could buy time until the South Vietnamese were better able to hold their own.[51] Practically the only support for the JCS position was that of the CINCPAC in Hawaii, Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, who thought

the time was ripe to "hit hard" and turn the war around. But like the Joint Chiefs, his views made little difference.[52] Compelled to retreat, the JCS grudgingly concurred in what they characterized as a "controlled program" of "intense military pressure" against North Vietnam, "swiftly yet deliberately applied." A lukewarm endorsement, it left the door open to the proposal of stronger measures should the need or opportunity arise.[53]

President Johnson had yet to be convinced that bombing, controlled or otherwise, would produce the desired results, and after listening to Secretary of State Rusk and George W. Ball, the veteran diplomat, he decided in early December 1964 to postpone overt military action against North Vietnam for at least 30 days to give the State Department time to explore the possibility of negotiations and to round up contributions of troops and support from other countries. Depending on the responses, decisions could be taken to conduct U.S. and South Vietnamese air strikes against North Vietnam during the next 2 to 6 months, starting with targets south of the 19th parallel and working northward. Mining of North Vietnamese ports and a naval blockade could follow in due course. The approved policy made no mention of inserting U.S. combat units, but neither did it rule out such a possibility. A partial victory for the Joint Chiefs, the President's decision acknowledged that military power remained a key component of American policy in Southeast Asia. But it further postponed the "hard knock" that the JCS believed to be necessary, sooner or later, to win the war.[54]

While the 30-day period specified by the President elapsed in mid-January, new decisions on military action were held in abeyance owing to political instability in Saigon. Then, on February 7, 1965, the Viet Cong attacked the U.S. military advisory compound near Pleiku in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, killing 8 U.S. Servicemen, wounding more than 100 others, and destroying 20 U.S. aircraft. The next day President Johnson ordered reprisal raids (code-named FLAMING DART) and gave the Joint Chiefs the go-ahead to prepare an 8-week bombing campaign of the North.[55] For reprisal purposes, the Joint Chiefs recommended immediate large-scale air attacks against seven enemy targets which, after review, the President whittled to two. Both were army barracks complexes used by the North Vietnamese to resupply the Viet Cong. Initial reports indicated the effects of the bombing as "moderate to good" in destroying enemy facilities. Upon closer inspection, however, it became clear that FLAMING DART had fallen short of expectations, and within days, enemy operations in the targeted areas were back to normal.[56]

The modest success of the FLAMING DART raids left the Joint Chiefs more persuaded than ever that if airpower were to be effective, it needed to be concentrated in repeated heavy doses. Hoping to move policy in that direction, the JCS secured the Secretary's approval to transfer an additional 325 aircraft, including 30 B–52s, to

the Western Pacific. Sustained bombing of the North (Operation *Rolling Thunder*), initially disguised as retaliation, began on March 2, but followed no coherent strategy or consistent political objectives. Seeing an opportunity to revive the hard-knock strategy, the new Air Force Chief of Staff, General John P. McConnell, proposed a 28-day campaign to destroy all 94 targets on the Joint Chiefs' earlier target list. At the same time, Admiral Sharp recommended an "eight week pressure program" against the enemy's logistical lines.[57] Putting these proposals together, the Joint Staff came up with a revised bombing plan for a four-phase, 12-week air campaign for the systematic destruction of North Vietnam's rail network, ports, and war-production facilities, culminating in heavy attacks on key military-industrial targets in the vicinity of Hanoi and Haiphong.[58] Sharp and McConnell were convinced that over time a concerted bombing campaign would significantly degrade North Vietnam's capacity and willingness to support the Viet Cong. However, Wheeler and Johnson (the Army Chief of Staff) were skeptical and would sanction only the program's initial phases, which were underway by early April. Straddling two stools, Wheeler told McNamara that while the bombing thus far had not reduced North Vietnam's military capabilities in "any major way," he was confident that eventually it would cause a "serious stricture."[59]

An expansion of the U.S. ground role in the South accompanied the enlarged bombing campaign against the North. The heralded arrival in early March of the Marines at Da Nang was in response to General Westmoreland's request the month before for additional security around U.S. air bases and coincided with Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson's fact-finding visit to Saigon, instigated at the request of the White House to "get things bubbling." Clearly, the momentum was building for a larger commitment of U.S. forces. By far the most cautious member of the JCS at the time, Johnson was also the least enthusiastic about the air war and further U.S. involvement in general. A survivor of the Bataan death march in World War II and a veteran of Korea, he knew the rigors and pitfalls of waging war in the Far East as well as anyone. Johnson had been in Vietnam 3 months earlier and was astonished by the rapid deterioration of security at the local level. Persuaded that the situation was critical, he dismissed as "fictional" General Omar Bradley's admonition against U.S. involvement in wars on the Asian mainland. Upon returning to Washington, he secured prompt endorsement from the President for 21 stop-gap measures ("band aids of a sort," the general called them) aimed at strengthening the existing advisory and support effort.[60] For the longer term, he believed it imperative that U.S. combat forces assume major responsibility for defending towns and installations and for operating offensively against the Viet Cong. Ultimately, he speculated, it might take as many as 500,000 troops and 5 years to complete the mission. "None of us," McNamara recalled, "had been thinking in anything approaching such terms."[61]

General Johnson's unsettling assessment seemed to confirm what the Joint Chiefs had been saying all along—that without a wholehearted U.S. commitment, Vietnam was lost. Even so, his predictions of what would be required and the length of time it would take to turn the situation around exceeded anything the Joint Chiefs had thus far envisioned. Despite their tough talk about a buildup of forces and delivering "hard knocks" to the enemy, the JCS had not looked much beyond a 3- or 4-month campaign. If the Chief of Staff was right, the United States faced a long, expensive, and arduous war. With that possibility in mind, General Wheeler began laying the groundwork the day after Johnson's return for an expanded conflict by having the Joint Staff initiate studies of the various administrative, funding, and logistical adjustments that would have to be made.[62]

Among the Chairman's JCS colleagues, however, there was not much inclination to look beyond the immediate crisis. As sobering as Harold Johnson's warnings of an open-ended conflict may have been, they were slow to sink in. Indeed, not even Johnson himself had thought far beyond the current situation, except in highly generalized terms. As a result, instead of trying to devise a long-range strategy, the JCS turned to hashing out differences among themselves over near-term solutions—the size and composition of the ground force, where to insert it, and whether it or the air war should have priority. Resorting eventually to compromise, they agreed that stepping up the air war and deploying forces on the ground (one full Marine division, one Army division, and one division from the Republic of Korea, if it could be arranged) should proceed in tandem and be aimed at achieving "an effective margin of combat power."[63]

Earlier studies done by the Joint Staff estimated a minimum requirement of six divisions to defend Southeast Asia, so the deployment of two to three divisions would not be much more than a foot in the door.[64] Nonetheless, the decision to intervene in force, even at this critical stage of the conflict, was far from automatic. While he supported graduated bombing of the North, Ambassador Taylor resisted the introduction of U.S. combat troops, arguing that it would shift the burden on to the United States and weaken South Vietnamese resolve. Others, including McNamara, Secretary of State Rusk, and the NSC's McGeorge Bundy, increasingly believed that the United States had no choice, though in making their case they urged the President to show restraint and hold down the number of committed troops. Knowing that he would be hard pressed to mobilize public and congressional backing for an immediate deployment of the size the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed, President Johnson opted in early April for a lesser figure of 20,000 logistical troops and two Marine battalions with tactical air support—a token commitment that barely disguised the fundamental shift in administration policy. Even more significant, he broadened the Marines' mission "to permit their more active use" against

the enemy.[65] General Wheeler promptly advised Admiral Sharp and General Westmoreland that this decision meant a change in employment from "static defense" to "counterinsurgency combat operations."[66] By the end of April 1965, U.S. forces were engaging the Viet Cong in firefights; by June they were regularly conducting offensive operations around their bases. For the United States, the advisory phase of the war was essentially over and a new, more deadly combat phase was beginning.

INTO THE QUAGMIRE

The President's decision of April 1965 committing organized units of U.S. ground troops to combat ushered in a rapid expansion of the American role in the war. Shortly after the President's action, General Wheeler accompanied Secretary McNamara to Honolulu for a 1-day conference on April 20 to take stock of the situation and to discuss future deployments. The other key participants were Admiral Sharp, Ambassador Taylor, and General Westmoreland. It was at this meeting that the broad outlines of basic strategy for the next 3 years emerged. If the meeting accomplished nothing else, McNamara wanted to win over Taylor's support for a stepped-up air and ground war in the South, on the assumption that this was where the war would be decided. Dominating the discussion, McNamara sought to impress upon the others his view that destruction of the Viet Cong, rather than pressure on the North, was crucial to a successful outcome and that land-based tactical air should be completely at Westmoreland's disposal for this purpose. *Rolling Thunder*, the coercive air campaign against the North, assumed a secondary role.[67] Afterwards, without much discussion, the JCS recommended eight U.S. battalion equivalents, with appropriate air and logistical support, for immediate reinforcement of the ground effort, with an additional twelve battalions earmarked for deployment at a later date.[68]

As it happened, these decisions coincided with the onset of a smaller but still alarming crisis in the Dominican Republic, brought on by a long-simmering power struggle between rival political factions. Convinced that the threat of a Communist coup loomed large, President Johnson in late April directed U.S. military intervention to restore order.[69] As General Wheeler explained to his immediate staff, the President had made up his mind to use "the force necessary" to prevent another Cuba in the Caribbean.[70] Moving quickly, the Joint Chiefs deployed nearly 24,000 troops (Marines and Army airborne) in a matter of days and by late May the situation was under control. A quick, hard-hitting operation, mounted as a joint effort, the American show of force in the Dominican Republic seemed to do its job with relative ease and barely a whiff of inter-Service friction.[71]

Whether the U.S. venture in Vietnam would enjoy the same success as the operation in the Dominican Republic remained to be seen. One skeptic, Army Lieutenant General Bruce Palmer, Jr., commander of U.S. forces in the Dominican Republic, hinted darkly that American intervention in Vietnam, undeniably a far bigger affair, might be too little too late.[72] However, very few, if any, of his colleagues agreed. Indeed, by now, a race was on between the United States and North Vietnam to see who could put the most troops into Vietnam in the shortest possible time to gain the advantage. Gathering momentum over the summer of 1965, the U.S. buildup accelerated rapidly as logistical capabilities improved. From around 60,000 troops in mid-1965, American military strength in Vietnam increased to 185,000 by the end of the year. A year later, it had grown to 385,000, and by the end of 1967, it reached 490,000. American combat casualties also mounted—28,000 killed in action by the time the Johnson administration left office and 18,000 more before the ceasefire took effect in 1973.[73]

Contrary to what the JCS expected or hoped to see, the American buildup came with vague war aims and constrained methods of achieving them. Since the 1950s, the stated goal of American involvement in South Vietnam had been to preserve the country's independence and prevent it from falling into Communist hands. A widely accepted hypothesis held that an enemy victory would set off a chain reaction of Communist takeovers across Asia (the "domino theory"). The Joint Chiefs fully subscribed to the domino theory and under the Johnson administration it became the most often cited rationale for U.S. involvement in Vietnam.[74] Given the high stakes involved, however, the White House remained uncommonly restrained in authorizing the application of military power, in contrast to the JCS position that the United States should hit hard and fast. In the summer of 1965, as the administration was contemplating how to manage the buildup, the Joint Chiefs assumed that the President would order a national emergency, mobilize the Reserves and National Guard, and seek supplemental appropriations. Nothing less, General Wheeler argued, would convince the American people "that we were in a war and not engaged in some two-penny military adventure."[75] For political reasons, however, the President decided otherwise. Treating social reforms at home (the "Great Society") as his first priority, he believed that a declared emergency and a call-up of the Reserves would divert attention and resources from his domestic agenda.[76] He thought he could downplay the war, juggle funds from current appropriations, and rely on volunteer enlistments and the draft to supply the necessary manpower. A "guns and butter" approach, the President's decision effectively stripped the war effort of experienced noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and over the long run played a large part in turning public opinion against the conflict by focusing anti-war sentiment on the draft.

The strategic concept governing the deployment of U.S. forces further underscored the restrained nature and limited aims of the American commitment. As described by Secretary McNamara at a Cabinet meeting in June 1965, a military victory in the traditional sense was not the U.S. objective. Rather, the function of American forces was to produce a "stalemate" that would convince the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese that even if they continued fighting, they could never win. "We think that if we can accomplish that stalemate," McNamara contended, "accompanied by the limited bombing program in the North, we can force them to negotiations, and negotiations that will lead to a settlement that will preserve the independence of South Vietnam."[77] Translating these broad objectives into a military strategy, Westmoreland came up with what amounted to a war of attrition which he formally presented to the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman in July 1965. While the ARVN protected the population centers, U.S. forces would conduct "search and destroy" missions to take back captured territory, restore government authority, and wear down the enemy.[78]

The Joint Chiefs endorsed this strategy, but pointed out (largely at the insistence of the Air Force and the Navy) that the only way it could achieve significant results was in conjunction with heavy pressure from air and naval power on North Vietnam to cease directing and supporting the Viet Cong.[79] From the start, however, the White House insisted that operations on the ground be confined as much as possible to the South. The only exceptions were occasional commando raids against the North and into neighboring Cambodia and Laos where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had their supply lines and base camps. Although CINCPAC had contingency plans for invading North Vietnam, they were rarely mentioned in high-level discussions and never used. On the contrary, as Undersecretary of State George W. Ball, the President's friend and confident, acknowledged, the administration went out of its way to send signals "that we do not seek to bring down the Hanoi regime or to interfere with the independence of Hanoi."[80]

The air campaign was the most guarded of all. Part of the reason was the persistent lack of a consensus among the Joint Chiefs over whether the air war or the ground war should have priority. These differences had hobbled the Joint Chiefs in developing clear-cut positions during the advisory phase and continued into the combat phase, with the Army favoring emphasis on land operations, the Air Force arguing for an intensive air campaign, and the Navy and Marine Corps somewhere in between.[81] Yet even if the JCS had been united, it probably would have made little difference. While CINCPAC coordinated Navy and Air Force attacks against the North under the *Rolling Thunder* campaign, COMUSMACV controlled tactical air operations over South Vietnam and had first call on air assets under the allocation of resources decided at the April 1965 Honolulu conference. Dominated by Army

officers, even with the presence of an Air Force deputy, Westmoreland's command in Saigon regarded airpower as the handmaiden of the ground forces and used it for close air support, escort operations, and interdiction of infiltration routes.[82]

The principal impediment to a more effective air war remained the President himself. Near the outset of the buildup, President Johnson made a conscious decision not to exploit the full potential of the air campaign against the North lest it invite Soviet or Chinese intervention, alienate opinion abroad, or encourage further dissent at home. "In Rolling Thunder," observes Air Force historian Wayne Thompson, "the Johnson administration devised an air campaign that did a lot of bombing in a way calculated *not* to threaten the enemy regime's survival."[83] By avoiding certain targets while delaying or moderating attacks on others, the administration allowed the initiative to pass to the enemy. NVA air defenses quickly became a formidable obstacle, costing the United States dearly in pilots and planes. A few years earlier, when the Joint Chiefs had begun urging stronger measures, the United States had had undisputed superiority in strategic nuclear power over the Soviet Union and might have carried out operations against North Vietnam with minimal worry for the wider consequences. But by 1965-1966, U.S. nuclear superiority was on the wane, leaving both McNamara and the President convinced that if they pushed too hard against North Vietnam, they would invite serious trouble with China or the Soviet Union.[84]

The most controversial aspect of the air war was the choice of targets for U.S. planes to bomb. A professional function customarily the domain of the Joint Chiefs, target selection came to be closely controlled and managed by the President in collaboration with McNamara, Rusk, and his other top civilian advisors at his "Tuesday lunch." As the Joint Chiefs became accustomed to the process, their targeting recommendations came to hinge as much on arbitrary assessments of what the President might accept as on what was needed to achieve military results.[85] For reasons never fully explained, the CJCS did not become a member of the Tuesday lunch group until late 1967. Until then, Secretary of Defense McNamara was the military's sole voice at these sessions, at which the President would go over JCS-proposed target sets in minute detail, approve, disapprove, or amend the selections, schedule attacks, and review the results of previous raids. Until the summer of 1966, Hanoi and Haiphong were off limits to bombing and U.S. planes were prohibited from approaching any closer than 30 miles to the Chinese border. Believing that attacks on the North by B-52s would appear provocative, President Johnson limited their use to bombing in the South and along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North from South Vietnam.[86] "This piecemeal application of airpower," one senior Air Force commander recalled, "was relatively ineffective because it still avoided many of the targets that were of most value to the North Vietnamese."[87]

The restraint shown by Washington in prosecuting the war contrasted sharply with the all-out commitment and well-honed objectives of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese and the support they received from Communist Bloc countries. As revealed in documents captured by U.S. forces in Cambodia in 1970, the North Vietnamese Communist Party made a binding decision in December 1963 to do whatever it took to "liberate" the South and to reunify it with the North under a Communist regime. Militarily, this meant increasing assistance to the Viet Cong, transitioning from guerrilla warfare to "big unit" tactics involving regimental-sized operations, and sending regular NVA units into the South along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Thus, while Washington thought it was still dealing with a guerrilla war, North Vietnam was gearing up for a full-scale conflict which it intended to win at any cost. Implementation of this strategy started slowly owing to disagreements within the party over tactics and the reluctance of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to sanction and assist the intensification of the conflict. But after Khrushchev's ouster from power in October 1964, Moscow became more amenable to providing stepped-up assistance to the Communist insurgency in the South and weapons, including sophisticated air defense systems, to protect North Vietnam against U.S. retaliation.[88]

While U.S. intelligence detected NVA formations in South Vietnam as early as April 1965, the battle of the Ia Drang Valley that November was the first solid confirmation of large-unit North Vietnamese involvement. Like the Chinese intervention in Korea in late 1950, the bloody combat in the Ia Drang Valley that left nearly 300 Americans dead was a shocking experience. Gilding over the losses, Westmoreland treated the battle as a major victory. Yet it should have been a wake-up call for the Joint Chiefs to push for a reexamination of U.S. tactics and strategy, to assess whether a war of attrition was realistic and feasible against a well-armed enemy increasingly composed of highly trained and disciplined North Vietnamese regulars. But by then, with Westmoreland and McNamara fully in control of military strategy, the Joint Chiefs were in no position to raise such questions or make many demands. Projecting a self-assured air, Westmoreland insisted he would prevail and took the President at his word that he could have all the resources he needed. A strategic review of sorts did take place, in mid-January 1966 in Hawaii, with President Johnson himself chairing some of the sessions. But it treated an inordinately broad range of topics, from combat operations to agricultural reform under the pacification program, and was so large (over 450 U.S. and South Vietnamese military and civilian participants) that it more properly resembled a pep rally. The outcome was a resounding reaffirmation of the current course and a full endorsement of Westmoreland's plan to add 102 maneuver battalions (79 of them American) to his force structure over the coming year.[89]

Immediately following the Hawaii Conference, the Joint Chiefs resumed their efforts to convince the President and the Secretary of Defense to mobilize the Reserves, all to no avail. By now, there was serious concern among the JCS that they were losing control over the strategic direction of U.S. military forces, not only in Southeast Asia but worldwide, as the burgeoning demands of Vietnam were beginning to erode force levels everywhere. Should a crisis erupt in Europe or Korea, the JCS warned, the United States would be hard put to mount an effective response.[90] Though fully aware of the situation, McNamara and the President regarded it as an acceptable risk. The mobilization of the Reserves would have required approval by Congress, where anti-war sentiment was on the rise. Even though the measure doubtless would have passed, it probably would have fallen well short of the resounding support shown for the Gulf of Tonkin resolution a year and a half earlier.

While deteriorating support for the war at home was rarely an explicit factor in JCS decisions and recommendations, it was ever-present in the background of their deliberations and impossible to ignore. Indeed, antiwar demonstrations soon became an almost daily occurrence on the steps of the Pentagon. Meanwhile, as the war dragged on, it seemed to acquire a life of its own, an open-ended conflict with no clear resolution in sight. Westmoreland's strategy of attrition may have looked sound on paper, but it was costly, time-consuming, and hard to assess in terms of its success. One method of evaluation was a controversial practice known as the "body count" of enemy dead, which the command in Saigon published weekly, claiming it to be evidence of progress in destroying the enemy. The numbers ran into the thousands, though whether they were accurate became a matter of some dispute. The theory was that eventually the VC and NVA would tire of taking heavy losses and cease their aggression. But with U.S. losses averaging around 1,300 per week killed and wounded, the evidence was mixed as to whether the American effort was making much headway toward its goal. The war of attrition, in other words, could cut both ways.[91]

A further complication was the continuing indifference of both Secretary McNamara and President Johnson toward JCS advice and their preference for dealing directly with Westmoreland in managing the conflict. A subunified command to CINCPAC, the COMUSMACV was several steps down the chain of command. Yet almost from the start, McNamara and the White House treated Westmoreland as being on a par with his superiors and normally put greater credence in COMUSMACV's assessments than those of the theater commander, Admiral Sharp, or the JCS. In fact, Westmoreland's views and those of the JCS were often practically identical, with the JCS sometimes even coaching Westmoreland on what to say or how to present it. Yet in the day-to-day handling of the war, Johnson and McNamara seemed to

believe that because Westmoreland was closer to the situation, he was more familiar with the nuances and tempo of the conflict, making his advice more authoritative. Whether Westmoreland's reportage and evaluations were in fact accurate and reliable became one of the most hotly debated issues of the conflict. Looking back, McNamara acknowledged that some of their discussions and the information he received were "superficial." But he never suggested that he considered Westmoreland's advice unsound or that he made a mistake by not paying more attention to the JCS.[92]

In these circumstances, it was almost inevitable that the Joint Chiefs of Staff would exercise limited influence on high-level decisions and the strategy and tactics used in the war. That they stuck it out, refusing to resign in protest as some have argued they should have, underscores their willingness to persevere (their "can do" spirit, as General Bruce Palmer, Jr., called it), and their sense of duty in the face of mounting adversity.[93] A shrewd politician, Lyndon Johnson thought he could handle the JCS like he had handled his political competitors over the years, by offering them compromises and meeting their proposals halfway. But in facing up to a confrontation with the North Vietnamese and, by extension, their Soviet and Chinese allies, the Joint Chiefs realized something the President did not: that halfway measures would never suffice and that waging a war against such an enemy meant accepting great risks or getting out. From the outset, the JCS had wanted a more vigorous response than President Johnson was willing to contemplate; for that reason, he and McNamara elected to ignore the Joint Chiefs and to follow a different path. Though it led ultimately to the same destination—a massive military commitment in Southeast Asia—it had more twists and turns and brought power to bear in increments that the enemy had less trouble absorbing.

NOTES

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General Earle G. Wheeler, USA; General Creighton W. Abrams, USA; and Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, Vietnam, ca. 1969