Chapter 10

VIETNAM: RETREAT AND WITHDRAWAL

On March 31, 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced over national television that he would not seek reelection and would instead devote the remainder of his tenure in the White House to finding a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. At home, the President faced a rising crescendo of protests against the war, mounting economic difficulties brought on by war-induced inflation, and challenges to his political leadership from Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, recent heavy fighting—the Communist Tet offensive and the ongoing battle for Khe Sanh—had shattered administration predictions that the United States was winning and that the war would soon be over. With an American-imposed solution appearing less and less feasible, the President ordered a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam above the twentieth parallel. Henceforth, the United States would concentrate on strengthening the South Vietnamese armed forces to resist Communist aggression on their own.[1] Since committing U.S. combat forces to Vietnam 3 years earlier, the United States had yet to suffer a major defeat. But it had also been unable to score a decisive victory. As a practical matter, President Johnson's announcement was the first step toward U.S. disengagement from Vietnam, a process that would still take 5 more years to yield what his successor, Richard M. Nixon, termed "peace with honor."

STALEMATE

Long before President Johnson announced his decision not to stand for reelection, the war in Vietnam had degenerated into a stalemate. At the outset of large-scale U.S. intervention in the summer of 1965, Secretary of Defense McNamara had wanted to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese that their aggression would never succeed and that their only choice was to withdraw their forces and accept a negotiated settlement.[2] The stalemate that McNamara envisioned had indeed come to pass, but it had not worked as he had predicted. Even though American intervention

had thwarted a Communist takeover and bolstered the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces, the U.S. presence had failed to intimidate the enemy. Trained and equipped for a war in Europe, American forces initially found themselves awkwardly adjusting to unfamiliar tactics and terrain. Dominant in mobility and firepower, they repeatedly inflicted heavy losses on the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, but could not achieve decisive results. The longer the war went on, the more resilient the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese became. Rather than wearing down the enemy's will and ability to fight, General William C. Westmoreland's strategy of attrition was having the opposite effect. By demonstrating the limits of American military power, it strengthened Viet Cong and North Vietnamese resolve. While they might not prevail in every engagement, they fought with growing confidence that they could stand up to the Americans, inflict enough casualties to turn public opinion in the United States against the war, and eventually win.[3]

Efforts by the Johnson administration to rally support for its involvement in Vietnam yielded disappointing results. At home, a growing and increasingly strident antiwar movement challenged the administration's policies with mass protests, acts of civil disobedience, and draft card burnings. In Europe and elsewhere overseas, opposition to the war was also on the rise. During the Korean conflict, twenty-two nations had contributed forces to help turn back the Communist aggressors; in Vietnam only four countries—South Korea, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand—sent combat troops to fight alongside U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. (Thai troops did not arrive in South Vietnam until mid-1968 and were not much of a factor in the war.) South Korea's participation came with numerous strings attached, including the Korean government's insistence that the United States provide large financial subsidies and other incentives.[4] NATO, America's long-time partner, evinced not the slightest interest in helping. A few Alliance leaders, like West German Foreign Minister Gerhard Schroeder, discerned a clear link between the outcome in Southeast Asia and the fate of Europe. Schroeder feared that, if the United States failed to prevail in Vietnam, it would expose Europe to renewed Soviet pressure. But his was a minority view. Far more prevalent among Europeans was the notion that Vietnam was a distraction, a needless diversion of American attention and resources that would end up weakening the Alliance and increase Europe's share of the defense burden.[5]

At no point did the Johnson administration attempt to develop or implement a defense policy that brought the allocation of U.S. resources for Vietnam into line with commitments elsewhere. While the Joint Chiefs were well aware of this gap in planning, they could never persuade either President Johnson or Secretary McNamara to take the necessary steps to bridge it. The foreseeable result was a draw-down of personnel and equipment assigned to or earmarked for Europe and other contingencies. Calling

up the Reserves, a course the JCS consistently favored, would have alleviated some of these problems. Yet any time they raised the issue, the President and the Secretary of Defense rejected it as politically infeasible. As a result, planning for Vietnam followed no coherent blueprint and became instead a series of ad hoc responses to an increasingly intractable situation that consumed more and more American lives and treasure.

In the autumn of 1966, Westmoreland launched a major offensive aimed at putting maximum military pressure on the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. According to the available intelligence, infiltration of regular NVA units from the North had subsided and there were signs that the Viet Cong was having trouble replacing its losses.[6] In light of these findings and a recent surge in U.S. troop levels, Westmoreland believed he had at his disposal sufficient strength to deal a crippling blow that would turn the war around. To augment the offensive in the south, the Joint Chiefs sought permission for Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific (CINCPAC), to step up Operation *Rolling Thunder* attacks against North Vietnam. By then, with Westmoreland in firm control of the ground war in the South, about the only place where the JCS could make a difference was in the air war against the North. Following a lengthy debate with the White House, they finally persuaded the President in June 1966 to relax some of the restrictions on bombing petroleum facilities near Hanoi and Haiphong.[7] Though the ensuing attacks had limited effect, they set the stage for the submission in August of a more ambitious *Rolling Thunder* program package that included industrial and transportation targets in North Vietnam's Red River Delta. President Johnson approved the new bombing scheme in November, just as the ground campaign was getting under way, but at the State Department's urging he deferred its full implementation pending the outcome of a British initiative exploring the possibility of negotiations. As it turned out, it was not until February 1967 that the President allowed the approved program to proceed in toto.[8]

The uncoordinated execution of these measures, and delays in carrying them out, virtually assured that they would have a limited impact on the course of the war. While Westmoreland's ground offensive scored some notable successes at the outset, it proved more difficult to sustain than expected with the forces available. Taking territory held by the Viet Cong was easier than holding it and making it secure. By the early spring of 1967, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had begun a counterattack that reclaimed lost ground as the American offensive became overextended and bogged down. Meanwhile, stepped-up enemy activity in the northern I Corps region along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and against the heavily fortified American base at Khe Sanh suggested that the North Vietnamese were massing for a conventional invasion of the South, causing COMUSMACV to divert troops and airpower from other operations. Seeing no other choice, Westmoreland (at Wheeler's urging) served notice in mid-March 1967

that he would need a minimum of 100,000 more troops within the coming year just to hold his existing positions in I Corps, and probably double that number to maintain the momentum of operations elsewhere. If approved, the additional buildup would bring the American presence in South Vietnam to over 670,000 troops.[9]

In Washington, Westmoreland's request for more troops touched off a heated internal debate that lasted well into the summer. One reason the review dragged on was that it had to compete with a sudden emergence of other critical problems—the ABM deployment issue, growing tensions between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus, the escalating militancy of the antiwar movement at home, and the outbreak of war in early June 1967 between Israel and its Arab neighbors resulting in a series of Israeli victories that recast the balance of power in the Middle East. Finding time to address these issues challenged the Joint Chiefs no less than it did McNamara and others in the Johnson administration and made it difficult to pursue an orderly and systematic assessment of the situation in Vietnam.

Once they got down to business, the Joint Chiefs rallied in support of Westmoreland, feeling that now was not the time to cut and run. All the same, there were continuing differences among them over basic strategy, with the Army and Marines favoring a greater effort on the ground in the south and the Air Force and the Navy urging stronger air and naval action against the North. To get around their disagreements, the chiefs linked a further buildup in the south such as Westmoreland proposed with an expansion and intensification of the *Rolling Thunder* air campaign against the North.[10] As far as Secretary McNamara was concerned, however, a renewed intensification of the war held no appeal. Since the previous autumn, he had shown growing frustration over the lack of military progress and could not help eyeing the rising financial costs of the war, which had grown steadily to more than a third of the defense budget.[11] Though he had once offered Westmoreland practically a blank check, he regretted having done so, and was inclined to level off U.S. military action in hopes of enticing the enemy into negotiations.[12] Still, he wanted Westmoreland's request to receive a fair hearing and called him back to Washington to explain his position directly to President Johnson. At one point in their meeting, the President turned to Westmoreland and asked testily: "When we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions? If so, where does it all end?"[13]

As the debate progressed, it focused more and more on the air war against North Vietnam. Confident that the results would show up sooner or later, General Wheeler characterized the air campaign was one of two "blue chips" the United States possessed (the other being the capacity to mount an aggressive ground campaign) that could directly influence the outcome of the war.[14] In practice, however, the United States had never pursued the air war with the same degree of commitment it had shown on

the ground. Under the allocation approved during the early days of the war, COMUSMACV had first call on air assets, with the result that about two-thirds of the sorties flown by the Air Force and the Navy had been either in support of combat operations in the South or for interdiction purposes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail; only about one-third of the sorties had been against the North. Moreover, under the "graduated response" rules that governed *Rolling Thunder*, many lucrative bombing targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area and Red River Delta remained untouched. Arguing that the next step was obvious, Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell persuaded his JCS colleagues that with or without a buildup in the South, they should press McNamara and the President to lift restrictions on the air campaign and pursue the rapid and methodical destruction of North Vietnam's war-supporting infrastructure.[15]

While the chiefs' position on the air campaign had strong support in military circles, it met with unmitigated disdain from McNamara and the OSD "whiz kids." Labeling the air war as counterproductive, they considered JCS proposals for expanding it dangerous and risky. McNamara had never put much stock in the bombing to begin with, so it was no surprise to him as the war dragged on that study after study reaching his desk showed it as having limited success in curbing infiltration into the South or on North Vietnam's capacity to wage war. Citing the administration-imposed restrictions on targets and bombing under which the Air Force and the Navy operated, the JCS responded that such results were practically preordained. But under the cost-effectiveness criteria he applied to practically everything, McNamara concluded that the air war was becoming too expensive in terms of pilots and planes lost and other factors and ought to be sharply curtailed rather than expanded.[16]

The showdown between McNamara and the Joint Chiefs came in August 1967 during open hearings before the Senate Armed Services Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, chaired by John C. Stennis of Mississippi. The instigator of the hearings was Senator W. Stuart Symington of Missouri, first Secretary of the Air Force in the Truman administration and an outspoken advocate of more vigorous use of airpower against North Vietnam. Like other conservative Democrats, Stennis and Symington had become impatient and thought that more could be done with airpower to win the war and to avoid the need for additional ground troops. Not wanting to give the committee any more opportunities than it already had to second-guess his conduct of the war, President Johnson sent McNamara and Wheeler to Saigon in July to work out a new statement of troop requirements and to review the air campaign. Following a busy round of briefings, McNamara and Wheeler returned to Washington bearing a revised request from Westmoreland for an additional 50,000 troops, the most the United States could muster without calling up the Reserves or vastly curtailing draft deferments. But despite heavy pressure from CINCPAC and the theater air staff, McNamara

refused to endorse an expansion of the bombing operations.[17] Knowing how Stennis and his colleagues would react, Johnson took matters into his own hands and on July 20, 1967, he approved a modification to the *Rolling Thunder* campaign that included about a dozen new targets, some in the Hanoi-Haiphong sanctuary area.[18]

Already severely strained, relations between McNamara and the Joint Chiefs became even worse once the Stennis committee's hearings began. Testifying in executive session, the JCS, Admiral Sharp, and Lieutenant General William W. Momyer, USAF, commander of the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam, all insisted that the administration's "doctrine of gradualism" toward bombing had proven ineffective and that the air campaign they were allowed to carry out was too little too late. In rebuttal, McNamara defended the current concept of operations as carefully thought out and "directed toward reasonable and realizable goals." Indicating that JCS proposals to ramp up the bombing were exactly the opposite, McNamara left the clear impression that he considered his military judgment superior to that of the professionals, while his choice of words challenged their soundness of mind.[19] The chiefs were dismayed and in the aftermath of the hearings, relations between the JCS and the Secretary of Defense sank to a new low. "Leaks" to the press of growing dissension within the Pentagon inevitably followed. Attempting to repair the damage, President Johnson held a news conference at which he insisted that there was "no deep division" within the administration over the prosecution of the war.[20] A lame defense, it convinced no one and only added to the administration's widening credibility gap. Like the conflict in Vietnam, the policy process in Washington had come practically to a standstill, unable to cope or to find new ideas.

TET AND ITS AFTERMATH

The impasse over Vietnam was short-lived, broken by the tightening NVA siege of Khe Sanh and the massive Viet Cong offensive launched in late January 1968 during the Tet holidays. Though not the "bolt out of the blue" that the Korean invasion of 1950 was, the Tet uprising still caught American and South Vietnamese forces off guard by its nationwide scale and scope and by the Viet Cong's determination to take and hold urban areas. Fighting in the ancient capital city of Hue was especially intense and required nearly a month of bloody house-to-house combat to dislodge the enemy. In all, 2,100 American and 4,000 South Vietnamese soldiers died in combat during the uprising. Viet Cong losses were put at 50,000 or more.[21]

The enemy's dramatic Tet offensive almost obscured the ongoing struggle for Khe Sanh, a strategic outpost in the northwest corner of South Vietnam's I Corps region. Defended by a combined force of U.S. Marines and South Vietnam (SVN)

Rangers, Khe Sanh straddled Route 9, a key east-west highway, and was an ideal launching point for search-and-destroy operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In January 1968, the North Vietnamese started massing three divisions around Khe Sanh, laying a siege that evoked memories of the 1954 contest for Dien Bien Phu. While there were strong arguments for abandoning the base, the consensus among the Joint Chiefs was that it should be held at all cost. Indeed, General Wheeler termed Khe Sanh "the anchor of our whole defense of the northern portion of South Vietnam," and argued that defending it would tie down many North Vietnamese who otherwise would be free to attack elsewhere.[22]

Though confident that the outpost would hold, Westmoreland wanted to minimize the risk and ordered what became the most intense air bombardment of the war against enemy positions around Khe Sanh. Toward the end of January, taking matters a step further, he notified the Joint Chiefs that he was exploring a plan, codenamed *Fracture Jaw*, to use nuclear or chemical weapons to relieve the enemy pressure. Referred to the Joint Staff for review, *Fracture Jaw* remained a topic of discussion between Washington and Saigon for several weeks. But as Khe Sanh's prospects improved, Westmoreland lost interest in any further nuclear planning. Eventually, the plan reached President Johnson, who wanted nothing to do with it and ordered it summarily withdrawn, thus bringing to a close the first and only episode in which the Joint Chiefs contemplated the specific use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.[23]

A failure militarily, the enemy's Tet offensive was a stunning political success that broke the back of support for the war in the United States. Almost overnight, opinion in Washington and across the country changed, leaving the Joint Chiefs practically alone in clinging to the administration's original objectives. Instead of insuring the survival of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam, President Johnson now declared that bringing the war to a peaceful resolution was his top concern. Earlier, McNamara had made known his decision to leave office and in late February 1968, disillusioned and demoralized, he finally stepped down.[24] His successor, Clark M. Clifford, promptly initiated a top-to-bottom review of the war. Unsure of what to expect, the Service chiefs turned to Wheeler, who did his best to bolster their morale and keep the momentum of the war going even while the President was renewing his call for negotiations and ordering cutbacks in air operations against the North, all with an eye toward eventual withdrawal. The result was a continuation of the conflict, but at a reduced tempo that left the outcome more in doubt than ever.[25]

With McNamara's departure, the JCS were cautiously optimistic that in reassessing its options, the administration would not stray too far from its original course. By then, Wheeler was both the dominant figure in JCS deliberations and an accepted member of President Johnson's inner circle. Shortly after the Stennis committee hearings in late

summer 1967, he had suffered a mild heart attack. Despite a swift recovery, he indicated he might have to retire. Johnson refused to let him go. "I can't afford to lose you," the President told him. "You have never given me a bad piece of advice."[26] Starting in October 1967, Wheeler was a regular participant in the Tuesday lunch, attended by the President and his senior advisors. On March 22, 1968, Johnson announced that Wheeler would serve an unprecedented fifth year as Chairman.[27] Yet proximity to power did not equate with influence and, as was often the case, Wheeler returned to the Pentagon from his meetings with the President appearing to his staff tired and discouraged.[28]

Day in and day out, Wheeler and the other chiefs waged an uphill battle to be heard. In fact, intelligence reports affirmed that the Tet offensive had decimated the Viet Cong, resulting in an improved military situation across Vietnam. It was the opportunity the Joint Chiefs had been waiting for and, wasting no time, Wheeler urged Westmoreland to exploit the enemy's weakness through a series of new operations. Accordingly, Westmoreland revived his earlier request for another 200,000 troops to finish the job. Wheeler knew that an increase of that size was bound to be controversial and that the odds of approval were against it, but he felt the war was entering a new and more "critical phase" and couched his endorsement of Westmoreland's request in an ominous assessment of the alternative.[29] What the President wanted, however, was less conflict, not more, and with that end in mind he accepted the advice of his new Secretary of Defense and others whose political instincts he trusted, that the time had come to deescalate the war, turn it over to the South Vietnamese, and get American troops out in an orderly manner.[30]

Disappointed by the turn of events, the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt increasingly beleaguered and isolated. They regarded the President's decision of March 31, 1968, to stop bombing above the twentieth parallel and to expedite the search for a negotiated settlement as ill-advised and militarily unsound. As Wheeler characterized it, the bombing halt amounted to an "aerial Dien Bien Phu."[31] Yet neither he nor the Service chiefs had anything better to offer that the President, Congress, or the American public would have considered acceptable. As during bombing pauses in the past, the JCS expected the North Vietnamese to use the respite to build up their defenses and to resupply their troops, and were not disappointed. Yet even airpower enthusiasts acknowledged that there was not much they could do for the next month or so due to the onset of the monsoon season and poor flying weather. Everything, it seemed, was conspiring against JCS efforts to keep the war on track.[32]

Setting the stage for an American withdrawal became the de facto policy. On October 31, 1968, President Johnson suspended the entire bombing campaign against the North, a gesture aimed at jump-starting the stalled Paris peace talks. Only armed reconnaissance flights continued. By now, the JCS realized that there

was virtually nothing they could say or do that might convince the President to change his mind. Treating the bombing halt as inevitable, they minimized the risks, accepting them as "low and manageable," even though they remained uneasy over the ultimate consequences for South Vietnam. Slowly but surely, the United States was winnowing its participation in the war and shifting the burden to the South Vietnamese, a process that came to be known as "Vietnamization."[33]

Carrying out the draw-down fell to the new COMUSMACV, General Creighton W. Abrams, who succeeded Westmoreland in mid-1968 when the latter returned to Washington to become Army Chief of Staff. A leading expert in tank warfare, Abrams' combat experience dated from World War II when he commanded an armored task force. As Vice Chief of Staff of the Army from September 1964 to May 1967, he had been deeply involved in the massive deployments of Army units to Vietnam. Though aggressive by instinct, he could sense that the war was winding down and that he would soon be under strong political pressure to limit casualties with low-risk operations and a more defensively oriented deployment of his forces. The Joint Chiefs would have preferred a more proactive posture to keep the enemy off balance. But by the time the Johnson administration left office, the pursuit of a military outcome was no longer a credible option. The best the chiefs could hope for from that point on was a holding action to allow a graceful exit.[34]

NIXON, THE JCS, AND THE POLICY PROCESS

It fell to a new President, Richard M. Nixon, to create something positive out of the previous administration's fiasco in Vietnam. As a candidate for the White House in 1968, Nixon promised to bring American troops home and to end the war "with honor." Even so, he opposed a precipitous withdrawal because it might damage American prestige and trigger a chain reaction of Communist takeovers in Southeast Asia. Once in office, he ruled out seeking "a purely military solution," but affirmed his determination to use force as necessary to achieve his goals.[35] At the same time, he and his assistant for national security affairs, Henry A. Kissinger, sought to enhance the prospects for a negotiated settlement by pursuing "détente" with the Soviet Union and a rapprochement with Communist China (see chapter 11). Though more open to JCS advice than Kennedy and Johnson, he also had no qualms about second-guessing or even belittling the chiefs' advice. Indeed, he was fond of citing H.G. Wells' observation that military people had mediocre minds because intelligent people would never contemplate a military career.[36] But he had the good sense to realize that it was better to have the Joint Chiefs on his side than against him. The result was a somewhat smoother relationship than in the past between military and civilian authorities, even

if at times Nixon followed a separate, secret agenda and seemed to have little use for professional military advice if it conflicted with his political objectives.

Those serving on the JCS during Nixon's first year in office were holdover appointments from the Johnson administration. As their terms of service expired, Nixon gradually brought in people of his own choosing. Like Kennedy and Johnson, Nixon found it easier and more convenient to deal with the Chairman. Once a year, he held a formal Oval Office meeting with JCS for picture-taking. Otherwise, he seldom met with them as a group. At Nixon's request, Wheeler stayed on as CJCS until July 1970, but his deteriorating health caused him to share his responsibilities with his heir-apparent, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chief of Naval Operations. An aviator in World War II with a distinguished record of combat experience, Moorer had a reputation around the Pentagon for being blunt but affable, cantankerous yet effective. As Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) in 1964–1965, Moorer had a personal hand in planning and overseeing the early stages of the *Rolling Thunder* air campaign against North Vietnam. Known as a "hawk" on the war, he was definitely the right choice for carrying out the administration's strategy of stepping up military pressure on North Vietnam. Following in Taylor's footsteps, Moorer shunned the role of "team player" and viewed himself first and foremost as an agent and spokesman for the administration. According to one official account, Moorer's influence as Chairman was so thoroughly pervasive that he "was now the only JCS member who really counted."[37]

Moorer's JCS colleagues were a typically diverse group with diverse interests. General John D. Ryan, who succeeded McConnell in August 1969 as Air Force Chief of Staff, was a leading airpower strategist in the Curtis LeMay tradition. An outspoken advocate for his Service, he touted the efficacy of strategic bombing whenever he could. His Army counterpart, General William C. Westmoreland, was the former COMUSMACV, whose frustration and brooding over his recent experiences in Vietnam were all too apparent. Though not yet a full-fledged member of the Joint Chiefs, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., acted as if he were. Described as "quiet, articulate, and thoughtful," he was an active contributor during JCS deliberations.[38] But with ending the Vietnam War now a foregone conclusion, most of the chiefs showed less interest in joint matters than in protecting their respective Services against the inevitable effects of postwar cutbacks.

The exception was Moorer's successor as CNO, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., who professed determination to demonstrate that Service and joint interests were not mutually exclusive, as some in uniform believed. The first surface commander to become CNO since Arleigh Burke, Zumwalt wanted to augment the Navy's fleet of expensive nuclear-powered aircraft carriers (CVANs) with smaller, conventionally-powered carriers and surface ships that could be built in greater numbers for

less money. He also stressed the need for improved inter-Service cooperation and collaboration to maximize available resources. One of his suggestions was that Army helicopter pilots and Air Force fliers train to operate from Navy vessels. While the Army warmed to the idea, the Air Force wanted no part of it. Still, it did not stop Zumwalt from continuing to explore other joint ventures for sharing assets.[39]

While the policy process in which the Joint Chiefs operated remained outwardly similar to that of previous administrations, decisionmaking became more entrenched than ever in the White House, where Nixon and Kissinger, the national security advisor, played the key roles. A complex and controversial figure, Nixon was exceptionally well versed in world affairs. In Peter W. Rodman's estimation, he had "the deepest intuition and shrewdest strategic judgment of any modern president."[40] Kissinger was equally well informed. Like McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, he came from an academic background, but was far more practical and better steeped in the history of great power politics. As a professor of government at Harvard University before joining the Nixon administration in 1969, Kissinger had published at length on balance-of-power politics and the concept of "limited" nuclear wars. He had built his reputation around studying the tactics and behavior of historic power brokers who excelled in the behind-the-scenes art of Realpolitik—like Otto von Bismarck, Germany's 19th-century "iron chancellor," and Prince Clemens von Metternich of Austria. His biographers generally agree that he saw himself in a similar light, operating as an Old World diplomatist when raison d'état and personal diplomacy reigned supreme.

Coordination between the White House and the JCS took two forms—through the resuscitated mechanisms of the National Security Council, and through backchannel communications. One of Nixon's declared goals was to restore the NSC to an approximation of the system that had existed under Eisenhower. Toward that end, he directed that the Council function as his "principal forum for the consideration of policy issues."[41] Initially, the Joint Chiefs welcomed this reaffirmation of the NSC's central role since it promised to restore more structured, reliable, and predictable procedures to the policy process. But according to Zumwalt, it was not long before the JCS began to question how much they could rely on Nixon and Kissinger to match words with deeds.[42] As time passed, Nixon relied less and less on the NSC and held fewer and fewer meetings.[43] Helmut Sonnenfeldt, a member of the NSC Staff at the time, recalled that Nixon studiously reserved the right of final decision and treated NSC deliberations as "purely advisory meetings."[44] Nor did Nixon bring back Eisenhower's practice of adopting detailed, all-encompassing basic policy papers to guide budgetary decisions, the development of programs, and the allocation of resources. Instead, he attacked problems piecemeal—an effective means of keeping others off balance and concealing his overall purpose—with a

barrage of directives, known as national security decision memoranda (NSDM) and requests for reviews, called national security study memoranda (NSSM).[45]

Below the NSC, JCS access to policy guidance was through a battery of interagency committees, all closely overseen, if not personally chaired, by Kissinger. These included the NSC Review Group, headed by Kissinger, to screen matters for submission to the full NSC, and four specialized advisory bodies organized at the Deputy Secretary level for Vietnam, defense policy, arms control, and crisis management.[46] Outside this structure, Kissinger also established informal contacts with the Pentagon through the JCS liaison office. The proper channel of communication was from the White House through the Office of Secretary of Defense to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Kissinger, however, often bypassed OSD by calling Moorer directly and by transmitting documents to him through the JCS liaison office, housed next door in the Old Executive Office Building. Melvin R. Laird, Secretary of Defense during Nixon's first term, deeply resented Kissinger's circumvention of his authority and after an unseemly episode in 1971 involving the mishandling of classified documents by a Navy yeoman assigned to the NSC as a stenographer, he closed the JCS liaison office. Whether the yeoman, Charles E. Radford, was "spying" for the JCS or acting on his own was never conclusively ascertained. But despite the closure of the office, backchannel contacts continued to be one of Kissinger's preferred methods of doing business, a habit he found impossible to break.[47]

WINDING DOWN THE WAR

Nixon's first order of business in Vietnam was to create a politico-military environment favorable to the withdrawal of U.S. forces. When he became President in 1969, the United States still had over half a million troops engaged there and no concrete plans for getting them out.[48] Modeling his policy on Eisenhower's strategy for ending the Korean War, he sought to apply a combination of diplomacy and "irresistible military pressure" to achieve a negotiated settlement with the North Vietnamese that would include the mutual withdrawal of U.S. and NVA forces.[49] Known as "linkage," his diplomatic strategy was to encourage détente with the Soviet Union and exploit signs of a Sino-Soviet ideological split to weaken Communist bloc support of Hanoi. Simultaneously, he extended the war through covert means into Cambodia and accelerated the Vietnamization and pacification programs to cover the phased withdrawal of U.S. ground forces and to provide the government of South Vietnam with increased capabilities for future self-defense. At the outset of his Presidency, Nixon announced to his Cabinet that he expected the war to be over in a year. Almost immediately, he was backtracking from his prediction.[50]

While the Joint Chiefs of Staff took close note of the negotiations, they were rarely directly involved. Even though they had representatives on the various interagency bodies dealing with the peace talks, the governing assumption within the JCS organization was that negotiating strategy did not lie "within the normal purview" of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[51] Their more direct and immediate concern was to figure out ways of keeping military pressure on the enemy while the United States scaled back its participation in the war. With the loss of U.S. nuclear superiority in the 1960s, Nixon was in no position, as Eisenhower was in 1953, to threaten the use of atomic weapons. Casting about for options, he and Kissinger flirted with the idea of resuming the air war against the North and briefly considered a plan (Operation Duck Hook) to launch a series of quick, intense, and "brutal" strikes against key North Vietnamese targets. But they quickly dropped the idea owing to the lukewarm support it enjoyed among the Joint Chiefs, the political repercussions such actions could have at home, and the danger of derailing plans for détente with the Soviet Union.[52]

With the range of options limited, the preferred approach both at the White House and in the Pentagon became a concerted bombing campaign with B–52s against Viet Cong and NVA sanctuaries in neighboring Cambodia, targets previously off limits to U.S. air attack. The Joint Chiefs, COMUSMACV, and CINCPAC had long favored the destruction of these enemy bases, but had had no luck persuading the previous administration to accept the political and diplomatic risks such an operation might entail. With Nixon's advent, they found a more receptive audience and on March 15, 1969, they received a green light to proceed.[53]

Like the decision to intervene with ground troops in 1965, the "secret" bombing of Cambodia was one of the most controversial episodes of the war. Lasting into May 1970, the attacks concentrated on six enemy bases along the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border and involved the expenditure of over 180,000 tons of munitions.[54] To keep the operation quiet, the White House, the Joint Staff, and COMUSMACV resorted to elaborate deception measures that concealed flight plans and the expenditure of bombs. Privately, members of the Joint Chiefs grumbled at being party to Nixon's duplicity, some complaining that efforts to hide the bombing were "stupid" and bound to fail.[55] But in Nixon's view, preserving secrecy was essential in order to avoid antiwar protests.[56] Actually, there was not much secret about the whole affair. Cambodian leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk knew about the bombing from the outset and obligingly looked the other way. The North Vietnamese were well aware, as were the Soviets, the Chinese, and key figures on Capitol Hill. About the only group not privy to the secret was the American public.

While putting pressure on the enemy through the secret bombing campaign, Nixon sought to expedite the U.S. withdrawal under cover of the Vietnamization

program, the incremental substitution of SVN troops for U.S. forces. As the Joint Chiefs repeatedly cautioned, however, the Vietnamization program devised under the Johnson administration and inherited by Nixon was intended solely to develop a security force and would not result in a SVN army that could tackle the North Vietnamese.[57] After taking a personal look at the program in operation, Secretary of Defense Laird came back from a trip to Southeast Asia in March 1969 with an alternative plan to increase the arming, training, and equipping of the South Vietnamese so they could take on not only the Viet Cong but also the NVA.[58] Though Nixon viewed Vietnamization as an integral part of his strategy, he had never envisioned developing and refining South Vietnam's military capabilities quite as fast or to the same degree. Initially skeptical of Laird's proposal, Nixon and Kissinger quickly changed their minds after the Secretary of Defense, without consulting the White House, publicly outlined his program on national television and "leaked" a story to the press, intimating that it was agreed administration policy. "It was largely on the basis of Laird's enthusiastic advocacy," Nixon recalled, "that we undertook the policy of Vietnamization."[59]

Whether the South Vietnamese were up to the task became a recurring issue in JCS deliberations over the next several years. On paper, the South Vietnamese military was a formidable force. With nearly a million men under arms, it ranked as one of the largest in the world. Except for a few elite units, however, it was a heavily conscripted army in which desertion rates were high and morale low. Barely a match for the Viet Cong, it was virtually untested against North Vietnamese regulars. Recognizing the ARVN's weaknesses, the Joint Chiefs urged a paced withdrawal of U.S. forces, coordinated with periodic assessments of the progress of Vietnamization, pacification, and the enemy situation.[60] Nixon agreed that the chiefs' "cut-and-try" approach made a lot of sense and should be followed as much as possible.[61] But for economic reasons he needed to curb defense spending and was under strong political pressure to bring U.S. troops home at an accelerated pace. As a consequence, in setting timetables for the redeployment of U.S. forces, the Joint Chiefs came to realize that "other considerations" than the progress of Vietnamization tended to be the decisive factors.[62]

An early test of Vietnamization occurred during the allied invasion of Cambodia in the spring of 1970. The results were inconclusive, however, owing to the heavy involvement of U.S. forces alongside the South Vietnamese, the extensive presence of U.S. advisors among SVN units, and because the NVA elected for the most part not to engage the invaders. The event precipitating the invasion was a political crisis in neighboring Cambodia, brought on by anti-Communist demonstrations culminating in March 1970 in a coup d'état that replaced the nominally neutralist regime of Prince Sihanouk with a pro-Western one headed by Premier Lon Nol. As one of his first acts, Lon Nol closed the port of Kampong Son (Sihanoukville) to

NVA transfers, thus denying the enemy a major entrepôt for weapons and supplies destined for South Vietnam. A wave of Communist counterattacks led by North Vietnamese regulars soon followed, prompting COMUSMACV, CINCPAC, and the Joint Chiefs to coordinate the development of contingency plans to shore up Lon Nol's regime and, at the same time, to complete the destruction of enemy sanctuaries along the border. The plan initially presented by the Joint Chiefs called for a cross-border operation into Cambodia with U.S. ground forces spearheading the effort.[63] At the time, there were still substantial numbers of U.S. combat troops in Vietnam and no clear picture of how well the ARVN would perform. Nixon and Kissinger, however, wanted the South Vietnamese to be in the vanguard, partly to deflect expected criticism at home and to underscore the lowering of the U.S. profile in accordance with recently announced troop reductions.[64]

In late April, a combined U.S.–SVN invasion force entered Cambodia. Though they captured large quantities of supplies, documents, and military hardware, the allies made little contact with the enemy after the first day. General Abrams wanted to exploit the situation with deeper probes into Cambodia to draw the enemy out. Back in the United States, the Cambodian invasion had aroused some of the largest and most strident protests to that point in the war, suggesting that political support was weak and continuing to decline. Feeling the pressure, President Nixon rejected Abrams' proposal to expand the operation and ordered U.S. troops back across the border by the end of June. While it was not much of a test for the Vietnamization program, Abrams praised the performance SVN forces and relayed word to Washington that he considered their planning and execution "very impressive."[65]

With growing confidence in South Vietnamese forces, Abrams (with encouragement from Nixon and Kissinger) began to envision even bigger operations. Thus, as the Cambodian incursion drew to a close, he received the go-ahead from Admiral Moorer for a new operation known as LAM SON 719, a "dry season" search and destroy foray into Laos to disrupt enemy movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Initiated with the expectation of large-scale U.S. combat ground support inside Vietnam and heavy U.S. air support in Laos, LAM SON 719 was the product of planning done late in 1970 at MACV headquarters in Saigon and in Hawaii by Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral John S. McCain, Jr.[66] By then, Nixon and Kissinger had more or less given up trying to negotiate a mutual reduction of forces with the North Vietnamese and had decided to concentrate on a unilateral U.S. withdrawal. The function of LAM SON 719, as Kissinger envisioned it, was to cut enemy supply lines, curb infiltration into the south, and buy time to complete an orderly pull-out of U.S. forces.[67]

LAM SON 719 may have been doomed before it started. With advance warning from their spies in Saigon, the North Vietnamese had ample time to reinforce

units and strengthen their defenses along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By their own account, the NVA had amassed a force of 60,000 troops, against an ARVN invasion force of 17,000. In Washington, meanwhile, following a lengthy and contentious debate, Congress finally passed a foreign military sales bill early in 1971 incorporating the Cooper-Church amendment banning U.S. advisors from assisting in operations outside Vietnam. With U.S. advisory assistance thus curtailed, the South Vietnamese faced serious problems coordinating their air and artillery support. Still, from all the Joint Staff had seen and heard of the plan, there was nothing overtly objectionable about LAM SON 719 and, indeed, much to recommend it, including Abrams' budding confidence in the ARVN and a growing awareness that this might be the last time the South Vietnamese could conduct a dry-season offensive while U.S. forces were still present in Vietnam in substantial numbers to provide backup.[68]

As the operation began in early February 1971, however, confidence in it began to fade. Most skeptical of all was Army Chief of Staff General Westmoreland. Reluctant to second-guess the commander on the scene, Westmoreland had stifled his reservations, much as the JCS had muffled their misgivings about plans for the Bay of Pigs invasion a decade earlier. When pressed by Kissinger for his views, however, Westmoreland lashed out against LAM SON 719, declaring it to be "a very high risk" enterprise with a slim chance of success. Several times as COMUSMACV, Westmoreland had studied the possibility of mounting a similar attack into Laos. But he had never followed through due to the Johnson administration's concern that it would be too risky and would require an inordinate commitment of resources—probably no fewer than four U.S. divisions, or nearly half the U.S. in-country fighting force. In lieu of the invasion taking place under LAM SON 719, Westmoreland urged the White House to consider short raids, feints, and mobile operations to keep the North Vietnamese off balance and to interrupt traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[69] Bothered by Westmoreland's comments, Kissinger turned to Moorer, who downplayed the general's concerns and offered his assurances, based on Abrams' assessments, that the concept behind the plan was sound.[70]

Once underway, LAM SON 719 began running into one problem after another. Outnumbered and outgunned, the South Vietnamese found their search-and-destroy mission turned into a sustained conventional battle in which the enemy had the initiative. Determined not merely to repel the attackers and protect their lines of communication, the NVA sought to inflict a crushing defeat on the South Vietnamese army that would discredit the American policy of Vietnamization. At a meeting with the Secretary of Defense on March 15, Westmoreland criticized ARVN tactics and, in Moorer's words, "badmouthed the whole LAM SON 719 operation." The next day Moorer assured President Nixon that "things were going pretty well." Nixon wanted

the ARVN to keep the operation going into April, when he intended to announce further U.S. troop withdrawals. But under heavy attack from the enemy, the ARVN began a precipitous withdrawal. The tide had turned and, as Kissinger put it, the South Vietnamese were "bugging out." What the administration tried to depict as an orderly tactical withdrawal, journalists on the scene described as a tragic and chaotic rout.[71]

BACK TO AIRPOWER

Though it was not the total catastrophe some observers depicted, LAM SON 719 was clearly a major setback for the United States and its Vietnamese allies. Most serious of all, it had exposed glaring shortcomings in the administration's Vietnamization program. Given enough time and training, perhaps, the ARVN might someday become a formidable fighting force; but for the foreseeable future, it was in no position to stop aggression from the North on its own. One of the few positive things to come out of the whole episode was Secretary of Defense Laird's increased interest in providing more effective measures to block enemy infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Toward the end of 1971, with this in mind, he assigned a new Army Brigadier General, John W. Vessey, to the U.S. Embassy in Laos. Working with the Ambassador and CIA station chief, Vessey oversaw the allocation of funds for covert operations against North Vietnamese infiltration. In 1982, under the Reagan administration, Vessey would again attract high-level attention and become the President's choice to chair the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[72]

Despite ongoing efforts by the Nixon administration to shore up South Vietnam's security, the danger from the North continued to grow, while U.S. troop strength continued to drop. By the beginning of 1972, there were fewer than 150,000 American Servicemen left in Vietnam, and under approved troop withdrawal schedules half of those would be gone in a few months. Shrugging off the ARVN's disappointing performance in LAM SON 719, the Nixon White House repeatedly urged the Saigon regime to undertake new forays into Laos and Cambodia. At the same time, to offset the loss of U.S. ground strength, Admiral Moorer, often on his own initiative, pressed Secretary of Defense Laird to relax restrictions on air attacks against North Vietnam and to increase the use of "protective reaction strikes" against surface-to-air missile (SAM) and antiaircraft (AAA) sites that threatened U.S. planes conducting interdiction flights over South Vietnam and Laos. Laird had no objection to American pilots protecting themselves, but as for other attacks against the North, he turned them down more often than not, feeling that they would re-escalate the war and delay U.S. troop withdrawals. President Nixon, however, proved more flexible, and by the end of 1971 bombing against targets in North Vietnam below the 20th parallel was again on the rise.[73]

Convinced that even more was needed, General John D. Lavelle, USAF, Commander of the Seventh Air Force in South Vietnam, took matters into his own hands by stepping up air attacks against the North. Whether he had authority to do so was never fully clear. Adopting "a liberal interpretation" of the rules of engagement, Lavelle later estimated that he carried out "in the neighborhood" of 20 such raids (the real number was closer to thirty) between November 1971 and March 1972. He defended his actions, however, on the grounds that he had the tacit encouragement of his superiors in Washington, including both Admiral Moorer and Secretary Laird, who had urged him to "make maximum use" of existing authority to put pressure on the North.[74] Still, in mounting preplanned attacks Lavelle had gone overboard and risked reigniting the still smoldering bombing controversy between Congress and the administration. Upon learning of the general's interpretation of orders, Moorer and Laird quickly arranged with Air Force Chief of Staff General John D. Ryan to have Lavelle quietly relieved of his duties. But as rumors of the incident spread, they prompted several well-publicized, albeit inconclusive, congressional investigations.[75]

Meanwhile, across Vietnam, the threat of stepped-up combat continued to mount. The showdown came around Easter, on March 30, 1972, when the North Vietnamese launched a coordinated attack against the South, which they initiated with a full-scale conventional invasion across the DMZ, using tanks and self-propelled artillery. Allied intelligence had known for months that the North Vietnamese were preparing a large-scale operation but could not pinpoint either the date or place. Throughout the ensuing crisis, Nixon and Kissinger frequently ignored established lines of communication with the Pentagon and in the interest of expediency dealt directly with Admiral Moorer and the Joint Staff, whose views were more in harmony with those of the White House than Laird's. Seeing the invasion as a challenge to the credibility of his whole foreign policy, President Nixon believed that only a vigorous military response would convince Hanoi and its allies in Moscow and Beijing that he meant business. With battlefield success his uppermost concern, Nixon saw no choice but to remove all restrictions on the use of airpower, something he had been loath to do earlier. In view of the North's blatant aggression, American public and congressional opinion largely acquiesced. Moorer agreed that Hanoi's leaders respected nothing more than the unstinting application of military force, and to that end he helped arrange a swift buildup of airpower. Among the forces added for action were 189 F–4 fighter-bombers, 210 B–52s (half of SAC's bomber force), and four carrier task forces, bringing to six the number of carriers on station, the largest concentration of naval airpower yet seen in the war.[76]

With the increased availability of airpower came friction between Washington and the command in Saigon over how and where to apply it. Nixon, Kissinger, and

Moorer envisioned a fairly broad-brush campaign aimed not simply at curbing the current aggression, but at carrying out punitive raids against the north to break the enemy's morale and force the North Vietnamese back into serious negotiations. Abrams, supported by Laird, wanted the additional airpower available for operations in the South, on the assumption that that was where the war would be won or lost. After the LAM SON 719 debacle, however, Moorer grew increasingly frustrated with Abrams. At one point during the early days of the enemy's Easter offensive, with Kissinger present, Moorer related the substance of a rambling telephone call they had just had in which the COMUSMACV complained that he was "sick and tired" of civilians in Washington telling him what to do and would resign if he did not have his way. Eventually, Abrams calmed down. But the damage was done. Thenceforth, Moorer often bypassed the COMUSMACV and dealt with Abrams' subordinate and Lavelle's successor as Commander of Seventh Air Force, General John W. Vogt, USAF, who until recently had been Director of the Joint Staff. By transferring Vogt to Saigon, the Chairman had a trusted ally on the scene whose appraisals and advice he valued more than Abrams'.[77]

Like Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon took a strong personal interest in the air campaign and participated actively in planning and overseeing its execution. Yet there was none of the soul-searching or hemming and hawing that had gone on during the Johnson years. In deference to Abrams' expressed concerns, Nixon gave first priority to supporting the South Vietnamese and blunting the NVA invasion. According to Vogt, the intensity of these air strikes on the invaders resembled the effects of a "meat-grinder."[78] Operations against the North, code-named *Linebacker*, harkened to the "hard knock" bombing strategy advocated by the Joint Chiefs in the mid-1960s, and stressed repeat attacks on bridges, rail lines, fuel supplies, cement and power plants, airfields, and other high-profile military, industrial, and transportation targets. In giving his approval to launch *Linebacker*, Nixon admonished Moorer to mount an all-out effort and to avoid wasting bombs on "secondary targets."[79] Going further, he wanted to restrict North Vietnam's resupply from external sources, and on May 8, 1972, he announced the unprecedented step of mining Haiphong harbor, something the Joint Chiefs had urged since the early stages of the war.[80]

For a variety of reasons, *Linebacker* achieved results that were never feasible under the *Rolling Thunder* campaign of 1965–1968. By shifting from guerrilla tactics to conventional warfare and by incorporating tanks and other mechanized equipment into their battle plan, the North Vietnamese became dependent, like other modern armies, on long, readily identifiable supply lines that made ripe targets for air attack. Interdiction under the *Linebacker* campaign thus became more successful than during *Rolling Thunder*. A further difference between the two campaigns was the increased availability by 1972 of precision-guided munitions (PGMs or "smart

bombs"), which allowed more accurate attacks against targets previously off limits in congested urban areas. While guided munitions had been around since the late stages of World War II, they had been difficult to use and not very effective. Improved models made their first appearance in Southeast Asia toward the conclusion of *Rolling Thunder* in 1968. Thereafter, technical problems limited their use to lightly defended targets in Laos and South Vietnam. But by 1972, more sophisticated electronics employing laser guidance systems opened the way for PGM raids against fixed targets in the heavily built-up Hanoi-Haiphong area.[81]

By early June, the North Vietnamese offensive was beginning to lose steam and there were indications from Hanoi of a renewed willingness to negotiate. In the United States, Nixon's decision to resume bombing had provoked predictable reactions from antiwar groups and liberals in Congress. But compared with the Cambodian invasion and earlier episodes, the protests and demonstrations were relatively mild, a sign that troop withdrawals and ending the draft were having the desired effect of diffusing the war as a political issue. Nixon's popularity at home was in fact at an all-time high, pointing toward an easy reelection in November. With his position thus fairly secure at home, Nixon kept up the bombing pressure on the North and did not call a halt until late October, when he was satisfied that the negotiations were on course toward an agreement.

THE CHRISTMAS BOMBING CAMPAIGN

While Nixon had used airpower to thwart an NVA military victory in the spring of 1972, he also hoped that it would pay diplomatic dividends by coercing the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table and into a peace settlement. Once the bombing stopped in late October, however, unexpected problems arose in convincing not only leaders in Hanoi but also the regime in Saigon, headed by President Nguyen Van Thieu, to accept a ceasefire. One of Thieu's main objections to the deal, which Kissinger negotiated, was that it would leave huge numbers of Communist troops in place in South Vietnam. As many as 160,000 NVA regulars remained in the South and another 100,000 were in Laos and Cambodia.[82] Despite months of heavy air attacks, neither Kissinger nor the Joint Chiefs saw any way of dislodging them without the large-scale reintroduction of U.S. ground forces.

Frustrated by this turn of events, Nixon again resorted to bombing to put pressure on Hanoi to abide by the accords and to demonstrate to the Thieu government that the United States would stand behind it once the peace settlement took effect. A secret letter from Nixon to Thieu, pledging that the United States would "react strongly" if South Vietnam were threatened again sealed the bargain.[83] However,

Nixon informed no one of his promise, not even the Joint Chiefs. Yet even if he had, it probably would have made little difference. Congress, with antiwar liberals in the vanguard, felt bound by no such guarantees, and when the Communists resumed their offensive in 1975, it fell back on earlier legislation blocking U.S. forces from intervening.

The resumption of bombing in December 1972 thus helped to facilitate the signing of a peace agreement which, in the long run, was largely inconsequential. Its major accomplishment was to facilitate the return of U.S. prisoners of war.[84] Codenamed *Linebacker II*, the operation covered an 11-day period over the holidays and became known as the Christmas bombing campaign. Militarily, the main difference between *Linebacker II* and previous bombing operations was the concerted use of B–52s against targets in and around Hanoi and Haiphong. Ever since the secret bombing of Cambodia, Nixon had had a fascination with the use of B–52s and during the buildup for *Linebacker I*, increasing B–52 deployments to Guam and Thailand had been his top priority. The big bombers appeared for the first time over the North Vietnamese heartland in five raids in April 1972. Without much evidence, Nixon boasted to his staff that these attacks had been "exceptionally effective, the best ever in the war."[85] In fact, the results had not been particularly impressive, and the need for heavy fighter escort had diverted assets from other missions. Meantime, Abrams was clamoring for more B–52 support to help thwart the Communist offensive in the South. The net result was that, from early May on, the B–52s ceased operations against the North and concentrated on targets below the twentieth parallel.[86]

As he contemplated launching *Linebacker II*, Nixon resolved that B–52s would spearhead the effort. Underlying the operation was his determination to mount a show of force that would break enemy leaders' will to resist. Initially, both Moorer and Kissinger doubted whether using B–52s would produce better results than fighter-bombers. But as it became clear that Nixon was less interested in specific military objectives than in achieving a strong psychological impact, their reservations evaporated. Working in unison, the Joint Staff, the Strategic Air Command, the Air Staff, and the Pacific Air Forces quickly assembled a list of 55 key targets, aiming in each case for "mass shock effect in a psychological context." On December 7, Moorer met at Camp David with the President, who reviewed the target plan and "seemed to be pleased with it." A few days later, Moorer notified the Commander in Chief of Strategic Air Command, General John C. Meyer, USAF, that a major air offensive against the North was "definitely on the front burner" and that Hanoi and Haiphong would be the primary target areas. "I want the people of Hanoi to hear the bombs," Moorer told him, "but minimize damage to the civilian populace." Moorer also consulted by secure telephone with the CINCPAC, Admiral Noel Gayler, and confirmed the punitive purpose of the bombing.[87]

Attacks commenced on December 18, 1972, and lasted, with a brief pause over Christmas, until December 29. Though Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers also took part, SAC's B–52s dropped 75 percent of the total bomb tonnage during *Linebacker II*. In wave after wave, night after night, they pounded targets from Hanoi and Haiphong to the Chinese border. The most impressive display to date of American military power, these raids came closer than anything yet to threatening the survival of the North Vietnamese regime. Realizing what was at stake, the North Vietnamese put up a ferocious defense and during the first few nights they inflicted unexpectedly high losses on U.S. aircraft. The most serious losses came on the third night (December 20–21) when enemy surface-to-air missiles claimed six B–52s out of an attacking force of ninety. B–52 crews were used to flying over Laos and South Vietnam and were unaccustomed to a hostile environment, so the downing of planes during the early stages of *Linebacker II* came as a shock. Morale problems ensued, and there was a jump in the number of crewmen reporting for sick call. A change in bombing tactics and the compression of attacks into closer intervals, allowing the North Vietnamese defenders less time to reload their SAMs, helped overcome the problem. "It worked out beautifully," Moorer confided to his diary. "I don't think anybody in the world could have coordinated an operation as well as we did."[88]

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the success of *Linebacker II* was the high-water mark of the war. After years of frustration and setbacks, they had finally dealt the North Vietnamese a crippling blow. Meyer and Moorer believed that the North Vietnamese probably had to give up because they were running low on SAMs. With another week of raids, Meyer estimated, "we could fly anywhere we want over North Vietnam with impunity."[89] Nixon, however, had other plans. Feeling that he had made his point, he ordered the B–52s to stand down rather than risk the loss of more planes and crews or possibly jeopardize his budding détente with the Soviets and his rapprochement with the Chinese. The Joint Chiefs had long contended that an unrestricted air campaign would be decisive in Vietnam, and in December 1972 their advice appeared vindicated.

THE BALANCE SHEET

The ceasefire signed in January 1973 lasted barely 2 years. During this interval, the Joint Chiefs completed the withdrawal of the few U.S. troops still in Vietnam and progressively redeployed their other forces from the region. For a while, the United States continued to bomb NVA and Communist base camps in Cambodia, but in August 1973 Congress called a halt. Congressional pressure likewise led to the cessation of air reconnaissance flights over Laos a year later. Moorer suspected

that the Communists would use the ceasefire to regroup and rearm, and they did. Launching a major offensive in April 1975, they quickly overwhelmed South Vietnamese defenders, who were practically helpless without American airpower. While Vietnamization had shielded the withdrawal of American ground troops, it had not done much to strengthen South Vietnam's security or to assure its continued independence. The Joint Chiefs had no plans to rush U.S. forces back into Southeast Asia or to intervene on the SVN government's behalf. Yet even if such plans had existed, political pressures at home doubtless would have blocked their implementation.

Despite the war's outcome, the Joint Chiefs never felt that the United States had erred by going into Vietnam. What they saw instead was a misguided effort, pursuing flawed goals and blunders in the way the war was planned, organized, and fought. Some of these blunders, they admitted, were of their own making; others were not. In World War II and initially in Korea, the attainment of military objectives had taken priority. But in Vietnam the Joint Chiefs had found themselves from the outset prosecuting a limited war heavy in diplomatic and political overtones. The initial objective was to apply military power to achieve a stalemate, an outcome which from the chiefs' point of view squandered their resources and ran counter to the American military ethos. Against an enemy bent on victory at any cost, such war aims were utterly unrealistic as well. Set within these parameters, the American effort in Vietnam was doomed to fail.

After the Vietnam War, the Joint Chiefs' role fell under close scrutiny. Calls for reform proliferated and were eventually instrumental in passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, an attempt by Congress to improve future JCS effectiveness through institutional reorganization (see chapter 15). The most trenchant critique of the chiefs' performance in Vietnam was by an Army major (later brigadier general), H.R. McMaster. In his thoroughly researched and well-written book, *Dereliction of Duty*, published in 1997, McMaster took the chiefs to task for not being more forthright in offering advice to the Secretary of Defense and the President. More than a generation removed from Vietnam, McMaster found it hard to understand how the Joint Chiefs could disagree so strenuously with the Johnson administration's "graduated response" strategy, yet remain so compliant as their superiors blatantly ignored their advice. Relegated to what he describes as a "peripheral position in the policy-making process," the chiefs became, in McMaster's words, the "five silent men."[90]

What McMaster overlooks is that by the mid-1960s, when American intervention in Vietnam took place, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had passed their prime. Though they remained, as the National Security Act decreed, the President's top military advisors, their stature and institutional influence had diminished considerably since the 1940s when they came into being as a corporate body. During World War II,

they met regularly with the President and accompanied him to meetings around the world. They knew every allied leader personally and were key figures at the high-level wartime conferences at which strategy and postwar planning took place. In terms of authoritative advice and influence, they had no rivals.

By the 1960s, the situation had changed. For one thing, the wartime grandees were long gone, succeeded by men who had been junior officers in World War II. Those who made up the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam era were highly dedicated and decorated military officers. No one seriously questioned their professional credentials or competence. But they operated on a different plane from those who had served on the Joint Chiefs in World War II, the leaders who had shaped the allied victory over the Axis. McMaster's complaint that the JCS should have been more outspoken on Vietnam overrates their stature and influence. Had they been Marshall, King, and Arnold or their immediate successors, their advice would have been hard if not impossible for the President, Congress, and the American public to ignore. But the men who served on the JCS by the 1960s lacked the gravitas of their predecessors. Little wonder, then, that Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson dismissed the suggestion that he and his colleagues ought to have resigned in protest as a hollow and pointless gesture.[91]

Moreover, a new policy- and decisionmaking system had replaced the one in effect when the JCS came into existence, resulting in a proliferation of overlapping agencies and organizations, some in direct competition with the Joint Chiefs. By the mid-1960s, the chiefs' most formidable competitor was the Office of the Secretary of Defense, which had grown steadily in influence and importance since its creation in 1947. Under McNamara, it had amassed a wealth of additional authority and capabilities for analyzing military strategy and for offering alternative advice to that rendered by the JCS. Given McNamara's forceful personality and the precarious relationship between the JCS and the White House under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, it was hardly surprising that the chiefs' credibility and influence were on the wane.

Unable to bring their views to bear directly, the Joint Chiefs adopted an incremental approach to the war. They assumed that any steps toward greater military involvement would sooner or later develop into the course they advocated. In the process, they lent their support to a military strategy they considered fundamentally flawed and became complicit in the administration's folly. At the same time, as the decision to intervene in force was taking shape, inter-Service bickering over whether to stress ground operations in the South or a concerted air and naval campaign against the North denied them a clear voice and focus. Yet even if the Joint Chiefs had spoken as one, their limited influence within the wider sphere of the policy process effectively undercut their ability to sway key decisions on the conduct of the war.

With the advent of the Nixon administration, the strategy debate came full circle back to the chiefs' original premise that the most effective approach was to mount heavy military pressure directly against North Vietnam. Owing to the ongoing reduction in U.S. ground forces and limited South Vietnamese capabilities, however, recourse to a combination of air and sea power became the only viable option. Fearing Chinese intervention or a nuclear confrontation with the Soviets, President Johnson had consistently scorned the chiefs' advice in that regard. But by Nixon's time, the emergence of détente and the opening with China allowed the President a degree of leverage and flexibility that had not previously existed. Given the decisive results achieved by the *Linebacker* operations, coupled with the mining of Haiphong, one is tempted to speculate that a bolder strategy earlier might well have avoided a long, drawn-out war. Yet without the diplomatic groundwork painstakingly laid by Nixon and Kissinger, the more aggressive strategy advocated by the JCS in 1964–1965 could just as well have backfired.

As disappointing to the Joint Chiefs as the outcome in Vietnam may have been, it was not the serious setback to American global interests that many had feared a Communist victory might be when the United States went into Vietnam. All the same, the nature and pervasive impact of the war had a devastating effect. Not only did the war shatter the national consensus that had supported and sustained faith in the containment concept for nearly two decades; it also left American conventional forces in a state of near-disarray, weaker and less sure of themselves than at any time since the 1930s. Especially hard-hit was the Army, which emerged from the conflict a shambles. Recovering from the trauma of Vietnam became the Joint Chiefs' first order of business, and for the next decade and a half, through the end of the Cold War, it would overshadow practically all other aspects of their deliberations.

NOTES

1 "President's Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam," March 31, 1968, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–69* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1970), Pt. I, 469–476; Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 365.

2 Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, chap. 9.

3 Merle Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 153–205 and passim.

4 Stanley Robert Larsen and James Lawton Collins, Jr., *Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2005), 120–159.

5 Lawrence S. Kaplan, "McNamara, Vietnam, and the Defense of Europe," in Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtsmark, and Andreas Wenger, eds., *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West* (London: Routledge, 2006), 286–300.

6 George L. MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive: October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1998), 25.

7 Jacob Van Staaveren, *Gradual Failure: The Air War Over North Vietnam, 1965–1966* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2002), 279–297.

8 Wayne Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back: The United States Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966–1973* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2000), 41–43.

9 Graham A. Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and The War in Vietnam, 1960–1968* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2009), Part 3, 43–45; MacGarrigle, 216–217.

10 JCSM-218-67 to SECDEF, April 20, 1967, "Force Requirements—Southeast Asia FY 1968," JCS 2339/255-3; Cosmas, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1960–68*, Pt. 3, 48–50.

11 Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 264–265.

12 See Draft Memo, SECDEF to President, May 19, 1967, "Future Actions in Vietnam," *FRUS 1964–68*, V, 423–438.

13 Notes on Discussions with President Johnson, April 27, 1967, *FRUS 1964–68*, V, 350.

14 CJCS Statement, February 7, 1967, attached to Letter, JCSJ to SecState, February 8, 1967, JMF 9155 (February 18, 1965), NARA.

15 JCSM-288-67 to SECDEF, May 20, 1967, "Worldwide US Military Posture," JCS 2101/538-5.

16 Draft Memo, SECDEF to President, June 12, 1967, "Alternative Military Actions Against North Vietnam," *FRUS 1964–68*, V, 475–481; McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 265–271.

17 William W. Momyer, *Airpower in Three Wars* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 1978), 25–26.

18 Cosmas, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1960–68*, Pt. III, 62–67; Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Escalation, 1962–67*, 419; Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 106–108.

19 McNamara testimony, August 25, 1967, in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Hearings: Air War Against North Vietnam*, 90:1, Pt. 4, 281 (quote) and passim.

20 "President's News Conference," September 1, 1967, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1967* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1968), Pt. I, 817.

21 Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 59.

22 CM-2922-68, January 19, 1968, quoted in Jacob Van Staaveren, "The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Toward a Bombing Halt, 1968" (MS, Office of Air Force History, September 1970), 8 (declassified).

23 Cosmas, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1960–68*, Pt. III, 142–143; Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 41; CM-2944-68 to SECDEF, February 3, 1968, "Khe Sanh," *FRUS 1964–68*, VI, 120.

24 Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 432.

25 Walter S. Poole et al., "Chairmen and Crises: The Vietnam War" (MS, Joint History Office, Joint Chiefs of Staff, n.d.), 129–136 (declassified/publication forthcoming) gives an excellent overview of JCS thinking during the immediate post-Tet period.

26 Interview by Dorothy P. McSweeny with Gen Earle G. Wheeler, May 7, 1970, 21–22, Oral History Collection, Johnson Library.

27 "President's News Conference," March 22, 1967, *Johnson Public Papers, 1968*, 430.

28 Interview with Lt. Gen. John B. McPherson, USAF (Ret.), April 3, 1990, JHO Collection. See also Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 94.

29 Cosmas, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1960–68*, Pt. III, 149–160; Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 88–97; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 351 (quote); "Report of CJCS on Situation in Vietnam and MACV Force Requirements," February 27, 1968, JCS 2472/237.

30 Clark Clifford, with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 492–526; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 365–424.

31 Quoted in Van Staaveren, "Toward a Bombing Halt," 39.

32 Momyer, 26–27.

33 "Notes on the President's Meeting," October 29, 1968, *FRUS, 1964–68*, VII, 399–401; Cosmas, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1960–68*, Pt. III, 230–231.

34 Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 244–245.

35 "Address to the Nation on Vietnam," May 14, 1969, *Nixon Public Papers, 1969*, 369–375. See also Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 159–160.

36 Entry, January 17, 1972, in H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 397.

37 Poole et al., "Chairmen and Crises," 224.

38 Palmer, *25-Year War*, 92.

39 Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), 69–70.

40 Peter W. Rodman, *Presidential Command* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 69.

41 *Department of State Bulletin* 60, no. 1548 (February 24, 1969), 163. See also David J. Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 114–115.

42 Zumwalt, 317–318.

43 During Nixon's first year as President, the NSC met 37 times, 21 times in 1970 and only 10 times during the first 9 months of 1971. See John P. Leacacos, "Kissinger's Apparat," *Foreign Policy* 5 (Winter 1971–1972), 5.

44 Helmut Sonnenfeldt, "Reconstructing the Nixon Foreign Policy," in *The Nixon Presidency*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), 319.

45 NSDM 1, January 20, 1969, "Establishment of NSC Decision and Study Memoranda Series," *FRUS 1969–76*, II, 29–30.

46 NSDM 2, January 20, 1969, "Reorganization of the NSC System," *FRUS 1969–76*, II, 30–33. See also Chester A. Crocker, "The Nixon–Kissinger National Security Council System, 1969–1972: A Study in Foreign Policy Management," in *Report of the Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy: Appendices* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, June 1975), vol. 6, 79–99.

47 Zumwalt, 369–376; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 722–723; Mark Perry, *Four Stars* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1989), 234–235.

48 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 226.

49 Richard M. Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 101–107.

50 Alexander M. Haig, Jr., with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (New York: Time Warner, 1992), 224.

51 Willard J. Webb, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1969–1970* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2002), 283.

52 Memo, Lake and Morris to Robinson, September 29, 1969, "Draft Memorandum to the President on Contingency Study"; Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, October 2, 1969, "Contingency Military Operation Against North Vietnam"; "Conceptual Plan of Military Operations," undated, all declassified in box 89, NSC Files: Subject Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, NARA; and <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB195/index.htm#1>. See also William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969." *Cold War History* 3:2 (January 2003), 113–156.

53 Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 283–286.

54 Webb, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1969–70*, 136–137.

55 Palmer, *25-Year War*, 96.

56 Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 382.

57 JCSM-6-69 to SECDEF, January 4, 1969, "Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces Improvement and Modernization," JCS 2472/272-28; JCSM–40–69 to SECDEF, January 21, 1969, "Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces Improvement and Modernization," JCS 2472/272-30.

58 Webb, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1969–70*, 11–12, 64.

59 Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 182–183; Nixon, *RN*, 392 (quote).

60 JCSM-522-69 to SECDEF, August 25, 1969, "Vietnamizing the War," JCS 2472/467-4.

61 NSDM 24, September 17, 1969, "Vietnam," *FRUS 1969–76*, VI, 407–408.

62 Webb, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1969–70*, 75–82.

63 JCSM-149-70 to SECDEF, April 3, 1970, "Ground Strikes Against Base Areas in Cambodia," excerpted in "JCS Recommendations and SECDEF Actions with Respect to Cambodia, 1 January 1969–15 February 1975" (MS, Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, JCS, February 26, 1975), 14.

64 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 483–505; Nixon, *RN*, 446–451.

65 Willard J. Webb and Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and The War in Vietnam, 1971–1973* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2007), 2.

66 Ibid., 2–3; Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 320–327.

67 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 990–991; Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 133–134.

68 Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 326–335; Webb and Poole, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 3–4.

69 Webb and Poole, *JCS and the War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 2; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 995–996.

70 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 271–273; Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 2–9.

71 Cosmas, *MACV: Years of Withdrawal*, 329–335; Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 12–16; Nixon, *RN*, 498–499.

72 Van Atta, 351–353.

73 Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 109–117.

74 Memo for the Record by Col Robert M. Lucy, USMC, Asst to CJCS, 21 Sep 72, "Responses for the Record by General Lavelle to Questions from Senator Smith," C, Material on Replacement of Gen Lavelle 1972 folder, JHO 18-0020.

75 Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back*, 199–210; Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 126–128.

76 Clodfelter, *Limits of Airpower*, 152–153.

77 Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 156. On Nixon's lack of confidence in Abrams, see Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, 436–437.

78 Entry, May 4, 1972, Moorer Diary, cited in Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 163.

79 Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 162.

80 "Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia," May 8, 1972, *Nixon Public Papers, 1972*, 585.

81 Wayne Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back: The United States Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966–1973* (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2000), 230–231. Only Air Force F–4s had the necessary modifications to carry PGMs.

82 Palmer, *25-Year War*, 131.

83 Letter, Nixon to Thieu, January 16, 1973, quoted in Nixon, *RN*, 749–750.

84 See Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2000), 453–490.

85 Entry, April 16, 1972, Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, 441.

86 Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back*, 224–227.

87 Clodfelter, *Limits of Airpower*, 184; Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 291–294.

88 Moorer quoted in Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 298; Clodfelter, *Limits of Airpower*, 192–193, discusses morale problems; Thompson, *To Hanoi and Back*, 264–265 summarizes strategy and changes in tactics.

89 Quoted in Webb and Poole, *JCS and War in Vietnam, 1971–73*, 298.

90 H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), 300–329.

91 Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 223–224.

Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, USN, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1970–1974