

## The Biggest Mistakes of the Vietnam War

### Still Popular in the Liberal Democrat Playbook - Part 3

Published: Wednesday, 28 December 2016 00:00

In Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we identified three of the biggest mistakes of the Vietnam War:

Hits: 5926

President Kennedy's failure to challenge North Vietnam's glaring and extensive violation of the 1962 Geneva Treaty on the neutrality of Laos, President Johnson's compounding of this error by allowing Laos and Cambodia to become sanctuaries for North Vietnamese troops and supplies, and Kennedy's regime change call that encouraged a South Vietnamese military junta to replace elected South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. The junta unfortunately murdered Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu. This threw South Vietnamese civil government and military leadership into chaos for over two years, which the Communists exploited to the fullest, forcing a huge expansion of American commitment and troops. This regime change was the greatest mistake of the war. President Carter's failure to support the Shah of Iran, long-time U.S. ally, in the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the Obama/Hillary Clinton backed Arab Spring involving Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria in 2011 were repeats of this media-pleasing liberal ideological error.

The fourth major error in Vietnam was the Johnson-McNamara theory of warfare—variously called “graded escalation,” “gradual escalation,” “the doctrine of gradualism,” or sometimes just “the slow squeeze.” It was the brainchild of Harvard academics, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was its foremost ranking advocate. Lyndon Johnson became its most faithful and powerful executive disciple. However bright the strategy of graded escalation might have seemed to Harvard whiz kids and game theorists, it went against the accumulated military wisdom of centuries. The Joint-Chiefs-of-Staff (JCS), Pacific Area Commander Admiral Grant Sharp, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the State Department Intelligence Agency, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk all strongly opposed it. The JCS and the intelligence agencies consistently advocated quick and decisive action against North Vietnam, including bombing critical military, air, naval, transportation, industrial, and fuel storage targets in all parts of North Vietnam, especially those near Hanoi and Haiphong. The Navy advocated aerial mining of Haiphong's strategic port. Conventional military wisdom is to hit an enemy as hard and fast as you can to maximize its costs and minimize ones own risks and costs. A Marine Gunnery Sergeant once gave the advice: “Hit 'em as hard as you can, when they ain't looking.”

Giving the enemy plenty of time has few experienced survivors.

Despite Sharp and the JCS's unanimous objections, Johnson and McNamara decreed that gradual escalation was the safest path to victory. The JCS and Admiral Sharp had no less than six major confrontations with McNamara over this strategy until its costly and ineffective results became such an issue with conservatives in Congress that McNamara was forced to resign.

The Johnson-McNamara “gradualism” strategy consistently gave our enemies time to rebuild and resupply. We deliberately pulled our punches so as not to hurt them too much. Rather than hitting the most important targets, we bombed the lowest priority targets first, giving them time to build up their anti-aircraft defenses before they were threatened. The rules of engagement prevented

## The Biggest Mistakes of the Vietnam War

bombing in much of North Vietnam, creating effective sanctuaries for North Vietnamese leaders, weapons, fuel supplies, and supply depots. One Navy aircraft was denied permission to bomb several railroad cars loaded with anti-aircraft missiles. We had to find them one by one as they were trucked missile by missile along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos on roads sheltered by thick jungle canopy. Johnson declared sixteen bombing halts to entice the North Vietnamese to peace negotiations. They used the time for frenzied rebuilding, resupply, and reinforcement and never gave Johnson a single concession in “negotiations.”

Johnson kicked off “Operation Rolling Thunder” in March 1965, which lasted until November 1968. This was the disastrous application of McNamara’s gradualism strategy to USAF and Naval air power. We lost 922 aircraft over North Vietnam, all the time avoiding the targets that would most damage the enemy. Of the 833 U.S. F-105 fighter-bombers ever built, 398 were lost over North Vietnam.

While the Air Force and Navy were expending 922 aircraft and hundreds of aircrews hitting secondary targets, North Vietnam was building the greatest anti-aircraft defense since the surrender of Germany in World War II—5,795 anti-aircraft guns, many radar-controlled; 250 surface-to-air missile complexes; and 101 Soviet MIG fighter-interceptors.

Johnson and McNamara were surprised and disappointed that their gradual escalation of the air war failed to bring Ho Chi Minh to the negotiating table—though no senior military commander or advisor was at all surprised. Yet the obvious failure of their gradual escalation policy and the relentless objections of senior military advisors and the intelligence community did not convince Johnson and McNamara of the folly of what Admiral Sharp called “powder-puff” air warfare doctrine.

To be continued.

-----

Mike Scruggs is the author of two books: *The Un-Civil War: Shattering the Historical Myths*; and *Lessons from the Vietnam War: Truths the Media Never Told You*, and over 600 articles on military history, national security, intelligent design, genealogical genetics, immigration, current political affairs, Islam, and the Middle East.

He holds a BS degree from the University of Georgia and an MBA from Stanford University. A former USAF intelligence officer and Air Commando, he is a decorated combat veteran of the Vietnam War, and holds the Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart, and Air Medal. He is a retired First Vice President for a major national financial services firm and former Chairman of the Board of a classical Christian school.

Click the website below to order books. <http://www.universalmediainc.org/books.htm>.