

## Major U.S. Mistakes in the Vietnam War

### Failure to Fully Utilize Air and Naval Superiority - Part 4

Published: Wednesday, 04 January 2017 00:00

The fifth big mistake in Vietnam was failure to utilize our most powerful military assets—our overwhelming superiority in Air and Naval Power—early in the conflict. Pacific Area Commander (CinCPAC), Admiral Grant Sharp, believed this was the greatest mistake in the war. This mistake was closely related to and overlapped the fourth big mistake, which was the Johnson-McNamara doctrine of gradualism discussed in part 4 of this series.

On April 20, 1965, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara held a conference in Honolulu to inform General Wheeler, the Chairman of the JCS and his top commanders in the Pacific of the Johnson-McNamara strategy to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to the Communist regime in Hanoi. Also attending this meeting were Admiral Sharp; General Westmoreland, Commander of the Military Advisory Command in Vietnam (MACV); and retired General Maxwell Taylor, the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon. McNamara brought with him his most influential advisor, Assistant Secretary of Defense, John McNaughton, and National Security Advisor Walt Rostow. This was a mere seven weeks following the commencement of Operation “Rolling Thunder,” Johnson’s plan to bring Hanoi to the negotiating table by a gradually escalating campaign of bombing targets in North Vietnam.

The JCS and U.S. intelligence agencies, however, had recommended a rapid and devastating escalation of air warfare against North Vietnam and warned President Johnson that the Communist regime in North Vietnam would view a slow escalation of bombing as a demonstration of weak U.S. resolve. They also warned that a gradual escalation of air warfare against North Vietnam would dissipate the decisive advantage of American airpower and allow the North Vietnamese time to build up their army and air defenses—which could result in a considerable cost to U.S. and allied forces in the future. Despite the objections of his chief military and naval commanders, McNamara announced that the Johnson strategy for halting North Vietnamese aggression in South Vietnam would rely principally on allied ground forces.

The chief role of U.S. airpower would be ground support of allied forces in South Vietnam rather than strategic bombing of the source of war materials in North Vietnam.

This decision had several immediate influences on the conduct of the war. First, it implicitly removed any danger of invasion of the enemy’s home territory by allied forces. The war had moved from a Viet Cong guerilla insurgency inspired and supported by the North Vietnamese to an outright invasion of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). South Vietnam was being invaded, but North Vietnam was safe from invasion. Second, North Vietnamese troops would be allowed sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos, on the western border of South Vietnam—at one point only thirty miles from Saigon. Third, the Johnson-McNamara restrictions on air warfare prohibited bombing around Hanoi, the port of Haiphong, and much of the railway system leading from China to Hanoi. These areas contained more than 80 percent of North Vietnam’s most lucrative concentrations of enemy port facilities, airfields, railroads, fuel storage, weapons, supplies, and troops. Trying to interdict the enemy’s supplies and soldiers on their way to South

## Major U.S. Mistakes in the Vietnam War

Category: Mike Scroggs Column  
Vietnam along the jungle roads of the Ho Chi Minh Trail would be far less effective and more costly than bombing them at their source. Johnson's strategy was essentially defensive and left most of the initiative to Hanoi.  
Published: Wednesday, 04 January 2017 00:00  
Hits: 7101

The Johnson-McNamara strategy also caused an immediate logistical crisis. North Vietnam's most acclaimed military hero and strategist, General Vo Nguyen Giap, famous for his defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, was in the process of infiltrating three fully equipped NVA divisions into Cambodia and from there planned to cut South Vietnam in half. By such a feat, he hoped to demoralize the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and cause the collapse of the politically vulnerable regime in Saigon.

Countering this North Vietnamese invasion without being allowed to use our overwhelming Air and Naval superiority, required a rapid American logistical and troop buildup in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland was able to deploy the First Air Cavalry Division against the NVA at Ia Drang and defeat them in November, but U.S. forces quickly escalated from 25,000 to 150,000. Denied the option of full use of U.S. Air and Naval superiority directly against North Vietnam, Westmoreland felt he needed at least 300,000 troops to save South Vietnam from military and political collapse. By 1969, there were 550,000 American troops in South Vietnam. Nearly 57,000 American and 250,000 South Vietnamese and Allied troops died.

Most high ranking military and intelligence professionals agree with the JCS assessment of early 1965. Had Johnson and McNamara agreed to the JCS plan to fully utilize our Air and Naval superiority against North Vietnam, we could have defeated North Vietnam quickly and easily, while suffering few losses of our own.

-----

Mike Scroggs 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>.