

Major Mistakes in the Vietnam War

Micromanaging and Ignoring Military Chiefs - Part 5

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A sixth prominent mistake in the Vietnam War was that President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara continually refused to listen to the experience and accumulated wisdom of military chiefs and micromanaged military operations. This was an exacerbating factor in the first five mistakes covered in this series: appeasement, allowing enemy sanctuaries, a U.S. media-driven South Vietnamese regime change, the disastrous military doctrine of "gradualism," and failure to utilize our strategic supremacy in Air and Naval power. Not listening to military experience and advice was also an important debilitating factor in providing effective political leadership in war. Some crucial leadership mistakes will be covered in another article in this series.

From the beginning of Rolling Thunder to late 1967, all the planning for air strikes was done at a Tuesday luncheon in Washington. Those attending were Johnson, McNamara, Secretary of State Rusk, Presidential Assistant Walt Rostow, and the Presidential Press Secretary, initially Bill Moyers. Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, a former Harvard faculty member and mathematical game theorist, was not an official member of this luncheon committee but wielded enormous influence on McNamara, who considered him his most trusted advisor. No military or naval officer was included in the planning, not even the Chairman of the JCS, until late 1967. The targets, the dates, the hour, the number and type of aircraft, the bomb loads, and many of the tactics were specified in Washington and passed through each intermediate headquarters to the USAF squadrons and Navy carriers affected. Thus, Johnson super-centralized even tactical decisions and micromanaged the air war.

On one occasion Johnson bragged, "I won't let those Air Force Generals bomb the smallest outhouse without checking with me." On another occasion he said, "I spent ten hours a day worrying about all this, picking the targets one by one, making sure we didn't go over the limits."

After a brief visit to South Vietnam in early October 1966, McNamara recommended to President Johnson that the U.S. should avoid any bombing escalation and seek a negotiated peace with Hanoi. This was against the unanimous advice of CinCPAC Admiral Sharp and the JCS

On October 14, in a memorandum to McNamara, which they explicitly urged to be passed on to the President, the JCS reacted strongly:

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff do not concur in your recommendation that there should be no increase in the level of bombing effort and no modification in areas and targets subject to attack. They believe our air campaign against North Vietnam to be an integral and indispensable part of our overall war effort. To be effective, the air campaign would be conducted with only those minimum constraints necessary to avoid indiscriminate killing of the population. The Joint Chiefs of Staff do not concur with your proposal that as a carrot to induce negotiations, we should suspend or reduce our bombing campaign against North Vietnam. . . Additionally, the Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the likelihood of the war being settled by negotiation is small, and that, far from inducing negotiations, another bombing pause will be regarded by the North Vietnamese leaders, and our

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lies, as renewed evidence of lack of U.S. determination to press the war to a successful conclusion.”
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By August 1967, McNamara's disputes with the JCS came under investigation by the Senate Armed Forces Committee. The Subcommittee on Investigation chaired by conservative John Stennis (D, MS) found fault with McNamara's policies.

“In our hearings we found... the roots of the persistent deterioration of public confidence in our air power because the plain facts, as they unfolded in the testimony, demonstrated clearly that civilian authority consistently overruled the unanimous recommendation of the military commander and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a systematic, timely and hard-hitting integrated air campaign against the vital North Vietnam targets. Instead...we have employed military aviation in a carefully controlled, restricted and graduated build-up of bombing pressure which discounted the professional judgments of our best military experts and substituted civilian judgment in the details of target selection and the timing of strikes. We shackled the true potential of air power and permitted the build-up of what has become the world's most formidable anti-aircraft defenses.”

On September 1, Johnson called a press conference to distance himself from McNamara's policies and to deny any conflict between military and civilian authorities. McNamara soon resigned.

Until Nixon became president in 1969, the war was micromanaged by Johnson, McNamara, and his civilian advisors in the Defense Department. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) continually urged President Johnson and Secretary McNamara to bomb strategic targets in North Vietnam and mine the harbor at Haiphong, but their advice was consistently ignored until Nixon finally made full use of Air Force and Navy airpower in 1972.

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.

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