



Doomed to fail: America's intervention in Vietnam

Why did American military involvement in Vietnam fail? In this article, **David McGill** explains why the United States never had a realistic chance of defeating the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies.

The decision by the United States government to become involved in supporting the South Vietnamese government against the communist North and their Viet Cong allies was one that would cost both America and Vietnam dearly. This article looks at why the Americans became involved in Vietnam, and also why they adopted the strategy that they did. It suggests that a degree of American involvement in Vietnam was probably inevitable, given their fundamental assumptions about how to defeat communism in Asia. The military policy they adopted to win the war was inherently flawed. It was based on the mistaken assumption that 'coercive diplomacy' would be effective in forcing the North Vietnamese to withdraw from the South and negotiate a settlement. This strategy was confirmed with the launch of Operation *Rolling Thunder* in March 1965, which marked the start of the major escalation of the conflict and demonstrated that the American leadership was pursuing a policy of trying to bomb the North Vietnamese into a negotiated peace. By 1968 it was clear that this strategy had

failed and American withdrawal, albeit gradual, was inevitable.

Why did the Americans get involved in Vietnam?

American involvement in Vietnam was always likely, given the United States' concern about the spread of communism in Asia. This was intensified by the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Lyndon Johnson stated, 'I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the communists took over in China. And I knew... what might happen if we lost Vietnam'.¹ The Korean War reinforced the belief that 'containment' was an effective policy. The 'domino theory' prevalent amongst American policy-makers also meant that they were likely to give support to regimes threatened by communist insurgencies. Truman gave covert aid to the French army in Indochina. After its defeat the Geneva Accords split the former French colony into Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The existence of a communist

regime in North Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh guaranteed continued American involvement.

South Vietnam was threatened by both communist insurgents (the Viet Cong) and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Ngo Dinh Diem took over South Vietnam in 1955, and the United States was drawn into increasing support for his regime. There was still open debate about how effective this aid could be and how far it should be continued.

President John F Kennedy was hesitant about committing major forces to the region, and there was disagreement within his administration about the way forward. The hawkish General Maxwell Taylor stated that, 'South Vietnam is not an excessively difficult or unpleasant place to operate... North Vietnam is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing' He recommended sending an immediate force of 8,000 logistical personnel to the South.² This plan was opposed by Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert S McNamara, both of whom argued that the United States would need to commit substantial troops to prop up the South and that this might not succeed. In 1962, a Pentagon war game suggested that up to half a million United States troops would be needed to defeat the communists in Vietnam and air power alone would have little effect.³ These competing views remained unresolved and there was no large-scale deployment of troops. Despite the reluctance of the Kennedy administration to escalate, there was a gradual increase in 'advisor' numbers and by 1963 there were over 16,000 United States personnel in South Vietnam. It was clear that some kind of decision was needed as to whether this would continue or not.

For a number of reasons, 1963 was a watershed year. In November 1963 the CIA actively supported the assassination of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem. Max Hastings argues that this 'dealt a crippling and probably irretrievable blow to America's moral standing in South-East Asia'.⁴ It also left South Vietnam without effective leadership. In the same month Kennedy's own assassination left the direction of the conflict open.

Lyndon Johnson and 'Coercive Diplomacy'

Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B Johnson, was relatively inexperienced in foreign policy. He won the 1964 election with a focus on domestic reform, rather than on foreign policy. Ironically it was the latter that would define, and ultimately destroy, his presidency. Johnson was



Map of the Vietnam War
Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library & Museum

unsure how to proceed in Vietnam. He saw it as a crucial matter on which he could not display weakness, but he was also aware that the American public did not want a major war. In these circumstances the policy of 'coercive diplomacy' looked attractive. A gradual, 'rational' escalation aimed at forcing the North to negotiate seemed to have the potential to succeed. After all, the North was unlikely to risk destruction to secure the South, and would realise that they could not resist United States air power indefinitely. This was the rationale for adopting, from 1965, the policy of 'coercive diplomacy', also called 'graduated response' or 'slow squeeze'. It first clearly emerged from discussions on 11 July 1964 held by William Bundy's Working Group on Vietnam. Bundy was a foreign policy advisor who worked for both Kennedy and Johnson, ending as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. The group narrowed Johnson's options down to three. One was to continue 'present policies indefinitely'. A second would be to add a 'systematic program of military pressures against the North' in what they described



Ngo Dinh Diem: President of South Vietnam (1955–63)

President Lyndon B. Johnson and General William Westmoreland at Cam Ranh Air Base, Vietnam, 23 December 1967
U.S. Air Force



as a 'fast/full squeeze'. The third option was somewhere in between, and was presented as a 'progressive squeeze and talk'. All three options aimed to get 'Hanoi completely out of South Vietnam and an independent and secure South Vietnam re-established'.⁵ Johnson chose the third option, described by Bundy as the 'most sophisticated alternative'.⁶ It promised the hope of a negotiated settlement without too much loss of American life. The North Vietnamese would be forced to the negotiating-table by an escalating process of air strikes that would target both civilian and military infrastructure, as well as transport. These air strikes could be escalated or reduced depending on the North's reaction. Their main aim was to persuade the North Vietnamese that the costs of continuing the struggle would be too high, and that negotiation would be necessary.

Operation *Rolling Thunder* was the result. It was a massive air campaign that started on 2 March 1965 and lasted for three years. American bombing targeted North Vietnam cities and infrastructure, as well as the supply chains used to transport weapons to the Viet Cong. On 31 December 1967, the United States Department of Defense announced that it had dropped 864,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam (far more than the total dropped during the Pacific War) and that they had caused massive damage to the North. By 1968 the United States had flown more than 300,000 sorties against North Vietnam. Although it succeeded in striking a large number of North Vietnamese industrial and military targets, and in interdicting some of the weapons shipments to the South, the campaign failed to force the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. It had the opposite effect, leading to continued resistance by the NVA and Viet Cong. It became a war of attrition for which the United States was not prepared. As casualties mounted, domestic opposition to the war grew. The war destroyed Lyndon Johnson's chances of re-election. Richard M Nixon was elected president in 1968, and his key campaign promise was

to withdraw American forces from Vietnam. How had the war gone so wrong?

The failure of Operation *Rolling Thunder*

Operation *Rolling Thunder* failed to coerce the North into negotiation. This was hardly surprising. Robert Pape argues that, 'North Vietnam during the Johnson years was essentially immune to coercion with air power'. According to Pape, the decision to use air power as the primary means of attacking the North could never have succeeded. The Hanoi regime was prepared to accept very high loss of life, and the destruction of their cities and industry, in order to achieve the goal of unification. In 1963, the leadership in North Vietnam had changed. Ho Chi Minh retired from active leadership, and was replaced by Le Duan and his subordinate Le Duc Tho. Le Duan had become General Secretary in 1960 with one clear aim – to unite Vietnam under a Stalinist-style communist regime. His key ally was Le Duc Tho, who was head of the Central Organisation Commission of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The accession of these figures to the leadership of the North represented the victory of the radicals. Their ascendancy meant that there would be no negotiation with either the United States or the South until total victory was won. Le Duan also built close links to Beijing, which promised direct military aid in a pact signed in August 1963. China's president, Liu Shaoqi, visited Hanoi and agreed to increase weapon supplies. Resolution 9, published in January 1964, committed the North to armed struggle until victory. With the assassination of Diem in the South and the renewed commitment of the North it was clear that an American strategy that relied primarily on air power would never succeed. As Max Hastings writes, 'Lyndon Johnson became merely one among a long procession of national leaders over the last century to discover the limitations of aerial bombardment'.⁷

American B-52 bombing targets in North Vietnam during Operation *Rolling Thunder*
U.S. Air Force



The air campaign also failed in its secondary objective, which was to support effectively the regime in the South. It also did little to raise morale amongst the civilian and military populations. In July 1965 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara admitted that this was the case. 'Now the bombing programs have become commonplace, and with the failure of the situation to improve, morale in South Vietnam is not discernibly better'. Americans struggled to understand why the North Vietnamese kept fighting. As Paul Warnke (general counsel to McNamara) commented, 'We anticipated that they (the North) would respond like reasonable people'. By 1968 the air campaign had destroyed 77% of all ammunition depots, 56% of power plants, 55% of all major bridges and 39% of railroad shops in North Vietnam. It killed or wounded over 48,000 civilians and 30,000 NVA soldiers. The Americans were clearly not dealing with 'reasonable people' but with an enemy determined to win whatever the cost.

Another consequence of Operation *Rolling Thunder* was that Americans were increasingly drawn into a guerilla war in the South. They were forced to deploy ever-increasing numbers of ground troops after American air-bases were targeted by Viet Cong troops. By 1969 there were over 543,000 troops in South Vietnam. United States soldiers fought the Viet Cong in the South, but were also engaged along the border with North Vietnam. The war widened as the United States attacked targets in Cambodia and Laos whilst attempting to disrupt supply routes to the South. In the countryside support for the Viet Cong persisted, but increasingly Southern cities were also threatened as bombings and assassinations destabilised the fragile South Vietnamese regime. American commanders became obsessed with the 'body-count' as a measure of success against the Vietcong forces they were fighting. As well as deliberate targeting of civilians, 'free-fire' zones were established to increase the figures of enemy dead. The most notable example of this was the infamous My Lai massacre in

March 1968, where United States troops ran amok and killed 504 unarmed civilians in one village.

From 1967 to 1972, the CIA also ran covert operations such as the Phoenix Programme, which targeted suspected Viet Cong and NVA supporters and officials in the countryside. These operations killed over 20,000 suspected Viet Cong officials in the South. United States forces became associated with war crimes and raised questions about the war's legitimacy, as well as stoking domestic opposition in America. Low morale in the United States Army also became a problem, especially since the regime it was supporting was notable largely for its corruption, cruelty and incompetence.

American withdrawal becomes inevitable

By 1968, the flaws in American strategy were obvious. The limited nature of the air campaign meant that the United States military increasingly demanded more latitude with targets. Increased ground forces were needed to support offensive operations. The policy of 'coercive diplomacy' had failed. This was confirmed when the Viet Cong in the South launched the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Over 80,000 Viet Cong and NVA troops attacked a variety of targets across the South. The offensive suggested that three years of Operation *Rolling Thunder* had not diminished the determination or ability of the enemy to fight. The Tet Offensive was a military failure, in that it did not spark the expected uprising amongst the people of South Vietnam. American and ARVN troops destroyed such large numbers of the Viet Cong that it marked the end of the Viet Cong as an effective military force. Hanoi was forced to replenish its ranks with NVA troops. This failure was part of the reason that the North finally agreed to start peace negotiations in Paris in May 1968.



However, despite the offensive's failure, support for the war within the United States plummeted. Many Americans no longer believed that their forces could win. At the end of January 1968, Johnson announced that Clark Clifford would replace McNamara as Secretary of Defense. Once in post, he quickly reduced offensive operations. In March 1968, he announced that the United States would not attack North Vietnam north of the 20th parallel, and in October he ordered an end to all bombing of North Vietnam. This was designed to support the peace negotiations that had started in May in Paris. Johnson announced that he would not stand for re-election in 1968 and when Westmoreland requested another 206,000 troops he was turned down. American withdrawal was gradual, and took place under the cover of 'Vietnamisation' and other face-saving terms. 'Vietnamisation' meant trying to disengage without losing the South: a task that proved impossible.

Nixon had some success in employing coercive air power with the *Freedom Train* and *Linebacker* campaigns in 1972. The North Vietnamese were switching to a conventional ground offensive with armour and infantry units, which could be successfully targeted. The aims of the operations were limited to forcing the North to reopen stalled negotiations. But these campaigns only delayed the North's eventual victory.⁸

After the war, some argued that the North could have been defeated if the Americans had adopted more intense

and wide-ranging offensive operations. Secretary of State James Baker stated in 1996 that, 'the politicians had dictated the war, that it was a limited war, the military had never been able to fight the war they needed to fight to win it'.⁹ In 1992 Colonel Harry Summers described the policy of 'slow squeeze' as 'disastrous' and argued civilian mismanagement of the war amounted to a 'stab in the back'.¹⁰ However, whether the Americans could have won even if they had adopted different tactics is debatable. The underlying reason that the Americans failed in Vietnam was because they misread the situation, seeing their

enemies primarily as communists rather than nationalists. Had the elections promised in the Geneva Accords actually occurred in 1956, the communists would certainly have won. By intervening in the conflict the United States was fighting a genuinely popular movement in favour of a regime that most southerners regarded as alien. Success would also have demanded a price that the American public would not have been willing to pay. Speculation is probably unhelpful: American political and military leaders adopted the policy that they did. It turned out to be the wrong one.

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American military police protecting the United States embassy during the Tet Offensive

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