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Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy During the Vietnam War

Mark Lorell, Charles Kelley, Jr.
With the assistance of Deborah Hensler

March 1985

Rand

PROJECT AIR FORCE

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A Project AIR FORCE report
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PREFACE

A recently completed Project AIR FORCE study, "Future Forces for Third World Contingencies," investigated possible configurations for a firepower projection force to be employed in the defense of Third World allies. One of the requirements for the force was that it should be designed to minimize the risk of casualties among U.S. military personnel. This requirement derived from the more general requirement that use of the projection force must appear to both friends and adversaries to be a credible option for the United States to exercise. Because recent analyses suggest that concern about U.S. casualties has been an important factor in the erosion of public support for U.S. military interventions since World War II, it is likely that the credibility of a firepower projection force would be enhanced if the force were designed to reduce the exposure of U.S. military personnel to direct combat.

While some causal relationship between increasing U.S. casualties and declining public support for post-World War II U.S. conflicts can be intuited—and studies exist to support the idea—this report seeks to examine in depth the effect that growing numbers of U.S. casualties have had on presidential policymaking over time. It draws on the experience of the Korean and, to a much greater extent, the Vietnam conflicts. The authors, who conducted extensive interviews with high-level decisionmakers in the latter conflict, detail gradual shifts in attitude and seek to determine to what extent the casualty issue, as it affected public opinion, influenced them. The Korean and Vietnam conflicts were far larger and more complex than the scenarios assumed in the Project AIR FORCE study of which this research is a part. Nevertheless, they provide a well-documented context in which to assess the casualty issue.

This report should be of interest to those concerned with formulating defense policies and developing force structure options for protecting U.S. interests in areas separate from the central areas of direct superpower confrontation.

SUMMARY

Project AIR FORCE recently completed a research effort to conceptualize and evaluate the performance of advanced technology unmanned systems for employment in localized high-intensity conventional conflicts outside the European NATO theater. These systems were expressly designed to provide effective direct combat support to Third World regional allies while reducing to an absolute minimum the likelihood of substantial casualties (killed or missing in action, prisoners of war, and the wounded) to U.S. military personnel.[1] This Report examines the relationship between casualties and public support for U.S. military intervention in Korea and Vietnam, and assesses the implications for future limited Third World operations.

Conventional wisdom holds that one of the types of contingencies in which U.S. military force may be required in the future is limited conflicts located outside the European-NATO theater entailing no direct involvement of Soviet combat forces. In the wake of the Vietnam experience, it is unlikely that any U.S. administration will commit large numbers of U.S. combat personnel to sustained limited wars in the Third World without a high degree of certainty that public opinion will solidly support that commitment and continue to support it over time. Yet survey data show that the public draws an important distinction between economic or military aid to Third World clients and the direct commitment of U.S. personnel to sustained combat. Since the late 1960s there has been very little public support for such direct commitment (except in the case of brief rescue or humanitarian operations), no matter what the specific circumstances. In the future, a President may elect to delay or forgo direct U.S. military intervention in a Third World conflict—even though it may be needed to defend legitimate U.S. interests—because of concern that public support may decline or collapse once the United States is deeply committed. Even if public support for a specific intervention is initially high, it can be demonstrated that continuing U.S. casualties over time will seriously erode public support.

While minimizing U.S. casualties has always been an important objective in the formulation of new strategies, force configurations, and weapon systems, we believe that a firepower projection force specifically designed to minimize the combat exposure of U.S. military

[1]Third World allies are defined as those nations friendly to the United States other than the highly industrialized states of Europe and the western Pacific rim.

personnel could in some instances increase the range of military options available to the President and Congress in supporting Third World allies under attack and protecting legitimate U.S. interests in those countries. This contention derives from analyses of the following three hypotheses, which are discussed in this Report:

- Threats to U.S. national security may make involvement in limited wars necessary. Yet it is inherently difficult for democracies to pursue limited warfare because of the unwillingness of the public to bear the costs of sustained limited warfare in the Third World.
- Casualties to U.S. personnel are the most visible and least tolerable cost of direct U.S. combat involvement in sustained limited wars. Mounting casualties tend to undermine public support and serve as a lightning rod for public dissatisfaction with other issues.
- It is possible to imagine circumstances in which concern over adverse public reaction to U.S. casualties and the resulting decline in public support would influence Presidential decision-making about military intervention in a Third World country—overriding purely strategic or military considerations.

The first section of this Report describes our hypotheses and research approach. Section II examines the first hypothesis through an extensive survey of public opinion poll data and academic analyses of poll data, and concludes that the hypothesis is substantially correct. Specifically, our analysis of the evidence suggests that:

- Large segments of the public are opposed to sending U.S. combat personnel to the aid of *any* ally under virtually *any* circumstances. Clear majorities are against direct combat support for Third World allies. Although public willingness to employ force has risen somewhat since its nadir in the early 1970s, it has fallen considerably since 1980.
- Poll data indicate that any U.S. commitment of combat personnel to a sustained Third World conflict that does not involve Soviet troops and that is not perceived as a direct and immediate threat to the continental United States will in all probability provoke considerable public opposition once the brief "rally around the flag" effect dissipates. This includes situations involving threats to oil sources in the Middle East.

- The costs and sacrifices imposed by U.S. involvement in limited wars are inherently difficult to justify to the public, because geographical locations are remote, military and political objectives are limited and abstract, the risk of lengthy stalemate is high, and achieving a clear-cut "total" victory may not be possible. The public tends to be unwilling to tolerate anything more than minimal costs in limited war situations.

U.S. strategies and force configurations that minimize the most important costs of direct U.S. combat support for Third World allies are likely to be important factors in securing and sustaining public support.

Section III reviews public opinion trends during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts to determine those costs or other factors that contributed most to the decline in public support for those wars. The abstract objectives, length, and inconclusiveness of both wars were, of course, important factors. Yet because of the constraints imposed on the use of military force in all *limited* wars, such wars are likely to be lengthy or inconclusive. On the basis of statistical analyses and analyses of the content of poll data, we conclude that:

- Given the length and inconclusiveness of the Korean and Vietnam wars, the growing number of casualties to U.S. military personnel over time became for the public both a highly visible cost of U.S. involvement and a painful symbol of frustration. For that reason, casualties were probably the single most important factor eroding public support for each of the conflicts.

Sections IV and V address the issues raised by our third hypothesis. We selected the Vietnam war to test this hypothesis because it is the most recent example of large-scale U.S. involvement in a high-intensity conventional Third World conflict. Section IV discusses the decision to commit major U.S. combat forces to Vietnam during the first half of 1965. Section V reviews President Johnson's 1968 decision to stabilize the war and seek a negotiated settlement. We focus on these two key decision periods during the Vietnam war to determine:

- How senior policymakers perceived the relationship between mounting casualty levels for U.S. personnel and public support for the war.
- How declining public support, or the anticipation of the same, affected the conduct of the war.

In other words, we desired to determine to what extent policies were advocated or adopted on the grounds that they promised to control or reduce U.S. casualties, rather than strictly on the grounds of their military or strategic efficacy. Our primary sources of information included interviews with senior policymakers of the period,[2] published documents, and secondary accounts.[3]

Section IV argues that in contrast to President Truman's relatively quick decision to enter the Korean war in 1950, President Johnson's decision fifteen years later was evolutionary, hesitant, and accompanied by lengthy and sometimes bitter debates within the Administration over the appropriate strategy, tactics, and force size. Part of the explanation is to be found in the ambiguity of the situation on the ground in Vietnam and the evolving nature of the threat. However, senior government officials interviewed in 1982 recall that President Johnson did operate under several important constraints. They generally agree that concern over the reaction of Communist China, and to a lesser extent the Soviet Union, to a rapid and massive increase in U.S. combat involvement in Vietnam was probably the single most important constraint on U.S. policy. Two domestic political considerations were also said to have influenced the President. First, President Johnson did not want to jeopardize his Great Society programs still before Congress. Second, he did not want to provoke an overreaction from right wing elements that might press for escalation beyond what he regarded as acceptable levels. (This possible overreaction was not necessarily seen as explicitly linked to increasing casualty levels.) Additionally, considerations of logistics, infrastructure, and the tactical environment in Vietnam also dictated a relatively slow and measured buildup.

There is ample evidence that during the policy debates of the spring and summer of 1965, the questions of anticipated casualty levels and their effect on public support were specifically discussed. Senior policy advisors recognized that (1) the United States was entering a major war that might prove to be a long war of attrition, and (2) U.S. forces would sustain substantial casualties. However, our analysis indicates that: concern over public support problems stemming from increasing casualty levels played little or no role in determining the pace and style of the buildup in the spring and summer of 1965.

Former officials gave three basic reasons for the lack of concern over the possible adverse effects of increased casualty levels on public

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[2]George Ball, George Blanchard, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, George Carver, Chester Cooper, Robert Komer, Robert McNamara, Walt Rostow, Dean Rusk, Frank Sieverts, Maxwell Taylor, and Leonard Unger.

[3]See the Bibliography.

support for the war: (1) Public support for defending Vietnam from Communist aggression was perceived to be very high, (2) the issues at stake were thought to be sufficiently important to elicit continuing support of the American people despite mounting costs, and (3) the ultimate costs to the United States in casualties could not be determined, but those costs were never anticipated to rise nearly as high as they eventually did. The argument that public support would decline over time as a function of total casualty levels in a manner similar to the Korean war, presented most forcefully at the time by George Ball, was largely ignored during policy deliberations in 1965.

President Johnson assumed the American people would bear the burden of military actions necessary to protect U.S. interests in Southeast Asia. Whether or not vital U.S. interests were actually at stake in Vietnam is still a matter for debate. Where the national leadership clearly erred, however, was in forgetting the lessons of Korea and the French experience in Algeria and Indochina that: (1) limited wars often cost more and last longer than anticipated, (2) public support inevitably declines with mounting casualties, no matter what interests are at stake, and (3) democracies cannot continue fighting limited wars indefinitely with steadily declining public support.

Section V traces the deterioration of the U.S. domestic situation after 1965 and the gradual recognition by some policymakers that, in the unique circumstances of limited war, casualties over time may so profoundly affect public support that the war can no longer be continued. Two and a half years after the decision to commit large-scale forces to Vietnam, the domestic situation in the United States had changed dramatically. Although the 1968 enemy Tet offensive proved to be no military victory for the Communist forces, it resulted in a critical turning point on the U.S. domestic front: Substantial numbers of prominent and influential figures became convinced that the American people were no longer willing to continue to pay the price in casualties and dollars for continuing the war indefinitely. Many senior policymakers began to see increasing merit in Ball's views. Several of President Johnson's former advisors felt, in retrospect, that much more attention should have been paid early in 1965 to anticipated casualty levels and their potential effect on public support for the war.

Our examination of the course of the war through the Tet offensive of 1968 produced the following conclusions:

- The continuing decline in public support eventually became a decisive factor influencing U.S. policy in Vietnam during the Johnson Administration.

- By 1967 at the latest, increasing numbers of officials, particularly civilians in the Defense Department, began to view the mounting U.S. casualty levels as one of the most important factors contributing to the general decline in war support.

From our analysis of the effects of casualties on public opinion during the Vietnam war and current trends in U.S. public opinion, we conclude that strategies and force configurations designed to minimize casualties to U.S. military personnel would help focus public debate on the intrinsic merits (or demerits) of military intervention in a Third World conflict in which U.S. interests were threatened. By reducing the number of U.S. lives at stake, such strategies and force configurations would increase the range of politically feasible options for direct military support. In turn, the likelihood that the President and Congress would be able to choose the most appropriate option from a military and strategic standpoint would also increase.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Preparation of this Report was critically dependent on the cooperation of several former government officials who were senior policymakers during the Vietnam conflict: George Ball, Under Secretary of State; General George Blanchard, Executive Officer to the Secretary of the Army and Assistant Division Commander of the First Air Cavalry Division in Vietnam; McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor; William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State; George Carver, CIA liaison to the White House; Chester Cooper, National Security Council staff; Robert Komer, National Security Council staff; Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense; Walt Rostow, National Security Advisor; Dean Rusk, Secretary of State; Frank Sieverts, Special Assistant for POWs and MIAs, State Department; General Maxwell Taylor, Ambassador to South Vietnam; and Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. These gentlemen gave generously of their time in sharing their recollections about the perception of casualty rates and their effects on decisionmaking. We are grateful for their assistance. Any errors in the interpretations of their remarks are, however, the responsibility of the authors.

CONTENTS

PREFACE iii

SUMMARY v

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS xi

FIGURES AND TABLES xv

Section

I. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS 1
- Introduction 1
- Casualties and Limited War 4

II. THE DILEMMA OF LIMITED WARS 8
- Length of Limited Wars 9
- Justification for U.S. Involvement 10

III. THE COSTS OF LIMITED WARS 16
- Public Opinion Trends During the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts 17
- U.S. Casualties and Public Support for the Korean and Vietnam Wars 20
- Public Opinion and Presidential Policy 28

IV. THE DECISION TO INTERVENE IN VIETNAM 31
- U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1965 32
- Initial Phases of the Ground Force Buildup, Spring 1965 39
- Phase Three: The Decision to Launch a Major Ground War, June-July 1965 47

V. TET 1968: THE TURNING POINT AT HOME 61
- Fading Optimism, 1965 Through 1967 63
- Tet and its Aftermath, January-March 1968 71
- Casualties and Public Opinion: Some Lessons from the Vietnam War 79
- Concluding Observations 84

BIBLIOGRAPHY 87

FIGURES

1. U.S. Aid to Third World Allies: Direct Combat Support as the U.S. Domestic Political Threshold 2
2. U.S. Aid to Third World Allies: Raising the U.S. Domestic Political Threshold 5
3. Trends in Public Support for the Korean War 18
4. Trends in Public Support for the Vietnam war 19
5. Cumulative American Casualties in the Korean and Vietnam wars 22
6. Chart from George Ball's Briefing to the NSC Meeting of July 21, 1965 53

TABLES

1. Public Support for Combat Intervention Overseas, November 1982 12
2. Troubling Aspects of the Vietnam War—July 1967 25
3. Troubling Aspects of the Vietnam War—March 1968 27

I. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

> Logically, the United States should either clearly devalue the nature and scope of its security interests to fit a drastic qualification of the original premises of containment, or else it should launch a major effort to attain limited-war forces capable of supporting the more demanding premises that still prevail. —Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, 1979

INTRODUCTION

Since the Second World War, decisive Presidential actions to initiate limited military interventions have usually generated a "rally around the flag" effect in public opinion. Over the long run, however, clearly defined and militarily attainable goals founded on a public consensus on U.S. regional foreign policy and military objectives are the minimum requirements for winning and maintaining public support in conflicts of any significant duration. The Korea and Vietnam experiences suggest that over time mounting casualties to U.S. personnel involved in Third World conflicts[1] may contribute to an erosion of public support and to the promotion of domestic unrest and divisiveness. This is especially likely to happen if the public is unclear about the reasons for the conflict or the likelihood of eventual military success. The Korea and Vietnam experiences suggest that, in such circumstances, casualties may become the focal point for public frustration. It is also clear that failure of public support constrains decisions regarding military action. In certain circumstances, this may prevent the United States from taking decisive action to protect its national security interests.

Over the past decade, considerable technical progress has been made in long-range missiles, sensors, communications, navigation, and munitions. Together these achievements have the potential to permit the structuring of forces that provide not only an effective means of projecting firepower, but also a great deal of protection for combat personnel by removing them from the immediate vicinity of the battlefield.

[1]Third World conflicts are defined here as those involving countries friendly to the United States that are not among the highly industrialized nations of Europe and the Pacific rim.

An effective force structure designed to minimize the human costs of intervention in Third World conventional conflicts would reduce the most important cost to the U.S. public and thus lessen the problem of long-term erosion of public support. With U.S. casualties largely eliminated from concern, public consensus would be founded primarily on the strategic, political, and moral merits of a given military intervention.

A force structure configured to minimize U.S. casualties might provide the President with a new option for offering combat assistance to friendly Third World nations without crossing the critical U.S. domestic political "threshold" that becomes apparent when large numbers of U.S. military personnel are committed to direct combat. Figure 1 shows various options arrayed according to the degree of U.S. involvement in the hostilities. The political threshold lies between the options of sending military advisors and committing U.S. military personnel to direct combat for a considerable duration.

Since the late 1960s, foreign policymakers have become concerned with the effects of the so-called "Vietnam Syndrome" on public opinion and Congress. Presidents, national security policymakers, Congress,

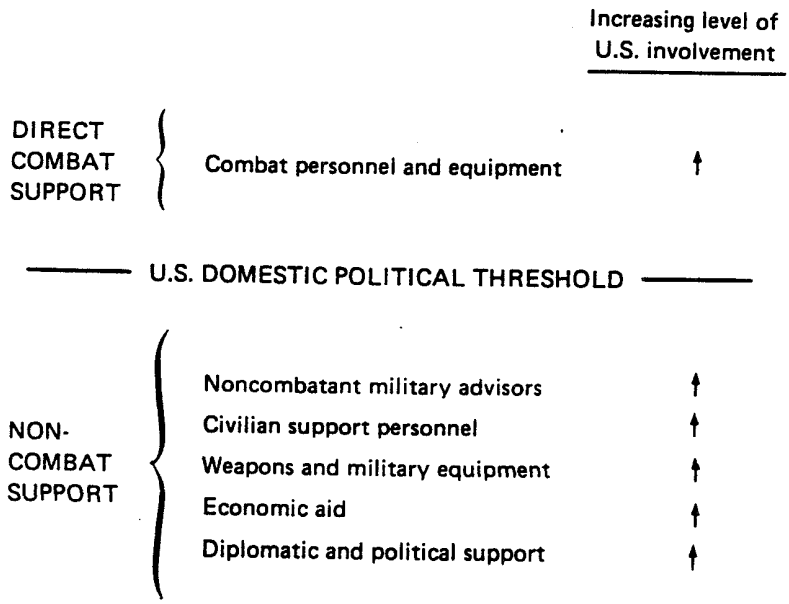

Fig. 1—U.S. aid to Third World allies: direct combat support as the U.S. domestic political threshold

the press, and public opinion seem to have become extremely sensitive to the combat-troop threshold with respect to Third World wars, because once the threshold is crossed, potential U.S. costs and risks escalate dramatically.[2] Military aid up to and including noncombat military advisors may cause domestic political dissent, often because such aid is believed to be a precursor to direct U.S. combat involvement. The commitment of U.S. combat forces to ongoing conflicts is a more serious act in the eyes of the public, in part because of the expectation that eventually large numbers of U.S. soldiers are going to die. The "Vietnam Syndrome" stems from the understandable desire to avoid another seemingly endless military commitment with ever mounting U.S. casualties.[3]

Recent U.S. public opinion polls seem to confirm the existence of the combat commitment threshold—particularly with respect to defending allies outside of NATO from non-Soviet threats. Indeed, polls show that much of the public opposes the employment of military force to defend *any* allies under *any* circumstances.[4] For example, a February 1981 Roper poll showed that approximately 25 percent of the public was against the use of U.S. troops for the defense of even our closest NATO allies or Japan under direct attack from the Soviet Union. Nearly two-thirds were opposed to this type of aid to such long-standing non-NATO allies as South Korea or Israel when attacked by local enemies. And only one-tenth favored a combat troop commitment to African nations directly threatened by Soviet or Cuban forces.[5] In the current more ambiguous situation in El Salvador, nearly 90 percent of the public is against the use of U.S. combat personnel to

[2]The following arguments apply only to major combat interventions in on-going conflict situations where there is a reasonable risk of a *lengthy* U.S. combat commitment. Brief rescue efforts or demonstrations of force such as the Mayaguez or Grenada affairs are not considered relevant here.

[3]Opposition to the Vietnam war led Congress to pass the War Powers Act in 1973. With this legislation, Congress reserves the right to reverse within sixty days any Presidential decision to commit U.S. military personnel to situations where combat is likely. For discussions of the breakdown in consensus on foreign policy issues among the political and opinion-making elites resulting from the Vietnam war, see Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, "Vietnam, Consensus, and the Belief Systems of American Leaders," *World Politics*, Vol. 32, 1979, and "Does Where You Stand Depend on When You Were Born? The Impact of Generation on Post-Vietnam Foreign Policy Beliefs," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1980, by the same authors.

[4]Public opinion research since World War II indicates that virtually any decisive Presidential act results in a sharp increase in Presidential popularity and support—the "rally around the flag" effect. This effect, however, is nearly always of very brief duration and is rapidly followed by a return to the public opinion trends evident prior to the Presidential action.

[5]Alvin Richman, "Public Attitudes on Military Power, 1981," *Public Opinion*, December 1981-January 1982, pp. 45–46.

support the regime of that country, even if the local government cannot defeat the Communist forces otherwise and even though nearly two-thirds of the public believe the establishment of a Marxist government there would endanger the national security of the United States.[6]

On the other hand, opinion polls confirm that the public is much more willing to support forms of aid that fall short of exposing U.S. personnel to direct combat. For example, while only about one-fifth of the public supported sending U.S. combat advisors to Zaire or Somalia during the local wars of 1978, at least twice as many approved of sending weapons and other military equipment.[7] In a like manner, close to twice the number of people willing to send combat forces to El Salvador in March 1982 backed the presence of noncombat U.S. military advisors in that country.[8] A Gallup poll on El Salvador taken a year earlier registered 33 percent in favor of economic aid, 18 percent in favor of military supplies, 26 percent supporting military advisors, but a mere 3 percent in favor of sending U.S. combat personnel.[9] Thus both recent poll data and common sense suggest that public opinion draws a major distinction between the commitment of U.S. military personnel to combat in a major conflict situation and most other forms of support to Third World clients. A critical domestic political threshold does seem to exist.

As Fig. 2 illustrates, strategies and force structures designed to minimize casualties to U.S. personnel might allow the United States to engage in actions that are somewhat higher on the scale of military involvement without losing public support.

CASUALTIES AND LIMITED WAR

We have assumed that U.S. public opinion is sensitive to the commitment of combat forces to limited conflict situations primarily because of the prospect of substantial casualties to U.S. personnel fighting in faraway places where U.S. interests may not be apparent.

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[6]Washington Post-ABC News Poll, March 1982, and New York Times-CBS News Poll, April 1983. See Barry Sussman, "Majority in Poll Oppose Reagan on El Salvador," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1982, pp. A1, A8, and Leslie H. Gelb, "Poll Finds Doubt on U.S. Strategy on the Russians," *New York Times*, April 15, 1983, p. 1.

[7]Richman, p. 46.

[8]Sussman, p. A8.

[9]"El Salvador," *Gallup Report*, Report 187, April 1981, p. 39. The April 1983 New York Times-CBS News Poll (Gelb, p. 1) registered 17 percent in favor of economic aid, 6 percent in favor of military aid, 11 percent in favor of sending U.S. troops, and 57 percent opposed to any type of U.S. aid or involvement, even though 61 percent believed that El Salvador was "very important to the defense interests of the United States."

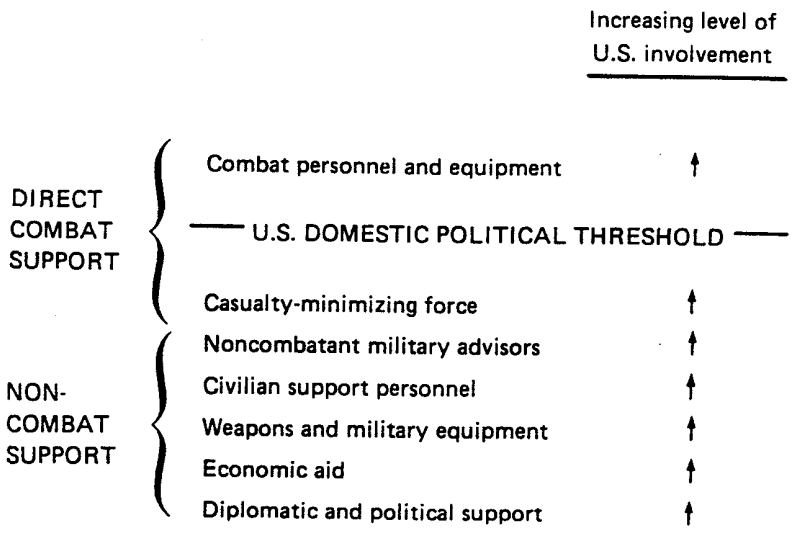

Fig. 2—U.S. aid to Third World allies: raising the U.S. domestic political threshold

This assumption is not beyond challenge. Many individuals are against the use of military force under any circumstances. Others may be most concerned about collateral damage and casualties to civilians. Some believe that the most unacceptable factors are economic hardship—increased taxes, inflation, forgone domestic programs—or the disruptions of personal lives caused by Reserve call-ups or the draft. And many other factors could be said to influence public attitudes, including the type of war (insurgency vs. invasion by an outside power), the specific country or organization threatening the U.S.-client government, the type of government the United States is defending, the anticipated duration and likelihood of success of U.S. military intervention, and the perceived risk of military confrontation with the Soviet Union. Basically, the public asks: Will the benefits that accrue from intervention justify the costs incurred? It is our contention that limited wars pose unique problems for democracies: Their benefits often appear abstract and relatively unimportant to the public, whereas their most important cost—growing numbers of dead U.S. soldiers—is all too real. If the United States or a close ally is not directly threatened by a major power, the willingness of the public to accept casualties is not high.

In summary, this report examines the following hypotheses:

- Threats to national security may make U.S. involvement in limited wars necessary. Yet it is inherently difficult for democracies to pursue limited warfare because of the unwillingness of the public to bear the costs of sustained limited warfare in the Third World.
- Casualties to U.S. personnel are the most visible and least tolerable cost imposed by direct U.S. combat involvement in sustained limited wars. Mounting casualties tend over time to undermine public support for limited wars, and in addition serve as a lightning rod for public dissatisfaction with other issues.
- It is possible to imagine circumstances in which concern over adverse public reaction to U.S. casualties and the resulting decline in public support would influence Presidential decision-making with respect to military intervention in a Third World country—overriding purely strategic or military considerations.

The first two hypotheses are discussed in the next two sections. The arguments in these sections are based largely on analyses of public opinion poll data.

To examine the third hypothesis, we used a case study approach to the Vietnam war, consisting of interviews with senior Johnson Administration officials[10] and examination of published documents and secondary accounts. The Vietnam war was selected as the most recent example of a major U.S. combat commitment to a high-intensity limited war. The detailed examination is focused on the period 1965 through 1968. The period before 1965 entailed primarily guerrilla warfare and did not witness a large-scale U.S. combat commitment. After 1968 the major emphasis of U.S. policy was on withdrawal of U.S. combat forces and "Vietnamization." While the whole period from 1965 through 1968 is reviewed with respect to the casualty question and public support, Secs. IV and V focus on two distinct decision periods that bound either end of the time frame. The first period covers the decision to commit substantial ground combat forces to Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965. The second includes the early months of

[10]George Ball, George Blanchard, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, George Carver, Chester Cooper, Robert Komer, Robert McNamara, Walt Rostow, Dean Rusk, Frank Sieverts, Maxwell Taylor, and Leonard Unger.

1968 when President Johnson decided to stabilize the level of the U.S. military commitment and seek a negotiated settlement. We assumed that if casualties were ever an influential consideration during the period from 1965 through 1968, this would be most apparent during one or both of these two decision periods.

II. THE DILEMMA OF LIMITED WARS

> The capacity of people in a modern democracy to support a limited war is precarious at best. —Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 1978

> Most Americans find nothing intrinsically immoral about fighting totalitarians. They just don't want to get involved unless the shooting is on their street. —John P. Roche, former Special Consultant to President Johnson, 1966–1968

> . . . unless it is severely provoked or unless the war succeeds fast, a democracy cannot choose war as an instrument of policy. —Ithiel de Sola Pool, *No More Vietnams?* 1968

It can be reasonably argued that sustained limited wars conducted in the Third World will very likely *always appear* to many Americans to cost more than they gain. The very nature of limited war causes difficulties in rallying and maintaining widespread public support.

The theory of limited wars requires that limited objectives be pursued through limited military means in order to avoid superpower confrontations and possible nuclear catastrophe. Without this approach, it is argued, the use of military force no longer remains a viable and credible policy tool for the pursuit of localized political-diplomatic objectives in the Third World.[1] Unfortunately, most early proponents of the theory failed to appreciate fully several difficulties inherent in such a strategy.

Some of the writings of Robert Osgood offer an interesting illustration of how an early theoretician of limited war strategies came to recognize the magnitude of the dilemma for democratic countries engaged in limited wars. In his influential book *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, written in 1957, Osgood argued that "the only rational course [for the United States] is to develop a strategy capable of limiting warfare and fighting limited wars successfully."[2]

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[1]The scholarly literature on the theory and practice of limited war is vast. The most important original theorists include Bernard Brodie, Alastair Buchan, Anthony Buzzard, James Gavin, Basil H. Liddell Hart, Denis Healey, William W. Kaufmann, Henry A. Kissinger, Paul Nitze, Maxwell D. Taylor, Robert E. Osgood, Thomas C. Schelling, John C. Slessor, Glenn H. Snyder, and others.

[2]Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957, p. 1.

His book set out the theoretical foundations of such a strategy. Twenty-two years later, in *Limited War Revisited*, Osgood wrote a sobering reevaluation of the early theories of the strategy, including his own. He concluded pessimistically that the "political and material impediments to the United States waging full-scale limited war as an instrument of policy in the Third World on the pattern of the Korean or Vietnam wars are immense, perhaps prohibitive."[3]

Osgood had come to recognize that limited wars pose fundamental military-political dilemmas for democratic nations. First, there is an inherent risk that limited wars will be relatively long and inconclusive. Second, such wars generally entail limited and often abstract political objectives, and when fought in remote and distant quarters of the globe, they may not appear to involve vital national security interests. Both of these characteristics tend to limit the public's willingness to support such wars.

LENGTH OF LIMITED WARS

Since the overriding objective of most limited war strategies is to avoid direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union, with all the risks of escalation to total war and nuclear devastation that this entails, military objectives and means must of necessity be limited and circumscribed. However, as history has shown, the constraints applied to the use of military force to avoid the possibility of provoking direct Soviet (or Chinese) intervention often make it difficult to achieve a quick and decisive military victory. Consequently there is the ever present risk that limited wars will degenerate into stalemates or long wars of attrition.

During both the Korean and Vietnam wars, the enemy enjoyed the use of sanctuaries from which it could launch attacks with relative impunity because the United States felt compelled to avoid possible confrontation with the enemy's superpower supporters. During the latter war especially, the President very carefully controlled and restricted the target systems approved for attack by the Air Force. Military people from both wars have often enough complained about these restrictions, arguing that had their hands not been tied, victory could have been achieved in short order. However that may be, *tying the hands of the military is the very essence of limited war.* Therein lies one of the basic dilemmas of the strategy. There is always room for legitimate debate over what level of force can usefully be applied

[3]Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1979, p. 79.

without running an unacceptably high risk of provoking escalation to superpower conflict. Nonetheless, because of the magnitude of the risks involved, political leaders are likely to prefer to err on the side of conservatism.

In short, there is no guarantee that future U.S. military intervention to support Third World allies against local aggressors, whether in Latin America, Africa, or the Middle East, will not lead to a long, indecisive war of attrition—"another Vietnam"—particularly if the United States must fight a proxy of the Soviet Union. Limited wars need not have a guerrilla element for this situation to occur, as the Korean war demonstrated. Although the Middle East has experienced a series of brief, intense conventional conflicts, the current Iranian-Iraqi war illustrates that stalemates are not unknown to the region. As one authority recently cautioned about U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf region:

> We have been conditioned by the swift Israeli 1967 and 1973 victories, and tend to view any future Mideastern conflict based on the Israeli experiences. However, in terms of military capabilities and geographical factors on the Arabian Peninsula, a conflict could well be one of attrition.[4]

JUSTIFICATION FOR U.S. INVOLVEMENT

The likelihood of not being able to win quickly and decisively is only one of the many problems with limited war strategies that became increasingly apparent as the strategies were actually applied to the real world. Another basic dilemma that was made painfully clear by the Korean and Vietnam conflicts is that limited military and political objectives make it very difficult for the public to accept the human and material sacrifices demanded of it. If the United States is not directly attacked and the fighting takes place far away from the United States and Western Europe, it may not be clear to large segments of the public that vital interests are genuinely at stake.

Public support for a war will depend on many factors, including perception of the stakes involved, the identity of the aggressor, the type of regime the United States is defending, and the risks of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. There is some evidence that the public would be more willing to send U.S. forces to defend relatively clear-cut

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[4]United States Congress, House of Representatives, *Proposed U.S. Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia*, Hearing before the Subcommittees on International Security and Scientific Affairs and on Europe and the Middle East of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 12, 1979, U.S. GPO, Washington, 1980, p. 47.

economic interests, such as oil supplies in a limited conventional war fought in the desert, than to intervene militarily in support of a repressive military junta fighting an internal insurgency movement in the jungles of Latin America. The latter case looks much more like "another Vietnam" to the public than does the former.[5]

Yet there is also much evidence to suggest that most potential Third World conflicts would present very serious public opinion problems for a President or Congress contemplating any major U.S. military intervention, no matter how important the U.S. interests at stake. A key element of the problem is that historically a majority of Americans find it difficult to accept that vital U.S. interests are ever at stake in any localized Third World conflict. This is a fundamental reason for the public's inability to tolerate limited wars.

Poll data consistently show that the public is very selective in its attitudes toward military intervention, as shown in Table 1. Some years ago, two Yale political scientists, Bruce Russett and Miroslav Nincic, analyzed opinion polls to determine how public support for committing U.S. combat forces to aid in the defense of other nations varied as a function of what nation was being considered.[6] To discover whether any factor or factors could explain the public's selectivity, Russett and Nincic carefully examined and compared a series of polls conducted between 1969 and 1975. They observed that in general the public assigns lower rankings to most Third World nations, with the notable exception of Mexico. Indeed, Mexico (and Canada) always ranked very high, followed by Western European NATO countries and Japan. Third World countries other than Mexico always clustered at the bottom of the list.[7] This same trend is confirmed by more recent poll data, as shown in Table 1.

Russett and Nincic developed measures to sort out the following characteristics to determine which was most important in explaining the low ranking of nearly all Third World countries: (1) distance from the United States, (2) economic importance to the United States measured as a country's total trade with the United States, (3) sociocultural affinity based on the level of economic development, land-use patterns, political system, religion, and culture, (4) type of government (Communist or non-Communist, democratic or authoritarian), and (5) presence or absence of a formal military alliance with the United States.

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[5]See Richman, p. 45.

[6]Bruce Russett and Miroslav Nincic, "American Opinion on the Use of Military Force Abroad," *Political Science Quarterly,* Vol. 91, No. 3, Fall 1976.

[7]The countries considered included Canada, Mexico, Bahamas, West Germany, Brazil, South Korea, Philippines, Japan, Italy, Taiwan, Finland, Israel, Thailand, Bolivia, India, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malaysia, Indonesia, Yugoslavia, and Romania.

Table 1

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR COMBAT INTERVENTION OVERSEAS, NOVEMBER 1982

(Percent)

Contingency	Opposed to Sending Troops	Support Sending Troops
Soviets invade Western Europe	35	65
Soviets invade Japan	49	51
Arabs cut off oil to United States	61	39
Soviets invade Poland	69	31
Arabs invade Israel	70	30
Iran invades Saudi Arabia	75	25
N. Korea invades S. Korea	78	22
Soviets invade China	79	21
Leftist guerrillas about to defeat government of El Salvador	80	20
China invades Taiwan	82	18

SOURCE: Gallup Poll, October-November 1982, commissioned by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. See John E. Rielly (ed.), *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1983*, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, Chicago, March 1983, p. 31.

The equations developed were able to predict about 80 percent of the variance in levels of public support. The single most important predictor proved to be distance of the country from the United States. Indeed, when using their regression equations to compare predicted with actual public support, the researchers discovered that distance had an even more powerful effect than a simple linear measure in miles

would suggest. Particularly with respect to Third World nations, the distance predictor turned out to be decisive. Whether or not the regime was Communist or had a formal treaty alliance with the United States was of less importance. Economic links became really important only when the use of nuclear weapons was under consideration. Surprisingly, sociocultural affinity and regime type (democratic vs. authoritarian) made relatively little difference.

The importance of geographic distance as a predictor indicates its importance in how the public defines the critical national security interests of the United States. That is, the only Third World countries the public overwhelmingly perceives as critical to the security interests of the nation are those that would be involved in the direct defense of the borders of this country. When there is no direct and immediate threat to the United States, public support for U.S. military intervention in the Third World diminishes rapidly, largely as a function of distance. (Distance is a less critical factor when closely allied Western countries such as NATO members are considered.)

Another extensive scholarly analysis recently published on the domestic effects of America's four major wars in the twentieth century confirms from another perspective the consistency of the U.S. public's attitude toward military intervention in Europe as contrasted to limited wars.[8] That study examines the changes imposed on society by war mobilization and the resulting effects on domestic social cohesion during World War I, World War II, the Korean war, and the Vietnam war. The study concludes that all four wars resulted in a marked decrease in social cohesion (measured in terms of strikes, civil strife, crime rates, and so forth). The difference in the magnitude of decline was a function of the degree of wartime mobilization (highest for World War II) and the degree of perceived direct threat to the United States posed by the enemy (lowest in Korea and Vietnam). Thus, when the American people do not feel directly threatened—that is, in virtually all limited war situations in the Third World—a relatively small mobilization leads to large decreases in cohesion, and "even slight sacrifices [become] intolerable."[9] The author argues that, based on his research findings, limited wars not involving a direct threat to the continental United States can be fought without serious domestic discord only if they involve an absolute minimum of sacrifice, are over very quickly, or are conducted in secret. These research findings, then, while derived

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[8]Arthur A. Stein, *The Nation at War*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980.

[9]Stein, p. 89.

from a completely different approach and perspective, confirm the implications of the Russett and Nincic analyses.

These analyses point to the central weakness of the argument that if vital interests are genuinely at stake in the Third World, the U.S. public will tolerate the costs necessary to protect those interests. No solid consensus exists among opinion makers and the public over what constitutes vital interests to the United States outside of defense of the homeland. For example, it is not clear that there would be widespread public support even for U.S. military intervention to safeguard oil supplies from a direct Soviet military threat. In a poll conducted by the American Broadcasting Corporation and the Washington Post in October 1981, the public was divided equally for and against using force to protect Middle East oil sources. Fifty-three percent said they would support the use of armed force if Soviet troops actually occupied the Persian Gulf area, but no more than a third would back such a move to save the government of Saudi Arabia from being overthrown by an internal revolution.[10] In Middle East scenarios where oil is not an issue, public support for the insertion of U.S. combat personnel plummets. For years poll data have consistently showed widespread public sympathy with Israel, but overwhelming opposition to sending combat forces in support of that country under any circumstances. Late in 1981, after extensive press coverage of an alleged Libyan "hit squad" having been sent to assassinate President Reagan and with the Mediterranean fleet squaring off against Libyan forces, nearly 80 percent of the public opposed taking military action against Libya.[11]

Thus poll data show very little backing for sending U.S. forces to defend traditional U.S. allies in the Third World under attack by neighboring countries. What would be the public response if Iraq invaded Kuwait, or Iran attacked the Persian Gulf states, or Saudi Arabia were faced with a large-scale fundamentalist Moslem insurgency? It is far from certain that the public would back sending U.S. combat forces. And in other parts of the globe where oil is not involved, U.S. public support is even more problematical. One need only mention such countries as Angola (before 1975) or South Africa or Somalia or Thailand to illustrate the problem.[12]

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[10]ABC News-Washington Post Poll, Survey 0042, October 1981.

[11]ABC News Poll, Chilton Research Services, Study 0047, December 1981.

[12]Again, it must be emphasized that these arguments do not apply to dramatic, victorious, and *brief* rescue missions or displays of force such as the Mayaguez or Grenada episodes. The public nearly always rallies to the President's support during such adventures, even if they are disastrous failures such as the Iranian hostage rescue attempt, as long as they are over quickly. We are concerned here with major long-term commitments to help Third World allies involved in high-intensity conventional warfare.

Some observers have argued that public hostility to U.S. overseas military intervention was a temporary phenomenon arising out of the unique trauma of the Vietnam war, one that will diminish as memories of that conflict fade. These observers would reject the type of analysis conducted by Russett and Nincic as being too heavily dependent on poll data from the Vietnam war era. Yet while many aspects of the domestic scene during that era were unique, it must be remembered that isolationism is a much stronger current in U.S. history than interventionism. In the twentieth century it has only been when the United States or its nationals were directly attacked—e.g., the sinking of the Lusitania or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor—that the profoundly isolationist nature of the American people has diminished.[13] Indeed, Russett and Nincic examined poll data from 1939 to 1941 for comparative purposes, and this analysis of the determinants affecting variations in the willingness to support military intervention proved strikingly similar to the results of polls administered between 1969 and 1975.

Nonetheless, it is true that public support for military intervention has climbed since its absolute low point in 1974, and there is now a wider consensus in support of higher military spending. Yet two important points about this change must be kept in mind. First, even at the height of public backing for use of military force in early 1980, the public still showed great selectivity in the countries it was willing to aid with combat forces, with Third World countries generally crowded on the bottom of the list. The variations discernible now are not unlike those visible in the polls from 1969 to 1975, or 1939 to 1941 for that matter. The second point is that since early 1980 there has been a moderate but accelerating decline in public support for committing U.S. troops abroad.[14]

In short, any U.S. combat intervention in a limited war that is not low cost or brief can easily result in serious domestic opposition. Yet neither economy nor brevity can be guaranteed in such ventures. Concern for the lack of public support could cause policymakers to hesitate or put off making decisive commitments, or even abandon the option of any U.S. military intervention beyond arms transfers or perhaps noncombat military advisors. Such delay, in turn, could seriously undermine the effectiveness of U.S. military intervention, particularly in contingencies where rapid response is critical to a favorable military outcome.

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[13]In December 1941, U.S. officials were concerned over whether the American people would support a declaration of war on Nazi Germany. Fortunately, Hitler solved the problem by declaring war on the United States on December 11.

[14]Richman, p. 45.

III. THE COSTS OF LIMITED WARS

> . . . our adversary [in Vietnam] was in a position to control the pace of military operations and the level of casualties, both his and ours. And the level of American casualties was to become a pivotal element in American public opinion. —Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years*, 1979

> There was a clear correlation between declining support [for the Vietnam war] and a mounting casualty toll. . . . Hanoi's expectation that the American democracy would not be able to sustain a long and bloody conflict in a faraway land turned out to be more correct than Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, which was supposed to inflict such heavy casualties on the Communists as to force them to cease their aggression. —Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 1978

> What Ho Chi Minh has done . . . is to hit the doctrine of limited war at its weakest point: domestic opinion. The Johnson Administration, hit by a ground war on a scale never anticipated and by the accompanying casualty lists, tried to maintain the ground-rules of limited war. —John P. Roche, "Can a Free Society Fight a Limited War?" *New Leader*, 1968

The only indisputable fact about public opinion during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts is that as the two wars continued, public support for the original decisions to intervene decreased substantially. Much less clear are the factors that most contributed to this decline. Particularly in the case of Vietnam, the list of possible factors is nearly endless: the length of the war, the difficulty in demonstrating clear-cut measures of progress, a perceived unwillingness of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, U.S. domestic discord, the enormous monetary cost, inflation, forgone social programs, Vietnamese civilian casualties, the alleged disproportionate use of massive U.S. firepower and defoliants, the "credibility gap," alleged U.S. "atrocities," the "corrupt" Saigon regime, nightly TV coverage of the war, the draft and its inequities, international criticism—and casualties to U.S. servicemen.

Although much research has been conducted on the course of public opinion during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, it focuses on many different issues of technique and substance, often varies considerably in quality and thoroughness, and sometimes comes to contradictory conclusions. Nonetheless, a reasonable body of literature exists that provides evidence that, given the length and inconclusiveness of the war,

mounting casualties to U.S. military personnel were one of the most important factors contributing to the decline in public support for both the Korean and Vietnam wars.

PUBLIC OPINION TRENDS DURING THE KOREAN AND VIETNAM CONFLICTS

Public opinion analysts now generally agree that the best measure of public support during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts can be found in polls employing "mistake" questions—that is, questions that ask whether or not the respondent believes it was a mistake for the United States to have entered the conflict. At least two frequent survey questions during the Korean war and three during the Vietnam era fit this characterization.[1] Although the actual percentages vary, all the surveys show the same basic trends—decline in support.

President Truman's decision to send combat forces to Korea at the end of June 1950 initially met with widespread public support, with the Gallup poll registering 66 percent approval in August, as shown in Fig. 3. However the entry of Communist Chinese forces in November ended the illusion of a quick, decisive, and cheap victory; public support plummeted. The polls administered in December 1950 show a falloff in support of 27 percentage points. Public support recovered somewhat with the stabilization of peace talks in mid-1951. For the remaining two years of the war, however, the figures for support for the war returned to a general downward trend.[2]

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[1]For Korea the questions were (1) "Do you think the United States made a mistake in going into the war in Korea, or not?" asked by Gallup thirteen times between August 1950 and January 1953, and (2) "As things stand now, do you feel that the war in Korea has been worth fighting, or not?" asked by the same organization nine times from December 1950 to September 1956. For Vietnam the questions were (1) "In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" asked by Gallup twenty-three times between August 1965 and May 1971, (2) "Some people think we should not have become involved with our military forces in Southeast Asia, while others think we should have. What is your opinion?" asked three times by the same organization between January and November 1965, and (3) "Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam or should we have stayed out?" asked by the Survey Research Center four times between November 1964 and November 1970. From John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1973. Also see Peter Braestrup, *The Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington*, Vol. 1, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1977, pp. 702–703.

[2]Some polls from the period show less clear-cut trends, partly due to differences in wording. Mueller observes that in the Cold War environment of the early 1950s the inclusion of the wording "Communist invasion" could artificially add as much as 10 to 15 points of support for the war compared to other polls. Mueller, pp. 44, 48. Also see Andre Modigliani, "Hawks and Doves, Isolationism and Political Distrust: An Analysis

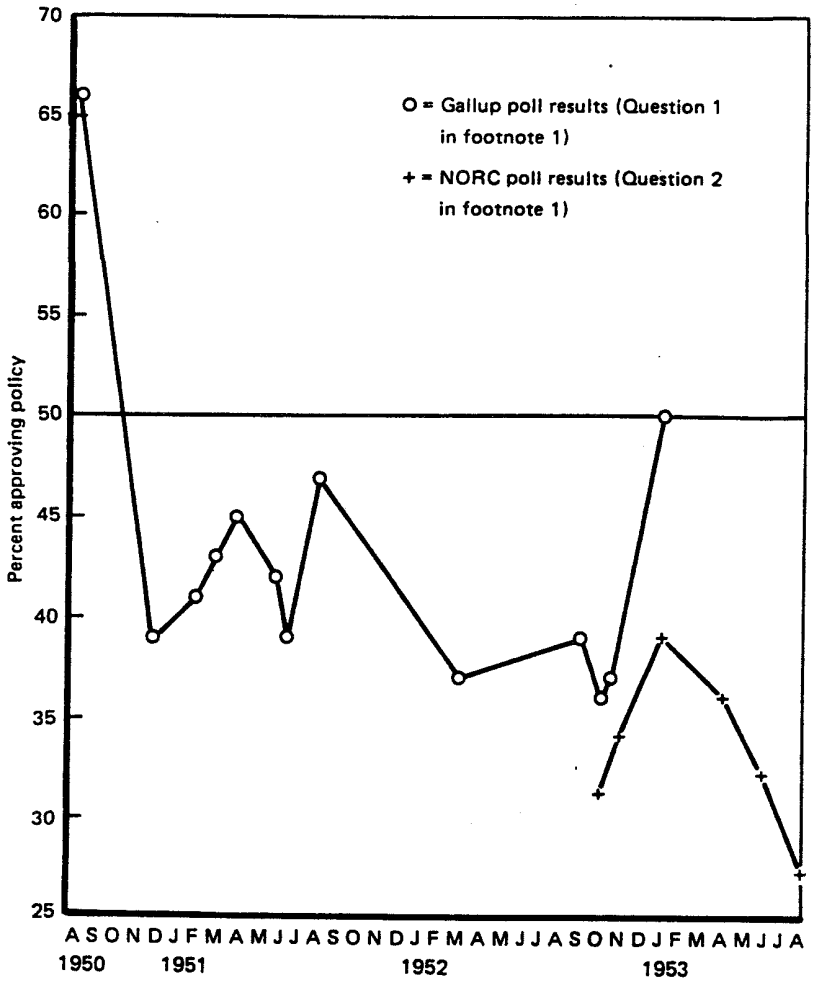

Fig. 3—Trends in public support for the Korean war

As shown in Fig. 4, public support for the Vietnam war exhibited certain obvious parallels and some differences compared with the Korean experience. With no dramatic event similar to the surprise

of Public Opinion on Military Policy," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, September 1972, pp. 962–963.

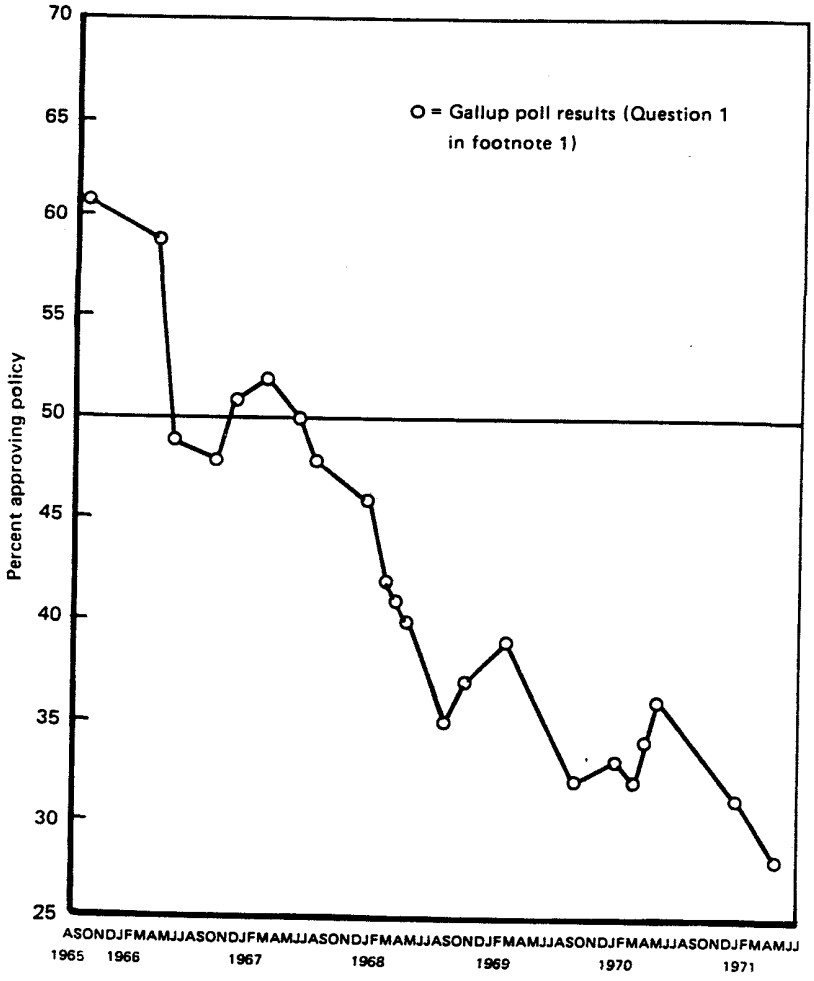

Fig. 4—Trends in public support for the Vietnam war

North Korean invasion of the South to provide a "rally around the flag" effect, public support of the Vietnam war in August 1965—at the time that the U.S. public began realizing a major combat commitment was being made—stood at 61 percent (Gallup data), a level somewhat below the comparable period for Korea. Nonetheless, with nearly two-

thirds of the country approving of his policies, the President was justified in believing that he was launching a war with strong popular backing. Support immediately began to drop off, however. As during the earlier conflict, the single largest decline in public support occurred as it became evident—in the spring of 1966—that the war would not be low-cost or brief. Support for the war then stabilized at about 50 percent for approximately a year. But in the spring of 1967, it fell permanently below 50 percent. Thereafter, a steady decline set in at roughly a constant rate until support declined to an all-time low of 28 percent in May 1971, at which time Gallup discontinued the "mistake" question.[3]

U.S. CASUALTIES AND PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE KOREAN AND VIETNAM WARS

No one can seriously dispute that both wars lost considerable public support as time progressed. Given the ambiguous context of limited wars as discussed in Sec. II, what were the most important aspects of these wars that contributed to a decline in public support? Or, put another way, which costs imposed on the public by limited wars are the most burdensome? If scholarly analyses such as Stein's are correct,[4] in most limited wars the public is likely to have a very low cost tolerance. To maintain domestic cohesion and popular support, the sacrifices and costs imposed on the public must be kept at a minimum. It is important, therefore, to determine which costs are the most important and visible.

It is difficult to isolate the numerous variables that may exert a significant influence on public opinion. Although public opinion trends on support of the Korean and Vietnam wars have been studied extensively and rigorously, few completely satisfactory approaches have been developed that successfully select and weigh all the factors influencing war support. Nonetheless, at least three reasonably successful attempts have been undertaken. Each of these three studies shows that, more than any other factor, casualty levels to U.S. personnel caused public support to decline during the two wars.

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[3]See Philip E. Converse and Howard Schuman, "'Silent Majorities' and the Vietnam War," *Scientific American*, Vol. 222, No. 6, June 1970; William L. Lunch and Peter W. Sperligh, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam," *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 32, 1979; and Mueller.

[4]See Sec. II.

The most extensive analysis to date was conducted in the early 1970s by John E. Mueller of the University of Rochester.[5] Mueller was struck by the differences in the *rate* of decline in public support for the Korean as compared with the Vietnam war and set out to explain it. Support dropped rapidly in the early phases of the Korean war, then declined at a much slower rate. In Vietnam, on the other hand, public support deteriorated at a fairly constant rate. He examined the similarities and differences between the two wars in terms of the following factors: locale, scope, tactics, military limitations, popular justification, domestic Presidential politics, how the wars started and ended, casualty levels, domestic economic effects such as inflation and unemployment, the amount and source of domestic opposition, and the Cold War atmosphere. Mueller concluded from his analysis that total casualty levels to U.S. military personnel are the variable that best fits the support curves for both the Korean and Vietnam wars. The difference in the rates of decline, Mueller found, could be explained by taking into account the total number of casualties at the time any given poll was taken, as shown in Fig. 5. A process of desensitization was also noted; that is, the public appears to have been much more sensitive to a given level of casualties at the outset of the war than in later phases. Mueller thus concluded that public support during both wars behaved in a remarkably similar manner: Every time U.S. casualties went up by a factor of ten, support in both wars decreased by approximately 15 percent. The different shapes of the support curves for the two wars are therefore explained by the different rates at which total casualties were accumulated.[6]

A later and, in some respects, more thorough study reaches similar conclusions.[7] The author of the study, Jeffrey Milstein, correlated public support for the Vietnam war with a series of cumulative costs of the war such as financial cost, total numbers of military personnel who had served in Vietnam, casualty levels, and so forth. He found that the correlation coefficient for casualties and public support of the war was very high—0.94. His analysis of the data led him to conclude: "The most significant costs to the American people were the number of American 'boys' killed and wounded in Vietnam. . . . The more casualties incurred, the more the public disapproved of the President and his Vietnam policy."[8] In addition, Milstein discovered that casualty levels

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[5]Mueller.

[6]See Mueller, pp. 23–61.

[7]Jeffrey S. Milstein, *Dynamics of the Vietnam War: A Quantitative Analysis and Predictive Computer Simulation*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1974.

[8]Milstein, p. 55.

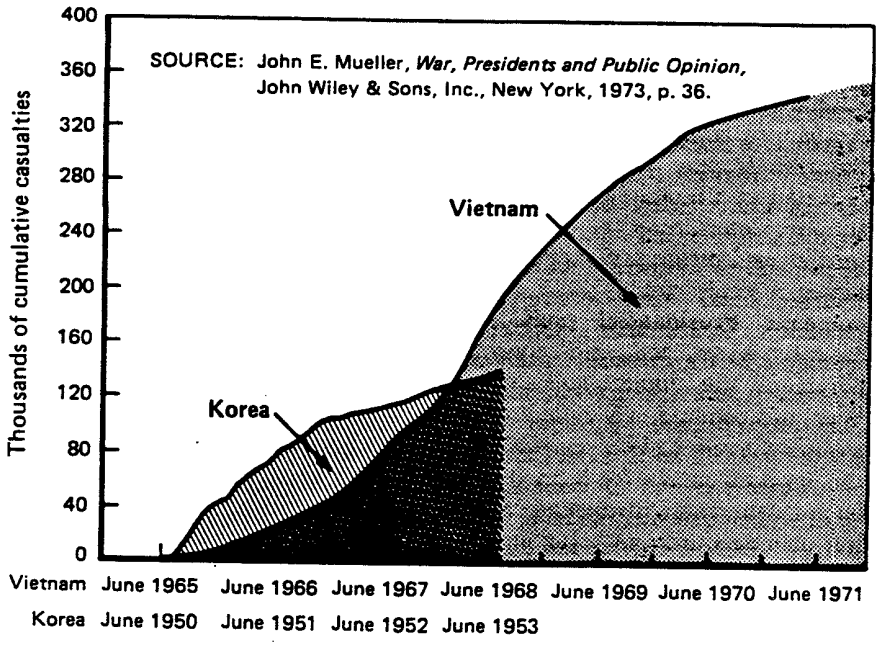

Fig. 5—Cumulative American casualties in the Korean and Vietnam wars

were not only the most important variable affecting war support, but they also affected overall approval ratings of the President. During the period of escalation (1965 through 1967), disapproval both of President Johnson's handling of his job and of the situation in Vietnam correlated very highly with the monthly level of U.S. casualties in Vietnam (the correlation coefficient was 0.79 for both questions).[9]

A more recent study, conducted by Samuel Kernell of the University of California at San Diego, strengthens Mueller's and Milstein's observations from a different angle.[10] While agreeing with Mueller's conclusions about the effect of casualties on public support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam, Kernell set out to explicitly refute a contention of

[9]Milstein, pp. 164–165.

[10]Samuel Kernell, "Explaining Presidential Popularity: How Ad Hoc Theorizing, Misplaced Emphasis, and Insufficient Care in Measuring One's Variables Refuted Common Sense and Led Conventional Wisdom Down the Path of Anomalies," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 72, No. 2, June 1978.

Mueller's and others that specific policies do not appear to affect Presidential popularity. Some statisticians have argued that all Presidents since World War II, with the exception of Eisenhower, lost popularity primarily as a function of length of time in office. Kernell, on the other hand, believed that this was an unsatisfactory explanation, on the basis of common sense and because it did not explain the different rates in the decrease of popularity of different Presidents. Instead his research showed that the state of the economy, international crises, wars, domestic political scandals, and so forth all affect Presidential popularity.

Kernell conducted a sophisticated multivariate regression analysis to test his hypothesis. Unlike Mueller, Kernell looked at monthly casualty rates instead of total casualty levels for the Korean and Vietnam war periods. Yet what he found seems largely to confirm the earlier studies that examine war support as opposed to Presidential popularity. A strong negative correlation (−0.68) was shown to exist between monthly casualty rates and President Truman's popularity during the Korean war. Monthly casualty rates were also shown to be the most important variable affecting Truman's popularity. For President Johnson, Kernell found that two variables, the monthly number of U.S. war dead and the number of bombing sorties over Vietnam, explained nearly 80 percent of the variance in public approval of the President. Each of these two variables independently exerted a strong effect on the President's popularity. An average monthly figure for U.S. war dead of 478 was shown to correlate to a decline of about one and a half percentage points in President Johnson's popularity. No other variables tested, other than bombing sorties against North Vietnam, came close to having this much effect on public opinion. And bombing sorties against North Vietnam were not unrelated to the casualty issue, since the rate of these sorties was closely linked to the level of casualties to U.S. airmen.

Although the three studies discussed above do not constitute irrefutable evidence of the key role played by casualties in determining public support, in the absence of any compelling statistical analyses that point to different conclusions they cannot be easily disregarded. And indeed other types of poll data are available that also confirm the link between casualties and declining public support.

The responses to two open-ended questions asked by the Harris poll organization in the late 1960s—not previously made public in a non-aggregated form—demonstrate convincingly that casualties, and particularly those killed in action (KIA), *troubled* the public more than any other factor about the Vietnam war, even though casualties had not directly affected a large percentage of Americans. In July 1967, Harris

asked the following two questions to a representative cross section of the American people: (1) "How has the war affected your own family, job, or financial life?" and (2) "What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally?"[11] Unlike the overwhelming majority of poll questions asked in the 1960s on the Vietnam war, these two questions did not provide a limited set of answers from which the respondent had to choose, but rather permitted the respondent to fill in a series of blank lines. Thus the response selected and the wording of the response were totally up to the person being interviewed. The first question determined that as of the summer of 1967, a slight majority of Americans did not feel that their own personal lives—family, job, or finances—had been affected by the war in any meaningful way.[12] Forty-five percent of the total responses indicated that the war had had an influence. Of these, only one-quarter expressed an effect related to casualties.[13] By far the most important factor affecting people's personal lives, representing 32 percent of the responses, was inflation.[14] In short, at that point in the war, most Americans felt that the Vietnam war had no direct effect on their personal lives, and the minority that did believed that effect was mostly economic.

Yet the answers to the second question in the Harris poll showed that most people were definitely *troubled* by aspects of the war, although not its economic effects. When Harris asked what troubled people most about the war, the responses showed that the public was most concerned about the casualties in Vietnam, as shown in Table 2. Thirty-one percent of the responses—from people for or against the war, and personally affected or unaffected by the events—listed "casualties," "loss of our young men," "loss of lives," and "killing." The poll data infer that the subresponses listed in this category refer primarily to U.S. casualties; other types of casualties are either explicitly or implicitly disaggregated.[15] In comparison, such answers as

[11]Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., Study 1734, questions #6 and #20c, July 1967.

[12]At that time 48 percent of the public supported the war and 41 percent opposed it, based on the Gallup "mistake" question.

[13]These responses were "Friends/relatives have died there," "Anxiety for friends/relatives who are in the service," "Anxiety for sons approaching draft age," and "Worry about people dying—Americans being killed."

[14]Expressed in the following ways: "Cost of living is higher," "Prices rising," "Inflation," and "Keeping wages down."

[15]For example, 6 percent of the total responses specifically listed "Killing innocent people" and "Killing women and children." Another category related to casualties but not necessarily linked to U.S. servicemen, "Bombings/terrorism," was also listed separately. Indeed, one category, "Sending our boys over there/sending them so young," which included 6 percent of the responses, could be interpreted as also directly linked to concerns over casualties to U.S. servicemen.

Table 2

TROUBLING ASPECTS OF THE VIETNAM WAR—JULY 1967[a]

	Percent of Total Responses
Casualty or Casualty-Related Aspects	
1. Loss of our young men/casualties/loss of lives/killing	31
2. Family separated/destroyed	7
3. Killing innocent people/women and children	6
4. Sending our boys over there/sending them so young	6
5. Boys not trained well/not supplied properly/ undergoing needless suffering	5
6. Bombings/terrorism	2
Other Aspects	
1. We are not making any apparent progress/should escalate/taking so long to end	12
2. Don't understand the war/why we are fighting/it's a senseless war	9
3. Rising cost/mishandling of funds	7
4. Danger of becoming a third world war	5
5. Political war/credibility gap	3
6. People not backing the government	3
7. Vietnamese don't care/understand/want to understand	2
8. Inequality of the draft	1
9. No support from our allies	1

[a]Free form responses to Harris poll 1734, question #6: "What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally?" See text for discussion.

"Danger of becoming a third world war," "Rising costs [inflation], mishandling of funds," or "Inequality of the draft" made up only very small percentages of the responses. Harris had grouped all the responses into 16 categories; the "casualties" category accounted for nearly one-third of the total responses. The next highest category—"Making no progress," "Should escalate," and "Taking so long to end"—included only a third as many responses, and no other category came even close to that. In the summer of 1967, then, no other issue about the war was nearly as crucial to the U.S. public as casualties.

In March 1968, Harris asked these same two questions again.[16] The preceding month, U.S. forces in Vietnam had suffered the highest casualty rates of the war, following the commencement of the enemy Tet offensive. U.S. casualties included an average of more than 500 KIAs a week compared with fewer than 200 a week in July 1967 when the Harris questions were originally posed. In addition, the bloody fighting had been portrayed in a particularly graphic fashion every night on television network news programs. Not surprisingly, the second Harris poll revealed an even greater concern over casualties than had been evident nine months earlier.

In a dramatic increase over the earlier poll, now well over half the respondents felt the war had personally affected their lives.[17] Yet nearly 50 percent of the responses of those who felt personally affected continued to pinpoint adverse economic influences such as inflation or taxes. Those expressing concern over a husband or son being drafted had now risen to 37 percent. Yet only 9 percent had a husband or son, or even knew any individual, who had been killed in Vietnam.

Nearly half the respondents, however, singled out by inference U.S. military casualties as the most troubling aspect of the Vietnam war (see Table 3).[18] No other category—Harris had organized the responses this time into twelve different groupings by content—came even close in frequency of response. In addition, other categories included different specific types of casualties, such as "Killing of South Vietnamese women and children/destruction of Vietnam," or "More Negroes dying in Vietnam," that accounted for only 4 percent and 1 percent of the responses, respectively.

Conventional wisdom holds that television coverage contributed enormously to the growing revulsion of the public against the Vietnam war. Interestingly, the same Harris poll conducted in March 1968 confirmed that television contributed to the opposition through its vivid reporting of the horrors of war and particularly of the casualties to U.S. servicemen. Pollsters asked respondents who claimed that television coverage had made them more opposed to the war to explain why

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[16]Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., Study 1813, questions #12c and 12d, March 1968. Question wording had changed slightly to "How would you say the war in Vietnam has affected you personally (your own family, job, financial life)? Any other way?" and "What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally? Anything else?"

[17]At that time 49 percent of the public opposed the war and 41 percent supported it, as measured by the Gallup "mistake" question.

[18]Again, Harris included all the following responses in this category: "Boys being killed," "Too young to die," "Casualties," "Deaths," and "Loss of human life."

Table 3

TROUBLING ASPECTS OF THE VIETNAM WAR—MARCH 1968[a]

	Percent of Total Responses
Casualty or Casualty-Related Aspects	
1. Boys being killed/casualties/too young to die/loss of human life/deaths	44
2. Killing of South Vietnamese women and children/ destruction of Vietnam	4
3. Against violence/immoral/don't believe in wars	2
4. More Negroes dying in Vietnam/Negroes are being used	1
Subtotal	51
Other Aspects	
1. Should fight to get it over with/our side is limited/the limited type of war it is	2
2. Relatives/friends being drafted/having to go	7
3. High cost of living/higher taxes/higher prices	7
4. We should not be over there/it's not our war/attitude of the Vietnamese people/not willing to fight	6
5. Nothing	3
6. Corruption the war has caused/black market	2
7. Dissension here in U.S./draft card burners	1
8. Too much politics/no progress/it's not a declared war/why are we fighting?/and *all other responses*	10
Subtotal	48

[a]Free form responses to Harris poll 1813, question #12c: "What two or three things about the war in Vietnam most trouble you personally? Anything else?" See text for discussion.

in their own words.[19] Almost half the responses fell in Harris' category that included: "Too many casualties," "Shows bloodshed and horror," and "It makes you realize just how terrible war is." Although it cannot be claimed that all these responses referred only to U.S. military casualties, it is likely that most did, since references to civilian and other types of casualties were coded in other specific categories.

[19]Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., Study 1813, question #13c, March 1968.

The evidence presented above shows a strong link in both the Korean and Vietnam wars between casualties and the course of public opinion regarding the war. Although there is no altogether satisfactory way to disentangle the effects of casualties from the effects of other factors with which casualties may be associated, the link is not surprising. Common sense tells us that Americans don't like to see their fathers and sons dying, especially in long wars fought over unclear or limited objectives in distant corners of the world.

PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESIDENTIAL POLICY

We have argued that the introduction of U.S. combat personnel to virtually any future limited conflict of major duration in the Third World not involving Soviet forces will probably result in a decline in public support over time. The public tends to be unwilling to tolerate anything more than minimal costs in limited wars, and casualties to U.S. servicemen are the most highly visible and important costs to the public.

The evident importance of casualties in curtailing public support for previous limited wars suggests that if it were possible to apply new strategies and force configurations that minimize casualties to U.S. personnel, the public might be willing to support military interventions that it would otherwise find unacceptable. More specifically, the public might be more willing to tolerate or approve a strategy of providing direct combat support to friendly Third World nations.

Our last proposition is that public support and opinion influence Presidential decisionmaking with respect to military intervention. Although this may at first appear to be self-evident, it is far from clear whether and how public opinion affects the executive decisionmaking process. Presidents are elected to carry out policies they deem correct regardless of the ups and downs of public opinion polls. When public support for a Presidential action is absent, the President may choose to persevere while attempting to convince the public of the correctness of that action.

In addition, it is often difficult to determine what alternative policy option the public would prefer when it opposes a specific Presidential policy. When a substantial percentage of the public registered its disapproval of the Korean and Vietnam wars, what did that mean in terms of desired alternative policy options? Careful analysis of poll data shows that opponents of each war wanted a rapid conclusion. However, throughout the Korean conflict and through 1967 during the Vietnam war, those dissatisfied with the government's war policy

overwhelmingly preferred a drastic escalation to quickly resolve the conflict on favorable terms. After 1967 the growing opposition increasingly favored deescalation and withdrawal.[20] Both these options were viewed with disfavor by the President.

Yet, because Presidents and other elected officials must pay attention to public opinion, it is not difficult to imagine situations in which public opinion pressures might cause a President to hesitate to use military force even when he thought it necessary—or to use it less effectively or appropriately than he otherwise might. Indeed, declining public support for a limited war, or even an anticipated decline in public support, could work to limit the President's policy options in several ways:

1. The President might delay or decline combat assistance to an important U.S. ally in desperate need of support.
2. After a commitment is made, withdrawal short of complete success might become politically difficult (the "quagmire" syndrome). Once casualties are taken, the nation's honor becomes deeply committed; withdrawal short of success could be viewed by the public as a national humiliation and a betrayal of the dead and POWs.
3. Pressures might begin to mount to escalate the use of force above desirable levels. The public's and/or the President's wish to achieve a rapid victory in order to prevent further casualties might conflict with the need to avoid escalation and confrontation with nuclear powers.
4. Conversely, public opinion pressures might lead to withdrawal of U.S. combat forces at a time when such an action could damage U.S. policy objectives.
5. Public frustration over casualties and other costs might create a climate of isolationism that would make it difficult to sustain other U.S. commitments, even those unrelated to the aims of the limited war.

Do pressures arising out of public opposition during a limited war actually influence policy? We attempted to answer this question by interviewing senior officials who have actively participated in policy decisions during a limited war. The next two sections examine two periods of the Vietnam war during the Johnson Administration. The inquiry focuses on two basic areas:

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[20]See Converse and Schuman, and Mueller.

1. How senior policymakers perceived the relationship between casualty levels for U.S. personnel and public support for the war.
2. How declining public support, or the anticipation of the same, affected the conduct of the war.

In other words, we set out to determine whether and to what extent policies were advocated or adopted on the grounds that they promised to control or minimize the visibility of overall U.S. casualties so that public support for the war could be maintained, rather than on the grounds of their efficacy in achieving U.S. military and strategic objectives.

IV. THE DECISION TO INTERVENE IN VIETNAM

> What the Johnson Administration demanded from the American people after 1964 was . . . a long, costly, bloody, and persistent partial engagement in a constrained and limited mix of civil and military programs designed to extend secure areas and create a viable government in South Vietnam. Not at once, but in the longer run, this proved fatal to domestic support. —Paul M. Kattenburg, 1980[1]

The period during which the U.S. government decided to commit substantial numbers of combat troops to Vietnam is an obvious choice as a case study to test some of the hypotheses raised in this report. It was reasonably clear to all the principals involved in the decision at the time that they were embarking on a long-term major combat commitment that would lead to many U.S. casualties. Particularly after the experience of the Korean war, one would assume that if the question of casualties and their relationship to public opinion ever influenced decisions about the use of military force, it must have been at that time.

Many accounts have been written of the decision to commit U.S. combat forces to Vietnam in the spring and summer of 1965. Rather than reiterate all the factors and events bearing on that decision, we will examine how the anticipation of casualties to U.S. combat forces shaped it. First, however, we review the general background to the period by briefly tracing the emergence of the U.S. limited war dilemma in Southeast Asia during the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy Administrations, with special reference to the casualty issue and the influence of the Korean war experience. We then examine the lengthy and sometimes bitter policy debates in the spring of 1965 over ground troop commitments and strategy. Finally, we review the final debate and decision to launch a major land war in June and July 1965. In a series of interviews conducted in 1982, several high-ranking policymakers of 1965 gave their recollections of the casualty question. In addition, some of the published documentary evidence from the period is examined for any indication that concern over casualties and public opinion affected the decision process.

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[1]Quoted from Paul M. Kattenburg, *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945–75*, Transaction Books, Inc., New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1980, p. 211. Kattenburg was Director of Vietnam Affairs at the State Department from 1963 to 1964.

U.S. INTERVENTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1950-1965

The Domestic Political Consequences of the Korean War

There are few indications that the Truman Administration entered the Korean conflict with any concerns that mounting casualty levels or other factors might ultimately erode public support for the war. Yet the war dragged on inconclusively for three years, becoming a divisive issue at home and eventually leading to the defeat of the Democrats in the fall elections of 1952. Memories of the disruptive domestic consequences of the Korean war clearly influenced the policies of the Eisenhower Administration. Similar memories also may have affected President Kennedy's policies and initially President Johnson's.

In June 1950, it took only five days from the time the People's Army of North Korea invaded South Korea for President Truman to decide to commit U.S. land, air, and naval combat forces on a large scale to that conflict. The President did not request Congressional authorization or a declaration of war. There seems to have been no concern over any linkage between U.S. casualties and public opinion. If any potential public opinion problem influenced the President, it was probably his memories of the extremely negative reaction against the Democrats for "losing" China to the Communists in 1949. And indeed, according to some polls over three-quarters of the public supported the President's forceful response to the crisis. However, both inside and outside the government, it was assumed that the war would be short—over by Christmas—and limited—that is, not involve the Soviet Union or Communist China. In July 1950, 86 percent of the American people believed the war would be over in less than 12 months.[2]

In September, Chinese Communist troops entered the war. By New Year's, Chinese forces had cleared all UN troops out of northern Korea and had recaptured Seoul. U.S. public support for the war fell 25 percentage points. In February 1951, the UN voted to seek a peaceful resolution of the conflict; five months later truce negotiations commenced at Kaesong and later continued at Panmunjom. These talks dragged on for nearly two years while the fighting continued. Public support for the war generally remained below 50 percent for this entire period.

Widespread public dissatisfaction with the Korean war contributed enormously to the defeat of Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate

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[2]See Glen D. Paige, *The Korean Decision: June 24-30, 1950*, The Free Press, New York, 1968; T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1963; David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1970; and Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1973.

for President, in November 1952. By October of that year, over half the public believed that Korea was the most important problem facing the nation. The Democrats ran on an economic prosperity program; much of the public responded to this the way a Texas housewife did during the election campaign: "The Democrats seemed to be saying prosperity was more important than the life of my boy."[3]

General Eisenhower, the Republican Presidential candidate, clearly understood the central political importance of the war and the deeply felt desire of millions of Americans to end the killing. As early as August 1952, Eisenhower began focusing his campaign on the war issue, proposing that U.S. soldiers be withdrawn from combat to allow South Korean soldiers to do most of the fighting—and dying. For example, on October 2 he stressed his aversion to the use of U.S. combat personnel in Korea: "If there must be a war there, let it be Asians against Asians, with our support on the side of freedom."[4] Eisenhower climaxed his campaign with a dramatic promise to go personally to Korea in order to bring an early and honorable end to the war. Eisenhower defeated Stevenson by a convincing margin in the November election.

Eisenhower Rejects Limited War as a Tool for Containment

According to one historian, "The lesson of the Korean War seemed clear to the new President—neither the American people nor the American economy could stand a succession of limited, conventional wars."[5] Eisenhower achieved an armistice in Korea within six months of taking office. The President and Secretary of State Dulles then began implementing a different national security strategy—the New Look—that in essence rejected Truman's strategy of containment using U.S. conventional forces in limited wars in favor of a policy of massive nuclear retaliation. The new Administration dramatically increased funding for the Strategic Air Command while cutting back money for conventional forces. Not surprisingly, Eisenhower's New Look has been characterized as a neo-isolationist response to, and rejection of, the human and material costs—and resulting domestic political costs—of limited conventional military intervention in the Third World.

Despite the many occasions when the option was considered, Eisenhower never committed U.S. combat forces to a Third World area

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[3]Quoted in Rees, p. 385.

[4]Rees, p. 397.

[5]Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 33.

where major combat seemed likely.[6] As early as August 1953, senior policy advisors began discussing the possibility of aiding the French military effort in Indochina. As the Communist siege of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu tightened, Dulles and General Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, urged military intervention. The President refused without Congressional authorization. Congressional leaders would not grant this without assurances of equal participation of other major allies, which were not forthcoming.

Congressional leaders feared that U.S. air and naval support of the French in Indochina would lead to the commitment of U.S. ground forces. As one historian noted, "They remembered the bitter and protracted experience in Korea, and were not eager to repeat it."[7] Indeed, Congress responded by introducing a bill limiting Presidential authority to dispatch troops without Congressional authority.[8] In the Senate, Democratic leader Lyndon Johnson condemned the prospect of "sending American G.I.s into the mud and muck of Indochina on a bloodletting spree."[9] The President finally concluded that even a U.S. air strike to save Dien Bien Phu was now politically impossible. On April 4, 1954, Eisenhower decided against direct military intervention in Indochina, largely for domestic political reasons. U.S. inaction doomed Dien Bien Phu—on May 7 the French garrison surrendered to Communist forces.

U.S. military intervention was again considered later in May and also in June to save the rapidly deteriorating French position on the Red River delta, but was again rejected for the same reasons. Vice President Richard Nixon knew that military intervention would be a "politically unpopular decision," and Eisenhower later explained that "losses would have been heavy."[10]

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[6]In July 1958, Eisenhower dispatched a large contingent of Marines to Lebanon to protect American lives and prop up a pro-Western government threatened by domestic disturbances. Little likelihood of any serious fighting was anticipated. Eisenhower wrote later, "The basic mission of the U.S. forces in Lebanon was not primarily to fight. Every effort was made to have our landing be as much of a garrison move as possible." See Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961*, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1965, p. 275. Eisenhower also had specifically requested Congressional authorization for the use of troops, and received it. Nonetheless, domestic opposition was anticipated and did materialize. All troops were withdrawn in three months.

[7]*The Pentagon Papers*, The New York Times, Bantam Books, Inc., New York, 1971, p. 11. Hereafter cited as The New York Times Edition.

[8]Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate For Change, 1953-1956*, Doubleday & Company, New York, 1963, p. 353.

[9]Quoted in George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States in Vietnam, 1950-1975*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1979, p. 35.

[10]Eisenhower, 1963, p. 373.

During the final two years of Eisenhower's second administration the situation in Southeast Asia worsened. Yet despite a large-scale U.S. investment in economic and military aid and advisors, the President made no major policy changes to protect that investment. Direct military intervention was contemplated, but not undertaken. As Eisenhower noted in September 1959, government officials worried that the area might "develop into another Korea."[11]

Kennedy's Ambivalent Stance Toward Limited War

President John Kennedy's new Administration rejected the Eisenhower-Dulles emphasis on massive nuclear retaliation, adopting a new policy of flexible response that included a desired capability to fight conventional limited wars and counter "national liberation" insurgency movements. In some respects Kennedy's approach resembled Truman's earlier containment policies. Yet Kennedy's actions reflected great hesitation over involving U.S. forces in direct combat in the Third World.

In the spring and summer of 1961, as the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate, the new President agonized over whether or not to make a major U.S. combat commitment. In a private meeting with Kennedy, George Ball, representing the State Department, strongly advised against dispatching U.S. combat personnel. Later Ball recalled telling the President, "You'll make a tragic mistake if you go down this road. You'll have 300,000 men in the paddies and jungles in five years time. . . . You know what I mean, and you'll just never see them again."[12] In a memorandum of August 4, Walt Rostow from the State Department and Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff), summarized the President's views as they had evolved up to that point:

> As we understand your position: you would wish to see every avenue of diplomacy exhausted before we accept the necessity for either positioning U.S. forces on the Southeast Asian mainland or fighting there . . . you would wish to see indigenous forces used to the maximum if fighting should occur; and that, should we have to fight, we should use air and sea power to the maximum and engage minimum U.S. forces on the Southeast Asian mainland.[13]

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[11]Quoted in Herring, p. 70.

[12]Interview, George Ball, May 4, 1982.

[13]Quoted in W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1972, p. 271.

Kennedy clearly was hesitant to commit rapidly on a large scale as Truman had done in Korea in 1950.

With the situation still worsening, however, in October Kennedy dispatched a fact-finding mission to Southeast Asia led by Maxwell Taylor. The next month Taylor, Rostow, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs raised the possibility with the President of sending up to 205,000 troops to South Vietnam and bombing North Vietnam. However, Taylor warned that even with a modest U.S. involvement, "any troops coming to Vietnam may expect to take casualties."[14] In a memorandum dated November 8 McNamara seemed to recognize implicitly the linkage between casualties and public opinion and the importance of taking decisive action for rallying public opinion:

> We would be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle.... The domestic political implications of accepting the objective are also grave, although it is our feeling that the country will respond better to a firm initial position than to courses of action that lead us in only gradually, and that in the meantime are sure to involve casualties.[15]

Kennedy decided against the use of combat personnel; instead he increased aid and advisors. The number of U.S. advisors in Vietnam grew from 946 in November 1961 to 2646 in January 1962. Kennedy's decision was summarized in a November 14 cable to Ambassador Nolting, stating that the "objective of our policy is to do all possible to accomplish [our] purpose without use of U.S. combat forces." Unsigned notes taken during a National Security Council (NSC) meeting the next day recorded: "Pres receiving static from Congress; they're against using U.S. troops." A Pentagon historian explains the President's decision this way:

> The President was thoroughly forewarned that such a move [committing combat forces] would lead both to continual pressure to send more troops and to political difficulties at home that would inevitably flow from the significant casualties that had to be expected to accompany a ground troop commitment. The risk of delaying the ground troop commitment might easily have been judged not worth the certain costs that would accompany it.[16]

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[14]Taylor to Kennedy, November 3, 1961.

[15]McNamara Memorandum for the President, November 8, 1961.

[16]*The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, The Senator Gravel Edition, Vol. II, Beacon Press, Boston, 1975, p. 118. Hereafter cited as The Gravel Edition.

Even so, the White House apparently remained uneasy about the possible public reaction to increased casualties among U.S. advisors in Vietnam. In 1961, U.S. military personnel in Vietnam suffered 14 battle casualties; in 1962 this rose to 109. As early as April 1962 reporters began asking the President what he was going to do "about the American soldiers getting killed in Vietnam." Ambassador Galbraith wrote Kennedy the same month warning him that U.S. forces might eventually "bleed as the French did." There is no question that the President became deeply concerned about the mounting criticism arising in part from the rising toll of American deaths in combat.[17]

However, the military and political situation in Vietnam appeared to improve markedly in 1962 and early 1963, in essence letting Kennedy off the hook. As a consequence, the Department of Defense began preparing plans for phasing out U.S. aid and advisors. In July 1962, a full-dress reexamination of Vietnam policy took place at CINCPAC (Commander in Chief, Pacific) headquarters in Hawaii. At that conference Secretary McNamara ordered that planning begin on phasing out U.S. military involvement. According to the Pentagon Papers account of the meeting, a major reason for this action was that McNamara felt:

> [I]t might be difficult to retain public support for U.S. operations in Vietnam indefinitely. Political pressures would build up as losses continued.

Phase-out planning continued throughout the remainder of 1962 and 1963, although the Administration became increasingly involved in a major political crisis surrounding the Diem regime which began to develop after May 1963. Nonetheless, the President went ahead and publicly announced a troop withdrawal in October—which was implemented in December.

Thus, while senior officials of the Kennedy Administration clearly showed concern over the possible effects of rising casualties on public opinion during a long drawn-out war, they were never forced to confront the critical choice of committing massive U.S. forces or losing South Vietnam. That unpleasant decision was left to President Johnson and his advisors.

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[17]Herring, pp. 91–92.

The Johnson Administration: Gradual Escalation of the Minimum Necessary Force

Following President Kennedy's assassination in November, Lyndon Johnson confirmed the continued validity of the withdrawal plans. Despite mounting evidence of worsening conditions in Vietnam throughout 1964, in public President Johnson did not depart radically from Kennedy's policies except during the summer when he ordered air strikes against North Vietnam in reprisal for attacks on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson was generally perceived by the public as a moderate on Vietnam compared to Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate. During the election campaign the President stressed that "American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves."[18] Johnson seemed sensitive to the casualty issue at this time. For example, during a campaign speech delivered near his Texas ranch on August 29, he noted:

> We have lost less than 200 men [in Vietnam] in the last several years, but to each one of those 200 men . . . it is a war and a big war and we recognize it. But we think it is better to lose 200 than to lose 200,000. For that reason we have tried very carefully to restrain ourselves and not to enlarge the war.

A memorandum written by Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton in September for an important White House strategy meeting also demonstrates the concern with casualties and their effect on public opinion, at least during the election campaign:

> *Special considerations during next two months.* The relevant "audiences" of US actions are the Communists . . . , the South Vietnamese . . . , our allies . . . , and the US public (which must support our risk-taking with US lives and prestige). During the next two months, because of the lack of "rebuttal time" before election to justify particular actions which may be distorted to the US public, we must act with special care.[19]

President Johnson rejected recommendations for air and ground escalation in both June and early November before the election.

Nonetheless, it had become increasingly obvious throughout 1964 that without more direct American military intervention, the Communists would win the struggle in South Vietnam. After the November elections, bombing North Vietnam seemed the best option available, not least, according to a Pentagon historian, because of "the relatively

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[18]Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*, Popular Library, New York, 1971, p. 68.

[19]"Plan for Action for South Vietnam," September 3, 1964.

low cost—in political terms—of such action."[20] In February 1965, the President authorized the "Flaming Dart" air raids against the North in retaliation for Viet Cong attacks on Pleiku and Camp Holloway that had caused 137 U.S. casualties.

In the following weeks the air war against North Vietnam very slowly and almost imperceptibly shifted from reprisal raids to a sustained bombing offensive with the inauguration of the "Rolling Thunder" campaign in the early spring. Yet there was little confidence within the Administration that a measured and gradual bombing campaign would produce quick results. After a month, increasing pessimism set in as it became evident that Rolling Thunder was not inducing North Vietnam to seek a negotiated settlement. To the contrary, the positions of Hanoi and its allies seemed to be hardening. At this point the White House appeared to be confronted with a stark choice among three unpleasant alternatives: (1) unilateral withdrawal of the U.S. presence, which would lead to a Communist victory, (2) a massive escalation in the air war against the North, which might provoke intervention, or (3) the commitment of major U.S. combat forces on the ground in South Vietnam, which would entail a substantial increase in U.S. casualties and economic costs.

INITIAL PHASES OF THE GROUND FORCE BUILDUP, SPRING 1965

When confronted with an overt invasion of South Korea by a large conventional army, President Truman responded quickly and without hesitation. In the spring of 1965, however, President Johnson faced a more ambiguous situation. Johnson's decision to commit substantial ground combat forces to Vietnam emerged slowly over a six-month period in response to a deteriorating military situation that was evolving away from insurgency warfare as North Vietnam began injecting regular NVA (North Vietnamese Army) troops into the conflict in the South. The decisions to deploy combat forces appear to have been made with hesitation and trepidation.

Deployment of combat troops to Vietnam during this period may be conveniently separated into three major phases. Each phase was loosely associated with a different strategic policy and concept of operations. Phase one began in late February when the President authorized sending the first combat troops to Vietnam—two BLTs (Marine Battalion Landing Teams)—to provide air base security at Da

[20]The New York Times Edition, p. 329.

Nang during the Flaming Dart campaign. During phase one the "enclave strategy" emerged. Phase two dates from early April when reinforcements were approved for a total force of 17 maneuver battalions. For the first time, offensive combat action was permitted, but only within a 50-mile radius of U.S. enclaves. Finally, in July the President inaugurated phase three by raising the troop ceiling dramatically to 44 battalions and adopting a more aggressive offensive strategy later known as "search and destroy." The July decision committed the United States to a major land war in Southeast Asia.

Why did the ground buildup in the spring of 1965 evolve gradually and with such apparent hesitation through these three phases? Why was there no declaration of war, no mobilization of the country, and little effort to rally public opinion around the flag? Did unpleasant memories of the rapid drop-off in public support during the Korean war cause the President to hesitate? The remainder of this subsection examines whether the anticipation of much higher casualty levels and perceived correlation between casualty levels and public support played any discernible role in the policy debates over strategy and troop levels and contributed to the pace of the initial troop commitments in the spring of 1965.

Ground Force Deployments: Phases One and Two, November 1964-June 1965

The following brief description of the major policy changes and decision points during phase one and phase two of U.S. ground deployments shows that the initial introduction of ground combat forces was a slow process stretching over at least a six-month period, with the President making the smallest force increases necessary to prevent defeat at each critical juncture. Even then the U.S. combat commitment remained on a relatively modest scale before the July phase-three decision.

On November 23, 1964, the JCS first proposed that U.S. ground troops be used for base security at Da Nang and Tan Son Nhut air bases. As the air campaign against the North intensified, concern had grown over the ability of ARVN (Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam) troops to provide adequate security. During the second half of February 1965, MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam), CINCPAC, and the JCS strongly endorsed sending in the Marines. Permission was granted on February 26. Two Marine BLTs—about 3500 combat troops—landed in Vietnam in early March. Secretary of State Dean Rusk announced on March 7 that the Marines had not come to kill Viet Cong. but if fired on would return fire. Most

indications suggest that senior policymakers in Washington did not view this deployment as a prelude to a major commitment of land combat forces to Vietnam.[21]

However, following a week-long tour of Vietnam in early March, General Harold K. Johnson, Commander in Chief of the Army, became alarmed at the worsening military situation on the ground, particularly in I Corps near the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone). He recommended that one U.S. division be deployed in coastal enclaves and in the Central Highlands to release more ARVN forces for combat, and advised the formation of a multilateral SEATO force for use in the DMZ area.

The day following General Johnson's departure from Saigon (March 13), MACV commenced work on a staff study of U.S. and Third Country troop requirements for Vietnam. MACV submitted the completed study to Washington late in the month. It requested two division equivalents (70,000 men), including 17 maneuver battalions, by June. The study recommended the deployment of one Army division to the Central Highlands for active combat. It noted that more forces might be required later. A week earlier the JCS had recommended sending two U.S. divisions and one ROK (Republic of [South] Korea) division for offensive operations.

The President and his advisors discussed these proposals and others at an important National Security Council meeting on April 1 and 2. Although no action was taken on the troop requests, the President authorized the deployment of two more Marine BLTs and 18,000 to 20,000 additional support troops. More important, Johnson agreed to permit U.S. forces to take part in offensive operations. Based on his understanding of the sense of the discussion, and in the absence of more specific guidance, Ambassador Taylor defined the U.S. combat mission as mobile counterinsurgency operations restricted to a 50-mile radius of U.S. bases. Several days later, Secretary McNamara endorsed the enclave buildup plan. Nevertheless, throughout the following weeks MACV and the JCS maintained pressure for additional troop commitments.

On April 20, Johnson's senior policy advisors and officials met at the Honolulu Conference to clarify the enclave strategy and develop recommendations on the continuing requests for additional troops. At this meeting Secretary McNamara, Assistant Secretary McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, Ambassador Taylor, General Wheeler, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland reached a consensus on broad strategic issues and troop reinforcements. A force

[21]The information in this subsection is drawn from standard narrative accounts of the war. See bibliography.

level for South Vietnam totaling 17 maneuver battalions—13 U.S. and 4 Australian and ROK, for a total of nearly 90,000 men—was recommended. The participants also earmarked 11 more U.S. and 6 ROK battalions for later consideration. These recommendations were forwarded to the President.

The JCS, however, continued to push for a much larger force package equivalent to approximately three divisions. A substantial upsurge in Communist military activity in April and May and the confirmation of the presence of regular units of PAVN (People's Army of [North] Vietnam) in Kontum Province bolstered their case for larger force commitments. In May, Viet Cong (VC)-NVA forces registered several spectacular offensive successes, including an attack on a U.S. advisors' compound at Songbe that resulted in heavy casualties.

On June 7, MACV urgently requested additional forces to help blunt the Communist summer offensive and protect provincial towns from falling into enemy hands. General Westmoreland recommended deployment of a total force of 44 battalions. In addition, some days later MACV requested the elimination of all restrictions on the use of U.S. troops in combat and the adoption of an aggressive strategy, known as "search and destroy," seeking out the enemy.

Westmoreland's request ignited debate in Washington that raged for nearly two months. Ultimately the request was approved, but by that time at least six months had passed since MACV and the JCS had begun rigorously pressing for large troop increases. Why had the President moved so slowly up to that point? Why was the minimum necessary response to a slowly deteriorating situation always selected? Were there concerns about casualties and public opinion that influenced the slow pace of the growing commitment through June 1965?

Phase One and Two: Causes for the Slow Pace of the Buildup

Senior government officials interviewed in 1982 recall that President Johnson operated under several important perceived constraints in the spring of 1965 that dictated the pace and style of U.S. intervention during the first two phases of U.S. troop deployments, but the anticipation of public opinion problems linked to higher casualties was not one of them. The consensus was that concern over the reaction of Communist China, and to a lesser extent the Soviet Union, to a rapid and massive increase in U.S. combat involvement in Vietnam was probably the single most important constraint on U.S. policy. Two domestic political considerations were also said to have influenced the President.

First, President Johnson did not want to jeopardize his Great Society programs still before Congress. Second, he did not want to provoke an overreaction from right wing elements that might press for escalation beyond desirable levels. The President sought to avoid a war crisis atmosphere that could develop from a formal declaration of war, call-up of the Reserves, and a general war mobilization of the country. Instead, he emphasized the continuity of his policies with those of previous administrations and played down the magnitude and potential costs of the new course on which he was embarking. Finally, considerations of logistics, infrastructure, and the tactical environment in Vietnam also dictated a relatively slow and measured buildup.

Nearly all senior administration officials interviewed singled out anxiety over the possibility of direct Chinese intervention and fears of nuclear escalation as the major policy constraints of that period. Memories of the Chinese intervention in the Korean war were clearly on everyone's mind. In the spring of 1965, these officials found themselves grappling with the most basic dilemma of limited war. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk put it this way:

> I mentioned that it was tough to apply military force in a limited fashion and I also raised the question as to whether it might have been wise for President Kennedy to put in 100,000 men at the very beginning, and I pointed out that the danger in that is that we may lower the nuclear threshold. We may hasten the time when the confrontation of nuclear weapons might occur, and that is one of the prices you might pay for a quick buildup. You see, one of the things that we achieved by this gradual approach was that we never presented either Peking or Moscow with such a change from one week to the next. . . . It may be that the sharper, quicker application of force may precipitate those issues that in common sense you ought to try to keep in the background if you can.[22]

Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara also emphasized the importance attached to avoiding unnecessarily provocative actions with respect to the Chinese.[23] Commenting on the very tight White House control exercised over Rolling Thunder strikes, former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy noted that "Johnson had an interest in not stirring the Chinese hornets."[24] In the spring of 1965, Bundy continued,

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[22]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

[23]Interview, Robert McNamara, July 21, 1982.

[24]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

> much more attention was paid to the question whether and in what circumstances an expansion of the American effort might bring the Chinese in than to the question of prospective U.S. casualties.[25]

Former Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor pointed out that the Secretary of State and others were worried about triggering a secret defense pact between Hanoi and Peking or Moscow.[26] Walt Rostow, Counselor of the Department of State and Chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council at this time, confirmed that Rusk and the President believed

> we should not go into the war with a bang and a declaration of war because we didn't know whatever secret agreements might exist between Hanoi and Peking and Hanoi and Moscow. That was certainly paramount in his [President Johnson's] mind in his responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief.[27]

The same points were summed up this way by former Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy:

> There were two major factors in not moving that hard that fast: (1) that it would be very negative to our relations with major allies, and (2) more important, we thought that there was a flash point of Chinese intervention. We certainly had the Yalu on our minds very, very strongly. . . .[28]

Domestic political considerations also figured prominently as constraints on the decisionmaking process in the spring of 1965. President Johnson appears to have been wary of the political consequences of mobilizing the nation onto a war footing both for his domestic Great Society programs and for the future conduct of the war.[29] Secretary McNamara pinpointed two key actions the President refused to take in the early summer of 1965 because of these domestic political considerations: (1) The President opposed any attempt to increase taxes to pay for the war for fear of undermining his Great Society programs in Congress, and (2) the President refused to meet increased military

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[25]Letter, McGeorge Bundy, June 6, 1983.

[26]Interview, Maxwell Taylor, June 10, 1982.

[27]Interview, Walt W. Rostow, May 6, 1982.

[28]Interview, William Bundy, May 4, 1982. Bundy recalled that his own concern over Chinese intervention was related more to the issue of what he called a "hard and fast" bombing campaign against the North than to the level of ground troop commitments. Letter, William Bundy, June 22, 1983.

[29]These two reasons are emphasized by Johnson himself in his Presidential memoirs and in his conversations with Doris Kearns. See Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, Harper and Row, New York, 1976.

manpower needs through Reserve call-ups.[30] McGeorge Bundy argued that,

> if you look back at the 1965 decision, one of the big reasons for doing it gradually was his desire not to stir up the country while he was passing a bill every afternoon. He didn't want a big Congressional debate at a time when the whole Great Society program was in the legislative process. He wanted to take the position that his policy was essentially the same as Eisenhower's and that any change—as I think he really believed—was only a change in what policy required. But a lot of the rest of us thought that the change in what policy required was large enough to require a change in the way he explained it. . . .[31]

Under Secretary of State George Ball emphasized President Johnson's fear of an overreaction from the right:

> Johnson was always afraid of what he called the "great beast," which were the people who would come in and insist that we really blow the whole place apart. He said, "I am far more afraid of the right wing than I am of the left wing." . . . he said it very much at the time. . . . He felt that he would be left without any real defenses to carry on a moderate war.[32]

Rusk pointed out that "we felt that in a nuclear world, it's just too dangerous for an entire people in a democracy to get too angry."[33] A senior staff member of the National Security Council, Chester Cooper, agreed:

> We were scared not because of the Viet Cong, they didn't scare us. The American people scared me and the Administration. They felt that this war had to be done without anybody really sensing that there was a war.[34]

Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and a participant in many of the deliberations of the period, confirmed that most of the senior advisors had at least some concerns about possible domestic political reactions.[35] The principals, however, did not apparently see any specific correlation between mounting casualty levels and pressures for escalation from the right.

Finally, considerations of logistics support, infrastructure, and unfamiliarity with terrain all contributed to the relatively slow

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[30]Interview, Robert McNamara, July 21, 1982.

[31]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

[32]Interview, George Ball, May 4, 1982.

[33]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

[34]Interview, Chester Cooper, March 10, 1982.

[35]Interview, Leonard Unger, March 22, 1982.

evolution of the ground buildup. General George Blanchard, Executive Officer to the Secretary of the Army at that time and later Assistant Division Commander of the First Air Cavalry Division in Vietnam, explained it this way:

> First of all, you're in a totally new environment which you really don't know. You go in and establish a base . . . carve yourself a base out of the jungle. In our case it was an awful lot of tree cutting and fixing and asphalting and so on. Then you have to get your logistics organized. Because if you're talking helicopters, you've got to have spare parts, and you've got to have fuel, and you've got to have maintenance facilities and so on in order to make them operationally effective. And all this takes time. Now, you're also in an unknown situation tactically. Because though you are aware of what's going on as far as the VC are concerned, as a commander you've got to determine for yourself what's going on in your area and where you can best employ your forces.[36]

As a member of the National Security Council staff in 1965, Chester Cooper agreed with Blanchard's view:

> We had no facilities in Vietnam to receive the kinds of forces that our people were suggesting we send out there. This was also unfamiliar and uncongenial terrain. . . .[37]

The facilities required were extensive. As George Carver, CIA liaison with the Johnson White House, wryly noted:

> Yes, the logistics tail slowed down the pace of involvement. You know, we don't go in unless the bowling alleys are in, unless the PX is in, unless the air conditioning is in at the office, unless the ice cream is there, unless the movies are there, unless the USO troops are bringing Jane Fonda out—before she became an anti-war activist—to sing "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'". . . .[38]

All the principals agreed that logistical and tactical problems did constitute important factors. The consensus stressed concerns over Chinese intervention first, and President Johnson's own special domestic political considerations second. Compared with these factors, concern over the possible effects of anticipated casualties on public support for the war does not appear to have been a particularly important issue at that time.

These constraints explain in part the rhythm of the buildup in early 1965 during phases one and two. The period that most closely resembles a clear-cut decision point to go to war, however, was June-July

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[36]Interview, General George Blanchard, March 10, 1982.

[37]Interview, Chester Cooper, March 10, 1982.

[38]Interview, George Carver, March 11, 1982.

1965, when the United States entered the third and final phase of its combat commitment. Westmoreland's June request for 44 battalions finally confronted the principals with the stark choice between continued deterioration or a major war involving substantial U.S. casualties. A Pentagon historian sums up the meaning and effect of the June request in the following manner:

> General Westmoreland's message #19118, of 7 June 1965 . . . punctuated a very grim period of ARVN defeats in Vietnam and stirred up a veritable hornet's nest in Washington. Up to that time, most of the Washington decision makers had been content to indulge in relatively low-key polemics about the enclave strategy and to advocate some experimentation with small numbers of U.S. troops in Vietnam. Westmoreland's request for reinforcements on a large scale, accompanied as it was by a strategy to put the troops on the offensive against the Viet Cong, did not contain any of the comfortable restrictions and safeguards which had been part of every strategy debated to date. Washington saw that it was Westmoreland's intention to aggressively take the war to the enemy with other than Vietnamese troops, and in such a move the spectre of U.S. involvement in a major Asian ground war was there for all to see. With no provision for quick withdrawal, and there was none, the long-term implications for the U.S. in terms of lives and money could not be averted. Temperatures rose rapidly after 7 June, and the debate was acrimonious and not without its casualties.[39]

If they had not been before, the issues at stake were clear to all in the senior levels of the national security establishment. The principals debated numerous questions of varying importance over the next two months. Ultimately, in late July, the President decided to approve MACV's request for more troops.

PHASE THREE: THE DECISION TO LAUNCH A MAJOR GROUND WAR, JUNE-JULY 1965

The Role of the Casualties/Public Opinion Argument

The height of the policy debate within the Johnson Administration on whether or not to enter into a major ground war in Vietnam took place in June and July 1965. In June, the President asked Secretary McNamara and National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy each to formulate a new policy of "more dramatic and effective action" for Vietnam. The resulting policy debate focused on McNamara's memo, the first draft of which, entitled "Program of expanded military and

[39]The Gravel Edition, Vol. III, p. 462.

political moves with respect to Vietnam," began circulating on June 26.[40] The memo unequivocally recommended expanded military moves, including an increase in U.S. ground combat forces to whatever level necessary to show the Viet Cong that they could not win. For the immediate future, this meant approval of Westmoreland's 44 U.S.-Third Country maneuver battalion request for 1965 (for a total of approximately 200,000 U.S. troops), with probably more needed in 1966. During the debate that followed on the McNamara memorandum, it appears that all the principals recognized that:

1. The United States would be entering a major land war.
2. The war might be a long war of attrition.
3. More troops would probably be needed.
4. U.S. forces would sustain substantial casualties.

According to interviews and published documentary evidence, there was substantial discussion about increased casualties and maintenance of public support. An entire NSC meeting late in July was devoted to examining this issue. Yet ultimately, the consideration of casualties does not seem to have played a critical role in the final decision or the types of policies adopted.

Secretary McNamara seemed aware of the problems of casualties and public opinion in his original June memorandum. In assessing the program's likelihood of success, he cautioned that:

> Since troops once committed as a practical matter cannot be removed, since US casualties will rise, since we should take call-up activities to support the additional forces in Vietnam, the test of endurance may be as much in the United States as in Vietnam.[41]

Nonetheless, in his overall evaluation of "domestic U.S. reaction," the Secretary predicted that the American people would recognize the importance of the task and thus accept the costs:

> Even though casualties will increase and the war will continue for some time, the United States public will support this course of action because it is a combined military-political program designed and likely to bring about a favorable solution to the Vietnam problem.[42]

Under Secretary of State George Ball was one of the first senior officials to respond formally to the McNamara memorandum. On June 28

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[40]The draft is printed in Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*, Appendix A, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1982, pp. 179–186.

[41]Quoted in Berman, p. 185.

[42]Berman, p. 184.

he circulated a memorandum entitled "Plans for Cutting Our Losses in South Vietnam" to all the principals. In this memo, Ball cautioned that McNamara's plan would result in a substantial number of U.S. casualties and involve the United States in a quagmire. Ball's memorandum quoted the memoirs of General Matthew Ridgway at length. In 1954 Ridgway had urged President Eisenhower not to intervene in Indochina:

> We could have fought in Indo-China. We could have won, if we had been willing to pay the tremendous cost in men and money that such intervention would have required—a cost that in my opinion would have eventually been as great as, or greater than, that we paid in Korea.[43]

Two days later McGeorge Bundy entered the fray with a memo to the Secretary of Defense. Bundy seemed to adopt some of Ball's arguments. He began by noting, "My first reaction is that this program is rash to the point of folly." The many potential problems raised by Bundy included the question:

> If U.S. casualties go up sharply, what further actions do we propose to take or not to take? More broadly still, what is the real object of the exercise. . . .?[44]

On June 30 Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy produced a memo responding to the McNamara program that suggested a compromise option entailing stabilization of the commitment of troops at roughly the current authorized levels (about 85,000) to provide time to test their combat effectiveness and to assess public acceptance of the war. He warned that the President had to "reckon the Congressional and public opinion problems of embarking now on what might clearly be an open-ended ground commitment."[45]

Ball stated his views more forcefully the following day in a memorandum to McGeorge Bundy intended for the President. Ball stressed the option-limiting effects that would flow from U.S. casualties, especially the "investment trap" syndrome. He argued that McNamara's policy meant

> protracted war, involving an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces, mounting U.S. casualties, no assurance of a satisfactory solution, and a serious danger of escalation at the end of the road. . . . The decision you face now, therefore, is crucial. Once large numbers of U.S. troops are committed to direct combat, they will begin to take heavy

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[43]Berman, p. 88.

[44]Berman, Appendix B, pp. 187–189. Also see The Gravel Edition, Vol. III, p. 472.

[45]Berman, pp. 89–91; The Gravel Edition, Vol. III, p. 473.

> casualties in a war they are ill-equipped to fight in a non-cooperative, if not downright hostile, countryside. Once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot—without national humiliation—stop short of achieving our objectives. Of the two possibilities, I think humiliation would be more likely than the achievement of our objectives—even after we have paid terrible costs.[46]

With the debate rapidly heating up, McGeorge Bundy summarized the views of the principals in a memo for the President dated July 1: McNamara and Ball "honestly believe in their own recommendations," and Rusk is leaning toward McNamara. Second-level men in both State and Defense were characterized as being generally skeptical and tending toward the Ball or William Bundy positions. The JCS wanted to go beyond McNamara. McGeorge Bundy recommended:

> My hunch is that you will want to listen hard to George Ball and then reject his proposal. Discussion could then move to the narrower choice between my brother's course and McNamara's.[47]

Preceding the selection of one of these options, however, McGeorge Bundy counseled "tight and hard analyses of some disputed questions," including the type of "full political and public relations campaign" that each option might necessitate.

Thus Ball, McGeorge Bundy, and William Bundy initially reacted with some hesitation to McNamara's memo, and all raised the issue of possible problems with public opinion flowing from increased casualty levels.

But the President also received advice from other quarters that echoed McNamara's optimism about the willingness of the public to support military intervention despite substantial casualties. In early July, Johnson met with a group of private advisors, including General Omar Bradley, Dean Acheson, and other prominent former officials.[48] They encouraged the President to adopt a tough policy in Vietnam along the lines of McNamara's program. They conceded that "this means large additional forces and probably much heavier casualties." Arthur Dean argued, on the other hand, that "there was a great deal of sentiment in the country for doing whatever it took. . . . This view

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[46]"A Compromise Solution in South Vietnam" from Under Secretary of State George W. Ball for President Johnson, July 1, 1965.

[47]Berman, pp. 93–94.

[48]The total panel included about fifteen advisors. These were divided into three groups, only one of which examined the Vietnam problem in great depth. This group was made up of Omar Bradley, Roswell Gilpatric, George Kistiakowsky of Harvard, Arthur Larson, and John J. McCloy. Letter, William Bundy, June 22, 1983.

seemed to be generally shared."[49] William Bundy's personal notes of the meeting of the whole panel record that it "felt that there should be no question of making whatever combat force increases were required."[50]

In the meantime, Secretary McNamara left for Saigon to discuss troop requirements with General Westmoreland. In preparation, he sent a memorandum to Ambassador Taylor with a long list of questions, including one that asked, "What casualties do you expect?" While in Saigon, however, it appears that McNamara learned that Johnson had decided to go ahead with the 44 battalion request. Nonetheless, the Secretary of Defense continued on his fact-finding mission, including his effort to determine what level of casualties to U.S. combat personnel could be anticipated.

In view of the message the Secretary of Defense apparently received while in Saigon, it is not surprising that McNamara's final report to the President, dated July 20 and based on his original draft memorandum of June 26, recommended going ahead with strong military action, but "if possible, without causing the war to expand into one with China or the Soviet Union and in a way which preserves support of the American people. . . . McNamara cautioned the President about the possibility that the planned course of action might fail and the United States could become involved in the "investment trap" as Ball had warned. Thus, the Secretary agreed that granting MACV's troop requests

> would stave off defeat in the short run and offer a good chance of producing a favorable settlement in the longer run; at the same time it would imply a commitment to see a fighting war clear through at considerable cost in casualties and material and would make any later decision to withdraw even more difficult and even more costly than would be the case today.

Yet as in his first draft, McNamara expressed unqualified optimism: Because of the importance of the U.S. objectives and the moderate and sensible response of the U.S. government, the public would be willing to tolerate the human costs. This was so even though the Secretary of Defense now estimated that by December U.S. forces could be suffering as many as 500 men per month killed in action:

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[49]Berman, p. 133.

[50]Letter, William Bundy, June 22, 1983. Arthur Larson and Paul Hoffman strongly dissented from the majority position.

> U.S. and South Vietnamese casualties will increase—just how much cannot be predicted with confidence, but the U.S. killed-in-action might be in the vicinity of 500 a month by the end of the year—[T]he United States public will support the course of action because it is a sensible and courageous military-political program designed and likely to bring about a success in Vietnam.

The principals finally reached a consensus on the MACV-McNamara program during a series of meetings conducted during the last week of July. The casualty issue received a major hearing, but it appears to have had little effect on the decision process. In a July 21 NSC meeting,[51] the various positions were discussed. Ball presented his views, once again stressing his "investment trap" warning. This time, he also emphasized that mounting casualties would produce increasing pressures on the President to escalate the war beyond prudent levels and cause a serious fall-off in public support. Ball had come prepared with briefing charts. One of his charts, reproduced here as Fig. 6, plotted the rising casualty levels in Korea against the declining public support for the Korean war. Ball recalled emphasizing the following points:

> In a long war, I said the President would lose the support of the country. I showed him a chart I had prepared [see Fig. 6] showing the correlation between Korean casualties and public opinion, as our casualties during the Korean war had increased from 11,000 to 40,000. The percentage of those Americans who thought that we had been right to intervene had diminished from 65% in 1950 to a little more than 30% in 1952. Moreover, as our losses mounted, many frustrated Americans would demand that we strike at the very jugular of North Vietnam with all the dangers that entailed.[52]

Despite some earlier signs of sympathy, both McGeorge Bundy and Rusk rejected Ball's conclusions during the meeting. None of the others appears to have been particularly impressed with his presentation.[53] Ball remembered:

> Nobody was prepared to discuss it [the casualty-public opinion question] in any specific way. We were discussing the general situation. This was one of the arguments I proposed. The President looked at it. I think he was impressed by it. I don't recall if he said much about it. I simply said, "Look, you have a lot of support right now,

[51]Those present were Dean Rusk, George Ball, William Bundy, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Leonard Unger from the State Department, Robert McNamara, Cyrus Vance, and John McNaughton from the Defense Department, General Wheeler for the JCS, Carl Rowan and Leonard Marks from USIA, and McGeorge Bundy, Jack Valenti, Horace Busby, and Chester Cooper from the White House.

[52]Interview, George Ball, May 4, 1982.

[53]See Berman, pp. 105–111.

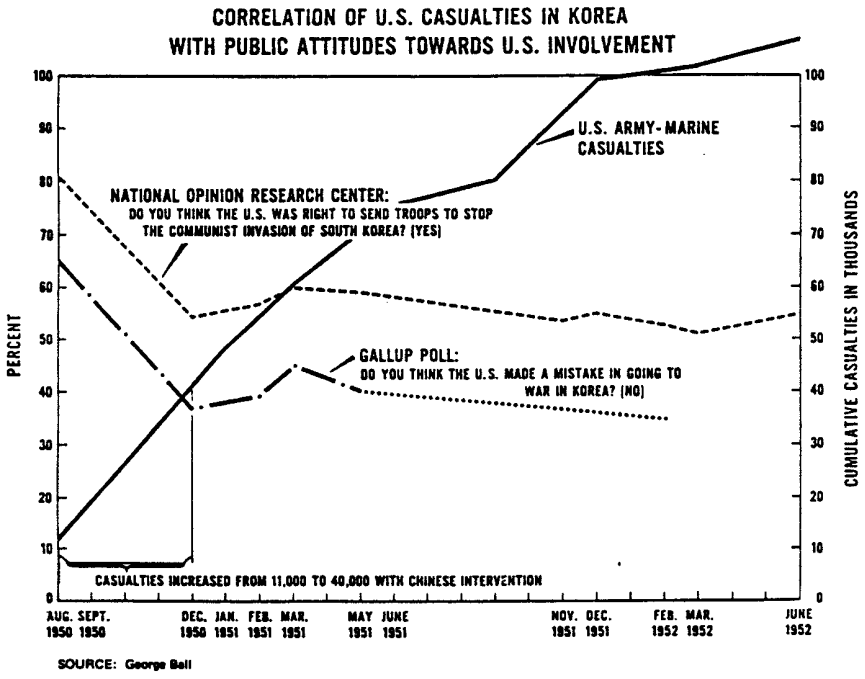

Fig. 6—Chart from George Ball's briefing to the NSC meeting of July 21, 1965

> but once you get a lot of casualties, this thing is going to change because it's a different kind of war and the American people are going to be profoundly shocked by their sons getting killed and you're going to have as great an opposition on your hands as occurred during the Korean war". . . . But nobody really focused on the consequences of a lot of casualties.[54]

At a second NSC meeting convened on July 27, the principals finally agreed to the basic 44 battalion plan. The President rejected maintaining forces at the current authorized levels (80,000 men), because increased VC-NVA activities would force the United States to "suffer the consequences of losing additional territory and of accepting increased casualties. . . . No one is recommending this course."[55] There is no record of any discussion of the casualty question and public opinion during this final key NSC meeting. Indeed, it appears that the casualty arguments were presented fully only once during the NSC meeting of July 21. Yet the issue had been raised repeatedly in various contexts in several memoranda written by the principals during the period.

Discounting the Casualties/Public Opinion Argument in 1965

Did Ball's casualty arguments make any impression at all on senior policymakers?[56] If not, why were they not taken seriously enough to affect policy? The evidence presented above shows that the President was exposed on several occasions to arguments that mounting casualties might eventually pose public support problems. During the debates in June and July, Ball, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, McNamara, and Johnson himself at least mentioned the possibility of increased U.S. casualties resulting in undesirable pressures or problems. Yet these arguments were ultimately discounted, rejected, or not considered sufficiently compelling to seriously affect policy. There are few indications that the casualty question was a critical consideration influencing any major aspect of the decision process in the spring or summer of 1965. So although the issue was raised, it played only a minor role. Apparently the principals believed or hoped that public opinion would differ from that experienced during the Korean war.

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[54]Interview, George Ball, May 4, 1982.

[55]Quoted in Berman, p. 125.

[56]Ball, of course, presented many other arguments in his attempt to persuade President Johnson not to make a major combat commitment to Vietnam. He also tried to convince the President that (1) the issues at stake in Vietnam were marginal, and (2) the United States could not win militarily. Ball's views derived largely from his first-hand observation of the effects on France of the Indochina war in the 1950s.

In discussing their memories of the period, senior policy advisors admitted that little attention was paid to the kinds of concerns raised by Ball. Indeed, most former senior advisors we interviewed seemed not to recall Ball's presentations at all. Secretary McNamara stated he had never seen Ball's casualty charts before. McGeorge Bundy observed that "the question of casualty levels was not a large element in the discussions of 1965."[57] William Bundy, who from the published documentary evidence appears to have expressed some sympathy with the "investment trap" critique, did not even remember Ball's presentation:

> I don't recall it [anticipated casualty levels] being explicitly brought in to any of the major decision periods. That is, I think there must have been rough underlying assumptions as to what level of casualties would attend, let us say, the decision to move to large-scale ground forces in July 1965. I don't recall anybody trying to say exactly what the casualty rates would be, or to come out with a picture that they would be "X" if we pursued one kind of strategy and "Y" if we pursued another. I don't recall it either that in the decision to go ahead in those important times of decision or in the choice of the military strategies, which was left quite largely to the military.[58]

When pressed further about George Ball's NSC briefing in which casualties were linked to public support during the Korean war, William Bundy commented:

> I don't remember it being advanced as a really telling argument at any one point. . . . I don't recall it. I wrote a middle-of-the-road memorandum myself, and I don't recall getting into the level of casualties. . . .[59] I don't recall arguing the level of support for the war or what the tolerance of the American people was for a given level of casualties.

A senior member of the National Security Council staff, Robert Komer, concurred with Bundy:

> I do not recall that at any time in '64, '65, '66 did the professionals or other senior officials call to the attention of the top policymakers that the casualty costs of Vietnam would continue to mount, and

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[57]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

[58]Interview, William Bundy, May 4, 1982. McNamara's final report to the President dated June 26 mentioned a possibility of as many as 500 KIAs a month by December. See p. 62.

[59]William Bundy's memorandum did briefly raise the question of public opinion. See p. 49.

> would eventually become a real drag on our ability to achieve our aims. I do not recall that being the case.[60]

Ambassador Taylor also did not remember Ball's briefing charts or any discussion of the casualty issue.[61]

Interestingly, in his memoirs President Johnson clearly recalled Ball's briefing at the NSC meeting of July 21 and noted that "we discussed Ball's approach for a long time and in great detail." However, Johnson remembers the main thrust of Ball's argument to have been that the United States "could not win a protracted war against local guerrillas in Asian jungles." A key reason that the United States could not win, in Ball's view, was because public support could not be maintained in the face of mounting casualties, but this point is not mentioned by the former President. Johnson "felt the Under Secretary had not produced a sufficiently convincing case or a viable alternative."[62]

Why had the Ball briefing and memos and the casualty/public support issue in general made no impression on the principals? Why can former senior officials even now scarcely recollect the presentation of arguments that proved to be so prescient? The Ball position was disregarded largely for three reasons: (1) Public support for defending Vietnam from Communist aggression was perceived to be very high, (2) the issues at stake were thought to be sufficiently important to elicit continuing support of the American people despite the costs, and (3) the ultimate costs to the United States in casualties could not be determined, but those costs were never anticipated to rise nearly as high as they eventually did.

Secretary Rusk argued that, in the first instance, all indications showed strong public support for vigorous action in Vietnam:

> Almost every day we had waiting for us on our desks a wrap-up of the evidence on public opinion from the previous day. And this was also available to the President, to McNamara, and to others. This included a good many different sources, of course, [and] key statements made in Congress. There would be resolutions of national organizations. It would include analysis of the mail at the White House and at the State Department. It would include conversations with political leaders in different parts of the country and the attitudes expressed by governors. All sorts of things. I think we had a better feel of what was happening around the grassroots than you could get just by reading the newspapers. . . . Bear in mind that we were in regular touch with the Congress. We had these daily reports

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[60]Interview, Robert Komer, March 29, 1982.

[61]Interview, Maxwell Taylor, June 10, 1982.

[62]Johnson, p. 147.

> on public opinion around the country—many evidences of strong support for the total effort.[63]

Rusk's confidence was shared by many senior administration officials in the summer of 1965, as can be discerned, for example, from a meeting held by the President with the JCS the day after Ball's briefing.[64] This time the President himself raised the question of casualties and public support. Johnson opened the meeting by bringing up the risks involved with the MACV-McNamara plan, specifically singling out increased casualty levels:

> The disadvantages of number three option [the MACV-McNamara plan] are the risk of escalation, casualties high, and the prospects of a long war without victory.

The President asked:

> Do all of you think the Congress and the people will go along with 600,000 people and billions of dollars being spent 10,000 miles away?

McGeorge Bundy also presented a memorandum prepared earlier that examined the types of public criticism that might result if the President went ahead with the proposed policy changes for Vietnam. Much of the memorandum mirrored George Ball's arguments. A long list of questions was presented, including: "How long—how much? Can we take casualties over five years?" In the discussion that followed, participants repeatedly referred to the evidence of strong public support in arguing for the MACV-McNamara plan. Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor responded to the President's questions by noting: "The Gallup poll shows people are basically behind our commitment." General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, told the President:

> How long would it take? Five years, plus 500,000 troops. I think the American people would back you.

Apparently Johnson and his senior advisors believed—or hoped—that Resor and Greene were correct. This was probably the greatest error made by the principals in 1965. There is no question that public support for the President's policy was strong at the beginning of the Vietnam venture, just as it had been in the first months of the Korean war. But Rusk and the others missed the central point of Ball's presentation—that the Korean war experience strongly suggested that public support would soon begin to evaporate as casualty levels rose.

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[63]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

[64]Berman, pp. 111–119.

Ball's arguments were also disregarded because the President and his advisors believed that issues of fundamental importance to the United States were at stake in Vietnam. If the United States did not fight, South Vietnam would fall. Johnson feared the public outcry that he believed would arise if his administration "lost" Vietnam far more than a decline in support due to mounting casualties. The President later justified his rejection of Ball's position in the following manner:

> I think all of us felt the same concerns and anxieties that Ball had expressed, but most of these men in the Cabinet Room were more worried about the results, in our country and throughout the world, of our pulling out and coming home.[65]

Secretary of State Dean Rusk stated his views in a memorandum to the President dated July 1, in which he insisted:

> there can be no serious debate about the fact that we have a commitment to assist the South Vietnamese to resist aggression from the North. . . . The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war.[66]

Perhaps McGeorge Bundy's later observations best sum up the attitude prevalent at the time:

> The crucial elements in the decision, as I think most of the records show, [are that] the President did the things he did because he thought without them there would be an immediate or very early defeat—it was really as simple as that. And he did not have any sense that he was losing control over events, nor in my view did he lose control over events. He simply put off to later choices about what would happen if this course began to have heavy costs. . . .[67]

Finally, as explained by Secretary Rusk, the casualty issue did not affect policy because no reliable estimates of probable casualty levels existed: "[W]e weren't making judgments based upon estimates of what the casualties might be because such estimates weren't worth anything."[68] And nobody seems to have anticipated the magnitude of casualties that finally resulted—despite McNamara's estimate of 500 KIAs a month and predictions of a long war of attrition. For example, William Bundy remembered:

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[65]Johnson, p. 147.

[66]Quoted in Berman, p. 92.

[67]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

[68]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

> I kind of assumed that it could go into the tens of thousands. I didn't think it would get seriously worse than that. . . .[69]

In conclusion, explicit concern over the possible linkage of anticipated casualty levels with declining public support played little or no role in the decision process during the spring or summer of 1965, although the issue was clearly raised by several of the participants in the policy debates. Memories of public opinion problems associated with casualties may have influenced policies during the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations, but during the tenures of these two Presidents the situation in Vietnam did not deteriorate to the point where the only alternative to a Communist victory seemed to be a massive U.S. military commitment. Because the issues involved were deemed so important, because the only alternative appeared to be the loss of South Vietnam to Communist aggression, the principals agreed in the summer of 1965 to go ahead with a major land combat commitment, fully aware that the resulting war might be long, difficult, and would result in substantial casualties to U.S. military personnel. One of the errors committed during this period was the assumption, rarely questioned, that since strong public support existed at the outset of the war and the nation's leaders believed critical national interests were concerned, the American people would continue to support the war for however long it would take.

The extent of the President's confidence in the willingness of the American people to bear the necessary burden in killed, wounded, missing, and captured U.S. personnel to defend nations from Communist aggression is perhaps best expressed in his own words. At a news conference on July 9, 1965, he stated:

> Whatever is required [to stop a Communist victory in South Vietnam] I am sure will be supplied. . . . It will require understanding and endurance and patriotism. We suffered 160,000 casualties since World War II, but we did not allow Greece or Turkey or Iran or Formosa or Lebanon or others to fall to aggressors, and we don't plan to let up until the aggression ceases.[70]

In short, the President and his top advisors overestimated the willingness of the public to tolerate increased casualties over time in a limited war. There can be no question that in the summer of 1965 President Johnson and his senior advisors sincerely believed that vital U.S. interests were at stake in Vietnam, and that the bulk of Americans supported them. They assumed the American people would bear

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[69]Interview, William Bundy, May 4, 1982.

[70]Quoted in Berman, p. 121.

the burden of military actions necessary to protect those interests. Perhaps the Administration could have explained the U.S. commitment and objectives more clearly and openly early in 1965, but Johnson's domestic political concerns prevented that approach. Of course, Presidents are elected to carry out policies they deem correct, regardless of the ups and downs of public opinion polls. Whether or not vital U.S. interests were actually at stake in Vietnam is a matter for debate. Where the national leadership erred was in forgetting the lessons of Korea and the French experience: (1) Limited wars often cost more and last longer than anticipated; (2) public support inevitably declines with mounting casualties, no matter what interests are at stake; and (3) democracies cannot continue fighting limited wars indefinitely with steadily declining public support.

Two and a half years of bitter warfare in Vietnam led to a gradual but dramatic transformation of the U.S. domestic scene. The 1968 enemy Tet offensive proved to be no military victory for the VC-NVA forces, but it resulted in the critical turning point on the U.S. domestic front. Substantial numbers of prominent and influential figures became convinced that the American people were no longer willing to go on paying the price in casualties and dollars for continuing the war indefinitely in Vietnam. The next section traces the deterioration of public support and the gradual recognition by some policymakers that in limited wars casualties over time indeed may so profoundly affect public support that the war can no longer be prosecuted.

V. TET 1968: THE TURNING POINT AT HOME

> Left with no clear alternatives it could accept, the American people . . . drifted increasingly into grumbling about the rising losses and costs of the war as the war dragged on. . . . By 1968, the domestic consensus of full support under which the United States had so grandiosely started under Kennedy in 1961 had been permanently lost. But the consensus had not simply been lost with respect to Indochina alone. After 1968, it became clear that the specific anti-communist and anti-Soviet domestic popular consensus which had for so long undergirded and supported the U.S. policies of containment and had sustained them throughout the high cold war, had been fundamentally shaken in the whole of American foreign policy. —Paul M. Kattenburg, 1980

The insertion of large-scale U.S. combat forces in Southeast Asia in 1965 stymied an overt North Vietnamese military takeover of South Vietnam. U.S. troops decisively defeated regular NVA units in numerous engagements. Massive U.S. firepower forced the Communists to revert increasingly to guerrilla tactics and insurgency warfare. All indications showed that from 1965 through 1967 U.S. forces made relatively slow but steady progress against the enemy on the ground in pure military terms, inflicting staggering losses on Communist forces. The United States appears to have been slowly winning the war in a strict military sense, particularly with respect to main unit conventional engagements.

Yet throughout this period, public support for U.S. military involvement in Vietnam steadily declined. During 1967 public support for the war fell permanently below 50 percent and continued to drop. Domestic unrest and increasingly violent opposition to the war were more and more in evidence. Political pressures mounted on the President to escalate the war beyond levels he and most of his civilian advisors considered appropriate and safe. As in the Korean war, the fundamental dilemmas of limited war had emerged with a vengeance once again. Slow steady progress on the military front was not enough. Growing numbers of Americans began questioning the costs of the war as it became obvious that no clear-cut objectives existed and that a quick, decisive victory was not in the cards.

At the end of January 1968, the enemy launched its long-awaited Tet offensive. Although the U.S. civilian and military leadership had expected the attack for some time, the Tet offensive proved to be more intense and widespread than had been anticipated. Regular NVA

forces cut off the Marines at Khe Sanh, raising the specter of a second Dien Bien Phu. Nonetheless, after some initial panic in Washington, U.S. and ARVN forces quickly gained the upper hand and very rapidly threw back the enemy forces on all fronts (except in the city of Hue). Most military observers agree that over the next several weeks enemy forces were seriously mauled. The enemy stranglehold on Khe Sanh was broken.

Although Tet has often been characterized as a staggering defeat for the enemy that virtually eliminated the Viet Cong as an important factor in any future fighting, it also seriously demoralized the American people and much of the policymaking elite.[1] The CIA liaison officer to the White House at this time, George Carver, summed up the Tet offensive as follows:

> As Tet was one of the great ironies of history. Tet was very similar to the Battle of the Bulge. It was a desperation, admittedly high-risk effort to reverse trends that the Politburo in Hanoi knew could simply not be allowed to continue for another year or two without running the risk of having its weakness so evident that it would be defeated. It was the largest defeat that the Communists ever suffered in the field and was the greatest political victory externally.[2]

Robert Komer recalled the American attitude in Saigon:

> If Washington fell off the wagon as a result of Tet-68, we in Saigon, to a man, at least in the Command, agreed that Tet was a big victory for us. Washington saw Tet as disastrous, and thought it proved the war probably couldn't be won. McNamara had concluded that earlier. But Washington now concluded that the war couldn't be won and was costing too much.[3]

Thus, although the Tet offensive failed in a military sense in Vietnam, it resulted in a stunning North Vietnamese victory in the United States in terms of American attitudes toward the war. American public opinion had not been properly prepared for the magnitude of the enemy attacks. U.S. press coverage gave the impression that the VC-NVA forces had struck a massive and highly successful blow against U.S. and ARVN forces.[4] The cutting off of U.S. forces at Khe Sanh revived unpleasant memories of the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu. Ultimate U.S. victory seemed further away than ever. Most important, U.S. casualties jumped to the highest weekly levels of the war. Night

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[1]For example, see Lewy, and General William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, Doubleday, New York, 1976.

[2]Interview, George Carver, March 11, 1982.

[3]Interview, Robert Komer, March 29, 1982.

[4]See Braestrup.

after night during February the American public viewed vivid color footage of the carnage on television news programs. Critical sectors of traditional support for the President began to waver as doubts grew over how much longer the American people would tolerate a continuation of the human and monetary costs of the war.

By 1968 President Johnson could no longer ignore the uproar in the country and the defections of some of his most stalwart supporters. A complete reassessment of U.S. Vietnam policy was ordered in early March. While this exercise did not lead to any dramatic changes initially, the aftereffects of the Tet offensive contributed to President Johnson's decisions, announced at the end of March, to place an ironclad ceiling on authorized troop levels, initiate a bombing halt north of the twentieth parallel, launch a new public effort to reach a negotiated settlement, and withdraw from the 1968 Presidential race. In essence, the beginning of "Vietnamization" and the ultimate policy of withdrawing U.S. combat forces can be dated from this period.

FADING OPTIMISM, 1965 THROUGH 1967

Published documents, particularly those found in the Pentagon Papers, show that in 1966 and 1967 serious doubts about overall U.S. policy in Vietnam emerged at senior government levels—most strongly among certain civilian officials in the Defense Department—as the war dragged on into a seemingly endless stalemate. Prominent among these were Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, and Assistant Secretary of Defense Alain Enthoven. As the war continued, concern over declining public support affected the views of these officials and others; the mounting human cost of the war was one factor contributing to that decline. As recognition of this factor spread, some officials began advocating new measures and strategies designed implicitly or explicitly to reduce or stabilize casualties to U.S. military personnel.

In 1966, McNamara began actively opposing further expansion of the war and urging greater efforts in the search for a negotiated settlement. Concern over slipping public support seems to have been a major factor in McNamara's conversion to increasingly "dovish" positions. As early as November 1965, the Secretary of Defense warned President Johnson that new troop reinforcement requests in the approval process could "not guarantee success." Two months later, McNaughton expressed fears that U.S. forces were becoming involved

in "an escalating military stalemate."[5] In June, CINCPAC submitted a request to raise the authorized troop ceiling for Vietnam to 542,588 for the end of CY1967. For the first time McNamara came out strongly against granting approval for the full troop request. In a trip memorandum dated October 14 the Secretary of Defense recommended to the President a reduction in the bombing of the North, a much reduced increase in U.S. troop levels, and a renewed push for a political settlement. While still expressing a degree of optimism, McNamara seemed worried about the willingness of the American people to continue bearing the costs of the war:

> My concern continues, however, in other respects. This is because I see no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon. . . . [The enemy] has adopted a strategy of keeping us busy and waiting us out (a strategy of attriting our national will). . . .

The Secretary of Defense seemed keenly aware of the dangers of continuing an open-ended commitment that entailed open-ended costs:

> The solution lies in girding, openly, for a longer war and in taking actions immediately which will in 12 to 18 months give clear evidence that the continuing costs and risks to the American people are acceptably limited, that the formula for success has been found, and that the end of the war is merely a matter of time.

In November it was decided that MACV would be granted only a relatively small troop increase. The Secretary of Defense informed the JCS that the troop ceiling objective for June 30, 1968, had been lowered to 469,000. McNamara laid out the reasoning behind this decision in a DPM (Draft Presidential Memorandum) to the President dated November 17 that included the following:

> the high and increasing cost of the war to the United States is likely to encourage the Communists to doubt our staying power and to try to "wait us out."

The DPM focused on two options the President could select:

> The first approach would be to continue in 1967 to increase friendly forces as rapidly as possible, and without limit, and employ them primarily in large-scale "seek out and destroy" operations. . . . The second approach is to follow a similarly aggressive strategy of "seek out and destroy," but to build friendly forces only to that level required to neutralize the large enemy units and prevent them from interfering with the pacification program.

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[5]The New York Times Edition, p. 516.

The memorandum recommended the second option—essentially a holding action intended only to prevent defeat—in part because:

> [Focusing on pacification], plus the effects of a successful interdiction campaign to cut off their other support, would effectively neutralize [the enemy], possibly at the cost of far fewer casualties to both sides than the first approach would allow.

McNamara had clearly preferred the second option—one that precluded any chance of a clear-cut military victory—in part because it promised lower casualty levels. Many other schemes emerged during this period that were designed to reduce U.S. military manpower requirements and casualties. These included McNamara's electronic barrier plan for the DMZ, the deployment of increased numbers of Third Country troops, and transferring more of the burden of fighting to ARVN. These types of "oblique alternatives" were first discussed at length in the debates of late 1966.

As Pentagon officials increasingly sought to control the costs of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, they came into conflict with the advocates of escalation—largely the military leadership—as a means to end the conflict more rapidly. The debate became particularly heated following the formal submission of General Westmoreland's troop increase requirement of March 18, 1967. This requirement, known as Program #5, detailed a "minimum essential" need for two and one-third additional divisions—about 100,000 men—and an "optimum force" of four and two-thirds divisions, or 201,250 more troops for a total authorized ceiling of 671,616 in 1968.

The problems of declining public support and the growing level of casualties became central issues in the debate over Program #5. Advocates of the program supported a less restrained military approach, and often maintained that decisive escalation would ultimately result in fewer total casualties because the war would be brought to a satisfactory conclusion more quickly. For example, early in 1967 General Beach, USARPAC (Commander, U.S. Army, Pacific), argued for escalation in the following manner:

> Our country harbors a natural desire to ease the hardships in the Vietnam conflict. The military, however, must press to go all out at all levels in SVN if we are to win. . . . We must be prepared to accept heavier casualties in our initial operations and not permit our hesitance to take greater losses to inhibit our tactical aggressiveness. If greater hardships are accepted now we will, in the long run, achieve a military success sooner and at less overall cost in lives and money. . . .

The opponents of Program #5 often attempted to counter such arguments by insisting that public support for the war could no longer be maintained unless the costs of the war—especially casualties—could be stabilized or decreased. One major center of opposition to further troop increases and other forms of escalation that emerged at this time was in the Pentagon's Systems Analysis office under Assistant Secretary of Defense Alain Enthoven. A draft analysis and critique of Program #5 troop requests undertaken by Systems Analysis noted:

> If we are to stay, we must have the backing of the U.S. electorate. As we divert resources from other national goals, as U.S. lives are lost, and as the electorate sees nothing but endless escalation for the future, an increasing fraction will become discouraged. . . . If we are not to lose everything, the trends will have to be changed: the increase in unfavorable public opinion will have to be slowed. . . .

Enthoven expanded on these arguments in a May 1 memorandum to the Secretary of Defense:

> I see this war as a race between, on the one hand, the development of a viable South Vietnam and, on the other, a gradual loss in public support, or even tolerance, for the war. . . . With regard to public support, some people feel we simply have no business being in this war. . . . But there are other factors influencing public support that we can control. Casualties are one.[6]

Several days later, McNaughton entered the fray over Program #5 with a proposed DPM sent to Secretary McNamara. The Assistant Secretary's memorandum is described by the Pentagon historians as exhibiting "uneasiness about the breadth and intensity of public dissatisfaction." It called for an overall reassessment of policy instead of a continuation of the policy of drifting in "deeper and deeper." McNaughton predicted that even if Program #5 won approval, General Westmoreland would again ask for more troops, at the "worst time, 1968" (presumably a reference to the upcoming elections).

The debate over Program #5 intensified at a time when the bombing campaign against the North was becoming increasingly controversial within the Administration. McNaughton's DPM had also recommended restriction of the bombing of North Vietnam to below the twentieth parallel. Advocates of this position routinely employed arguments concerning the need to reduce casualties, maintaining that

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[6]At this time Systems Analysis was undertaking detailed studies of U.S. and allied casualties based on troop location, type of mission, and so forth that were published in the weekly series *Southeast Asia Analysis Report.* See Thomas C. Thayer (ed.), *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965–1972,* Vol. 8, *Casualties and Losses,* OASD(PA&E) Asia Division, February 1975.

bombing in the North around Hanoi needlessly wasted the lives of U.S. pilots. The President's National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow,[7] described in the Pentagon Papers as a "strong bombing advocate" and long in favor of hitting the "North Vietnamese industrial target system," shifted position and came out in support of a bombing cutback in a memorandum dated May 6.[8] As the first advantage listed in support of his recommendations, Rostow noted, "We would cut our loss rate in pilots and planes." Further on he explained:

> I believe we are wasting a good many pilots in the Hanoi-Haiphong area without commensurate results. The major objectives of maintaining the B option [restricting bombing below the twentieth parallel] can be achieved at lower cost.

Meanwhile McNaughton's draft DPM had been reworked by Secretary McNamara and his staff, and was forwarded to the President on May 19. President Johnson called the twenty-two page document "one of the most detailed memos he [McNamara] had ever submitted since I became President."[9] The DPM urgently advised against approval of Program #5. In addition to supporting the new bombing restrictions that had been under discussion, the memo contained "a new and radical thrust" that "amounted to . . . a recommendation that we accept a compromise outcome" in South Vietnam. In defending its position on curtailing the bombing of North Vietnam, the DPM observed: "The primary cost of course are [sic] US lives: The air campaign against heavily defended areas costs us one pilot in every 40 sorties."

It is evident that the draft memorandum of May 19 was in part a response to the unchecked erosion of U.S. public support for war. The DPM's overall assessment of the Vietnam situation stressed decreasing public support at home:

> [The war in Vietnam becomes] increasingly unpopular as it escalates—causing more American casualties, more fear of its growing into a wider war, more privation of the domestic sector, and more distress at the amount of suffering being visited on the noncombatants in Vietnam, South and North. . . .

A central objection in the memorandum against granting MACV's full troop increases was the "irresistible pressures" that would result for massively escalating the war. Mobilization of the Reserves would provoke a "bitter Congressional debate." Ironically, the Secretary of

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[7]Rostow had assumed the post of National Security Advisor on April 1, 1966, following McGeorge Bundy's resignation on February 28.

[8]New York Times Edition, p. 533, and Document #128, pp. 573–577.

[9]Johnson, p. 369.

Defense and his staff were now forcefully advancing the same argument employed by Ball in the summer of 1965: The increased casualties and broad war mobilization of the country that would flow from Program #5 would unleash the "great beast" of public demands for escalation. Thus, anticipated public pressure to expand the war was characterized as the "toughest" question:

> The addition of the 200,000 men, involving as it does a call-up of Reserves and an addition of 500,000 to the military strength, would, as mentioned above, almost certainly set off bitter Congressional debate and irresistible domestic pressures for stronger action outside South Vietnam. Cries would go up—much louder than they already have—to "take the wraps off the men in the field. . . ." The use of tactical nuclear and area-denial radiological-bacteriological-chemical weapons would probably be suggested at some point if the Chinese entered the war in Vietnam or Korea or if US losses were running high while conventional efforts were not producing desired results.

Debate over Program #5 continued through June. On May 24, the JCS again called for reinforcements of an additional 200,000 men for Vietnam. JCS, CINCPAC, and MACV again pressed for a much expanded bombing campaign against the North. The outbreak of war in the Middle East, however, led President Johnson to defer making a final decision on future force levels and strategy until mid-July. At that time, Johnson decided to choose a middle course on the bombing issue; the air offensive would be continued but with some additional restrictions. These included a ban on attacks within ten miles of the North Vietnamese capital, because "we were losing more pilots in the heavily protected Hanoi-Haiphong area than elsewhere."[10] With respect to Program #5, the President approved a relatively small increase of only about 50,000 men, or half of MACV's "minimum essential" number. Johnson's memoirs offer no explanation for this decision. The Pentagon Papers assert that the key issue was Johnson's unwillingness to suffer the domestic political consequences of mobilizing the Reserves.

Neither side in the internal debate taking place within the government considered the President's decision of mid-July 1967 to be the final word. The military continued pressing for more reinforcements, a more intense bombing campaign, and an expansion of the war. On the latter point, Walt Rostow was one of the few senior civilian advisors who strongly supported their position. For their part, the civilians in the Pentagon, led by McNamara, kept pushing their case for further limiting the war.

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[10]Johnson, p. 368.

In his discussions with the President, the Secretary of Defense began placing increasing emphasis on the problem of public opinion and on the linkage between casualties and declining public support. For example, on October 1, 1967, McNamara arranged a special luncheon meeting with Johnson in order to present "a major proposal for a new course of action." This proposal was later written out in greater detail in a memo to the President, dated November 1, entitled "Outlook If Present Course of Action Is Continued." McNamara "foresaw requests for additional ground forces and believed that American and Allied casualties would increase." He continued:

> There is, in my opinion, a very real question whether under these circumstances it will be possible to maintain our efforts in South Vietnam for the time necessary to accomplish our objectives there. . . . The alternative possibilities lie in the stabilization of our military operations in the South (possibly with fewer U.S. casualties) and of our air operations in the North. . . .[11]

The Secretary of Defense made three specific recommendations, one of which explicitly called for an examination of policies that would reduce casualties of U.S. military personnel and transfer the fighting to ARVN. The memo recommended (1) stabilizing ground and air efforts, (2) halting the bombing of the North before the end of 1967, and (3) initiating "a new study of military operations in the South aimed at reducing U.S. casualties and giving the South Vietnamese greater responsibility for their own security."

The contents of McNamara's memorandum were discussed at length by the President's civilian advisors. Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Ambassador to Saigon Ellsworth Bunker, and Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach appear to have opposed an unconditional bombing halt but supported the rest of the recommendations. On October 17, McGeorge Bundy[12] sent the President a memorandum that generally supported McNamara's first and third recommendations. Maxwell Taylor, Abe Fortas, and Clark Clifford all opposed the McNamara proposals.

On October 17, the JCS responded to the Secretary of Defense's latest proposals with a memorandum to the President recommending a lengthy series of escalatory actions to increase pressure on North Vietnam.

Once again the President adopted a middle course between the two extremes, rejecting both the JCS proposals and the McNamara

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[11]Quoted in Johnson, p. 372.

[12]On leaving the government in February 1966, Bundy had assumed the presidency of the Ford Foundation.

recommendation for an unconditional bombing halt. On December 18, he sent a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense explaining his decisions. Instead of a bombing pause, he called for renewed strikes against targets in the North that "would not involve excessive civilian casualties; excessive U.S. losses; or substantial increased risk of engaging the USSR or Communist China in the war."[13] With respect to McNamara's first recommendation, the President opposed a publicly announced policy of stabilization, but rejected any further force increase:

> I do not believe we should announce a so-called policy of stabilization. . . . On the other hand, at the moment I see no basis for increasing U.S. forces above the current approved level.

Most interesting for the purposes of this report, the President fully endorsed McNamara's third recommendation on limiting casualties to U.S. military personnel:

> The third recommendation of Secretary McNamara has merit. I agree that we should review the conduct of military operations in South Vietnam with a view to reducing U.S. casualties, accelerating the turnover of responsibility to the GVN, and working toward less destruction and fewer casualties in South Vietnam.

It is unclear whether this review was ever undertaken. What seems most likely is that the President's memorandum was rapidly overtaken by events. A little over a month later, VC-NVA forces launched their 1968 Tet offensive, the consequences of which ultimately led to a major reassessment of Vietnam policy in Washington.

The evidence from the period of heavy U.S. combat involvement in Vietnam from 1965 through 1967 thus shows a growing awareness, at least among the leading civilian officials of the Defense Department, of the problem of declining public support for the war and an increasing recognition that an important factor undermining public support was the mounting casualties to U.S. servicemen. During this period internal debate within the Administration centered with growing frequency on the issues of declining public support and the effects of casualties on public opinion. By 1967, the Office of the Secretary of Defense was producing recommendations specifically designed to reduce casualties to U.S. personnel and to transfer more of the combat burden to ARVN.

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[13]Quoted in Johnson, p. 600.

TET AND ITS AFTERMATH, JANUARY-MARCH 1968

As 1967 drew to a close, the President and most of his senior advisors remained guardedly optimistic about prospects in Vietnam. VC-NVA forces took heavy beatings during major engagements in October and November. When it met in early November, the President's advisory group of distinguished former government officials—known as the Wise Men—expressed concern about public opinion and declining public support, but generally supported the overall conduct of the war.[14]

By December, however, indications of enemy preparations for a major new offensive began to be detected. General Westmoreland and others argued that an enemy offensive was imminent.[15] On January 31, 1968, the beginning of the Tet lunar New Year, the enemy struck. Although an offensive had been anticipated, its scale, intensity, and initial degree of success took Washington, the media, and the public by surprise. VC-NVA troops launched coordinated attacks on almost all major cities, provincial capitals, and many district towns throughout South Vietnam. Targets in Saigon included the U.S. embassy and the Presidential Palace. Yet U.S. and ARVN forces soon brought the situation under control. After suffering staggering losses, enemy troops were ejected within days from all cities they had entered or occupied, with the exception of Hue. South Vietnamese civilians did not rise up in opposition to the government as enemy forces had anticipated. ARVN units fought surprisingly well. The U.S. media, however, continued to portray the enemy Tet offensive as a stunning setback for U.S. and ARVN forces.[16] As one historian has noted, despite major Administration efforts to portray Tet as a decisive enemy defeat, "to the American people and to the press it remained a disaster."[17]

MACV was confident that the forces already in Vietnam were adequate to handle the enemy offensive. Officials in Washington, however, did not want to take any chances with the besieged Marine base at Khe Sanh because of the perceived similarities to the French situation at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. At the prompting of General Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, General Westmoreland finally submitted a request for emergency reinforcements of about 11,000 men on February

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[14]Participants at this meeting included Dean Acheson, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Clark Clifford, Douglas Dillon, Arthur Dean, Henry Cabot Lodge, Robert Murphy, Abe Fortas, Omar Bradley, and Maxwell D. Taylor.

[15]See Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977, pp. 64–73.

[16]See Braestrup.

[17]Schandler, p. 85.

12. This request indirectly reopened the debate over force level ceilings for 1968 that had raged since at least March 1967 over Program #5.

For some time the Joint Chiefs of Staff had expressed concern over the depletion of U.S. worldwide strategic troop reserves resulting from the demands of the Vietnam conflict. The President had consistently opposed a Reserve call-up for domestic political reasons. The JCS reasoned that the crisis atmosphere engendered in Washington during the early phase of the Tet offensive provided an appropriate occasion to once again raise the issue of a Reserve call-up. Consequently, the JCS recommended against approval of Westmoreland's troop reinforcement request unless it was accompanied by a call-up. McNamara vigorously opposed this recommendation; he supported sending the reinforcements, but only for the duration of the emergency, after which they would be withdrawn. The President approved Westmoreland's request, but deferred any decision on a call-up.[18]

With the situation on the ground stabilized, General Wheeler left for Saigon late in February to determine with General Westmoreland future U.S. troop requirements. Once again, the Chairman of the JCS saw the opportunity to press for mobilization of the Reserves. The troop request generated from this trip was designed to meet both U.S. global requirements and a hypothetical worst-case situation in Vietnam. In essence, it was a resubmission of Program #5's "optimum force" troop request of March 1967. Forwarded to the President on February 27, the new requirement called for an increase of 206,756 troops for a new ceiling of 731,756, necessitating a major Reserve call-up.

Many senior officials in Washington gained the impression that the new request was dictated solely by the requirements of the situation in Vietnam following the Tet offensive. Consequently, many were surprised and shocked by the magnitude of the troop requests, which seemed to confirm the extremely pessimistic portrayal of the situation in Vietnam.[19] The Wheeler-Westmoreland request provoked another round of intensive debates in Washington that resulted in the recognition that U.S. policy toward Vietnam had to be fundamentally reexamined. The critical factor in this realization was the general collapse of public support for the war and the mounting divisiveness that threatened to tear apart the political fabric of the nation.

As might be expected, McNamara forcefully opposed the new request. He recommended a small Reserve call-up and a much smaller increase in troop levels plus new initiatives for a negotiated settlement.

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[18]See Johnson, p. 386; and Schandler, pp. 92–104.

[19]Schandler, pp. 105–120.

The Secretary of Defense argued that his course would "limit losses in men and dollars and would help ease the growing dissension within the country."[20]

Partly because of his increasing opposition to U.S. military policies in Vietnam, Secretary McNamara decided in November 1967 to resign his post effective March 1. The President designated Clark Clifford, a lawyer in private practice and long-time informal political advisor to the President, to succeed McNamara. On February 28, Johnson directed Clark Clifford to head a special study group to review the Wheeler-Westmoreland troop request.[21] The Clifford group rapidly expanded its field of inquiry to include a review of the entire Vietnam situation, in an attempt to "reconcile the military, diplomatic, economic, Congressional, and public opinion problems involved."[22] Defense Department civilians, not unsympathetic to McNamara's views, dominated the Clifford group and influenced considerably the new Secretary of Defense. Many of the pessimistic appraisals generated for the group were founded on the view that public opinion would no longer tolerate "more of the same" in Vietnam.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs) prepared a paper for the Clifford group specifically on public opinion. It strongly recommended denial of further troop increases, a change to a defensive strategy, and a reduction in offensive activities. From the perspective of public opinion, the paper argued, the advantages of following this course of action would be "overwhelming" because:

> The pain of additional deployments, reserve call-ups, increased draft calls, *increased casualties*, extended tours would be eliminated. . . . The frustration of more-and-more-and-more into the endless pit would be eliminated.[23]

In his report for the Clifford group, Alain Enthoven, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, emphasized the relative costs in casualties that could be anticipated from each of a variety of different options. This report argued that a return to a modified enclave strategy and the abandonment of search-and-destroy tactics

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[20]Johnson, p. 392.

[21]Participants included McNamara, Maxwell Taylor, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Fowler, Nicholas Katzenbach, Walt Rostow, Director of the CIA Richard Helms, William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Warnke, Philip Habib (Bundy's deputy), and others.

[22]Johnson, p. 393.

[23]Emphasis added.

would be advantageous because it would stabilize U.S. casualties at much lower levels.[24]

Paul Warnke's office of International Security Affairs conducted the most complete and thoughtful reassessment of U.S. policy. Like the office of Public Affairs, ISA focused on the collapse of the home front as the major reason necessitating deescalation of the war. Casualties were implicitly recognized as a key component in the growing unpopularity of the war. ISA opposed approval of the Wheeler-Westmoreland troop request because:

> We will have to mobilize reserves, increase our budget by billions, and see U.S. casualties climb to 1,300–1,400 per month. . . . [G]rowing disaffection accompanied, as it certainly will be, by increased defiance of the draft and growing unrest in the cities because of the belief that we are neglecting domestic problems, runs great risks of provoking a domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions.

Warnke's paper is said to have had "a tremendous impact" on the new Secretary of Defense, convincing him that a fundamental change in policy was in order.[25] Yet largely due to the intense objections of the JCS and other military elements, the Clifford group eventually omitted all discussion of a basic change in strategy in its final DPM dated March 3. The revised DPM called for a small increase in authorized troop levels and deferment of a decision on larger increases for a later date. It argued, however, that new strategic guidance for Vietnam had to be formulated. In addition, it warned that no matter what was done, the United States would fail if:

> The attitudes of the American people towards "more Vietnams" are such that our other commitments are brought into question as a matter of U.S. will.

Ultimately, however, the position of the civilians in the Defense Department prevailed. By March 22, President Johnson had tentatively decided to send only 13,500 additional troops to South Vietnam, mainly support forces for the 10,500 troop "emergency" contingent dispatched in February. The President also agreed to authorize only a small Reserve call-up of 62,000. Johnson later gave the following reasons for not granting MACV's requested troop increases at this time:[26]

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[24]See Schandler, pp. 146–147.

[25]Schandler, p. 156.

[26]Johnson, p. 415.

- A renewed Communist offensive seemed unlikely.
- ARVN was improving.
- Serious domestic financial problems were emerging.
- Domestic public support continued to decline.

The importance of the decline in public support in determining the President's decision cannot be overemphasized. Nothing had brought home more forcefully to Johnson and his advisors the fundamental change in attitudes wrought by the Tet offensive than a series of meetings with the Wise Men conducted late in March.[27] As noted earlier, the Wise Men had backed the President's Vietnam policies with virtual unanimity after their previous meeting in November. Now, with few exceptions, the Wise Men advised stabilization or deescalation of the war accompanied by new peace initiatives. The major reason for the change in attitudes was the widespread conviction that the American public would no longer tolerate the costs of continuing the war as before. As Walt Rostow later recalled, the Wise Men "were not focusing on Vietnam, but on the political situation in the United States."[28]

On March 26, the President met personally with the Wise Men. Bundy summarized the generally pessimistic views of the group and counseled transferring more of the fighting burden to ARVN. Most of the Wise Men argued that the time had come to disengage from the Vietnam combat commitment. The group made it clear to the President that the general collapse of public support for the war required a radical change in policy. As President Johnson observed later:

> All the advisers expressed deep concern about the divisions in our country. Some of them felt that those divisions were growing rapidly and might soon force our withdrawal from Vietnam.[29]

Clark Clifford later described the effect of this meeting on the President in the following manner:

> The President could hardly believe his ears. . . . He was so shocked by the change in attitude of the Wise Men that he wanted to hear the briefings they had received. The meeting with the Wise Men

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[27]Those attending the meetings included Dean Acheson, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Douglas Dillon, Cyrus Vance, Arthur Dean, John J. McCloy, Omar Bradley, Matthew Ridgway, Maxwell Taylor, Robert Murphy, Henry Cabot Lodge, Abe Fortas, and Arthur Goldberg. Dean Rusk, Clark Clifford, W. Averell Harriman, Walt Rostow, Richard Helms, General Wheeler, Paul Nitze, Nicholas Katzenbach, and William Bundy represented the Administration.

[28]Quoted in Schandler, p. 262.

[29]Johnson, p. 418.

> served the purpose that I hoped it would. It really shook the President.[30]

After this meeting, several senior advisors, particularly Clifford and Rusk, pressed the President hard to announce a bombing pause, a stabilization of the war, and a new peace initiative as the only way to restore even a semblance of domestic unity. Otherwise, they argued, growing popular discord would not permit a further continuation of the war for long. Although the President and his advisors did not believe Hanoi would negotiate, they realized dramatic proposals were necessary to maintain public cohesion.

As a result of the Clifford group review and the discussions with the Wise Men, on March 31 President Johnson announced the three policy measures that altered the nature of the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam:

- A token troop increase of only 10,500. In effect this was a rejection of any further troop increases.
- A full bombing halt north of the DMZ, to induce the North Vietnamese to enter into peace negotiations.
- Gradual transfer of combat responsibilities to ARVN.

Although little changed in the short run, Tet proved to be the turning point for U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam. The gradual disengagement and withdrawal of U.S. forces can be dated from March 31. As one authority recently observed:

> The siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet offensive marked America's strategic defeat in Vietnam. It would be five years until America finally withdrew and over seven years until the Republic of Vietnam finally succumbed to a North Vietnamese invasion, but after our "success" at Khe Sanh, the war was unwinnable for the United States. We had lost the one absolute requirement for victory—the support of the American people.[31]

In his speech of March 31, the President also announced his intention not to run for reelection in November. The media generally interpreted Johnson's decision to withdraw from the Presidential race as a decisive indication that the growing unpopularity of the war had ruined the President's chances for a second term. While there were many reasons other than the war why the President chose not to run, there can be no doubt that the decline in public support for the war was the most

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[30]Quoted in Schandler, p. 264.

[31]Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., "Vietnam Reconsidered," *The New Republic*, July 12, 1982, p. 30.

important factor in determining the changes in Vietnam policy announced on March 31. As the President later explained:

> My biggest worry was not Vietnam itself; it was the divisiveness and pessimism at home. I knew the American people were deeply worried. . . . For the collapse of the home front, I knew well, was just what Hanoi was counting on. . . .
>
> I sensed that another idea was now influencing many Americans, including men who had played a major part in our critical decisions since 1965. They seemed to feel that the bitter debate and noisy dissension at home about Vietnam were too high a price to pay for honoring our commitment in Southeast Asia. They deplored the demonstrations and turbulent arguments about Vietnam.[32]

The recollections of President Johnson's senior policy advisors and other officials who were interviewed in 1982 confirmed that the domestic reaction to the 1968 Tet offensive was the critical factor that led to the reassessment of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Some, although not all, felt that casualties to U.S. personnel had become the major burden of the war that the public was no longer willing to bear. Others argued that once the decision to seek a negotiated settlement had been reached a continuation of casualties at existing levels became politically intolerable. Although opinions differed somewhat, there was a general consensus among President Johnson's former senior advisors that Tet became a turning point at home not because it was a defeat for U.S. forces, which they believe it was not, but because it so clearly dramatized the continuing and seemingly endlessly mounting costs to the United States of a war that was perhaps "unwinnable."

Secretary Rusk explained the effects of the Tet offensive on the U.S. domestic front as follows:

> How was it that the Tet offensive of early 1968, which resulted in a tremendous military setback for the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, was translated into such a brilliant political success here in the United States? I don't think I have all the answers to that but certainly the continuing casualties, the duration and extension of the war in time, plus the television in everybody's living room every day [were critical factors].[33]

George Ball, one of the Wise Men in 1968, concurred:

> What people were talking about then was, "My God, we can't go on another five years losing people." It wasn't, you know, "We can't accept another 15,000 dead," but the fact was that it looked like a

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[32]Johnson, p. 422.

[33]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

> long continuing war and nobody was prepared to face that. And there were lots of statements that the American people would not accept any more casualties.[34]

As another member of President Johnson's informal advisory group of former senior officials in 1968, McGeorge Bundy insisted that the "terrible surprise" of the Tet offensive and the fact that "the situation in the [South Vietnamese] countryside really had not improved" led the Wise Men to counsel disengagement. Bundy added, however, that it was "obvious that the casualties in the war were an important part of the problem."[35] Leonard Unger, formerly of the State Department's Vietnam Task Force and Ambassador to Laos, agreed that by 1968 U.S. casualties had clearly become one of the most important costs of the war in the mind of the public.[36]

Other individuals interviewed stressed that following the President's public announcement of a bombing halt and new efforts to reach a negotiated compromise settlement late in March, casualties came to be viewed inside the Administration as increasingly intolerable politically. The most important benefit of progressively transferring more and more combat responsibilities to ARVN was reduced U.S. casualties.[37] Robert Komer, in charge of the pacification effort in Saigon at the time of the Tet offensive, later recalled:

> Particularly after Tet 1968 the consideration that we were continuing to lose substantial numbers of men became a very important factor in the political decision process in Washington. . . . Another variable enters the picture in 1968 and that is an election, with an unpopular war that we don't seem to be winning—the casualty rate becomes a terribly important factor.[38]

Walt Rostow agreed: "Towards the end there was a consciousness of trying—once they started on Vietnamization—of trying to save casualties."[39] McNamara confirmed that "the issue of casualties was very much an issue on our minds,"[40] as is confirmed by the Secretary's own memoranda from late 1967.

Thus a clear consensus emerged from the interviews with senior policy advisors and other officials from the Johnson Administration that declining public support for the Vietnam war had been a critical factor

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[34]Interview, George Ball, May 4, 1982.

[35]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

[36]Interview, Leonard Unger, March 22, 1982.

[37]Monthly U.S. military casualty levels did begin to decline rapidly after 1968.

[38]Interview, Robert Komer, March 29, 1982.

[39]Interview, Walt Rostow, May 6, 1982.

[40]Interview, Robert McNamara, July 21, 1982.

in the decisions to fundamentally alter U.S. policy in the spring of 1968. Several agreed that mounting casualties over time were the primary or at least a major cause of the decline in public support for the war, and that loss of public support forced the President to abandon his chosen policy in Vietnam.

CASUALTIES AND PUBLIC OPINION: SOME LESSONS FROM THE VIETNAM WAR

There are undoubtedly many lessons to be learned from the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. In the opinion of many of the former officials we interviewed, one of these lessons for future policymakers is that initial levels of public support for U.S. involvement in a prolonged and indecisive limited conflict cannot be maintained indefinitely if substantial numbers of U.S. casualties continue to be generated. Rusk warned how widespread support during the initial phases of an overseas intervention can lull officials into complacency over possible future problems once the number of casualties begins to grow:

> I think that at the beginning of such an enterprise—Korea, Vietnam—there's a strong sense of support—rally around the flag, this is the right thing to do—that sort of thing. But over time, that begins to erode. . . . [In 1965] the President was on the phone to people in different parts of the country regularly. I would go to national conventions of the AFL-CIO, Rotary, Kiwanis, groups of that sort. I'd go to joint sessions of state legislatures, things, you know, where you could get a pretty good feel as to what the large majority of the view at that time was. But that changed. . . . And again this was because of the continuing flow of casualties after so long a period plus our inability to show people that the war was going to be over in due course.[41]

Chester Cooper, a member of the National Security Council staff whose tasks included dealing with groups in opposition to the war, expressed essentially the same views:

> The war wasn't really popular in 1964, it just wasn't unpopular. By 1965 the marches and teach-ins began . . . there was plenty of opposition to the war without the casualties. But the casualties were the kind of thing that was oppressive. The letters that had to go out to families; the funerals that were observed when you'd cross Memorial Bridge every day. It was getting so that by 1966 and 1967 one could meet people whose sons or husbands had died or had been seriously wounded in Vietnam. In 1964 and 1965 this was a very rare thing. And it was then that the reality of this war came home.[42]

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[41]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

[42]Interview, Chester Cooper, March 10, 1982.

Robert Komer viewed the effects of mounting casualty levels in the same light:

> The most obvious and immediate cost is the cost of casualties. The death notices in the newspapers and so forth. Remember what it costs you in blood is much more politically visible than what it costs you in treasures. . . . Casualties become a problem because they are cumulative. You spend a lot of money, but then you have another appropriation the following fiscal year and the year after that. But casualties mount up, and they have a psychological and political impact over time.[43]

The major lesson many former officials drew from the Vietnam war experience was that in the future U.S. intervention in the Third World must be decisive and brief. In their view, an effective and brief engagement entailing heavy U.S. casualties might garner substantial public support. Public support declines when casualties continue to add up over time, as was the case during the Vietnam war. Dean Rusk summarized this argument as follows:

> A rather heavy number of casualties can be taken in the short term to get the struggle over with, but if there is a steady stream of casualties over a considerable period of time, then the erosion on the home front is very significant, or can be very significant.[44]

Walt Rostow's views were similar:

> The lesson I draw from Vietnam, and Korea too, is that if we get involved somewhere to the extent that U.S. power is relevant to the combat and the situation and we can do it—the way to do it is to make an unlimited commitment for a very limited, lucidly stated goal. We're not going to hang around this way.[45]

The same lesson was put this way by Robert Komer:

> If you're going to resort to force, it is much better to pour it all on first off and try to achieve a quick, decisive victory, in order to avoid getting bogged down in a quasi-stalemate.[46]

Few would quarrel with the desirability of achieving a quick, decisive victory in any military adventure. The problem is, as we have

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[43]Interview, Robert Komer, March 29, 1982.

[44]Interview, Dean Rusk, June 8, 1982.

[45]Interview, Walt Rostow, May 6, 1982.

[46]Interview, Robert Komer, March 29, 1982.

argued,[47] that many likely future contingencies in the Third World may entail a major risk of stalemated military action. The "rules" of limited war, intended to avoid nuclear confrontation, may not permit the use of conventional force on a scale that will guarantee rapid results. In 1965 officials recognized that the war could not be won quickly partly because of the nature of the conflict and partly because restraints had to be placed on the application of force to avoid superpower confrontation. Yet they also believed the issues at stake were extremely important, so important that the public would support the necessary sacrifices. They did not anticipate the magnitude of the casualties eventually suffered nor the ultimate length of U.S. involvement. This is precisely one of the most frustrating dilemmas of limited military intervention in the Third World, because costs and length of involvement are impossible to predict with any degree of accuracy at the point when military action is being contemplated.

For these reasons and others, several former officials observed that, in retrospect, much more attention should have been devoted to the question of ultimate costs and the casualty/public support problem at the beginning of the Vietnam venture in the spring of 1965. The lesson is clear: When contemplating U.S. military intervention, policymakers should very carefully assess the probable length of involvement and the magnitude of casualties that might be suffered. As McGeorge Bundy pointed out,

> the question of casualty levels was not a large element in the discussion of 1965, but it probably should have been a larger element than it was.[48]

Chester Cooper observed that concern over the casualty question arose too late—only when it had already begun to pose serious problems:

> Although I think there was a general sense that they would have to be careful about unnecessary casualties, I think it was only later when we got to the point where casualties went from tens to hundreds to thousands that there was a very great concern that we had better take a hard look at the casualties. I think it was at that point when concerns became a subject of discussion. When they introduced the ground forces in 1965 I don't think even the word "casualties" necessarily came up. . . . (But) your options begin to narrow very quickly once American boys are being killed."[49]

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[47]See Sec. II.

[48]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

[49]Interview, Chester Cooper, March 10, 1982.

William Bundy also felt that anticipated casualty levels and their effect on public support should have been major topics for explicit discussion in 1965.[50]

Finally, William Bundy also volunteered a sobering warning for the future. In his judgment, the public's sensitivity to casualties has grown steadily since World War II and is continuing to grow:

> I think there's absolutely clearly a correlation [between casualty levels and declining war support]. And I think the level of casualties is the most conspicuous negative index in any war. As this war [Vietnam] went on there were all kinds of other negative indexes. . . . But what I'm saying is that it certainly became my clear view and I think would have been my clear view at the time that the country as a whole would be less tolerant of casualties in Vietnam than it had been in Korea, that it had been less tolerant in Korea than it had been in World War II. And while that is related in part to the sense of the validity of the cause . . . there has been a steady secular decline in the preparedness of the nation to accept casualties abroad. . . . And even though we're in a more assertive national mood now, that consensus would be fragile if it came up against really sharp financial consequences, but especially against casualties.[51]

Finally, many of the former officials we interviewed cautioned future policymakers to be very sensitive to the political ramifications of prisoners of war as a special category of casualties that pose unique public opinion problems. During the Vietnam war, POWs began to represent an important domestic issue as early as 1965, and became a very serious problem once open negotiations commenced with North Vietnam in 1968. In a recent interview, Frank Sieverts, Special Assistant for POWs and MIAs under George Ball at the State Department, testified to the political importance of the problem. When the war began heating up early in 1965, Sieverts began reading extensively on the Korean war POW experience. After the North Vietnamese captured their first U.S. POWs—Marine pilots—in 1965 and threatened to conduct war crimes trials, Sieverts became concerned that the POW issue could drag the war on much longer than militarily necessary, as had been the case in Korea. His major task was to prevent the POW issue from being blown out of proportion and prolonging the conflict or producing greater pressures for unacceptable escalation. George Ball, according

[50]Interview, William Bundy, May 4, 1982.

[51]Interview, William Bundy, May 4, 1982.

to Sieverts, also became very concerned about the POW question and received heavy pressure from President Johnson to defuse the problem, particularly as Congress increasingly called for some sort of action through 1965 and 1966. Sieverts believed a major victory had been achieved when in 1966 the North Vietnamese agreed not to prosecute U.S. POWs, partly as the result of a worldwide media campaign orchestrated by the State Department.[52]

Sieverts's views on the unique political importance of POWs as a special category of casualties, especially when negotiations are under way, was confirmed by Robert Komer:

> [It is an important issue], particularly prisoners of war in the later stages. Now, of course, the North Koreans did exactly the same thing the North Vietnamese did, and that was to use those POWs as leverage. In fact they're still using them today, the Vietnamese. . . . We Americans value American lives, so toward the end of any conflict, getting our prisoners back is very important to us.[53]

McGeorge Bundy's views on the POW issue reflected Komer's:

> Certainly [the POW issue] was a big one. And they [the North Vietnamese] played it for what it was worth on the other side, knowing perfectly well that there is a big asymmetry in that kind of war, because they couldn't care less about their POWs.[54]

Chester Cooper explained why mounting numbers of POWs can have so much effect politically:

> There was a growing movement as early as 1966, led primarily by the families of the POWs who were active and very vocal. You must remember, when you're talking about Air Force POWs, you're talking about flyers. Therefore you're talking about people who have gone to either the Air Force Academy or one of the service academies. Therefore you're talking about people who are reasonably well educated and who have families who know their way around. . . . This small group of articulate and reasonably well-educated and in some cases quite well-connected folk were very strong.[55]

Cooper concluded: "The whole question of POWs was the Achilles' heel, not so much in fighting the war, but in negotiating the war."

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[52]Interview, Frank Sieverts, March 25, 1982.

[53]Interview, Robert Komer, March 29, 1982.

[54]Interview, McGeorge Bundy, July 20, 1982.

[55]Interview, Chester Cooper, March 10, 1982.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

There can be no question that the decline in public support proved to be a decisive factor in the evolution of U.S. policy during the war in Vietnam. By 1967 at the latest, concern over declining public support for the war spread throughout Washington. At the same time increasing numbers of officials, particularly civilians in the Defense Department, began to recognize that the mounting level of U.S. casualties was one of, if not the most, politically damaging cost of the war. Recent analyses of poll data, as discussed in Sec. III, indicate that, given the length and slow progress of the war, casualties increasingly became the focus of public concern. Undoubtedly, this is partly because as casualties continued to mount, they became unacceptable to an increasing number of people. In addition, casualties came to symbolize for many people the frustration of a lengthy war in which victory seemed ever more elusive.

Finally, the deepening domestic crisis, brought on in part by the unwillingness of many Americans to continue paying indefinitely the costs of the war in killed, wounded, and captured, proved to be the key factor in 1968 behind President Johnson's decision to begin down the long road toward ultimate disengagement. Though it had played a relatively small role in the decision process of 1965, the casualty question clearly loomed larger and larger as the war dragged on. Several former advisors to President Johnson felt, in retrospect, that much more attention should have been paid early on in 1965 to the question of anticipated casualty levels and their relationship to continued public support for the war. In the opinion of many of those interviewed, future conflicts must be short and decisive.

A majority of the American people always have supported and are likely to continue to support quick, decisive, and victorious U.S. military forays into the Third World—especially for purposes such as peacekeeping or rescue of U.S. citizens—even if substantial casualties are suffered in a single operation or over a brief period of time. But insertion of U.S. combat forces into localized Third World conflicts is always a risky business. Political constraints will in all likelihood continue to be placed on military actions in limited war situations. In such situations a rapid and clear-cut resolution of a conflict is often not possible. Poll data spanning the period from the 1930s to the present and historical experience both indicate that the public will tolerate only very low costs over time if the United States has not been directly attacked or is not perceived as directly threatened. These same data demonstrate that casualties are by far the most painful cost to the public. Public support in such circumstances inevitably declines

and is finally replaced by widespread dissension that has the potential to lead to political disruption. The French learned this lesson in Indochina and Algeria, as did the British a half century earlier during the Boer War.

Democracies cannot sustain prolonged military interventions without broad public support. Minimizing casualties to U.S. military personnel in such circumstances should be a very high priority not only for its own sake, but also because mounting casualties erode public support and can serve as a lightning rod for public dissatisfaction over other issues. We assume that there are circumstances in which it might be necessary or desirable for the United States to enter a limited conflict that could turn out to be protracted. Under such circumstances, there should be means to help prevent the casualty issue from gradually forcing the President or Congress into taking militarily inadvisable actions. If casualties to U.S. military personnel could be minimized, public debate about U.S. involvement would be more likely to focus on the involvement's intrinsic strategic, political, and moral merits. Public support generated and sustained on that basis would permit Congress and the President to pursue national security objectives more effectively through a wider range of military options. To secure this critical leverage, national security planners should remain sensitive to the broader ramifications of casualties to U.S. military personnel when formulating future strategies, force configurations, and weapon systems for use in limited Third World contingencies.

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