down. Thus [Senator Mike] Mansfield could be dismissed as spineless, as "milquetoast"; thus [Senator J. William] Fulbright could be castigated as a "crybaby." Though Johnson on occasion showed himself quite capable of asking probing questions in policy meetings, he had little patience with those who tried to supply probing answers. His macho ethos extended to relations among states. "If you let a bully come into your front yard one day," he liked to say, in reference to the lesson of Munich, "the next day he will be up on your porch and the day after that he will rape your wife in your own bed." In such a situation, retreat was impossible, retreat was cowardly. Johnson's approach did not make him reckless on Vietnam—he was, in fact, exceedingly cautious—but it made him quite unable to contemplate extrication as anything but the equivalent of, as he might put it, "tucking tail and running."

This personal insecurity in Johnson, so much a feature of the recollections of those who knew him and worked with him, might have been less important in Vietnam policy if not for the way it reinforced his equally well documented intolerance of dissent. Even in the early months of his presidency he was incredulous to learn that some Americans might be opposed to his policy of fully supporting South Vietnam; it was un-American, he believed, to make an issue during the Cold War of national security matters. Throughout his career Johnson had made his way in politics by intimidation, by dominating those around him, and he did not change this modus operandi once he got the White House. "I'm the only president you have," he told those who opposed his policies. His demand for consensus and loyalty extended to his inner circle of advisers, a reality that, when combined with his powerful personality, must have had a chilling effect on anyone inclined to try to build support for a contrary view. . . .

In this way, while responsibility for the outcome of the policy process rested with all of those who participated in it, it rested chiefly with the president. Johnson, no one else, ensured that the critical decisions on Vietnam were made by a small and insular group of individuals who by the latter part of 1964 had been involved in policy making for several years in most cases, who had overseen the steady expansion in the U.S. commitment to the war, and who had a large personal stake in seeing that commitment succeed. . . . Johnson was poorly served by his advisory system, but it was a system he in large measure created.

An Unwinnable War

ROBERT K. BRIGHAM

Three alternative military strategies have been put forward since the end of the Vietnam War as missed opportunities for a U.S. military victory. They are: (1) invasion of North Vietnam; (2) incursion into Laos; and (3) concentration of U.S. forces on defense of "enclaves."

When each is reexamined carefully, in light of recently released information from new Chinese and Vietnamese sources, we find that none of them would likely have produced a better outcome for the United States.

An invasion of North Vietnam was enthusiastically advanced by some in the U.S. Army. They believed that the United States should have attacked the North directly, north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) at the 17th parallel. Military leaders who supported this strategy, however, overlooked the threat of China and, on occasion, even appeared eager for a direct confrontation. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara was convinced, in contrast, that an invasion of the North carried an unacceptable risk of bringing the Chinese into the war. He reasoned that Beijing would act in its own self-interest and would never surrender its buffer area to the West. Gen. Bruce Palmer Jr., Gen. William Westmoreland's deputy in Vietnam, agrees. He argues in his book *The Twenty-Five Year War* that "one cannot quarrel with the decision not to invade North Vietnam because it was too close to China." In addition, as Palmer recognized, a war with China would have had little to do with American objectives in Vietnam and could even have led to millions of unnecessary deaths.

New documentary evidence from Hanoi and Beijing supports the worst U.S. predictions. We now know that North Vietnam asked for and received security commitments from Beijing from 1960 onward. In 1962 a Vietnamese delegation headed by Ho Chi Minh and Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh visited China, requesting aid for the southern struggles. The Chinese communists pledged an additional 230 battalions to the Vietnamese if needed. The following year, Beijing's military chief of staff, Luo Ruiqing, visited Hanoi. He told Ho that if the Americans were to attack the North, China would come to its defense. In June 1964 the North Vietnamese Army's chief of staff, Van Tien Dung, received Beijing's pledge of "unconditional military support." During the Tonkin Gulf crisis of August 1964, Chinese communists placed their naval units stationed in the area on combat readiness and ordered them to "pay close attention to the movement of American forces" and be prepared to "cope with any possible sudden attack." The Chinese air command went on alert, and the Seventh Army's air force was moved to the Vietnamese border, where it remained for several years. Four other air divisions were also moved closer to the border, and Beijing built two new airstrips in anticipation of an American invasion. American intelligence reports also detected the Chinese movement of nearly forty MiG fighters to the North Vietnamese airfield at Phuc Yen.

In 1965, when the sustained bombing of the North began under Operation "ROLLING THUNDER," the Chinese agreed to step up their commitment to Vietnam as a rear area and deterrent. Beijing pledged repeatedly that it would avoid a direct military conflict with the United States as long as possible, but it would not back away from a confrontation. On March 25, 1965, an editorial in the Party's official newspaper announced that China had offered Hanoi "any necessary material support, including the supply of weapons and all kinds of military materials." It stated further that, if necessary, China was prepared to "send its personnel to fight together with the Vietnamese people to annihilate the American aggressors." Shortly after these statements, China sent the first wave of its combat engineers to Vietnam to aid in the construction of antiaircraft batteries, railroads, airports, bridges, and roads. By 1968, the number of Chinese serving within North Vietnam's borders reached 200,000. . . .

Some analysts have suggested that China may have backed away from its mili-

hardened. Until the end of 1964, China's official policy concerning U.S. planes flying into its airspace was to avoid a direct confrontation. By mid-1965, however, this policy had been reversed. Accordingly, there were nearly two hundred confrontations between China and the United States, resulting in the destruction of twelve American fighters. Even after relations between Vietnam and China had soured, the evidence indicates that Beijing's own self-interest would have led it to defend its "buffer zone" in Indochina. . . .

China was motivated to aid Vietnam by its own foreign policy needs. Beijing hoped to use its support of the war in Vietnam to stimulate mass mobilization within China for the Cultural Revolution. Chinese leaders claimed that Beijing was the center for continuous revolutions and that the United States threatened that central role. China repeatedly claimed that it would support Vietnam by any means necessary, "even at the expense of heavy national sacrifice." Accordingly, when a Vietnamese delegation visited Beijing in April 1965, China pledged to aid Hanoi economically and militarily. Aid came in the form of armored vehicles, small arms and ammunition, uniforms, shoes, rice, and even recreation equipment for North Vietnamese soldiers. Chinese communist sources claim that more than $200 million in material aid was sent to Hanoi annually beginning in 1965.

At the time, other considerations were also thought to preclude taking the war to the North. During the early years of the war, the Sullivan Group, a presidential advisory group, had concluded that attacking the North would do little to reduce its support for the war in the South. For example, the group predicted:

> It is not likely that North Vietnam would (if it could) call off the war in the South even though U.S. actions would in time have serious economic and political impact. Overt action against North Vietnam would be unlikely to produce reduction in Viet Cong activity sufficiently to make victory on the ground possible in South Vietnam unless accompanied by new U.S. bolstering actions in South Vietnam and considerable improvement in the government there.

Indeed, the war had always been fundamentally about the political future of Vietnam south of the 17th parallel, and a direct attack by U.S. ground forces against North Vietnam would have had little or no positive effect on meeting this objective. The United States came to understand too late that the insurgency in the South was primarily indigenous. During the early days of the insurgency, we now know, it was the southern cadres who pressed Hanoi to allow them to move toward the armed struggle. Attacking the North to stop the insurgency was strategically meaningless, given the U.S. objective of preserving the *South* Vietnamese government in Saigon. By 1968 it was understood in Washington that the NLF would have continued to carry the fight to the South Vietnamese Army, and it would have remained in control in the countryside no matter what happened in North Vietnam.

Many southern cadres felt betrayed because of the 1954 partition of Vietnam, which left them vulnerable to the brutal efforts of the anticommunist Ngo Dinh Diem to exterminate them. Thereafter, the southerners tended to stress the need for a decisive battlefield victory prior to engaging in peace talks. Communist documents show

Writing after the war in a special issue of a military history journal, Le Duc Tho, a longtime member of the Party's political bureau, noted that southerners often engaged in offensive struggles "in spite of orders to the contrary by northern cadres." This is especially true after Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh became director of the Central Office South Vietnam—the mobile command post in the South—in 1965. Nguyen Chi Thanh was a southerner who had long advocated a more military pursuit of the war effort. During the early 1960s, he argued that victory over the South Vietnamese and their American backers would come only on the battlefield. "If we feared the United States," Nguyen Chi Thanh declared, "we would have called on the people of southern Vietnam to wait and coexist peacefully with the U.S.-Diem clique. We are not afraid of the United States. . . ."

An attack against the North, therefore, was a losing strategy on several counts. It virtually guaranteed a war with China. If China intervened, one could only surmise what the Soviets would do, in an attempt to retain their leadership of the world communist movement. Neither did such a strategy take account of the irrelevance of an invasion of the North regarding saving the South Vietnamese government from collapse. And finally, neither did such a strategy acknowledge the probable consequences—north and south—for U.S. forces. The probable casualties would have dwarfed the actual U.S. casualties from the war, leading in all likelihood to severely hostile reactions in the U.S. Congress and American body politic.

Former U.S. Army Col. Harry Summers has long been one of the most outspoken advocates of the invasion of Laos. Summers argues that a combined military action into Laos could have blocked the Laotian panhandle from being used as a base by North Vietnamese forces. After blocking the flow of men and supplies South, Summers contends, the South Vietnamese forces could have isolated the battlefield from communist incursions originating in Laos and destroyed the NLF.

The U.S. Army actually considered this proposal during the war but ultimately rejected it as unacceptable. When Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson explored the option, he concluded that it would require support services beyond U.S. capabilities. For example, he found that such an operation demanded the astounding total of 18,000 engineer troops to make the operation feasible. Alas, the United States did not have available 18,000 engineer troops for assignment to Vietnam and Laos. Furthermore, U.S. intelligence reports reliably reported that, until mid-1969, the majority of communist forces in the South were actually southerners, who had not need of a sanctuary in Laos in which they might prepare to "invade" South Vietnam. They were already there.

The Trong Son, or Ho Chi Minh Trail, ran through the Laotian panhandle. Advocates of the Laotian invasion strategy believe that by invading Laos the United States could have effectively cut off the trail, stopped supplies heading from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, and thus won the war. But it is clear now, years later, that the southern insurgency could have survived without the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All the conditions that created the insurgency would still have been present.The NLF was never dependent on the North for its sustenance, in any case.

Finally, the force that Summers proposed would probably have met with the

in Laos, where U.S. combat losses were higher in a relative sense than those within the territory of Vietnam. Thus, the "barrier across Laos" strategy ignores the reality of jungle war and the extraordinary disadvantages the U.S. would have had in such a war with the NLF and North Vietnamese. . . .

Leading military strategists in Hanoi agree that cutting off the Ho Chi Minh Trail via an invasion of Laos would have accomplished nothing for the United States. Gen. Doan Chuong, director of Hanoi's Institute for Strategic Studies, recently addressed the issue as follows:

> If the supply route had been truly cut off during the war, this would have been a very serious development. That is why the strategic Truong Son Road [Ho Chi Minh Trail] was constructed and involved such elaborate precautions, as you know. We not only had trials on land, we also had a "sea trail." In addition to the East Truong Son Road, there was a West Truong Son Road, with numerous criss-cross pathways, like a labyrinth. So it would have been hard to cut it off completely. As you know the U.S. applied various measures to block it: bombing, defoliating, sending in commandos, setting up a fence called "McNamara's Line," concentrating air strikes on the panhandle area, and so on. Still, the route remained open. . . . We could not, and in fact did not, allow the Trail to be cut off. . . .

William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. field commander from 1964–1968, opposed the Laotian invasion strategy. In his memoirs, General Westmoreland recalls with amazement that many of his critics—within the military and without—"considered it practicable to seal land frontiers against North Vietnamese infiltration. . . . Yet small though South Vietnam is," he pointed out, "its land frontier extended for more than 900 miles." To have defended that entire frontier, according to General Westmoreland, would have required "many millions of troops."

A cardinal error of advocates of the Laos incursion, it would appear, is their use of the U.S. experience in Korea as a model for what they believe should have been done in Vietnam. But the Korean Peninsula presented problems for the infiltration of men and supplies far different from what was faced in Vietnam. Surrounded by water on three sides, the actual Korean *frontier* was quite limited. Not only is the Vietnamese frontier, in this sense, almost 1,000 miles long, or roughly the distance from Boston to Chicago; in addition, the Truong Son Mountains of Indochina, along which supplies moved north to south, are home to the largest triple-canopy jungle in the world outside of the Amazon Basin. Detection and interdiction of the movement of supplies is nearly impossible in such conditions, which can create almost total darkness at noon on a sunny day.

A third alternative U.S. strategy in Vietnam—gathering U.S. forces into enclaves located in or near strategic assets—is in some ways more sophisticated than the invasion strategies directed at North Vietnam and Laos. Those advocating this strategy showed that they understood the nature of the war on the ground in South Vietnam: a fundamentally indigenous insurgency that could be successfully combated, if at all, by the application of counterinsurgency techniques in the South.

At the heart of this notion is the idea that U.S. troops would occupy a supporting role by controlling the densely populated coastal areas. The South Vietnamese forces would thereby be free to move inland from coastal bases, where they would

communists would never be strong enough to drive the U.S. Army into the sea. At worst, its adherents claimed (as some still claim), the enclave strategy would have bought time for South Vietnam to become stabilized, at minimum cost in American lives and material. An added feature, it is claimed, is that the insurgency itself would actually weaken once U.S. troops secured the heavily populated coast.

The enclave strategy, however, like the other alternatives, has not been without its strident critics. They assert that herding U.S. forces into enclaves would have disallowed the Americans from taking maximum advantage of their most potent weapon—superior firepower. Considerable doubt has also been expressed as to the ability of the South Vietnamese Army to carry the battle inland to the NLF. Time and again, the South Vietnamese proved they were no match for the NLF's committed guerrillas.

General Westmoreland was absolutely opposed to the enclave strategy. He believed bringing American combat troops into the major coastal cities of the South, including Saigon, would constitute a huge mistake. He saw the potential for them to get embroiled in the daily street demonstrations and other political conflicts that plagued the South. When Gen. Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended the enclave strategy to Westmoreland as one that would free the South Vietnamese for offensive operations in the countryside, the field commander pointed out that approximately 40 percent of the South Vietnamese forces were always available for, or committed to, combat operations in any case. . . .

In fact, a variant of the enclave strategy had been tried before, by the French, and it had failed miserably. Col. Quach Hai Luong, deputy director of Hanoi's Institute for Strategic Studies, recently argued that the Americans would have met a similar fate if they had withdrawn to enclaves: "That would conjure up a situation that was similar to what happened during the French war. The French had also concentrated their forces in the big cities. If you do that, then you would be able to control various outlets [i.e., ports] and economic and political headquarters. If you want to occupy a country for a long time, as the French did, then that's what you would do." As Quach Hai Luong went on to point out, however, the Americans had no wish to occupy Vietnam in the traditional sense, as the French did. To him, this meant that the strategy of enclaves would make even less sense for the Americans than it did for the French. At least the French goal—long-term occupation of Vietnam—was consistent with the strategy, even though it failed. But for the Americans, he could see no benefits to it whatsoever.

Many who have compared the American and French military experiences in Vietnam agree. Bernard Fall, a French journalist and scholar with vast experience in Indochina, wrote in 1961 that the enclave strategy invited disaster because it concentrated conventional forces in an area where it could not dispense its weapons, for fear of alienating the local population. Revolutionaries, according to Fall, could isolate enemy forces for attack and simply use the village or rural area as a sanctuary. This was certainly the French experience along the central Vietnamese coast on Highway 1—*La Rue Sans Joie,* or "The Street Without Joy."

After the war, Harry Summers recalled an encounter with a North Vietnamese

prepared to turn back an invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnam. If that had been the nature of the problem, the United States might have been successful. But what they encountered, and what some analysts still find it impossible to accept, is a war in the South that was fundamentally a war among southerners. Each side had a more powerful patron—the NLF was allied to Hanoi and the South Vietnamese government to the United States. And in this kind of war, the United States, along with its uninspired and hapless South Vietnamese allies, did not "know the territory."

Any strategy, including those just reexamined, would have required for its success a viable South Vietnamese government with credibility in the eyes of the South Vietnamese people. No government in Saigon after November 1963, when Diem was assassinated, was credible in this sense. From 1965, therefore, when U.S. combat troops first arrived, the situation in Saigon was politically untenable. In the end, no American strategy could have reversed the outcome in Vietnam, because the NLF and its North Vietnamese allies had committed to total war. Each was prepared to sustain casualties, far beyond American estimates, without giving up the fight. Any war would have been a war of attrition on the ground. And it is obvious, looking back, which side was willing, as John Kennedy said during his inaugural address, to "pay any price, bear any burden."

FURTHER READING

David L. Anderson, ed., *The Human Tradition in the Vietnam Era* (2000)
———, *Shadow on the White House* (1993)
———, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (1991)
Christian Appy, *Working-Class War* (1993)
Loren Baritz, *Backfire* (1985)
Richard J. Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution* (1972)
David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors* (1993)
Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat* (1991)
———, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning* (1993)
Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War* (1989)
William C. Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War* (1988)
Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (1996)
Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge* (1997) (on the LBJ White House)
Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (1988)
Anne Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam* (1995)
Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam* (2000)
Peter Braestrup, *Big Story* (1977)
———, ed., *Vietnam as History* (1984)
Robert Brigham, *The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War* (1999)
Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK?* (2003)
Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War* (1996)
Larry Cable, *Unholy Grail* (1991)
Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam* (1993) (on Laos)
Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot* (1993) (on JFK and Vietnam)
James W. Clinton, *The Loyal Opposition* (1995)
Warren I. Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (1980)

Charles DeBenedetti with Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (1990)
William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (2000)
———, *Sacred War* (1995)
Bernard Fall, *The Two Vietnams* (1967)
Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (1972)
Marc Frey et al., *The Transformation of Southeast Asia* (2003) (on decolonization)
Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (1996)
Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam* (1988)
———, *Pay Any Price* (1995) (on LBJ)
Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam* (1979)
William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War* (1986–1987)
James William Gibson, *The Perfect War* (1986)
Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (2002)
Daniel P. O'C. Greene, "John Foster Dulles and the End of Franco-American Entente in Indochina," *Diplomatic History,* 16 (1992), 551–572
Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy About Indochina? The Politics of Misperception," *Journal of American History,* 79 (1992), 568–587
David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (1972)
Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"* (1986)
Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (1988)
David Harris, *Our War* (1996)
James P. Harrison, ed., *The Endless War* (1989)
Patrick L. Hatcher, *The Suicide of an Elite* (1990)
Kenneth Heineman, *Campus Wars* (1993)
John Hellman, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1986)
Herbert Hendin and Ann P. Haas, *Wounds of War: The Psychological Aftermath of Combat in Vietnam* (1985)
George C. Herring, *America's Longest War* (1996)
———, *LBJ and Vietnam* (1994)
Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States* (1990)
Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War* (1996)
Richard H. Immerman, "The United States and the Geneva Conference of 1954: A New Look," *Diplomatic History,* 14 (1990), 43–66
——— and George Herring, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: The Day We Didn't Go to War," *Journal of American History,* 71 (1984), 343–363
"International Dimensions of the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History,* 27 (2003), 35–149
Maurice Isserman, *Witness to War* (1995)
Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (1989)
Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation* (2002) (on the JFK and Diem assassinations)
Matthew Jones, *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia* (2001)
George McT. Kahin, *Intervention* (1986)
David Kaiser, *American Tragedy* (2000)
Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin, eds., *Dienbienphu and the Crisis in Franco-American Relations, 1954–1955* (1990)
Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam* (1983)
Douglas Kinnard, *The Certain Trumpet: Maxwell Taylor and the American Experience in Vietnam* (1991)
Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire* (2000)
Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (1985)
Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (1986)
Diane B. Kunz, ed., *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade* (1994)