

CHAPTER NINE

The Pentagon

1963–1965



OUR FAMILY COMPENSATED for the disappointment of not staying in Europe by vacationing in the French château country en route to Le Havre to board the S.S. *United States*. It was strange to drive slowly along those quiet back roads in the shade of the plane trees. The last time I'd been on these roads was nineteen years before, clutching a Sten gun and watching each fieldstone barn and medieval steeple for possible ambush. On an absolutely splendid summer afternoon we stopped for a picnic on the banks of the Loire, just downstream from the ferry site over which Jacques and I had crossed the river to link up with Patton's armor columns. Muddy white ducks swam in the tranquil backwater, squabbling for the crusty scraps of baguette the children tossed. The burnt-out panzers were gone; no American fighter-bombers growled overhead. Mary and I split a nice bottle of wine, watching the clouds above the slate roofs of a château nearby. At a time like this, it was hard to remember I was a soldier in a dangerous world.

I looked forward to my new assignment in the Pentagon with a certain ambivalence. I had the temperament and skills of an effective staff officer, but I preferred command of a combat unit. Serving in the office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Force Development (ACSFOR), however, would put me in direct contact with the Army's leadership. At this point in the Cold War, with the largest standing "peacetime" military establishment ever, a Pentagon tour was considered a part of the maturing process for senior officers. If we were going to be successful generals, we had to understand the methods and manners of the Defense Department's civilian leadership. I accepted this. But a Pentagon staff job lacked the kind of soldiering—

contact with the troops and field exercises—that I'd enjoyed in the 101st Airborne and the 16th Infantry.

So, I was prepared for three years of bureaucratic drudgery, during which, hopefully, I would "mature" and grow wise in the ways of the Washington power elite, all in preparation for a senior command position. But I had no way of knowing, when I went to work for General Bill Depuy in the summer of 1963, that two years later I would be at the vortex of the most critical and controversial series of decisions the U.S. military faced in the second half of the twentieth century.

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IN 1939, when the Pentagon was completed, the massive structure was considered an almost brazen political and architectural statement: the institutionalization of a large, permanent military establishment, something new in America. The miles of dun-colored corridors, radiating in concentric circles from an open courtyard in the five-sided building, provided offices and conference rooms for a giant military bureaucracy then known as the War Department. But twenty-five years later, the Pentagon where I reported to work was only one building of the American military's huge Washington headquarters complex. Various annexes and technical support centers had spread for miles across Washington's northern Virginia suburbs. Tens of thousands of career military personnel and civilians labored in this sprawling establishment, supporting a global military system that had become the single most expensive sector of the federal government.

The driving force behind this military juggernaut, of course, was America's Cold War commitment, specifically our containment policy. Like the Roman Empire of the first century, the Western world had cordoned off the barbarians and was obliged to guard the frontiers with a huge standing army. But now the relatively spartan legions of the Caesars had been replaced by aircraft carrier battle groups, nuclear-powered missile submarines, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), airborne and armored divisions equipped with tactical nuclear weapons, Special Forces groups, and far-flung teams of military advisers.

As the technical stakes increased, so did our expenditures. Unlike World War II, which had a finite (but horrendously challenging) strategic objective—the total defeat of fascism—our Cold War objectives were less defined. The arms race was a fact of life. The Soviets' development of an ICBM with a thermonuclear warhead provoked a crash program for the development of our own Atlas missile.¹ The deployment of a new British or American battle tank prompted a similar deployment by the Soviets. Battlefield and short-range tactical nuclear weapons proliferated with amazing speed on

both sides of the Cold War frontier.² Communications and headquarters detachments had to be "hardened" to survive on the nuclear battlefield. Chemical and biological weapons also proliferated as adjuncts of tactical nuclear arms. And the list went on.

The high cost and complexity of this permanent global military confrontation became issues of major concern in the Kennedy White House. The young president had been taken aback by the awesome power (and escalating cost) of the American military. The aborted Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and the subsequent Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 further impressed on Kennedy that the American military required much tighter civilian management than he had originally anticipated.³ In certain ways, Kennedy felt the military had grown to a point of alarming autonomy, that it had to be reined in, subdued, and controlled. His chosen instrument for this task was Robert Strange McNamara, the secretary of defense.

In theory, McNamara was the perfect man for the job. He had spent World War II as a bright young Pentagon official who had used the methods of management science he had learned at the Harvard Business School to help organize America's global conflict. Specifically, McNamara and his colleagues had applied new statistical analysis systems to accomplish the challenging mission of controlling the flow of men and matériel on an unprecedentedly vast scale. At age thirty he joined a group of talented "whiz kids" who reorganized the Ford Motor Company after World War II. McNamara the Ford executive instituted a system of rigorous cost-accounting techniques, by which every aspect of the company's operations could be reduced to logical, quantifiable data. His cost-effectiveness techniques seemed to work—although many people forgot that the "logic" of this approach produced the Edsel, the most disastrous design failure in American industrial history. In 1960, he was the first man outside the Ford family (and the youngest) ever to become company president. But he only served as Ford president for a month before becoming Kennedy's secretary of defense.

Although distracted by the Berlin and Cuban crises of 1961 and 1962, McNamara never lost sight of his primary objective, the modernization of America's armed forces along logical, cost-effective lines. He was aided in this mission by a handpicked coterie of like-minded young civilian systems analysts, many recruited from academia. McNamara was absolutely confident that he could streamline and rationalize the cumbersome military juggernaut. And he was equally certain that the career officer corps, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, represented an institutional obstacle to this rationalization process. The military, he believed, lacked the imagination and insight to modernize itself. McNamara dismissed the hard-earned, mature "military judgment" of the Joint Chiefs as imprecise and illogical. His key civilian subordinates, such as former academic Alain Enthoven, who headed

the Pentagon's new Office of Systems Analysis, went so far as to proclaim that "the so-called 'principles of war' are really a set of platitudes that can be twisted to suit almost any situation."⁴ McNamara and his disciples felt the military would have to be led kicking and screaming through the portals of the cost-effectiveness utopia.

Like all experienced managers, McNamara understood that the budgeting process was the key to authority. He who controlled the purse strings controlled the entire operation, be it a corporation or the Department of Defense. One of McNamara's first major steps at the Pentagon was to overhaul the traditional budget-request, procurement process, replacing it with an elaborate new management technique: the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS). The rationale for PPBS was in the logic of connecting precisely defined "Program Objectives" to the means and methods (including funding and procurement) to accomplish them. This technique evolved directly from McNamara's corporate management experience. It worked well solving stable, straightforward problems with clear solutions: conditions that rarely prevailed in wartime.

Before the advent of cost-effectiveness management techniques, American industry would often produce products, then try to develop a market for them. This was a wasteful, imprecise process McNamara abhorred. As a Ford executive, he reversed the process, striving to first clearly identify a market niche, then building a product to fill it. In effect, the marketplace became a *system* that could be *analyzed*. For example, if Ford analysts foresaw a market for a compact car (or fuel-efficient delivery van) five years in the future, producing such a vehicle became an obvious corporate objective. The organization would be mobilized to achieve that objective; budget would be allotted only to those corporate groups that could demonstrate—through elaborate statistical projections—that they could most effectively meet the objective. In essence, the PPBS approach connected tactics to strategy through the budget process. Above all, every phase of the process *appeared* rational. At any given stage of the design and marketing, every manager involved could demonstrate exactly why he was spending company funds.

McNamara was determined to impose this same level of rational accountability on the Pentagon. The Air Force might want to order a new tactical fighter-bomber because American industry could provide an aircraft superior to anything in their inventory. But now the Air Force chief of staff had to "quantify" exactly how this new plane cost-effectively met formal policy objectives. Before McNamara, technical innovation leading to tactical superiority was self-justifying. Under PPBS, this was no longer the case. Cost effectiveness became the watchword, indeed the shibboleth of the McNamara Pentagon.

The logical extension of all this was the principles of joint procurement

and of minimum requirements. If, for example, the Marine Corps and the Army both wanted to buy an anti-tank missile, PPBS required that the two services match their requirements and jointly procure the weapon, thus eliminating waste. Such cost effectiveness worked well on Alain Enthoven's computer spreadsheets. In reality, however, things weren't so simple. The Marines' requirements might have included man-portability and resistance to saltwater, while the Army's ideal missile might have been vehicle-mounted and robust enough to survive airdrops. With cost effectiveness as the primary procurement criterion, such special requirements were often disregarded, resulting in weapons that didn't work.

The most flagrant example of this flawed process was the saga of the dual-purpose F-111, the "McNamara fighter." In 1961 both the Air Force and the Navy wanted an advanced tactical fighter-bomber. The Navy aircraft had to operate off aircraft carriers, while the Air Force plane was to fly low-level deep-penetration missions. In a protracted test of wills between the McNamara-Enthoven systems analysts and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the civilian leadership prevailed, requiring the two services to develop a single aircraft to meet their needs. This was obviously impossible, at least to experienced Air Force generals and Navy admirals. Again, "military judgment" reared its ugly head to dispute the logic of cost effectiveness. The result was an Edsel aircraft of monumental proportions. Design compromises made the Air Force F-111 almost impossible to fly safely on low-level missions (many crashed in Indochina attempting to do so), while the Navy's F-111B weighed in at thirty-five tons, far too heavy for carrier operations. But to McNamara and his team the plane was a fine example of cost effectiveness.⁵ In fact, the whole process was a monument to the efficient production of an unusable aircraft.

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AN atmosphere of confrontation between the military professionals and McNamara's cold-blooded analysts prevailed when I took over the Army's Force Development Plans Division, working for Brigadier General Bill Depuy, director of Plans and Programs. But even the staunchest opponents of McNamara's bean-counters had to admit that the armed services needed reorganization. Specifically, confusion as to the roles and missions—McNamara's almighty "Objectives"—had led to widespread waste and duplication. Under McNamara's armed forces reorganization policies each service had to reexamine and justify its force structure in terms of its actual mission. In addition, the individual services no longer procured their own equipment and supplies; this responsibility was given to a newly created branch of the defense department, which submitted all requests to PPBS analysis.

My division led the reorganization effort in the Army. Bill Depuy gave

me my assignment and guidance, and then supported my efforts completely. He was no fan of McNamara, but he hoped a more efficient Army might evolve from the painful exercise. The Plans Division had the responsibility of analyzing the Army's long-term force structure. I had to dig deeply into each branch, unit by unit, to determine if the personnel and equipment met the Army's overall mission objectives.

The basic "War Plan" projected a possible conventional ground war in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, to which the Army would contribute active and reserve units adequate to repulse a Soviet-led invasion. In addition, the Plan foresaw various Third World contingency operations. My office had to analyze the future staffing and equipping of both active-duty and reserve units to meet these requirements. What I found was often shocking. My staff discovered that there were thousands of "TTPPS"—Transients, Trainees, Patients, Prisoners, and Students—the "horde of personnel who are always coming or going, but never seem to arrive," which the Army seemed to have forgotten.⁶

And when we analyzed the Transportation Corps, we found dozens of amphibious support companies equipped with Ducks, seagoing trucks designed to transport men and matériel from ships to an invasion beach. But the Army had not had an amphibious operations mission for years; that job had formally passed to the Marine Corps in the 1940s. Yet thousands of men and millions of dollars' worth of equipment were tied up in these companies. Even more shocking, I discovered that the Army's deputy chief of staff for logistics had equipped them with a great many amphibious vehicles because procuring them in great quantity had lowered the unit price. Without question, this was the type of bloated waste McNamara's reorganization was meant to abolish.

My investigation of the Transportation Corps led to the Corps of Engineers, where I discovered an all but forgotten Amphibious Support Brigade. This was a little empire unto itself, with both active and reserve units, including men who had served since World War II. Their sole purpose was to keep alive the skills of amphibious warfare, which the Army no longer needed according to current roles and missions statements.

I recommended abolishing the amphibious support units of both the Transportation Corps and the Engineers. As expected, howls of protest arose from their ranks. Depuy prepared me to take my case to General Creighton Abrams, the vice chief of staff of the Army, who handled purely Army matters for Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson. Abrams had been one of Patton's best tank commanders in Europe. He was known for his direct, sardonic manner. After I made my case against the amphibious units, Abrams gazed coolly over his smoking cigar at the representatives of the Engineers and Transportation Corps, who had also made presentations

to support their positions. These branches had sent their big guns, a major general from Transportation and a lieutenant general from the Engineers, with a couple of brigadiers thrown in as spear holders. There were one hell of a lot of stars on the opposition's epaulets facing my lonely silver eagles. But I guess I had made my point well.

"Unless you gentlemen have something more to offer," Abrams said to the representatives of the Transportation Corps and to the Chief of Engineers, "I have to go with the ACSFOR."

We had won our first battle in the reorganization war.

Later, my office began a careful analysis of the Medical Corps, once more comparing requirements for personnel "spaces" and equipment with actual mission objectives. We discovered a pattern of overstaffing (and over-equipping) that made the Transportation Corps appear impoverished. There were literally hundreds of field hospital units, mostly in the reserves and National Guard. We found that most of the medical units had been added in the 1950s. The documentation justifying all these field hospitals cited the large number of projected casualties from a tactical nuclear war. In addition, the Medical Corps assumed that these casualties would be treated in the field, rather than evacuated to safe areas or to the United States. Both these assumptions were out of date. Army doctrine at the time foresaw a conventional, not a nuclear conflict; the combination of Army medical evacuation helicopters and Air Force jet aircraft was capable of the rapid transportation of casualties from the battlefield all the way to the States in a matter of hours.⁷

The Medical Corps was planning for a nuclear war using transportation of World War II vintage without regard to the intercontinental medical-evacuation role assigned the USAF. Once more, I recommended a deep reduction of personnel and equipment to eliminate waste. Once more, I was sent to General Abrams to argue the ACSFOR's position in the matter. But the Medical Corps did not give up easily. They were represented by the Surgeon General, who brought along a suave lieutenant colonel, equipped with an easel and charts in the best Pentagon dog-and-pony-show tradition. While the Surgeon General nodded gravely, the Colonel presented a graphic case for the continuation of the Medical Corps' existing staff level. He showed grisly photos of battlefield casualties, and reassuring pictures of the medics and nurses ministering to the wounded. Without all those field hospitals, he said, thousands of men would die needlessly.

"General Abrams," the Colonel said earnestly, tapping his easel with a pointer, "until you've actually treated a sucking belly wound in the field, you have no idea how important these units actually are."

Having been a frontline commander for General George "Blood and Guts" Patton, Abrams had undoubtedly seen his share of sucking belly

wounds. He chomped on his cigar noncommittally and spoke from the corner of his mouth. "Well, Singlaub?"

I stated my case, emphasizing that the newly upgraded strategic airlift, equipped with C-141 jet transports, could quickly evacuate such seriously wounded soldiers to the Medical Corps' splendid facilities here in the States. I was about to make my follow-up arguments, when Abrams nodded brusquely.

Again, he chomped his cigar. "Well, I agree with the ACSFOR."

That was the end of the meeting.

That afternoon, when the decision to cut the field hospitals was made formal, I got a call from a Medical Corps friend, Dr. Stodard Parker, who worked in the office of the Surgeon General. It seemed I wasn't too popular among the medics. "Jack," Doc Parker said, "my only advice to you is don't get sick."

I didn't have time to worry about the medics' possible vengeance. I was ordered on TDY to assist Brigadier General Robert C. Taber on a special project. Bob Taber was an assistant division commander of the 82nd Airborne who had managed the airlift of our troops to the Dominican Republic. I'd worked with Bob during my airlift planning days, and he needed me to help analyze the entire U.S. military's strategic movement capabilities for both sealift and airlift over the next five years. As with all such complex assignments, the Army wanted the results yesterday. So I found myself shunted from a comfortable office in the Pentagon to a gritty, stuffy old World War II building at National Airport, where Bob had set up shop for STRATMOVE 69, as the project was called.

We were given three future requirement scenarios: the reinforcement of American forces in Europe, in Vietnam, and in Indochina outside of Vietnam.

Our initial analysis was so effective that it eventually spawned nineteen additional studies, which in turn reshaped America's global military mobility. We saw a requirement for a huge new strategic airlift transport capable of moving large armored vehicles and helicopters intercontinental distances. This ultimately became the massive C-5A transport. We also foresaw the need for a whole new class of roll-on/roll-off naval transports for the rapid deployment of mechanized divisions. And we started the planning for the biggest logistical operation since World War II: the pre-positioning of equipment and supplies in the Pacific and Far East aboard ships—"floating warehouses"—for entire American divisions that could be flown from their stateside bases within days of an alert.

Finally, we planned a realistic logistical system for American operations in Southeast Asia that was centered on our strongest ally in the region, Thailand. This would entail building a modern military port at Sattahip,

south of Bangkok, and a large air base nearby at U Taphao. To me, these plans indicated America was becoming serious about stopping the advance of communism in Southeast Asia.⁸

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WHILE the civilian and military leaders at the Pentagon were grappling with reorganization of the armed forces, the political and military situation in Vietnam was steadily deteriorating. During the eleven years between the Geneva agreements ending the French-Indochina War and mid-1965 when the United States faced its most important policy decisions in the region, the non-Communist Republic of Vietnam had struggled against mounting direct military aggression from North Vietnam and Communist-sponsored insurgency. By 1965, a Communist military victory was imminent.⁹

To understand the evolution of this situation, it is necessary to recall the course of events following the Geneva agreements in 1954. Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel, with French armed forces regrouping to the south and the Viet Minh occupying the north. A final political settlement was to be based on nationwide elections scheduled for July 1956. But the non-Communist provisional government of the South, headed by the former emperor Bao Dai, and its new ally, the United States, refused to sign the election-schedule provisions of the accord.¹⁰ A year later, Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of the newly founded Republic of Vietnam, refused to even discuss elections with Communist officials of North Vietnam. He cited the Geneva accords and noted that the Communist Viet Minh had taken control of the North by force of arms, not through elections. What Diem did not enunciate, but what everyone understood, was that any "nationwide" election was sure to be won by the Communist leaders of the more populous North, who controlled their country through typical totalitarian methods, and who had left behind thousands of Viet Minh agents in the South.¹¹

The 17th parallel became an international frontier, dividing the Communist north and the non-Communist south. After the French collapse hundreds of thousands of anti-Communist refugees, many Roman Catholic (including Diem and his large, wealthy family), fled to the south, where they soon dominated politics in Saigon. As the French reduced their military and economic aid to the South, the United States moved in to fill the vacuum. By 1960, South Vietnam was receiving more per-capita American aid than any country in the region. Under American pressure, the Diem government undertook a program of land reform intended to break the traditional grip of powerful Mandarin absentee landlords. The United States also set about training and equipping a new army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). While Diem struggled to consolidate his power and accommodate his Amer-

ican sponsors, he had to face a series of bloody revolts by the militias of several indigenous religious sects. Suppressing these revolts earned Diem a reputation for brutality (particularly in the liberal European and American press), but in reality he used the traditional Asian methods of bribery and division of spoils more than wholesale repression.¹²

Ho Chi Minh and his advisers were taken aback by Diem's resiliency. They had not anticipated the successful formation of a non-Communist government in the South. Ho's goal of becoming the leader of a super-national Southeast Asian Communist "nation," however, was still paramount. But the North needed a breather from armed conflict in order to consolidate its control. Rather than initiate immediate armed aggression against the South, Ho summoned several thousand former Viet Minh soldiers and political cadres to the North for training in guerrilla warfare.

The Diem government responded with a vigorous anti-Communist campaign, which drove most of the Viet Minh cadres underground—often into refuges in the roadless jungles near the Cambodian border. But a year later the Communist guerrilla leaders, newly trained and reequipped in the North, were moving south along a system of footpaths in the jungle mountains of the Annamite Cordillera, an infiltration route that became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

These political cadres and guerrillas spread out through the southern provinces of the Republic of Vietnam and unleashed a well-managed program of anti-government terror. The focus of this campaign was the so-called *tru gian*—"the extermination of traitors"—effort. This was a widespread assassination campaign, employing Communist death squads who targeted government officials and functionaries, ranging from rural health workers to village mayors, schoolteachers, and, of course, military officers. According to a former Communist cadre leader, the *tru gian* assassination campaign "tried to kill any government official who enjoyed the people's sympathy and left the bad officials unharmed in order to wage propaganda and sow hatred against the government."¹³ It is not surprising, therefore, that the Diem government's efforts at "nation building" were less than spectacular.

Over the next several years, the Saigon government and its American ally worked with grim determination to counter the Communist guerrilla war. The derogatory epithet "Vietcong" (Vietnamese Communists) was applied to all the groups within the Communists' umbrella organization in the South, the National Liberation Front. American military and political advisers poured into the country. By 1963, there were over 23,000 American military advisers working with South Vietnamese armed forces. American Special Forces units were involved in active combat against the Vietcong. The terms "insurgency" and "counterinsurgency" became the new watchwords of the

Pentagon. Our strategy was to steadily increase our military, political, and economic support of the Diem government, just as the North increased their military aggression in the South.

But Buddhist and student resistance to Diem's increasingly authoritarian rule cost him the support of the Kennedy White House. Diem and his influential family became comparable to the ostensibly "corrupt" Chiang Kai-shek regime.¹⁴ In August 1963, bloody raids by Vietnamese Special Forces under orders from Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu against Buddhist pagodas outraged Western sensibilities. Pressure on the Kennedy White House to dump Diem in order to find more efficient leadership to prosecute the counterinsurgency aimed at winning the "hearts and minds" of South Vietnam's peasants became irresistible. Kennedy approved a coup against Diem.¹⁵ President Diem and his brother were murdered by the junta that led the coup. Contrary to popular myth, the coup that toppled the Diem government was not engineered by the CIA. In fact, the Agency, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended continued American support for Diem. But Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge relayed White House orders that Saigon CIA officers—including my old Jedburgh colleague Lucien Coinein—serve as conduits between the junta and Washington.¹⁶ The Saigon leadership disintegrated into anarchy. Over the next eighteen months there were five more military coups. Clearly, the ARVN leadership was preoccupied with political turmoil, not waging a vigorous war against the Communists.¹⁷

The U.S. military involvement intensified in August 1964, when the Johnson White House used the pretext of North Vietnamese torpedo boat attacks on American destroyers operating in international waters of the Tonkin Gulf to unleash air strikes against Communist base areas in North Vietnam. Johnson and his advisers concealed the fact that the destroyers *Maddox* and *Joy* were supporting South Vietnamese Special Operations forces along coastal North Vietnam. The Tonkin Gulf incident became the pretext for a congressional resolution giving Lyndon Johnson freer military options in the region. But rather than striking hard to truly punish Ho Chi Minh, Johnson acted timidly. He stated that the United States sought "no wider war," while personally approving the air raids against leftover French naval facilities. This pattern of North Vietnamese aggression against the American military, followed by limited reprisal raids against Communist military infrastructure, was to continue for years, and indeed became a cornerstone of our overall strategy.¹⁸

There were many obvious problems with this policy, which deeply troubled my colleagues in the Pentagon, especially those like me who had served in Indochina during World War II. To begin with, the White House made a false assumption that Ho and his Communist leadership truly valued the

barracks and bases left behind by the French army. In reality, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA, which had evolved directly from the Viet Minh) was organized on the Red Chinese pattern: Units were usually billeted in villages or the jungle, and did not rely on rigid, Western-style large formations dependent on barracks. Equally important, such national assets hardly mattered to an international Communist. He intended to lead a revolution throughout Indochina, after which infrastructure could be rebuilt. Bombing old French bases might have made sense to McNamara and his eager neophytes like Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton, who became one of the chief target selectors. But, as my friends in ACSFOR often put it, Ho didn't give a "rat's ass" for a bunch of old French barracks. The destruction of those buildings was simply not the way to pressure him.

What would have hurt North Vietnam, of course, was a maritime quarantine and the destruction of its rail and road links to Communist China. By 1965, North Vietnam was receiving massive military aid from the Soviet Union and its allies, most of which passed through the port of Haiphong. Aid from Communist China came on the same railroads and narrow highways that I had reconnoitered for sabotage as a young OSS officer in 1945. If we really wanted to hurt Ho's ability to make war in the South, we should have destroyed the port of Haiphong, mined the harbor, and taken out the vulnerable land transportation links to China. In fact, that is exactly what the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed as the first step of any American escalation in Vietnam.¹⁹

In Saigon, America's uncertain policy was carried out by General William Westmoreland, the commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, the retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As Communist infiltration from the North increased and ARVN resolve weakened, Westmoreland and Taylor requested American ground combat troops in limited numbers. U.S. Marine battalion landing teams beefed up the defenses around the Danang air base in the north of the country and the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived to carry out a similar mission around the air bases near Saigon. The presence of U.S. troops did thwart anticipated Communist assaults on these bases, but the ARVN was still being battered all across South Vietnam.

While Saigon's military leadership disintegrated into the internecine struggles of a banana republic, the North Vietnamese stepped up their infiltration of the South and shifted from guerrilla warfare to the next stage of Mao's revolutionary struggle blueprint: semi-conventional warfare. The Vietcong were now organized in regular "main-force" battalions, which could maneuver in groups of three as regiments. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had dispatched several such regiments (some in division-size formations)

down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, where they either set up base camps in the Cambodian or Laotian forest or were shunted east through valleys into the lightly populated central highlands of South Vietnam. Under the cover of the southwest monsoon, the NVA besieged the American Special Forces camp at Duc Co and battered the ARVN units in the highlands. By the early summer of 1965, MACV intelligence gave Westmoreland the "gloomy" estimate that one NVA regular division was already operating in the highlands and that two more were en route south along the Trail.

Ironically, as the military situation in the countryside deteriorated, Saigon's generals finally thrashed out their political rivalries. A relatively stable military government emerged with General Nguyen Van Thieu as chairman and Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky as premier. Both officers understood the gravity of the situation, and were eager to put palace intrigues behind them and make the sacrifices necessary to block a Communist victory. But the situation was so desperate that MACV intelligence recognized that the ARVN alone was incapable of blunting the swelling Communist offensive.²⁰

Westmoreland advised Washington that he would need much larger numbers of American combat troops to prevent the outright defeat of the ARVN. After consultations with McNamara and Lyndon Johnson's national security adviser, the former Harvard professor and Kennedy appointee McGeorge Bundy, Westmoreland and Taylor worked out a formula for direct American military intervention to save the ARVN. An international force was planned, including several army and marine battalions from the Republic of Korea, a token force from Australia, and a large new U.S. force totaling one division and three brigades. This would bring overall allied combat strength up to forty-four maneuver battalions.²¹ With helicopter and other support units, American forces in Vietnam would total almost 130,000. This request galvanized the Pentagon and the White House into an intense examination of America's long-term strategy in Vietnam.

After intense consultation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, McNamara was convinced that the United States could not delay any longer the decision on committing significant combat forces. He recommended to Lyndon Johnson that Westmoreland's request for combat troops be quickly implemented, and that those troops be allowed to go on the offensive, undertaking the "search and destruction of the main enemy units." Equally important, McNamara backed the JCS recommendation that a complete quarantine of war matériel be imposed on North Vietnam, using all available air and naval power. This would require mining North Vietnamese ports, bombing airfields and missile sites, and destroying rail and road links to China.²²

In other words, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was properly forwarding to the President the only logical strategy, which had been developed after much consideration by the country's senior military leaders.

The JCS fully understood Ho's indifference to limited reprisal bombing of purely military targets. Ho Chi Minh was a dedicated, disciplined international Communist, with decades of revolutionary struggle behind him. It was ludicrous to hope a few bombing raids on old French barracks would suddenly change him. If America wanted to stop Communist aggression in the South, the obvious way to do that was to destroy North Vietnam's war-making capability, not try to "punish" Ho Chi Minh with a limited carrot-and-stick bombing campaign.

Even more important was the need to clearly and unequivocally demonstrate to the North Vietnamese—and their Soviet and Chinese Communist sponsors—that the United States intended to stand behind South Vietnam. Everyone knew the Saigon government was battered and undercut by venal generals on the one hand and widespread Communist insurgency (including the terror of the *tru gian* death squads) on the other. If America was going to intervene militarily to support this country through the long, bloody process of nation building, while simultaneously defeating aggression from the North, we had to demonstrate our determination, our stomach for the protracted battle.

In other words, we had to convince Ho Chi Minh we were serious. The JCS knew the best way to accomplish this was through the declaration of a national emergency, which would include extension of terms of service, as well as the mobilization of the armed forces reserves. The call-up of the reserves was a key element here, and served several purposes. First, mobilization would demonstrate exactly how serious we were, just as Kennedy's reserve call-up during the Berlin crisis of 1961 showed the Russians our true resolve. Both the Soviet and North Vietnamese leadership operated with a European internationalist mindset, in which mobilization was tantamount to a declaration of war. Conversely, a country that did not mobilize its reserves in a military emergency was obviously bluffing. Second, on a more practical level, a reserve call-up was needed—especially by the Army—in order to staff the planned force-structure expansion (what became the "Army Buildup Plan") with qualified personnel. Unless we called up the reserves, we would not have experienced officers and NCOs to lead the new units to be created to replace the forces deployed to Vietnam.

This mobilization was an integral part of the JCS war plan, which also included the maritime quarantine of North Vietnam and the destruction of vital lines of communication. The Joint Chiefs were unanimous in the recommendation of this plan to McNamara, and the strongest advocate was Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson. He had visited South Vietnam on several occasions during the building crisis and was convinced that only a massive U.S. intervention (with a reserve mobilization) would succeed in defeating the Communist invasion and their will to continue the war.

Johnson had been a prisoner of war of the Japanese for almost four years. He commanded the 8th Cavalry Regiment that bore the brunt of the Chinese intervention in Korea. He understood that war in Asia was not an academic exercise in "counterinsurgency" that could be fine-tuned through the subtleties of target selection and alternating threats and promises. While President Johnson seemed to view the conflict in Indochina in terms of back-room political dealing, Chief of Staff General Harold Johnson saw the crisis in Vietnam in direct, brutal military terms.

The Army obviously would have the largest responsibility in the enlarged war. After McNamara's initial support for Westmoreland's intervention plan, General Johnson gave his ACSFOR, Lieutenant General Ben Harrell, the responsibility of creating a practical force-structure plan that would permit the Army to fight in Vietnam and continue to meet its other requirements, especially its NATO responsibilities. The job of writing this Army Buildup Plan (which went through several major modifications) fell to my colleague Colonel Lloyd "Chill" Wills, head of the Programs Division in the Plans and Programs Directorate. Wills was a crusty infantryman who had commanded a line battalion in the 3rd Division in the Iron Triangle during the savage fighting in the spring of 1953. He worked his Pentagon staff as if they were the headquarters of a combat outfit. Chill Wills understood that his division's task was to produce vital action documents that could make the difference between success or failure as the Army prepared for war in Southeast Asia. (The other division chief in our directorate was Colonel Fritz Kroesen, who went on to become a four-star general and commander of the U.S. Army in Europe in the 1970s, where he was almost blown up in a terrorist assassination attempt.)

Wills's task was further complicated by the sudden American military intervention in the Caribbean nation of the Dominican Republic. A revolt by leftist military units there threatened to destabilize the country and Lyndon Johnson decided to intervene to support pro-American government elements to prevent a pro-Castro coup d'état. From the perspective of ACSFOR, this complication meant one of our key strategic intervention forces, the 82nd Airborne Division, would not be available for fast deployment to Vietnam.²³ Nevertheless, Wills had to plan a buildup that would achieve quick results on the ground in South Vietnam, not just satisfy McNamara's clipboard professors.

Everybody had an opinion on accomplishing the complex buildup. But Wills did not need opinions, he needed a formal plan. As his officers worked almost around the clock in June and early July 1965, Wills repeatedly told them, "Don't get it *right*; get it written." McNamara began to modify the buildup plan by cutting back on the "round-out" reserve forces to be mobilized to augment regular units, so Chill Wills and his staff had to scrap one draft plan after another to match the new requirements.²⁴ It's important

to recall that this demanding staff work was accomplished before the days of desktop computers and word processors. As McNamara's systems analysts pared down the reserve call-up to achieve their sacred cost effectiveness, Wills's people had to shuffle and readjust their plan. Their adding machines and electric typewriters clattered through many a late night. But Chill Wills stayed on top of this long, frustrating exercise. When things got really confused, he'd thump his desk and proclaim: "Get your pencils out. I don't need any more technical advice."

I watched my colleagues struggle with this intense effort through the first weeks of July. Wills and his staff kept us informed on their effort, both as a professional courtesy and also because the shape of the expanded Army had a direct bearing on our own work for the future force structure. In mid-July, McNamara, accompanied by Henry Cabot Lodge, the newly redesignated ambassador to Vietnam, left for Saigon to consult with Westmoreland and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, who was about to leave the post. While there, McNamara got word that President Johnson had approved the basic intervention plan, including the Army buildup with its reserve call-up and, equally important, the extension of active-duty personnel tours. Simultaneously, Lyndon Johnson held a series of press conferences at which he also announced America was prepared for full mobilization. The President went so far as to proclaim that our "national honor" had been committed to the defense of South Vietnam.²⁵

These were strong words. All of us in ACSFOR naturally assumed that the inevitable declaration of an emergency would automatically extend service terms. This was only common sense. If a brigade of the 101st Airborne, for example, was deployed to fight in Vietnam, *all* the officers and men who had trained together would be needed in combat, including those whose enlistments were due to expire. Even though some men might have only signed up for three years, the declaration of a national emergency and the mobilization of the reserves would mean for all practical purposes that America was at war, albeit a limited one. There would probably have to be some kind of rotation point system established, as there was in Korea, but at least outfits would go into combat at full strength.

When McNamara returned from South Vietnam, he presented President Johnson with a Top Secret memorandum summarizing the recommendations on the planned military intervention, which had been endorsed by the JCS, Westmoreland, and Ambassadors Taylor and Lodge. It is important to note the timing and content of this message. Military historian Walter Hermes has summarized it as follows: "He [McNamara] proposed that the U.S. strength in Vietnam be increased to 175,000 by October, including 34 maneuver battalions, with possibly another 100,000 men to be added in 1966. Congress should be asked to authorize the call-up of about 235,000 Reserve

and National Guard troops, including 125,000 for the Army, 75,000 for the Marines, 25,000 for the Air Force, and 10,000 for the Navy. Although the call-up would be for two years, the reserves would probably be released after a year, when the increases in the regular forces would be trained and ready to replace them. The Army would expand by 270,000 men, the Marines by 75,000, and the Air Force and Navy would each add 25,000 to their regular personnel to provide for other contingencies in the interim, using the draft, recruitment, and extending tours of duty to fill these requirements."²⁶

This was indeed a serious recommendation, which had the full endorsement of America's professional military leaders, as well as that of the Secretary of Defense. McNamara's memo sparked a high-level White House meeting on Vietnam that began on the morning of Thursday, July 22. The Joint Chiefs were present, as were McNamara and LBJ's national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy. The issue on the table was clear: Was America prepared to meet Communist military aggression in Vietnam with appropriate force? McGeorge Bundy led the argument against full mobilization and a proclamation of a national emergency. Calling up the reserves, he said, was tantamount to a declaration of war. McNamara concurred, but pointed out the seriousness of the crisis in Vietnam. Without a large-scale intervention by American combat troops, he said, South Vietnam would fall. The members of the JCS each spoke adamantly in favor of mobilization. Again, the strongest advocate was General Harold Johnson.

LBJ asked Johnson if he believed Ho Chi Minh's statement that his nation would fight for twenty years if need be.

"I believe him," General Johnson replied.

The President noted that Congress might oppose mobilizing the reserves, but McNamara was confident he could convince Congress of the need. Johnson adjourned the meeting, leaving the strong impression among the JCS that America was about to mobilize for war.²⁷

Back at the Pentagon, Chill Wills's shop was churning out paper nonstop, fine-tuning the reserve call-up orders and augmentation of regular units. They worked through the weekend. General Johnson contacted Major General Harry Kinnard, the commander of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). The new Air Cav was the fruition of years of planning and represented the shift in doctrine that I had helped plan back at the Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. With the 82nd Airborne tied up in the Caribbean, the Air Cav would be our first major combat unit deployed from the States for offensive operations in Vietnam. Their area of operations would be the central highlands, that roadless, jumbled terrain where major NVA units were now poised to cut South Vietnam in half. Johnson told Kinnard his division would be the point unit of a major American mobilization.

"Get ready," the Chief of Staff told Kinnard. "You're going to Vietnam."

"When?" Harry Kinnard asked.

"Now."²⁸

While the Army grappled with the complexities of a major combat deployment, President Johnson met once more with his close advisers, this time in the quiet atmosphere of Camp David. McNamara was joined by Johnson's longtime confidants Clark Clifford and Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg. Clifford and Goldberg represented another aspect of Johnson's complex—indeed, convoluted—persona: the anointed heir of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Johnson saw his expensive and ambitious Great Society program as the monument on which his presidency would stand shining in the spotlight of historical judgment. Now his most trusted advisers noted that wresting a national emergency and reserve mobilization from Congress would fatally undercut his plans for the Great Society. Johnson faced the dilemma of a classic "guns or butter" policy choice. The tragedy of his eventual decision was his self-delusion—abetted by Robert McNamara—that the country could have both effective guns in Vietnam and the ample butter of the Great Society. But on this summer weekend he had not quite reached that point of self-delusion.²⁹

To bolster their argument, Clifford and Goldberg emphasized McGeorge Bundy's position that mobilization was tantamount to a declaration of war; no one could predict how Communist China or the Soviet Union would react. The specter of the Red Chinese hordes sweeping across the frozen mountains of Korea was still very much alive. Apparently, no one at the meeting had bothered to consult the CIA, which had been reporting for months that China's descent into the chaos of the Great Cultural Revolution had all but paralyzed the Communist leadership. China was involved in its second civil war; it was doubtful they would undertake a military intervention in Indochina.³⁰

This situation represented a dubious "intelligence failure" similar to the events in the spring of 1950, when Truman's cabinet rejected explicit CIA warnings about the pending North Korean invasion. In mid-1965, however, the Johnson White House was actively hostile to the CIA. Lyndon Johnson had never trusted Kennedy's director of Central Intelligence, John McCone. The President instinctively rejected Agency estimates that North Vietnamese aggression could only be countered through a massive military intervention. By the time Johnson replaced McCone with Admiral William F. Raborn in April 1965, the President was already well entrenched within a circle of advisers who took little counsel from the CIA. Raborn himself was a high-technology submarine expert with no geopolitical background. Senior Agency officers were shocked at his ignorance of world events. He made a docile token presence at National Security Council meetings where key decisions on our Vietnam policy were made.³¹

Johnson was soon swayed by his advisers' arguments. He now reversed himself, and leaned toward the worst possible compromise. Up to 200,000 American combat troops would still be deployed; the armed forces would still be expanded. But this would be accomplished without mobilization of the reserves or an extension of terms of service.³²

McNamara, ever the nimble statistician, blithely agreed to this disastrously illogical policy. As historian George McT. Kahin has noted, McNamara suddenly reversed field, abandoning the JCS, and assured Johnson "that an overall expansion of American armed forces could be managed without calling up the reserves." McNamara further advised the President that "his senior military advisers" were willing to accept the obvious pitfalls of this policy: the slow buildup rate, the debasing of the officer and noncommissioned officer ranks, and all the rest of it.³³ Given this advice, Johnson's decision is more understandable.

On Monday July 26, Johnson met again at the White House with his key military and civil advisers. He announced he now favored a graduated military escalation that fell short of a decisive mobilization and proclamation of an emergency. McNamara made it clear he backed the President. General Harold Johnson and his JCS colleagues sat through this meeting in shocked silence. Their civilian superior, Robert McNamara, had abandoned them.³⁴

I was wrapping up my workday on that Monday afternoon when General Paul Phillips, the new director for Plans and Programs, sent me to see Major General Michael Davison, the deputy ACSFOR.

Davison came right to the point. "Okay, Jack," he said, his face grave, "we've got a new requirement for the Army Buildup Plan and your office is going to have to write it."

General Davison explained that Chill Wills's staff was exhausted by their long efforts over the previous weeks. My people were to prepare the revised plan. "The first phase calls for adding one division and three brigades as soon as possible," Davison said, consulting his notes.

"That's no problem, General," I said. "We've been working on a plan to add from one to six divisions, so all we have to do is adjust the numbers and the reserve call-up."

Davison shook his head. "Jack," he said, "there've been a few changes." McNamara, he said, had just ordered the Army to develop a plan to deploy these units to Vietnam with *no* call-up of reserve forces and *no* extension of terms of service. This first stage of the Army's Vietnam expansion would also include combat support units such as Engineers, and many more helicopter companies.

Mike Davison and I looked at each other silently for a moment. Every officer with combat experience would have shared our emotions. There are certain times in all wars when a man is asked to implement stupid, indeed disastrous, orders. This was one of them.

"Sir," I protested, "all our plans call for using reserve units to staff the training centers that we're going to need for all the new draftees." I began enumerating the obvious objections, and Davison nodded grimly. "The construction engineer battalions are all in the reserves. We're going to need them for building bases over there. And what about finding qualified officers for the new units?"

Davison cut me off. "You crank out the plan, Jack, and make a list of all these points." He paused a moment, then spoke bluntly, one soldier to another. "If you ask me, this plan is so dumb it'll never fly."

But, he added, we had to go through the exercise. I was to have the revised plan letter-perfect in multiple copies to brief General Johnson at 0700 the next morning. Johnson and I would then brief Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor at 0730, and he would brief McNamara at 0800. In turn, McNamara would carry the plan to the White House, where, we hoped, it would be quickly rejected.

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It was after six when I got my staff assembled. General Davison had already alerted all our points of contact in the Army Staff to stand by for all-night duty. I explained what we had to do, told the officers to get on with their work, despite their obvious distaste for the exercise, and established a series of deadlines throughout the night by which I needed their various inputs. Somehow, they were going to have to find qualified personnel in active-duty units to staff the expanded training centers, to provide construction-engineer battalions, and of course to staff all the NCO and officer slots in the expanded units. And this would have to be accomplished with no reserve call-up and no extension of duty tours.

General Davison had some mandatory social event he had to attend, but he promised to stop in later that night to check on our progress.

My first major concern was the impact this expansion would have on our combat units in Europe. During my earlier force-structure reviews, I'd discovered the units assigned to NATO were in pretty fair shape, adequately staffed and equipped to perform their missions, but with no deadwood. Moreover, many of the Army's best officers and NCOs were assigned to Europe. This sudden Army expansion without a reserve call-up would obviously draw down hard on Europe, depleting the combat battalions' officers and NCOs.

As the frantic night continued, the dimensions of the problem grew more ominous. The proposed expansion called for an increased monthly draft of 20,000 recruits. But the Army was then losing 20,000 men a month through retirement and completion of service. Therefore, at best, the new draft was

a dubious way to fill out the ranks of the expanded units. We would have to push thousands of NCOs through Officer Candidate School to have adequate second lieutenants, and replace them with "instant" NCOs. This would occur while the Reserves and National Guard had several thousand qualified junior officers who had already requested active duty but would be denied the opportunity.

Looking downstream a year or two, it became obvious that many career officers and NCOs would serve a year in the Vietnam combat zone, return for a few months' duty in the States, then be eligible for combat duty again. The negative potential of all this on Army morale was terrible. As my section leaders reported in with their figures that night, I realized the plan was actually worse than I had originally thought, but that, regrettably, it was statistically possible. And we all knew Assistant Secretary Enthoven and his systems analysts saw only numbers, not flesh-and-blood soldiers. To them, "morale" was just as invalid a concept as "the principles of war."

However, after midnight, I saw that one of the most fundamental military principles was being disregarded here. Basic doctrine held that any offensive (including an intervention such as this with offensive combat troops) be conducted in "mass." A wise commander conducted a maximum-effort offensive, not the minimum deployment proposed by McNamara and the White House.³⁵ In so doing, the commander improved his chances for success and also limited casualties.

The Communists in Hanoi would interpret no mobilization and no extension of duty tours as an obvious sign of muddled policy. If America intended to subdue Ho Chi Minh and turn him away from aggression in the South, we had to seriously threaten his war-making capability. The French never mobilized reserves in their strategically flawed war (they consistently underestimated Ho and General Giap), and they paid the price at Dien-bienphu. And Lyndon Johnson was reputed to consider Vietnam a "pissant" country, hardly worthy of serious American contempt.³⁶ He was dead wrong. North Vietnam's population in 1965 was over 16 million (there were almost 15 million people in South Vietnam) and it had one of the largest per-capita military establishments in the world. The Communists were mobilized for war; we were not.

And they could readily take advantage of *their* mobilization. Without a reserve call-up or service extensions, the U.S. Army would need nine months to deploy the projected 200,000 troops to Vietnam. In that period, the NVA could easily match our numbers through infiltration south along the Trail. These problems became blatant as we struggled with the revised plan that night.

By dawn, my staff had a new Army Buildup Plan that met McNamara's requirements, at least on paper. But I had a list of serious objections to it

when I entered General Johnson's office at 0700. As always, the Chief of Staff was gravely courteous. He was a man of deep inner strength and quiet dignity, attributes that probably sprang from his years of harsh captivity during World War II. Just as I began my briefing, Army Secretary Resor entered from his adjoining office. General Johnson told me to continue, and his manner signified I was to withhold nothing.

After noting the complex personnel shifts and unit juggling of the plan, I cited the major objections. With no reserve call-up or extension of service, the Army would be obliged to commit troops to Vietnam piecemeal; I pointed out that the nine-month delay in deployment gave the NVA ample time to counter our buildup. Both General Johnson and Resor were well aware that a lack of mobilization signified an obvious lack of resolve. But they were troubled when I explained this plan's impact on the officer corps. Regular officers and NCOs would draw an unfair share of combat duty and their junior ranks would soon be filled with unqualified people. The draw-down on our best units in Europe would quickly leave them "hollow," a specter feared by every commander. This impact would be hardest on the combat arms, as well as on certain support elements such as the Engineers, the Signal Corps, and Army Aviation. Furthermore, the training centers would not be able to cope with the enlarged draft without the reserve units specifically assigned to staff them. Without the mobilization of reserve construction battalions, we would have to convert combat engineers to building base areas, further weakening the Army in Europe.

Finally, I noted that our best-trained and most important combat units, such as the Air Cav, would be deployed badly understrength unless their troops' terms of service were extended.

General Johnson shook his head, his face a somber mask. "You make your point well, Colonel," he finally said.

Secretary Resor agreed. He asked me to continue briefing him on the way down to McNamara's office. No doubt we presented an unusual picture in the long corridors: a tired colonel with a sheaf of papers and an ashen-faced Army secretary. Resor went in to brief McNamara carrying a copy of my notes at 0810. I went back upstairs to finish briefing the ACSFOR staff.

At 1130, the word came down that McNamara was back from the White House. If President Johnson had even bothered to listen to our objections, he had quickly dismissed them. We were to execute this tragically flawed plan.

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At noon on Wednesday, July 28, Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation on television. The United States had increased its commitment of combat troops

in Vietnam to 125,000 men, and more troops would be deployed as needed. The draft would be doubled. But there would be no mobilization of reserves. Terms of service would not be extended. Most of the men in my office watching the speech had served in combat in two wars. We listened in bitter silence.

Down the hall, General Harold Johnson changed into his best summer uniform, the blouse replete with combat decorations. He told his driver to take him to the White House. He intended to resign in protest at the criminal folly just announced by his commander in chief. As the black Ford sedan approached the tall wrought-iron gates of the White House, Johnson unpinned the four silver stars from his epaulets and jingled them lightly in his brawny hand. He had been appointed chief of staff as a lieutenant general, passing over more than a dozen men of four-star rank. Now he was about to throw away those four stars. Even a man of his deep convictions and integrity was not capable of this act. In any event, there were several generals over whom he had jumped who would gladly step in to replace him. General Johnson pinned his stars back on and told the driver to return to the Pentagon.

Years later, he told Colonel Harry Summers that he had rationalized the moment, convincing himself he could do more by staying with the Army's system than by resigning. "And now," he told Summers, "I will go to my death with that lapse in moral courage."³⁷