

## **Lesson 5: President Johnson and the Vietnam War**

### *Introduction*

The assassinations of President Kennedy and of Ngo Dinh Diem had a tremendous impact on the events in Vietnam. With Kennedy's death, the encroachment of communist nations around the globe, and the sudden destabilization of the South Vietnamese government, things were in flux both at home and abroad for the United States in late 1963. This lesson examines the period immediately following the death of JFK to the opening military operations of the Vietnam War.

### *President Johnson Stays the Course*

In the United States, Vice-President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) was quickly flown to Washington, DC, and sworn in as the President of the United States. Whether for better or worse, LBJ promised to hold fast to his predecessor's policies regarding the situation in Vietnam.

By the time Kennedy was assassinated, the U. S. presence in South Vietnam had swelled to more than 16,000, including advisors, intelligence agents, paramilitary personnel, as well as US Air Force pilots and their ground crews (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). This significant three-year buildup of Americans in the region would be dwarfed by the personnel increases in the years that followed, however.

LBJ retained Kennedy's cabinet, assuring a smooth and seamless transfer of power between presidents. Among them were Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, and CIA Director John McCone (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). Since there were no changes to these key presidential advisors, there were virtually no changes to Kennedy's foreign policies, either.

Indeed, Johnson set about increasing the American presence in Vietnam on the request of the new U. S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, General Maxwell Taylor (the previous ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, had resigned by June of 1964). On General Taylor's request, troop levels were increased dramatically and General William "Westy" Westmoreland was made commander of the Military Assistance Command - Vietnam (MACV) in 1964.

### *Military Juntas (Sort of )Take Control in Vietnam*

Following the death of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Nhu, the generals of the South Vietnamese military took control of the country's politics. However, this situation proved to be quite unstable, with the various factions and commanders within the nation's armed forces vying for political power. Thus, a series of short-lived "governments" were established and overthrown in a series of coups that led up to the outset of the Vietnam War.

The political and religious differences within the populace were amply represented by the military and their commanders, who added their own egos and ambitions to the incendiary situation. As a consequence, "...few of the intervening governments provided very much political stability or social order, and by the time they addressed these issues, it was too late" (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). The Vietcong (VC) and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had grown in strength and were now capable of launching a final offensive against the demoralized and unstable government of South Vietnam.

### *The Gulf of Tonkin*

In early August, 1964, the USS *Maddox* was approached at high speed by three boats while in the Gulf of Tonkin--international waters off the coast of North Vietnam. Despite taking evasive action and firing warning shots across the boats' bows, the approaching craft continued unabated. At this point, the guns of the USS *Maddox* opened fire, crippling the first boat, forcing the second to flee, and hitting the third boat. Undaunted, the third boat passed by the bow of the *Maddox*, spraying it with machine gun fire (Daugherty, 2002). Those aboard the USS *Maddox* believed the attacks were from the North Vietnamese.

Upon hearing of the incident, President Johnson issued a strongly-worded response, stating the "United States ships have traditionally operated freely on the high seas in accordance with the rights guaranteed by international law within the set limits of territorial waters" (Daugherty, 2002). He further warned Ho Chi Minh's government in Hanoi that US ships "...will take whatever steps are necessary that ... North Vietnam will be under no misapprehension as to the grave consequences which would inevitably result from any further unprovoked military action against the United States" (Daugherty, 2002).

Two days later, the USS *Maddox*, now joined by the destroyer USS *C. Turner Joy*, were again attacked by five unidentified vessels, again in international waters. While some dispute whether or not these second attacks actually occurred, it served as the impetus for the United States to take decisive action.

The upshot of these events was the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was put before Congress on August 5, 1964. It passed both the House (414-0) and the Senate (88-2) and served as "...the principal constitutional authorization for the escalation of US military involvement in the Vietnam War" (Daugherty, 2003). On August 11, 1964, President Johnson signed the resolution into law.

### *Sending in the Marines*

In the Fall of 1964, the election for the next U. S. President was held, with Lyndon Baines Johnson running for election against the Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater of Arizona. Using his position as interim president to full advantage, Johnson campaigned on a platform of not going to war in Vietnam. However, he also visibly maneuvered warships into the Gulf of Tonkin to shore up his "tough" image and guard against the much more conservative, hawkish platform of Goldwater.

In a massive landslide, Goldwater was defeated and Johnson was elected as President of the United States. However, the situation in Vietnam was such that, even though LBJ presented himself as a dove on international affairs, a conflict in jungles of Southeast Asia would force him to break his campaign promises:

"Johnson had few options, given the momentum behind supporting South Vietnam, the commitment of the U.S. to prevent the spread of communism there, and the American prestige that was on the line when Johnson started bombing North Vietnam in 1964" (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). To abandon the Republic of Vietnam now would certainly allow them to be conquered by the North Vietnamese communists--and that would mean massive political defeat for the Democrats in the following American elections.

Although he tried to focus on domestic issues, Johnson was finally forced to deal with the Vietnam situation in an official way by the spring of 1965. The Vietcong (VC) were pushing their attacks in South Vietnam, actually killing American servicemen in the process. At the time, Johnson did nothing, which emboldened the VC to mount further attacks. Indeed, the NVA pushed larger and larger numbers of troops into

South Vietnam, further threatening the political and social stability of the government in Saigon (Frankum and Maxner, 2003).

In February of 1965, during the Tet holiday (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration), "...the Viet Cong attacked U. S. military units near Pleiku and killed nine Americans. Something had to be done to stop this killing and stabilize the situation. General Westmoreland suggested sending in the marines" (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). Johnson consented, sending the U. S. 9th Marine Expeditionary Force to Danang (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). The introduction of U. S. marines into the situation could only mean one thing: the war was underway.

## Chapter Review Questions

### *Multiple Choice*

1. The two U. S. destroyers fired on by the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin were the USS *Maddox* and the USS \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. *Atlantic*
  - b. *C. Turner Joy*
  - c. *Merrimac*
  - d. *Nimitz*
  - e. *T. C. Lea*
2. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. 1960
  - b. 1961
  - c. 1962
  - d. 1963
  - e. 1964
3. Lyndon Johnson ran against \_\_\_\_\_ in the 1964 elections.
  - a. *Barry Goldwater*

- b. Gerald Ford
  - c. Hubert Humphrey
  - d. None of the above
  - e. Richard Nixon
4. Who was the Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations?
- a. Dean Rusk
  - b. John McCone
  - c. McGeorge Bundy
  - d. Robert McNamara
  - e. None of the above
5. Following President Diem's death, South Vietnam was ruled by \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. General Giap
  - b. His brother, Nhu
  - c. Several military *juntas*
  - d. The Dragon Lady
  - e. None of the above

*True/False*

- 1. The nickname of General Westmoreland was "Morely". **False**
- 2. The Vietcong attacked U. S. military units during the Tet holiday. **True**
- 3. President Johnson ran for election on a platform of going to war in 1964. **False**
- 4. Ngo Dinh Nhu was President Ngo Dinh Diem's brother and advisor. **True**
- 5. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was signed into law in August, 1964. **True**

## **Lesson 6: Making Battle Plans**

### *Introduction*

Once American marines were on the ground in Vietnam, it was clear to everyone that the United States' involvement in the situation would involve the use of our military might. The ground war began in earnest after March, 1965, as the U.S. Marine Corps were ordered to secure ports, airstrips, and coastal facilities in preparation for more American troops to arrive. This lesson examines the early military operations of the Vietnam War and includes a brief synopsis of the respective strategies of the Vietcong and the United States.

### *Hardly a Monolith: The Strategies of the Vietcong*

As the composition of the Vietcong (VC) forces began to change in composition following the U.S. bombings in 1964. Prior to this time, most of the ARVN and VC troops were natives of South Vietnam. Most of the conflicts that occurred in the southern half of the country were between two groups that were basically indigenous to the area (Frankum and Maxner, 2003).

However, in 1964 and 1965, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) sent additional troops southward in an effort to aid the VC and deliver a quick knock-out blow to the South Vietnamese military apparatus. The combined forces of the NVA and the VC could (hopefully) then reunite all of Vietnam under communist rule by deposing the American-backed government based in Saigon (Frankum and Maxner, 2003).

The way to achieve this goal, however, was not entirely clear, as strategists emerged within the communists' ranks, each proposing a different method of conquering South Vietnam. Ironically, the division in military strategy seemed to split evenly between the native northern and native southern communists.

The northern approach was the classical communist "people's war" strategy, which wherein the southern Vietnamese would be allowed or liberate themselves and join their comrades in the north. The southern approach "...advocated the North's full support of the armed struggle in the South, on the premise that Vietnam was one nation and therefore dependent on all Vietnamese for its independence and reunification" (MSN Encarta, 2009). Ho Chi Minh ultimately decided to adopt the latter strategy and dispatched the first units of northern-born communist regulars to the south in 1964.

With regard to tactics, the communist forces opted to conduct a guerilla-style war, utilizing hit-and-run strikes and avoiding open combat whenever possible. General Giap and the other North Vietnamese commanders understood they were vastly out-gunned by the Americans. Thus, they relied on a plan that emphasized dealing a steady stream of casualties to the U. S. forces while simultaneously avoiding the massive casualties that would surely result from a head-on battle strategy.

In order to wage such a war, however, the North Vietnamese needed to find a way to cross the 17th parallel (the dividing line established by the Geneva Accords that split the country in two), which was made a demilitarized zone (DMZ). In order to move their troops, vehicles, and materiel into South Vietnam, they would a plan. Thus, the NVA/VC forces

"...moved into South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia. In use since 1957, the trail was originally a series of footpaths; by the late 1960s it would become a network of paved highways that enabled the motor transport of people and equipment" (MSN Encarta, 2009).

The North Vietnamese had several assets they could employ: "...time, a strong will to fight, and an ability to mobilize the entire country to engage in a total war for national survival" (Frankum and Maxner, 2003). The driving force behind their war effort was that their national survival in the north was stake. This notion was seized upon and propagandized every time the U. S. would conduct a successful operation or a bombing raid.

The longer the war went on, the more costly it would be to the Americans. Thus, the North Vietnamese were in no hurry. However, since they had limited manpower and resources, this strategy severely limited the amount of fighting they could endure if they were to drag the conflict out for a period of many years "...until the U.S. finally gave up and left, mirroring their success against the French during the French-Indochina War" (Frankum and Maxner, 2003).

### *That Vision Thing: The U. S. Strategy for War*

As the greatest fighting force in the world, the United States had superior military firepower and could muster very large numbers of troops (or "boots on the ground", as it has come to be called). President Lyndon Johnson and his advisors (especially Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara), were leery of a protracted

conflict on the Indochina Peninsula. Such a war effort would be taxing on the United States economically, politically, and socially. A quick conclusion to the hostilities, then, was high on the agenda: hit hard, hit fast, defeat the communists, and go home.

The United States, however, had several other strategic considerations to weigh. First, America was not immediately threatened by the North Vietnamese communists and, thus, did not have a "total war" mentality about the conflict. Second, because they were not in a "total war" mentality, the use of nuclear missiles was off the table. Third, President Johnson refused to mobilize reserves to give the impression that the regular U. S. forces could handle the situation (the regular forces were bolstered by a military draft, however). Finally, the United States had to be mindful of the Soviet Union and/or China becoming involved in the conflict. The object was to keep the war localized and not provoke a third world war (Frankum and Maxner, 2003).

In light of these strategic considerations, the United States adopted a conventional warfare strategy similar to their successful battle blueprint from World War II: a two-pronged stratagem of attrition and erosion. In military parlance, "attrition" means depriving the enemy of some vital resource or resources they need to continue fighting, such as troops (the resource targeted in Vietnam), food, supply lines, and so forth. "Erosion" refers to the systematic destruction of military and industrial targets, as well as roads, weapons caches, etc.

Since the NVA/VC fighting forces had limited personnel and were poorly armed, it was reasoned the United States would win the conflict quickly using attrition and erosion strategies. Nevertheless, it would require some time to amass enough ground forces in Vietnam to engage in attrition. Therefore, the erosion strategy was employed first via a series of aerial and sea-based bombing raids on the VC supply lines.

## Chapter Review Questions

### *Multiple Choice*

1. Which of the following was NOT a strategy employed by the NVA/VC or the United States?
  - a. Attrition
  - b. Body count
  - c. Erosion



- d. Guerrilla war
  - e. All of the above
2. Communist strategists originally from North Vietnam advocated a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ strategy.
- a. Direct action
  - b. Invasion of South Vietnam
  - c. People's war
  - d. Wait-and-see
  - e. None of the above
3. Communist strategists originating from South Vietnam advocated a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ strategy, which was endorsed by Ho Chi Minh.
- a. Direct action
  - b. Invasion of South Vietnam
  - c. People's war
  - d. Wait-and-see
  - e. None of the above
4. Northern Vietnamese combatants were prepared to \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Go head-to-head with the U. S. in open battle
  - b. Make the war last as long as possible
  - c. Move to China
  - d. Surrender easily
  - e. None of the above
5. In deciding to go to war in Vietnam, President Johnson \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. Had almost no choice
  - b. Held a press conference in Europe
  - c. Threw a fund-raising gala
  - d. Was presented with many different options

e. All of the above

*True/False*

1. The United States' strategy in Vietnam relied on attrition and body count. **False**
2. The North Vietnamese opted to conduct a guerilla-style war since they were militarily inferior to the United States. **True**
3. The Ho Chi Minh Trail wound through the countries of Laos and Thailand. **False**
4. The United States Marines first landed at Danang. **True**
5. In the Vietnam War, the United States, the South Vietnamese, and the North Vietnamese possessed a "total war" mentality. **False**