

Synopsis / Analysis of *Dereliction of Duty*, by H.R. McMaster.

The assassination of Diem and his brother, which the US either directed or was complicit in, probably doomed at the outset our effort to keep South Vietnam (SVN) out of the Communist orbit.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 was the result of US provocations, including the raiding of North Vietnam (NVN) coastal installations, which were kept secret from the American public. While the first encounter between the US Navy and NVN gunboats was real, the second encounter, on which the legal basis for the war, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, rested, most likely did not occur. Nevertheless, LBJ went ahead with the resolution to give himself political cover. It was a presidential election year and he was vulnerable to a “soft on communism” attack from Barry Goldwater

Secretary of Defense McNamara’s view of the Vietnam conflict was formed in part by the Cuban Missile Crisis, where he advocated applying graduated pressure, e.g., blockade, diplomatic initiatives, rather the overwhelming force, e.g., massive bombing, invasion, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) urged. Since the outcome of the Crisis, removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba (but not Soviet troops), was considered a “win” for the US, it strengthened McNamara’s belief in “graduated pressure” and his contempt for the JCS. He seems to have ignored or repressed the fact that a key element of the Soviet’s willingness to withdraw its missiles was the US secretly agreeing to remove our missiles from Turkey. (Neither Turkey, nor any of the NATO allies, nor the citizens of the US were informed of this part of the deal.)

As Vietnam heated up, McNamara consistently followed the path of “graduated pressure”, bypassing the JCS and micromanaging every aspect, e.g., selecting the number and identity of each bombing target in the Rolling Thunder campaigns against NVN, choosing the Army and Marine units and how much of their strength would be deployed to SVN. In almost every instance, he would approve only a one-third to one-half of what had been requested by the JCS or Ambassador to SVN Maxwell Taylor, who had been given control over military operations there. (Westmoreland was his military assistant for a period of time.)

Many of the Chiefs of Staff had been recommended for appointment by Taylor (under both JFK and LBJ) based on their ability to get along in DC, not their leadership quality. LeMay was a strong personality, but his solution to everything was “bomb the hell out of them” (despite the contrary evidence of the WW II Strategic Bombing Survey). Marine Commandant Shoup was firmly against any commitment that could lead to a ground war in Asia, but he retired before the war really got rolling.

The JCS wanted to bring maximum, immediate pressure on NVN, not “graduated pressure”, to achieve the goal of a free and independent SVN, but they were divided by service rivalries and could never agree on a common plan of action. So McNamara ignored them and continued with the slow increase in pressure, convinced that the purpose of military action was to “send a message” to NVN that would convince them,

as rational human beings, that it was in their best interest to stop what they were doing in the South. He didn't see military force, as the JCS did, as a means to destroy the enemy's will and capacity for aggression.

For McNamara, an influence on his conduct of the war as significant as the Cuban Missile Crisis was his education in classical economics. There the fundamental assumption is that human beings are "rational actors" who will make decisions to maximize benefits and avoid losses. He had no background in history, never mind war, so he was operating from a false and unquestioned academic premise. So McNamara was "sending messages" that could only be interpreted by the NVN as a sign that the US was confused. When McNamara did consider the possibility that "graduated pressure" might not work, he consoled himself with the idea that we could at that point simply withdraw, having shown our seriousness by shedding blood. So further involvement in VN was an easy choice for him, if things went well, we would win, if not, we could always disengage and in either case we would preserve our credibility and maintain our national prestige.

By April 1965, McNamara had changed his goal for VN from "winning" to "denying victory to NVN / Vietcong (VC)". By June 1965, the goal had further devolved to no more than achieving a "stalemate". The JCS, Congress, and the American people were never advised of this change of direction. The JCS were still operating on the premise that a win, guaranteeing a "free and independent SVN" was the desired outcome. However, they knew that their requests for the military means to achieve their goal were being consistently denied and they never unequivocally articulated to McNamara or LBJ what they thought it would take to win. Among themselves, they estimated it would take a minimum of 5 years and 500,000 to 700,000 troops, when the maximum they were being promised was 180,000 troops with the assumption that victory was a year or two away. They nevertheless went along with "graduated pressure", in the hope that someday down the road they would get the troops, materiel, and freedom to wage war that they desired. So they were complicit in allowing the US to gradually drift into a war without a clear purpose or a clearly articulated strategy to achieve that purpose. The only member of the JCS who spoke his mind was Marine Commandant Greene who told both a Congressional aide and LBJ himself that he saw the war effort requiring at least 500,000 troops and 5 more years. None of the other Chiefs spoke up and the moment passed. (Greene had rocked the boat earlier, but when promise an expanded Marine Corps, he muted his message.)

From the start, Vietnam, was a nuisance LBJ didn't want to deal with. He agreed to provoke NVN in order to get the Tonkin Gulf resolution passed and cover his flank from Goldwater's "soft-on-communism attacks. He lied about the deteriorating situation in SVN during the presidential campaign. Once elected, he back-burnered VN as much as possible so as to advance his Great Society program. During 1965, in order to keep his domestic program on track, he refused to seek a much needed emergency defense appropriation or to mobilize the reserves. In addition, fear of negative international

publicity made him super cautious about bombing NVN. So instead, he agreed to send more troops to SVN, which he thought (at least in 1965) would be less controversial than bombing NVN. LBJ thought the immediate point of US involvement was to “kill them Viet Cong” and it was this outlook, for lack of the JCS or anyone else advancing a carefully thought-out alternative, which led to the later obsession with “body counts.”

Although McMaster doesn't go into it in any depth, it's clear that for all the military experience residing in the Pentagon and all the brain power surrounding the president, the reasons for France's defeat in Indochina were never seriously examined.

Alternatives, such as disengaging from SVN and negotiating with NVN were raised only so they could be dismissed. Early warnings from De Gaulle that we should either get out of Vietnam or super-escalate to directly take on China were given no consideration. Similarly, General Greene's advice that the US either vastly increasing troop levels or get out of VN were ignored. Clark Clifford, one of Washington's “wise men”, wrote LBJ in May 1965 warning him to keep troop levels low or risk getting sucked into a “quagmire”. He received no response. LBJ characterized withdrawing from VN, as “bugging out” and proposals (there weren't many) to withdraw were met with the argument that it would be tantamount to another “Munich”. That the geopolitical situations in Europe in 1938 and Southeast Asia in 1964-65 differed vastly does not seem to have been considered.

McMaster concludes that it's possible the VN war achieved something in America's interest, but he doubts it.

And, unfortunately, a valuable lesson that might have been salvaged from the war's wreckage - - that you don't go into a war without having its purpose and desired endpoint clearly identified and communicated to the American people - - was never learned.