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December 27, 1965

1965  
Wrapup

As Strategy  
for ~~base~~  
NY. H-T.

### AMERICA'S INSCRUTABLE WAR.

PLEIKU, SOUTH VIET NAM--This was an ungainly place for history to be written.

During the ~~evening~~<sup>mid-</sup> morning hours, on February 7, Presidential advisor MacGeorge Bundy arrived in the silvery C-123 transport aircraft, "The White Whale" ~~which~~<sup>was</sup> used by American commander General William C. Westmoreland, the only airplane in the country ~~of~~<sup>with</sup> wall-to-wall carpeting. Standing on the mortar-pocked steel airstrip, Bundy glanced at the forms of twisted helicopters and aircraft, and reviewed the billets where 116 Americans servicemen were wounded or killed, some of them in their beds. The Viet Cong Communist guerrillas, in a lightning attack by suicide and mortar squads, had created a turmoil and destructive havoc in this small corps headquarters town (pop. 25,000) only 20 miles from the Cambodian border and not far from the finger-like road-lets comprising the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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Earlier, the Vietnamese commander-in-chief Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh arrived, and while American Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor in Saigon conferred by telephone with the highest ranking American officials in Washington, Khanh, Bundy and General Westmoreland escaped the inquisitive press corps and conferred inside the "White Whale." Within seconds the key decision was articulated to Khanh; within hours 49 American planes from 3 Seventh Fleet Carriers sped north of the 17th parallel to the military barracks in the North Vietnamese city of Dong Hoi.

(Ironically to observers here, the three key decision-makes at the Saigon level were politically finished by the end of 1965. General Khanh was couped out of the country to an Ambassadorial post he was never ~~assigned~~ to. Ambassador Taylor resigned to become a "Presidential consultant." Presidential Advisor Bundy ~~had~~ resigned.)

Originally, the bombing of North Vietnam was thought to be a policy of tit for tat--if you destroy our installations, we'll destroy yours. But this soon gave way to a general policy of retaliation and then to a general policy, at first, the policy was officially proclaimed as aimed at inducing the North to negotiate, and the battle cry of the highest ranking American officials became "we'll be at the conference table by September."

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But Hanoi did not negotiate. Then the official line shifted to the military objective of hitting the military installations and routes of communication which allowed Hanoi to infiltrate men and material into South Vietnam. But, at year's end, the official estimates of North Vietnamese infiltration into the South had more than doubled--to 2500 men a month.

Superficially, the policy of bombing North Vietnam failed to meet its political objective of forcing Hanoi to negotiate or its military objective of stopping infiltration. More accurately, the policy half-succeeded, for by year's end, the bombing of the North had partially paralyzed the economic potentials and manpower reserves of the country. In short, if the bombings did not stop Hanoi's policy of aggression, in official eyes, it ~~wasn't~~ would at least make it more expensive and painful for North Vietnam to continue that policy. The policy of aerial escalation was also a little noticed policy of aerial expansion--Laos <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ also known to be subject to American bombing raids throughout the past year; and by the beginning of 1966, the airwar threatened to spread to Cambodia, which would engulf the whole Indo-China peninsula.

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The air war over North Vietnam, however, did not halt or abate the sharp deterioration of the ground war within South Vietnam, which had continued unimpeded since the fall of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in November, 1963. The coup d'etat and resulting repercussions wrecked the government's administrative and intelligence apparatus; the <sup>impermanence</sup> ~~impermanency~~ of a stable government at the Saigon level produced whirlwind changes of officials up and down the administrative ladder. More significant, the strategic hamlet program formulated and nurtured by the Diem regime collapsed as the Viet Cong "conquered" each of the government hamlets, leaving behind their own guerrilla bands and political machinery <sup>as</sup> ~~they~~ advanced forward.

The gravity of the situation in the countryside could partially be measured by statistics. Before the fall of Diem in late 1963, the Saigon government claimed 8,000 strategic hamlets of the 12,000 hamlets in the countryside. By the end of 1965, the most optimistic "guess-timate" placed the number of "pacified" pro-government hamlets at 2,000. The government's pacification plan for 1966 is known to call for pacifying those hamlets in a 6-mile radius <sup>around</sup> ~~from~~ the 43 provincial capitals and a 3-mile radius <sup>around</sup> ~~of~~ the 250 district towns in the countryside.

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Beginning with the fall of Diem, military commanders quickly changed their "measle" maps; the dots which had been slightly red were changed to Communist-controlled; the pink contested areas became red and even the white "measle pox" which had once been totally government controlled became a contested 'pink'. By mid-1965, government provincial capitals and district headquarters were ringed by a small oasis of friendly villages, but otherwise were isolated by the increasing Red pressure in the countryside. Then, in July, 1964 the first North Vietnamese-born troopers began appearing and these units, later to be designated as People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN), solidified the growing Red strength in the countryside.

By the end of 1965, highest-ranking officials said 9 PAVN regiments had infiltrated from North Vietnam (American, Korean and Australian ground units by late 1965 numbered 44 <sup>"mavericks"</sup> ~~"maneuver"~~ battalions--or roughly 15 Regiments. )

To combat internal deterioration, and to complement the bombing of North Vietnam, on March 8, 1965 the first 3,500 Marines rolled ashore ~~only to be~~ welcomed by a bevy of girls carrying ~~frangipani~~ <sup>LES 07</sup> frangipangi.

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The American influx continued throughout the year--in "tranches" the French word for slice--a slice of the 3rd Marine Division, and finally the whole division; a slice of the 101st Airborne, a slice of the 1st Marine Division; the Republic of Korea tiger regiment and Marine Division; the Royal Australian Regiment; and finally the elite 1st Air Mobile Cavalry Division, comprising 400-some helicopters and 15,000 troops, many of them airborne qualified. By years end the number of American combat military personnel numbered ~~150,000~~ <sup>180,000</sup> the outlook for 1966--the equivalent of at least one division a month for the next 12 months--or at least nearly 200,000 more troops.

The first Marines were officially designated to provide "local, close-in security" for the Danang airbase; then the troops began "offensive patrolling for defensive <sup>purposes</sup> ~~patrolling~~," but by mid-July, when the 173rd Airborne Brigade launched a search-and-destroy operation in the Communist stronghold of D-Zone, the American troops for the first time since the Korean War were offensively and officially engaged with Communist elements.

Using the approach of gradualism, the policy of the employe of American troops, as well as the policy of bombing North Vietnam, was slowly escalated, expanded, stiffened and broadened until at the end of 1965 America <sup>had</sup> ~~was~~ based into a war which it barely realized it had entered.

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On March 8, with the arrival of the first American ground ~~units~~ units, the decade-old Cold War moved into a Lukewarm War, if not a Hot War. The ideological conflict, which had previously existed in diplomatic dispatches and conference table discussions, moved down to the swamps and jungles of South Vietnam; Vietnam became the focal point for the conflict of what was officially described as differing and conflicting ways of life.

But, more significant to observers here, it was a dramatization and crucial testing of two systems of power. One was the massive physical power of America; the other was the power of the Communists to manipulate the masses, to incite uprisings and deterioration of Anti-Communist strength in a war the Communists, more specifically, the Chinese Communists, labelled as the "war of liberation." Both, Washington and Peking appeared to agree it was the "war of the future."

The difference between these two implementations of power was well described by a 20-year-old American private who saw the building in Danang.

"I can tell you when Uncle Sam moves in, there's no goofing around," he explained, "There was nothing here; then the Marines moved in and the buildings started going up. We got ~~the~~ word a F-100 squadron was moving in here and we had 4 days to fill 200,000 bags of dirt for sandbagging of mortar defenses. Even the colonels were shoveling dirt.

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"Now you can look down this ~~air~~ runway and for two miles there are American jets wingtip to wingtip. That's real power."

But the private, who had sat for 14 hours a day, for 13 months in a foxhole at the edge of the Danang runway explained the dichotomy of the war.

"The Viet Cong know more what's happening on this airbase than the base commander and the 20,000 American Marines around it. There are six thousand workers who come on here daily--we know some of them are Viet Cong. If the Vietnamese security officer keeps them off, he and his family will be killed. The Viet Cong can come on this base right under our noses--we don't know who's who. We saw an old woman carrying a bucket of drain oil into the gate. When we checked her, there was only an inch of oil and the rest of the bucket was a false bottom filled with plastique. We captured one of the workers drawing all the defense structures on the base. We captured one of the drivers of an American bus taking down the tail numbers of all the American aircraft on the base. Once my unit was given five-hours of leave to go to the commissary. When we returned more than half of the 100 American foxholes around the base had a small paper bag in them. Each bag had a poisonous krait snake in it. Some worker had just walked around and dropped a snake in each foxhole."

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This conflict in the two systems of power---the old woman with a bucket of plastique vs. the double-the-speed-of sound Phantom jets---was the essence of America's Inscrutable War, which one Western diplomat described as "the unholy trinity of terrorism, subversion and guerrilla warfare."

The February 7th bombing of North Vietnam produced jittery nerves in Saigon where the population attempted to anticipate the Communist reaction. Would Hanoi's <sup>MIG</sup> F-4s bomb south of the 17th parallel in reprisal? Would the Chinese Communist invade? The answer came 87 days later in Santo Domingo, when American Marines and paratroopers were dispatched to prevent wholesale chaos. But, as in Vietnam, American Marines and paratroopers were not a substitute for, nor could they create an efficient, just indigenous government.

America's Inscrutable War in Vietnam had <sup>BRUSHED</sup> ~~brushed~~ into another area, of the volite, underdeveloped, uncommitted Third World.