

# New Series: Viet Nam, Past and Prospect

*This is the first of a series of four articles reviewing the war in Viet Nam during 1965 and assessing the prospects in 1966.*

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Amid mortar craters and charred aircraft here on the morning of Feb. 7, 1965, three figures in the war against the Communists in South Viet Nam met in a gleaming C-123 transport. Before they emerged, the nature of the war had changed.

One was McGeorge Bundy, special assistant to President Johnson for national security affairs, who took time before the meeting to survey Pleiku's blasted airplanes and helicopters and the billets where shortly before eight Americans had died and 125 had been wounded in a Viet Cong guerrilla raid.

With Mr. Bundy was Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the American commander, who provided the C-123, called the White Whale and the only wall-to-wall carpeted airplane in South Viet Nam.

The Vietnamese commander-in-chief, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, had arrived earlier. Meanwhile, in Saigon U. S. Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor conferred by telephone with the highest ranking American officials in Washington.

Gen. Khanh, Mr. Bundy, and Gen. Westmoreland escaped inquisitive reporters inside the White Whale. Soon, the key decision was told to Gen. Khanh and within hours 49 U. S. planes from three 7th Fleet aircraft carriers sped north of the 17th Parallel to bomb the military barracks at the North Vietnamese city of Dong Hol.

At first, the bombing of North Viet Nam was a policy of tit-for-tat—if you destroy our installations, we'll destroy yours. But it soon gave way to general retaliation, and then to regular and continual bombing. In the beginning, the policy was officially proclaimed an inducement to the North to negotiate. High ranking American officials said hopefully: "We'll be at the

conference table by September."

But Hanoi did not negotiate. The new official objective was to hit the military installations and the communication routes which allowed Hanoi to pour men and materiel into South Viet Nam. By the year's end, however, official estimates said North Vietnamese infiltration had more than doubled—to 2,500 men a month.

Superficially, bombing North Viet Nam failed. It did not force Hanoi to negotiate; it did not stop the infiltration. But actually, the policy half succeeded. By the end of the year, the bombing had partially paralyzed the economic capacity and man-power reserves of North Viet Nam.

If the bombing did not stop Hanoi's aggression, in official eyes, it would at least make it more expensive and painful for North Viet Nam to continue. Escalation was accompanied by a little noticed policy of expansion, Laos was known to be subject to American bombing raids throughout the past year. By the beginning of 1966, the air war threatened to spread to Cambodia, and then would engulf the whole Indo-Chinese peninsula.

## GROUND WAR

The air war over North Viet Nam, however, did not abate sharp deterioration in the allied ground efforts in South Viet Nam, which had been worsening since the fall of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in November, 1963. The repercussions of the coup against Diem badly damaged the government's administrative and intelligence apparatuses. Amid government instability in Saigon swirled whirlwind changes of officials at every level. The strategic hamlet program, formulated and nurtured by the Diem regime, collapsed as the Viet Cong regained one government hamlet after another, leaving behind their own guerrilla bands and political machinery.

With some accuracy the situation in the countryside could be measured by statistics. Before the fall of Diem, the Saigon government

claimed control of 8,000 of the 12,000 hamlets in the countryside. By the end of 1965, the most optimistic estimate put the number of "pacified," or pro-government, hamlets at 2,000.

After the fall of Diem, military commanders quickly began to change their "measle" maps. Pink contested areas became red; and white "measle pox"—which once had been government controlled—became contested "pink." By the middle of 1965, government provincial capitals and district headquarters were ringed by small oases of friendly villages, but otherwise were isolated by increasing Red pressure in the countryside. Then, in July, 1964, the first North Vietnamese regular troops began appearing. These units, later to be designated as People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN),

solidified the growing Red strength.

By the end of 1965, military spokesmen said 9 PAVN regiments had infiltrated from North Vietnam. (American, Korean and Australian ground units by late 1965 numbered 44 battalions—or roughly 15 regiments.)

On March 8, 1965, the first 3,500 U. S. Marines came ashore and were welcomed by a bevy of girls.

The American and allied buildup continued throughout the year. In came part of the 3d Marine Division, and later the whole division, a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, elements of the 1st Marine Division, the Republic of Korea's Tiger regiment and Marine Division, an Australian regiment, and finally the entire U. S. 1st Cavalry Airmobile Division, with its more than 400 heli-

copters and 15,000 troops, many of them airborne. By the end of the year, American combat military personnel numbered 130,000. The outlook for 1966: the equivalent of at least one division a month for 12 months, or nearly 200,000 more troops.

## MARINES

The 1st Marines officially were to provide "local, close-in security" for the Da Nang air base, but soon they began what U. S. spokesmen called "offensive patrolling for defensive purposes." By mid-July, American troops went into unequivocal full combat with Communist forces for the first time since the Korean war—as the 173d Airborne Brigade went out on a search-and-destroy operation in the Red stronghold known as D-Zone.

With the new employment of ground and air forces, the U. S. role went through gradual metamorphosis. At the end of 1965 America was in a war it barely realized it had entered. The cold war had gone hot in the jungles of the Indochinese peninsula.

Beyond the ideological conflict, the war dramatized and tested two systems of power. One, the massive physical power of America; the other, the power of the Communists to manipulate the masses, to incite uprisings, labeled by the Chinese Communists as the "war of liberation." Washington and Peking appeared to agree it was the "war of the future."

The essence of the war was described by a 20-year-old American private who saw the buildup in Da Nang:

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

"Now you can look down this runway and for two miles there are American jets wing tip to wing tip," he said. "That's real power."

The private, who had sat

14 hours a day for 13 months, in a foxhole at the edge of the DaNang runway turned to the other side of the war.

## INTELLIGENCE

"The Viet Cong know more about what's happening on this air base than the base commander and the 20,000 American Marines around it," he said. "There are 6,000 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 plastic explosive. We captured one of the workers drawing diagrams of 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," the private went on.

"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 small paper bags in them. Each bag had a poisonous krait snake in it. Some worker had just walked around and dropped a snake in each foxhole."

This conflict in the two systems of power—the old woman with a bucket of explosive and 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."

America's Inscrutable War in Vietnam had brush-fired into another area of the volatile, underdeveloped, uncommitted third world.

The next article will examine the difficulties of public administration in Viet Nam, and the problems of American relations with the South Vietnamese.