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**McNAMARA vs THE JCS  
VIETNAM'S OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER:  
A FAILURE IN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

**BY**

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**McNamara vs. the JCS  
Vietnam's Operation ROLLING THUNDER: A Failure in Civil-Military Relations**

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## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel George H. Rhynedance, IV  
TITLE: McNamara vs. the JCS. Vietnam's Operation ROLLING THUNDER: A Failure in Civil-Military Relations  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 03 April 2000                      PAGES: 24                      CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

This paper examines the relationship between Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF), and General Earl Wheeler, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) - and, by proxy, the JCS - during Operation ROLLING THUNDER, the bombing campaign in Vietnam. The paper focuses primarily on the period between 1964 and 1968. It traces McNamara's journey from president at Ford Motor Company to Secretary of Defense, as well as how Wheeler came to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It defines Operation ROLLING THUNDER and its phases, and follows with an examination of the relationship between McNamara and the JCS - and its ultimate failure. This failure in civil-military relations led not only to confusion and indecision in the cabinet, but to dissent among the nations top military and civilian leaders in the most appropriate way to prosecute the campaign in Vietnam. Ultimately McNamara and the JCS would find themselves pitted against one another on the floor of the Senate Armed Services Committee - the body who would finally adjudicate their differences. The paper concludes with an examination of three major issues - failure of civil-military relations, loyalty, and strategic viability - and offers the subject matter as a vehicle for self-examination and study by the strategic leader.



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## **MCNAMARA VS. THE JCS. VIETNAM'S OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER: A FAILURE IN CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

### **LAYING THE BEDROCK: JOHNSON, MCNAMARA AND WHEELER.**

Some years after his presidency, Lyndon Johnson was asked to reflect on the beginning of his term of office. In doing so, it becomes clear that he was conflicted by two opposing challenges during those early years. First, his desire to adjust the domestic glidepath of the country through a program called "The Great Society," and second, the dark specter that loomed on the Far Western horizon, Vietnam.

I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved - the Great Society - in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home...But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.<sup>1</sup>

With those prophetic words, President Lyndon Johnson aptly summed up the conundrum of the time. What to do about Vietnam.

By early 1964, the United States was mired in what was quickly becoming a very difficult and confusing conflict to prosecute. Johnson and his cabinet had their hands full with determining the best method for providing some degree of protection to South Vietnam from the Communist North. In an effort to - among other things - shape the battlefield, to halt escalation, and to break the will of the wholly underestimated Ho Chi Minh, the United States embarked on a bombing campaign designed to deter further North Vietnamese aggression into the South. This campaign was called Operation ROLLING THUNDER. Two key players - among many - to the execution of the bombing campaign and the ultimate prosecution of the war were Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between McNamara, the Defense Department's chief civilian, and Wheeler, the Joint Staff's top military man (and by proxy, the JCS), and how their inability to unify their collective efforts on a military strategy for the bombing of North Vietnam played a key role in the failure of that operation. This relative failure in civil-military relations led not only to confusion in the cabinet, but to dissent among the nations top leaders as to how best to prosecute the campaign. Ultimately the two would find themselves pitted against one another in 1967 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee - the body who would adjudicate their differences.

### **MCNAMARA AND WHEELER ASSUME THEIR ROLES.**

In 1961, Americans welcomed newly elected President John F. Kennedy to the White House. Kennedy immediately began the business of appointing his staff. One of the first positions he filled was

that of Secretary of Defense. At the urging of outgoing Secretary Charles Wilson, Kennedy appointed - and Congress ultimately confirmed - Robert Strange McNamara, the 44-year-old President of Ford Motor Company.<sup>2</sup> Known as one of the original "whiz kids" of the Kennedy administration, McNamara served under two Presidents - Kennedy until his assassination in 1963 and Johnson until 1967 when McNamara resigned and was replaced as SECDEF by Clark Clifford.

General Earle G. Wheeler's journey to the Chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was a little more complicated. As outgoing Chairman, General Maxwell Taylor retired from active duty to assume a role as military advisor to the President in the Johnson cabinet; he recommended his close friend and trusted confidant, Earle Wheeler, as his replacement. Several years earlier, during the 1960 presidential election campaign, Wheeler had come in contact with presidential candidate Kennedy as a regular briefing officer. Kennedy and Wheeler seemed to hit it off. Wheeler was tall and fit, his mannerisms were gentlemanly and affable - a character trait that would establish a closeness with President Johnson as well - and Kennedy was instinctively drawn to him.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to becoming the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Wheeler served as the Army Chief of Staff. This assignment was heavily influenced, again, by General Taylor as he assumed his role as President Kennedy's CJCS. "When Kennedy announced Taylor's appointment to the chairmanship in August 1962, Taylor recommended his old Operations Deputy as the Army Chief of Staff."<sup>4</sup> As Army Chief of Staff, Wheeler's exposure to Secretary of Defense McNamara built largely on the positive impression he had made on President Kennedy. In fact, Wheeler was known as a "good company man." He got along well with McNamara and his staff, and he was politically savvy in the ways of Capital Hill. In his book Dereliction of Duty, H.R. McMaster describes the headquarters experience Wheeler brought to the job. "Unlike a high-ranking officer coming to Washington for the first time, Chairman Wheeler was sensitive to and familiar with the political machinations of the Pentagon, the White House, and Capital Hill. Wheeler's sensitivity to the politics of executive-legislative relations made him an attractive choice for Lyndon Johnson."<sup>5</sup> On 3 July 1964, General Earle G. Wheeler was appointed and confirmed by President Lyndon Johnson and the Congress as the sixth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He would serve in that capacity until July 1970.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE GENESIS OF OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER.**

At the time of President Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, the U.S. was struggling with a number of world commitments, not just Vietnam. "Instability in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the continued Soviet threat in Europe took up time and attention."<sup>7</sup> It was around that time - in fact just four days after the assassination - that President Lyndon Johnson, as one of his first acts, issued National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273 which affirmed the United States government's support of the fledgling government of South Vietnam. Johnson stated, "...it remains the central objective of the United States in South Vietnam to assist the people and government of that country to win their

contest against the externally directed and supported communist conspiracy. The test of all U.S. decisions and actions in this area should be the effectiveness of their contribution to this purpose."<sup>8</sup> The concern at that time was that communist efforts into South Vietnam were part of a much larger plan of communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Put simply, South Vietnam represented a domino the U.S. felt could not be lost in the Cold War.

A short time later, in February 1964, the President issued NSAM 288, the codification of a fact finding trip to Vietnam by Secretary of Defense McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor. McNamara and Taylor believed the government of South Vietnam was in great danger. "The two examined the new South Vietnamese government of Nguyen Khanh, who had taken power in a coup on 30 January. McNamara concluded that the Khanh regime was in danger of collapsing to the North Vietnamese-backed Viet Cong insurgency and recommended that the United States assume an increased role in preserving the Saigon government."<sup>9</sup>

President Johnson agreed with McNamara's assessment. He was however, ambivalent since he had only recently embarked on his campaign of domestic reform called "The Great Society." He was afraid the domestic focus would be lost if he allowed the country to become embroiled in a conflict in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Johnson was concerned that aggressive military action in Southeast Asia would send a message to the Soviet Union or China that could cause escalation on a scale he wanted to avoid. He was also worried that overt involvement at anything other than a very cursory level in Southeast Asia would cause concern among the NATO allies that the U.S. might be overextended and unable to adequately hold up their end of the bargain in NATO defense.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Johnson knew that of the means available to him to accomplish the ends in Southeast Asia, "domestic political opposition ruled out a general mobilization of the American population and economy."<sup>11</sup> This lack of popular support at home would weigh heavily on the mind of the new president. With NSAM 288, Johnson - through McNamara - directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to come up with a plan of graduated military pressure designed to deter the North Vietnamese government and its military forces from continued insurgency operations in the South. Johnson wanted to demonstrate U.S. resolve in the region. The Joint Chiefs of Staff responded to the tasking in April 1964 with a Commander, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) developed plan that "linked retaliatory raids to continuous bombing of gradually increasing intensity."<sup>12</sup> This was the genesis of Operation ROLLING THUNDER.

At this point, the members of the Johnson cabinet were generally working with each other on the challenge of Vietnam. There was general "hawkish" agreement between the Executive Branch and the Defense Department that the President's desire to show U.S. resolve through gradual offensive military means and to pressure Hanoi was the proper method for addressing the problem in Southeast Asia. Only George Ball, the Under Secretary of State - and subtly, one of McNamara's internal agencies, the Office of International Security Affairs (ISA), disagreed with the approach the administration was taking. In a memo to (among others) the Secretary of Defense in October 1964, Ball argued that, "...taking over the war would lead to heavy loss of American lives in the jungles and the rice paddies. Bombing the North

would neither break its (the North Vietnamese) will nor significantly hurt its ability to support the Vietcong.”<sup>13</sup> McNamara, so focused on the gradual response idea, would recall about Ball’s memo many years later that “in pungent - and prophetic - words, he wrote: ‘Once on the tiger’s back we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.’”<sup>14</sup> Faced with the dissenting opinion of only one man, McNamara chose basically to ignore it. He admitted later that the memo deserved further exploration by other key government agencies, and that he should have brought Ball’s concerns to the attention of the President. “We should have immediately discussed the memo with the President; that we did not reflected our belief that he (Ball) had not found a way to achieve the objective we all sought.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, it was not until February 1965 when Ball passed his memo to the President through a presidential aide that Johnson even saw it. Nevertheless, it was too late. NSAM 288 was “on the street” and the JCS were working in earnest with CINCPAC on a plan for the initiation of the bombing campaign.

Ultimately there would be two camps in the Johnson administration when it came to bombing in North Vietnam. The “hawks” believed that military action would win the day and would break the will of the North Vietnamese, while the “doves” would pressure the President to negotiate peace in the region.<sup>16</sup> As the bombing plans were being developed, the administration was clearly coming down on the side of hawkish intervention in Southeast Asia. Over time that would change, especially for McNamara. On February 24, 1965, Operation ROLLING THUNDER, the sustained bombing of North Vietnam would begin. It would generally be considered over by October 1968, three and a half years later.<sup>17</sup>

#### **OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER.**

In his book Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure, James Clay Thompson describes Operation ROLLING THUNDER in terms of five phases. Each phase represented a distinct or unique change in the campaign, and some phases ran concurrent with others. These phases are useful in tracing both McNamara’s journey from hawk in the early phases of the campaign, to “dove” in the latter stages, and in demonstrating Wheeler’s steadfast desire to prosecute the air campaign in a decisive manner.

In an overall sense, Operation ROLLING THUNDER had three major objectives. As stated in his book Crosswinds, Earl H. Tilford defines these objectives as follows: First, strategic persuasion, designed to coerce Hanoi into abandoning its support of the southern insurgency; second, to show U.S. resolve in the region and to boost the morale of the South Vietnamese; and third, the only tactical objective, and over time, the dominating motivation in the campaign, interdiction.<sup>18</sup> With these overall objectives as a backdrop, the operations five internal phases - as described by Thompson - make a good tool for sequencing key events in the civil-military relations of the time.

“The first phase of ROLLING THUNDER began in the Summer of 1965 with the objective of destroying the logistical system of North Vietnam and thus the capacity of the North Vietnamese to

infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam."<sup>19</sup> This phase and objective would continue through the duration of the bombing campaign and is generally referred to as strategic persuasion.

"The second phase of the air war involved an intense series of attacks on North Vietnam's petroleum storage facilities and lasted for about one month. Between 29 June 1966 and the end of July 1966, about 70 percent of those facilities were destroyed."<sup>20</sup>

Phase three was the most intense part of the air campaign.

Phase III operations began in the spring of 1967 after the winter monsoon lifted, were directed against the industrial targets in North Vietnam including electrical production facilities, the only steel mill in North Vietnam, and a cement plant. Rivers and estuaries along the southern coast were mined. President Johnson authorized targets along the Chinese border that had previously been off limits for attack. By late fall (1967), there were very few targets of any military or industrial value that had not been bombed and either destroyed or damaged.<sup>21</sup>

The fourth phase of Operation ROLLING THUNDER was the beginning of the gradual ratcheting-down of phase three. It marked the beginning of the end of the campaign, though there would occasionally be short periods of increased intensity. "Phase IV consisted of intense bombing aimed at interdiction in the area of North Vietnam closest to South Vietnam."<sup>22</sup> This reduction in bombing was closely monitored by the President. Significant restrictions were placed on the campaign.

On 1 April 1968 the ROLLING THUNDER program was limited to an area south of the Twentieth Parallel; on 2 April 1968, a further reduction in the scope of the attacks to the area south of the Nineteenth Parallel was ordered by the president. Phase IV lasted until the beginning of the Paris Peace Conference in November 1968.<sup>23</sup>

The final phase of Operation ROLLING THUNDER consisted of all the attacks made after the Paris Peace Conference. These attacks were intense at times and almost always retaliatory in nature, but tapered off at a significant pace until 1972.

These five phases are generally accepted among Vietnam historians. There is some dissent over phase five. Stanley Karnow, in his book, Vietnam: A History, considers Operation ROLLING THUNDER officially over in late 1968 when President Johnson stopped all bombing of Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> He does not recognize Thompson's final phase, choosing to consider the bombing incidents after the "official" end of the campaign as just that, isolated bombing incidents in retaliation for some misdeed or miscue by Hanoi. That notwithstanding, by the end of the campaign - either 1968, or 1972 - McNamara's transformation was complete and he and Wheeler had taken their disagreement to Capitol Hill by the end of phase three.

### **MCNAMARA AND THE JCS.**

In late 1963 and early 1964, based on his belief that the U.S. must do something to help the new South Vietnamese government survive, Secretary McNamara supported the hawkish perspective of the Johnson administration and the Joint Chiefs. As a matter of fact, McNamara was instrumental in developing the "gradual response" philosophy that President Johnson espoused. It was the text of

McNamara's trip report to Vietnam that formed the basis for NSAM 288 which laid out the U.S. political objective in Vietnam. "NSAM 288 phrased this objective as eliminating North Vietnamese control and direction of the insurgency. The memorandum offered two additional aims of a potential air effort: to destroy the morale of the Viet Cong cadres and to bolster the morale of the Southern regime."<sup>25</sup>

McNamara would, over time, stray from the hawkish point of view he believed in in early 1964. By 1967, McNamara would testify that the bombing campaign in North Vietnam was a failure, and would resist pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to increase the intensity of the bombing campaign against the North. Still years later, he would admit he waited too long to fully oppose the continued bombing of the North.<sup>26</sup>

The year between the time NSAM 288 was issued and the time Operation ROLLING THUNDER (Phase I) began was wrought with fits and starts, and was defined by confusion among the key planning participants as to what the administration actually wanted. Though the objectives stated above seem fairly clear in hindsight, it appears that this was not the case in 1964 and early 1965.

General Earle Wheeler assumed his duties as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in July 1964. At that point, he "fell in" on a developing plan to bomb North Vietnam in order to break the will of the North Vietnamese to wage continued insurgency efforts in the South. Wheeler was a hawk, and strongly supported the idea that strategic bombing could solve the issue in Vietnam as well as accomplish the regional objectives of the President. He would remain a hawkish supporter of continued pressure in the form of air power in Southeast Asia throughout the three and a half years of the operation.

From the start, Wheeler was a proponent of air power as a means of deterring continued support for the insurgency efforts by North Vietnam. Wheeler was not alone in his support for strategic bombing. The leaders of the 1965 Air Force, officers that cut their professional teeth at the end of World War II and in the Korean War, "had spent their entire careers in an Air Force wedded to the concept of strategic bombing."<sup>27</sup> Wheeler's support of the idea of strategic bombing in North Vietnam is not surprising. In 1964, Wheeler participated in a Pentagon wargame that was designed "to reflect as closely as possible any situation that might arise in Vietnam."<sup>28</sup> As a member of the "enemy" force, his Red team parried every move made by a politically constrained "friendly" force - the Blue team. The blue team "fought" an air campaign. However, for every "move" the Blue made, the Red team countered with a limited action that forced the Blue team to escalate their response. The Blue team, consisting largely of strategic bombing proponents from the Air Force, became frustrated with their inability to shape the battlefield against the guerrilla-oriented Red team.<sup>29</sup> The war game would prove prophetic. It would be exactly how the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese would react to Operation ROLLING THUNDER. Wheeler therefore, had to be a hawk. He had to advocate heavy handedness in the air campaign because he knew - at some level, based on that wargame - that political restrictions on a campaign in Vietnam based almost solely on air power would cause ultimate failure.

Operations Plan (OPLAN) 37-64, the CINCPAC-authored strategic bombing plan developed as a result of NSAM 288, called for a three-phase bombing campaign focused on Laos, eastern Cambodia,

and North Vietnam. It was from this plan, that the JCS drew up and submitted their now famous 94-target list aimed at removing the industrial base supporting the North Vietnamese insurgency.<sup>30</sup> There was however, already dissension among the senior strategists and policymaking agencies about the best way to prosecute the President's "gradual pressure" desire. The State Department (Ball), and the Defense Department's Office of International Security Affairs advocated controlled, increased pressure based on retaliation, while the JCS favored a heavy-handed air-based assault on the North Vietnamese infrastructure - military, industrial, economic, and transportation systems. Even the Navy weighed in with a plan, air interdiction localized in the panhandle of North Vietnam - a plan more based on the range of its planes than on a strategic endstate.<sup>31</sup> McNamara was somewhere in the middle at this point. He knew that retaliation-based response would answer the President's desire, but would also allow the North Vietnamese to control the tempo of the operation. The Joint Staff reinforced that idea in a memo to McNamara that warned, "we and the South Vietnamese are fighting the war on the enemy's terms."<sup>32</sup>

In his book, In Retrospect, McNamara describes the myriad of influences exerting pressure on the administration in those early years. Of course there was the trip report - in the form of a memo to the President - shortly after his return from Vietnam that described a severely unstable South Vietnamese government. Along with, and because of this instability there was significant potential that any intervention on behalf of the south would be ineffective. There was a lack of fidelity in the recommendations from the Joint Staff. This confounded McNamara and had to be dealt with by the Secretary. He criticizes the Joint Staff for proposing and then sticking by a military strategy that did not address why it was the most appropriate. In a memo to the Secretary espousing more aggressive moves in Southeast Asia, the Joint Chiefs failed to address why these moves were necessary. McNamara explains that he did not fully support the Joint Chiefs from the early stages of the operation, and sums up what would ultimately drive them apart by saying, "But at what cost and with what chance of success [more force]? This memo, and subsequent ones given to me over the next four years [by the Joint Chiefs], contained no answers to these crucial military questions."<sup>33</sup> These conflicting proposals and perspectives, even in hindsight, make the issues of the day difficult to sort out, and even more difficult to focus an appropriate solution on. The bottom line is that from early on, the SECDEF, at least partially disregarded the best recommendations of his military experts - the JCS. This established a gap between the two at a time when they should have been thinking and acting in concert with one another. This gap would widen over time as McNamara would retreat from the view proffered by the JCS - that heavy-handed air power could win the day. The circumstances of the time also make McNamara appear to be more of a dove - prone to pulling out altogether or at least minimizing military intervention - than a hawk even in the early phases of the operation. McNamara admits as much in his book, but believes he was swept "along the road to Abilene" by the events of the time. "When combined with the inflexibility of our objectives, and the fact that we had not truly investigated what was essentially at stake and important to us, we were left harried, overburdened, and holding a map with only one road on it. Eager to get moving, we never stopped to explore fully whether there were other routes to our destination."<sup>34</sup>

As time, and Rolling Thunder went on, the Ball memorandum became more important and prophetic. More and more agencies would find in independent study that Operation ROLLING THUNDER was having little impact on the North Vietnamese efforts in the south. The bombing had started out focused on interdicting the North Vietnamese, had taken a strategic pause, then restarted to include North Vietnamese POL storage areas in early 1966, and had escalated to include industrial centers and electrical power in late 1966 and early 1967.

Results of the bombing varied based on the agency reporting them. Most agencies found that Operation ROLLING THUNDER had little impact on the North Vietnamese. There were no indications that the bombing had stemmed the flow of troops and supplies to the south. In June, 1966, and again in September of 1967, McNamara asked the Jason Division of the Institute for Defense Analyses to study the effects of the campaign. Among other things, the Institute concluded that the bombing was not degrading Hanoi's ability to conduct military operations, and that there was probably no amount of bombing that would. These views were basically codified by CIA and DIA reports coming out at about the same time.<sup>35</sup> These reports reinforced McNamara's emerging view that this relative ineffectiveness was a sign that the U.S. needed to cut their losses and get to the negotiation table. The JCS, on the other hand, felt the bombing had kept the North Vietnamese from mounting a major offensive effort in the south and was therefore working well. In fact, they requested more latitude in the conduct of the bombing campaign as a way of wrestling the initiative away from the north.

By mid-1967, McNamara and the JCS could not have been farther apart in their assessment of the effectiveness of the campaign in Southeast Asia. McNamara had become a full-fledged dove. He believed the reports coming out of the CIA, the DIA, and the State Department were correct, and strongly disagreed with the latest request for more troops, and Pentagon requests for more bombing latitude. This prompted him to formally recommend to the President that the "war in Vietnam is acquiring a momentum of its own that must be stopped."<sup>36</sup> In his book, McNamara would recall, "Today, it is clear to me that my memorandum pointed directly to the conclusion that, through negotiating or direct action, we should have begun our withdrawal from South Vietnam. There was a high probability we could have done so on terms no less advantageous than those accepted nearly six years later - without any greater damage to U.S. national security and at much less human, political, and social cost to America and Vietnam."<sup>37</sup> His credibility now was suffering with the military community and at this point in some military camps, he was viewed as a lost cause.<sup>38</sup>

If there was a "straw that broke the camel's back," it was the McNamara memo. Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs were crushed at the lack of support by their civilian superior. There were rumors of a mass military resignation at the highest level.<sup>39</sup> The civil-military structure was breaking down. The bond that should have existed between McNamara and the JCS was unraveling. There was a state of constant disagreement at a fundamental level. McNamara wanted the U.S. out, the JCS wanted more pressure. Wheeler, remembering the wargame, understood implicitly that a gradual response was doomed to fail. He had pushed to the limit to be allowed the latitude to provide what he considered appropriate guidance

to the President. His views seemed to be falling on deaf ears. In the immediate aftermath of the McNamara memo, Wheeler sent an "eyes-only" memorandum to the President disagreeing with McNamara's position on the bombing. In fact, Wheeler, again recommended sharper, more focused, and harder measures be taken in North Vietnam.<sup>40</sup> The need for some type of arbitration could not have been clearer. The President accepted neither recommendation at face value and opted for a compromise somewhere in the middle deciding on still increased pressure under the graduated approach he had adopted at the beginning of the campaign. It was at this point that Congress came into the picture. McNamara and the Chiefs were asked to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee's Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, chaired by John Stennis (D-Miss.).

Stennis and his subcommittee had long been hawks and were extremely dissatisfied with the Secretary of Defense and his desire to withdraw from the theater and to limit the air campaign. "The Joint Chiefs welcomed the opportunity to take their case 'to the Hill.' The Joint Chiefs saw this as their opportunity to explain their version of the air war and, perhaps, bring pressure on the administration to give them the discretion they had long sought in conducting ROLLING THUNDER."<sup>41</sup> McNamara and the President viewed the hearing with trepidation because it would reveal that the defense establishment was a house divided.

This trepidation could not have been better founded. The hearings were a disaster for the administration. In a Congressional confrontation pitting the Joint Chiefs against their bosses, it could not have gone better for the Joint Chiefs, and it resulted in a degree of vindication for the Chairman and his officers. The hearings ran for nearly three weeks, from August 9 to August 29, 1967, and can be summed up by the words of Senator Cannon (D-Nev.) as recalled by Secretary McNamara.

Senator Cannon was not interested in discussing our (the administrations) objectives. Instead, he zeroed in on my unwillingness always to follow the military's advice on the use of force in Vietnam. 'As long (ago) as October 1965,' he said, 'these targets...were unanimously recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I am wondering whether or not you have any confidence in the members of the Joint Chiefs..., and just what the reason is that their recommendations on military matters and military targets were not followed.'<sup>42</sup>

In his book, Tilford, a preeminent historian on Vietnam, says of the hearings, "The generals were vindicated. The secretary, and by extension the president, had been rebuked."<sup>43</sup> This questioning of his effectiveness and conviction spelled the beginning of the end for Secretary McNamara. He would resign from his position and depart the Defense Department in February of 1968. One month after the hearings, General Wheeler would suffer a serious heart attack - another indication of the stress of the times.

President Johnson seemed oblivious to the ever-widening gap between the civilian military leadership and the JCS - specifically, McNamara and Wheeler. In notes from December 1967 - after the congressional hearings - the President would say of the defense staff, civilian and military alike:

There has never been a decision when we haven't all agreed. That includes Secretary Rusk, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. There have been no divisions in this government. We may have been wrong, but we have never been divided. There has

never been a period when the diplomatic and military and staff advisors have had less acrimony or division. We discussed with reason and we are in general agreement.<sup>44</sup>

In retrospect, and when one considers carefully the events of the previous three years, this seems a tremendous misrepresentation of the facts. Johnson's administration was plagued by the gap between the civilian and military members of his defense staff and his denial that it did not exist seems to corroborate H.R. McMaster's thesis in his book Dereliction of Duty in which he accuses the Johnson administration of regularly lying to the American public on issues regarding Vietnam.

#### **THE FINAL FRONTIER: MCNAMARA AND WHEELER FACE-OFF.**

There are a number of strategic lessons that stem from the McNamara-JCS split of the mid-60s. First, and foremost is the issue of civil-military relations and the blatant failure of the intended union between military leaders and the civilians appointed over them. In the case of Vietnam, the Defense establishment - primarily the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff - did not agree on a strategy for prosecuting the war. This polarized and essentially paralyzed the military leadership of the country. Decisions came hard. Everything was a fight, from the jungles of Vietnam, to the Oval Office of the White House, to the E-Ring of the Pentagon. The net effect: 643,000 tons of bombs dropped on North Vietnam which destroyed 65 percent of its oil storage capacity, 59 percent of its power plants, 55 percent of its major bridges, 9,821 vehicles, and 1,966 railroad cars.<sup>45</sup> What it did not do was interdict forces from the North with any consistency or break the will of the North Vietnamese, both stated objectives of Operation ROLLING THUNDER.

In 1984, the Army's former Deputy Commander in Vietnam, General Bruce Palmer, in his book The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam, described the lesson about civil-military relations in the following manner. "In the great emergencies bound to arise in the future, it is imperative that our highest civilian and military heads be in close, even if not cordial, contact with each other, maintaining a continuous and candid discussion of the purpose of the undertaking, the risks involved, and the probable costs, human and material...of a hostile relationship between our civilian heads and the Joint Chiefs of Staff invites disaster."<sup>46</sup> This lesson was prophetic when it was written in 1984, and well learned by the civil-military teams of the late 1980s, men forged in the fire of the Vietnam controversy. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell understood the value of a command team that was effective and decisive during Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. They capitalized on the dysfunctional lessons of the McNamara-Wheeler team and made history as the civil-military architects of the highly successful war in Southwest Asia. In fact, if you use James Kitfield's book, Prodigal Soldiers, billed as an examination of "how the generation of officers born of Vietnam revolutionized the American style of war"<sup>47</sup> as a guide you will find that the President-Secretary of Defense-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff teams of Bush-Cheney-Powell in 1990 and of

Johnson-McNamara-Wheeler in 1965 were polar opposites in how they prosecuted their respective conflicts.

Another issue to be drawn from this body of evidence - more implied or embedded than the first - is that of loyalty. Glaring in the research is Robert McNamara's fierce loyalty and support to his President. To a fault, McNamara seemed to do everything in his power to support the President and his policy of gradual pressure on Vietnam - even as he began to doubt the President's hawkish nature. This meant disagreeing with the Joint Chiefs on fundamental philosophy. McNamara's downfall was his inability to work with the JCS so he could properly advise the President. As a whiz kid, and a "number cruncher," and the former president of Ford Motor Company, with little expertise in strategic matters, McNamara had a difficult time delegating responsibility and recognizing expertise. As a result, over time he alienated the Joint Chiefs, and this alienation negatively influenced the cabinet for the military members of his staff. It is difficult to judge if this was an act of omission or commission on McNamara's part, but it played right into the hands of the micromanaging Lyndon Johnson.

Equally glaring is the covert lack of support of General Wheeler to his supervisor the Secretary of Defense. Early on, Wheeler was known as a good company man, and he was outwardly supportive of the Secretary. In fact, throughout his service as the Chairman, when called upon to support the administration, Wheeler cooperated. However, McNamara's recurring disregard for the recommendations and desires of the JCS forced Wheeler to regularly communicate directly with the President - around the Secretary. As it was, the Chairman and the JCS testified before Congress in direct contradiction of the Secretary...and won! Did the ends justify the means? Was the Chairman carrying out his sworn duty when he by-passed the SECDEF, or was he duty-bound to remain within the confines of his chain-of-command? Would resignation have called attention to the gap between the military and the Secretary? In the end, the Congress vindicated the JCS. Ultimately, Operation ROLLING THUNDER would be judged a failure. Could our system of civil-military liaison possibly face a time darker than this?

Finally, there is the question of strategic versus operational viability. Why didn't Operation ROLLING THUNDER work? Why didn't the bombing of the North Vietnamese break their will to fight on in the South? I believe it is because the Johnson administration - most probably the Joint Chiefs of Staff - improperly identified the hub of North Vietnamese power and waged an ineffective war against it for over three years. The military desire to bomb and destroy industrial capability had little effect on the insurgents conducting guerilla warfare in the south. As the Japanese moved relentlessly on the Malayan Peninsula in 1941-42, and as General Wheeler did in the wargame of 1964, the North Vietnamese retreated to the jungles and adapted during the bombing, always continuing their efforts to the south. Japanese soldiers on bicycles in Malaya were as difficult to interdict effectively with warplanes as North Vietnamese soldiers were as they moved south in the jungles of South Vietnam in 1965. Bombing the North's industrial complex, had little affect on its agrarian-based society. When a bridge was bombed, the next day there would be a fording site close by. When a section of road was bombed out, a number of trails would soon appear to bypass the damaged area. In fact, over the duration of Operation ROLLING

THUNDER, the North Vietnamese troop movements to the south increased rather than decreased. The cost to Americans was tremendous in terms of loss of life. Additionally, early in the campaign it cost the U.S. \$6.60 to inflict one dollars worth of damage on the North Vietnamese. A year later it would cost the U.S. \$9.60 to inflict the same amount of damage.<sup>48</sup> Most ironic was the steeling affect the bombing had on the will of the North Vietnamese. At one point, Ho Chi Minh was quoted as saying he would never negotiate a peace with the U.S. under the threat o American bombs.<sup>49</sup> In fact, he did not.

Operation ROLLING THUNDER and the relationship between the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the mid-1960s provide an interesting backdrop for the study of strategic viability and strategic decision-making. Vietnam and the 1960s were ugly times for the U.S. military. The events of the times however, set the American military machine on a path of self-recovery that would culminate in the early 1990s with the war in Southwest Asia. In the final analysis, it is the ability of the military professional to study and understand those things that went wrong in the 1960s that will ultimately prevent those same things from occurring again in the future. It is my hope that in some small measure, this paper will contribute to that legacy.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mark Clodfelter, The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrase from H.R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 2-4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrased from Joint Chiefs of Staff, Organizational Development of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1942-1989 (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 1989), 69-70.

<sup>7</sup> Robert S. McNamara and Brian VanDeMark, In Retrospect: The Tragedies and Lessons of Vietnam (New York: Times Books, 1995), 108.

<sup>8</sup> Clodfelter, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Paraphrased from Clodfelter, pg. 40-44, and from James Clay Thompson, Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 26-29.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Clodfelter, 45.

<sup>13</sup> McNamara, 156-157.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>16</sup> The idea of hawks and doves is introduced in, Earl H. Tilford, Jr., Crosswinds: The Air Force's Set Up in Vietnam (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 88.

<sup>17</sup> Clodfelter, 147, and Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History. The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 682.

<sup>18</sup> Paraphrased from Tilford, 70.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, 42-44.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>24</sup> Karnow, 684.

<sup>25</sup> Clodfelter, 45.

<sup>26</sup> McNamara, 320-323.

<sup>27</sup> Tilford, 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

<sup>30</sup> Paraphrase from Tilford, 66.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> McNamara, 108-109.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 275, and paraphrased from Tilford, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>38</sup> Paraphrase from Tilford, 92.

<sup>39</sup> McNamara, 273.

<sup>40</sup> Tilford, 89.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>42</sup> McNamara, 289.

<sup>43</sup> Tilford, 96.

<sup>44</sup> David M. Barrett, ed., Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam papers: A Documentary Collection (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 559.

<sup>45</sup> Clodfelter, 134.

<sup>46</sup> Bruce Palmer, Jr., The 25-Year War: America's Military Role In Vietnam (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 201.

<sup>47</sup> James Kitfield, Prodigal Soldier (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), cover.

<sup>48</sup> Clodfeiter, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Paraphrase from McNamara, 267.



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