Politics and War: Twelve Fatal Decisions That Rendered Defeat in Vietnam

by Gen Raymond G. Davis, USMC(Ret)

Politics dominates war; but for war to be waged successfully, those responsible for political decisions must comprehend not only the larger circumstances of the war, but also the effect of their political decisions on the military situation. Here a senior Marine commander assesses what several political decisions really meant to those who fought the war in Vietnam.

Through the years since the Vietnam War, I have watched expectantly for authors, historians, writers, and commentators to discover the real causes for our disastrous, total defeat in Vietnam. Somehow every effort I have seen misses the main problems by a wide margin. I have become increasingly concerned that if we don't face up to the root problems that led to the Vietnam disaster we can expect no better results in the future.

My participation during the Vietnam era was from a number of crucial vantage points. Initially, as Marine Corps manpower coordinator, I worked with the buildup and deployment of forces. Then, as a division commanding general in Vietnam, I experienced the effects of our policies, goals, and efforts. Finally, as commander of the Marine Corps Development and Education Command, it was necessary to study and analyze the decisions concerning the war and the results thereof.

In recent times I reviewed many ideas and joined in discussions of the causes and results of decisions made throughout the Vietnam era. My interest is not in how the decisions were arrived at or who the participants were, but in what decisions resulted in our disastrous defeat in the Vietnam War. I have selected a dozen key decisions that in their sum total could have brought no other result than that which we experienced.

1. Role for Military Forces

Early on in planning for military deployments, it became obvious that a force of about a half-million troops would be required in Vietnam. In retrospect, the prompt application of that size force would have brought early success by enabling us to destroy enemy forces and secure the countryside. Instead, it was 1968 before sufficient military forces were available to accomplish these tasks.

The Military Assistance Command approach, which tended to downplay the requirement for a sizable troop commitment, distorted the role of our forces from the beginning. The size of the military assistance force was actually shrinking in 1964–1965. The near-unanimous resolution in Congress after the Tonkin Gulf incident was taken as support for our entry into the conflict.

From the beginning it was known that the real enemy would be those 14 NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regular divisions plus the Viet Cong (VC) main force regiments and battalions. This was ignored; and limited war, graduated response, and tit-for-tat ideas, all based on some theory of human rationality and effective gamesmanship, got in the way of a clear statement of purpose and role for the armed forces being deployed.

2. Limit on Funds

The FY65 supplemental budget was established at $11.2 billion as being needed to deploy forces. The so-called "Senate Kitchen Cabinet" let the President know that funding the war would conflict with fully funding his Great Society Program—a program envisioned as the cornerstone of the Johnson administration. A decision was then made to fund only $1.7 billion of the $11.2 billion needed. Although some funds were buried in nondefense appropriations, most of the money required was deferred to later years. Deployments were slowed down as necessary to remain within these limited expenditures.

3. Withholding the Ready Reserve

Thirteen active divisions were ready for deployment (10 Army, 3 Marine). However, the backup forces necessary for these divisions to be sustained in the field were in the Ready Reserve. This was by design—McNamara required such a design on the basis that the "second trip" of available transportation would provide for the time needed to call up the Ready Reserve. It was never envisioned that the active divisions would be deployed without the essential backup units from the Ready Reserve—heavy transport, artillery, armor, engineer, communications, medical, legal, supply, fuel farms, administration, etc.

A decision was made to withhold the Ready Reserve and replace it by multiplying the size of the draft calls in order to build new units from scratch. This was to require more than three years. Members of the Ready Reserve who had been organized, equipped, trained, and paid as backup for the active divisions stayed at home, while the increasingly heavy hand of the draft found replacements to organize, equip, train, and send in their place.

The unduly heavy draft calls caused a near breakdown in administration with resultant injustices; national borders saw floods of evaders going to Canada, Mexico, Sweden, etc. At home, Reserve units became, in the view of many, havens for draft dodgers.

Deployment of the essential military forces was delayed—the war, prolonged. A vicious cycle developed: The inadequate forces in Vietnam, both American and Vietnamese, could only defend themselves. A substantial, steady stream of casualty reports went back home with little to show in the way of progress in the war. Support for the war diminished, and this led to less aggressive pursuit of our objectives—thus more casualties and less progress.

Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., a career Army officer (West Point, 1936) who commanded the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam from 1968–72 once observed to Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Jr., during the Marine Commandant's visit to Vietnam, "of the 50 or so division commanders I have known in Vietnam, Gen Davis has no peer. He's the best."

Confusion resulted from the fact that operational requirements had to be geared to the availability of additional units as they were built up with trained draftees. It became routine to ready a group of units and send the list of them to Saigon. The command in Saigon would then request them, and they would quietly deploy. Field commanders were severely limited in their ability to adopt a forward-looking strategy. News reporters reflected this uncertainty to our citizens at home, with resultant reduction in confidence.

4. Pacification in Reverse

Inadequate forces meant that many key areas of Vietnam could not be protected. As a result, large segments of the population were uprooted and moved from their homes and concentrated into camps where they could be protected. Their confidence in their government and in ours eroded as they saw their homes, their property, and their livelihood abandoned. Again, people were being severely hurt with the appearance of negative progress in the war.

Those areas that were protected could, in many cases, be protected only during the day. The night belonged to the enemy. People were caught in the middle and forced to support and/or do the dirty work of the enemy. They were punished both by the VC cadre and by our patrols as the two sides fought back and forth in the area. The "search and destroy" operations conducted in response to this pattern were not fruitful.

No real progress in pacification could be made until our forces finally arrived in 1968. Then the NVA divisions were destroyed, the VC main force regiments were destroyed, and the VC cadres were removed from the villages. People returned to their homes and were protected day and night; they rebuilt their homes and schools and recovered their farms and gardens. Significant progress was apparent for the first time. But it all came too late. Pressures at home brought on another tragic decision: to withdraw U.S. support from Vietnam.

5. Areas of Sanctuary Provided for Enemy Forces

The enemy was given sanctuary for his forces in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam itself. The result was that he had freedom of movement along a 1,400-mile border. He could concentrate his forces at the place and time of his choosing, picking our weak points, and launch an attack into South Vietnam. Then when he got hurt, he fled back into his sanctuary to get ready to come again at another site. Our "gain" was another long list of casualties with no progress to show for it.

From his sanctuary the enemy fired heavy artillery and rockets in sneak attacks. We could shoot back at these fleeting targets, but were not permitted to go and destroy the attackers. Enemy forces could never be decisively defeated and destroyed because of these sanctuaries. We could not exploit the tactical advantages of maneuver to gain deep penetration into his rear or on his flank because of the restrictions of the areas of sanctuary.

The sanctuary areas were prescribed to support ideas about the neutrality of Cambodia and Laos, on the one hand, and fear of the Chinese on the other. These faulty concepts had no validity as was proved early in the war. Cambodia and Laos were fully occupied by the NVA: thousands of trucks traversed the roads in Laos hauling munitions used to kill American troops. Sihanoukville Port was used to supply NVA divisions in Cambodia where they posed a serious threat to Saigon. The Chinese never once challenged our assault of North Vietnamese targets. The removal of these sanctuaries even as late as 1968 would have permitted the destruction of the NVA army and guaranteed victory for South Vietnam.

The absurdity of the "sanctuary syndrome" extended beyond Cambodia and Laos. The NVA operated throughout the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and fully occupied the northern half. We could not enter it. Military leaders also argued loud and long for the blockade of Hanoi harbor to limit enemy resupply, but to no avail. The sanctuary syndrome prevailed even there.

6. The McNamara Line—A $6 Billion Blunder

Although enemy elements were entering South Vietnam through the 1,400-mile border, a decision was made to control infiltration along the 26-mile northern front. A series of strongpoints were built, each to be manned by a battalion. These heavily fortified positions were surrounded by barbed wire and minefields. Between the strongpoints were continuous chains of sensors. The forward positions were supported from the rear by fortified artillery positions. The price tag was $6 billion.

The design was to detect and prevent infiltrations, a faulty role indeed. Infiltrators had a free run everywhere else along the border. Besides, we were not concerned with infiltration—our enemy was coming in division-size units. Not only was the system not needed for infiltration defense, it hindered our effort to fight the larger forces. Rules required that the fortified positions be fully manned at night. Large patrols were ordered to break contact if they were in a fight late in the day in order to rush home before dark—added casualties resulted.

The forces tied down in the McNamara line would have been much more effective out in the mobile mode—as was proved in 1968 when the rules were finally changed. Morale soared when the troop units finally escaped from those fortified positions and launched out to find and destroy the enemy.

7. Air Defense Buildup

Intelligence reports from every source portrayed clearly that the North Vietnamese had embarked on a massive effort to build up airfield and antiaircraft defense installations. The serious consequence of this development was obvious to all, and deep concern generated quickly. However, a decision was made to withhold Air Force and Navy attack on these emerging defenses; such attacks might disturb the Chinese.

The ultimate result was that we were soon faced with one of the best air defense systems in the world. Later, the hills around Hanoi became a depository for downed U.S. aircraft; Hanoi prisons were filled with downed U.S. pilots.

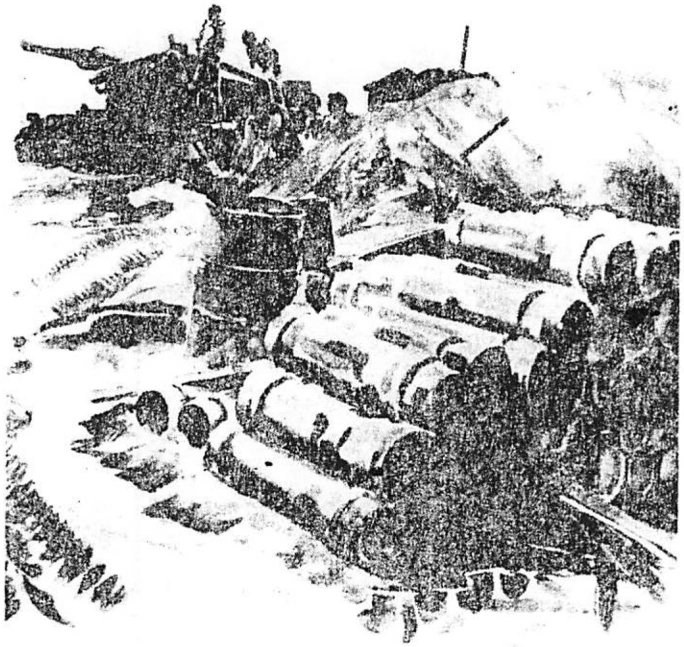
8. Cease-Fire

Periodically, "cease-fires" were agreed to that permitted enemy VC to "visit" their home areas Actually these lulls permitted them to reestablish their presence over larger areas with resupply, recruiting, reorganization, etc. The massive, surprise Tet offensive of early 1968 was the capstone of their deceptive use of the cease-fire.

9. Artillery/Rocket/Bombing Halt

In 1968 the enemy wanted to talk, and we agreed to stop shooting across the DMZ if they would cease firing rockets into cities. As was typical practice, the enemy was seriously hurt and was looking for some breathing room. The pattern was clear: Whenever the enemy was hurt he would then want to talk; and, of course, we gave him what he wanted.

In this case, two circumstances dictated the situation. We had captured his supply of rockets—3,500 of those 7-foot models—in the western mountains. And we had established a deadly counterbattery system that destroyed his ability to shoot at us across the DMZ. An experimental, computerized, state-of-the-art counterbattery system was brought to Quang Tri Province and set up at Con Thien base near the DMZ. Our heavy artillery was moved well forward, and an all-out shoot was conducted against what was estimated to be 160 heavy cannons on the Red side of the DMZ. After this our 8-inch batteries were maintained in forward positions where they could respond to the computerized system. This weapon was the most accurate artillery piece developed to date. Multiple inputs of sensor information were fed into the computer—flash, sound, radar, and visual—from various points along the DMZ. Observation aircraft operated overhead with photo capability. For 40 days whenever an enemy gun would shoot, the computer would provide data to sight the 8-inch; the 8-inch would shoot a spotting round; the computer would correct the splash; a second round from an 8-inch would hit the enemy gun. More than 40 enemy weapons were shown in photos to have been hit—tube separated from carriage, entire piece turned over, etc.



So with no rockets to shoot, the North Vietnamese agreed not to shoot any. And since they could no longer shoot across the DMZ, they wanted us to agree not to shoot. There was never a question in our minds, though, that if they got more rockets they would use them; and if we gave them a fat target, they would shoot at it.

Compounding the problem, various "bombing halts" limited the pursuit of an effective air war against enemy forces, supplies, and installations. A worst case example: In 1972 the enemy launched an all-out offensive against the south—roads were jammed with troops and vehicles. Our tactical aircraft clobbered him—so much so that he asked for a truce. Subsequently, he signed a treaty with Mr. Kissinger that included, among other things, a promise not to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

In 1975 he launched a column of tanks, troops, and trucks down the trail—obviously as a test. Washington would not commit U.S. tactical aircraft—a decision that led directly to the capture of Saigon a short time later.

10. ARVN Regional Concept

Our limited military resources and limited response syndrome led to a faulty concept in the organization and deployment of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). It became regional in its outlook and application. Divisions were fixed in place with no concept or experience as a national army. A limited number of units, prominent among them the Airborne and Marines, were used as a strategic reserve throughout the country.

ARVN leaders gained little experience in large-scale field operations; no attitude of seeking out and destroying the enemy existed. Some experience was gained in the expeditionary efforts into Cambodia, but not enough to prevent the lack of experience from becoming a factor in the disastrous defeat suffered in Laos.

11. Withholding of Support in Laos

After a successful expedition into Cambodia, preparations were made to destroy the NVA bases in Laos. Forces were assembled at Khe Sanh. Normal U.S. support was included in the design. Unfortunately, the day before the operation was to begin the news media broke the story in Washington. The enemy was given confirmation of the precise details of the forces, the time and the place of the operation. Worse, the clamor around our capital city caused some hurry-up, disastrous decisions to be made about the participation of U.S. forces.

First, there was an announcement that "no U.S. forces would participate," followed quickly by certain exceptions: our bombers and helicopters would go along. But, more importantly, the essential support for the helicopters would be withdrawn. The long-range recon patrols, which were essential for keeping the choppers on safe routes, would not be put into place. The guidance and control communications teams normal to ARVN units were withdrawn, depriving the ARVN units of a secure voice radio capability. This meant ARVN communications were open to interception and disruption when NVA entered nets with deceptive messages.

An extreme loss in helicopters and their crews resulted (120 craft is the number I recall), the most ever in the Vietnam War. Pilots found themselves flying over insecure routes, responding to instructions from Vietnamese controllers, who had no experience, no secure communications, and limited language capability. Plus the NVA entered those nets and caused greater confusion. A disastrous defeat for the ARVN resulted. Their armored forces were abandoned and lost, their elite units destroyed, some of their finest leaders were killed or captured.

This was indeed the beginning of the end. A successful expedition might have eliminated the NVA threat as had been done in Cambodia, but our wrong decisions made that impossible. Instead, a defeated, much weakened ARVN soon was to begin the withdrawal of forces from key areas that they could no longer hold under pressure from the NVA.

12. Premature Withdrawal of U.S. Forces

Pressures to end the war and the decision of "America's most trusted voice," Walter Cronkite, that it was "time to get out of Vietnam" brought on a program of premature withdrawals. This takes us back to the role of U.S. forces. Had it been clear from the beginning that we were to destroy the enemy forces, it would have been equally clear in 1969 that our mission had not been accomplished. Since the NVA had been only partially destroyed, the result of our withdrawal was predictable. Withdrawal commenced in the same year that we finally got our forces deployed in full strength—such was the result of the accumulation of bad decisions.

As soon as it became apparent that U.S. support was finally, fully withdrawn, the ARVN found itself boxed in on every front with no hope of salvaging even a portion of its country. A final death blow was delivered to the South Vietnamese Army when it was denied essential ammunition supplies—60,000 tons of ammunition already in Saigon harbor in 6 ships was sent back to the United States in 1972. Fighting without ammunition was a situation the enemy never once faced since support by China and Russia never faltered.

Conclusions

These 12 decisions with their main genesis coming from Washington, which was some 10,000 miles distance from the battle area, could bring but one result—total disaster.

I join those who proclaim "No more Vietnams," but for different reasons than most. I am not ready to surrender our role as protectors of freedom. Our friends must know that we do support their quest for freedom. "No more Vietnams" means to me that when we do launch military forces in that noble cause of freedom we must do so with an absolute desire to win. To commit our military forces and then withhold support is to betray those men who so bravely serve our Country. When we go to war, we must go to win—that or stay at home. And if stay at home becomes our policy we will soon stand alone in a hostile world. Some would say "better Red than dead." But if we are to survive in freedom we must continue to follow the challenge of Patrick Henry: "Give me liberty, or give me death." USMC