

# DISSENT AND DECISION-MAKING: A STUDY OF GEORGE BALL'S AND JOHN McNAUGHTON'S OPPOSITION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

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*During the Vietnam War, public condemnation of continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam reached proportions unequaled during any previous war. Inside the government as well, there were voices which spoke, albeit carefully, against the continuing escalation of U.S. troops in Indochina. In this article, Ross A. Kennedy examines the processes of dissent and their influence on decision-making within the government. He discusses in detail the differing tactics of Under Secretary of State George Ball and Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton in their attempts to alter governmental policy towards the war. After reviewing the efforts and tactics of these men with regard to their different positions within the government, Mr. Kennedy explores in detail their successes and failures. The author concludes by assessing legitimate channels for dissent within the government and the inherent failure of those channels to allow both Ball and McNaughton to speak against governmental policies with members of the administration.*

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE DILEMMAS OF DISSENT

In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson launched a bombing campaign against North Vietnam and authorized the deployment of 175,000 troops to South Vietnam. The stated objective of this policy was an "independent, non-Communist South Vietnam" free from attack.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's decision to escalate America's war in Vietnam has been the subject of considerable historical analysis. But surprisingly little attention has been paid to those within the government who opposed the President's decisions in 1965 and to those who continued to argue against the spiralling escalation that followed.

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1. National Security Action Memorandum 288, *Pentagon Papers*, Senator Gravel Edition, 4 vols., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 3:50-51. The *Pentagon Papers* will hereafter be cited as *PP*. See also 3:730 for President Johnson's Johns Hopkins Speech.

Almost all the passing references to "dissent"<sup>2</sup> in the Johnson administration focus on Under Secretary of State George Ball, who is usually portrayed as an institutionalized "devil's advocate" with little chance, in that role, of influencing policy.<sup>3</sup> The focus on Ball has been at the expense of another, largely unrecognized, dissenter Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton. Most writers identify McNaughton with his superior, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and understate the policy differences which existed between the two men. This blurring of the policy distinctions between McNaughton and McNamara has led historians to overlook how their differences influenced policy between 1965 and McNaughton's death in 1967.

The Vietnam policy opposed by Ball and McNaughton was implemented in 1965 by Lyndon Johnson with "very little attention," according to Larry Berman, "to where he would be six months or one year down the road."<sup>4</sup> He did not impose any upper limit on America's commitment to the war, nor did he direct any working group to study and outline in detail his options if the build-up of forces failed to achieve its objectives. The President's failure to take these steps had important consequences. It left the field commander, General Westmoreland, operating without any clear limits on force levels, which meant that the General could — and as Johnson soon discovered, would — continually request more men. Equally important, it left the President without maneuvering room in evaluating Westmoreland's demands. Having failed to consider the possibility that the U.S. might need to redefine its objectives and strategy, Johnson had little choice but to "support the men in the field" and give Westmoreland most, if not all of what he wanted. As a result, the U.S. became increasingly mired in a stalemated war. The character of the decisions made in July 1965 virtually committed the administration to a policy of open-ended military escalation in Vietnam.

In dissenting against this policy, Ball and McNaughton had to decide how to influence the top officials who supported the war without alienating them. After all, one does not dissent simply for the satisfaction of speaking out; one speaks out to influence events. To succeed, however, one needs power — but by dissenting one risks losing power. This dilemma can be resolved only by employing tactics which both advance one's dissenting views and maintain the ability to influence others.

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2. For the purposes of this paper, "dissent" is defined as attempts to deescalate the U.S. commitment to Vietnam.

3. James Thomson, "How Could Vietnam Happen: An Autopsy," *Atlantic Monthly*, (April 1968), p. 49.

4. Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), p. 147.

Balancing on the tightrope between power and dissent, Ball and McNaughton had to decide when to push for radical changes in policy, when to fall back and make more marginal recommendations, and when to stress problems with prevailing strategy and objectives.

Neither Ball nor McNaughton dissented effectively enough to change radically President Johnson's Vietnam policy. But dissent had consequences whether or not it succeeded in fundamentally changing policy. From Ball's own perspective, his dissent in 1965 had a counterproductive impact on policy. His tactics had much to do with this outcome. In key meetings, the Under Secretary decided to forego confrontations with Johnson. As a result, he consistently found himself on the defensive in verbal exchanges with the other principals. Also, in July 1965, Ball failed to emphasize his ideas about controlling America's commitment to the war. These tactical mistakes combined to reinforce the consensus against Ball's views and contributed to the open-ended character of the July 1965 decision to escalate the war. McNaughton's dissent, however, had very different consequences. By focusing on minimizing U.S. objectives in the war, McNaughton managed to provoke real debate within the administration. In doing so, he influenced one of the key proponents of escalation, Secretary McNamara, and moved him to try to cap the level of American involvement in Vietnam.

## II. GEORGE BALL: DISSENT FROM WITHIN

When President Johnson made his decision public on July 28, 1965, announcing at a press conference that U.S. forces in Vietnam would be increased "almost immediately" by 50,000 men and that "additional forces" would be sent "as requested," he acted against the advice of a top-level member of his administration.<sup>5</sup> Under Secretary of State George Ball had urged the President not only to refrain from any escalation but also to avoid "committing U.S. forces on an open-ended basis." In addition, he pressed Johnson to direct his top advisors to prepare plans for future courses of action, including both further escalation and disengagement "from an untenable situation."<sup>6</sup> Ball revealed these views to the President directly, taking advantage of Secretary of State Rusk's feeling that Johnson "was as entitled" to Ball's views "as to his."<sup>7</sup> Having no "obvious jurisdictional or institutional influences to affect his judgment," Ball had no reason to hedge his opinions with the President and

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5. President Johnson's remarks to the press, July 28, 1965, *PP*, 3:477.

6. Memo, George Ball to the President, June 18, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 75.

7. George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1982), p. 384.

did not do so.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, because of Ball's non-Ivy League, Midwestern background, Johnson was favorably disposed to listen to his views. ("I know," Johnson told him once, "you're not one of those smart-ass egg-heads.")<sup>9</sup> Still, LBJ completely ignored Ball's advice.

In seeking to explain Ball's ineffectiveness some writers have asserted that the Under Secretary, despite operating at the highest level of government, never had any real influence with the President because Johnson did not take his views seriously. James Thomson, for example, argues that once Ball "began to express doubts" and Johnson took to calling him the official "devil's advocate," he lost any opportunity to influence events.<sup>10</sup> Once designated the devil's advocate, according to this theory, Ball's views became predictable discourses that Johnson tolerated only to give future historians evidence that he had "listened to all sides" before making decisions.<sup>11</sup> Because they were expressed only for the record, Ball's ideas supposedly carried little weight. The actual record, however, reveals that Ball did have real influence within the administration. In August 1964, long after Ball's opposition to escalation had been established (as far back as November 1961 he had gone on record against sharply stepping up America's commitment to South Vietnam), President Johnson actually followed his advice. In the midst of the Tonkin Gulf crisis, Ball convinced Johnson not to provoke the North Vietnamese further with another destroyer patrol following the second alleged Communist attack on the *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy*, despite opposition from the rest of the President's advisors.<sup>12</sup> Though a minor victory, the incident lends support to Ball's claim that Johnson called him a devil's advocate not to neutralize his views but to "negate any impression of dissent among the top hierarchy" in the public's mind.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Johnson did not react to Ball's dissenting memos in a *pro forma* manner, but discussed the papers privately with his White House aides Bill Moyers and Jack Valenti and then challenged the specific points of the memos in meetings, even remembering "the page numbers where those arguments occurred."<sup>14</sup>

To discover why President Johnson ignored his Under Secretary and opted to embark on a high-risk policy without specifying a limit to U.S. involvement or planning for future alternatives, we must look beyond the "devil's advocate" thesis. A large part of the answer lies in the

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8. *PP*, 3:238.

9. Ball, p. 426.

10. Thomson, p. 49.

11. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Crest, 1972), p. 596.

12. Ball, pp. 379-380.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

President's desire to avoid a military defeat he felt would have grave international and domestic consequences.<sup>15</sup> But Johnson's perception of the stakes involved explains only why he chose to escalate, not why he chose to escalate without putting any limits on America's liability or initiating any study of future options.

One cannot simply dismiss Ball as a devil's advocate with no hope of influencing policy. The question remains, however, as to why Johnson totally ignored his Under Secretary's advice and opted to embark on what amounted to open-ended escalation in Vietnam. The answer lies in Ball's dissent tactics. In deciding how best to present his views, Ball made two key mistakes. First, apparently concerned about appearing threatening to President Johnson, perhaps because of his sensitivity to criticism, Ball decided not to debate the President in meetings.<sup>16</sup> He concentrated instead on making his arguments most aggressively in memoranda to Johnson. As a consequence, Ball consistently found himself on the defensive in conferences with the President and other principals. Second, in late June 1965, in the midst of the crucial debate over troop deployments, Ball decided to deemphasize his line of argument about how to control America's commitment to the war. Instead, he began stressing the need to get out of Vietnam altogether, an argument accepted by none of the other principals. Combined with Ball's performance in meetings, this tactic in effect allowed the President and his other top advisors to avoid facing the probability that their policy would fail to attain its objectives.

Ball's tactics of dissent became evident in February 1965 as the administration decided to begin a policy of "sustained reprisal" against North Vietnam. As recommended by McGeorge Bundy, the President's National Security Advisor, the policy of sustained air action against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) aimed to "increase . . . optimism in the South" and, Bundy hoped, lead to a "more effective government in Saigon." Another "longer-range" objective was to weaken "the will of Hanoi to direct and support the VC [Viet-Cong]."<sup>17</sup>

In October 1964, well before the initiation of the bombing program, Ball had written a memo attacking its logic and suggesting that the U.S. "try to bring about a political settlement without direct U.S. military involvement that would check, or at least delay, the extension of Communist power into South Vietnam." He specifically attacked the logic of increased U.S. involvement, arguing that "no one . . . had yet

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15. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), pp. 151-152.

16. Halberstam, p. 596.

17. Memo, McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, February 7, 1965, *PP*, 3:312-314.

shown that United States action against the North would create political cohesiveness in Saigon," nor that it would "persuade the Hanoi government to stop helping the Viet Cong." Drawing on a State Department Planning Study completed in March 1964, Ball argued that bombing would only trigger a "major invasion of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese forces." He concluded his paper by emphasizing the danger of believing that the administration "could halt the process of escalation whenever we [felt we had] accomplished our objective or the enemy was about to respond with unexpected force." Finally, Ball called on his colleagues to compare the costs and risks of escalation with the costs and risks of a political solution to the conflict.<sup>18</sup>

However cogent Ball's analysis of the program's risks and the improbability of its success may have been, in a meeting held with the President and the other principals in late February 1965 soon after the start of the bombing, the Under Secretary nevertheless found his ideas about the risks of escalation being questioned, rather than the program's logic and improbability of attaining its objectives. Secretary of Defense McNamara produced "a pyrotechnic display of facts and statistics" to prove that Ball had "overstated the difficulties" of escalation, while Secretary of State Rusk "made a passionate argument about the dangers of not going forward."<sup>19</sup> Discussion in this meeting completely ignored Ball's point that bombing the North would probably fail to achieve its stated objectives and focused instead on the secondary issues of his estimate of the risks involved and the possibilities of negotiation.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Ball apparently did not assault McNamara's and Bundy's belief that the U.S. would "obtain international credit merely for trying" to shore up its South Vietnamese ally through bombing strikes.<sup>21</sup> Bundy, for example, argued that even if the policy failed to achieve its objectives, "as it may," the "value of the effort seems to us to exceed its costs."<sup>22</sup> But in an earlier meeting held in Johnson's absence on November 24, 1964, even Rusk, who was interested not in "saving face but in saving Vietnam," had challenged Bundy's reasoning, asserting that "the harder we tried and then failed, the worse our situation would be."<sup>23</sup> At the February meeting with the President, however, Ball failed to bring out

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18. Ball, pp. 381-382. For the State Department Policy Planning Study, see Halberstam, pp. 434-436, p. 603 and *PP*, 3:154-156.

19. Ball, p. 392.

20. Berman, p. 51.

21. Transcript of principals' meeting, November 24, 1964, *PP*, 3:327.

22. Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, February 7, 1965, *PP*, 3:312.

23. *PP*, 3:237. Rusk on "saving Vietnam," see quote in Henry F. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet: Deliberation and Decision on Peace and War Under Lyndon B. Johnson*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), p. 88.

the internal disagreement over this crucial point, allowing it to lie submerged beneath the consensus that something had to be done to improve the situation in South Vietnam. To be sure, at this early stage of the decision-making on the war, Ball probably had little hope in any case of convincing the others to reconsider their policy. Bundy, McNamara, and Rusk all viewed the bombing campaign as something which might help take the pressure off South Vietnam while still giving the U.S. the option "to procede or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not."<sup>24</sup> Most important, President Johnson concurred: "limited bombing," he noted, was "seduction, not rape, and seduction was controllable, even reversible."<sup>25</sup>

Ball's tactics in February established a pattern where he was put on the defensive in important meetings — a pattern he repeated during the decision-making process on U.S. combat troops that culminated in an increase of force levels in Vietnam to 175,000. The administration began introducing large numbers of U.S. combat troops along the coast of South Vietnam in April, after it became apparent that the air offensive would not achieve its objectives — at least not, as the principals put it, "within the next six months." The new troops, numbering about 82,000, were to engage in "offensive ground operations" against the VC which would be strictly limited to within fifty miles of U.S. bases established in coastal enclaves. The objective of the troops was to "break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory," which would "lead eventually to a political solution." This solution, the ultimate political objective of the U.S., involved the restoration of the Saigon government's sovereignty over all of South Vietnam.<sup>26</sup>

Ball reacted to the April decisions over combat troops by stressing the need to reconsider the policy of escalation and shift the U.S. goal away from insistence on a non-Communist South Vietnam toward finding a way out of the conflict "with the least loss of face."<sup>27</sup> On April 21 Ball sent a memo to the President entitled, "Should We Try to Move Toward a Vietnamese Settlement Now?" In it he drew on CIA Director John McCone's opinion that the North Vietnamese would react to an American troop build-up with increased "covert infiltration," a move which would lead to pressure "for an ever-increasing commitment of U.S. personnel

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24. Working Group Draft Position Paper on Southeast Asia (written by William Bundy), November 29, 1964, *PP*, 3:678.

25. Quoted in Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1979) p. 137.

26. Record of April 1-2, 1965 NSC meetings and of April 20, 1965 Honolulu Conference, *PP*, 3:453-456.

27. Ball, p. 387.

without materially improving the chances of victory."<sup>28</sup> But while McCone concluded that this meant the U.S. had to "change the ground rules of the strikes against North Vietnam" and "hit them harder, more frequently, and inflict greater damage," Ball emphasized that America "dared no longer postpone a settlement."<sup>29</sup> He called for substituting "political activity . . . for a shooting war" and outlined a program offering amnesty to "all Viet Cong adherents who ceased fighting," promising that they could then take part in elections to establish a constitutional government in Saigon.<sup>30</sup> But Ball found none of the other principals interested in his idea. They believed that his plan meant "negotiating from weakness," something which could be avoided if the U.S. held more cards in the form of combat troops introduced into the South.<sup>31</sup>

In meetings held in late April, Ball apparently did not focus his dissent on the administration's idea that 82,000 American troops deployed in coastal enclaves would convince North Vietnam to give up the war. Instead, he linked his push for negotiations with the prediction that escalation would grow out of control and the U.S. would "soon . . . be sending 200,000 to 250,000 men" to Vietnam. Secretary of Defense McNamara, one of the chief proponents of escalation, responded not by demonstrating how the 82,000 troops would achieve their objectives but by attacking Ball's predictions. Supported by Rusk and Bundy, he asserted that "no one's talking about that many people."<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, Ball was right. On June 7, 1965, General Westmoreland decided that considerably more U.S. troops would be necessary to achieve the Administration's goals. In a message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Westmoreland asserted that "the conflict in Southeast Asia is in the process of moving to a higher level" as the enemy shifted to a "big-unit war," and requested reinforcements of approximately 100,000 men "as rapidly as is practical." Westmoreland also demanded the freedom to use his battalions as he wished, to "maneuver the troops around inside the country" and put them "on the offensive against the Viet Cong." The General added that while these additional forces would "establish a favorable balance of power by the end of the year," if the U.S. wanted to "seize the initiative from the enemy, then further forces would be

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28. Memo, John McCone to the principals, April 2, 1965, *PP*, 3:353.

29. *Ibid.* See also Ball, pp. 393-394.

30. Ball, p. 394.

31. Halberstam, p. 703. See also memo, McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, April 1, 1965, *PP*, 3:360.

32. Halberstam, p. 705.



required into 1966 and beyond.”<sup>33</sup> Westmoreland’s June 7 message marked the beginning of a crucial debate over U.S. policy in Vietnam within the administration because, for the first time, the principals faced the “spectre of U.S. involvement in a major Asian ground war.”<sup>34</sup>

On June 18, with Westmoreland’s request (now called the “44 battalion request”) endorsed by the Chiefs and set before the principals, Ball made a major change in tactics. Instead of continuing to emphasize the need to pursue a political solution — the tactic which had failed so completely in April — the Under Secretary now chose to stress the dangers of escalation and its low probability of success. Aware of Johnson’s “almost obsessive determination never to lose command,” he entitled a June 18 memo to the President, “Keeping the Power of Decision in the South Vietnam Crisis.” Ball began by arguing that “before we commit an endless flow of forces to South Vietnam we must have more evidence than we now have that our troops will not bog down in the jungles and rice paddies — while we slowly blow the country to pieces.” He urged the President to recognize that “the more forces we deploy in South Vietnam — particularly in combat roles — the harder we shall find it to extricate ourselves without unacceptable costs if the war goes badly . . . the failure to turn the tide will generate pressures to escalate.”<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps realizing that calling for withdrawal or negotiations was probably futile at this point, Ball outlined what might be termed his “fall-back” recommendations. He told the President to approve a 100,000-man force level but to make it clear to his advisors that he was “not committing U.S. forces on an open-ended basis to an all-out land war in South Vietnam” but instead was making a “controlled commitment for a trial period of three months.” During the test period, the President should “emphasize our willingness to stay in South Viet-Nam as long as we are wanted” and at the same time “press the war on the ground . . . as vigorously as possible.” Ball also recommended that Johnson direct his top advisors to prepare contingency plans for future consideration. Options to be studied and staffed out included further escalation, a “vigorous diplomatic offensive designed to bring about a political settlement,” and “a military or political solution — short of the ultimate U.S. objectives — that can be attained without the substantial further commitment of U.S. forces.” The Under Secretary elaborated on the need for

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33. Cable, Westmoreland to CINCPAC (to President), June 7, 1965, *PP*, 3:438-440, 3:462. See also Gen. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 140. See also cable, Westmoreland to CINCPAC, June 13, 1965, *PP*, 3:470-471.

34. *PP*, 3:462.

35. Memo, George Ball to President Johnson, June 18, 1965, quoted in Berman, pp. 74-75 and in Ball, p. 395.

detailed plans in his conclusion: "Since we cannot yet be sure that we will be able to beat the Viet Cong without unacceptable costs, we would be prudent to undertake an additional study of the political means to achieve less than a satisfactory solution — or, in other words, a solution involving concessions on our side as well as the Viet Cong."<sup>36</sup>

Secretary of Defense McNamara weighed in with his own views of the 44 battalion request on June 26 in a draft memorandum to the President (DPM). He favored full deployment of the requested forces, which would bring the U.S. troop level up to 175,000. McNamara noted that this number was "too small to make a significant difference in the traditional 10-1 government-guerrilla formula," but asserted, like Westmoreland, that the war in Vietnam was evolving into a "'Third Stage,' or conventional war in which it is easier to identify, locate, and attack the enemy." In this type of war, he stated, the 44 battalions could indeed make "a significant difference." The Secretary also urged Johnson to call up the reserves and "quarantine the movement of war supplies into North Vietnam" by mining its ports and destroying its transportation links to China. The objectives of the entire program remained as they were in April: to convince North Vietnam that it could not win, and force it to accept a "favorable settlement" of a non-Communist South Vietnam free from attack.<sup>37</sup>

Ball's response to McNamara, made on June 28 and followed up on July 1, differed significantly from his fall-back position of June 18. The Under Secretary continued to question how escalation would achieve its stated objectives, but now began reemphasizing the need to withdraw from the war as soon as possible. He entitled his June 28 paper, "Plan for Cutting Our Losses in South Vietnam." Ball now recommended maintaining "present levels of deployment" and delivering an ultimatum to the leadership in Saigon: if "those leaders" failed to "put together a government of national union under civilian leadership" within a month, the administration would "reconsider the extent of our commitment." Ball predicted the government of South Vietnam (GVN) would react to the ultimatum by either inviting the U.S. to leave or by seeking a "political solution with the Viet Cong." In any event, Ball argued, the U.S. could avoid escalation and begin to withdraw with consequences "far less harmful than had often been asserted."<sup>38</sup>

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36. *Ibid.*

37. Memo, Robert McNamara to President Johnson, June 26, 1965, quoted in Berman, pp. 179-186. For McNamara's views on the elements of a "favorable settlement," see memo, McNamara to the President, July 20, 1965, *PP*, 4:620.

38. Memo, Ball to President Johnson, June 28, 1965, quoted in Ball, p. 397. See also Berman, pp. 85-86.

In his July 1 follow-up memo, his last before Johnson made his decision to commit 175,000 U.S. troops to the war, the Under Secretary continued to emphasize, as the title indicated, "A Compromise Solution in South Vietnam." Missing from this memo was any mention of a test period for 100,000 U.S. troops, any explicit stress on the need to put a ceiling on America's commitment, or any recommendation concerning future planning. Ball did attack, however, the assumptions behind the 44 battalion request and pointed out the dangers of escalation. He stated that no one had "demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war," and he directly challenged McNamara's assumption about the conflict's entering a "third phase," insisting that "we have no basis for assuming that the Viet Cong will fight a war on our terms." But after predicting that escalation would start a "well-nigh irreversible process" ending in "humiliation" for the United States, Ball shifted attention to calling for negotiations. He recommended — in contrast to his June 18 fall-back position approving a 100,000-man force level — limiting troops to 72,000 men and restricting their combat role, while at the same time starting "some serious diplomatic feelers." Finally, as on June 28, Ball made a careful nation-by-nation analysis of how the Asian states would react to a compromise settlement involving U.S. disengagement from South Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

Ball's analysis of McNamara's proposals, if not his conclusions, did have an influence on some of the other principals. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, for example, wrote McNamara on June 30 that his June 26 DPM had "grave limitations." Like Ball, Bundy noted that McNamara proposed a "new land commitment at a time when our troops are entirely untested in the kind of warfare projected." Bundy also saw "no reason to suppose that the Viet Cong will accommodate us by fighting the kind of war we desire" and perceived that McNamara had omitted any "examination of the upper limit of US liability." Echoing Ball's argument that Washington might not be able to "control the risk" whenever it chose to step up its intervention in the war, Bundy went on to emphasize the pressures and dangers inherent in escalation:

If we need 200 thousand men now for these quite limited missions, may we not need 400 thousand later? Is this a rational course of action? Is there any real prospect that US regular forces can conduct the anti-guerrilla operations which would probably remain the central problem in South Vietnam?  
. . . Any expanded program needs to have a clear sense of its

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39. Memo, Ball to President Johnson, July 1, 1965, quoted in Ball, pp. 398-399. See also *PP*, 4:615-617.

own internal momentum . . . If US casualties go up sharply, what further actions do we propose to take or not to take? More broadly still, what is the real object of the exercise? . . . Still more brutally, do we want to invest 200 thousand men to cover an eventual retreat? Can we not do that just as well where we are?<sup>40</sup>

This remarkable memo, only recently declassified, reveals that like George Ball, Bundy recognized the need for a ceiling on the level of U.S. commitment to South Vietnam and for contingency planning, especially since McNamara's proposed program had only a limited chance of success.

Bundy's brother William, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, also responded to McNamara's DPM with views which paralleled the recommendations outlined by Ball on June 18. Undoubtedly affected by the Under Secretary's analysis of the situation while providing him with staff assistance in late June, Bill Bundy urged the President not to approve the 44 battalion request. He argued that the administration "did not know at this point how effective our forces will be" nor how the South Vietnamese people would react to "U.S. forces engaged in the countryside." Moreover, he wrote, "as the Ball papers point out, Hanoi is by no means committed to a really conventional type of war, and they could easily go on making significant gains while giving us precious few opportunities to hit them." The Assistant Secretary therefore recommended a "middle way" in Vietnam, urging the President to limit troop deployments to 75,000-85,000 men and to "test how the situation develops in the summer while avoiding the extremes of ultimatums/withdrawal (Ball memorandum) or the far greater, early ground deployments and extensive actions against the DRV proposed in the McNamara memorandum."<sup>41</sup>

William Bundy, then, basically agreed with Ball's views of June 18 concerning the need to make a controlled commitment in Vietnam and shared Ball's worry about how the "appearance of a white man's war" would affect the South Vietnamese.<sup>42</sup> But he disagreed with Ball's "ultimatums/withdrawal" proposal outlined on June 28. In essence, Bill Bundy did not want to confront the logic of Ball's position. He could see "all the problems" involved with escalation but simply could not

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40. Memo, McGeorge Bundy to McNamara, June 30, 1965, quoted in Berman, pp. 187-189. For Ball's views on controlling the risk of escalation, see memo, Ball to Rusk, Bundy, and McNamara, October 5, 1964, quoted in Ball, p. 387. This paper was discussed among the four men in November 1964, and again with the President on February 26, 1965.

41. Memo, William Bundy to the President, June 30, 1965, *PP*, 4:610-611.

42. Memo, Ball to the President, June 18, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 74.

agree "to reverse twenty-five years of American policy" and let South Vietnam "go down the drain."<sup>43</sup> Bundy thought that a defeat would "create an immediate and maximum shock wave for Thailand and the rest of Asia" favorable to increased communist expansion.<sup>44</sup> The costs of losing, in short, looked higher than the costs involved with pressing ahead. Also, being a "classic civil servant" in David Halberstam's words, Bill Bundy had less interest in disturbing his superiors with hard questions than in "grabbing the middle position" (as reflected in his "middle way" proposal) and supporting whatever decision the President favored.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, McGeorge Bundy sought "to raise questions" but "not to answer them."<sup>46</sup> He, too, agreed with Ball on the irrationality of an open-ended commitment and doubted that the VC/NVA (North Vietnamese Army) were shifting to conventional tactics. This meant, as McNamara himself admitted, that the 44 battalions would not make a significant difference in the war — that they would not even approach the achievement of their objectives. But like his brother, Bundy had no inclination to face up to the implications of his analysis.

In a memo Bundy sent to Johnson on July 1 outlining the "positions within the government," he noted that Secretary of State Rusk supported McNamara's proposals, except for the ones which moved "rapidly against Hanoi by bombing and blockade" (Rusk told the President that the "integrity of the U.S. commitment . . . the principal pillar of peace throughout the world" was at stake in Vietnam and had to be preserved "without a general war if possible"). Bundy had a "hunch" that Johnson would "want to listen hard to George Ball and then reject his proposal."<sup>47</sup> Because he recognized that Johnson wanted "to turn the tide — not cover a retreat," he urged him to choose between his brother's course and McNamara's.<sup>48</sup> Even while advising Johnson that he might want to solicit some "pretty tight and hard analyses of some disputed questions," such as how much of McNamara's planning would be on a contingency basis and what the upper limit of the U.S. liability would be, Bundy wrote that the decision "should be made in about ten days."<sup>49</sup> Since Bundy moved so quickly to support Johnson in the President's determination to secure agreement "at the lowest level of intensity he could on a course that would meet the present need in Vietnam and not derail

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43. Halberstam, p. 784.

44. Memo, William Bundy to President Johnson, June 30, 1965, *PP*, 4:610.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 482.

46. Memo, McGeorge Bundy to McNamara, June 30, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 187.

47. Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, July 1, 1965, quoted in Berman, pp. 190-191.

For Rusk's views, see memo, Rusk to the President, July 1, 1965, *PP*, 4:23.

48. Letter, McGeorge Bundy to Berman, quoted in Berman, p. 145.

49. Memo, Bundy to the President, July 1, 1965, quoted in Berman, pp. 190-191.

his domestic legislative calendar," he was saying, in effect, that unless someone else brought up the "disputed questions," they would remain unresolved.<sup>50</sup>

By the time Ball met with the President and the other principals on July 21, Johnson had already decided to go ahead with the 44 battalions. He still held the meeting in order to solidify the consensus on his decision and to avoid, as Bundy recommended to him on July 18, giving "the appearance of great haste" in deciding to go to war.<sup>51</sup> Since the other principals had no desire to disturb the President with hard questions, Under Secretary Ball, the dissenter, represented the only hope of piercing the staged atmosphere of the meeting and forcing the administration to face up to the implications of its actions.<sup>52</sup> This was realistically his last opportunity to influence policy. His only chance lay in aggressively placing the burden of proof on the advocates of escalation and in exposing the proposed policy's dubious assumptions and low probability of success. In the process he might succeed in smoking out those — like the two Bundys — who at least agreed with his analysis, if not with his conclusions.

It is conceivable that the President, obsessed with building his short-term consensus, might have cut Ball off while the others kept their peace. But the Under Secretary could have then shifted to less threatening ground — namely his fall-back recommendations of June 18. While ostensibly supporting the President, the Under Secretary might have convinced him, perhaps with the help of Bill Bundy and others, to take the minimal steps of initiating interagency planning on future options and putting a ceiling on U.S. liabilities. According to Larry Berman, such steps "could and should have been done."<sup>53</sup> Neither seriously threatened Johnson's determination to prevent defeat and to get into the war as quietly as possible, and both coincided with the views of at least some of the others present at the meeting.

But on July 21 Ball's strategy of dissent neither consistently placed the burden of proof on his colleagues nor emphasized his June 18 fall-back position. Only at the outset of the meeting did he take the offensive, asking if it were not possible "that the VC will do what they did against the French — stay away from confrontation and not accommodate us." General Wheeler confidently replied that "they will have to fight somewhere," but McNamara, curiously, admitted that "we don't know what VC tactics will be when the VC is confronted by 175,000 Americans."

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50. Letter, Bundy to Berman, quoted in Berman, p. 145.

51. Memo, Bundy to the President, July 8, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 99.

52. William Bundy oral history, Johnson Library, quoted in Berman, p. 106.

53. Berman, p. 75.

Ball failed to pursue this crucial point. Instead, he made an incredible statement to the President: "If the decision is to go ahead, I am committed."<sup>54</sup> Ball never again took the offensive in pointing out the irrationality of an open-ended commitment, or the irresponsibility of implementing a high-risk policy without forming any contingency plans.

Ball proceeded to advocate not his fall-back position of June 18 but his ideas about getting out of the war as soon as possible. Given that this tactic had failed in April and that the views of the President and the other principals clearly had not changed, Ball should have calculated that pushing for withdrawal at this stage was futile. Moreover, he knew, since they had worked together in June, that William Bundy had similar ideas to those emphasized in the June 18 paper. But at this meeting, Ball seemed obsessed with telling the President that he should take his "losses, let their government fall apart, negotiate, discuss, knowing full well there will probably be a take-over by the Communists." Such language only emphasized the consequences of his proposals and further highlighted Ball's isolated position that America should get out of the war. In effect, Ball invited the burden of proof to be directed at him and as the President did not hesitate to take advantage of the invitation he responded to Ball at one point with: "I don't believe that. Does anyone believe that?"<sup>55</sup>

As political scientist John Burka recently pointed out, Ball's July 21 performance "did not significantly contribute to the advisory process."<sup>56</sup> In fact, his dissent ironically played an important role in securing the implementation of the Vietnam policy he opposed. The blame for the July decision should not be placed on Ball's shoulders, however, since both McNamara and Rusk outranked him, and since in the final analysis it was the President's decision. The point is simply that Ball chose to dissent in such a way that he reinforced the probability that a bad policy would emerge from the June-July debates. His tactics in meetings and his decision bluntly to recommend getting out of the war at a time when such a course of action had very little chance of success, combined to underscore his isolation among the principals, and to reinforce the consensus against his views. Consequently, Ball made it much easier for the President and his advisors to avoid taking even the minimal step of contingency planning. No one should have *had* to force Lyndon Johnson

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54. Transcript of July 21, 1965, meetings between the President and his top advisors, quoted in Berman, pp. 106-111.

55. *Ibid.*

56. John Burka, "Anatomies of Decision Making: Questions, Considerations, and Conclusions," APSA convention paper, 1982, p. 39.

to take those steps; but neither did anyone, including Ball, make a vocal and concerted attempt to do so.

As for Ball, the sequence of major decisions against his advice meant the end of any real chance he had to influence events. Ball himself had "no illusions" about his ability to affect policy once hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops began pouring into South Vietnam. He did not resign in protest, however, because he "did not want to be a hero of the yippies" and felt it would give "aid and comfort to the enemy." Both inside and outside the government, Ball abdicated any opportunity to influence the policy he opposed.<sup>57</sup>

### III. JOHN MCNAUGHTON: DISSENT FROM BELOW

At the same time that George Ball directed his dissent against escalating American involvement in the war, another official, Secretary of Defense McNamara's trusted aide John McNaughton, began his own efforts to alter the course of U.S. policy. Like Ball, he too had to cope with the problem of choosing the actions and arguments which would have the best chance of influencing without alienating the key decision-makers who supported the war.

But McNaughton faced an additional obstacle which had not confronted Ball. As Under Secretary, the second highest job in the State Department, and as someone whom Secretary Rusk felt should make his views known to the President, Ball operated at the highest level of the administration. He dealt directly with Johnson and his top advisors and could state his views as honestly as he wished without fear of losing his job. In contrast, McNaughton, as Assistant Secretary of State for International Security Affairs (ISA), found himself one step removed from the center of power. He did not even hold the number two position at Defense (that being the Deputy Secretary of Defense); instead, he worked out of McNamara's own office. Thus, whereas Ball could influence Johnson directly, McNaughton had to work through McNamara, his superior.

To understand McNaughton's dissent, the full consequences of his subordinate position must be realized. His superior, McNamara, demanded "total loyalty upward" from his subordinates, which meant, according to McNamara's biographer Henry Trewitt, that once the President or the Secretary had made a decision his subordinates had to support that decision even if they opposed it in private.<sup>58</sup> McNaughton agreed with this conception of "loyalty," telling an aide in 1964 that if the

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57. Ball, pp. 432-433.

58. Henry L. Trewitt, *McNamara: His Ordeal in the Pentagon*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 226-227.



President "ever asked him what his position was, even if he differed from McNamara, he would back up the Secretary."<sup>59</sup>

In addition, as a former Harvard Law School professor, McNaughton saw himself as McNamara's lawyer, which meant playing the "dual role of counselor and advocate."<sup>60</sup> He therefore told McNamara his doubts about the war in private while ostensibly supporting the Defense Secretary's views outside the office. For example, Ball usually showed his memos on the war to Rusk, Bundy, and McNamara before sending them to Johnson. McNamara had McNaughton respond to them. McNaughton would reply with a paper more or less agreeing with Ball's analysis but concluding that McNamara's recommendations were correct.<sup>61</sup> From Ball's perspective, McNaughton was therefore simply an extension of McNamara. Indeed, any power McNaughton possessed existed "only as long as he had Robert McNamara's complete confidence, and as long as everyone in government believed that when he spoke, he spoke not for John McNaughton but for Bob McNamara."<sup>62</sup>

Given McNaughton's position in the government, it is not surprising that he is usually portrayed as having compromised his dissent so much in order to maintain his "effectiveness" within the administration that he should not be characterized as a dissenter at all. Leslie Gelb, for example, one of the few writers who examines McNaughton's views, argues that his "dovishness" was not "excessively different than the President's; he pushed not for withdrawal, but for minimizing escalation." Moreover, according to Gelb, McNaughton criticized the "inadequacy of means" rather than the viability of ends. In other words, he ignored the "basic assumptions that kept the war going."<sup>63</sup>

A close look at the record, however, reveals that McNaughton acted upon his opposition to the war far more than Gelb gives him credit for. It is true that McNaughton did not become a dissenter until after he realized that the coercive bombing of North Vietnam, a policy he supported and had helped to plan, had failed to achieve its goals. Even then, driven by the desire to stay "effective" with Secretary McNamara, McNaughton avoided making any explicit recommendations for radical shifts in policy, at least until May 1967. Nevertheless, he did challenge U.S. objectives in Vietnam as early as January 1966 by consistently describing the situation there and outlining options for McNamara in a

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59. Thomas Janes, "Rational Man — Irrational Policy: A Political Biography of John McNaughton's Involvement in the Vietnam War," B. A. honors thesis, Harvard University, 1977, p. 14.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

61. Ball, p. 406.

62. Halberstam, p. 445.

63. Gelb, p. 149. See also p. 292.

way that undercut official policy. While McNaughton's dissent did not in itself change policy, it did succeed in influencing Secretary McNamara and in persuading him to try to put a ceiling on the level of U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.

The key problem for McNaughton in 1964 and especially after March 1965, was that while McNamara believed in the administration's policies and objectives in Vietnam, he did not. When McNaughton succeeded William Bundy as head of ISA in early 1964, Secretary McNamara had been the administration's "principal desk officer on Vietnam" since about 1962.<sup>64</sup> McNamara had played an important role in urging President Kennedy to mount a counter-insurgency effort in Vietnam, and after Kennedy's death he moved quickly to take charge of Vietnam policy.<sup>65</sup> With the apparent failure of the counter-insurgency effort in late 1963 and early 1964, McNamara, who "believed in American power," explored ways to bring military pressure to bear on North Vietnam to affect the struggle in the South.<sup>66</sup> He thus supported the first phase of these pressures, a covert action program against the North, which began in February 1964.

When McNaughton, still new to his job, accompanied McNamara to Vietnam in March 1964, his superior clearly favored greater U.S. involvement in the war. On March 16, McNaughton helped McNamara draft a statement of U.S. objectives in Vietnam and a program that called for a "considerable enlargement of U.S. effort." The President approved this document on March 17 as National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288. In contrast to NSAM 273, issued in late 1963, NSAM 288 described the primary U.S. objective in Vietnam not merely to provide help to Saigon in its "contest" against the Communists, but to secure "an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam." NSAM 288 stated that unless the U.S. achieved this objective, "almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance," and the threat to India, Australia, and Japan "would be greatly increased." As noted in the Pentagon Papers, "the encompassing nature of the definition of objectives" strongly implied an end to the "severe restriction upon violent means," which had characterized the theory if not always the practice of the Kennedy administration's counter-insurgency program. Not surprisingly, NSAM 288 concluded by recommending that planning begin on how to start pressuring North Vietnam.<sup>67</sup>

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64. Halberstam, p. 264.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 425.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 426. See also Trewhitt, p. 286.

67. National Security Action Memorandum 288, PP, 3:50-51.

In private, McNaughton began to have doubts about the wisdom of McNamara's plans to take the war to the North Vietnamese. In the spring of 1964 he met often with Michael Forrestal, an old friend who worked in the White House, and his doubts would "pour out." Why, McNaughton wondered, should the U.S. bomb North Vietnam to help a South Vietnamese government which was obviously "weak and probably not viable?" He also worried about the dangers of escalation, telling Forrestal that "each day we lose a little control," because if the U.S. failed to end the war by escalating today, the reasons for continuing to escalate "will still exist tomorrow, and we'll be in even deeper."<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps convinced by McNamara, whom he "admired . . . without reservation," and believing that it might be possible, if not probable, to coerce North Vietnam into ending its support for the VC, McNaughton grudgingly supported the idea of bombing the North Vietnamese.<sup>69</sup> Even if the program failed to convince Hanoi to stop its support of the Viet Cong, McNaughton believed that it would at least give the U.S. "bargaining points with which to negotiate."<sup>70</sup> He therefore favored "option C" during a working group study of the Vietnam situation in November 1964 — an alternative which called for "an orchestration of . . . communications with Hanoi and . . . a crescendo of additional military moves against infiltration targets, first in Laos and then in the DRV, and then against other targets in North Vietnam." The program aimed not to destroy North Vietnam but to persuade the DRV to "stop sending arms and supplies to SVN [South Vietnam]" and to "order the VC and PL [Pathet Lao] to stop their insurgencies and military actions." McNaughton noted, however, that the program involved a chance of "big escalation" and thus the risk of "coming out very badly." McNaughton revealed his doubts privately to McNamara, writing to him on January 27, 1965 that "striking DRV might, but probably won't [help South Vietnam]." But McNamara did not share these doubts, scribbling by McNaughton's comment, "Dissent. Help the actual situation."<sup>71</sup> In any event, McNamara felt that bombing could be controlled and at the very least would "buy time" for South Vietnam.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps swayed by this argument, McNaughton nevertheless thought it worth the risk, since even if it failed, it would demonstrate "that the US was a 'good doctor' willing to keep promises, be tough, take risks, get bloodied and hurt

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68. Halberstam, pp. 447-448.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 445. See also Janes, pp. 29-30.

70. *PP*, 3:225.

71. Memo, McNaughton to McNamara, January 27, 1965, *PP*, 3:686-687.

72. Meeting of the principals, November 27, 1964, *PP*, 3:242.

the enemy badly," thus protecting America's "reputation as a counter-subversion guarantor."<sup>73</sup>

"Option C" went into operation in February 1965, and soon became known as the "Rolling Thunder" bombing campaign. At first the program reflected McNaughton's aim to "inflict such pain or threat of pain upon the DRV" that it would make substantial concessions to the U.S.<sup>74</sup> By the beginning of March, however, target selection increasingly became influenced not by "political and psychological considerations" but by military exigencies, namely the Joint Chiefs' desire to interdict the flow of men and supplies into South Vietnam.<sup>75</sup> The shift in targeting rationale, accompanied by increased attention to the question of ground troops, reflected the failure of the bombing campaign to bring North Vietnam to the negotiating table or to improve significantly the situation in the South.

The failure of the bombing to achieve its objectives, its increasing emphasis on interdiction of supplies rather than coercion, and the realization that further escalation in the form of ground troops was on the way, all helped to turn McNaughton from a doubter of policy into an active opponent of it. This became evident in early March, soon after General Westmoreland requested two Marine battalions to provide security for the U.S. airfield at Da Nang. The request generated little debate in Washington, but McNaughton, apparently suspecting that Westmoreland and the Chiefs wanted the battalions not so much for security as for an initiation of a phased build-up of U.S. ground troops, made a "last minute attempt" to substitute the 173rd Airborne for the Marines.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to the Marine battalions, the Airborne brigade was lightly armed and more "readily withdrawn."<sup>77</sup> Also, substituting the 173rd would create "planning tangles for the Chiefs" and therefore delay "pressures for further deployment pending the development of new plans."<sup>78</sup> Predictably, the Chiefs reacted strongly against this effort to throw a "monkey wrench" into their plans and prevailed, undoubtedly because McNaughton "did not receive any support for his attempt."<sup>79</sup>

The two Marine battalions marked the beginning of a build-up of American forces in Vietnam which culminated in July with the decision to deploy 175,000 men. On March 20, the Joint Chiefs, arguing that

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73. Working group draft number 3 (written by McNaughton), November 7, 1964, *PP*, 3:601-604.

74. *PP*, 3:317.

75. *Ibid.*, 3:340.

76. *Ibid.*, 3:431.

77. Westmoreland, p. 124.

78. *PP*, 3:431.

79. *Ibid.*, 3:431-433.

more force was needed "to persuade the DRV to abandon its support and direction of the insurgency, to defeat the Viet Cong . . . and . . . to create a stable GVN [Government of Vietnam]," requested that two U.S. divisions be sent to Vietnam to engage the VC.<sup>80</sup> With his boss taking the attitude that "anything that will strengthen the position of GVN will be sent," McNaughton wrote a carefully worded memo to McNamara on March 24 entitled, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam."<sup>81</sup> Most of the paper outlined the aims, risks, and possible benefits of "will-breaking strikes" against North Vietnam and of embarking on a "large US ground effort in SVN and SEA [Southeast Asia]."<sup>82</sup> While not directly challenging U.S. policy in Vietnam, McNaughton nevertheless tried to show — as Ball did — that escalation would not succeed and proceeded to suggest alternatives.

He began by noting that it was unlikely that the situation in South Vietnam could be "bottomed out" without extreme U.S. measures against the North "and/or . . . large numbers of US (and other) combat troops inside SVN." He went on to emphasize the weakness of the GVN by listing no fewer than nineteen ways in which it might collapse. As McNaughton saw it, the U.S. faced a "trilemma" since "all three of the possible remedial courses of action" had major problems. Bombing the North involved a "substantial risk of escalation" because of various "flash points," such as strikes near China, which might lead to a step-up of the war by either the U.S. or the DRV. In fact, McNaughton noted that the bombing campaign might escalate "to conventional war with DRV, China, (and USSR?)" or even "to the use of nuclear weapons." At least one flash point — air strikes north of 17° — had already been passed, McNaughton wrote, and another would be reached in about one month. In emphasizing the risks of Rolling Thunder and finding no advantages in it, McNaughton observed that the whole program was "balked" by "doubts that the DRV will cave . . . and that the VC will obey a caving DRV," which left the strikes as "only a political and anti-infiltration nuisance."<sup>83</sup>

The second horn of McNaughton's trilemma involved U.S. ground force deployments. Again, as with his outline of Rolling Thunder, he appeared pessimistic. At best, "massive deployments" would "improve the GVN/US:VC ratio to the optimum 10+:1" and boost allied morale. McNaughton mentioned nothing about successfully defeating the VC,

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80. Memo, Army Chief of Staff Johnson to McNamara, March 14, 1965, *PP*, 3:428.

81. McNamara's response to Johnson's March 14, 1965 memo, *PP*, 3:429.

82. McNaughton to McNamara, "Plan of Action For South Vietnam," March 24, 1965, *PP*, 3:695-707.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

one of the primary missions of the troops. In McNaughton's analysis, even the marginal advantages of deploying troops were outweighed by the risks of Chinese intervention or DRV counter-escalation. Troops, McNaughton wrote, "could be net negatives, and be besieged," and, moreover, would be "difficult to withdraw . . . without admitting defeat." This last point was crucial since McNaughton defined U.S. aims as "70% — to avoid a humiliating US defeat."<sup>84</sup>

Finally, McNaughton found the third course of remedial action, negotiations, "tainted by the humiliation likely to follow." Though he recommended "quiet talks," asserting that "there is now a hint of flexibility on the Red side," McNaughton's position was not dovish. He still advocated that the U.S. prepare to deploy troops and continue bombing, and his negotiation package did essentially call for North Vietnam to capitulate. Nonetheless, the only other person in the administration calling for negotiations at this time was George Ball. McNaughton asserted that if the DRV did not "play" his negotiating "game," the U.S. "must be prepared" to escalate (with, as he had already pointed out, great risks and little chance of success) "and/or . . . to reconsider our minimum acceptable outcome."<sup>85</sup>

McNaughton made a real effort on March 24 to convince McNamara that further escalation was not only dangerous but probably futile, which meant that a change in U.S. political objectives might be appropriate. But McNamara did not listen; instead he urged the President to go ahead with the April deployment of 82,000 troops to coastal enclaves in South Vietnam, emphasizing to Johnson that his advisors all agreed on the correctness and necessity of the decision.<sup>86</sup> As George Ball later recalled: "McNamara's reputation was at stake, he had handled Vietnam up to this point and he could not just turn around now that the military was proposing the logical extension of his earlier recommendations. Besides, McNamara always said, the troops will just be used for a short time, there was no need to suddenly change position." McNaughton supported his chief in meetings even while telling him privately on April 26 to halt the bombing and "fully assess the objectives of U.S. policy."<sup>87</sup>

In June, as deliberations began on Westmoreland's 44 battalion request, McNaughton adopted a position similar to the one Ball took on June 18. He began to focus on getting McNamara, the "*primus inter pares* among the principals" who was already on record in favor of plunging ahead, to recognize the full implications of meeting Westmoreland's

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84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. Memo, McNamara to the President, April 21, 1965, *PP*, 3:358.

87. Janes, p. 80.

requests — both for troops and for permission to switch from an enclave to a search-and-destroy strategy aimed at defeating the enemy in the South.<sup>88</sup>

McNaughton first attempted to pin down the Joint Chiefs on the crucial question of the level of U.S. forces necessary to “win in South Vietnam.” On July 2, he asked the military to “produce a clear articulation of what our strategy is for winning the war in South Vietnam” and urged the Joint Chiefs to consider how large a force the DRV would infiltrate into the South in response to a build-up of U.S. troops. McNaughton also stated that America should have a “75%” assurance of winning, defining a “win” as “demonstrating to the VC that they cannot win.” In the process, a “favorable settlement” would have to emerge in which “VC terrorism is substantially eliminated” and the GVN would exercise “fairly complete sovereignty over most of South Vietnam.” Finally, McNaughton asked the military “how long our forces will have to remain in order to achieve a ‘win’ and the extent to which the presence of those forces over a long period of time might, by itself, nullify the ‘win’.”<sup>89</sup>

McNaughton’s July 2 memo represented an attempt to get some answers to the hard questions that everyone except Ball wanted to ignore. It also amounted to an effort “to get the military to set viable objectives and make realistic calculations on the enemy’s response.”<sup>90</sup> The Chiefs’ reply, however, “did not take escalatory reactions into account” and simply restated the search-and-destroy strategy advocated by Westmoreland. General Wheeler told McNamara on July 14 that “there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will — and if that will is manifest in strategy and tactical operations.”<sup>91</sup> Wheeler believed that America could win the war — but only if the administration gave the military everything it wanted.

Undoubtedly disturbed by McNamara’s indifference to the implications of an open-ended U.S. commitment to attain what he felt were unattainable objectives, McNaughton wrote his boss a memo on July 13 which “dared to attach a probability” to the Secretary’s confident expectation that the North Vietnamese would fold when they saw 175,000 American troops in South Vietnam. McNaughton assumed that U.S. forces would rise to between 200,000 and 400,000 men and then assigned

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88. *PP*, 3:395. On McNamara’s stature among the principals, see Berman, p. 82.

89. Memo, McNaughton to General Goodpaster, July 2, 1965, *PP*, 4:291-293.

90. Janes interview with former General Gavin concerning the military implications of McNaughton’s questions, quoted in Janes, p. 91.

91. Wheeler to McNamara, July 14, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 139. See also *PP*, 4:293-295 for the JCS Study Group’s response to McNaughton’s questions.

a probability of only 50 percent to the chances of a U.S. "win" by 1968, an election year. Significantly, McNaughton expected "the probability of failure to increase" with each year of investment (10% in 1966, 15% in 1967, and 20% in 1968). In an attempt to induce McNamara to evaluate seriously the viability of U.S. objectives, McNaughton noted that no one had put a "value scale" on "(a) desirability of various outcomes, (b) undesirability of various efforts, and (c) undesirability of having tried and failed." Even while supporting his chief's recommendations to Johnson, at least on paper, McNaughton concluded that even with a win, "it is not obvious how we will be able to disengage our forces from South Vietnam . . . Most likely, in the case of success, is a settling down into a 'compromise'-like situation with a large number — perhaps 2 divisions — of US forces required to stay a period of years."<sup>92</sup>

McNamara did not respond, at least in writing, to his subordinate's rather pessimistic views of his program's chances for success. Instead he waited to see how North Vietnam would react to the 44 battalions. The Secretary did not have to wait long. In mid-November 1965, as both McNamara and McNaughton pushed for a bombing halt to test Hanoi's willingness to negotiate, it became clear that the DRV had met the administration's escalation with escalation of its own. As a bloody battle between the North Vietnamese and Americans raged in the Ia Drang Valley, intelligence confirmed on November 17 that Communist infiltration into South Vietnam had sharply increased. Six days later General Westmoreland requested 48,000 more troops on top of a second-phase force of 112,000 discussed in July and recommended by McNamara on November 3. All these troops were in addition to the 175,000 actually approved in July.

The Secretary of Defense must have been dismayed by these developments, given his belief in July that once the Communists saw American troops arriving in large numbers they would "recognize reality." It was "inconceivable" to McNamara "that they would continue to fight."<sup>93</sup> Despite the counter-escalation, McNamara wrote Johnson on November 30 that "the best chance of achieving our stated objectives" rested in a bombing pause (which would "lay a foundation in the mind of the American public and in world opinion" for later intensification of the U.S. war effort and also "give NVN [North Vietnam] a face saving chance to stop the aggression").

McNamara's intensification called for an increase in U.S. troop strength

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92. Memo, McNaughton to McNamara, July 13, 1965, *PP*, 3:483-485. See also Berman, pp. 140-141.

93. Trewhitt, p. 225. See also Halberstam, p. 769.



to 400,000 by the end of 1966, with the possible need for *an additional* 200,000 in 1967.<sup>94</sup> The Secretary did not take a position on whether or not to change the administration's "stated objectives." He had, however, told Johnson on November 3 that a "compromise outcome" involving anything less than a stable, non-Communist South Vietnam would be "difficult to sell domestically and damaging to U.S. political effectiveness on the world scene."<sup>95</sup> McNamara concluded his November 30 DPM on a note which no doubt shocked Lyndon Johnson:

We should be aware that deployments of the kind I have recommended will not guarantee success . . . the odds are even that we will be faced in early 1967 with a 'no decision' at an even higher level.<sup>96</sup>

Despite his awareness of the darkness ahead, McNamara apparently saw no need to change U.S. objectives in Vietnam. McNaughton did. On January 18, 1966 McNaughton wrote a blunt memo, apparently to McNamara, outlining the situation in stark terms and arguing, as the analyst in the Pentagon Papers wrote, that "the United States . . . should consider coming to terms." McNaughton began by asserting that "we . . . have in Vietnam the ingredients of an enormous miscalculation . . . the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] is tired . . . The PAVN [People's Army of (North) Vietnam]/VC are effectively matching our deployments . . . The GVN political infrastructure is moribund . . . South Vietnam is near the edge of serious inflation and economic chaos." The Assistant Secretary stated that the only reason the U.S. had not withdrawn from Vietnam was to preserve America's "reputation as a guarantor," but he urged that "we not construe our obligation to be more than do the countries whose opinions of us are our reputation." After succinctly summing up the U.S. military position in Vietnam ("we are in an escalating military stalemate"), McNaughton moved on to his most important point:

Some will say that we have defaulted if we end up, at any point in the relevant future, with anything less than a Western-oriented, non-Communist, independent government exercising effective sovereignty over all of South Vietnam. This is not so. As stated above, the US end is solely to preserve our reputation as a guarantor. It follows that the 'softest' credible formulation of the US commitment is the following:

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94. Memo, McNamara to President Johnson, November 30, 1965, *PP*, 4:622-623.

95. Memo, McNamara to President Johnson, November 3, 1965, *PP*, 4:303.

96. Memo, McNamara to President Johnson, November 30, 1965, *PP*, 4:622-623.

DRV does not take over South Vietnam by force. This does not necessarily rule out . . . a coalition government including the Communists . . . Furthermore, *we must recognize that even if we fail in achieving this 'soft' formulation, we could over time come out with minimum damage: if the reason was GVN gross wrongheadedness or apathy*, if victorious North Vietnam 'went Titoist,' and/or if the Communist take-over was fuzzy and very slow.<sup>97</sup>

Without mentioning NSAM 288 — the engine driving the U.S. policy of military escalation in Vietnam — McNaughton repudiated it and stressed that "the U.S. commitment could be fulfilled with something considerably short of victory." He even implied that America could deal with an outright defeat by blaming it, as George Ball suggested, on the ever-incompetent South Vietnamese. Even though McNaughton's analysis of the situation in Vietnam showed U.S. policy to be bankrupt and its objectives overstated and unattainable, he remained loyal to McNamara despite the Secretary's recommendations to the President for escalation (which he helped write). McNaughton still kept his own recommendations carefully in line with official policy. He did point out, however, that if escalation continued, troop levels could reach one million. In any event, the Secretary could not have missed the "central point" of the paper concerning U.S. objectives, nor McNaughton's almost desperate plea to start making "hard decisions." McNaughton concluded: "It took us almost a year to take the decision to bomb North Vietnam . . . it could take us months . . . to get . . . in position to go for a compromise . . . we should 'tip the pitchers' now if we want them to 'pour' a year from now."<sup>98</sup>

On January 24, McNaughton's dissent finally had some impact on McNamara. Whereas on December 7 McNamara stated that 600,000 men in Vietnam "could ultimately prevent the DRV/VC from sustaining the conflict at a significant level," six days after McNaughton's memo he changed this to "could *probably* ultimately . . ." (author's emphasis). McNamara also deleted two sentences; one predicting a fifty-fifty chance of "large numbers of Chinese forces" entering the war as a response to 600,000 American troops in the South and another noting that even the problematic odds of success in 1967 would be "marred by the chances of an active Chinese intervention." The deletions made it clear that with

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97. Memo, McNaughton to (probably) McNamara, January 18, 1966, *PP*, 4:47-48. Emphasis added.

98. *Ibid.* See also Janes, p. 112.

only North Vietnam as an opponent, even with 600,000 troops the odds were even that the U.S. would be stalemated in 1967 at a much higher level of violence, "with pacification . . . hardly underway and with the requirement for the deployment of still more U.S. forces."<sup>99</sup> Thus, McNaughton's January 18 paper, with its pessimism and suggestions for limiting objectives rather than radically changing them, did exert an influence on McNamara, but not enough to persuade him to tell Johnson to find a way out of the war.

In fact, McNamara continued to endorse escalation, urging the President in March, 1966 to go along with the military's request to destroy North Vietnam's oil depots ("POL storage") — targets which had been off limits because of their proximity to civilian population centers. McNaughton argued "violently in private" against the move, but to no avail.<sup>100</sup> He did, however, convince McNamara to direct the military to investigate the idea of building a barrier across the DMZ (de-militarized zone). McNaughton's barrier idea, ostensibly aimed at halting infiltration, was actually an attack on Rolling Thunder, which he saw as a major obstacle to negotiations. According to Jerrold Zacharias, one of the officials who worked on the proposal, neither "McNaughton [nor many] of the scientists believed that the system would ever work. They proposed the idea primarily as a pacifier, hoping that it would give the Air Force something else to do besides bomb."<sup>101</sup>

McNaughton also attacked the bombings directly in memoranda to McNamara, telling him in March (even as the Secretary recommended the POL strikes) that the program had "failed to reduce the limit on the capacity of the DRV to aid the VC to a point below VC needs" and could not be expected to do so. Nor did the Assistant Secretary find any evidence "that bombings have made it more likely the DRV will decide to back out of the war." McNaughton, hoping that outside experts might convince McNamara to tell the President to halt the bombing, asked the Secretary to consider an offer from four distinguished scientists to study "technical aspects of the war," especially the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. McNamara agreed to the proposal and the "Jason Summer Study" commenced work in the summer of 1966.<sup>102</sup>

McNaughton's next major effort to encourage reconsideration of U.S. policy came in April 1966 as Buddhist demonstrations gripped South Vietnam. Concerned about the political crisis, various officials, including

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99. Memos, McNamara to the President, December 7, 1965 and January 24, 1966, *PP*, 4:50-51.

100. Halberstam, p. 449.

101. Janes, p. 131.

102. Memo, McNaughton to McNamara, mid-March, 1966, *PP*, 4:112-113.

William Bundy and McNaughton, began examining U.S. alternatives in the event of a serious deterioration. Assigned to study administration options if the GVN fell and was replaced by a "neutralist" government that sought negotiations and a cease-fire with the VC, McNaughton concluded that the U.S. would have to "get out of Vietnam." More important, he took advantage of the policy review to attack a key assumption perpetuating American involvement in the war — the domino theory. McNaughton made a careful "country by country examination" of the impact of U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and, unlike Bill Bundy, concluded that it "would not affect the present line of containment from its Korean anchor down the Japan-Ryukyus-Taiwan-Philippine Island chain." In the words of the Pentagon Papers analyst, McNaughton's memo stood "as a terse and effective refutation of the full-blown domino theory, offering . . . cool-headed alternatives that should have evoked more clear thinking than they apparently did about the irrevocability of our commitment to South Vietnam."<sup>103</sup>

McNaughton's efforts finally began paying off in the summer of 1966. On August 29 the Jason group turned in its report "concluding that bombing had failed in all its specified goals." The report emphasized that McNamara's last recommended escalation, the POL strikes, had not resulted in "any critical denial of essential POL" to the North Vietnamese, chiefly because they had dispersed their storage capability and increased imports from the USSR and China. Even if the strikes continued, the report warned that "it does not seem likely that North Vietnam will have to curtail its higher priority POL-powered activities" such as "infiltration."<sup>104</sup>

The Jason report, the failure of the POL strikes, and McNaughton's dissent (which in a sense had produced the Jason report since he had played an important role in the group's formation) combined to have a powerful effect on McNamara as he considered another troop increase demanded by the Chiefs in late 1966. With Westmoreland reporting "no indications that the enemy has reduced his resolve" or "rate of infiltration," the military wanted to go well beyond the 431,000 approved in November 1965 to a new ceiling of 569,000.<sup>105</sup> Even with the field commander warning that the war could "continue to escalate," the Chiefs simply restated U.S. objectives as they had before: the exten-

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103. McNaughton, "Politics in Vietnam: A 'Worst' Outcome," *PP*, 4:90-91.

104. Jason report, *PP*, 4:111.

105. Cable, Westmoreland to CINCPAC, August 26, 1966, *PP*, 4:326-327. See also the Joint Chiefs of Staff review of CINCPAC's force requirements, September 24, 1966, *PP*, 4:426-427.

sion of GVN control over South Vietnam and the defeat of the Communists.<sup>106</sup>

Clearly frustrated, McNamara refused to endorse the request in another bleak DPM sent to the president on October 14. He stated outright: "I see no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon." The bombing, he reported, had not "significantly affected infiltration or cracked the morale of Hanoi." Still, McNamara did not recommend changing objectives as McNaughton had suggested back in January. Instead, he urged that the U.S. get "into a military posture that we credibly would maintain indefinitely." McNamara therefore recommended stabilizing U.S. force levels at 470,000, building a barrier, stabilizing and then terminating Rolling Thunder "for an indefinite period in connection with covert moves towards peace," and pursuing a "vigorous pacification program."<sup>107</sup> Even while pressing for negotiations, McNamara left U.S. objectives unstated.

Despite the Joint Chiefs' violent objections to McNamara's DPM, especially to its emphasis on curtailing the bombing "as a carrot to induce negotiations" (they preferred to conduct the air campaign "with only those minimum constraints necessary to avoid indiscriminate killing of population"), the President in early November approved the 470,000 ceiling and refused to step up the bombing campaign.<sup>108</sup> McNamara had "won" this bureaucratic battle, but his failure to urge the President to establish new, scaled-down objectives in Vietnam made his "victory" ephemeral. Indeed, in a memo dated November 17, McNamara essentially reaffirmed the objectives of NSAM 288, upon which the JCS had based its troop requests. McNamara stated that the "principal task of US military forces in SVN must be to eliminate the offensive capability of the regular [North Vietnamese] units in order to allow the GVN to counter the guerrilla forces and extend permanent control over areas from which regular units have been cleared."<sup>109</sup> The Secretary's failure to modify NSAM 288 left the military with "an excellent opening for the next round of force requirements discussions."<sup>110</sup>

McNaughton's dissent once again had failed to provoke McNamara into debating the key question of U.S. goals in Vietnam at the highest levels of government. McNamara's sense of loyalty to the President may

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106. CINCPAC Planning Conference, February 12, 1966, *PP*, 4:315. These objectives were reaffirmed on June 18, 1966 when CINCPAC submitted its request to McNamara for extensive new deployments. See *PP*, 4:324-325 and 4:346.

107. Memo, McNamara to the President, October 14, 1966, *PP*, 4:348-355.

108. Memo, Joint Chiefs to McNamara (to the President), October 14, 1966, *PP*, 4:127-128. See also *PP*, 4:356-357.

109. Memo, McNamara to the President, November 17, 1966, *PP*, 4:369.

110. *PP*, 4:365.

have constrained him from bringing up objectives with Johnson. He had, after all, strongly urged Johnson to undertake the massive intervention in 1965 which had committed the administration to victory over the Communists. In addition, McNamara could hardly recommend abandoning stated U.S. aims without admitting "that he had miscalculated," which in turn meant an instant loss of effectiveness with an increasingly isolated and embattled Lyndon Johnson.<sup>111</sup> Finally, McNamara possibly still believed in the American objectives; he "still appreciated the possible long-range consequences of undisguised defeat in Vietnam."<sup>112</sup>

McNamara's actions ultimately split the administration into three camps which debated force levels and the impact of a bombing halt on negotiations, but ignored the question of U.S. objectives. At one extreme stood the military, forever citing NSAM 288 and calling for "substantially" more than the approved 470,000 troops, a call-up of the reserves, "cross border operations" against Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos, increased bombing, and the mining of North Vietnam's ports.<sup>113</sup> The other extreme was represented by McNamara's October 14 DPM which emphasized capping the war and cutting back on the bombing to induce negotiations. Although McNamara also called for "girding, openly, for a longer war," his opposition to the military's plans for escalation made him, and his civilian aides, the top-level "doves" of the administration.<sup>114</sup>

Buffered on both sides by the hawks and doves, President Johnson, supported by William Bundy, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown, and by his White House aides, tried to pursue a "carefully modulated middle course."<sup>115</sup> At first he sided with the restrained approach of McNamara, halting the bombing for seven days in February 1967 in an effort to trade a permanent end to Rolling Thunder for an end to Hanoi's infiltration of men into the South. But when this dove tactic failed (Hanoi reacted by massively resupplying its men in South Vietnam), Johnson shifted back to escalation in the air. At the same time he held the troop level at 470,000 and avoided calling up the reserves for domestic political reasons.

Despite stepping up the air war, Johnson did not give the Chiefs everything they wanted. He only approved strikes, such as those against

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111. Halberstam, p. 748.

112. Trewitt, p. 237.

113. Joint Chiefs to McNamara, "Deployment of Forces to Meet CY Requirements," November 4, 1966, *PP*, 4:361-362. See also memo, Joint Chiefs to McNamara (to the President), October 14, 1966, *PP*, 4:356-358.

114. Memo, McNamara to the President, October 14, 1966, *PP*, 4:348-355. See also the *PP*'s analyst on the split in the administration, *PP*, 4:138-139.

115. *PP*, 4:136.

thermal power plants, which “would incur little risk on counter-escalation” or of provoking domestic doves.<sup>116</sup> He disapproved requests to bomb and blockade Hanoi and Haiphong, even though the military confidently assured him that it had quantitative studies revealing that such measures would shorten the war. Such smug predictions irritated Johnson, who sarcastically replied, “I have one more problem for your computer — will you feed into it how long it will take five hundred thousand angry Americans to climb that White House wall out there and lynch their President if he does something like that?”<sup>117</sup>

In January 1967, in the midst of a debate over the upcoming bombing pause, McNaughton returned to his tactic of focusing attention on U.S. objectives. Responding to a draft NSAM written by the new National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow, which called for a step-up in both ground offenses and in Rolling Thunder, McNaughton floated a memo asserting that the “national commitment of the United States in Vietnam . . . is that the South Vietnamese people shall not be conquered by aggressive force and shall enjoy the inherent right to choose their own way of government.”<sup>118</sup> McNamara apparently endorsed McNaughton’s views but did not fight for them within the government. The Chiefs, however, immediately responded by asserting that the U.S. aimed to establish “an independent nation free of Communist subversion and able to determine its own government and national aspirations.”<sup>119</sup>

The two views had a crucial difference. The Chiefs, as their strategy of heavy bombing and seeking out and destroying the enemy in the South reflected, wanted to defeat the Communists and clear them out of South Vietnam. Given this objective, officially stated in NSAM 288 and essentially reconfirmed by McNamara as recently as late 1966, the military’s strategy, and never-ending calls for more force, made sense. But McNaughton’s objective — preventing the take-over of South Vietnam by force — had *already* been achieved. The U.S. did not need to escalate further, nor did it have to destroy the VC and NVA and drive them out of the country. By accepting McNaughton’s objective, the U.S. could shift its policy from escalation to disengagement.

McNaughton’s assault on NSAM 288 climaxed in the spring of 1967 when he finally convinced McNamara to submit a radical DPM to the President calling for fundamental changes in policy. On May 19, in reaction to a request from General Westmoreland for U.S. force levels

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116. *Ibid.*, 4:148. See also Gelb, p. 158.

117. Gelb, p. 158. See also Gelb, pp. 284-285.

118. Memo, McNaughton to McNamara (to Rostow), January 1967, *PP*, 4:393.

119. Memo, Joint Chief’s response to McNaughton, probably to McNamara, January 1967, *PP*, 4:394.

to increase to 555,000, a figure termed the "minimum essential" to achieve a "stable and independent non-Communist government in South Vietnam," McNamara forwarded a DPM to Johnson written by McNaughton which began by attacking both Rolling Thunder and the case for more escalation. McNaughton wrote that he found "no sign that the bombing has reduced Hanoi's will to resist or her ability to ship the necessary supplies south," and pointed out that there was no assurance that raising force levels to 665,000, Westmoreland's "optimum" number, would end the war "in less than two years and no assurance that they will end it in three, or five, years." McNaughton also argued that going to 665,000, which required calling up the reserves, would lead to "irresistible domestic pressures . . . to 'take the wraps off the men in the field.'" He believed, he wrote, that as U.S. losses rose and "desired results" remained unachieved, at some point would come the suggestion that the U.S. employ "tactical nuclear and area-denial radiological-bacteriological-chemical weapons."<sup>120</sup>

Having stated his case against escalation, McNaughton moved on to the heart of his paper, namely the "importance of nailing down and understanding the implications of our limited objectives." He urged the President to issue a NSAM making clear the exact U.S. commitment in Vietnam, which McNaughton described as allowing the people of South Vietnam "to determine their own future." This commitment ceased if South Vietnam ceased to "help itself." McNaughton added that the U.S. did not seek "to ensure that a particular person or group remains in power, nor that the power runs to every corner of the land." The U.S. did not "insist that the independent South Vietnam remain separate from North Vietnam" nor that the "self-chosen government is non-Communist." McNaughton also urged that the President firmly impose a definitive ceiling of about 500,000 troops and cut back the bombing campaign to targets south of the 20th parallel. Finally, he recommended that the administration "declare that we have already either denied or offset the North Vietnamese intervention and that after the September elections in Vietnam we will have achieved success." The administration could then pressure the South "to start the business of producing a full-spectrum government in South Vietnam."<sup>121</sup>

The Chiefs reacted vehemently against McNaughton's memo, which in effect called for halting escalation and beginning disengagement under the guise of "success." They stressed that his proposals were not "consis-

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120. Memo, McNamara (McNaughton) to the President, May 19, 1967, *PP*, 4:169-177. For a more complete version, see *PP*, 4:477-489.

121. *Ibid.*



tent with NSAM 288 or with the explicit public statements of U.S. policy and objectives." They also recommended, too late, that the DPM "not be forwarded to the President."<sup>122</sup> William Bundy basically supported the Chiefs, taking "pointed issue with the DPM's reformulation of U.S. objectives" and emphasizing that "Asians would quite literally be appalled . . . if we were to settle for an illusory peace that produced Hanoi control over all Viet-Nam in short order."<sup>123</sup> The State Department responded to the DPM as well. Nicholas Katzenbach, who had replaced Ball as Under Secretary in late 1966, agreed with "the arguments for limited objectives."

Unfortunately, the President agreed with Bundy.<sup>124</sup> He did not act on the DPM's recommendations, telling an aide as he handed him the proposals, "You've never seen such a lot of shit."<sup>125</sup> McNamara, sensing the "cool Presidential reaction," opted to focus his efforts, as he had in late 1966, on limiting the amount of Westmoreland's troop request, not on changing U.S. objectives.<sup>126</sup>

McNaughton's dissent succeeded in at least provoking some debate concerning U.S. aims in Vietnam, but a debate which did not include Secretary McNamara, who simply could not or would not make an all-out fight for any major change in policy. McNamara's predicament had changed little from that of late 1966. He felt disillusioned with the war but loyal to Lyndon Johnson, frustrated though fearful of the consequences of defeat, and ultimately, appalled at the carnage but aware that breaking sharply with official policy meant a loss of influence within the administration.<sup>127</sup>

McNamara's awkward position, a close friend recalled, had him "in torment by the spring of 1967."<sup>128</sup> As his anguish deepened, his behavior became "increasingly erratic."<sup>129</sup> To avoid alienating the President, for example, he did not push hard for McNaughton's May 19 DPM. But within a few weeks, in August, McNamara threw away what remained of his effectiveness, not in an effort to change U.S. objectives in Vietnam but in a public break with the Chiefs over Rolling Thunder, which particularly offended the Secretary since it stood as an obstacle to negotiations and as a clear failure on the basis of cost-effectiveness. His tactics had little positive impact on Johnson, who publicly denied that any

122. Memo, Joint Chiefs to McNamara, June 1, 1967, *PP*, 4:178-180. See also *PP*, 4:498-500.

123. Memo, William Bundy to State and Defense, May 30, 1967, *PP*, 4:181-183.

124. Memo, Katzenbach to Cyrus Vance, June 8, 1967, *PP* 4:183.

125. Halberstam, p. 784.

126. *PP*, 4:183.

127. Trewhitt, pp. 237-238.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

129. Halberstam, p. 769.

differences existed among his advisors and then quickly moved to ease McNamara out of the administration.<sup>130</sup>

McNaughton failed in his goal of changing U.S. objectives in Vietnam not because the "effectiveness trap" crippled his dissent, but because he never got any effective help from the only man in the government who could lobby at the highest level for his views. For his dissent to have had any chance of success, McNaughton needed both to convert McNamara from a proponent of escalation and NSAM 288 into an advocate of disengagement, and also, to convince the Secretary that the best way to achieve change lay in fighting hard for vastly scaled-down U.S. goals. Though McNaughton did eventually get McNamara to see the need for radical changes in his own policy, he could not remove the bureaucratic dilemmas confronting his chief nor could he control how McNamara would respond to them. McNaughton's dependence on someone else's efforts for his views to prevail, the major obstacle faced by any subordinate dissenter, ultimately doomed his efforts to alter U.S. objectives in Vietnam. Still, his dissent did have an impact: he provoked debate that split the Johnson Administration and by influencing McNamara he contributed to the limitation of U.S. escalation in Vietnam.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: PERSONAL CONVICTIONS AND PUBLIC POWER

Of the two dissenters, McNaughton performed the better balancing act on the tightrope between power and dissent. Ball tended to make critical errors at crucial moments, allowing himself to be put on the defensive in key meetings and pursuing strategies such as advocating U.S. withdrawal even after such tactics had failed and could not be expected to succeed. Consequently, he underscored his isolation among the principals and simply reinforced the consensus against his views. In contrast, McNaughton consistently chose to define carefully limited political objectives which would allow the U.S. to cease escalation and begin disengaging from Vietnam. By minimizing rather than bluntly and explicitly rejecting stated U.S. aims, he managed to help split the administration and provoke real debate, thereby opening up the possibility of a change in policy.

When that change went unrealized, as it did for both McNaughton and Ball, each dissenter still faced two final "tactical" decisions. First, they had to decide if further effort inside the government was futile and the time had come to resign. If so, the issue became either to leave quietly or to play out dissent to its logical conclusion and make the

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130. *PP*, 4:199-205. See also Halberstam, pp. 783-784.

resignation a protest against the war. Neither Ball nor McNaughton chose the latter option, even though each came to believe that bureaucratic maneuvering had outlived its usefulness. Ball revealed his disillusionment with dissent by leaving the government quietly in late 1966. McNaughton, in turn, decided shortly before his death in a tragic plane accident in July 1967 to leave his job at ISA. While he planned to stay in the government, his new position as Secretary of the Navy had little to do with Vietnam decision-making. Like Ball, McNaughton left his post quietly. Like Ball, he opted for silence because he believed it "important not to be disloyal to the war effort" while Americans died fighting. He felt that a vocal resignation would do relatively little good, and in the final analysis, he wanted to remain a part of the foreign policy establishment.<sup>131</sup>

On the surface such logic appears reasonable. But it is less so when one realizes the depth of Ball's and McNaughton's feelings about the war. Even in 1965, before the conflict's domestic impact became apparent, Ball characterized intervention in Vietnam as nothing less than a "catastrophic error" leading to "humiliation" for the U.S.<sup>132</sup> Using even more revealing language, a "deeply troubled" and "physically exhausted" John McNaughton set down his views two months before he died.<sup>133</sup> He wrote to McNamara that the war had so alienated the American public from its own government that people "widely and strongly held that 'the Establishment' is out of its mind." The feeling, he stated, "is that we are trying to impose some US image on distant peoples we cannot understand (anymore than we can the younger generation here at home), and that we are carrying the thing to absurd lengths." Bringing to mind America's most savage civil conflict, McNaughton then added: "Related to this feeling is the increased polarization that is taking place in the United States with the seeds of the worst split in our people in more than a century."<sup>134</sup>

Clearly, McNaughton and Ball saw the war not as just another "ineffective policy" but as a calamity of historic proportions, highly destructive to the national interest. Given these deeply held convictions, it is difficult to understand their assertion that speaking out against it in public would be "disloyal". Their argument that resigning vocally was not worth the risks since it might not produce positive results sounds equally dubious. One can just as easily argue that speaking out might have had benefits,

131. Janes, p. 8. For Ball's views on resignation, see Ball, pp. 430-433.

132. Memo, Ball to President Johnson, June 18, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 87; memo, Ball to President Johnson, July 1, 1965, quoted in Berman, p. 89.

133. Townsend Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention*, (New York: David McKay, 1970), p. 51.

134. Memo, McNaughton to McNamara, May 6, 1967, PP, 4:479.

such as the conversion of a wavering hawk Senator or increased pressure on Johnson to cap the war. While there was a risk that Johnson might react by re-asserting the policy of escalation, such a risk already existed with domestic dissent growing. In any event, both men had already taken similar risks inside the government, had decided that further dissent "from within" was futile, and still wanted to change policy.

The question therefore remains: why did they not try dissent "from without"? Their arguments about "loyalty" and "effectiveness" seem strained, sounding more like rationalizations than reasons. The only answer left is Ball's and McNaughton's desire to remain part of the foreign policy "club". The "club" had a rule that disagreements among top officials be kept private. Violating that code meant sacrificing any chances one had for future appointment to a high-level post.<sup>135</sup> Careerism ultimately carried the day for Ball and McNaughton. In a time of great crisis, they opted for power, or at least the hope of it, over their beliefs. Of course, one can still admire their efforts inside the government to turn around a policy one writer has characterized as "the worst tragedy to befall this country since the Civil War."<sup>136</sup> But the admiration is clouded by disappointment.

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135. Janes, p. 8.

136. Halberstam, p. 810.