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Taking Charge of Vietnam Policy

In some respects, McNamara became the victim of his own success. Although he had always been on the sidelines of the Special Group (CI)'s work, he was made responsible for implementing the administration's counterinsurgency agenda in its first major test case, South Vietnam. The administration's interest in counterinsurgency provided the intellectual bedrock for the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN), the administration's plan to disengage from the country. In keeping with McNamara's notions of civilian control of policy-making, the plan was predicated on a strategy emanating from civilian advisors primarily at the State Department, and he limited his role to aligning military resources to best serve the defined strategy. He did not comment on the strategy's substance but focused instead on the organizational and military requirements required to meet its objectives. His enthusiasm for the strategy was rooted in the fact that it dovetailed with and complemented his own managerial priorities at the Defense Department.

Vietnam seemed a perfect place for the Kennedy administration to "take a stand" and test its abilities to wage limited wars in the developing world. As General Taylor enthusiastically wrote, "A victory for us would prove that our people can live in the village with Asians and help them. That underdeveloped nations can defeat 'wars of liberation' with our help, strike a telling blow to the mystique of the 'wave of the future.'"[1] Many historians remember the Kennedy administration's involvement in Vietnam against this militant and hopeful backdrop. They have depicted a linear and uninterrupted upward trajectory toward a deepening United States' commitment and increasing number of troops that culminated in the full-scale "American War" in Vietnam. However, the trends in

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increasing troop numbers belie the fact that a period of planning for withdrawal in 1962–1963 punctuated this otherwise steady trajectory and that McNamara was the leading force behind those plans.

In the spring of 1962, after months of disorder in the field and in Washington, the Defense Department finally "zeroed in" on Vietnam policy just as it had already done on many of the administration's other more complex problems. Although this initially seemed to presage a deeper and more militarized presence in Vietnam, the administration instead turned to a policy of disengagement. In July 1962, McNamara formally instructed the JCS to draft what became known as the CPSVN and which posited as its goal a relatively swift US withdrawal by 1965. As the CPSVN emerged as the most effective tool for a general "winding down"[2] of the in-country presence and became embedded in the OSD's budgetary calendar, it created a momentum and imperatives of its own.

The October 1963 NSC meetings, which took place after Taylor and McNamara's trip to Vietnam, enshrined the CPSVN in a public and administration-wide policy of disengagement from Vietnam. The transcripts of the October NSC meetings reveal the motivations of the various decision-makers in accepting the policy and in making it public. Together with McNamara's trip notes, the transcripts also shed particular light on his role in pushing for withdrawal.

McNamara's understanding of where the Defense Department stood in relation to other agencies in government – namely as an implementing rather than a policy-setting office – together with his own short-term bureaucratic priorities explain his support for withdrawal. His approach was more mechanistic than visionary: he implemented rather than articulated strategy and was more concerned with the economic and budgetary issues than any grand strategy per se. Historians have largely ignored the period in part, perhaps, because it fits poorly with the conventional view of McNamara as one of the most prominent and explicitly hawkish architects of the war.

Roger Hilsman, a former colleague and main strategist for Vietnam in the State Department, perhaps overstated McNamara's intelligence but not his forcefulness in describing how McNamara had the "imagination to push views even farther down the line of their logical development, and ... the will for strong leadership."[3] In the months leading up to McNamara's instructions to the JCS to draft the withdrawal plans, he received a number of overlapping views on Vietnam from Kennedy and his counterinsurgency advisors. Specifically, the advisors felt that US policy in Vietnam had become excessively reliant on military force.

Historians have long debated "Kennedy's withdrawal plans." When they accept that these plans were more than contingency plans or a public relations stunt, they tend to assume that the plans flowed from President Kennedy's vision. John Newman, for instance, has written about secret understandings and meetings where President Kennedy instructed McNamara to begin plans to withdraw after he realized that military advisors in the field had deceived him.[4] However, when asked about this, McNamara said he had "absolutely no recollection of any such conversation" and insisted that *he* initiated the planning rather than the President.[5] Ultimately, the decisions to move toward a policy of disengagement on Vietnam were largely above board and fit neatly with McNamara's own bureaucratic priorities at the OSD.

Also, just as the war itself later came to be known as "McNamara's war," the withdrawal plans were also closely associated with McNamara. In Washington, in 1963, they were known as "his" plans.[6] Furthermore, just as President Johnson played a key role in the branding of the war as "McNamara's," and to some extent hid behind his Secretary of Defense, Kennedy too let McNamara become the public face for plans with which he was at least complicit.

During the crucial October 2–3, 1963, meetings where McNamara and Taylor's report from Vietnam was discussed and after which his disengagement plans were publicized and agreed on as administration policy, President Kennedy asked McNamara a number of probing questions as if he was discovering the material for the first time. However, they had met alone for two hours on the morning of October 2, 1963, following McNamara's return from Vietnam to review the draft report.[7] After meeting with the President, McNamara had spent about two hours with William Bundy, finalizing the report in time for the NSC meeting in the late afternoon. Given the importance of "loyalty" in McNamara's understanding of his job, he would most likely not have supported such a high-profile policy if it did not have presidential approval.

Also, it was not unlike McNamara to change the policy he defended after meeting with the President, arguing the exact opposite of what he privately or at least initially supported. McNamara might have shifted from being relatively aggressive on Vietnam to being the leading advocate for disengagement because he wanted to loyally represent the President's secret views. However, his own priorities at the OSD and the fact that, until 1962, he and many in the administration had not really given Vietnam their full attention also explain his change.

Although Kennedy had created a Task Force on Vietnam in his first month in office,[8] the administration turned its attention there only in the spring of 1961. Before this time, the administration's main focus in Southeast Asia had been Laos, a candidate for military intervention until Kennedy settled on negotiations and eventually neutralization. However, both Kennedy and McNamara rejected French President Charles de Gaulle's and later Senator Michael Mansfield's idea that Vietnam should be neutralized as well.[9]

With Vietnam coming to the fore, in May 1961, Kennedy dispatched his Vice President to reassure South Vietnamese President Diem and to assess the regime's ability to withstand an intensifying Communist insurgency. On his return, Johnson expressed alarm at the situation but applauded Diem's leadership qualities – calling him the "Churchill of Asia" – and proposed that with greater US support, he could provide a "pole of attraction for the countries of Southeast Asia."[10] Kennedy greeted Johnson's suggestion that intervention was needed "with a great deal of impatience" even while he expanded US assistance to Vietnam.[11] At the time, McNamara supported robust backing of the Diem regime and explained to the House of Representative's Committee on Foreign Affairs, "You ask how much effort should we put in to stem the flow and march of Communism in that area and I would reply whatever effort is required."[12]

To some extent, McNamara's strong statements were a product of the administration's lack of strategy for Vietnam. The Vietnam problem had not preoccupied the administration and so it had chosen instead to follow the path of least immediate resistance, namely to continue to define the conflict in Vietnam in terms it had inherited from Eisenhower.[13] The commitment to President Diem and South Vietnam's independence went unquestioned, and, just as Eisenhower had described in his landmark "domino theory" speech, the conflict was defined principally as one of Communist aggression.[14]

However, even as US assistance expanded, the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate. Within the administration, a consensus was emerging that the Defense Department should prepare for a more active military role for the United States. In this context, in November 1961, Kennedy sent two more advisors to Vietnam: Maxwell Taylor, who was then still the President's military advisor, and Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy's deputy at the NSC and a noted economist and modernization theorist. Kennedy's instructions for them reflected the administration's ambivalence over Vietnam: on the one hand, he asked them to consider

"how we organize the execution of this program" while also asking "is the US commitment to prevent the fall of South Vietnam to Communism a public act or an internal policy decision of the US Government?"[15] In other words, the trip's objective was two-fold: to ascertain whether the administration should commit itself to the fate of South Vietnam and, separately, what it could do in either scenario to improve the situation on the ground.

From the outset, Kennedy and Sorensen expressed reservations over a stronger military role. Sorensen wrote that "we need to think" before sending combat troops, including about "whether US troops can accomplish much more in the mud and the mountains than Vietnamese troops (who could be better trained, supported and directed)."[16] Similarly, Taylor noted that Kennedy's instructions were that he "should bear in mind that the initial responsibility of the effective maintenance of the independence of South Vietnam rested with the people and the government of that country. This was not something that the United States should take over and deal with unilaterally."[17]

Despite this note of caution, Taylor and Rostow returned from Vietnam with a host of recommendations for improving and expanding the assistance program, including replacing Ambassador Frederick Nolting with someone "like [veteran diplomat Averell] Harriman," expanding the defoliation program, deploying more air support and, crucially, introducing troops using the cover of floods that had been battering the country.[18] The Commander of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Lt. General Lionel C. McGarr in Vietnam and the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Command (CINCPAC) Admiral Harry D. Felt had first suggested the floods as "excellent opportunity to minimize adverse publicity" for introducing troops.[19] At the same time, knowing the President's reservations, Taylor reassured Kennedy that "this force is not proposed to clear the jungles and forests of VC [Viet Cong] guerrilla. That should be the primary task of the armed forces of Vietnam from which they should be specifically organized, trained and stiffened with ample advisors down to the battalion level."[20]

Although McGeorge Bundy had warned Taylor not to share his views publicly, "especially those relating to US forces,"[21] he and others in the administration were receptive to the idea of troops. Bundy himself told the President, "I believe we should commit limited US combat units, if necessary for military purposes (not for morale) to help South Vietnam," and agreed with Rusk and McNamara that a "military man" rather than a civilian ambassador should be put in charge of the country team.[22]

The State Department agreed. Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson wrote that the government should "take the decision to commit ourselves to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam" knowing that the introduction of "US and other SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] forces may be necessary to achieve that objective."[23]

McNamara initially supported the conclusions of the report and suggested that the administration should send a "strong signal to the other side," even if introducing troops threatened to create greater commitments down the road. He even estimated that this could balloon into as many as 205,000 troops.[24] However, by November 11, he made a revealing volte-face and instead agreed with the President that troops should be only a last resort.[25] Where some see a "vacillation"[26] on McNamara's part, it is more likely, as the *Pentagon Papers* have suggested, that presidential instructions or nudging explain his change of opinion. McNamara turned around in order to defend the President's view or at least a view Kennedy wanted represented within the bureaucracy.[27] Nitze's notes from the meeting where the Taylor report was discussed are informative. In them, Nitze wrote that Kennedy commented, "Don't say we commit. Don't want to put troops in."[28]

In the months that followed, and as he assumed a leadership role on Vietnam policy, McNamara pushed this view more aggressively throughout the bureaucracy. By December 1961, he was redacting Kennedy's letters to Diem to ensure that no open-ended commitment was provided for the remainder of the Kennedy administration. For example, a key line that promised "the needs of your embattled nation will be met" was deleted.[29]

As he had done within the OSD, McNamara took charge by also changing organizational structures and the people that staffed them. Some of the staff changes were under his control; others were part of a broader administration reshuffle. Two advisors were sidelined because they were considered to be too close to the Diem regime and associated to past, failing policies. The first was Edward Lansdale, a former OSS officer in Vietnam and friend of Diem's who had been active on the Task Force on Vietnam. He was also eclipsed because McNamara "did not like him."[30] The second was Ambassador Nolting, who was sidelined before Henry Cabot Lodge eventually replaced him in 1963.[31]

Lodge was an interesting choice as he had been Kennedy's political opponent for the Massachusetts Senate seat in 1952 and again as vice presidential candidate on the Nixon ticket in 1960. Although the administration insisted that Lodge's appointment did "not have political

significance" and that Rusk alone had made the decision, neither is likely.[32] McGeorge Bundy's notes from a later meeting when problems in Vietnam became particularly acute suggest that Lodge provided useful political cover against Republican criticism: "put it on Lodge," Bundy wrote and underlined several times.[33]

Moreover, in November 1961, in a government reshuffle dubbed the "Thanksgiving Massacre," key hawks were removed from positions of influence on Vietnam as the administration moved to "bring more people who understand the Kennedy policies and believe in them."[34] Walt Rostow, the Deputy National Security Advisor, who had sparked a governmental debate by proposing the introduction of ground troops to Vietnam, became head of the State Department's Policy Planning Council.[35] At the CIA, John McCone replaced Allen Dulles and immediately worked on improving cooperation with the OSD. Averell Harriman, who as Ambassador at Large had overseen negotiations on Laos, became Assistant Secretary for the Far East. Later, Arthur Schlesinger described how the notoriously overpowering and impatient Harriman "gave Far Eastern policy a coherence and force it had not had for years [and] rapidly became the particular champion of the New Frontier within the State Department."[36]

On the military side, things also changed rapidly. First, the Taylor–Rostow report provided added impetus to McNamara's support for creating a command rather than the MAAG, a more technical and informal arrangement, that currently existed. Acting on other recommendations in the report, McNamara increased assistance programs including Project Farm Gate, which aimed to use air power for guerrilla warfare including through defoliation. Second, Rostow added to growing criticism of McGarr's ability to manage the mounting US presence. He wrote to President Kennedy that he "believe[d] that all the choppers and other gadgetry we can supply South Vietnam will not buy time and render their resources effective if we do not get a first class man out there to replace McGarr."[37] By February 1962, the MAAG and McGarr had been replaced with the Military Assistance Command – Vietnam (MACV) led by General Paul Harkins, a Maxwell Taylor protégé. McNamara pitched Harkins to Kennedy arguing that the "JCS consider him an imaginative officer, fully qualified to fill what I consider to be the most difficult job in the US Army."[38]

Kennedy's civilian advisors understood the risk inherent in creating MACV with a designated four-star general at its helm and in incrementally strengthening its powers. With troop numbers rising from an early

low of 3,000 in 1961 to more than 12,000 by 1962, the organizational change could be perceived, as Admiral Felt described it, as a "theater buildup for the entire Southeast Asia."[39] Civilian advisors worried that military commanders might view the creation of MACV as a concession to their plans to "be ready for whatever action they may decide it necessary to take."[40] The embassy in Saigon warned that "this is essentially a political job in the broadest sense, and should be organized and run as such" and cautioned that the "vigor in the Department of Defense in this situation needs to be matched by equal vigor in the non-military aspects if the proper proportions are to be maintained in our total effort there."[41]

The civilian advisors were also concerned that by centralizing authority under MACV, US strategy in Vietnam might shift toward a conventional military position. In April 1962, for instance, Robert Komer wrote to McGeorge Bundy and Taylor questioning whether the Defense Department was well suited to assume responsibility for policing functions and counseled that the United States should "guard against over-militarizing our counterinsurgency effort." He added that the military had "no greater expertise than cops recruited by [US]AID/CIA, indeed less," and that putting these activities under DOD control "risk[ed] the same thing that occurred in [US]AID – the program is so small compared to the main function of the agency that it gets lost in the wash." He concluded, "We don't want a bunch of colonels running programs in which they have no particular expertise."[42] Rufus Phillips, the head of USAID in Saigon, who was also a former CIA official in the country, had in fact threatened to resign over these concerns: he worried that DOD command produced inefficiencies, delays and impeded the necessary flexibility for counterinsurgency.[43]

However, by January 1962, it was the JCS, not McNamara, who were encouraging the introduction of ground troops and a more conventional reading of the conflict in Vietnam. The JCS argued for "all actions necessary to defeat communist aggression" and warned that losing South Vietnam could lead to "communist domination of all of the Southeast Asian mainland" and that "SEATO [would] cease to exist." Crucially, whereas he had been receptive to ground troops requests in the past, McNamara now forwarded the recommendations to the President with a cover letter that said that he was "not prepared to endorse" it.[44] McNamara sounded more like Komer and Phillips. In a speech delivered in February 1962, as MACV was being established, he struck a note of caution, saying, "Combating guerrilla warfare demands more in ingenuity than in money or manpower."[45]

By early 1962, McNamara's attention turned to counterinsurgency strategies coming from the field and Washington that promised to achieve the two objectives that President Kennedy had laid out after the Taylor–Rostow report, namely limiting the US government's commitment to South Vietnam and avoiding the introduction of ground troops. As the number of troops grew, it became all the more urgent to define what exactly these troops could or could not do and what their exact objective was; in other words, to develop a strategy.

Concurrently, the administration matured in its organizational arrangements for counterinsurgency, most notably with the creation of the Special Group (CI). In its first month of existence, the Special Group received a document that Hilsman had drafted, entitled the "Strategic Concept for South Vietnam." The paper was specifically designed to produce a counterinsurgency strategy for Vietnam as an alternative to the application of military force. Hilsman, a West Point–educated counterinsurgency expert, had been with the OSS behind enemy lines in Burma and later had become a speechwriter for Senator Kennedy. Together with Harriman, his mentor, who had been promoted with the "Thanksgiving Massacre," Hilsman tried to regain State control of Vietnam policy in the early months of 1962.

At the OSD, ISA replaced Gilpatric in coordinating Vietnam policy and eventually oversaw each successive draft of the CPSVN from 1962 to 1963. From McNamara's bureaucratic vantage point, the administration's Vietnam policies were now beginning to work as they should: strategic guidance was coming from the State Department and the White House, and ISA was organizing requisite defense tools. However, since ISA was also responsible for the department's aid program, economic and budgetary considerations inevitably colored their decisions.

All in all, 1962 was a boom time for counterinsurgency intellectuals in Washington. Not only had they sparked the President's interest, but on Vietnam, they found an unlikely ally in Secretary McNamara. He embraced the opportunity to test new tools and techniques for fighting limited wars in the developing world not least because they seemed to provide an economical alternative to conventional deployments. On the one hand, the counterinsurgency experts were concerned about the militarization of field operations. On the other, McNamara was concerned about the ballooning costs of Vietnam operations. Both sets of concerns coalesced in the spring of 1962 and were addressed in the CPSVN that promised to refocus and reduce the US mission in Vietnam.

McNamara's calendar provides insight into the people who may have influenced his understanding of counterinsurgency theory. At the start of April 1962, he met with Robert Thompson twice – one meeting lasted five hours and another for three hours, an unusually long time for someone who customarily scheduled, at most, forty minutes for his meetings.[46] Thompson, a British counterinsurgency expert with experience suppressing the Malayan insurgency, advised the US government on its policies in Vietnam through the British Advisory Mission in Vietnam (BRIAM). He became increasingly prominent as he bypassed US officials in the field and consulted closely with both the Task Force on Vietnam and with Robert McNamara directly. McNamara described Thompson as "somewhat of a legend,"[47] while the British Ambassador to Washington David Ormsby-Gore, who was also an old friend of Kennedy's, noted "how much weight the President attached to Mr. Thompson's views upon the situation in Viet Nam."[48]

In the spring of 1962, as Hilsman presented his "Strategic Concept," Thompson produced his own "Delta Pacification Plan." In it, he stressed the need to have "largely civilian rather than military" advisors at the local level and a greater focus on development.[49] For Hilsman, the plans were explicitly designed to short-circuit what he saw as the militarization of the administration's Vietnam policy. For much of 1962, the administration refined its counterinsurgency strategies, and in July 1962, McNamara began setting an end date for winding down the Defense Department's presence in Vietnam altogether.

As Hilsman noted in a footnote to his plan for South Vietnam, which went through a number of versions between January and March 1962, "The basic approach followed in this plan was developed by Mr. R.G.K. Thompson." The *Pentagon Papers* go further and describe his report as "an unabashed restatement of most of Thompson's major points toward which President Kennedy had, not incidentally, already expressed a favorable disposition."[50] The Foreign Office came to a similar conclusion, noting first that Hilsman's "basic concept owes a great deal to Thompson, with whom he had a long talk while in Saigon" and, second, that the reason McNamara did not much care for Hilsman was that he was "not the most modest of men and is inclined to overrate his own abilities."[51]

However, McNamara paid attention to Thompson as well as to Bernard Fall, another source of inspiration for Hilsman and one of the few people McNamara acknowledged had "educated" him on Vietnam. According to McNamara, Fall was "the best" journalist in South Vietnam.[52] In an anonymous article published in March 1962 that Hilsman

widely circulated in the State and Defense Departments, Fall complained that the "United States seeks to win the struggle by mechanical means (helicopters and weed killers) forgetting all over again that a revolutionary war can be won only if the little people in the villages and the hills can be persuaded that they have a stake in fighting on our side."[53]

At their core, Thompson's "Delta Pacification Plan" and Hilsman's "Strategic Concept" made similar recommendations although they diverged on emphasis: Hilsman focused relatively more on civic action and security, while Thompson emphasized strengthening political and administrative structures.[54] Still, they found common ground in the recommendation that South Vietnamese forces, and their American assistants, should focus on guerrilla rather than conventional tactics and push the strategic hamlets program.

In March 1962, with great fanfare, Diem launched Operation Sunrise with the strategic hamlets program at its core. As the "cornerstone" of the counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam, the strategic hamlets program was designed to produce secure villages where peasants would be separated from the Vietcong by applying the "oil spot" theory of expanding security on the basis of military operations designed to "clear and hold."[55] The gist of "clear and hold" was that military forces should secure an area and extend the "safe" area outward rather than the alternative "search and destroy," which relied on targeted and temporary military engagements.[56] In practice, the strategic hamlets program became a loosely defined rubric where many different agencies dumped their programs.

Both Hilsman and Thompson foresaw some of the main problems that arose when theories are translated into practice. First and foremost, they complained about the lack of civilian-military coordination in Vietnam, a prerequisite for a successful counterinsurgency strategy.[57] Second, Hilsman argued that American military culture was incompatible with the program in Vietnam, and the military's role should therefore be reduced. "MAAG's Jungle Jim and military forces tend to follow tactics more appropriate to conventional, World War II situations than to guerrilla warfare," he wrote.[58] He later explained, "My major policy was to get MACV out of business, that Americans couldn't do anything but advise Diem. This is what it finally came down to."[59]

By the summer of 1962, the administration's counterinsurgency strategies seemed on track in Vietnam, and Michael Forrestal from the NSC staff wrote to Kennedy, "While we cannot yet sit back in the confidence that the job is well in hand, nevertheless it does appear that we have

finally developed a series of techniques which, if properly applied, do seem to produce results."[60] However, by December, after a flurry of official visits to Vietnam, Forrestal and Hilsman expressed concern over confusion in the field. In their trip report, they asked, "Is there a plan? This answer is no. There are five or six plans many of which are competing. There is consequently great confusion."[61] As a result, at his American advisors' behest, by the end of the year, Diem consolidated existing plans into a National Campaign Plan (NCP) that matched the CPSVN timetable.

Overall, as the administration moved into 1963, the signs were not good. The new year began with a humiliating defeat for the South Vietnamese forces in Ap Bac. Questions were raised about field reporting, about the ability of the South Vietnamese to fight despite all the assistance they had received and also about the team assembled on the field. Despite these concerns, McNamara instructed the JCS to accelerate the CPSVN timetable for the handover of responsibilities to the South Vietnamese. In the spring of 1963, things got worse as the Catholic Diem regime began a violent crackdown against the Buddhist community, provoking nationwide unrest as well as an angry backlash in the United States. Congressional figures began to describe the country as a "quasi-fascist" state as the Diem regime remained entirely unresponsive to the Kennedy administration's requests for political reform.[62] One of the earliest emblematic images of the Vietnam conflict emerged at this time: the "Buddhist crisis" was seared into the collective consciousness of Americans when a monk set himself on fire in a sign of protest. In May 1962, against this backdrop of increasing tension, McNamara requested and received his second draft of the CPSVN, which proposed an even shorter time frame for withdrawal.

Instead of throwing McNamara's plans off-course, the events in South Vietnam seemed to strengthen his determination to continue to centralize programs and authority under the Defense Department and to move forward with the CPSVN. By July 1963, MACV either ran or coordinated virtually all the programs in South Vietnam. In addition, McNamara moved even more aggressively to make clear that the end goals were to help the South Vietnamese fight *their* war and to insist that it was an insurgency rather than a full-scale conventional war. The overarching objective of each version of the CPSVN and the public announcement in October 1963 was to "prepare the Vietnamese to assume full responsibility by December 1965" with a "withdrawal of all US special assistance units and personnel by that date."[63]

What exactly the South Vietnamese took "full responsibility" for evolved. Earlier drafts recognized a limited external threat in addition to an insurgency; later drafts identified the threat of an insurgency alone. Defining the conflict only as an insurgency had implications for troop planning of US and South Vietnamese forces. As long as the conflict in Vietnam was defined as a conventional engagement where the United States had a major responsibility, engagement was inherently open-ended and produced risks of escalation as battlefield failures led to continued demands for ever-growing force deployments. By setting out clear parameters in October 1963 that the peak of US strength had now been met,[64] the CPSVN sought both to put a break on the escalatory momentum and to halt continued requests for troop strength increases in Vietnam.

Ultimately, Hilsman's greatest ally, whether by design or chance, was McNamara. Whether or not McNamara had concluded that US military culture was "incompatible" with the situation in Vietnam, as Hilsman had done, is not clear. What is clear is that he was concerned with the military's unwillingness to break out of traditional frameworks, that on Vietnam, as in other areas of defense policy, he felt a large doctrinal gap between civilian and military advisors, and as a result, he became increasingly involved in dictating strategy, an area that was traditionally reserved for military commanders.

For instance, in January 1962, as if to confirm Hilsman's fears, the Chiefs reported to the President that "any war in the Southeast Asia mainland will be a peninsula and island-type of campaign – a mode of warfare in which all the elements of the Armed Forces of the United States have gained a wealth of experience and in which we have excelled both in World War II and in Korea."[65] Again, in March 1962, LeMay disregarded McNamara's instructions to focus on clear-and-hold operations and strategic hamlets, dismissing them as "too defensive" and requesting instead that the Air Force be granted fighter jets.[66]

Similarly, in November 1962, US Army Chief of Staff Earle "Bus" Wheeler made a speech in which he noted: "It is fashionable in some quarters to say the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political or economic, rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military."[67] This could not have been more at odds with the official administration policy and, as a result, spurred a flurry of angry memos among Kennedy's advisors, with Hilsman leading the charge.[68] Wheeler was evidently slapped on the wrist for his speech because within months, on a visit to Vietnam, he made a completely different statement

and emphasized that "military actions would not be enough to win the war" and the centrality of the strategic hamlets program to this end.[69]

Faced with the Chiefs' "blinkered pursuit of conventional objectives,"[70] McNamara regularly reminded them and Admiral Felt that they were dealing with subversion and not the conventional military threats that they felt prepared to handle.[71] This frustrating back-and-forth troubled Kennedy, who "privately complained that everybody . . . seemed to be forgetting that our role in Vietnam should be political rather than military."[72] Moreover, although the CPSVN specifically indicated that operations should focus on "clear and hold," the services dragged their feet. Hilsman or one of his colleagues at INR angrily annotated one memo from CINCPAC in February 1963 with the following comment: "The number of clear and hold operations for 1962 would not exceed (and probably less than) 15, while the number of search and release operations for last year would probably exceed 100!!"[73]

Aside from these conceptual differences, McNamara was also concerned that bureaucratic divisions along service and civilian-military lines were hampering the administration's strategy in Vietnam. As Thompson and Hilsman observed, the success of the strategy depended on successful inter-agency cooperation. In May 1962, one report from the field read: "we have too many cooks busy spoiling the broth – there are military agencies: Army, Air Force and Navy as well as State Department and other civilian groups all in the area: USIA, CIA, [US]AID, etc. There is no unified command and no comprehensive planning."[74] In his October 1963 report, McNamara concluded that MACV's principal objective of producing a better-coordinated policy on the ground was not succeeding. Early hopes about the "unparalleled opportunities" to create a template of "functioning inter-agency and international effort" in Vietnam that could "serve as guidance in other free world struggles"[75] floundered on the fact that not even Ambassador Lodge and General Harkins, who had been good friends back in Massachusetts, could successfully cooperate. By November 1963, a White House meeting concluded that "there is no country team in Vietnam at the present time in any real sense."[76]

Service rivalries also began to emerge. In particular, there were complaints that MACV was Army-dominated, mirroring charges in Washington that the administration's new defense policies favored the Army over the other services. McNamara himself conceded that while the "primary responsibility in these areas lies with the Army," it was important to expose other services, and especially the Marines and Air Force, to the experience as well.[77] Nevertheless, by the end of 1963, of the

16,000 troops on the field, 10,100 were Army troops; and of the five general officers in key positions, only one was from the Air Force.[78] Army officials were also prone to making "derogatory comments" about Air Force overtures to become involved in counterinsurgency, a field they felt "had always been primarily Army."[79]

To some extent, the Army's experience in counterinsurgency was irrelevant to service Chiefs who believed that a conventional war was around the corner. In the spring of 1962, even General Taylor joined the chorus of military advisors who believed that the "point could quickly come when the VC would come out to fight something resembling a conventional war."[80] Furthermore, in a critical report, the Army itself admitted, "We seem to be still trying to counter insurgency with tools and methods applicable to a conventional war," though it noted, "The Army is nonetheless considerably ahead of the Air Force. They insist on applying the wrong tools in the wrong way."[81]

Inter-service rivalries also loomed large on the use of Vietnam as a testing ground for counterinsurgency. In keeping with his interest in counterinsurgency, Kennedy viewed Vietnam as an ideal "training laboratory"[82] and urged the services to "expose [their] most promising officers to the experience of service there." He "directed that the Services make [Vietnam] a laboratory both for training our people, and for learning the things that we need to know to successfully compete" in what he saw as the "future of war."[83] Rotations in Vietnam became prerequisites for Army promotions and were especially important for the Special Forces. Vietnam taught them to work in fully unconventional "wars of national liberation" contexts, precisely the kind of situation Kennedy wanted them prepared for.[84] The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff chimed in and noted the importance of using "Vietnam in particular, and Southeast Asia in general, as a 'laboratory' for the improvement of US counterinsurgency and remote area conflict capability," something he felt was "very much in the national interest."[85]

In April 1961, in order to "test new techniques," the administration had set up a Combat Development Test Center (CDTC) in South Vietnam as part of a program called Project Agile run out of the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). By January 1962, the center also reported to the newly created Special Group (CI), and although the center combined military and civilian experts, it reported to the Secretary of Defense and to MACV on its military activities. The center oversaw the testing of a range of more or less controversial tools that included using dogs and high-powered voice amplifiers in the

strategic hamlets as well as the more contentious use of herbicides.[86] By September 1962, the Army set up its own test unit center, and three months later, the Air Force did the same.[87]

As a result, by the end of 1962, both CINCPAC and the JCS were expressing concern "about the proliferation of such activities." Not only were the services competing over programs; they also seemed to be bypassing CINCPAC's authority. In keeping with Eisenhower's reforms to command structures, MACV was meant to coordinate operations in Vietnam and report to CINCPAC, which, in turn, reported to the Secretary of Defense. The services, which were no longer meant to have operational responsibility, seemed to be reasserting themselves through the back door under the rubric of "testing." This was the subplot, so to speak, when CINCPAC voiced "concerned about the nature of the tests" that the Army was conducting and expressed "desires to keep tight control and monitory R&D activities in South Vietnam."[88] Ultimately, Admiral Felt and the JCS concluded that testing was spiraling out of control and detracting from the main objective. He recommended that it should therefore be scaled back.[89] By October 1963, experimentation was either reduced or transferred to Thailand and, according to the CPSVN, was being phased out altogether.[90]

Similarly, the CPSVN process addressed concerns over the proliferation of militias and paramilitary forces in South Vietnam. By 1962, MACV oversaw Civil Guard (CG) and Self-Defense Corps (SDC) as well as the hamlet militia, which were charged with more traditional security concerns in the villages as an adjunct to the South Vietnamese Army forces (ARVN). In addition, under the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program, Special Forces under CIA command oversaw an even greater number of forces, many of which played on the country's ethnic and religious divisions. For instance, the Trailwatchers, a force that operated along the Laos and Cambodia borders, drew primarily from the Montagnard minority, while other forces played on Catholic allegiances, including the so-called Catholic Youth and Fighting Fathers forces.

William Colby, the CIA Station Chief who oversaw many of these forces, complained that they lacked order, control and coherence and were wasteful.[91] The CIA could not afford the costs associated with the "rapidly expanding operations."[92] Moreover, the Army began to express anger that its Special Forces, "probably the most mature and best-trained in the Army [were] employed in providing basic training to Vietnamese recruits" and that they were still operating under CIA command while the

Army was running its own parallel programs in Vietnam.[93] For all these reasons, Colby welcomed the decision in July 1962, as part of the CPSVN process, to centralize paramilitary forces under MACV command as part of Operation Switchback and to wind down their numbers in subsequent years. Bringing the Special Forces and their programs within the remit of MACV served, first, to centralize disparate operations around the country in way that promised greater operational coherence and coordination and, second, to secure their long-term financing.

Later versions of the CPSVN also wound down the use of air power on the battlefield, a victory for the counterinsurgency experts over their military counterparts and indeed over its champion McNamara. The gap between the Chiefs and counterinsurgency experts was perhaps at its widest over the use of air power and especially defoliants in Vietnam. McNamara's position in this debate is instructive and illustrates how he did not fit along binary notions of hawks and doves. Although he argued for winding down the US presence in Vietnam, on the one hand, he was enthusiastic about the use of new technology there. He took this position not least because it promised to be relatively cheap and because the South Vietnamese could be trained relatively quickly to use it themselves. He was less attuned to humanitarian concerns over the use of herbicides. When he did push to draw back the program, it was part of a general winding down of the US presence and a tightening of operations in Vietnam.

McNamara had been an early proponent of using air power in Vietnam when the program began in earnest after the Taylor–Rostow report was submitted. One official history has suggested that his enthusiasm for its use derived from the fact that he "could quantify results."[94] Michael Forrestal at the NSC, who opposed the program, wrote, "The main train of thinking was that you cannot say no to your military advisors all the time and, with this I agree."[95] But McNamara had not had many qualms refusing his military advisors' input in the past. Instead, he wanted to prove that the Defense Department could make a valuable contribution to the new models of war fighting. Hilsman explained that to understand the bombing program "it is probably necessary to understand the peculiar stake of the Air Force as an organization," namely that it needed to prove its relevance for counterinsurgency.[96] However, this was true of the Defense Department as a whole: in the aftermath of the Ap Bac battle, Wheeler was dispatched to Vietnam specifically to try to identify how to "use air power in counterinsurgency operations."[97]

While the use of air power in Vietnam was divisive, the defoliation program was particularly so. In the spring of 1962, the administration felt compelled to issue press guidelines to the field about the "much publicized" use of herbicides. Harriman, his friend John Kenneth Galbraith, Hilsman and Forrestal were especially angry about the program as was USIA Director Edward Murrow, who warned that the administration would "pay dearly for [it] in terms of Asian opinion."[98] Confronted with Harkins and Felt's suggestion in December of 1962 to create open-fire zones along the Cambodian border, Harriman "question[ed] the use of airpower in counterinsurgency," complaining that "we must never forget that this is a political war" and reminding his colleagues that "French experience suggests, in fact, that air interdiction is not a useful concept in this kind of warfare."[99] The MAAG also warned that "the indiscriminate use of firepower, regardless of caliber, type or means of delivery cannot be condoned in counterinsurgency operations," that it "only serve[d] to push people into Viet Cong arms."[100]

Aside from its public relations aspects, the program's detractors questioned its military use. Reports from the field that circulated around Washington indicated that the program had achieved only limited success. One Army report bluntly noted that the "defoliation program is a failure. That's the official view now."[101] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lemnitzer remarked that results were "not impressive,"[102] while Harold Brown, McNamara's director of Defense Research and Engineering (DDR&E) who managed Project Agile, wrote that reports about the success of these programs were "overoptimistic."[103] Yet the program continued to be met with "the strong approval of Secretary McNamara, General Taylor" and "the field," which was primarily CINCPAC.[104] Well after he had received reports questioning the value of air operations, McNamara was still telling Kennedy that they were producing "excellent results" and recommending that he give Harkins "free reign."[105]

By November 1962, despite continued requests to continue if not expand the program from MACV, CINCPAC and McNamara, the detractors had convinced President Kennedy to cut back the program and ensure that it be "reoriented upon the original concept as soon as possible." Kennedy also required that each operation receive prior White House rather than OSD approval and that it demonstrate its "operational value."[106]

By the spring of 1963, McNamara had changed his position and was on board. As the CPSVN planning went ahead, the air units were the first to be withdrawn. The initial 1,000-man withdrawal increment included

mostly air units, including a C-123 spray detachment and armed helicopters.[107] The President's instructions might have influenced McNamara's change of heart, but Thompson's trajectory on the issue of air power was also revelatory and helps to explain McNamara's about-face.

In April 1962, going against many field reports, Thompson remained generally favorable to the program. He argued that the "use of air in the form of helicopters, C-123 and attack planes" was "remarkably effective," while his only reservation over crop destruction was that "foreigners should not be actively involved." At the same time, he sounded a note of a caution and explained that "many so-called Viet Cong are not fighting for Communism" but instead nationalism that could be reinforced should they see "foreigners killing Vietnamese." In large part, the issue was a public relations one for Thompson, part of the "psychological and information activities" that he advocated and which recommended that foreigners should not be "at the sharp end" but instead should focus on "doctors, USOM [United States Operations Mission] people or civic action people who are handing out services or goods [who] cause no problem."[108]

However, a year later, Thompson had turned sharply on the issue and on a visit to Washington warned President Kennedy against relying on defoliants and air power more broadly. Now he "doubted that the effort involved in defoliation was worthwhile" because of the "automatic aversion of the Asians to the use of unknown chemicals." On air power, he said that, in the long term the "war would be won by brains and feet" rather than helicopters and that he was now "dead against" bombing "as this would leave an indissoluble legacy of bitterness."[109]

Looking back on the spring of 1962, as the contours of US policy for South Vietnam were defined under McNamara's leadership, Thompson's influence on the Secretary is remarkable. He informed McNamara's turn against the use of air power and defoliation and educated him on the counterinsurgency strategy that became enshrined in the CPSVN. However, McNamara welcomed Thompson and Hilsman's plans in the spring of 1962 because they dovetailed with his own managerial priorities. Limiting the US role in South Vietnam and moving away from a traditional military deployment was compatible with McNamara's proposed solutions for the administration's wider economic problems. To the counterinsurgency strategists, the CPSVN made sense from a military perspective; to McNamara, they also made sense from an economic and budgetary perspective.