The Military Owes The President(s) More

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In *The New York Times Magazine* for 21 May 1995, there appeared an interview[1] with General John M. Shalikashvili that reflected favorably on the good sense and candor of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The answers to the first two questions, however, call for a discussion that goes beyond what the Chairman had to say:

Q: Former Secretary of Defense McNamara recently declared that the United States should have withdrawn from Vietnam after the murder of Diem. He said, "We were wrong, tragically wrong.". . . [W]hat did you think when you heard that?
A: Disappointment. A degree of frustration, because there's an implication—I've not read his book—that these are things that the men who were in leadership positions knew, but did not do anything about.
Q: McNamara told this newspaper that similar mistakes are being made in Washington today. He pointed to Somalia and Bosnia as examples.
A: To compare Somalia to Vietnam is factually and morally wrong. Somalia was a *totally* different humanitarian effort—to save lives. So is America's role in Bosnia. It's unfair for me to sit and try to make judgments on what I have not read. But if the question is, "Can one compare the Vietnam conflict with America's role in something like Somalia or America's involvement in something like Bosnia." it's patently wrong.

General Shalikashvili is right; Vietnam, Somalia, and Bosnia were different situations. But they had one thing in common: their solutions called for insight. And in each of them it can reasonably be said that the key leadership of the United States lacked insight at the time critical decisions were made.

Under what Mr. McNamara now calls the "gravely flawed . . . ill-founded" strategy of containment in Indochina, his President at end-1961 raised President Eisenhower's Vietnam commitment of 800 advisors to, in two years, 16,000 advisors and troops. Three weeks after the November 1963 murder of President Diem, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. For five years President Lyndon Johnson held to the line that the United States would, with its armed forces and in its national interest, support the territorial integrity of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). For at least half that period he had the support of Congress and the American people.

Therefore, in 1964, it was the responsibility of the U.S. military establishment, of which Robert McNamara was the civilian chief, to produce a strategic/operational/tactical solution that would conform to that political/grand strategic judgment. That establishment, lacking insight, failed to do so:

- In 1964 and 1965, none of the "best and the brightest" that President Johnson inherited understood the true situation in Vietnam, nor did McNamara's most senior military advisors.
- In 1965, they sent U.S. troops into the countryside in a fruitless strategy of attrition, even though a strategy was available that could produce decisive war termination under reasonable terms—i.e., an effective U.S.-supported RVN internal pacification effort coupled with a clear denial of North Vietnam's support to the Viet Cong in the South.
- When, in 1966 and 1967, they began to understand how to cope with the internal situation in Vietnam, they went along with air power as the way to deal with the problem of infiltration and external support to the Viet Cong. That failed.

After Tet 1968 and into 1972, pacification began to work inside the country, continued massive infiltration notwithstanding.[2] But by then the cost of an attrition strategy had become too high. In early 1973 the United States withdrew its last forces. The following year, the Congress denied further U.S. support to the RVN and it fell to Northern invasion the next spring.

The responsibility for failure in Vietnam clearly falls on President Johnson and his civilian advisors. But it also falls on the senior U.S. military officers who gave Mr. McNamara and the President their advice in 1964-65. Theirs was the critical failure in insight. It was they who should have grasped the true situation in the Vietnamese countryside and laid out the measures that would cope with it. It was they who should have grasped the crucial importance of denying the communists inside South Vietnam support from the North—and who should have proposed decisive measures to virtually end that support. It was their duty to recognize that that a satisfactory solution in the South was not achievable without bold action in both those dimensions, and to recommend decisive measures that would have produced timely success.

In April 1964, I returned from a year in Vietnam where I had been senior advisor to the Vietnamese Army's 21st Infantry Division, operating in the RVN's four southernmost provinces. This mostly paddy-land region in the Mekong Delta was the size of Connecticut, and 1,500,000 people lived there. Two rival governments were contesting for their loyalty.

One government was the RVN, with its province, district, and village chiefs, and with its armed forces, from hamlet militia to district and province contingents to regular units that operated under the 21st Infantry Division. The other government was that of the Viet Cong, with its own province, district, and village chiefs and with main force guerrilla units that roamed the countryside while local platoons and squads operated down through hamlet level. Each government had its tax collectors, schools, and information cadres. Each had its military/civil program for expanding its control of the land and its people.

Under President Ngo Dinh Diem the RVN had undertaken an ill-conceived "strategic hamlets" program that herded its rural people into defended localities. The Viet Cong's leaders were facing Diem with a proven concept of their own. They were gaining in this contest for the land and its people.

Our Advisory Team 51 was located at Bac Lieu with division headquarters. My pacification assistant was Lieutenant Colonel Robert Montague, first in his class (1947) at West Point. With us was Richard Holbrooke on his first foreign service assignment;[3] he represented the U.S. Aid Mission in South Vietnam. Bob, Dick, and I worked with the division commander and his people, and especially with a grizzled French-speaking lieutenant colonel who told us about the French experience in Morocco 50 years earlier, where Marshal Lyautey had gradually brought new areas under control through a deliberate process called the "expanding oil spot."

In Bac Lieu, Americans and Vietnamese together developed an oil spot pacification concept for local application. By February 1964 the Vietnamese division, province, and district chain of command had articulated the concept, and a Viet-

namese-run school in Bac Lieu was teaching it to civil/military cadres, who would carry it out in villages. As I left in April, the Bac Lieu chief was expanding that town's area of control with his first oil spot expansion effort. In each of the other three provinces another initial effort soon would be under way.[4]

The spring of 1964 I took to the Pentagon, to State, to the CIA, and around the country a large roll of cloth briefing charts that Bob Montague had sent home with me, telling all who would listen that we had found the essential recipe for pacification. Following this recipe, pacification must be accomplished deliberately and thoroughly; it should be made the task of RVN division commanders; and it should be given all possible U.S. assistance, including well-indoctrinated advisors. But the Vietnamese should execute it. The United States should not under any circumstances put ground forces in the populated countryside. Unable to tell friend from foe, U.S. troops using heavy firepower would do too much harm. We should increase the RVN's troop strength; we should train, equip and advise them; we should support them with helicopters. Then they could cope with the Viet Cong main force units, and with the growing North Vietnamese regular forces infiltrating into their country.

Finally, I preached that the United States should commit ground forces to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, thus extending the boundary that divided North from South. This should be a multinational effort, undertaken in response to the flagrant North Vietnamese violation of the 1962 Geneva accords that the Kennedy administration had engineered to neutralize Laos. In that agreement, North Vietnam and 13 other nations pledged that ". . . they will not introduce into the Kingdom of Laos foreign troops or military personnel in any form whatsoever . . . (and) they will not use the territory of the Kingdom of Laos for interference in the internal affairs of other countries."

As a National War College student, I proposed to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail with a multinational ground force for fortification and land clearing operations, ambush patrolling, and powerful artillery and air support that could deny North Vietnam all but seaborne infiltration—and inshore naval operations could stifle that.[5] Employment of U.S. forces in Laos had not been feasible earlier, but by end-1964 President Kennedy's defense buildup had greatly strengthened U.S. air power, airlift, and naval forces. Army divisions in the strategic reserve now numbered eight instead of three; they included a recently tested airmobile division with hundreds of helicopters that was well suited for the jungle.

In my proposal, this decisive blow should be coupled with an effective U.S.-supported but Vietnamese-conducted internal pacification effort like that of the 21st Division. Had this two-pronged strategy been adopted in 1964 or early 1965 and vigorously pursued, the war could have been concluded successfully in far less time and at far less cost than it took us to suffer a defeat.[6]

It was not adopted. In mid-1965, the United States introduced its ground forces into the countryside, began a half-hearted air campaign aimed at leading Ho Chi Minh to end his external support, and adopted a self-defeating strategy of attrition. In the 21st Division, few traces of our pacification idea remained; people had moved on.[7]

General Shalikashvili told his interviewer that Mr. McNamara seemed to imply that there were "things that the men who were in leadership positions knew, but did not do anything about." What happened was that in 1964-65 those leaders *did not understand things that they should have understood, hence failed to do what they should have done*. In a word, they lacked insight.[8] Tens of thousands of unnecessary casualties and untoward damage to our national fabric were the result.

When I left Vietnam after my third tour, I wrote:

> I believe that great costs could have been saved in the Vietnam experience if our individual and collective insight had been better as things were developing. . . . Intellect alone does not guarantee insight. Soldierly virtues such as integrity, courage, loyalty, and steadfastness are valuable indeed, but they are often unaccompanied by insight, which comes from a willing openness to a variety of stimuli, from intellectual curiosity, from observation and reflection, from continuous evaluation and testing, from conversation and discussion, from review of assumptions, from listening to the views of outsiders, and from the indispensable ingredient of humility. Self-doubt is essential equipment for a responsible officer in this environment; the man who believes he has the situation entirely figured out is a danger to himself and to his mission. . . . The reflective, testing, and tentative manner in which insight is sought does not mean indecisiveness. It simply raises the likelihood that the decided course of action will be successful, because it is in harmony with the real situation.[9]

A staff contributes to, but cannot produce, a commander's insight. A President, a Secretary of Defense, a JCS Chairman, a Service Chief, or a theater commander must somehow find accurate insight within himself, and then with will and skill act upon it.

In late 1991 through 1993, national-level insight was lacking in the situations in both Somalia and Bosnia. On Somalia, history has already spoken.[9]

As to Bosnia's tangled tragedy, history has yet to judge what would have been better insights as the Balkan crisis unfolded in 1991-93. But surely the choices offered to the President need not have been, on one hand, to leave the matter to the Secretary General of the United Nations and, on the other, to engage the United States alone or with NATO in the commitment of hundreds of thousands of troops. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, for one, had an alternative idea involving air power. In the next year, each of the nation's war colleges could do a great service by tasking student teams to run the clock back to 1991 and to produce an alternative array of what-might-have-been. That would help develop and sharpen officer insights—so necessary for our uncertain future.

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[1]"Who's the Enemy Now?" by Claudia Dreifus, *New York Times Magazine*, p. 34.
[2]See William E. Colby, "Vietnam After McNamara"; *The Washington Post*, 27 Apr. 1995, p. A.21.
[3]Now Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs.
[4]See Col. John H. Cushman,"Pacification Concepts Developed in the Field by the RVN 21st Infantry Division," *Army*, March 1966, pp. 21-29.
[5]Lt.Col. John H. Cushman, *External Support of the Viet Cong: An Analysis and a Proposal*, Individual Research Paper, National War College, Washington, DC, 15 March 1965. 61 pages, with maps. Top Secret when written, it was declassified, with exceptions, in 1986.
[6]Gen. Bruce Palmer, in pp. 182-187 of his *The 25-Year War* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1984), argues that to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail with ground forces was "probably" a "more feasible alternative" from "the early days of the U.S. commitment."
[7]In 1966, Bob Montague and Dick Holbrooke as White House staffers helped presidential assistant Robert W. Komer develop the massive U.S. program in support of pacification that Komer, as deputy to General Westmoreland with the rank of ambassador and continuing with their help, instituted in Vietnam.
[8]*Senior Officer Debriefing Report of Major General J. H. Cushman*, Hq, Delta Regional Assistance Command, APO San Francisco, 96215, 14 Jan. 1972, p. 2.
[9]Secretary of State Warren Christopher on the "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour," 2 2 March 1995:"America . . . learned some difficult lessons [in Somalia]. We learned the lesson to avoid what is called mission creep, i.e., we learned that we need to have a very . . . specific mission with the United Nations . . . , that we have to do our job and get out before we try to take on tasks that we can't do. We benefitted from that . . . costly lesson."

Lieutenant General Cushman, U.S. Army (Retired), in his second Vietnam tour, commanded the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. During and after Tet 1968, operating in the countryside around Hue, he and his brigade earned the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm.