

More Flags: Free World Military Forces in Vietnam

A

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The Vietnam War is generally thought to be a war in which American forces fought beside their South Vietnamese allies, without any outside assistance. In truth, more than forty nations provided assistance of some type to the Republic of Vietnam in its struggle against the Communists. Seven nations joined the United States in providing direct military assistance; they were the Republic of Korea, Republic of China, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Spain. Four of these nations provided combat troops that fought alongside American and South Vietnamese soldiers in the field. Two of these nations, Australia and New Zealand, were both involved in combat in Vietnam for over ten years. The purpose of this paper is to examine the events that led to the commitment of what became known as Free World Military Forces in Vietnam.

From the earliest days of American involvement in Southeast, U.S. policy makers made certain assumptions about the conflict in Vietnam. As the Korean war had been perceived as a battle against North Korean and Chinese Communist aggression, the policy makers saw the war in Vietnam as yet another opportunity to combat Communist aggression. In Korea, the U.S. had enlisted allies in the fight against Communism, thereby adding to the forces arrayed against the Communists and lending credibility to the American effort there. As retired Lieutenant General Stanley R. Larsen wrote after the war, "It is not at all surprising that in the early sixties, when the nature of the U.S. commitment to Vietnam was taking shape, the idea of multilateral aid was being considered."¹

This idea can be traced to a November 11, 1961 memorandum to President John F. Kennedy from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that noted the need for multilateral action. Rusk and McNamara wrote: "From the political point of view, both domestic and international, it would seem important to involve forces

from other nations alongside of United States forces in Viet-Nam...Our position would be greatly strengthened if the introduction of forces could be taken as a SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] action, accompanied by units of other SEATO countries..."² It was thought that such international participation would help in ameliorating any charges of American imperialism in Southeast Asia and help achieve the kind of consensus enjoyed by United Nations forces during the Korean War. However, nothing came of these early ideas at this time. President Kennedy's focus was on Laos since the security situation in Vietnam did not look that acute at the time. However, by late 1963, the Laos question had been settled at least tentatively by the 1962 Geneva Accords and the situation in South Vietnam had grown increasingly unstable with the death of South Vietnamese Ngo Dinh Diem during a coup in early November.

Shortly thereafter, President Kennedy himself was assassinated. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, was left to deal with the growing crisis in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, he, too, would come to the conclusion that international support would be essential to providing credibility for American efforts in Southeast Asia. In the spring of 1964, Johnson launched an international appeal for "More Flags" to come forth to support a beleaguered South Vietnam in its fight against communism. At a news conference on 23 April, Johnson said he anticipated that the United States would send more military aid to Saigon, but also said he hoped: "we would see some other flags in there, other nationsand that we could all unite in an attempt to stop the spread of communists in that area of the world, and the attempt to destroy freedom."³ Some historians have suggested that the "More Flags" program was really the brain child of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, but there is little doubt that President Johnson, who had built his political career on compromise,

achieving consensus, and coalition building, saw the value in Rusk's approach and made it his own; the search for international support would remain a priority until Johnson left office.

A week after the president made his comments at the press conference, the "More Flags" program was made official in a 1 May 1964 cable from Secretary of State Rusk to all of America's embassies worldwide. The message stated: "The United States Government has decided to call upon other nations of the Free World to express their support in the form of political and material contributions to the Vietnamese Government."⁴ Several countries were already providing technical assistance, development funds, and humanitarian aid, but Rusk instructed the American ambassadors to press their host governments for increased support if they were already contributing and commitments from those nations not yet contributing. Rusk said, "The nature and amount of the contributions being sought are not for the present as significant as the fact that their being made."⁵ While not expressly stated, the idea was to get as many "flags" as possible to demonstrate international support not only for the Government of South Vietnam, but also for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. The most important factor was that an allied nation sent aid, any aid to South Vietnam, because by doing so, that country, *ipso facto*, showed it supported the U.S. position there.⁶

The first priority for enlisting aid for the South Vietnamese was aimed at the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). In a memorandum dated 25 May, McGeorge Bundy, Presidential Assistant for National Security Affairs, recommended that a high-level conference be called to consult with SEATO allies in order to obtain specific support commitments. However, the proposed conference never took place and this was

the last attempt to solicit support under the SEATO umbrella. Certain members, especially France, disapproved of American policy in Vietnam and rather than deal with such antipathy within SEATO, Johnson eventually turned elsewhere.

Per Rusk's instructions, U.S. ambassadors traveled throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America trying to persuade countries to pitch in and help South Vietnam with development funds, medical and engineering advisers, and food.. This early effort was not targeted on securing foreign combat troops, but that would change with time. The normal procedure was for the American embassies to solicit aid from their host countries in accordance with a list of desired aid prepared by Headquarters Military Assistance Command Vietnam. When a country agreed to provide some assistance, the U.S. government then informed the South Vietnamese government, which in turn would make a formal request for aid from that country.

Despite the diplomatic efforts of the U.S. ambassadors, only 15 countries responded to the initial American request. Only six of the responding nations offered any significant help; these nations included South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Nationalist China and this was largely nonmilitary aid. The "More Flags" program was obviously not coming anywhere near what Johnson expected from it.

On 1 December 1964, Johnson convened a meeting of his closest advisors in the White House. At this meeting, the discussion centered around how to best achieve the U.S. objectives in Vietnam. It was agreed that every effort would be expended to end North Vietnam's support of Viet Cong operations in South Vietnam; to re-establish an independent and secure South Vietnam; and to maintain the security of other non-Communist nations in Southeast.⁷ These objectives portended an increase in U.S.

commitment to the war. If anything this led to a commensurate increase in the effort to enlist international support for South Vietnam and U.S. policies in Southeast Asia. During the meeting, the President expressed his dissatisfaction with the "More Flags" program and charged his advisors to develop a new plan to increase international participation. It was decided to ask Thailand to provide military support to South Vietnam, as well as intensify its own counterinsurgency efforts in Thailand. British Prime Minister J. Harold Wilson was to be briefed on the situation and asked for support. William P. Bundy of the State Department would speak to Australia and New Zealand about the possibility of sending small combat units when and if the United States moved to the second phase of its strategy of increasing military pressure against the Communists.⁸ The Philippines were to be asked for a commitment of approximately 1,800 men. The meeting closed with an agreement to explore any and all possibilities for more outside aid. This meeting and the agreements reached marked a turning point in the "More Flags" program; from that point on, the effort to seek international support for South Vietnam shifted from securing primarily humanitarian and economic aid to obtaining military related aid and ultimately combat troops that would fight alongside South Vietnamese and American soldiers.

Realizing that getting other nations to commit combat forces in South Vietnam would be a difficult sell, Johnson knew that something had to be done to "sweeten the pot" in order to entice those nations who might otherwise not want to get involved. On 15 December 1964, the president directed the State Department to notify America's allies that the United States would pay the entire cost of any free world military aid commitment to South Vietnam. As Robert Blackburn said, "If Lyndon Johnson, using ideological arguments and diplomatic pressures, could not convince other countries to adopt America's

Vietnam policy as their own, he would now attempt to bribe them into doing so.”⁹ Still, there was no immediate response from most of America’s allies and only the Philippine, Korean, and Nationalist Chinese governments, who were already providing nonmilitary aid, made it known through diplomatic channels that they might consider providing military assistance to South Vietnam. Therefore, the attempt to buy support did not have the desired results; not one previously uncommitted country chose to offer assistance.

It must be noted at this point that the effort to enlist allies for South Vietnam was from the beginning an American initiative. While President Johnson actively courted outside support to help fight the war, the South Vietnamese government was decidedly ambivalent about the whole matter. According to Chester Cooper, former director of Asian affairs for the White House, the U.S. quest for more flags had gotten off to a slow start in late 1964 because it required “the application of considerable pressure for Washington to elicit any meaningful commitments” from other nations, but also because of the “lassitude, even disinterest of the Saigon government,” which was too preoccupied with the continuing internal political turmoil. Moreover, Cooper asserts, “Saigon appeared to believe that the program was a public relations campaign directed at the American people.”¹⁰

Part of the South Vietnamese attitude in this matter could be traced back to Vietnamese culture and history. The Vietnamese people had struggled for a thousand years to repel foreign invaders who wanted to carve a national identity for themselves among the diverse peoples of the Indochinese peninsula and the South Vietnamese were less than excited about inviting more foreign troops to their land. Consequently, from the very beginning of the “More Flags” program, requests for aid for South Vietnam would originate from Washington, not from Saigon, which merely went along with Washington’s actions.

Thus, according to Cooper, this left "Washington to play the role of supplicant in the quest for Free World support."¹¹

Despite Saigon's ambivalence, the American effort to solicit Free World support received additional emphasis as the United States became more directly involved in the war in 1965. It became increasingly important to portray the war as not merely an American war, but rather one in which free nations banded together against the forces of Communism. Accordingly, the Johnson administration continued to press its overseas missions for action on behalf of the "Many Flags" program. As a spur to their orders to continue pushing the program, a cable was sent reaffirming the president's undiminished personal interest in the program to all U.S. embassies in January and March, saying: "President continues to place very high priority on obtaining broadest possible Free World support for South Viet-Nam."¹²

Even as the President and the Joint Chiefs discussed the deployment of a Marine expeditionary brigade to Da Nang, there was renewed talk about securing combat troops from other nations. In late February 1965, the Joint Chiefs recommended the deployment of a Republic of Korea Army division for counterinsurgency and base security operations. The Chiefs acknowledged two considerations that would be applicable to all allied forces deployed to South Vietnam. The first was how the force would be supported logistically and the second addressed command and control relationships.

With the first U.S. Marine battalion on its way to Da Nang, the State Department requested Ambassador Maxwell Taylor's view on the advisability of forming an international combat force in South Vietnam. Taylor had already expressed reservations about sending Marines to Da Nang, stating that he felt that such an approach might

encourage the government of Vietnam to let the U.S. government assume an even greater share of the burden. Likewise, he was not enthusiastic about soliciting foreign troops for Vietnam. However, as the Johnson administration moved toward full-scale deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam, the motivation to broaden the international nature of the forces confronting the Communists only increased.

In a high-level policy meeting on April 1, 1965, the decision was made to solicit combat troops from Australia and New Zealand. There was much discussion over the advisability of obtaining troops from the Republic of Korea, which had already indicated a willingness to send troops. The South Vietnamese had expressed some reluctance in having the Koreans in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the decision was made to secure concurrence and co-operation from Saigon on possible contributions from other countries, including South Korea. On April 3, a report from General William Westmoreland, senior U.S. commander in South Vietnam, added additional impetus to the decision to both send U.S. forces and to secure allied troops. Westmoreland reported that recent evidence had revealed that elements of the 325th Division of the People's Army of Vietnam (what became known as the North Vietnamese Army) were operating in South Vietnam; this information meant that the nature of the war was changing and South Vietnam was now facing an invasion from the north.

The discussions and decisions that resulted the 1 April meeting were codified on April 6 with the issuance of National Security Action Memorandum 328. This document charged the State Department to explore with the Korean, Australian, and New Zealand governments the possibility of providing combat forces to join the of U.S. troops that were deploying to South Vietnam. This effort received additional impetus on April 15 when

Washington sent Westmoreland a message that more U.S. troops would be sent in view of the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam.

As the war escalated, so did Johnson's call for allied assistance. He began pulling every lever at his command – the SEATO treaty, diplomatic pressure, personal entreaties, and the disposition of U.S. foreign aid – to broaden allied involvement in South Vietnam. What had started out as a request for all kinds of aid now meant combat troops, not just economic and technical assistance. With nearly twenty years of allied “containment policy” against communism on the line in South Vietnam and international opinions mounting against U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, the president was understandably eager to avoid going it alone.¹³

At a conference in Honolulu on 20 April 1965, the deployment of one Australian battalion at Vung Tau and one Korean regimental combat team of three battalions at Quang Ngai was approved. These forces had previously been offered by the two nations during separate negotiations. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor was directed to secure the concurrence of the government of South Vietnam. Later it was decided that the Republic of Korea would be asked for a division rather than a regimental combat team.

In early May, General Westmoreland set forth the procedures and command relationships that would govern the employment of allied forces when they arrived in-country. The Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam would assume operational control of what would be called Free World Military Forces. These forces would retain national command identity, but accept operational control by senior U.S. commanders. The United States in turn would provide administrative and logistical support.

While Westmoreland and his staff worked out the procedures for integrating the allied troops into the command structure, Australia and Korea prepared to send the troops that they had promised. The first to respond was Australia, which formed a task force around the nucleus of the Royal Australian Regiment. This task force arrived in June 1965 and was placed under the operational control of the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade, operating from Bien Hoa in III Corps. Additional elements such as a 105-mm battery, a field engineer troop, two signal troops, and an air reconnaissance flight would bring the Australian commitment to 1,557 by the end of 1965.

Also in May 1965 the government of New Zealand decided to replace its engineer detachment, which had been sent earlier, with a combat force. In July, a 105-mm howitzer battery arrived in South Vietnam and was also placed under the 173rd to provide fire support for the Australian task force. By the end of the year, there were 119 Kiwi soldiers in South Vietnam. Ultimately, General Westmoreland wanted Australia and New Zealand to deploy a full Australian-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) brigade during the next year.

The Republic of Korea had initially deployed a task force consisting of an army engineer battalion with associated support and self-defense troops that focused early efforts on civic action projects. The main body of this force had arrived in March 1965 and was based at Di An in Bien Hoa Province. In accordance with the decisions made at the Honolulu Conference in April, the U.S. requested additional South Korean forces and in August, Seoul agreed to the deployment of an Army infantry division, one Marine corps regiment, and one field support command troops. Accordingly, the ROK Capital Infantry Division and the 2nd Marine Brigade were completely deployed by early November 1965, a

total of 20,620 soldiers. These forces were placed under the de facto operational control of U.S. Commanding General Field Forces Vietnam and given security duties at Cam Ranh Bay and Qui Nhon.

By end of 1965, President Johnson, despite the arrival of the ANZACs and the Koreans, was still very unhappy with the general response to his repeated calls for allied support. There had been some commitments from several countries, but generally the response was much less than Johnson had hoped and in no way contributed toward the international consensus that he was trying to portray. As the war escalated, the appeal for support increasingly fell on deaf, and in many cases, hostile ears. Fear of adverse world opinion specifically affected the decisions of many of the nations from which Johnson sought support.

Some current and former allies were more vocal in their response to Johnson's escalation of the war and subsequent requests for allied assistance. The French under Charles de Gaulle were extremely caustic toward U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. Not only did they refuse to provide support, but ultimately the French condemned the United States for the war in Vietnam and effectively joined the Communist in branding the U.S. a "neocolonial aggressor" in Southeast Asia.¹⁴

With no hope of swaying de Gaulle, Johnson turned his focus on Great Britain. British Prime Minister Harold Wilson had supported the U.S. position in South Vietnam in the early days. However, as the war went along, the British became less and less enthralled with Johnson's escalation of the war. Nevertheless, Johnson, wanting desperately to avoid any suggestion that the U.S. was waging a "colonial war," pressed Wilson for a British troop commitment in Vietnam. Saying he would settle for a "company of bagpipers," he

declared that there should be a contingent of three to four hundred Britons in Vietnam and a British aircraft squadron or two.¹⁵ Such was not to be the case. Wilson, although still supportive of U.S. aims in Vietnam, had to consider a mounting antiwar sentiment at home and did not think it was prudent for his nation to become mired in the war there.

Additionally, he, like many of America's allies in Europe, was concerned that the United States was becoming obsessed with the war in Vietnam to the exclusion of its commitments in Europe. The British Prime Minister would soon find his own political position at peril because of his support of Johnson and thus any hope of assistance in Vietnam from Great Britain was lost.

Johnson had earlier asked for support from the Federal Republic of Germany. The Germans responded with a grant of \$40 million in aid for the South Vietnamese, emphasizing complete support for U.S. policy in Vietnam. This aid and such public pronouncements were received well in Washington, but the truth of the situation was much more complex. While Germany supported the U.S. attempt to stem the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, there were many in the Bonn government who were, like the British, very worried about the United States becoming so weakened by the war in Vietnam that it would not be able to fulfill its European defense obligations. As far as sending troops outside Germany, this was still a sensitive issue that was forbidden by the Federal constitution.

Having gotten little in the way of real support from his European allies, Johnson renewed the campaign for "More Flags" among America's Asian and Pacific friends. Thailand had long been closely monitoring the situation in Vietnam, realizing that the conflict had potential for spilling over into their own country by way of Cambodia. They

had first sent troops to South Vietnam in 1964 in the form of a 16-man Royal Thai Air Force contingent. Johnson was not happy with this level of Thai support and wrote Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn requesting that his country find some way to increase the level of combat support to South Vietnam. It was imperative for Johnson to have more Asian representation to his "many flags" program to prove to the American public that the program was more than a political charade. Additionally, the addition of more troops from Thailand and other nations would help offset Westmoreland's spiraling requests for additional U.S. forces to fight the war.

In December 1965, the Thai government announced that it was considering sending an 800-man combat battalion to South Vietnam. More than 5,000 Thais volunteered to fill the force. However, the Thai government told Washington that the cost for sending this battalion would be that the U.S. would fund, equip, and supply the force. The U.S. agreed and on 17 February 1966, the Royal Thai Military Assistance Group Vietnam was activated in South Vietnam with the Thai Air Force contingent becoming a subordinate element of that group. Over the years, the Thai commitment in Vietnam, at the continual requests of the U.S. government, would grow to over 11,000 troops. It would cost the United States approximately \$50 million dollars annually to train, equip, and supply the Thai units in Vietnam.¹⁶

The U.S. also asked the Philippines to supply troops and the response and resultant costs mirrored those experienced with securing Thai forces. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, who agreed to send a 1500-man engineer unit to South Vietnam, was motivated as much by the desire for financial aid for his country as by the concern for the Vietnamese. In return for sending the Philippine troops, the U.S. military assistance program not only

paid for the Philippine force, but also granted Marcos several types of military aid, much of it for use in the Philippines itself rather than in South Vietnam. By mid-October 1966, the 2,000-man 1st Philippine Civic Action Group Vietnam was established at a base camp on the outskirts of Tay Ninh City. This force consisted of an engineer construction battalion, medial and rural community development teams, a security battalion, a field artillery battery, and logistics and headquarters element. The Philippine force would cost the United States \$39 million between 1967 and 1969.

As efforts to enlist additional nations failed to reap any meaningful results, the Johnson administration focused on getting those allies already in Vietnam to increase their commitments. The Australian commitment, at Washington's urging, grew from one battalion to two and included numerous headquarters, support, and aviation units. Additional troop deployments and the arrival of RAAF C-130 Hercules air transports swelled the Australian contingent to its peak in October 1967 when it numbered over 8,000 troops in South Vietnam. Over time, in response to American requests, the New Zealand commitment grew to approximately one thousand combat and artillery support troops. Unlike Thailand and the Philippines, both Australia and New Zealand bore the costs of maintaining their forces in South Vietnam themselves. These two nations were very concerned that a Communist victory in Vietnam might have an impact on the rest of Southeast Asia and the western Pacific. Prime Minister Keith Holyoake of New Zealand said, "South Vietnam is something of a test case in Asia. If the Communists have their war there, they will move on to probe elsewhere, in Thailand, Malaysia, and farther west. Every Communist step forward is a step closer to Australia and New Zealand."¹⁷ The Australian leadership agreed with Holyoake, and despite growing annoyance with the war at home, both

Australia and New Zealand maintained a strong presence in South Vietnam right up until the end of the American phase of the war.

The Johnson administration also convinced South Korea to increase its commitment and ultimately the total number of Korean troops reached almost 50,000. This was an important commitment because Korea was an Asian nation that itself had repulsed Communist aggression with international assistance. South Korean President Chung Hee Park proudly explained that his country's participation in South Vietnam "would not only solidify our national security but also contribute toward strengthening the anti-Communist front of the Free World."¹⁸

Despite Park's proclamation, South Korea's motivation was not entirely altruistic. The material cost of South Korean participation in the war was paid by the United States. It amounted to \$1 billion from 1965 to 1970. Additionally, the United States gave South Korea \$150 million in development loans and \$600 million profits from military procurement, contracts for services, and construction projects.

Although Johnson never totally gave up on his effort to enlist other international participation in the war, his decision to bomb North Vietnam in June 1966 effectively ended any hope of widening the allied effort. The time of the greatest buildup was during fiscal year 1966, after which there was a leveling off period with a steady decrease in the number of Free World Military Forces as the war went on.

During the war, thousands of Aussies, New Zealanders, Koreans, Thais, and Philipinos fought alongside American and South Vietnamese troops. Total casualties suffered in Vietnam by Free World Military Forces was 5,241, of which 4,407 were Korean and 475 were from Australia and New Zealand.¹⁹ There is no doubt that these forces

contributed to the overall allied war effort, but Lyndon Johnson's dream of an international consensus supporting U.S. presence and aims in South Vietnam never materialized, despite an inordinate amount of effort to make it so. The international response to the continued U.S. presence in South Vietnam, the mounting unpopularity of the war around the world, and Saigon's ambivalence doomed Johnson's efforts. Ultimately, the war would remain America's war.

ENDNOTES

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2. *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam (The Senator Gravel Edition)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), II, 113.
3. Lyndon B. Johnson. *Public Papers of the President of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the *Federal Register*, National Archives and Records Service, 1965), November 22, 1963 to June 30, 1964, 285.
4. Message, Rusk to AmEmbassies, 5/1/64, "Vietnam Memos, Vol. XVIII, 5/64," Item No. 110, pp. 3-4. NSF Country File – VN, Box 4, LBJ Library, Austin, Texas.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. Robert M. Blackburn. *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags"* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1994), 14.
7. Larsen and Collins, 3.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Blackburn, 24.
10. Cooper, Chester. *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970), p. 266.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Message, Rusk to AmEmbassies, 1/16/65, "Vietnam Memos, Vol. XVI, 1/10-31/65," Item No. 153. NSF Country File – VN, Box 12, LBJ Library, Austin, Texas.
13. Edward Doyle and Samuel Lipsman. *The Vietnam Experience: America Takes Over, 1965-67* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1982), p. 124.
14. Doyle and Lipsman, p. 125.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
16. Cooper, p. 267.
17. Quoted in Doyle and Lipsman, p. 131.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Blackburn, p. xiii.

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