

Planning for War

THE MARINE CORPS IN CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR INDOCHINA AND SOUTH VIETNAM, 1951–65

By Edward T. Nevglowski¹

The origins of the U.S. Marine Corps' initial involvement in the Vietnam War is a little-known part of the conflict's historiography.² In the nearly 50 years since the first combat unit arrived in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), or South Vietnam, military historians have yet to explore why it was U.S. Marines landing, as opposed to the Army, and why of all places in the RVN they landed at Da Nang on 8 March 1965. Underscoring this apparent oversight in the collective history of the conflict is the broad acceptance of the idea of a hastily planned landing and subsequent counterinsurgency campaign championed by the Marines. However, a thorough analysis of the volumes of documents pertaining to the planning for intervention in the RVN proves this to be a flawed characterization of the tasks assigned to the Marines in contingency plans drafted nearly a decade earlier.

What was the Marines' role in Da Nang and in

larger contingency plans? The absence of a comprehensive study to answer these questions adds to an already inaccurate and misleading historiographical account of the planning origins and how Marines came to be so deeply involved. The purpose of this article is to address these historiographical oversights by explaining the Marines' conceptual roles in contingency plans developed between 1951 and 1965. This affords the opportunity to correct a grave misinterpretation perpetuated by historians lacking a clear understanding of the war and military planning for intervention before 1965.

Nearly every study of America's military intervention in Vietnam begins with the description of this "hasty" landing in the wake of an increase in insurgent activity around Da Nang and elsewhere in the country. The controversial *Pentagon Papers* describes it as a watershed event in the history of the war presenting a "major decision made without much fanfare—and without much planning. Whereas the decision to begin bombing North Vietnam [the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)] was the product of a year's discussion, debate, and a lot of paper, and whereas the consideration of pacification policies reached talmudic [*sic*] proportions over the years, this decision created less than a ripple."³ This rather common depiction of the landing could not be further from the truth.

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² The term *Vietnam War* can be confusing and sometimes misleading, depending on the historian and the context of its usage. The war between the French and the Viet Minh, from 1946 to 1954, is referred to as the First Indochina War. The period from 1955 to 1960 is a transitional period. The Vietnam War as typically discussed includes only the period involving full and direct U.S. military action from 1961 to 1975. However, for purposes of this paper and unless otherwise stated, the term Vietnam War will generally include all three periods.

³ Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, vol. 3, Senator Gravel Ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 433.

Even before the 8 March landing, planners considered the Marines essential to an array of contingencies for defending the south. Senior U.S. military officials would see to it that civilian officials followed these plans, though some were more difficult to convince than others. On the eve of the landing, Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton proposed to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the Army's 173d Airborne Brigade should take on the security mission at the airfield and other key facilities and installations instead of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB). His sole reasoning was that any American military action had to be inconspicuous so as not to attract attention for fear of further destabilizing the situation there. In McNaughton's view, the image of Marines equipped with tanks and artillery pieces storming ashore from amphibious ships could do further damage. Conversely, he judged that Army airborne forces signaled a "limited, temporary nature of the U.S. troop deployment" since they carry less equipment and "look less formidable" than a Marine amphibious force.⁴

McNaughton's proposal received strong opposition from the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs and U.S. ambassador to the RVN, Maxwell D. Taylor, as well as from General William Westmoreland and Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, the commander of all U.S. forces in the Pacific, including South Vietnam. Admiral Sharp justified his rejection of McNaughton's last-minute proposal by referencing the seven active contingency plans governing American military intervention in Indochina that explicitly assigned Marines to Da Nang. Sharp insisted that, because "the situation in Southeast Asia has now reached a point where the soundness of our contingency planning may be about to be tested," there was neither the time nor the need to make changes to previously approved plans even if the political and military objectives were slightly different.⁵ In addition, he argued that, from a planning and preparation perspective,

since the origination of OPLAN 32 in 1959, the Marines have been scheduled for deployment to Da Nang . . . contingency plans and a myriad of supporting plans at lower echelons reflect this same deployment. As a result, there has been extensive planning, reconnaissance, and logistics preparation over the years. . . . I recommend that the MEB be landed at Da Nang as previously planned.⁶

Sharp deemed McNaughton's request to replace the 9th MEB with the 173d Airborne Brigade "imprudent," particularly since military planners determined this region of the country required a lighter, mobile, and more self-sustaining force.⁷ Like Sharp, Westmoreland also argued in favor of deploying Marines to Da Nang:

Almost all contingency plans developed through the years for Southeast Asia involved marines in the northern provinces of South Vietnam, and if one of the contingencies should come about, I wanted to go with the plan. In view of a lack of logistical installations or support troops, a marine force trained and equipped to supply itself over the beach was preferable to an airborne force lacking logistical capabilities.⁸

President Lyndon B. Johnson and McNamara agreed, ending McNaughton's proposal. The 9th MEB proceeded to Da Nang as planners intended.

In the early years of potential direct U.S. military involvement, from 1959 to 1962, amphibious ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet carrying the 9th MEB responded repeatedly to Communist advances in Indochina. On each occasion, the Seventh Fleet acted according to contingency plans developed years earlier.

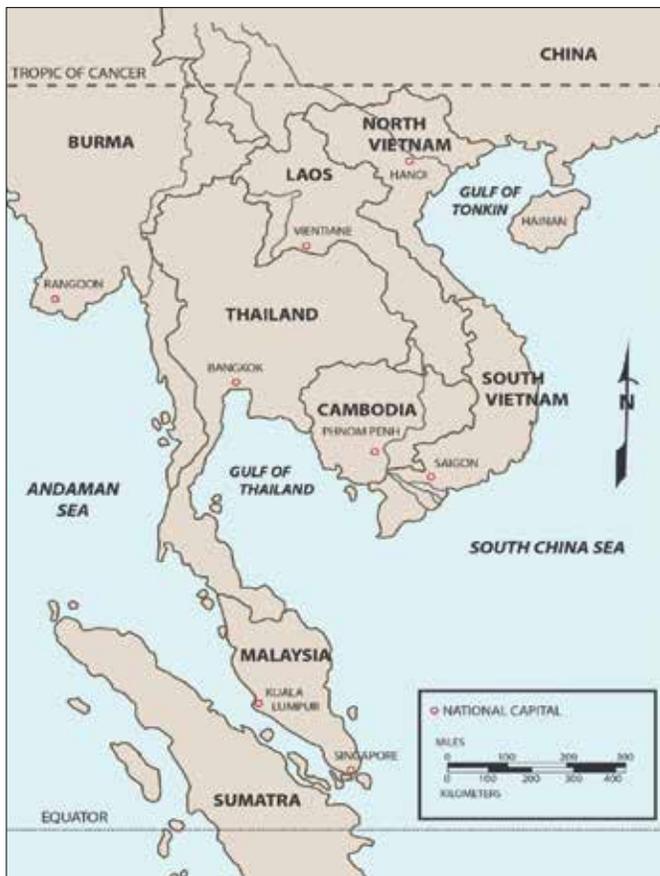
⁴ Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, 402.

⁵ Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1 March 1965, Greene Papers, 3093, Box 3, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA, 3.

⁶ Jack Shulimson and Maj Charles M. Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC: Marine Corps History and Museum Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978), 9.

⁷ Shulimson and Johnson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*.

⁸ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 149.



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Indochina and the Ho Chi Minh trail network.

er to counter aggression in the region. Determined to prevent America's regional allies from falling to Communism, President John F. Kennedy kept close watch over Indochina and pledged to intervene, militarily, if necessary. During the Laos crisis of 1962, however, President Kennedy told his senior White House aide, Walt Whitman Rostow, that if he committed U.S. military forces to prevent Indochina from becoming a collection of Chinese satellite states he would do so in Vietnam, not in Laos. According to Rostow, Kennedy's rationale that southern Vietnam was the more logical choice was, among other reasons, because of its "direct access to the sea" and geography that "permitted American air and naval power to be more easily brought to bear."⁹ That same year, the Geneva Accords

of 1962 (or Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos) prohibited all parties involved in the conflict from basing military forces and equipment there and shifted the U.S. military's attention back to the RVN, making the South China Sea an important part of planning. Less than three years later, the 9th MEB waded ashore at Da Nang.

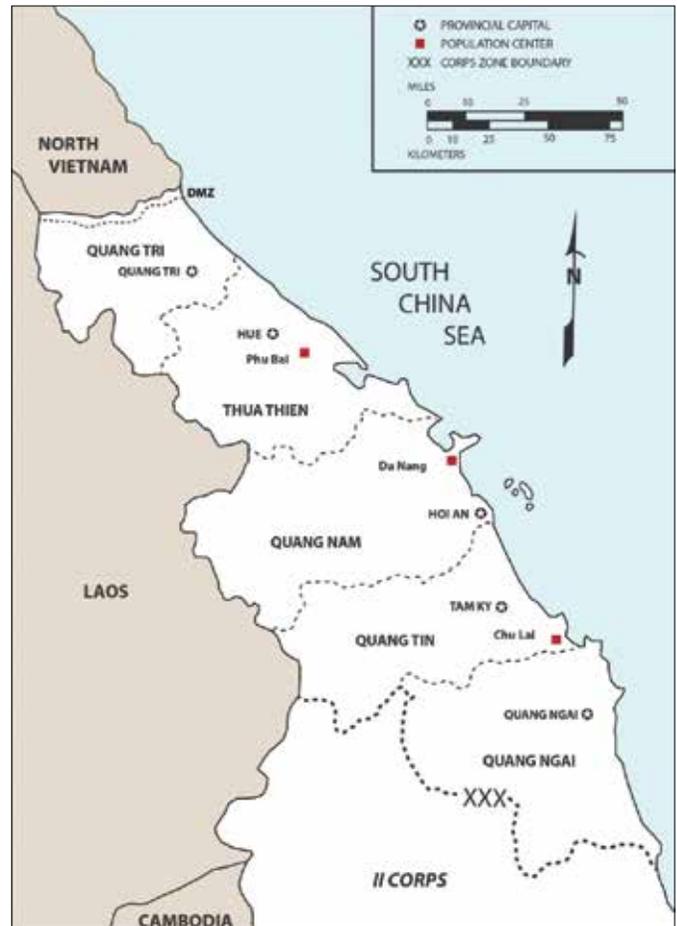
Long before Kennedy's edict, discussions among U.S. military planners on the prospects of military intervention in Indochina included some of the same rationalizations on sea power, Marines, and, among other key locations, Da Nang. Whether blunting a North Korean-style invasion of Indochina and, later, the RVN by Chinese and DRV forces, or curtailing an insurgency threatening to overtake all of Southeast Asia, Marines were sure to play a role based in part on the reasons Kennedy highlighted and the Marine Corps' mission, functions, and doctrine of the

⁹ William L. Rust, *Kennedy in Vietnam: American Vietnam Policy, 1960-1963* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 34.

time.¹⁰ By the time the conflict reached the point of full American military intervention under President Johnson, contingency plans provided for a significant Marine contribution to defend the country's five northern provinces.

The relationship between the Marines and the conflict in South Vietnam dates as far back as the First Indochina War between the Viet Minh independence movement and the combined French colonial forces, including those from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Viet Minh offensive of 1954, featuring Chinese-made tanks and artillery, ended with several captured or abandoned French outposts north of Hanoi and a high command pulling its combat units closer to the capital to prevent its capture. After nearly eight years of fighting, France saw the war as unwinnable unless the United States and Britain provided direct military assistance. One such French request included "twenty thousand Marines" to seize the seaport at Haiphong before opening an escape route between Hanoi and the port for safe passage of French forces to Da Nang.¹¹ With the exception of the size of the Marine contingent, the request mirrored a study presented to the French three years prior in 1951.¹² President Dwight D. Eisenhower concluded in both instances that, without concurrences from Congress or the support of U.S. allies, intervention was not in America's best interest.¹³

The 1954 Geneva Accords officially ended the war and partitioned Vietnam into two countries. The war's end also marked the beginning of America's deliberate planning to defend the RVN from an invasion by the DRV and China. Early plans for the commitment of U.S. forces entailed substantial Marine involvement. Like plans for contingencies elsewhere in the world, the Marine Corps tied its doctrine, operat-



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ing concepts, equipment acquisitions, officer education, and unit training to what it anticipated to be its role in the south. By 1962, the Marines were focusing on a conventional scenario, even though military planners on the Joint Chiefs' staff shifted their attention to a Communist-inspired insurgency and U.S. support for a national pacification effort. Although combating guerrilla forces and pacifying the population consumed a great deal of the Marine Corps' attention, the Service envisioned that it would still deploy combat units to repel a ground invasion and for sustained conventional military operations.

Civilian and military officials debated committing U.S. combat forces to end the stalemate and reunify the two Vietnams. Foremost on the minds of military planners was the potential for a North

¹⁰ Alexander S. Cochran Jr., "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam, 1952-1965," *Parameters* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 64-65.

¹¹ *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War, 1947-1954* (Washington, DC: Historical Division of the Joint Secretariat, Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2004), 180-81.

¹² *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War, 1947-1954*.

¹³ *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War, 1947-1954*.

Korean-style invasion to seize the south's major cities and seaports and the capital in Saigon. Agreements coming out of Geneva to hold national elections likely prevented an invasion, though few in President Eisenhower's cabinet expected the north to remain idle. Anticipating Communist aggression, Eisenhower's national security team began work in 1955 on a security policy vis-à-vis an American military response. The result was National Security Council Memorandum 5602/1 and a U.S. Department of Defense initiative to develop contingency plans for direct military involvement.¹⁴ A planning cell under the supervision of the Joint Chiefs explored several scenarios requiring a direct U.S. military response. The cell formalized its findings in June 1956 with Limited War Plan-Indochina.¹⁵ Aimed at repulsing "overt aggression" by China and the DRV, the plan outlined the American military response in two distinct phases: a massive allied air bombardment of invading formations, including the potential use of nuclear weapons, and the introduction of U.S. and allied ground forces to seize select military objectives in the south and the north.¹⁶

Critical to the success of the opening phase was a South Vietnamese "delaying action from the 17th parallel to the hill mass around Tourane" to buy time for U.S. forces to arrive and form the counterattack.¹⁷ Three U.S. Army regimental combat teams and two Marine regimental landing teams served as the vanguard of an American-led campaign estimated to take

between 9 and 12 months to complete. The mission was to seize and defend the seaports and airbases at Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Saigon, where additional forces and supplies were to arrive before counterattacking Viet Minh forces (and potentially Chinese) south of the 17th parallel.¹⁸ Their objective was to destroy or push all Communist forces north of the 17th parallel and reestablish the demarcation line.

That same year, the Army conducted its own study of the situation in Indochina. Campaign Plan-North Vietnam, like Limited War Plan-Indochina, highlighted many of the same points and offered a few changes. In its plan, an Army division would lead the counterattack north of Da Nang in conjunction with amphibious landings by Marines in the DRV to cut off Viet Minh escape routes and to seize key military bases on the coast.¹⁹ Afterward, the Marines would join the Army for a follow-on attack against the port at Haiphong before moving west along the Red River valley and seizing Hanoi.²⁰ The end state was a reunified Vietnam under control of the RVN's government, thereby ending the conflict entirely and halting China's advances in Indochina and Southeast Asia. Planners estimated the counteroffensive alone to take three months to complete with another eight months to clear and secure Viet Minh base areas in the mountains north of Hanoi.²¹

The headquarters for all American military forces in the Pacific produced its own blueprint for conflict in Indochina, which was identical to the Army's Campaign Plan-North Vietnam, but with one major difference whereby amphibious landings north of the 17th parallel were contingent upon the intensity of the resistance at Da Nang and the high probability of success. Confident that a framework for American mili-

¹⁴ Willard J. Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam, 1954-1959* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007), 132.

¹⁵ Limited War Plan-Indochina (revised 26 November 1956), as cited in *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, vol. 5, Planning the War* (McLean, VA: BDM Corp., 1980), 3-6.

¹⁶ Limited War Plan-Indochina (revised 26 November 1956), 3-6; Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960—The United States Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1985), 270; and U.S. Policy in Event of Renewal of Aggression in Vietnam, JCS 1992/479 enclosure to Memo JCS to SECDEC, 9 September 1955, CCS 092 Asia (6-25-48) (2), Records of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, RG 218, NARA, Washington, DC.

¹⁷ Tourane was the French name for Da Nang at the time. See Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam, 1954-1959*, 132.

¹⁸ *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, vol. 6, Conduct of the War, book 2, Functional Analyses* (McLean, VA: BDM Corp., 1980), 3-7.

¹⁹ Plan for U.S. Participation in Event of Viet Minh Aggression in Vietnam, Appendix to Memo, JCS for CINCPAC, 11 July 1956 as cited in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 270.

²⁰ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-7; U.S. Policy in Event of Renewal of Aggression in Vietnam, JCS, 1992/479; and Spector, *Advice and Support*, 270.

²¹ Spector, *Advice and Support*, 271.

tary action was in place, the Joint Chiefs delegated sole detailed planning and coordination responsibilities to the Pacific Command's multi-Service planning cell.²²

With ownership of detailed planning and coordination, the senior joint U.S. military command in the Pacific theater began work on Operations Plan (OPLAN) 46-56.²³ Defeating a ground invasion by a combined Chinese-DRV force or by North Vietnamese forces acting alone was still the primary concern as was the timely arrival of U.S. forces and RVN holding actions between Da Nang and the demilitarized zone. Two major changes surfaced as a result of the Pacific Command's more detailed planning effort. The first was that OPLAN 46-56, unlike its predecessors, restricted the use of nuclear weapons. The second was the realization of a more complex Communist ground invasion scheme.

Based on their study of the terrain and geography, planners did not foresee the Communists limiting their invasion to one axis of advance, particularly if there was the potential for direct U.S. ground and air involvement. Instead, planners believed the Communists would rely on as many as three attack routes. The first and most direct route took invasion forces south across the demilitarized zone along National Highway 1 (the only north-south road in Indochina) to capture the major cities of Hue, Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, and Phan Thiet.²⁴ Communist forces also might attack via the Lao panhandle along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. With this particular route, invading forces could move south before turning east into South Vietnam at the central highlands and capturing the border towns of Kon Tum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot straddling National Highway 14. Planners assessed that the Communists' goal was to

cut the country in half.²⁵ The third route planners considered began in northern Laos and traversed the full length of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the central and southern part of the country and into eastern Cambodia along the Mekong River, putting invading forces within easy striking distance of Saigon.²⁶ Most expected enemy forces to use a combination of the three routes to deceive and overwhelm American and RVN command-and-control and defenses.

The opening phase of any combined American-RVN military response to the most simple or complex invasion was to keep the Communists north of Da Nang and to use ground forces and supplies for both land- and sea-based counteroffensives. Several coastal points were vitally important since, according to Vietnam War historian Dr. Alexander S. Cochran Jr., planners expected U.S. forces would deploy to "Vietnam by sea and a few by air" and be "resupplied through coastal ports."²⁷ As detailed planning continued, the Joint Chiefs approved a list of ground and aviation commands for the military response. Planners earmarked the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, both in Japan, for operations to seize the Hai Van Pass just north of Da Nang where National Highway 1 traversed the Truong Son mountain range and emptied into the enclave.²⁸ Optimistic that the Marines could slow the pace of invading forces with a hasty defensive line and buy time for additional American and allied forces to counter the offensive, planners wanted an additional Marine contingent to remain at sea for use in amphibious landings at various points on the southern and northern Vietnamese coasts.²⁹

When planners surmised that the Communists might consider alternate and multiple invasion routes,

²² See Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam, 1954-1959*, 132; and Limited War Plan-Indochina, 3-6. All four Services had planners on the staff of the Joint Chiefs and at the Pacific Command to ensure their interests and capabilities were understood during planning.

²³ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-7, 3-8.

²⁴ Cochran, "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam, 1952-1965," 64.

²⁵ Cochran, "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam"; and Spector, *Advice and Support*, 268.

²⁶ Cochran, "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam."

²⁷ Cochran, "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam."

²⁸ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-7; and Spector, *Advice and Support*, 268-70.

²⁹ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol. 5; and Spector, *Advice and Support*.

they realized Saigon might not be the only seat of government at risk. The Thai capital at Bangkok and the Laotian capital of Vientiane also were at risk of becoming Communist targets.³⁰ Their theory prompted senior military officials to consider drafting a more expansive plan and to include Thailand and Laos as part of their overall Indochina defense strategy. Events internal to South Vietnam and the greater Indochina region compelled Pacific Command to more critically assess North Vietnam's intentions, as well as those of China, and the means by which the Communists might overcome the advantages the U.S. military held in technology and firepower.

The rationale behind American plans centered on the type of conflict into which the Joint Chiefs believed U.S. forces were entering. In 1959, the Communists started to view reunification in terms of years and not as a result of a single overt military invasion. Graham Cosmas wrote in *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation* that the DRV recognized that a conventional invasion, with or without China, would not achieve reunification. Instead, it would have to combine "large-scale military campaigns with widespread popular uprisings" to realize this goal.³¹ Getting the support of the people would take time. Cognizant of America's pledge to protect the south from invasion and of its advantages in military technology and firepower, the north decided instead to present numerous conventional and unconventional challenges to RVN officials and U.S. officials and their allies to resolve. Beginning first with the rise of the Communist Pathet Lao insurgency in Laos in 1957, the north put pressure on the south by creating instability on its borders. Then, in 1960, the DRV set conditions for war in the RVN when it revised its 1946 constitution. In it, the ruling Lao Dong (Vietnamese Workers) Party drafted a proclamation directing its forces to prepare to defend the north and liberate the south. The same decree gave formal rise to the southern branch of the

Lao Dong, known formally as the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), with the mission of undermining the RVN government and stirring resentment among the southern people toward their government and military.³²

Recognizing the United States was likely to suspect DRV involvement in violating the Geneva Accords by undermining the RVN government, Communist officials attempted to conceal their actions by encouraging nationalists and other non-Communist organizations to participate in reunification efforts. These groups formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in December 1960, the majority of which was Communist.³³ The growth of the movement prompted the Lao Dong to form the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) to coordinate all political and military activities south of the demilitarized zone. Under COSVN's direction, the NLF carried out day-to-day guerrilla actions in the south. Similar to Mao's people's war in China, the NLF's strategy consisted of military operations at the regional, provincial/district, and village levels to wage a guerrilla campaign to gain the support of the population and control the countryside before "consolidating and expanding the base areas" and to strengthen "the people's forces in all respects . . . in order to advance to building a large, strong armed force which can, along with all the people, defeat the enemy troops and win ultimate victory."³⁴ The result was a massive expansion of the NLF in slightly more than two years. According to Cosmas's estimates, the

³⁰ Spector, *Advice and Support*.

³¹ Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2006), 72. MACV = Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

³² According to Douglas Pike, there are numerous interchangeable titles historians use to describe the political and military organizations associated with the war. The NLF, referred to by South Vietnamese officials as the "communist traitors to Vietnam," or Viet Cong (VC), was a politico-military Communist-dominated nationalist insurgency seeking to liberate the country and reunify the north and the south. It was the successor to the Viet Minh (the precursor to the NLF), which was a collection of Communist and nationalist organizations formed to oust the Japanese and French between 1944 and 1954. The official title of the NLF's fighting arm was the People's Liberation Armed Forces, or PLAF. See Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

³³ See Pike, *Viet Cong*, 82.

³⁴ Cosmas, *MACV*, 72.

NLF grew “from about 4,000 fulltime fighters in early 1960 to over 20,000,” with as many as “20 battalions, 80 separate companies, and perhaps 100 platoons of widely varying personnel strength,” the bulk of which COSVN deployed in and around Saigon.³⁵ The NLF formed battalion-size units specifically to conduct conventional operations in the central highlands and northern provinces.³⁶

The NLF adhered to the same tactics the Viet Minh used against the French. Fighting units consisted of three elements: main forces, provincial or district units, and local guerrilla forces. The uniformed and well-armed, organized, and equipped main forces consisted of battalion- and regimental-size units who took their orders directly from the COSVN and subordinate regional headquarters. These main forces were for major operations and attacks against large French (and later American) formations only. The provincial and district units were a composite of guerrilla and main force units operating at the company and battalion levels. Although equipped and organized similar to the main forces, these units were not nearly as capable. Their primary role was small-scale raids and other offensive actions.

The least capable armed component outside the “estimated 20,000 combat troops counted by the allies” was the village-level local guerrillas.³⁷ Formed into platoons or smaller units, guerrillas received their orders from district and village officials. Ill-equipped and untrained, guerrillas lived among the people and harassed South Vietnamese, French, and American units as they moved through or near villages. Their greatest attribute was conducting reconnaissance for the main forces as well as providing logistics support and partially trained replacements.³⁸ All levels of the Communist armed division relied upon the villages for food, clothing, recruits, labor, and medical supplies. Most of their weapons and ammunition, however, came from the DRV or were fabrications. As early as 1962, the NLF built base areas in the rural areas and

outside the RVN government’s sphere of control and influence. The Marines’ long-term plan in the northern provinces was to retake these areas, along with the enclaves, one at a time.

Successful incursions into Laos and inconspicuous interference in the south’s deteriorating domestic affairs shifted the momentum in favor of the Communists. Instability in the south increased as the Communists’ political cadres, educated and trained in the north just after the partitioning of Vietnam, returned to their hamlets and villages to play on the fear and anger of disenfranchised farmers and to challenge the legitimacy of the RVN government.³⁹ Promising sweeping land reforms in exchange for their loyal support—and punishment for their betrayal—the initial wave of political cadres made immediate gains among the people living in the rural areas and away from the large and more prosperous cities. At the same time, Chinese and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) advisors and equipment outfitted district and main force units. To ensure an endless flow of weapons and ammunition, the NVA carved out new infiltration routes leading to and from South Vietnam and expanded existing pathways.

The Pacific Command’s responsibility to plan for military action brought about a less centralized and unconventional way of thinking as well as a broader perspective emphasizing greater awareness of the regional situation and not one focused solely on the RVN. The principal issue prompting planners to revisit their earlier planning considerations was the potential for invading forces to use new and multiple routes. Since two of the three anticipated routes crossed through neighboring Laos and Cambodia, the security and stability of those countries were important to the South Vietnamese government. Border control, therefore, was important. Due to the RVN’s geographic disposition and the presence of Communist forces in Laos and Cambodia, planners saw value in developing more inclusive U.S. action.

The conditions in Laos, more so than in Cambodia and the RVN, convinced planners that a new and

³⁵ Cosmas, *MACV*.

³⁶ Cosmas, *MACV*.

³⁷ Cosmas, *MACV*, 72–73.

³⁸ Pike, *Viet Cong*, 79.

³⁹ Pike, *Viet Cong*, 82.

comprehensive series of plans reflecting simultaneous actions in different parts of Indochina was necessary. Known as Operations Plan 32: Defense of Indochina (OPLAN 32), the successor to OPLAN 46-56 was America's first real attempt to bring together military forces from throughout Southeast Asia to contain Communism and, specifically, to prevent the fall of Indochina entirely.⁴⁰ The series of plans consisted of actions in the RVN to counter both a conventional ground invasion and an insurgency, as well as actions to defeat DRV-backed insurgencies threatening Laos and Thailand. Actions specific to South Vietnam fell under OPLAN 32-59.

OPLAN 32 consisted of four distinct phases to counter or combat Communist aggression: Phase I-Alert; Phase II-Counterinsurgency; Phase III-Direct North Vietnamese attack; and Phase IV-Direct Chinese attack. In Phase I, U.S. forces were to assemble and to make preparations to respond to deployment orders regarding either or both scenarios. Phase II "extended from the time the United States decided to take military action against a Communist insurgency until the friendly government regained control or the conflict escalated into a full-scale local war."⁴¹ Although Phase III put American forces in action against the DRV specifically, Phase IV dealt with actions against China in the event of its direct involvement in any ground invasion.⁴² Concerning the Marines, Phase II entailed a "scaled-down version of the Phase

III deployment, with a portion of the Marine force going to Da Nang and two Army brigades to the Saigon area."⁴³ In Phases III and IV, a full Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) would deploy to Da Nang, with an Army division deploying to Qui Nhon and the central highlands and an Army airborne brigade to Saigon.⁴⁴ These forces were to assist RVN forces in blocking the Communist attack down the coast and against Saigon. Their principal mission was to defend the developed coastal areas, thereby freeing RVN units to take the offensive.

OPLAN 32 architects, unlike those of previous plans, conceded to the idea that an insurgency was likely and that by inciting instability in a neighboring country the Communists were attempting to divert U.S. attention and, if possible, military resources away from South Vietnam. The final draft of OPLAN 32 left open the possibility for American ground forces to "engage in unspecified counter-guerrilla activities" after turning back the anticipated ground invasion.⁴⁵ In the event of calling on U.S. forces to counter an insurgency, planners decided the same enclaves used as part of the defensive and counterattack against the ground invasion would still serve as bases of operations.

The presence of Communist forces in Laos that had remained in place by the Geneva Accords left the Royal Lao Government (an ally to the United States) and neighboring Thailand vulnerable to influence and attack. As the situation in Laos intensified, planners focused on developing a Lao-specific branch plan. With this in mind, the Pacific Command added OPLAN 32-59 (L) in June 1959 to prepare for unilateral U.S. military action to restore "stability and friendly control of Laos in the event it was threatened by Communist insurgency."⁴⁶ A theme common to all of the operation plans for Indochina was the rapid

⁴⁰ The number 32 signifies the overall purpose of the plan, which was to defend Indochina. With each plan's revision, planners attached the year in which the original work on the plan began (i.e., OPLAN 46-56 began in 1956). For specific situations in the RVN and in Laos that might be unrelated to the other, different numbering conventions existed. For example, OPLAN 37-64 was to stabilize the south, while OPLAN 99-64 was the effort to stabilize Laos, but only after the 1962 Geneva Accords made Laos off-limits to U.S. plans to protect South Vietnam. Each subplan provided specific guidance for confined missions or to achieve a specific result (e.g., OPLAN 34-64 Covert Actions in North Vietnam). Regardless of the specific situation, location, and mission, all plans fell under the overall OPLAN 32 construct. See *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-4.

⁴¹ *CINCPAC Command History, 1960* (Honolulu, HI: Headquarters of the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, 1961), 21-24. CINCPAC = Commander in Chief, Pacific.

⁴² *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-5.

⁴³ Cosmas, *MACV*, 188.

⁴⁴ Cosmas, *MACV*.

⁴⁵ Cosmas, *MACV*.

⁴⁶ Edward J. Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*, vol. 2, *From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1986), 26; and Norman B. Hannah, *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1987).

deployment of conventional military forces. OPLAN 32 (L) was no different, but this time America's quick response was for securing airfields and the Mekong River crossing points connecting Seno and Vientiane, Laos, to Thailand. Those actions included a sizeable Marine air-ground commitment.

President Kennedy's election in 1960 brought with it several dramatic changes to U.S. military policy toward Indochina. It also impacted joint military planning and the Marine Corps' potential role in the war there. The first change came with President Kennedy's pledge to rebuild the U.S. Armed Services. Allan R. Millett explained in *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* that under Kennedy, the Marine Corps "began a five-year surge in readiness that brought it to its highest level of peacetime effectiveness by the eve of the Vietnam War."⁴⁷ Kennedy's rationale for restoring traditional military capabilities was to ensure that the United States possessed both feasible and credible counters to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's encroachment into Western Europe. The most significant change, however, would be Kennedy's pledge to counter Khrushchev's declaration to support unconditionally wars of national liberation around the world. Indigenous rebellions and popular insurgencies in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and in other parts of Central America, Africa, and Indochina were but a few examples.⁴⁸

Countering Soviet support for wars of national liberation was one of Kennedy's first directives to the Joint Chiefs. He tasked the Service chiefs with developing and including special warfare and counterinsurgency doctrine in Service training and professional military education. At the same time, Kennedy increased defense spending to prepare the Services to fight conventional wars. The Services responded to Kennedy's Flexible Response policy by overhauling

Service-specific roles and responsibilities to meet his mandate for providing courses of action other than the nuclear option championed by President Eisenhower in his New Look initiative beginning in 1953.⁴⁹ Despite Kennedy's interest in special/counterinsurgency warfare, he and Secretary McNamara wanted a Marine Corps "capable of sustained combat" against a peer competitor and on land.⁵⁰ The Marine Corps was already moving in that direction. A decade earlier, the 19th Commandant, General Clifton B. Cates, stressed that the Service build a "solid foundation of competence in conventional land warfare," adding that "if the occasion demands it" Marine forces will be "capable of moving in and fighting side by side with Army divisions."⁵¹

In 1951, Marine Corps doctrine writers began emphasizing a quick-strike capability as opposed to the Army's heavier and more deliberate land warfighting doctrine focusing on both offensive and defensive thinking. Service doctrine under General Cates centered on creating a force capable of seizing and holding objectives, such as seaports and airfields, to support the arrival of a larger Marine and Army force. Under Flexible Response, however, the Marines would not return immediately to amphibious ships waiting offshore. Instead, they would continue limited offensive and defensive operations to support the larger ground campaign as well as keeping lines of communication and resupply routes open for Army forces fighting farther inland. Rather than operating from ships, base

⁴⁷ Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 543.

⁴⁸ *Analysis of the Khrushchev Speech of January 6, 1961: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-seventh Congress, First Session, Testimony of Dr. Stefan T. Possony, June 16, 1961* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961).

⁴⁹ *Flexible response or flexible deterrent options* refer to a U.S. defense strategy that offered a wide range of diplomatic, political, economic, and military options to deter an enemy attack. The term *flexible response* first appears in Gen Maxwell D. Taylor, USA (Ret), *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), which sharply criticized U.S. national security policy. Eisenhower's New Look approach relied heavily on the capacity for a devastating assault with nuclear weapons—massive retaliation—to fight Soviet military provocations, regardless of whether they involved nuclear weapons or not. The Eisenhower administration thought it could deter all forms of aggression by the Soviet Union and China without maintaining expensive and large conventional military forces.

⁵⁰ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 546.

⁵¹ Col John E. Greenwood, "The Pre-war Era," *Marine Corps Gazette* 56, no. 9 (September 1972): 37.

areas similar to the beachheads of the Second World War would provide the Marines with intermediate logistics support, artillery emplacements, and shore-based command-and-control nodes. With additional capabilities, the Marine force could extend or duplicate their beachheads farther inland, if necessary.⁵²

While the Marine Corps improved its warfighting capacity, Pacific Command planners considered with great certainty that a DRV-sponsored insurgency was now the most likely threat to the RVN and that the long-anticipated conventional invasion was less likely. Counterinsurgency warfare and military support to political, social, and economic concepts received greater attention. Up to this point, U.S. advisors concentrated on preparing RVN forces to repel a conventional ground invasion. After conventionally organized and equipped NLF battalions routed Army, Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), units in 1961, President Kennedy sent his chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Maxwell Taylor, to South Vietnam to assess the situation and recommend a way forward. Taylor's trip led to the establishment of a new command structure, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), and the quadrupling of American personnel supporting its mission. He brought back a profound understanding of the conflict and a cautious tone concerning America's direct military involvement in the fighting.⁵³

Unlike Taylor, the Joint Chiefs resisted widening America's advisory-and-assistance role. Although Commandant General David M. Shoup had a close professional relationship with Kennedy, it did not prevent him from being one of the more vocal opponents of America's and the Marine Corps' potential involvement in the conflict, particularly in a counterinsurgency role.⁵⁴ Shoup did just enough to convince Kennedy that the Marine Corps followed his directive to incorporate counterinsurgency warfare into

its doctrine and training. Historian Howard Jablon observed in an article on General Shoup that, despite Shoup's many accomplishments, he failed to convince Kennedy that "counterinsurgency warfare was unrealistic" and that the Marines were not suited for nation-building.⁵⁵ Given the option, Shoup wanted to keep from involving Marines in these types of conflicts.

The Pacific Command offered few deviations to their theories on both an overt and covert Communist takeover of the RVN. With President Kennedy's deep interest and concern that wars of the future would be both conventional and involve the people and guerrilla elements (as witnessed in Cuba, French Indochina and Algeria, and China), planners wanted to produce options in the event U.S. forces had to confront either or both. To be able to fight an insurgency, while at the same time having the resources in place to counter a conventional invasion, planners identified locations along the Mekong River stretching from Thailand across Laos and the RVN to the Tonkin Gulf and other positions south near the Cambodia-RVN border.⁵⁶ This main line of resistance, supported by the other allied nations making up the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) included armor and infantry forces as part of an anti-infiltration scheme designed to halt the flood of Communist advisors and equipment entering the country from North Vietnam.⁵⁷ These were the same locations planners considered to be potential border crossing points for the conventional ground attack, if it materialized.

In either instance, Marines would play a much larger and preemptive role than Pacific Command planners had conceived and studied with the idea of deploying U.S. ground forces in advance of an invasion and before the insurgency grew out of control. One plan called for a MEB to establish "secure base

⁵² Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 546-47.

⁵³ Maxwell D. Taylor, *Report on General Taylor's Mission to Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1961), 8.

⁵⁴ Frank Wallace, *Kennedy's General: A Story of Uncommon Courage—The Remarkable Life of David M. Shoup* (Berkeley, CA: Minuteman Press, 2013).

⁵⁵ Howard Jablon, "General David M. Shoup, USMC: Warrior and War Protestor," *Journal of Military History* 60, no. 3 (July 1996): 513.

⁵⁶ See Cochran, "American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam."

⁵⁷ Created in 1954, SEATO was a response to the demand that the Southeast Asian area be protected against Communist expansionism. *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-8.

areas” at Da Nang and other coastal locations.⁵⁸ They also envisioned that a separate and larger MEF would either pass through Da Nang to carry out operations against the insurgency or stay “anchored on the coast to preserve additional amphibious option.”⁵⁹ Meanwhile, a second MEF (minus the brigade at Da Nang) would remain at sea “to quarantine South Vietnam to degree necessary to significantly reduce Viet Cong sea infiltration.”⁶⁰ They continued stressing the importance of amphibious operations against the DRV to draw Communist forces away from the demilitarized zone and Laos-Cambodia-RVN triborder region. Roughly 205,000 U.S. combat and support personnel (six divisions) were to support this plan, including nearly 85,000 Marines.⁶¹

To prepare the Marine Corps for the range of potential tasks, General Shoup directed the Landing Force Development Center at Quantico to develop a classified advanced base staff exercise centered on the volatile security situation in and around Da Nang. The goal was to orient officers to the conflict and enhance their understanding of the Marine Corps’ prospective area of operations. He also wanted to glean ideas and concepts from their planning to improve Service-level thinking on the conflict and how the military command in South Vietnam could best deploy and employ Marine forces. All Marine officers assigned as students at both the Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College in Quantico between 1963 and 1965 participated in a planning exercise titled Operation Cormorant. The scenario involved the deployment of a reinforced MEF at Da Nang in an effort to stabilize and defend the enclave in the face of a growing insurgency and looming Communist ground invasion.⁶²

Given the security situation, a common trend Shoup noted was that students saw pacification of the populated areas as a critical task and that it would require a significant number of Marines to secure and hold pacified rear areas. No less important was their regard for conventional military operations. When the 9th MEB landed at Da Nang in 1965, a large number of the Marine officers assigned to the command were uniquely familiar with the security situation in Da Nang and the tasks assigned to them as a result of their Operation Cormorant planning experiences.⁶³ Regardless, Shoup was no more willing to get Marines involved in a purely counterinsurgency role. Instead, he stressed the Marine Corps’ neutrality: “We do not claim to be experts in the entire scope of actions required in counterinsurgency operations. We do stand ready to carry out the military portions of such operations and to contribute to such other aspects of the counterinsurgency effort as may be appropriate.”⁶⁴

In the aftermath of widespread civilian unrest brought on by the insurgency, religious indifferences, repeated changes in the RVN government and military leadership, and ongoing pleas for land and social reforms, U.S. planners replaced OPLAN 32-59 with OPLAN 32-64 in early 1964.⁶⁵ The central theme of planning shifted from defending the south from an outside threat to stabilizing the country in spite of several internal threats. At the same time, to increase pressure on the north to cease its support for the NLF, the Joint Chiefs recommended an air campaign featuring a highly scrutinized list of 94 industrial and military targets to cripple the country’s economy and ability to provide the necessary warfighting materials and resources to sustain the war.⁶⁶ Some of the

⁵⁸ “Commandant of the Marine Corps’ Point Paper on Options in South Vietnam,” March 1964, Greene Papers, 3093, Box 3, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

⁵⁹ “Commandant of the Marine Corps’ Point Paper on Options in South Vietnam.”

⁶⁰ “Commandant of the Marine Corps’ Point Paper on Options in South Vietnam.”

⁶¹ Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, 108.

⁶² Francis J. Kelly, “Advance Base Problems,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 51, no. 11 (November 1967): 47-49.

⁶³ “Da Nang Revisited,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 49, no. 5 (May 1965): 1.

⁶⁴ Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 548. Shoup’s statement comes from an excerpt of his 1963 comments to the U.S. House Armed Services Committee. See *Hearing on Defense Appropriations Fiscal Year 1964, Before the House Armed Services Committee, 88th Congress* (January 1963) (testimony of Gen David M. Shoup, USMC), 909.

⁶⁵ South Vietnam endured failed military coup attempts in 1960 and again in 1964. A successful military coup in November 1963 ended the presidency and life of Ngo Dinh Diem.

⁶⁶ Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, 108.

perspectives from previous plans gained new life. In OPLAN 32-64, planners reintroduced three invasion routes that were identified in earlier plans, only this time they looked to these locations as crossing points for insurgents and NVA forces slipping into the south from the north, Laos, and Cambodia.⁶⁷ The plan established border control points to monitor these areas specifically. OPLAN 32-64 called attention to several major sea and coastal infiltration points as well.

Pressure to involve American ground forces accelerated in 1964 after a series of ARVN battlefield setbacks convinced U.S. political and military officials that the South Vietnamese government could not win the war. A once-cautious General Westmoreland, who assumed command of USMACV in June, contemplated implementing the defensive line outlined in OPLAN 32-59. In his proposal to the Joint Chiefs to consider the measure, he suggested deploying mobile light infantry units near the demilitarized zone to both delay invading forces and clear and hold guerrilla base areas and surrounding Saigon with an elaborate system of defenses formed around air cavalry units and mechanized and armor divisions extending north and west of the capital city.⁶⁸ In keeping with the plan, Marine forces would operate in the northern provinces, where they were to establish beachheads adjacent to the largest enclaves and where any number of beaches could be used for landing Marines and resupplies.⁶⁹ If the Communist ground invasion never materialized, the role of U.S. ground forces was to advise and build the RVN's military's fighting capacity in conjunction with support for national pacification programs to reinforce the population's confidence in the government. OPLAN 32-64 represented more than just a new plan; it reflected the way the United States viewed the evolving situation in South Vietnam.

The Johnson administration considered the NLF closer to overthrowing the RVN government than at any time in the past decade, reigniting both private and public debates over America's direct intervention. With each passing day, Communist political cadres

and guerrilla forces seemingly increased in numbers, popularity, and overall strength. Hanoi viewed the NLF's gains as an opportunity to increase pressure in the demilitarized region, infiltrating more than 12,000 soldiers in 1964 as compared to the 7,900 in 1963.⁷⁰ In the northern provinces, the Marine Corps watched closely as the contact between the ARVN and the main forces and NVA increased in frequency and lethality. In areas where NVA units were purportedly infiltrating, Chinese and Soviet weapons and ammunition surfaced in large quantities, as did reports of soldiers in uniforms and equipment typically worn by the Chinese military.⁷¹ Official intelligence reports described the once relatively quiet northern provinces as a flashpoint. Main force attacks there, compared with the rest of the country, increased from 6 percent in 1963 to 13 percent in 1964.⁷² Although the total number of enemy killed country-wide decreased from 20,573 in 1963 to 16,785 in 1964, the number killed in the northern provinces tripled from 664 to 1,887.⁷³ During 1963, 10 percent of the ARVN soldiers killed came as a result of fighting there, an increase of nearly 25 percent.⁷⁴

In light of the increase in NVA activity, Johnson approved intelligence collection operations off North Vietnam, over the demilitarized zone, and along the Ho Chi Minh trail. He also encouraged the RVN government and military to go on the offensive against the NLF. The results of the latter, however, were not what Johnson expected. American military advisors reported wholesale corruption and incompetence at the highest levels of the military and low morale in the ranks as the primary reason for the ARVN's failures. Johnson sought a wider role for U.S. forces, and

⁶⁷ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, 5:3-10-3-12.

⁶⁸ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol. 5.

⁶⁹ *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol. 6, 168.

⁷⁰ *Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March-September 1965* (Pearl Harbor, HI: Headquarters Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, 1965), 12.

⁷¹ *Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March-September 1965*, 13.

⁷² *Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March-September 1965*.

⁷³ *Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March-September 1965*.

⁷⁴ *Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March-September 1965*.

the Tonkin Gulf incidents in August 1964 gave him the justification he needed to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”⁷⁵

By the end of 1964, the South Vietnamese population’s diminished confidence in their government and the ARVN was impacting the country’s daily affairs. The ever-present fear of yet another military coup, coupled with the continuing trend of battlefield defeats, threatened the decades-old American effort to build a strong central government and national military in South Vietnam. The consensus was that the country was sure to collapse if the RVN government, with the assistance of the United States, did not reverse the “losing trend.”⁷⁶ During an official visit in January 1965, one of President Johnson’s top national security advisors, McGeorge Bundy, remarked that “the situation in Vietnam is deteriorating and without new US action, defeat appears inevitable—probably not in a matter of weeks or even months, but within the next year or so. There is still time to turn it around, but not much.”⁷⁷

Still at an impasse as to the depth and degree of direct U.S. military involvement, Johnson was nonetheless resolute in keeping the south free from Communism despite the desperate political and military situations. He believed he was doing as much as he could politically. Militarily, however, Johnson acknowledged that there was still more the United States could, and would likely have to, do. He reached a decision point when the NLF attacked U.S. forces based at Pleiku and Qui Nhon on 7 and 10 February 1965, killing a combined total of 33 servicemembers and

destroying or damaging 52 aircraft.⁷⁸ Similar to the attack against the RVN-U.S. airbase at Bien Hoa outside Saigon on 1 November 1964, NLF guerrillas infiltrated multiple layers of security with relative ease before attacking aircraft revetments and personnel billeting. Unlike in the days following the events at Bien Hoa, however, Johnson responded to the Pleiku and Qui Nhon attacks with Operations Flaming Dart I and II. For the next three weeks, U.S. aircraft struck an NVA compound located at the port city of Dong Hoi in southern DRV and infiltration routes leading into the RVN from across the demilitarized zone and from Laos. Johnson and senior members of his cabinet viewed the air strikes as retaliatory actions and the first steps in pressuring North Vietnam to end its support of the NLF.⁷⁹

Following a mid-February 1965 inspection tour of the military bases supporting the Flaming Dart airstrikes, General Westmoreland’s deputy commander, Army general John L. Throckmorton, voiced his concerns about the security of these installations as well as the protection of U.S. servicemembers and aircraft, citing the attacks at Bien Hoa, Pleiku, and Qui Nhon as evidence to back his concerns.⁸⁰ Troubled by his deputy commander’s assessment, Westmoreland sought permission from Admiral Sharp to employ the 9th MEB, afloat in the South China Sea since January, to secure the Da Nang airbase.⁸¹ Westmoreland’s request for Marines—the second such request in three months (the first came after the Bien Hoa attack)—renewed the debate between civilian and military officials regarding the use of U.S. ground forces and the capacity in which they were to be employed.

The arrival of the 9th MEB marked the end of

⁷⁵ The Tonkin Gulf incident consisted of two engagements between DRV Navy torpedo boats and the American destroyers USS *Maddox* (DD 731) and USS *Turner Joy* (DD 951) off the coast of North Vietnam on 2 and 4 August 1964. House Joint Resolution 1145 passed on 7 August 1964, permitting Johnson to take the necessary action to defend U.S. forces and the RVN from Communist aggression. *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series)*, vol. 20, *Ninetyth Cong., Second Session, 1968* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 1.

⁷⁶ Gen Westmoreland and other civilian and military officials frequently used this expression to describe the direction of the war.

⁷⁷ Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, 309.

⁷⁸ John Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive, 1965–1968* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Office of Air Force History, 1988), 17, 31.

⁷⁹ Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam*, 31.

⁸⁰ USMACV to CINCPAC, 20 February 1965, Box 237, Subject files, Office of the Secretary of Defense History, Washington, DC, hereafter USMACV February memo; and E. C. Janicik, *Southeast Asia Force Deployment Buildup, Part 1, 1965*, Incident for Defense Analysis Report R-137 (Washington, DC: Weapon Systems Evaluation Group, 1968), 33.

⁸¹ USMACV February memo; and Janicik, *Southeast Asia Force Deployment Buildup*.

the advisory-and-assistance era and opened a new phase of American involvement. The absence of any study on the Marines' arrival from the historiography of the Vietnam War leads many to view the Da Nang landing as hasty, though long before the landing the Marine Corps already owned a vital part of the plan for combating Communist ground forces and stabilizing Indochina and the RVN from the start. Multiple plans directing military intervention during the later stages of the First Indochina War put Marines as the vanguard of any U.S. force committed to the region.

Although the circumstances prompting the landing at Da Nang were different than planners originally anticipated, the idea that it would be Marines landing there and operating beyond Da Nang was anything but hastily decided or new. Even after securing Da Nang, there was still a predetermined plan for what the Marines would do next; yet for reasons unknown, historians tend to overlook the central purpose of both, lessening the meaning and significance of the Marine commitment to the RVN and perpetuating a misleading view of their intended role.

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