

Vietnam 1965: The Day It Became the Longest War

The following is the Introduction to the book "Cheers and Tears: a Marine's Story of Combat in Peace and War " by Lt. Gen. Charles Cooper, USMC (Ret.) with Richard Goodspeed (Trafford Publishing, 2006). The book is available at Amazon dot com and many book retailers. This chapter was provided by Lt. Gen. Cooper for posting.

The Day It Became the Longest War

"The President will see you at two o'clock."

It was a beautiful fall day in November of 1965, early in the Vietnam War-too beautiful a day to be what many of us, anticipating it, had been calling "the day of reckoning." We didn't know how accurate that label would be.

The Pentagon is a busy place. Its workday starts early-especially if, as the expression goes, "there's a war on." By seven o'clock, the staff of Admiral David L. McDonald, the Navy's senior admiral and Chief of Naval Operations, had started to work. Shortly after seven, Admiral McDonald arrived and began making final preparations for a meeting with President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

The Vietnam War was in its first year, and its uncertain direction troubled Admiral McDonald and the other service chiefs. They'd had a number of disagreements with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara about strategy, and had finally requested a private meeting with the Commander in Chief-a perfectly legitimate procedure. Now, after many delays, the Joint Chiefs were finally to have that meeting. They hoped it would determine whether the US military would continue its seemingly directionless buildup to fight a protracted ground war, or take bold measures that would bring the war to an early and victorious end.

The bold measures they would propose were to apply massive air power to the head of the enemy, Hanoi, and to close North Vietnam's harbors by mining them. The situation was not a simple one, and for several reasons. The most important reason was that North Vietnam's neighbor to the north was communist China.

Only 12 years had passed since the Korean War had ended in stalemate. The aggressors in that war had been the North Koreans. When the North Koreans' defeat had appeared to be inevitable, communist China had sent hundreds of thousands of its Peoples' Liberation Army "volunteers" to the rescue.

Now, in this new war, the North Vietnamese aggressor had the logistic support of the Soviet Union and, more to the point, of neighboring communist China. Although we had the air and naval forces with which to paralyze North Vietnam, we had to consider the possible reactions of the Chinese and the Russians. Both China and the Soviet Union had pledged to support North Vietnam in the "war of national liberation" it was fighting to reunite the divided country, and both had the wherewithal to cause major problems.

An important unknown was what the Russians would do if prevented from delivering goods to their communist protégé in Hanoi. A more important question concerned communist China, next-door neighbor to North Vietnam. How would the Chinese react to a massive pummeling of their ally? More specifically, would they enter the war as they had done in North Korea? Or would they let the Vietnamese, for centuries a traditional enemy, fend for themselves?

The service chiefs had considered these and similar questions, and had also asked the Central Intelligence Agency for answers and estimates.

The CIA was of little help, though it produced reams of text, executive summaries of the texts, and briefs of the executive summaries—all top secret, all extremely sensitive, and all of little use.

The principal conclusion was that it was impossible to predict with any accuracy what the Chinese or Russians might do. Despite the lack of a clear-cut intelligence estimate, Admiral McDonald and the other Joint Chiefs did what they were paid to do and reached a conclusion. They decided unanimously that the risk of the Chinese or Soviets reacting to massive US measures taken in North Vietnam was acceptably low, but only if we acted without delay. Unfortunately, the Secretary of Defense and his coterie of civilian “whiz kids” did not agree with the Joint Chiefs, and McNamara and his people were the ones who were actually steering military strategy.

In the view of the Joint Chiefs, the United States was piling on forces in Vietnam without understanding the consequences. In the view of McNamara and his civilian team, we were doing the right thing. This was the fundamental dispute that had caused the Chiefs to request the seldom-used private audience with the Commander in Chief in order to present their military recommendations directly to him. McNamara had finally granted their request.

The 1965 Joint Chiefs of Staff had ample combat experience. Each was serving in his third war.

The Chairman was General Earle Wheeler, US Army, highly regarded by the other members.

General Harold Johnson was the Army Chief of Staff. A World War II prisoner of the Japanese, he was a soft-spoken, even-tempered, deeply religious man.

General John P. McConnell, Air Force Chief of Staff, was a native of Arkansas and a 1932 graduate of West Point.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps was General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., a slim, short, all-business Marine. General Greene was a Naval Academy graduate and a zealous protector of the Marine Corps concept of controlling its own air resources as part of an integrated air-ground team.

Last and by no means least was Admiral McDonald, a Georgia minister's son, also a Naval Academy graduate, and a naval aviator. While Admiral McDonald was a most capable leader, he was also a reluctant warrior. He did not like what he saw emerging as a national commitment. He did not really want the US to get involved with land warfare, believing as he did that the Navy could apply sea power against North Vietnam very effectively by mining, blockading, and assisting in a bombing campaign, and in this way help to bring the war to a swift and satisfactory conclusion.

The Joint Chiefs intended that the prime topics of the meeting with the President would be naval matters—the mining and blockading of the port of Haiphong and naval support of a bombing campaign aimed at Hanoi. For that reason, the Navy was to furnish a briefing map, and that became my responsibility. We mounted a suitable map on a large piece of plywood, then coated it with clear acetate so that the chiefs could mark on it with grease pencils during the discussion. The whole thing weighed about 30 pounds.

The Military Office at the White House agreed to set up an easel in the Oval Office to hold the map. I would accompany Admiral McDonald to the White House with the map, put the map in place when the meeting started, then get out. There would be no strap-hangers at the military summit meeting with Lyndon Johnson. The map and I joined Admiral McDonald in his staff car for the short drive to the White House, a drive that was memorable only because of the silence. My admiral was totally preoccupied.

The chiefs' appointment with the President was for two o'clock, and Admiral McDonald and I arrived about 20 minutes early. The chiefs were ushered into a fairly large room across the hall from the Oval Office. I propped the map board on the arms of a fancy chair where all could view it, left two of the grease pencils in the tray attached to the bottom of the board, and stepped out into the corridor. One of the chiefs shut the door, and they conferred in private until someone on the White House staff interrupted them about fifteen minutes later.

As they came out, I retrieved the map, then joined them in the corridor outside the President's office. Precisely at two o'clock President Johnson emerged from the Oval Office and greeted the chiefs. He was all charm. He was also big: at three or more inches over six feet tall and something on the order of 250 pounds, he was bigger than any of the chiefs. He personally ushered them into his office, all the while delivering gracious and solicitous comments with a Texas accent far more pronounced than the one that came through when he spoke on television. Holding the map board as the chiefs entered, I peered between them, trying to find the easel. There was none. The President looked at me, grasped the situation at once, and invited me in, adding, "You can stand right over here." I had become an easel—one with eyes and ears.

To the right of the door, not far inside the office, large windows framed evergreen bushes growing in a nearby garden. The President's desk and several chairs were farther in, diagonally across the room from the windows. The President positioned me near the windows, then arranged the chiefs in a semicircle in front of the map and its

human easel.

He did not offer them seats: they stood, with those who were to speak-Wheeler, McDonald, and McConnell-standing nearest the President. Paradoxically, the two whose services were most affected by a continuation of the ground buildup in Vietnam-Generals Johnson and Greene-stood farthest from the President. President Johnson stood nearest the door, about five feet from the map.

In retrospect, the setup-the failure to have an easel in place, the positioning of the chiefs on the outer fringe of the office, the lack of seating-did not augur well. The chiefs had expected the meeting to be a short one, and it met that expectation. They also expected it to be of momentous import, and it met that expectation, too. Unfortunately, it also proved to be a meeting that was critical to the proper pursuit of what was to become the longest, most divisive, and least conclusive war in our nation's history-a war that almost tore the nation apart. As General Wheeler started talking, President Johnson peered at the map. In five minutes or so, the general summarized our entry into Vietnam, the current status of forces, and the purpose of the meeting. Then he thanked the President for having given his senior military advisers the opportunity to present their opinions and recommendations. Finally, he noted that although Secretary McNamara did not subscribe to their views, he did agree that a presidential-level decision was required. President Johnson, arms crossed, seemed to be listening carefully. The essence of General Wheeler's presentation was that we had come to an early moment of truth in our ever-increasing Vietnam involvement. We had to start using our principal strengths-air and naval power-to punish the North Vietnamese, or we would risk becoming involved in another protracted Asian ground war with no prospects of a satisfactory solution.

Speaking for the chiefs, General Wheeler offered a bold course of action that would avoid protracted land warfare. He proposed that we isolate the major port of Haiphong through naval mining, blockade the rest of the North Vietnamese coastline, and simultaneously start bombing Hanoi with B-52's. General Wheeler then asked Admiral McDonald to describe how the Navy and Air Force would combine forces to mine the waters off Haiphong and establish a naval blockade. When Admiral McDonald finished, General McConnell added that speed of execution would be essential, and that we would have to make the North Vietnamese believe that we would increase the level of punishment if they did not sue for peace.

Normally, time dims our memories-but it hasn't dimmed this one. My memory of Lyndon Johnson on that day remains crystal clear. While General Wheeler, Admiral McDonald, and General McConnell spoke, he seemed to be listening closely, communicating only with an occasional nod. When General McConnell finished, General Wheeler asked the President if he had any questions. Johnson waited a moment or so, then turned to Generals Johnson and Greene, who had remained silent during the briefing, and asked, "Do you fully support these ideas?"

He followed with the thought that it was they who were providing the ground troops, in

effect acknowledging that the Army and the Marines were the services that had most to gain or lose as a result of this discussion. Both generals indicated their agreement with the proposal. Seemingly deep in thought, President Johnson turned his back on them for a minute or so, then suddenly discarding the calm, patient demeanor he had maintained throughout the meeting, whirled to face them and exploded. I almost dropped the map.

He screamed obscenities, he cursed them personally, he ridiculed them for coming to his office with their "military advice." Noting that it was he who was carrying the weight of the free world on his shoulders, he called them filthy names- shitheads, dumb shits, pompous assholes-and used "the F-word" as an adjective more freely than a Marine in boot camp would use it. He then accused them of trying to pass the buck for World War III to him.

It was unnerving, degrading.

After the tantrum, he resumed the calm, relaxed manner he had displayed earlier and again folded his arms. It was as though he had punished them, cowed them, and would now control them. Using soft-spoken profanities, he said something to the effect that they all knew now that he did not care about their military advice.

After disparaging their abilities, he added that he did expect their help.

He suggested that each one of them change places with him and assume that five incompetents had just made these "military recommendations." He told them that he was going to let them go through what he had to go through when idiots gave him stupid advice, adding that he had the whole damn world to worry about, and it was time to "see what kind of guts you have."

He paused, as if to let it sink in. The silence was like a palpable solid, the tension like that in a drumhead. After thirty or forty seconds of this, he turned to General Wheeler and demanded that Wheeler say what he would do if he were the President of the United States.

General Wheeler took a deep breath before answering. He was not an easy man to shake: his calm response set the tone for the others. He had known coming in, as had the others, that Lyndon Johnson was an exceptionally strong personality, and a venal and vindictive man as well. He had known that the stakes were high, and now realized that McNamara had prepared Johnson carefully for this meeting, which had been a charade.

Looking President Johnson squarely in the eye, General Wheeler told him that he understood the tremendous pressure and sense of responsibility Johnson felt. He added that probably no other President in history had had to make a decision of this importance, and further cushioned his remarks by saying that no matter how much about the presidency he did understand, there were many things about it that only one

human being could ever understand.

General Wheeler closed his remarks by saying something very close to this: "You, Mr. President, are that one human being. I cannot take your place, think your thoughts, know all you know, and tell you what I would do if I were you. I can't do it, Mr. President. No man can honestly do it. Respectfully, sir, it is your decision and yours alone."

Apparently unmoved, Johnson asked each of the other Chiefs the same question. One at a time, they supported General Wheeler and his rationale. By now, my arms felt as though they were about to break. The map seemed to weigh a ton, but the end appeared to be near. General Greene was the last to speak. When General Greene finished, President Johnson, who was nothing if not a skilled actor, looked sad for a moment, then suddenly erupted again, yelling and cursing, again using language that even a Marine seldom hears. He told them he was disgusted with their naive approach, and that he was not going to let some military idiots talk him into World War III. He ended the conference by shouting "Get the hell out of my office!"

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had done their duty. They knew that the nation was making a strategic military error, and despite the rebuffs of their civilian masters in the Pentagon, they had insisted on presenting the problem as they saw it to the highest authority and recommending solutions. They had done so, and they had been rebuffed. That authority had not only rejected their solutions, but had also insulted and demeaned them.

As Admiral McDonald and I drove back to the Pentagon, he turned to me and said that he had known tough days in his life, and sad ones as well, but ". . . this has got to have been the worst experience I could ever imagine."

The US involvement in Vietnam lasted another ten years.

The irony is that it began to end only when President Richard Nixon, after some backstage maneuvering on the international scene, did precisely what the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended to President Johnson in 1965. Why had Johnson not only dismissed their recommendations, but also ridiculed them? It must have been that Johnson had lacked something. Maybe it was foresight or boldness. Maybe it was the sophistication and understanding it took to deal with complex international issues. Or, since he was clearly a bully, maybe what he lacked was courage. We will never know.

But had General Wheeler and the others received a fair hearing, and had their recommendations received serious study, the United States may well have saved the lives of most of its more than 55,000 sons who died in a war that its major architect, Robert Strange McNamara, now considers to have been a tragic mistake.