problems. North Vietnamese leaders most likely held back in order to test the possibilities of achieving their goals peacefully, either through a deal with Nhu or, more likely, by waiting for Diem’s woes to mount to the point where the United States might become willing to withdraw on terms favorable to Hanoi. Hostile moves promised to demolish these possibilities by provoking the United States to intervene more directly in the war or to overthrow Diem and bring to power a new leadership more subservient to Washington.

While Hanoi held back, key governments around the world were undoubtedly amenable to a settlement. Soviet leaders, even more than their North Vietnamese allies, feared a major war involving the United States and quietly kept alive the possibility of talks. In the West, meanwhile, the British and French governments worried that the United States faced bleak prospects in Vietnam and would be distracted from more important parts of the world—notably Europe—if it became embroiled in a war. West European interest in negotiations peaked on August 29, 1963, when French president Charles de Gaulle called publicly for talks to neutralize Vietnam. Although he did not spell out a detailed plan, de Gaulle envisioned an agreement among the great powers to reunify Vietnam under a coalition government that would ensure neither communist nor Western domination of the country. Whether neutralization would in fact prevent an outright communist takeover was an open question, but many champions of this scheme considered that grim possibility preferable to an even grimmer war.

The rapid deterioration in South Vietnam led many Americans to think in similar ways. Influential newspapers advocated neutralization, while some liberals in Congress suggested using Diem’s brutality as a pretext for negotiating a withdrawal from South Vietnam. As before, however, appeals for talks gained no traction within the executive branch. Indeed, Kennedy’s aides lashed out against Nhu’s flirtations with Hanoi and de Gaulle’s proposal. The administration responded to the crisis in South Vietnam not by scaling back its commitment but by seeking a more compliant leadership in Saigon. At first, Americans demanded simply that Diem drop Ngo Dinh Nhu—the focus of U.S. anger—from the government and cooperate more closely with Washington. When Diem refused, the Kennedy administration turned to a more extreme solution: a coup d’état to install entirely new leaders. That possibility emerged in late August 1963, when a group of disaffected South Vietnamese generals secretly contacted U.S. representatives to test Washington’s interest in overthrowing Diem. Senior U.S. officials differed over the idea, but Kennedy authorized Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, to give the green light.

For a time, nothing happened. Coup plans unraveled as suspicion and uncertainty spread among key plotters. Given a chance to reconsider their options, American policymakers bickered angrily—a sign of mounting frustration among officials who lacked any attractive options. Some advocated pressing ahead with a coup. Others warned that removing Diem would only heighten South Vietnam’s instability. The
As exultant crowds in Saigon cheered the army and tore up portraits of Diem, Lodge congratulated himself on the coup. “The prospects now are for a shorter war,” he cabled to Washington, confident that the new government would press the anticomunist fight more assertively. But such optimism soon evaporated as U.S. officials realized they had misjudged their co-conspirators. Although headed by military officers, the new regime reflected pervasive war weariness throughout South Vietnamese society. The junta aimed not so much to step up the war effort as to broaden the Saigon government’s base of political support in order to negotiate with the NLF from a position of greater strength.

Making matters worse for Washington, Hanoi responded to the coup by sharply intensifying the war in the South. Over the previous two years, North Vietnamese and NLF leaders had generally agreed on the need to restrain communist military operations, partly out of fear of irritating Moscow but largely on the calculation that there was no point in antagonizing the United States when the Diem regime seemed likely to collapse under the weight of its own shortcomings. The coup eliminated the latter motive for caution by bringing to power a South Vietnamese government that appeared, at least initially, to enjoy the twin advantages of considerable popularity and redoubled U.S. backing. At contentious party meetings in November and December 1963, communist leaders agreed that the time had come for bolder military moves. Hanoi still showed a degree of caution, rejecting proposals to send large numbers of regular North Vietnamese troops across the seventeenth
parallel. But they decided nonetheless to strengthen the Southern insurgency in hopes of scoring quick battlefield victories that would bring the NLF to power before the United States could intervene more fully.

These decisions marked a major victory for Le Duan, who had been arguing for years in favor of bold action in the South, and other militants such as Le Duc Tho and Nguyen Chi Thanh, party leaders who would become increasingly prominent in managing the war. Meanwhile, party officials who backed a more cautious policy were increasingly marginalized. The hawks, openly espousing a Maoist vision of aggressive insurgent warfare over the restrained approach preferred by Moscow, ousted many moderates from government posts and placed some under house arrest. Revealingly, even Ho Chi Minh, who had thrived for so many years through his remarkable ability to bring together revolutionaries of different political stripes, found himself on the sidelines. At more than seventy years old, the towering figure of the Vietnamese revolution became a figurehead with little authority over day-to-day policymaking. The coup thus back fired on the United States, exacerbating the political problems that it faced in South Vietnam and emboldening militants in Hanoi.

Another momentous development in November 1963—the assassination of Kennedy—compounded the setback by ensuring that there would be no reappraisal of the American commitment in the months ahead. To be sure, it is doubtful that Kennedy would have taken early steps toward negotiation or withdrawal. For more than two years, after all, he had massively expanded the American investment in Vietnam. Yet Kennedy possessed a nuanced grasp of the difficulties confronting the United States in Vietnam and saw reasons to avoid introduction of combat forces. It is plausible to speculate that Washington might have pulled back from Vietnam rather than send Americans into battle if he, rather than the less subtle Lyndon Johnson, had occupied the White House in 1965, when a choice could no longer be deferred.

From the outset of his presidency, Johnson took a belligerent position on Vietnam. “We should all of us let no day go by without asking whether we are doing everything we can to win the struggle there,” he told administration officials during his second week in office. Johnson’s attitude reflected his unwavering acceptance of the geostrategic assumptions that had underpinned American involvement in Vietnam for several years. As Senate majority leader in the 1950s and then as vice president, he had spoken apocalyptically about the risks of communist advances, warning at one point that the United States would have to “surrender the Pacific and take up our defenses on our own shores” if the communists prevailed in Southeast Asia. After rising to the presidency, Johnson saw additional reasons to take a hard line. For one, he believed that at a moment of national grieving for Kennedy it was politically vital to stick with his predecessor’s policies, especially in foreign affairs. Johnson lacked confidence in that arena and leaned heavily on Kennedy’s key advisers.

The new president also believed that he needed to take a
president and his advisers refused to consider backing down. The key question for them was not whether, but how, to prop up South Vietnam. Increasingly, they concluded that the United States, to have any hope of success in Southeast Asia, must expand its military activities. Planning focused on an old idea—the introduction of American combat troops to bolster the South Vietnamese army—and a new one: launching air attacks against North Vietnam to coerce it into ending support for the Southern insurgency. By the middle of 1964, a consensus had formed among Johnson’s key advisers and the military that one or both of these moves would be necessary.

Yet Johnson was loath to take either step in the short term. He worried that the Khanh government was too frail to withstand a larger war. More important, he feared that any abrupt departures in Vietnam might hurt him in the presidential election that November. Although polls showed that he enjoyed a huge lead over his Republican challenger, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, Johnson believed that a major expansion of the war might cause both liberals and centrists to have second thoughts. The trick was to display firmness on the Vietnam issue while deferring any dramatic moves until after the election.

**DECISIONS FOR WAR**

Keenly attuned to his electoral prospects, Johnson authorized only minor invigoration of the war effort in 1964, even as he and his advisers contemplated a major escalation later. Johnson increased the number of U.S. military advisers to 23,300 by the end of the year and appointed a new American commander, General William Westmoreland, in the hope that the veteran of the Second World War and Korea would deliver better results. In a sign of things to come, the administration also approved a plan for gradually stepping up military pressure on North Vietnam, especially by supporting South Vietnamese sabotage raids against Northern targets.

These initiatives, like so many that had preceded them, did little to strengthen South Vietnam. In only one respect—the one that mattered most to Johnson in the near term—did he find success during 1964: he managed to keep Vietnam from harming his electoral prospects. In fact, he probably enhanced his standing by demonstrating a deft blend of boldness and restraint when a crisis erupted three months before the vote. On August 2, an American destroyer, the USS Maddox, came under attack from North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin in retaliation against South Vietnamese commando raids on the Northern coast. The Maddox, unharmed, returned fire and sank one torpedo boat. Two nights later, the captain of another destroyer, the USS Turner Joy, reported on the basis of sketchy radar and sonar readings that his ship had been similarly targeted.

Some U.S. officials doubted that the second attack had actually occurred—skepticism vindicated by later investigations. But Johnson had little interest in ascertaining the facts. Rather, sensing an opportunity to mollify conservatives who had been calling for more aggressive action in Vietnam, he ordered an air strike against North
Vietnamese naval installations. Johnson also exploited the episode by persuading Congress to give him the power to take further military action if he saw fit. On August 7, after minimal debate, the House and Senate overwhelmingly passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized the president to take “all necessary measures” to resist aggression in Vietnam. With politicians across the political spectrum eager to burnish their anti-communist credentials ahead of the November elections, even members of Congress skeptical of American commitments in Vietnam backed the measure without quibble. The only opposition came from two liberal Democrats, Senators Ernest Gruening of Alaska and Wayne Morse of Oregon.

The Gulf of Tonkin affair served Johnson’s political interests in various ways. The air strike, combined with Johnson’s clear affirmations of American support for South Vietnam, produced a 30-point surge in the president’s approval ratings. Even better for Johnson, the episode neutralized Vietnam as a campaign issue. Once he had demonstrated his willingness to use force, the Republicans could no longer assail him for weakness. Newly invulnerable on the right, Johnson accentuated a moderate position on Vietnam over the remainder of the campaign. “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves,” he told one audience. Such assertions enhanced Johnson’s standing with centrist voters who favored firmness against communism but opposed direct involvement of American troops. Partly as a result of his apparent moderation on Vietnam, Johnson won the largest presidential landslide in American history.

The conclusion of the campaign enabled Johnson and his advisors to refocus on Vietnam free of the political calculations that had constrained them for several months. The situation they confronted was more ominous than ever. The increasingly unpopular General Khanh had resigned in August, initiating a series of leadership changes. War weariness and anti-Americanism intensified dramatically over the second half of 1964. Further complicating matters for Washington, Johnson’s air strike against North Vietnam, far from deterring communist activities in the South, had the opposite effect. In September, Hanoi sent units of the regular North Vietnamese army to the South for the first time. Communist leaders, viewing the bombing attacks as the likely first step in a major American escalation, hoped that increased infiltration would bring victory before the United States could intervene more decisively on behalf of Saigon. But Hanoi also braced itself for a protracted international conflict by soliciting greater aid from China and the Soviet Union. Thus did the escalatory cycle take another turn toward full-scale war involving both North Vietnamese and U.S. troops.

The situation in South Vietnam, coupled with fears that Johnson’s sweeping electoral victory might embolden him to step up American involvement, produced a fresh wave of appeals in late 1964 and early 1965 for the United States to pull back. From Canada to Japan, American allies refused persistent U.S. requests for help in Vietnam and warned of mounting risks. French president Charles de Gaulle renewed
his neutralization proposal, insisting that such a scheme, though far from perfect, was better than waging an unwinnable war. Within the Johnson administration, meanwhile, no less a figure than Vice President Hubert Humphrey weighed in against escalation. In a memo to the president in mid-February 1965, Humphrey insisted that Johnson’s massive electoral victory gave him the freedom to draw back from Vietnam without fear of political attack from conservatives. In fact, Humphrey prophetically advised, a major war would create a much more serious problem for Johnson—opposition from his core Democratic Party supporters.

Johnson ignored these appeals and, in a series of crucial decisions from November 1964 to March 1965, dramatically expanded the U.S. military role in Vietnam. Though the administration moved slowly and deliberately during these months, its caution did not reflect uncertainty about the need to expand the war. At each stage, Johnson chose from a narrow range of options, all of which presupposed the necessity of fighting to preserve an anticommunist South Vietnam. Rather, Johnson’s caution reflected three calculations that led him to eschew drastic moves. First, he feared that rapid escalation might provoke China or the Soviet Union to intervene more aggressively in Vietnam, transforming the conflict into a dangerous confrontation between nuclear-armed superpowers. Second, he worried that dramatic steps might topple the teetering South Vietnamese government by inviting communist reprisals. Third, he feared that expansion of the war would distract attention from his domestic agenda, which he had begun to implement.

The first landmark American decision came less than a month after the election. Rejecting more extreme proposals by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Johnson approved a two-stage plan of aerial bombing. The first phase consisted of limited attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos as well as what American officials dubbed “tit for tat” raids against North Vietnam in response to communist attacks in the South. The second phase involved a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam lasting from two to six months—an operation that, Johnson understood, would require the introduction of American ground troops to guard U.S. airbases. The president immediately approved bombing against targets in Laos, but he held back from attacking North Vietnam out of fear that South Vietnam was still too weak to withstand a wider war.

With the Saigon government apparently on its last legs after another coup at the end of January, U.S. leaders faced a crucial moment of decision. “The time has come for harder choices,” Bundy and McNamara advised the president. They warned that the United States was courting “disastrous defeat” by insisting that Saigon put its house in order before bombing of the North could begin. Johnson agreed. “We have kept our gun over the mantle and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now,” the president declared. “I can’t ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand tied behind their backs.” Johnson insisted only that the United States wait for a pretext to begin the campaign. It did not take long. On February 7, NLF troops
attacked U.S. bases at Pleiku, killing eight Americans. In response, Johnson ordered U.S. aircraft to strike military bases in North Vietnam. Less than a month later, the administration initiated Operation Rolling Thunder, its campaign of sustained bombing against the North.

From the initiation of Rolling Thunder, it was but a short step to the introduction of U.S. combat troops. In late February 1965, General Westmoreland appealed to Washington for two battalions of Marines to guard a major U.S. airfield at Da Nang. A few American officials questioned whether U.S. troops were adequately prepared to fight a guerrilla-style war and doubted that it would be possible to limit further deployments once Americans were in combat. On the whole, though, Westmoreland’s request stirred little debate among officials who had already accepted the probability of sending ground soldiers. Johnson approved Westmoreland’s request, and on March 8, 1965, the Marines waded ashore near Da Nang. The United States was at war in the air and on the ground.

WAR ON MANY FRONTS

Even as the United States went to war, President Johnson made clear there would be no departure from the gradualism that had guided him up to that point. “I’m going up old Ho Chi Minh’s leg an inch at a time,” he boasted. By slowly ratcheting up the scale and intensity of the American war effort, Johnson aimed to find North Vietnam’s breaking point—the level of destruction and death that would lead Hanoi to sue for peace on Washington’s terms. Few Americans doubted that the United States, the world’s mightiest nation, could force a country as poor and weak as North Vietnam to its knees.

North Vietnamese leaders foresaw a different outcome. American troops were ill-suited to fight guerrillas in a distant, alien landscape, Le Duan, the first secretary of the Vietnamese communist party, told a meeting of top Hanoi officials in July 1965. Le Duan predicted, moreover, that the American public would have little stomach for a long war, while Vietnamese revolutionaries would absorb whatever
punishment the Americans inflicted for as long as necessary. “The North will not count the cost,” he declared.  

Le Duan’s analysis proved closer to the mark. Unquestionably, American intervention, which the communists had hoped for years to avoid, posed serious problems for Hanoi and the NLF. But the communists adapted to the new situation and learned to exploit their adversaries’ weaknesses, as they had for decades when facing setbacks. On the battlefield, they fought the United States to a stalemate even as American power grew rapidly between 1965 and 1968. In the political arena, the Saigon government persistently failed to gain legitimacy as the war dragged on, while the American public increasingly questioned U.S. policy.

TOWARD A MAJOR WAR

Once U.S. Marine units had disembarked in Vietnam, pressure mounted quickly on the Johnson administration to undertake a major ground war. In late March 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff asked for three divisions of U.S. soldiers and permission to use them in offensive operations throughout South Vietnam. The request put Johnson in a familiar bind. On the one hand, the president and his advisers accepted the military’s contention that bombing by itself would accomplish little in the short run and that the Saigon regime might collapse without a major infusion of American manpower. On the other, Johnson continued to fear that drastic steps in Vietnam would imperil his domestic agenda and risk provoking a war with China. As usual, Johnson opted for the middle ground, giving the military most—but not all—that it requested. He agreed to send forty thousand new troops and to allow U.S. forces to undertake offensive operations. But he ordered that they do so only within four limited “enclaves” surrounding key bases along the coast.

Johnson also sought to minimize the risks of escalation by ensuring that these decisions, among the most momentous in the long process of deepening American involvement, attracted as little public attention as possible. The administration explained the bombing of North Vietnam simply as retaliation for communist attacks in the South and never announced the switch to sustained strikes. Similarly, administration officials downplayed the commitment of combat troops and publicly acknowledged the shift to offensive operations only in the course of a routine press briefing weeks later. Thus Johnson committed the United States to a major war without ever forthrightly saying so.

Inevitably, though, the administration faced criticism as news of the expanded commitment trickled out. Many conservatives demanded that Johnson escalate more quickly. Meanwhile, proponents of negotiation and disengagement grew more vocal as the war heated up. University professors organized “teach-ins” on Vietnam, and students staged demonstrations. On April 17, 1965, more than fifteen thousand protesters attended the first antiwar march in Washington. Internationally, Britain, Canada, and other American allies, joined by the secretary general of the United Nations and many nonaligned governments, urged negotiations more strongly than ever.
Such criticism led Johnson to speak out about the war, but he remained determined to minimize controversy. In a major speech at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, he sought to mold public opinion by appealing to critics on both sides. To mollify the hawks, Johnson reaffirmed his commitment to an independent South Vietnam. To assuage the doves, he declared his willingness to join in “unconditional discussions” for a peaceful settlement and even proposed a billion-dollar development program for Vietnam modeled on America’s Tennessee Valley Authority.

The speech led to a flurry of gestures by both Washington and Hanoi suggesting interest in a diplomatic solution. The day after the president’s address, North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong laid out a four-point program for a peace settlement—U.S. withdrawal, respect for the 1954 Geneva agreements, implementation of the NLF agenda demanding elections for a new South Vietnamese government, and eventual reunification.

Although he did not say so explicitly, Pham Van Dong left open the possibility that these demands constituted merely an opening bargaining position rather than preconditions for a settlement—a key distinction apparently designed to make the proposal attractive to Washington. A month later, Johnson approved a five-day pause in the bombing to indicate his openness to talks.

This maneuvering came to nothing, however, for neither government had any serious intention of negotiating. On the contrary, each saw a better chance of achieving its aims on the battlefield than at the bargaining table. Johnson and his advisers recognized that they held a weak hand because of the dismal political and military condition of South Vietnam. They insisted that talks could occur only once the situation improved dramatically—sufficiently, that is, to enable them to dictate terms to Hanoi. On the communist side, some policymakers genuinely backed negotiations. These officials worried that American bombing would cripple North Vietnam and that an expanded war would harm relations with Beijing and Moscow. But Le Duan and other hawkish leaders prevailed, as they had since at least 1963. These policymakers still hoped to topple the Saigon government quickly, before American escalation went much further. Even if that did not happen, though, they believed superior morale, patience, and tactical innovation would eventually carry them to victory over any size force the Americans chose to send. “We will fight,” Le Duan boasted in May 1965, “whatever way the United States wants.”

Such confidence came partly from Hanoi’s success in securing help from China and the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders, hoping to avoid a major war in Southeast Asia, had cut their aid to North Vietnam in 1964. But intense Sino-Soviet animosity—a major feature of the Cold War in the 1960s—led new Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to step up support for North Vietnam in 1965. Soviet policymakers feared that failure to do so would cede Southeast Asia to Chinese domination and weaken Soviet claims to leadership throughout the Third World. On a trip to Hanoi in February 1965, Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin pledged “all necessary support and assistance” for North Vietnam and
initiated an aid program that ultimately delivered vast stocks of military supplies.\textsuperscript{5}

For his part, Chinese leader Mao Zedong feared direct U.S. Chinese fighting and hinted repeatedly that China would not intervene in Vietnam as long as U.S. ground forces did not invade the North. Still, eager to demonstrate his commitment to worldwide revolution, Mao responded enthusiastically to Hanoi’s appeals for increased aid in early 1965. “Our principle is that we will do our best to provide you with whatever you need and whatever we have,” pledged one of Mao’s top lieutenants, Liu Shaoqi.\textsuperscript{6} Starting in June, China sent huge quantities of goods—everything from munitions and food to toothpaste and recreational equipment—along with thousands of troops to repair roads and carry out other tasks. Although China never dispatched combat units, the support troops it sent, peaking at about one hundred seventy thousand in 1967, freed North Vietnamese soldiers to fight below the seventeenth parallel.

Hanoi’s confidence also sprang from the rapidly evolving military and political situation in the South. Reinforced by North Vietnamese regulars, the NLF launched a major offensive in May and scored numerous victories. Despite years of U.S. aid, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam neared the brink of collapse. The same seemed to be true of the government in Saigon. In June, yet another turn of the leadership carousel brought to power a military junta led by Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and Army General Nguyen Van Thieu, men with virtually no political support beyond the disintegrating military sphere from which they came. The two men seemed “the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel,” U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense William Bundy remembered later.\textsuperscript{7}

This deterioration led to the largest escalatory steps yet by the United States. More convinced than ever that South Vietnam was crumbling, U.S. commanders asked for one hundred fifty thousand more troops and permission to use them offensively throughout South Vietnam. These requests sparked a series of intense discussions among the president, his top advisers, and congressional leaders during July—the closest that Washington came to thoroughly debating whether to wage a major war. A few participants, especially Undersecretary of State George Ball, argued vigorously against the expansion, warning that the United States was poorly prepared to fight a guerrilla conflict in a remote, alien country. But the most influential policymakers, particularly McNamara and Rusk, backed the military, restating old concerns about protecting American credibility and propping up wobbly dominoes. “If the Communist world finds out we will not pursue our commitments,” said Rusk, “I don’t know where they will stay their hand.”\textsuperscript{8} McNamara predicted that defeat in South Vietnam would lead to communist control in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and probably Malaysia within three years, while governments as distant as Greece and Turkey would question their alliances with Washington.

Johnson asked probing questions and expressed anxiety about the many problems the United States faced in Vietnam. Nevertheless, at the end of July he approved a major expansion of the ground war. As before, the president
did not go as far as the military asked. He ordered the immediate dispatch of fifty thousand troops, with another fifty thousand to follow before the end of the year and, very likely, still more after that. But he also approved the military’s request to use U.S. forces all over South Vietnam. The way was clear for the United States to take over the main burden of the fighting.

Map of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia showing major sites of the American war.

**BOMBING THE NORTH**

For the next three years, the United States struggled to achieve its goal—a secure, noncommunist South Vietnam—by simultaneously waging a ground war in the South and bombing the North. The air campaign against North Vietnam had three objectives: to bolster South Vietnamese morale by demonstrating American resolve, to prevent the infiltration of troops and equipment into the South, and to punish North Vietnam to the point where it would beg for peace on American terms. The bombing may have helped marginally to achieve the first goal, but it unquestionably failed to accomplish the other two.

As with the ground war, Johnson escalated U.S. bombing incrementally, an approach that angered military aides eager to try for a massive knockout blow. At first, U.S. attacks focused overwhelmingly on infiltration routes and military bases in the southernmost parts of North Vietnam. Those strikes wrought tremendous devastation. “The trees were completely destroyed,” one North Vietnamese soldier later recalled of the approaches to Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1966. “It was like traveling through a desert.” Still, Hanoi managed not only to sustain the flow of troops and matériel to the South but even to increase it. The rate of infiltration rose from an average of about fifteen hundred soldiers per month in 1965 to forty-five hundred a month in 1966 and six
thousand a month in 1967. Only 10 to 20 percent of infiltrators failed to reach the South, usually because of disease.

Frustrated, some U.S. officials urged expansion of the target list to include industrial sites farther north. By destroying factories, ports, and fuel depots, advocates contended, the United States would reduce the war-making capacity of North Vietnam while inflicting sufficient punishment to push Hanoi to plead for negotiations. For months, Johnson resisted this pressure, hoping that the mere threat of bombing North Vietnam's industrial core would be enough to force Hanoi to back down. Johnson even halted the bombing for thirty-seven days in December 1965 and January 1966 in a bid to influence Hanoi with the promise of peace as well as the devastation wrought by U.S. firepower. North Vietnam remained defiant, however, and in June 1966, Johnson approved a drastic expansion of the bombing. Over the next three months, U.S. bombs destroyed 75 percent of North Vietnam's oil storage capacity.

The logic of further escalation proved irresistible as Hanoi held firm in the months that followed. Neither the president nor his advisers could imagine that such a weak nation—a "damn little pissant country," as Johnson put it—could hold out indefinitely. It was just a matter of time, they continued to believe, before the United States would finally break Hanoi's will. In this quest, massive B-52s and other American aircraft made 79,000 bombing runs against North Vietnam in 1966, a threefold increase over the year before, and 108,000 in 1967. By the end of 1968, the United States had dropped 643,000 tons of bombs on the country and expanded its target list to include even heavily populated industrial areas close to the center of Hanoi and previously off-limits sites near the Chinese border. In all, Rolling Thunder destroyed 59 percent of North Vietnam's power plants, 55 percent of its major bridges, and almost ten thousand vehicles. The bombing also killed an estimated fifty-two thousand North Vietnamese and took an enormous physical and psychological toll on many others. "I saw children who had been killed, pagodas and churches that had been destroyed, monks and priests dead in the ruins, schoolboys who were killed when schools were bombed," an engineer from Haiphong later recalled.

Despite such horrors, Hanoi's breaking point remained elusive. North Vietnam's ability to persevere may have resulted in part from the way Washington managed the bombing. As critics of the Johnson administration have long charged, incremental expansion of the attacks gave North Vietnam time to disperse its modest industrial facilities and organize its population to withstand the onslaught. But the American failure resulted more fundamentally from misjudgments about the susceptibility of North Vietnam to bombing. No matter how fiercely it attacked the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the United States stood little chance of completely strangling the flow of troops and equipment to the South. North Vietnamese and NLF soldiers got most of their supplies from Southern villagers and, by one estimate early in the war, required only thirty-four tons of supplies each day from the North—a paltry amount that could be
American aviators, who, along with 209 other prisoners of war, gave Hanoi a valuable bargaining chip that it would exploit later in peace talks with Washington.

North Vietnam also withstood U.S. bombing through its own resourcefulness. The government moved factories and fuel supplies to remote locations, sometimes underground tunnels or caves, and assigned women to replace military-age men in both factory and field. Everywhere, North Vietnamese dug bomb shelters—more than twenty million over the course of the war, by Hanoi’s count. "Call the Shelter Your Second Home," government slogans proclaimed. Meanwhile, Hanoi recruited hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese, mostly young women, to repair bomb damage. Crews fixed roads, railways, and bridges throughout the country but labored especially on the infiltration routes, where American bombing was heaviest. Engineers designed pontoon bridges that could be dismantled when not in use, and truck drivers learned to camouflage their vehicles and to drive at night without headlights.

All of this was accomplished through severe regimentation of North Vietnamese society and strong doses of anti-American propaganda. The Hanoi dictatorship sponsored plays, songs, and postage stamps celebrating the shooting down of American bombers, while propagandists flooded the country with patriotic appeals and withheld information about casualties. There is little evidence, however, that Hanoi depended heavily on outright coercion of the population. In fact, North Vietnamese morale appears
to have remained reasonably strong during the years of sustained American bombing. Interviewed in later years, North Vietnamese civilians remembered the bombing as a time of extreme hardship, shortages, and the ever-present danger of death. But they also recalled strong patriotism and profound disgust for their enemies as the damage mounted. “They turned their hatred into activity,” one North Vietnamese villager recalled of his compatriots.18

THE WAR IN THE SOUTH

The war in South Vietnam followed much the same pattern as in the North. To break the communists’ will, Washington repeatedly expanded its commitment. American personnel in South Vietnam totaled 184,300 at the end of 1965, 385,300 a year later, and 485,600 at the end of 1967, peaking at 543,400 in April 1969. These forces undertook increasingly ambitious operations, while U.S. aircraft pummeled communist-held areas of the South with more than one million tons of bombs between 1965 and 1968, twice the tonnage dropped on the North. Yet communist forces managed not only to withstand American escalation but even to increase their own military capabilities in the South.

From the start, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pursued a strategy of attrition. Under that approach, American commanders aimed to locate and then annihilate concentrations of enemy troops. Over time, they hoped, aggressive “search-and-destroy” operations would inflict casualties more quickly than North Vietnam and the NLF could replace their losses, thus forcing the communists to seek peace on American terms. Critics complained that the attrition strategy ignored the need to stamp out insurgent political organizing among the civilian population of South Vietnam. But Westmoreland maintained that a strategy centered on population control would require more troops than he had and would result in a longer war than the American public would tolerate. The task of building security in the countryside—“pacification,” in military parlance—thus fell largely to the South Vietnamese army.

The attrition strategy depended on grueling infantry patrols to flush the enemy out of its hiding places. Fundamentally, though, search-and-destroy was designed to minimize U.S. casualties by emphasizing mobility, technology, and firepower, categories in which U.S. forces enjoyed huge advantages. To find communist units, they relied on aerial surveillance, radar, and even devices that detected the smell of human urine. Meanwhile, American planes dropped millions of gallons of Agent Orange and other chemical defoliants to prevent communist forces from maneuvering beneath Vietnam’s vast jungle canopy. Once enemy units were located, U.S. forces sought to pounce on them quickly and inflict as high a “body count” as possible. Helicopters rushed soldiers to the battlefield, while aircraft and artillery pounded enemy positions.

Westmoreland achieved his most urgent objective in the early days of the U.S. intervention—to stave off the collapse of South Vietnam. By the end of 1965, U.S. forces had blunted communist momentum, giving the Saigon government a new lease on life. Westmoreland failed,
The effectiveness of the communists’ approach was reflected in the outcomes of major operations undertaken by U.S. forces. During 1966 and 1967, Westmoreland repeatedly sent large forces to destroy NLF bases near Saigon. In Operations Attleboro, Cedar Falls, and Junction City, U.S. and South Vietnamese troops killed thousands of enemy soldiers and seized tons of weapons, while razing hostile villages and wide swaths of jungle. Through it all, aircraft and artillery pulverized the area to assure that nothing remained of the communist strongholds. And yet none of these stunning displays of mobility and firepower succeeded in uprooting communist forces permanently. Each time, NLF fighters retreated into elaborate underground tunnel complexes or across the border into Cambodia, where Americans were not allowed to chase them. When U.S. and South Vietnamese forces withdrew, the communists moved back in. Farther north, in the Central Highlands, another theater of heavy fighting, the pattern was similar. Major U.S. operations inflicted severe casualties and kept the communists off balance. But American forces never destroyed their ability to carry on the war.

Communist advantages were even more evident in the countless small skirmishes that made up the vast majority of the fighting in South Vietnam. More than 96 percent of all firefight involved U.S. units numbering fewer than two hundred troops. In these engagements, the North Vietnamese and NLF troops—the latter dubbed “Vietcong,” “VC,” or “Victor Charlie” by U.S. GIs—almost always held the tactical advantage, choosing when and where to initiate combat and pulling back when losses threatened to mount too high. “You go out on patrol maybe twenty times or more, and nothin’, just nothin’,” one U.S. soldier complained in 1965. “Then, the twenty-first time, zap, zap, zap, you get hit and Victor Charlie fades into the jungle before you can close with him.”

Sometimes communist forces inflicted casualties without even making contact. Between 1965 and 1970, land mines and booby traps caused 11 percent of U.S. fatalities.

These conditions took a heavy physical and psychological toll on American troops, who inhabited a world of disorienting paradoxes. On the one hand, they enjoyed remarkable comforts in their base camps, including abundant food and beer, hot showers, and rock ‘n’ roll music courtesy of Armed Forces Radio, all maintained by a huge staff of supply officers, cooks, mechanics, and other “rear-echelon” specialists. In all, support personnel accounted for 80 percent of all U.S. troops in Vietnam. American soldiers could also count on quick evacuation and sophisticated medical care at base hospitals if they were wounded. On the other hand, combat “grunts” endured arduous patrolling—“humping the boonies,” in GI jargon—amid forbidding terrain, soaring temperatures, and torrential rain. Westmoreland's strategy compounded those problems by forcing U.S. GIs to fight a war without front lines. Morale declined as soldiers, averaging just nineteen years old, fought repeatedly over the same ground and anticipated ambushes from every direction. For many Americans, the goal became simply to survive the standard thirteen-month tour of duty and return to “the world” in one piece.

Frustrated and frightened, U.S. soldiers tended to view all Vietnamese with distrust. Instead of bolstering partnerships with anticomunist Vietnamese and winning over the uncommitted, Americans frequently alienated the local population through demeaning or aggressive behavior. This problem resulted partly from the difficulty of distinguishing Vietnamese who supported the Saigon government from those who backed the NLF. Americans rightly believed that many Vietnamese—“gooks” or “dinks” in American slang—lacked clear-cut loyalties and cooperated with the NLF when they could do so safely. Distrust lowered inhibitions against destroying property and abusing civilians. “Children were suspect, women were suspect,” one American GI remembered. “It’s very easy to slip into a primitive state of mind, particularly if your life is in danger and you can’t trust anyone.”

Alienation of the Vietnamese population also resulted from the devastating economic transformation wrought by the overpowering U.S. presence. Bombing and shelling destroyed entire villages and damaged South Vietnamese agriculture, forcing American authorities to import rice into a country that had once been one of the world’s leading producers. Four million peasants, about one quarter of South Vietnam’s population, fled to squalid refugee camps or overcrowded urban areas. In Saigon and other cities, the rapid influx of American goods and money produced rampant inflation and a vast black market in everything from weapons to whiskey to air conditioners. Prostitution flourished wherever there were American GIs. As in the French colonial period, some Vietnamese got rich and lived well. But for many more the new economy brought poverty, crime, disease, and debasement.
THE POLITICS OF WAR

By withstanding American force above and below the seventeenth parallel, the communists neutralized Washington’s greatest asset, its advantage in military technology. This accomplishment increased the likelihood that the war would be decided in the political arena, where the communists held a considerable edge. Heirs to the nationalist tradition dating back decades, the North Vietnamese government and the NLF maintained a degree of legitimacy enjoyed by no other contender for power in the South. At the same time, the Saigon government failed to broaden its base of support, and the Johnson administration increasingly confronted hostility abroad and antia war activism at home.

Attitudes among the South Vietnamese population during the war are difficult to gauge, largely because they tended to fluctuate with the ebb and flow of the fighting. Still, an overall pattern is discernable. After 1965, support for the NLF declined markedly in response to greater violence and rising demands for taxes, labor, and conscripts. Ebbing revolutionary enthusiasm did not, however, bring appreciable gains for the Saigon government. Data from My Thuy Phuong, a village near Hue, may suggest a larger trend. The proportion of villagers supporting the NLF dipped from 80 percent to about 50 percent during the peak years of American involvement, but those supporting the South Vietnamese government rose to 15 percent at most, whereas at least 35 percent were politically undecided. In short, ordinary South Vietnamese shifted between indecision and supporting the NLF. At no point did the Saigon regime vie for broad loyalty.

Still, American policymakers persisted in their decade-old effort to create a viable South Vietnamese state. For a brief time during 1965 and 1966, they seemed to be getting somewhere. Chronic governmental instability came to an end as Nguyen Cao Ky’s regime proved surprisingly durable. Optimistic that they had at last found leaders capable of sinking roots into the populace, American officials pressed Ky for reforms aimed at expanding his government’s appeal. At a February 1966 summit meeting in Honolulu held to jump-start new efforts in this vein, Ky and Johnson jointly declared their dedication to win what Ky called “the heart of the people.”

As with so many similar undertakings in the past, the new initiative achieved little. The summit had barely ended when the Ky regime faced a powerful surge of antigovernment agitation in many cities. As in 1963, Buddhists led the protests but quickly drew support from students and other groups hostile to the regime and its dependence on the United States. The upheaval ended only after Ky sent troops to Da Nang to quash a mutiny by soldiers loyal to the Buddhists—an act that that made a mockery of the government’s professed commitment to political reform. Meanwhile, efforts to promote pacification and economic development in the countryside brought meager progress. Shortages of trained personnel, discord between Washington and Saigon, and corruption among South Vietnamese administrators bedeviled the program...
from the outset, as did effective countermeasures by the NLF. Johnson’s decision in May 1967 to streamline the pacification effort under a single U.S. bureaucracy promised better results, but, because of foot-dragging by South Vietnamese officials, it took a year to implement the plan.

Only in one area did Saigon and Washington see tangible advances in their campaign to build up the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese state. Prodded by U.S. officials, the Ky government supervised the drafting of a new constitution and held nationwide elections. Yet even these achievements were tainted in ways that reflected widespread antipathy toward the regime. The government and its allies manipulated the constitution-writing process to assure that only staunch anticommitists could hold office and then rigged the elections held in September 1967 to ensure the outcome. Despite all these machinations, the government’s candidate for president, Nguyen Van Thieu, won with just 35 percent of the popular vote, while Truong Dinh Dzu, a virtual unknown who backed negotiations with the NLF, finished second with 17 percent.

All of these failures deepened skepticism around the world about U.S. policy. In 1965 and 1966, the Johnson administration intensified its efforts to obtain troop commitments—or at least economic support or military equipment—from its allies. American policymakers believed such contributions were crucial to substantiate U.S. claims to be fighting on behalf of the entire “free world.” A few Asian and Pacific countries, eager to preserve close ties with Washington, responded positively. South Korea sent sixty thousand troops in exchange for major U.S. economic concessions. Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and Taiwan contributed much smaller contingents. America’s most powerful allies, however, declined to help. Leaders of Britain, France, Canada, Italy, and other major U.S. partners, deeply skeptical of American policy and facing domestic pressure to steer clear of the war, acted mainly by launching or backing diplomatic initiatives to settle the war through negotiations—part of a constant quest for talks that yielded more than two thousand peace bids by governments and international organizations around the world from 1965 through 1967.27

These proposals created a similar dilemma for Washington and Hanoi. Both governments wished to score propaganda points by professing their desire for peace. But both also believed, despite stalemate on the battlefield, that they could achieve their aims by carrying on the fight. Each side, that is, continued to assume it would eventually find the other’s breaking point. Accordingly, the U.S. and North Vietnamese governments frequently declared their openness to peace talks but hastened to spell out terms that essentially demanded surrender by the other side on the central issue, the status of South Vietnam. Hanoi insisted that the NLF control the political future of the South, whereas the United States refused to consider that possibility. Only once—a secret initiative launched by Polish and Italian officials in late 1966—did the two sides seriously consider a compromise formula. But persistent distrust between Washington and Hanoi torpedoed any possibility of a deal.

Around the world, America’s reputation suffered as the
war dragged on. From Sweden to India to Japan, large chunks of public opinion lauded North Vietnam as a heroic nation fighting for its independence and decried U.S. behavior, especially the bombing of the North. Far more worrying for the Johnson administration, however, was plummeting support for the war in the United States. In the early months of escalation, Johnson enjoyed relatively strong approval. Although highly motivated doves and hawks criticized his handling of the war in 1965 and 1966, big majorities of Congress and the public backed him, just as they had supported presidential decisions on national security since the Second World War. In 1967, however, antiwar activism accelerated dramatically, marking a watershed moment not only in the Vietnam War but also in the Cold War more generally. For the first time, a large percentage of the public questioned the way political leaders managed foreign affairs. By the end of the year, polls showed that 45 percent of Americans believed intervention had been a mistake.28

Some of Johnson's critics were hawks who believed the United States should escalate further. But many were part of the increasingly vocal antiwar movement, a diverse, fractious conglomeration of Americans who wanted to end the fighting immediately or, much more commonly, through a negotiated settlement. At one end of the spectrum were college students, pacifists, and hippies who viewed the war as a symptom of an antidemocratic mind-set that also underlay racism, sexism, materialism, and excessive obedience to authority. For these Americans, antiwar activism was often part of a larger agenda for profound social change that mobilized many young Americans during the 1960s. The United States could establish a more decent society, they believed, only by jettisoning traditional attitudes and thoroughly reforming the country. A far larger body of liberals offered a more limited critique of the war. In this view, the U.S. commitment in Vietnam represented major errors of judgment but did not flow from deeper flaws in American motives or institutions. The fighting must stop, liberals contended, to avoid squandering America's good name and resources in a brutal conflict that could not be won at a reasonable cost.

Antiwar protesters collect draft cards during a demonstration at the Federal Building in San Francisco, California, on October 16, 1967. (AP Images)

Antiwar activism took many forms. More than half a
million young men—most famously heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali—defied the draft. Some burned their draft cards in solemn ceremonies organized by protest groups. Approximately fifty thousand escaped prosecution by fleeing to Canada, while others risked trial in the United States. Meanwhile, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and other African-American leaders lashed out in 1967 against a conflict that distracted the nation from the unfinished civil rights agenda and sent black soldiers to fight in Vietnam for liberties denied them at home. Most spectacularly, demonstrations on campuses and in cities around the country grew ever larger and more bitter, culminating in a giant protest in Washington, D.C., in fall 1967. More than seventy-five thousand activists gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on October 21 for speeches denouncing the war. “Support Our GIs, Bring Them Home Now,” banners proclaimed. The next day, thirty-five thousand protesters marched to the Pentagon, where radical leader Abbie Hoffman led an effort to levitate the building with mystical chants. Less whimsically, protesters pelted soldiers guarding the site with debris. Later the soldiers cracked down violently, arresting 667 protesters—the largest arrest total from any demonstration to date. The whole episode was, however, only a hint of the confrontations and controversies to come in 1968.

THE TET OFFENSIVE

“NORTHERNERS, SOUTHERNERS FACING THE Americans, advance! Victory is ours!” So declared Ho Chi Minh in a short poem he published in early 1968 to mark Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year. Communist leaders chose the holiday to launch a massive offensive throughout South Vietnam aimed at inspiring a general uprising to overthrow the Saigon government and bring the NLF to power. Just after the start of festivities, roughly eighty-four thousand troops launched surprise attacks against hundreds of cities and villages from the seventeenth parallel to the Mekong Delta. Most remarkably, a squad of NLF commandos briefly penetrated the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon, the symbolic epicenter of American power in the country.

Yet within days, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had beaten back the onslaught almost everywhere. Some Americans contended, in fact, that the attacks had resulted in a major U.S. victory—a claim repeated by many commentators since 1968. A more accurate appraisal came
from CBS newsman Walter Cron-kite, who glumly asserted a month after the offensive began that the United States was “mired in stalemate.”

Neither the communist attack nor the U.S.–South Vietnamese counterattack did anything to break the deadlock that had taken hold over the previous three years.

The offensive merely changed the nature of the stalemate. By confirming opposition to the war among the American public, it persuaded President Johnson to end his policy of gradual escalation. It also led both Washington and Hanoi, at last, to open negotiations on a settlement. But neither side abandoned its key aims in South Vietnam, and the bloodiest fighting of the war ensued during the remainder of 1968 as each continued to search for the other’s breaking point.

**Prelude**

By mid-1967, the military deadlock stirred roughly analogous debates in Washington and Hanoi. In each capital, some officials, confident that the war was turning their way, favored further escalation. Others saw no chance of winning a full-fledged military victory and urged negotiations. If the terms of debate were similar, however, the decisions that resulted diverged sharply. As so often before, Johnson settled on a middle-ground solution that called essentially for more of the same. Hanoi leaders, meanwhile, opted for a huge offensive that they hoped would bring victory.

In Washington, the military led the drive to expand the U.S. war effort. Increasingly bitter about what they regarded as excessive caution among civilian leaders, Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff pressed Johnson not only to send more troops and to intensify the bombing but also to take steps that he had so far refused—mobilization of reserve units and extension of the ground war into Cambodia, Laos, and even the southernmost parts of North Vietnam to destroy communist bases and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Behind these proposals lay optimism that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were steadily grinding down the enemy. Robert Komer, head of the reorganized pacification program, claimed particularly encouraging results, reporting in September 1967 that 68 percent of the South Vietnamese population lived under “reasonably secure conditions” and that only 17 percent of inhabited areas were controlled by the NLF. “The war is by no means over but neither is it stalemated,” the U.S. command in Saigon reported to Washington. “We are steadily winning it, and the pace accelerates as we reinforce our successes and intensify our pressures.”

Many senior civilian officials vigorously disputed such claims. In fact, these policymakers contended, the United States was failing to achieve any of its goals. Intelligence reports showed that aerial bombing had little effect on Hanoi’s will or ability to wage war. Meanwhile, CIA analysts cast doubt on claims of progress in the ground war, notably by questioning the statistics underpinning the military’s optimism. Though Westmoreland claimed there were only two hundred eighty-five thousand NLF and North
Vietnamese soldiers in the South, the CIA, more sensitive to the presence of irregular guerrilla forces, counted between five hundred thousand and six hundred thousand—numbers that made a mockery of military claims that U.S. forces had reached the crossover point.\textsuperscript{4}

Skeptics also pointed to failures in the political realm. After visiting Saigon, Vice President Hubert Humphrey warned privately that the United States was “throwing lives and money down a corrupt rat hole” by backing the unpopular Thieu regime.\textsuperscript{5} Worse yet, in the view of an increasingly disillusioned Defense Secretary McNamara, the war was damaging U.S. leadership globally. “The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny, backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one,” McNamara wrote.\textsuperscript{6}

Once a key proponent of escalation, McNamara spoke for many officials when he called for a halt to bombing in the North. He also recommended capping the number of American ground forces, shifting to a new military strategy, and transferring the major combat burden to the South Vietnamese army, the ARVN. More fundamentally, he urged that the United States revise its war aims and seek negotiations on a compromise settlement. McNamara put the best face on his suggestions by pointing out that the Western position in Asia had improved since 1965. A right-wing coup in Indonesia had ended the communist threat in that pivotal nation, while huge turmoil within China—the consequence of Mao Zedong’s catastrophic attempt to remake his country through a “Cultural Revolution”—severely weakened Beijing’s ability to exert influence beyond its borders.

Confronted with bitter division among his advisers, Johnson, increasingly angry and dejected, refused both extremes and clung to the middle. He feared that bold escalation would not only fail to bring decisive results but also stir additional antiwar agitation in the United States and antagonize the communist powers. At the same time, he worried that steps toward negotiation would unleash criticism from conservatives and damage American credibility worldwide. Johnson’s personal proclivities may also have fed his refusal to back down. Deeply invested in his image as a tough-minded leader, he feared for his own reputation as well as that of his party. Only in small ways was Johnson willing to alter course. In late 1967, he modified U.S. peace terms by dropping his insistence that Hanoi stop all military activity in the South before he would suspend the bombing and open negotiations. This step did not, however, reflect any change in the basic American goal: a durable, noncommunist South Vietnam.

In late 1967, in fact, Johnson showed far more eagerness to shore up domestic support for the war than to rethink his aims. Exasperated by the antiwar movement, he ordered the CIA to start an illegal surveillance program against protest leaders. Over the next seven years, the initiative that became known as Operation Chaos collected information on three hundred thousand Americans. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, meanwhile, made efforts to infiltrate and harass the movement. The White House also sought to
mobilize pro-administration opinion by establishing organizations to disseminate favorable reports about the war. More visibly, the administration brought Westmoreland back from Saigon in November 1967 to reassure the public that the war was going well—a mission he embraced warmly. “We have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view,” Westmoreland declared in a much-publicized speech. Withdrawals of American troops, he suggested, might begin within two years.2

Johnson’s decisions to stay the course coincided with decisions in Hanoi to try for sudden, decisive gains through a major offensive. As in Washington, communist policymaking during 1967 took place within a highly contentious atmosphere. Mounting death and destruction encouraged some leaders, roughly the same group that had earlier prioritized the construction of socialism in the North over military struggle in the South, to insist that Hanoi should shift to a less costly military strategy and seek negotiations. American bombing was demolishing the North Vietnamese economy, these moderates complained, while the ground war was exacting an intolerable toll in human lives.

This peace-minded faction was also emboldened by shifts within the communist bloc. Although Hanoi generally managed to maintain cooperative relations with both Moscow and Beijing despite the deepening Sino-Soviet rift, individual North Vietnamese leaders leaned toward one superpower or the other. Leaders who favored aggressive pursuit of the war usually sided with China, which, after a few peace-minded years in the 1950s, had consistently espoused revolutionary activism. Those who favored a negotiated solution generally sided with the Soviet Union, which had long advocated a peaceful road to reunification. As the Vietnam conflict escalated, the militant, pro-Chinese group controlled policymaking, while Chinese aid to North Vietnam exceeded that from the Soviet Union. By 1967, however, the balance had shifted. With China consumed by the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet Union became North Vietnam’s most important patron. Pro-Moscow moderates gained new stature.

Pressure for compromise confronted the pro-Chinese militants with a serious problem: How could they rededicate their nation to the far-reaching war aims that had guided DRV policy since 1963? Their answer was the Tet Offensive and a related purge of moderates from the government. By mounting unprecedented attacks, Communist party First Secretary Le Duan and other hardliners hoped to score a decisive victory that would bring their goals within reach. Through a purge, they hoped to eliminate key opponents and to show Moscow that accepting Soviet aid did not mean accepting its conciliatory agenda. Hardliners put the scheme into operation in July 1967, when the secret police imprisoned a small group of intellectuals and journalists on trumped-up charges of conspiring against the party. Arrests of party members and government officials followed. Meanwhile, planning for what the communists called the “General Offensive and General Uprising” went forward.8

Superficially, leaders in Hanoi exuded optimism that the long-awaited moment—the urban uprising that had always
been the end-point of communist strategy—had arrived. “Our victory is close at hand,” proclaimed party instructions to local officials in the South. Quietly, however, communist leaders knew they were gambling. They might achieve only a partial victory without ending the war, or, in the worst case, they might provoke the United States to expand the conflict. Anxious about heavy losses, Hanoi assigned the bulk of the fighting to NLF units rather than to the North Vietnamese army. Still, communist military strength in the South, along with the unpopularity of the Saigon regime and the fragility of American public opinion, gave Hanoi reason to believe it could land what party leaders called “thundering blows” that would “change the face of the war.”

ATTACK AND COUNTERATTACK

Military preparations for the offensive began in October 1967, when communist troops launched attacks in remote areas. Their objective was to lure U.S. forces away from densely populated regions that were the ultimate target. American and ARVN troops prevailed in heavy fighting at Dak To in the Central Highlands, Song Be and Loc Ninh near Cambodia, and elsewhere. But the communists achieved their goal of inducing Westmoreland to thin his forces near Saigon and along the coast. Assuming that communist ambitions were focused on the northernmost provinces, Westmoreland sent especially heavy reinforcements to Khe Sanh, an isolated U.S. Marine base besieged by North Vietnamese troops. Commanders of U.S. forces, along with the American media and President Johnson, fixated for several weeks on the savage fighting there, convinced that Hanoi aimed to score a victory akin to the triumph at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

With American attention thus distracted, communists prepared for the urban attacks scheduled to coincide with Tet, a holiday for which both sides had observed a cease-fire in previous years. NLF troops, sometimes disguised as ordinary peasants or even as South Vietnamese soldiers, moved into the cities and stockpiled weapons, while political operatives plotted assassinations of South Vietnamese officials and readied themselves to lead a popular uprising.

The Tet attacks commenced in the wee hours of January 30, inaugurating the Year of the Monkey with a monumental burst of fighting. Within hours, communist forces had struck five of six major cities, thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, and sixty-four district capitals. In Saigon, nineteen NLF soldiers blew a hole in the wall surrounding the U.S. embassy at 2:45 a.m. and waged a six-hour firefight with Marine guards before being killed or wounded. Other NLF units attacked the Saigon airport, President Thieu’s palace, and the national radio station. Far to the north, about seventy-five hundred communist troops seized the old imperial capital of Hue.

Reports from U.S. intelligence services had indicated for some weeks that an attack might be coming, and Westmoreland had persuaded South Vietnamese leaders to keep half their forces on duty during the holiday. On the whole, though, U.S. commanders, exaggerating the degree to which they had weakened the enemy, had little inkling of