Hell No! They Won't Go! Lyndon Johnson and the Nonmobilization of U.S. Army Reserve Forces

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B.A., Georgetown University, 2010

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

University of Virginia
December, 2013

General Harold K. Johnson considered resigning in protest over President Lyndon Baines Johnson's refusal to mobilize U.S. Army reserve forces for active duty service in South Vietnam several times throughout his tenure as army chief of staff during the war in Vietnam. A sensitive and honorable man who had distinguished himself both on the battlefield and as an advocate for soldiers' interests, the general ardently believed that, by not calling up reserve forces, the United States had adopted a misguided force planning model that would not only cripple the Army's total force strength, but would lead to thousands of avoidable American combat deaths. For General Johnson, the president's refusal to mobilize reserve forces was one of the worst executive decisions of the entire Vietnam War. It drove the Army to juggle inadequate resources, train units for combat duty that were intended for other important support functions, and—most egregiously—to send a crop of young, unprepared draftees into battle when drilled reservists were available for deployment.

Having been repeatedly rebuffed by the Lyndon Johnson administration for voicing these concerns—forced, at times to endure the president's bullying and personal attacks—General Johnson debated resigning his command, hoping his actions would send a strong message to government officials and the American public about the grave consequences of nonmobilization. However, in spite of his fears and frustrations about the president's force planning policymaking, Harold Johnson ultimately decided to play the part of the "good soldier" and retain his position, deferring to executive leadership and continuing to advocate privately for an alternate course.[1]

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[1] Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 268.

As Lewis Sorley notes in his biography of General Johnson, the soldier reached a different conclusion about the ethics of military leadership in the last years of his life. In a poignant conversation with his friend Brigadier General Albion Knight, Johnson remarked of his decision to work within the system:

> I remember the day I was ready to go over to the Oval Office and give my four stars to the President and tell him, 'You have refused to tell the country they cannot fight a war without mobilization; you have required me to send men into battle with little hope of their ultimate victory; and you have forced us in the military to violate almost every one of the principles of war in Vietnam. Therefore, I resign and will hold a press conference after I walk out of your door.' I made the typical mistake of believing I could do more for the country and the Army if I stayed in than if I got out. I am now going to my grave with that lapse in moral courage on my back.[2]

The general's comments capture the divisiveness of a potential reserve force mobilization during the Lyndon Johnson administration, an important contemporary debate that has been eclipsed in recent years by an outpouring of scholarship on two key historiographical issues: the origins of American intervention in Vietnam and the sources of U.S. defeat.[3] By treating a potential reserve force call up within these frameworks, scholars have tended to marginalize force planning, suggesting that mobilization was a

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[2] Albion W. Knight Jr., interview with Lewis Sorley, June 16, 1995, quoted in Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 304.

[3] For some of the most influential studies of America's entry into the Vietnam War, see, Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-61* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986). On the sources of American defeat in Vietnam, see, Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982); Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1977); C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2002); Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

peripheral concern for policymakers and a decision that was made once—in July 1965—before the president reversed himself nearly three years later. [4]

Scholars have generally explained Johnson's decision not to call up reserve forces—an apparent tactical error—in the context of domestic politics, arguing that electoral and legislative concerns dissuaded the president from revealing the extent of U.S. involvement in Vietnam to either Congress or the public.[5] Because a reserve force call up would have belied the depth of the American commitment to South Vietnam, Johnson decided to rely on other manpower sources like the draft and increased recruiting. According to David Halberstam, ". . . the use of the reserves would blow it all. It would be self-evident that we [the United States] were really going to war, and that we would in fact have to pay a price," a cost, many historians have argued, the administration was unwilling to bear. [6] If Congress knew that the country was engaged in a full-scale ground war Johnson believed it would have likely reconsidered budget allocations in light of greater anticipated military expenses, jeopardizing funding for domestic initiatives including the president's Great Society programs.[7] Jeffrey W.

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[4] For studies that treat mobilization decision-making within the broader frameworks of U.S. entry into Vietnam and the reasons for its defeat, see, Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 249-50; Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, 119-23; Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 162; Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 117-22; Kahin, *Intervention*, 366-402.

[5] On President Johnson's decision not to mobilize U.S. Army Reserve Forces for domestic political purposes, see, Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Francis M. Bator, "LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection." *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (June 2008): 309-340; Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*; Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993); Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Gardner, *Pay Any Price*; Jeffrey W. Helsing, *Johnson's War/Johnson's Great Society: The Guns and Butter Trap* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000); Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976); Robert Dallek, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Making of a Tragedy." *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring 1996): 147-162.

[6] David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1969), 593.

[7] On President Johnson's decision not to mobilize U.S. Army Reserve Forces in order to protect Great Society legislation, see, Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*; Hunt, *Lyndon*

Helsing summarizes the dominant historiographical explanation for nonmobilization when he writes that, by refusing to mobilize the reserves, "Johnson opted for a path by which he believed he could avoid the hard policy choices between the war and his domestic agenda – a path whereby he could minimize the costs by controlling the nature [and image] of escalation."[8]

In contrast to the wider Vietnam literature's tendency to treat a potential reserve force call up as a peripheral domestic political debate, operational military historians at the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute have been particularly interested in tactical and strategic questions surrounding mobilization and force planning.[9] However, because these studies serve not only historical but functional planning purposes as well, Strategic Studies scholars tend to focus on nonmobilization's impact on the Army's overall force structure and its ability to meet worldwide contingencies, not on Johnson's rationale for eschewing a call up. Therefore, historians at the Strategic Studies Institute usually rely on secondary sources to contextualize and explain Johnson's decision-making process, making their most significant contributions, instead, in the areas of military impact and response.

Johnson's War; Helsing, *Johnson's War/Johnson's Great Society*; Logevall, *Choosing War*; Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream;* Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front*.

[8] Helsing, *Johnson's War/Johnson's Great Society*, 2.

[9] For studies of nonmobilization and its impact on the Army's force strength produced under the auspices of the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, see, John D. Stuckey and Joseph H. Pistorius, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve: Historical Perspective and the Vietnam War, Final Report* (Carlisle Barracks: PA, Strategic Studies Institute, 1984); James T. Currie, "The Army Reserve and Vietnam." *Parameters* XIV (1984): 75-84; Timothy I. Sullivan, "The Abrams Doctrine: Is it Viable and Enduring in the 21st Century?" Master's thesis, U.S. Army War College, 2005. Though unaffiliated with the Strategic Studies Institute, Lewis Sorley has a background in military operations and has taught courses at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, a program that shares many of the US Army War College's concerns about the importance of force planning. His work should, therefore, be considered part of the larger historiographical conversation about the importance of force planning. See, Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*; Lewis Sorley, "Reserve Components: Looking Back to Look Ahead." *Joint Force Quarterly*, 36 (Dec. 2004): 18-23.

This essay seeks to reframe the mobilization decision-making process by arguing that President Johnson repeatedly elected not to call up reserve forces throughout the July 1965 to April 1968 period, despite the military's vehement protestations, because of the perceived domestic political and international ramifications of a mobilization. Whereas mobilization policymaking had traditionally been conceived of as an operational matter that fell under the military's purview, Johnson and his civilian defense and domestic policy advisers used force planning as a *political tool* to control public, Congressional, and foreign perceptions of American intentions in ways that previous wartime administrations had not.[10]

The American military has always relied heavily on its citizen-soldiers, deploying reservists in every major conflict. Most recently, President John F. Kennedy mobilized reserve forces for service during the Berlin Crisis. Kennedy's flexible response doctrine called for a "wider choice" of military response options to thwart Communist aggression than simply "humiliation or all-out nuclear war." However, in order to use conventional forces to deter threat, Kennedy recognized that he needed additional men in Europe. Therefore, "*for the first and only time in US history the Reserve forces were mobilized not to fight a war but as a pure instrument of foreign policy* (as distinct from military policy)."[11] In so doing, Kennedy took an important step in helping to politicize force planning. Rather than declare a state of emergency—which would have allowed the president to call up one million reservists for a year under the Reserve Forces Act of 1955—Kennedy asked congress to enact a Joint Resolution and activate 250,000 men, a request the legislature approved. The Berlin mobilization exposed serious flaws,

[10] Stuckey and Pistorius, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve*, 3-29.
[11] ibid, 18. Emphasis added.

however, with post-Korean War reserve force restructuring initiatives, including several logistical problems related to determining which reservists would be activated for service. The Berlin call up also revealed the limits of presidential authority over mobilized forces. The Reserve Forces Act of 1955 only authorized the president to call up troops for one year unless congress extended the reserves' tour length. Several historians have argued that President Johnson feared that calling up reserves for Vietnam would not only cause many of the same logistical problems that Kennedy had faced in 1961, but might also lead to further conflict with congress over tour extensions if the war lasted longer than the one year mobilization period.[12]

But despite the challenges of the Berlin call up, "because the US Army was organized and functioned based upon a mobilization precept there was during the Vietnam War, an *unquestioned belief*" within the military "that mobilization of the Guard and Reserves would, of course, occur."[13] Given the executive's long history of deferring to the military's force planning recommendations—even throughout the troubled Berlin call up, Army strategists naturally assumed that they would play a key role in setting mobilization policy for Vietnam, a project that began in the early 1950s when Army planners first began to prepare for an Indochinese intervention. With a total strength of 695,000 men—approximately two-fifths of the entire U.S. Army's troop strength by the summer of 1965—the U.S. Army Reserve was a critical component of the military's overall force structure.[14]

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[12] On the logistical problems of the Berlin mobilization as negative precedents for Vietnam mobilization, see, Stuckey and Pistorious, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve*, 18-25; Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 117-18.
[13] Stuckey and Pistorius, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve*, 18. Emphasis added.
[14] ibid.

Nevertheless, despite the *operational* logic of deploying reservists to South Vietnam, this paper argues that Johnson—like Kennedy in Berlin—saw force planning less as a tactical decision than a political opportunity. By going to war "in cold blood"—a phrase Secretary of State Dean Rusk often used to describe the administration's limited war strategy whereby reserves would not be mobilized, special budget appropriations requests would not be made, and public discussion of the war would be limited—the president hoped to avoid an expanded war with China and the Soviet Union as well as domestic backlash against the war.

Although Johnson's choice not to mobilize reserve forces was primarily driven by his desire to avert a guns-or-butter-decision, I also emphasize the ways in which the president used force planning as a political tool to advance his international agenda in addition to his domestic policy goals. Reflecting on the Chinese intervention in the Korean War and applying the perceived lessons of that experience to his July 1965 circumstances —that the Chinese might respond militarily to U.S. involvement in an Asian land war close to its borders—Johnson elected not to call up reserve forces partly because he believed that by doing so, he might unnecessarily provoke the Communist adversaries, perhaps inciting military reprisals. However, during the winter of 1965-1966, as it became increasingly apparent to policymakers that the Chinese did not intend to intervene militarily unless attacked, the geopolitical imperatives for nonmobilization became less persuasive than they had been previously. At the same time, the U.S. antiwar movement began to generate significant attention and support, further discouraging Johnson from taking any unnecessarily bellicose actions, including calling up reserves. While the war's impact on legislative and electoral politics had always been

the key factor dissuading the president from mobilizing reserve forces, by 1966, defense and state department officials also began to justify their nonmobilization policy recommendations in light of a call up's anticipated domestic political consequences.

However, by ignoring countervailing policy recommendations from military leaders on an ostensibly operational matter, Johnson and his civilian advisers exacerbated tensions that had been developing between the civilian and military establishments since the mid-1960s. The president's decision to eschew the Army's force planning proposals compounded the Joint Chiefs frustration with civilian defense officials' perceived foot dragging on strategic bombing requests, nearly prompting the JCS to resign en masse.

Although Johnson ultimately called up 24,000 reservists to active duty in the climate of crisis following the 1968 Tet Offensive, the mobilization was far too little, too late. The president's three-year delay in mobilizing reserve forces severely compromised the Army's overall force strength and its ability to meet worldwide contingencies.[15] To prevent future presidents from adopting nonmobilization policies and to restore the Army's depleted force structure, high-ranking military officers—including commander, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Creighton Abrams—took steps to depoliticize mobilization in the immediate post-war period. Abrams successful advocacy for the Total Force Concept, a planning model that limits

[15] On nonmobilization reducing the Army's total force strength, see, Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 216; Lewis Sorley, "Reserve Components," 19-20; Sullivan, "The Abrams Doctrine," 2-3; Stuckey and Pistorius, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve*, 62.

the executive's ability to deploy active Army forces without calling up reservists, effectively recast mobilization as an operational measure in the post-Vietnam years.[16]

Summer 1965: An Executive Decision

On June 7, 1965, General William C. Westmoreland—commander Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)—cabled the Pentagon to inform Washington that the military situation in South Vietnam was rapidly deteriorating. "There are indications that the conflict in Southeast Asia is in the process of moving to a higher level," he warned. "Some PAVN [Vietnam People's Army] forces have entered SVN [South Vietnam] and more may well be on the way." Southern Communist guerilla units had demonstrated increased discipline when engaged and a greater willingness to sustain heavy losses in battle while "ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] troops [were] beginning to show signs of reluctance to assume the offensive and in some cases their steadfastness under fire [was] coming into doubt. The GVN [Government of Vietnam]," he concluded, "cannot stand up successfully to this kind of pressure without reinforcement . . . . I see no course of action open to us except to reinforce our efforts in SVN with additional U.S. or third country forces."[17] Westmoreland concluded his message with a request for 41,000 combat troops to stabilize the present situation—noting that another 52,000 forces would be needed later—bringing the total U.S. commitment in South Vietnam to 175,000 American men.

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[16] The Total Force Concept changed the Army's force structure to "require mobilization of the Reserve Component even at the low end of the spectrum of conflict." Sullivan, "The Abrams Doctrine," 3. See also, Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

[17] Memorandum from William C. Westmoreland to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 7 June 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968-Vietnam* 2:733-35 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*).

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs briefed the president on Westmoreland's cable the following day. Although MACV had been steadily alerting Washington to the South Vietnamese's faltering military position vis-à-vis the Communists since late 1964, administration officials were shocked and devastated by Westmoreland's latest situation report. McNamara later recalled that, "of the thousands of cables I received during my seven years in the Defense Department, this one disturbed me most. We were forced to make a decision."[18] Would the administration deploy dramatically increased numbers of U.S. combat troops to Vietnam, and if so, what components would be mobilized to meet the request?

Although the military had been preparing for a potential intervention in South Vietnam for decades, civilian administration officials only began to grapple seriously with questions of escalation and force planning after receiving Westmoreland's cable. In response to the general's troop request, Under Secretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs George Ball submitted a lengthy memo to the president and Secretary of State Dean Rusk on June 18 in which he advocated capping U.S. forces in Vietnam at "no more than 100,000," igniting a debate among key administration leaders which culminated in McNamara's call for a dramatically expanded U.S. commitment predicated on the mobilization of U.S. Army Reserve forces.[19] Although the defense secretary had supported a limited escalation throughout the middle weeks of June, he shifted in favor of a more dramatic expansion, undergirded by a call up, after receiving another situation report from Westmoreland on June 24 in which the general warned that

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[18] Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Book, 1995), 189.
[19] Memorandum from George Ball to President Lyndon Johnson, 18 June 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 29.

the war was likely to last longer than most intelligence experts had expected.[20] McNamara accounted for the general's upward force projections in a July 1 memo to the president in which he argued that "a decision should be made now to bring the US/3d-country deployments to 44 battalions [34 American, 10 to be supplied by third country forces] within the next few months." He emphasized the importance of a call up, arguing that reserve forces should be mobilized even if the president decided against McNamara's 44 battalion program and deployed "no more than 100,000 men"—the force cap previously recommended by Ball.[21]

Rusk, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs William Bundy, and Ball also submitted memos to the president the same day clarifying their positions on a ground force escalation and indicating their perceptions of the relative strategic importance of South Vietnam to U.S. security. They did not address a potential reserve force mobilization in their analyses, most likely reflecting McNamara's more intimate knowledge of the Army's infrastructure and the fact that a potential call up had not yet become a central point of administrative debate. The defense secretary found himself most closely allied with Rusk who took a hardline stance in his rare paper to the president. Calling the preservation of an independent, noncommunist, South Vietnam "critical," the secretary of state argued that an escalation of American forces was the best means of denying Viet Cong success.[22] By contrast, Ball advocated a negotiated settlement, arguing that it would be easier to withdraw presently before U.S. credibility became fully vested in South Vietnam than after American forces had sustained heavy

[20] MAC3240, 24 June 1965, ibid, 42-3.
[21] Memorandum from Robert McNamara to Lyndon Johnson, 1 July 1965, ibid, 98, 100.
[22] Memorandum from Dean Rusk to Lyndon Johnson, 1 July 1965, ibid, 104-6.

losses.[23] In his paper, Bundy called for a middle way course of action, suggesting that U.S. forces be brought up to a paid strength of 85,000 at which point the American program could be reevaluated.[24]

Despite the ratcheting up of debate over escalation, Johnson remained undecided about what course to pursue. He was, however, *beginning to form an opinion about the nature of mobilization,* an apparent tactical concept with significant political import. The president telephoned McNamara on the morning of July 2 shortly before a scheduled meeting with his key Vietnam advisers to ask his defense secretary whether or not he believed that Congress and the public would support an escalation on the scale outlined in the McNamara proposal. McNamara responded that, "if we do go as far as my paper suggested—sending numbers of men out there—we ought to call up reserves . . . Almost surely if we do call up reserves you'd want to go to Congress to get authority. This would be a vehicle for drawing together support."[25] Johnson paused before tentatively agreeing that McNamara's reasoning, "makes sense."[26] While the president's grudging affirmation should not be construed as evidence that he believed in mobilization's legislative utility, the conversation reveals Johnson's tendency to privilege considerations

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[23] Memorandum from George Ball to Lyndon Johnson, 1 July 1965, ibid, 106-13.
[24] Memorandum from William Bundy to Lyndon Johnson, 1 July 1965, ibid, 113-15.
[25] Legally, reserve forces can be activated in two ways: by executive order or through legislative action. The Reserve Forces Act of 1955 authorizes the president to call up one million reservists for a one-year period after declaring a national emergency (10 U.S.C. 673). Reserve forces can also be mobilized by the service secretaries "in time of war or of national emergency declared by congress, or when otherwise authorized by law . . ." (10 U.S.C. 672). In a memo to McGeorge Bundy reviewing the legal means of activating reservists, Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget Henry Rowen argued that seeking a joint resolution from congress "seems far and away the best" method. "It assures Congressional participation and support and avoids the problems involved in declaring a new national emergency." See, Memorandum from Henry Rowen to McGeorge Bundy, 23 July 1965, ibid, 223-24. Like Rowen, McNamara wanted reserves to be activated via congressional resolution in order to generate wider, congressional support (and tacit approval) for the war.
[26] Telephone Conversation Between President Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara, 2 July 1965, ibid, 186. McNamara incorrectly dates the conversation to July 14, McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 200-1; Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 144.

of the political consequences of escalation and mobilization over the policy's military import.

During the first half of July, Johnson rarely discussed a potential call up, suggesting that while he had begun to conceive of escalation and force planning as a set of political decisions, the president had not yet assigned significant value to mobilization itself. However, when probed on this issue by defense department officials, the president did express a willingness to call up reserve forces despite the possible legislative consequences. In a July 17 cable to his boss, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance reported that he had met with Johnson the day before to discuss McNamara's escalation proposal and that during the appointment, the president had affirmed, "his current intention to precede with . . . [the McNamara] plan." Although Johnson emphasized that it was impossible for him to "submit [a] supplementary budget request of more than $300-$400 million to Congress before next January [because] if a larger request is made to Congress, he believes this will kill [his] domestic legislative program," the president confirmed that he still found "legislation authorizing [the] call-up of reserves . . . acceptable in the light of his comments concerning [his] domestic program."[27] While Johnson did not feel that domestic political concerns precluded a mobilization during the middle weeks of July, legislative calculations clearly framed the president's thinking about the feasibility of force planning models.

Meanwhile, McNamara continued to advocate for a reserve call up based on its military value and his belief that mobilizing reserves via joint resolution would engender

[27] Telegram from Cyrus Vance to Robert McNamara, 17 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 162-63. Francis M. Bator misconstrues the Vance telegram as evidence of domestic political motivations for nonmobilization. A full reading of the cable reveals that the president intended to mobilize reserves despite his belief that budget requests beyond $300-$400 million would kill his domestic legislative agenda. See, Bator, "No Good Choices," 322.

congressional support for the administration's Vietnam policies. On July 13, the day before the defense secretary left for a fact-finding mission to Saigon, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton gave National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy a draft of the trip report that McNamara planned to submit to Johnson upon his return from Saigon. (As Lewis Sorley notes, McNamara often developed his conclusions about fact-finding missions in advance of departure, adjusting his rhetoric afterwards based on what he perceived in-country). In the draft report, McNamara reiterated his support for a reserve force mobilization, a view reflected in the final copy.[28] In the report to the president, dated July 20, McNamara argued that the administration must choose between three possible courses: withdrawal, maintenance of the status quo, or the prompt expansion of U.S. military forces. McNamara recommended the third option which was best met, he wrote, through the deployment of 34 maneuver battalions and increased troop deployments in 1966, undergirded by "the call-up of approximately 235,000 men in the Reserve and National Guard" and a dramatic expansion of the active armed forces (approximately 250,000 Army, 75,000 Marines, 25,000 Air Force, and 25,000 Navy) to "be accomplished by increasing recruitment, increasing the draft and extending tours of duty of men already in the service." McNamara argued that this massive mobilization program would allow trained regular forces to relieve reservists by the end of their yearlong activation period. U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, former ambassador to South Vietnam General Maxwell Taylor, Deputy Ambassador Alexis Johnson, Chairman of the Joint

[28] Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 208; Memorandum from Robert McNamara to Lyndon Johnson, 20 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 171-179.

Chiefs General Earle Wheeler, Westmoreland, and Admiral Grant Sharp all signed off on McNamara's military recommendations.[29]

The president was relatively uninterested, however, in the strategic importance of mobilization in helping to maintain the Army's total force structure. In a briefing on July 21, Johnson began to express resistance to a call up based on mobilization's potential negative impacts on his foreign policy goals. After listening to the defense secretary summarize his recommendations, the president questioned the necessity of a call up for the first time, asking, "What results could be expected? . . . We must make no snap judgments. We must carefully consider our options." Searching for alternatives, Johnson asked the group if anyone disagreed with the course that McNamara had laid out, at which point Ball responded that he "had great apprehensions that we can win under these conditions." Not only did U.S. forces face a protracted war against local guerrillas, he argued, but "there remains a great danger of intrusion by the Chinese Communists" if we pursue this course. They have taken a protracted view of the situation, Ball continued, and begun ordering blood plasma from the Japanese in anticipation of a war with the Americans. When Johnson asked whether or not the U.S. could win an expanded war against the Chinese without nuclear weapons, no one seemed to be able to provide an answer. [30]

Throughout the rest of the week, Johnson peppered his advisers with questions about the likelihood of provoking a wider war with the Chinese—and to a lesser extent,

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[29] Memorandum from Robert McNamara to President Lyndon Johnson, 20 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 171-79. Though Westmoreland approved the military recommendations in McNamara's memo, the general was wary of a reserve force mobilization because he believed that the war would last longer than the one-year period for which reserve forces could be activated. He favored calling up reserves "only when the enemy was near defeat and more American troops could assure it." See, Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 143.

[30] Notes of Meeting, 21 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 191; Memorandum for the Record, 21 July 1965, ibid, 197; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 146-47.

the Soviets—suggesting his growing concern for the geopolitical ramifications of escalation and mobilization. In a meeting with McNamara, Bundy, Vance, the service secretaries, the JCS, and foreign policy insider Clark Clifford, Johnson continually steered the conversation back to the likelihood of a Communist intervention:

> President: If we gave Westmoreland all he asked for what are our chances? *I don't agree that NVN [North Vietnam] and China won't come in. . . What reaction is this going to produce?*
>
> Wheeler: Since we are not proposing an invasion of NVN, Soviets will step up material and propaganda—same with Chicoms [Chinese Communists]. Might have NVN introduce more regular troops.
>
> President: *Why wouldn't NVN pour in more men? Also, call on volunteers from China and Russia?*
>
> Wheeler: … On volunteers—the one thing all NVN fear is Chinese. For them to invite Chinese volunteers is to invite China's taking over NVN. . .
>
> President: Anticipate retaliation by Soviets in Berlin?
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> Wheeler: You may have some flare-up but lines are so tightly drawn in Berlin that it raises risks of escalation too quickly. [NATO Supreme Allied Commander Lyman] Lemnitzer thinks no flare-up in Berlin. In Korea, if Soviets undertook operations, it would be dangerous.[31]

Despite Wheeler's confidence in the military's ability to maintain a limited war, the president remained unconvinced, turning to General Johnson to ask him whether or not he believed an infusion of hundreds of thousands of American men—including reservists—and billions of dollars in defense spending would provoke the Communists to launch military reprisals against American installations. When General Johnson replied that he did not think that these actions would spur a Chinese or Soviet intervention, the president quipped, "[Douglas] *MacArthur didn't think they would come in either*," in reference to the Korean War general's miscalculation. When General Johnson hurriedly began explaining that Vietnam was different from Korea for a variety of tactical reasons, the president interrupted to ask the army chief of staff whether or not the Chinese

[31] Meeting Notes, 22 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 209-17.

possessed sufficient manpower to support an invasion. "Yes, they do," the general responded.[32] This answer must have troubled the president because he redirected attention to avenues for limiting Chinese and Soviet involvement in Vietnam during an afternoon session with another configuration of foreign policy advisers. After admitting that he had come to believe that an escalation might be necessary to preserve an independent, non-communist South Vietnam, Johnson insisted that the United States refrain from taking any additional, unnecessarily provocative steps that risked widening the war. The president then went on to suggest that declaring a national state of emergency and calling up reserve forces would likely be particularly provocative actions that might signal U.S. bellicosity to the Chinese.[33] Recognizing that mobilization could function not only as a tool of domestic politics, but diplomacy as well, the president hesitated to call up reserves to protect both his legislative and foreign policy agendas.

McNamara laid out three escalatory options in an important meeting on July 23. Plan I was a repackaged version of the secretary's July 20 proposals: a dramatic escalation supported by a reserve force mobilization and increased recruiting and drafting. Under Plan II, large numbers of ground forces would be committed over time, with the deferment of a possible reserve force mobilization until September. The same numbers of forces were to be committed under the newly introduced Plan III, but the escalation would be undertaken without a call up in order to signal America's limited aims. Despite McNamara's expressed support for Plan I, Johnson chose Plan III, the

[32] Meeting Notes, 22 July 1965, ibid, 209-17.
[33] Meeting Notes, 22 July 1965, ibid, 218.

course he believed least likely to precipitate an expanded war with the Communists and domestic backlash against his Vietnam policies.[34]

When McNamara met with the service secretaries the next morning to relay the president's decision and to review deployment timetables, the military leaders were astounded to learn that reserve components would not be mobilized. General Johnson later recalled that the news "came as a total and complete surprise and I might say a shock. Every single contingency plan that the Army had that called for any kind of an expansion of force had the assumption in it that the reserves would be called."[35] The general voiced his apprehension, warning, "Mr. McNamara, I haven't any basis for justifying what I'm going to say, but I can assure you of one thing, and that is *without a call-up of reserves that the quality of the Army is going to erode and we're going to suffer very badly*. I don't know at what point this will occur, but it will be relatively soon. I don't know how widespread it will be, but it will be relatively widespread."[36]

Despite the military backlash, the president proceeded with his decision not to call up reserve forces, a policy he formalized during a National Security Council meeting on July 27. In summing up the rationale underlying his decision, Johnson told the group, "We could ask for everything we might desire from Congress—money, authority to call up reserves, acceptance of the deployment of more battalions," but instead, "*we have chosen to do what is necessary to meet the present situation, but not to be unnecessarily*

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[34] Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to Lyndon Johnson, 24 July 1965, ibid, 236; Memorandum for the Record, 24 July 1965, Greene Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center (hereafter MCHC), cited in Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 211-212 and Drea, *McNamara, Clifford*, 35.
[35] Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 212.
[36] Memorandum for the Record, 24 July 1965, Greene Papers, MCHC, quoted in Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 212 (emphasis added).

provocative to either the Russians or the Communist Chinese."[37] Although Johnson spoke earnestly about the geostrategic motivations underlying nonmobilization, he concealed the domestic political imperatives reinforcing his decision. According to Bundy's meeting notes, "while the president was placing his preference for alternative five [escalation without mobilization] as against alternative four [escalation with mobilization] on international grounds, *his unspoken objective was to protect his legislative program*—or at least this had appeared to be his object in his informal talks . . ."[38]

Domestic political sensitivities also shaped the president's decision to announce the escalation in a press conference the next day, rather than more formally before a joint session of Congress.[39] At thirty-four minutes past noon on July 28, the president addressed the nation from the East Room of the White House. Rocking slightly he began, "Three times in my lifetime, in two World Wars and in Korea, Americans have gone to far lands to fight for freedom." Staring directly into the camera, Johnson announced, "I have today ordered to Viet-Nam the Air Mobile Division and certain other forces which will raise our fighting strength from 75,000 to 125,000 men almost immediately. Additional forces will be needed later, and they will be sent as requested." To support this escalation, the president revealed his intention to raise the monthly draft call and to increase the voluntary enlistment effort. "After this past week of deliberations, I have concluded that it is not essential to order Reserve units into service

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[37] Summary Notes of the 553d Meeting of the National Security Council, 27 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 263; Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, 149 (emphasis added).
[38] William Conrad Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships Volume III* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 425-26.
[39] Memorandum of Meeting With the Joint Congressional Leadership, 27 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3:264-269; Jack Valenti, *A Very Human President* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 354-56.

now. If that necessity should later be indicated, I will give the matter most careful consideration and I will give the country—you—an adequate notice before taking such action, but only after full preparations."[40] The president had succeeded in presenting the escalation to both the country and the world as an unchanged policy.

Fall 1965 – Spring 1967: Minimum Necessary Action

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reviewed the president's speech favorably, noting that Johnson "seemed both coolly calculating" and "emotionally patriotic" in his approach to the Communist challenge.[41] But by September, the Louis Harris Poll found that dissatisfaction with Johnson's conduct of the war had jumped from thirteen percent before the July 28 announcement to nearly thirty-five percent.[42] As more American men departed for Vietnam, public opinion increasingly turned against the war, a trend that would continue until the final days of Johnson's tenure—profoundly affecting mobilization decision-making.

As McNamara had predicted in his July 1 memo, by November 1965, it had become apparent to all relevant civilian and military officials that the nearly 200,000 "Phase I" forces were insufficient to defeat Communist forces in South Vietnam. Though an American/ARVN victory, the bloody Ia Drang River Campaign of November had demonstrated yet again the enemy's endurance and willingness to sustain heavy losses. Increasing rates of Northern infiltration further depressed the all-important combat ratio, putting additional pressure on the White House to deploy "Phase II" troops. Reviewing

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[40] "The President's News Conference: July 28, 1965," The American Presidency Project, accessed March 19, 2012, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=27116#axzz1paL1AatF.
[41] Chalmers M. Roberts, "Guardian at the Gate," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 1965, accessed April 1, 2012, http://search.proquest.com/docview/142609478?accountid=14678.
[42] Harris Survey, June 1965, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html; Harris Survey, Sep, 1965. Retrieved April 7, 2012 from the iPOLL Databank.

Westmoreland's 1966 force projections with an eye toward preparing the upcoming defense department budget, McNamara wrote to the president recommending that he authorize the deployment of 40 battalions—a figure that would bring the total U.S. personnel in Vietnam to nearly 400,000. "These deployments would be essentially completed by the end of 1966," he explained. "They could be accomplished without calling up the Reserves or extending tours of duty, but, in that case, they would lead to further reductions in the strength of our strategic reserve to meet contingencies elsewhere."[43] Bearing in mind the advice of the Joint Chiefs and the heads of the services, McNamara offered the commander-in-chief a second option: "An alternative would be to call up Reserves—not only replenishing the strategic reserves, but also giving a clear demonstration of US power and purposes."

While the president and key administration officials—McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk, Joe Califano, and Bill Moyers—tacitly agreed with the recommended force increases, they stressed, throughout December 1965, the importance of only taking "*the minimum necessary action*" to meet Westmoreland's needs.[44] In accordance with this limited war strategy, the policymakers coalesced in their "strong" opposition to a reserve

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[43] A strategic reserve is a reserve component that is called to serve during times of national emergency; Draft Memorandum from Robert McNamara to President Lyndon Johnson, 3 November 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 514-28; Memorandum from Robert McNamara to President Lyndon Johnson, 30 November 1965, *FRUS 1964-1965-Vietnam* 3: 591-94.

[44] Special Assistant to the President Joseph A. Califano, Jr. was one of President Johnson's chief domestic advisers. See, Joseph A. Califano, Jr., *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Bill Moyers was as a key domestic aide, and President Johnson's informal chief of staff from October 1964 through 1966. He also served as White House press secretary from July 1965 through February 1967. See, Bill Moyers, *Bill Moyers on America: A Journalist and his Times*, ed. Julie Leininger Pycior (New York: New Press, 2004).

force mobilization, despite their awareness of the destructive consequences that this decision portended for the military.[45]

The threat of a wider war with China did continue to concern some members of the administration throughout the end of 1965 and into the early months of 1966, discouraging officials from advocating a reserve force call up.[46] As McNamara would repeat several times to Congress during the early months of 1966, "We have done everything humanly possible—both militarily and diplomatically—to make it unmistakably clear that there is no justification for Communist China to involve itself in a war in Vietnam."[47] But, by the winter of 1965-1966, geopolitics no longer seem to have played a determinative role in mobilization policymaking. Johnson had deployed large numbers of combat troops, and thus far, China had not signaled its intention to intervene militarily. However, as Congress and the public both became increasingly skeptical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Johnson's conduct of the war, the administration eschewed all policies—including a call up—that might stimulate further debate or signal—to the American public—a protracted U.S. commitment to Southeast Asia.

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[45] Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson, 2 December 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 594-97 (emphasis added).

[46] Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara were particularly wary of provoking the Chinese and emphasized this concern in several meetings throughout the early months of 1966. See, Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson, 3 December 1965, ibid, 597-98. Edward E. Rice, consul general in Hong Kong, articulated the greatest concern of most administration officials in a memo to William Bundy. He noted that while most intelligence reports suggested that China would not intervene unless attacked—or possibly, if North Vietnam was on the verge of collapse—"the leaders in Communist China [are] like the leaders of other governments in some respects: they probably make some important decisions only as the relevant situations develop, instead of having decided in advance what they would do in all of a variety of contingencies." In other words, while the Chinese were signaling that they would not intervene in a limited war, it was impossible to be confident in that assumption, especially because the U.S. lacked formal relations with the Chinese through which they could communicate directly to avert a crisis. Letter from Edward E. Rice to William Bundy, 9 November 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 556-59.

[47] Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., March 3, 1966, 477.

Just as the administration began to discuss Westmoreland's troop requests for 1966, Johnson was dealt a heavy public relations blow. CBS war correspondent Eric Sevareid published an account of a conversation that he had allegedly had with recently deceased United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson. The article accused the Johnson administration of having rejected a negotiated settlement in the months leading up the 1964 election for political purposes.[48] The Sevareid interview seemed to confirm, for McNamara, the need to demonstrate—not just to the Communists but, most importantly, to the American public—the administration's ultimate desire for peace and its commitment to maintaining limits on the war.[49] Bundy agreed. In a series of memos to Johnson—written between December 2 and 4, 1965—the national security adviser recommended that the president authorize Westmoreland's requests, but that he do so without mobilizing the reserves and without "annouc[ing] a large lump sum increase anytime soon. Indeed our preliminary judgment is that steady increase of pressure on the ground *should be as undramatic as possible*."[50] Media attention should be dedicated to a bombing pause, signaling to the American public that, "Johnson is for peace, while Ho is for war. This has great advantages in balancing further military deployments and the big military budget."[51]

In an effort to demonstrate his peaceful intentions to the American public, Johnson reluctantly acquiesced to the proposed bombing pause. Unfortunately for the administration, this overture had little strategic or domestic impact. By March of 1966,

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[48] Document 203, Footnote 2, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 203.
[49] Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson, 27 November 1965, ibid, 582-84.
[50] Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson, 2 December 1965, ibid, 594-97; Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson, 3 December 1965, ibid, 597-98 (emphasis added).
[51] Memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to President Lyndon Johnson, 4 December 1965, ibid, 599.

more than half of the people polled by Louis Harris & Associates believed that Johnson's handling of the war was only "poor or fair."[52] Sixty percent advocated "calling up the National Guard and the Reserves," suggesting that there was, in fact, popular support for a mobilization.[53] But Johnson mistrusted indications of public support for a call up, quipping, "If you make a commitment to jump off a building, and you find out how high it is, you may withdraw the commitment."[54] Having already concluded that the American people would not support a call up once implemented, Johnson seemed unwilling or unable to change his mind about the impact of a mobilization on public opinion.

What troubled Johnson most during these difficult winter months—as public support for the war dipped below fifty percent—was not the current level of popular dissatisfaction, but mounting congressional opposition to his conduct of the war. Congress had largely refrained from publicly criticizing the president's performance throughout 1964 and 1965.[55] But by January 1966—in the wake of the Dominican intervention, the Sevareid interview of Stevenson, increasing public opposition, and the possibility of future deployments—Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman F. William Fulbright—who had already broken with the administration over other foreign

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[52] Harris Survey, Mar, 1966. Retrieved April 1, 2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

[53] NORC/Stamford University Survey, Feb, 1966. Retrieved February, 4 2012 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html

[54] Johnson made this comment on July 22, 1965 during a meeting with his advisers when discussing the possible deployment of Phase I forces. The sentiment expressed during the earlier discussion reflects Johnson's similar distrust for public opinion the following winter. See, Meeting Notes, 22 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 216

[55] Senate Majority Leader Michael Mansfield (D-MN) was a particularly strident opponent of the Vietnam War but—out of loyalty to the president—he refused to criticize him publicly. See, Memorandum of Meeting with Joint Congressional Leadership, 27 July 1965, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 3: 268; Memorandum from Mike Mansfield to President Lyndon Johnson, 27 July 1965, ibid, 270-72.

policy concerns—publicly attacked Johnson's Vietnam strategy in a series of televised hearings.[56] One by one, members of the Johnson administration were trotted out in front of the hostile committee to testify on various aspects of Vietnam policy. As they were grilled, the officials continued to emphasize that they were only taking the minimum necessary action in Vietnam—the policy that Bundy, Califano, and Moyers had laid out in November.

McNamara came before the committee at ten o'clock on Thursday March 3. After greeting the secretary curtly, Fulbright asked for the defense secretary's overview of the present military situation in Vietnam. McNamara responded by offering a list of ten questions which he felt the committee might be interested in discussing, the last being, "Has not the United States become stretched so thin militarily by our operations in Southeast Asia that we are not prepared to support our commitments elsewhere in the world?" to which he responded, "no." One of the strengths of the current U.S. Vietnam policy, McNamara argued, was the nonmobilization of reserve forces because—while it "does demand some special effort and ingenuity on the part of our military leaders to build up our forces"—it "preserv[es] our ability to meet contingencies elsewhere in the world."[57] While McNamara's sincerity is suspect given his earlier support for a call up—and his obligation to represent the president's views to Congress, the defense secretary's

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[56] Senator F. William Fulbright broke with the administration over the Dominican intervention. On April 30, 1965, Johnson sent troops to the Dominican Republic to suppress a revolt against the junta that had followed Juan Bosch. The official justification for the intervention was initially the protection of U.S. lives and then the suppression of "known Communists" in the rebel government. Fulbright held informational hearings on the events in the Dominican before delivering a caustic Senate address that attacked Johnson for his actions. The president responded by "banning Fulbright from all White House functions for over a year." For a detailed account of the Dominican intervention and the Fulbright-Johnson fall-out, see, David Robert Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 118-20; Randall Bennett Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 95-106.

[57] Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., March 3, 1966, 478.

testimony reflects the depth of the administration's commitment to nonmobilization. Whereas the president had previously avoided publicly discussing a call up, McNamara now trumpeted nonmobilization as a strength of the president's Vietnam policy. When briefing Johnson after the hearing, McNamara reassured him that the defense department was continuing to strengthen its opposition to a reserve force mobilization.

Summer 1967: Civilian – Military Discord

When military leaders pushed again for a call up in conjunction with their force requests during the spring and summer of 1967, President Johnson and his civilian advisers expressed strong opposition to the proposal. McNaughton noted that a mobilization entailed "horrible baggage" which was likely to exacerbate the "unpopularity of the war in the US, especially with young people, the underprivileged, the intelligentsia and (I suspect) women."[58] McNamara agreed, urging the president to, "avoid the *explosive Congressional debate* and US Reserve call-up implicit in the Westmoreland troop request."[59] The president had no intention of worsening the domestic political situation. He capped U.S. forces in Vietnam at 525,000 men—to be deployed through 1968—and rejected the request for a mobilization.

The brass was furious. General Andrew P. O'Meara—Commander in Chief, U.S. Army, Europe—summarized the operational costs of nonmobilization in a letter to General Harold Johnson dated May 9, 1967:

> Let there be no question in anyone's mind as to what the expansion of the Army without the call-up of Reserves has cost us. Many fine young officers have been given invaluable experience. But this experience has consisted of making a lot of mistakes and obtaining much less than the full teaching value which those mistakes should have produced because there were not enough people to point out the mistakes and insure [sic] proper corrective action. . . . Our equipment suffers

[58] Memorandum from John McNaughton to Robert McNamara, 6 May 1967, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 5: 382.
[59] Draft Memorandum from Robert McNamara to President Lyndon Johnson, 19 May 1967, ibid, 434 (emphasis added).

> because we don't have enough experienced officers and NCOs to insure [sic] its proper use and its proper maintenance and repair. . . . This spring we had two serious failures in the communications center of this headquarters. These failures were due to the young lieutenants on duty being inexperienced and lacking full comprehension of their jobs. We have plugged this gap by keeping experienced personnel on shifts but they are personnel whose talents are badly needed elsewhere. I could go down the list of our activities from public relations to military justice and cite similar costs. *I am not crying in my beer.*[60]

Whereas the White House used force planning as a political tool—eschewing a call up as a public sign of the country's limited commitment to Vietnam—O'Meara and his uniformed peers experienced the negative operational effects of nonmobilization policy daily. As nonmobilization depleted the Army's total force strength, the JCS continued to warn civilian administration officials that the best prepared men were being passed over for deployment, the Army's ability to meet worldwide threats was decreasing daily, and the reserves—once a bastion of highly trained soldiers—were becoming a haven for draft dodgers.[61]

Civilian-military relations reached a new low during the summer of 1967. On August 16, during a hearing of John Stennis's Preparedness Subcommittee, McNamara claimed that he did not "believe that there [was] [a] gulf between the military leaders and the civilian leaders in the executive branch," infuriating the JCS who felt that the secretary's comments undermined their previous testimony in which they had supported a different set a policies. Reacting not only to McNamara's recent testimony but also to years of ignored recommendations and limited direct access to the president, Chairman Wheeler called the other members of the Joint Chiefs to his office and requested that all

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[60] Letter from Andrew P. O'Meara to Harold K. Johnson, 9 May 1967, Military History Institute (MHI), Harold K. Johnson Papers, Series I, Sub Series I, Box 75, Folder 5.

[61] By mid-1966, several of the service secretaries had come to fear that reserve units had become havens for draft dodgers who counted on the president's continued endorsement of nonmobilization. Harold K. Johnson, interview by Rupert L. Glover, tape 8, transcript, December 28, 1972. MHI, Harold K. Johnson Papers, Series VI, Box 201, Folder 12.

aides leave the room.[62] It was time for the chiefs to resign in protest of the civilian restrictions, Wheeler argued. He suggested that they hold a press conference the following morning to make the announcement. After a long night of discussion, all agreed. But by the next morning, Wheeler had changed his mind, deciding—just as General Johnson had, that it was best to stay on and continue advocating for change from within the command structure. The chairman reconvened the rest of the JCS and convinced them to remain as well.[63]

Despite the chiefs' decision to stay on, the episode reveals not only the extreme hostility that the brass felt toward their civilian superiors, but the incredible importance that the military leadership vested in reserve force mobilization—an issue that the nation's top officers seemed momentarily willing to resign over.

Spring 1968: Tet and its Impact

At 12:35 on the morning of Tuesday, January 30, 1968—less than an hour into the Vietnamese New Year holiday—Communist forces launched a coordinated general offensive throughout South Vietnam. Troubling reports began streaming into the Pentagon from MACV, indicating that the enemy had not only reneged on its peace agreement for the Tet holiday, but that it was currently in the process of mounting its largest campaign to date. Images of hostile actions—including a firefight in the United States Embassy in Saigon—seemed to indicate to a transfixed American public, the precariousness of the U.S./ARVN position. Although MACV pronounced Tet a tactical

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[62] Harold K. Johnson, interview by Rupert L. Glover, tape 11, transcript, March 6, 1973. MHI, Harold K. Johnson Papers, Series VI, Box 201, Folder 5.

[63] Mark Perry, *Four Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 162-66. Although Perry did not provide any citation information for the original account, he later claimed that Generals John Vessey, Bruce Palmer, and Edward C. Meyer had given him details. Lewis Sorley indicates that General Wheeler discussed the episode with his wife, his son, and General Bruce Palmer before his death, further confirming the event. See, Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 286.

failure for the VC/NVA forces, the Communists totally eroded the American public's confidence in the U.S. military posture in Vietnam.[64]

The administration worked tirelessly to both control the developing public relations crisis and to ensure that MACV was adequately supplied to stave off the onslaught. During the first few days of the offensive, Johnson spoke regularly with Wheeler seeking both reassurance that Khe Sanh—a Marine Corps outpost that had become a site of heavy fighting—would not collapse in the way of Dien Bien Phu and asking for information about Westmoreland's needs: material and human.[65] Recognizing an opportunity to raise the 525,000 man troop cap—and reconstitute the depleted strategic reserve with a percentage of the allocated forces—Wheeler encouraged Westmoreland to submit a request for reinforcements.[66] "Do you need reinforcements?" Wheeler asked. The president "is not prepared to accept defeat in South Vietnam. In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them."[67] But, to Wheeler's dismay, the commander of U.S. forces responded that Khe Sanh was well fortified and no new deployments were presently needed.[68] Wheeler tried again, cabling back that he sensed that "the critical phase of the war is upon us, and I do not believe you should refrain from

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[64] For an account of the Tet Offensive, see, Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*; James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995). For an analysis of Tet's impact on American public opinion about the Vietnam War, see, Jake Blood, *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War* (London: Routledge, 2005); Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).
[65] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 350.
[66] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 354; Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 427; Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 70-1.
[67] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 351.
[68] Memorandum from Earle Wheeler to President Lyndon Johnson, 3 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6:117-20.

asking for what you believe is required under the circumstances."[69] Westmoreland was puzzled. Every one of his previous troop requests had met with intense scrutiny.

In Washington, Wheeler was steadily laying the groundwork for a reserve force mobilization which, he hoped, would help to rebuild the strategic reserve, a force that—by this time—was solely composed of the 82nd Airborne Division. In a meeting with the president and the Joint Chiefs on February 9, Wheeler stressed the importance of calling up the reserves. "Westmoreland needs reinforcements for several reasons," he explained. "If this program is followed, it will be necessary for the President to get authority to extend terms of service" and to "call up individual reservists. In all prudence, I do not think we should deploy these troops without reconstituting our strategic reserve in the United States."[70] But, as they had since the summer of 1965, civilian members of the administration expressed concern about the domestic political consequences of a reserve force mobilization. Incoming secretary of defense Clark Clifford cautioned that an emergency call up would send a deleterious public message at a time when the administration was claiming victory in the Tet Offensive.[71] McNamara agreed and added that he would instruct his staff to draw up plans for an escalation supported exclusively by active forces.[72]

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[69] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 351.
[70] Meeting Notes, 9 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 160-61; Notes of the President's Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 9 February 1968, Johnson Papers, Tom Johnson's Notes, Box 2, quoted in Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 586.
[71] Meeting Notes, 9 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 160-61. Clark Clifford was formally sworn into office on March 1, 1968.
[72] Meeting Notes, 10 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 171.

The JCS were furious insisting that they could not possibly support a deployment without an accompanying mobilization.[73] Exasperated, the president dispatched Wheeler to Saigon to consult with Westmoreland. Together, the generals devised new force requirements which the Chairman submitted to Johnson four days later. Wheeler called for "three increments" of reinforcements, totaling more than 206,000 men. In a meeting on February 28 to discuss the Wheeler recommendations, an astounded Johnson asked where this massive number of troops could possibly come from. ". . . From a call up in reserve forces. There would be two call ups in the Army, the first for 90,000 and the second for 70,000," McNamara responded. "What type of men would be called?" Johnson wanted to know. Three types, McNamara answered: World War II and Korean veterans, men who have already finished their active service and are now in the reserves, and men with six months of training and less active duty service.[74]

The administration had reached another fork in the road. Logistically, filling Wheeler's request mandated a reserve call up, an action the administration was loath to take for political reasons. At the same time, civilian officials recognized the military's need for further troops. Unprepared to make a decision with the available information, Johnson asked Clifford to conduct a review of current U.S. policy in Vietnam, suggesting that he give particular care to "such problems as the balance of payments, *the complications of a reserve call-up*, alternate military strategies [and] peace moves . . ."[75]

After a thorough review of administration policy in which the recently confirmed secretary of defense exploited his newcomer-status to ask simple—yet probing—

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[73] Pentagon Papers, Part IV C-6-c, 12; Interview with Earle Wheeler by Dorothy Pierce McSweeny, 21 August 1969, U.S. Army Center of Military History, 11-5, cited in, Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 241.
[74] Meeting Notes, 28 February 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 274-75.
[75] Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 393 (emphasis added).

questions of the brass, the Clifford team presented its findings on Monday, March 4. "We recommend," they wrote, "an immediate decision to deploy to Vietnam an estimated total of 22,000 additional personnel" to meet Westmoreland's urgent need. Of equal importance, they argued, was an "early approval of a Reserve call-up" to meet not only "the balance of the Westmoreland request," but "to restore a strategic reserve in the United States, adequate for possible contingencies world-wide."[76]

Wheeler and the Joint Chiefs had finally succeeded in convincing members of the civilian defense establishment that a mobilization could no longer be put off. The military necessity had simply become too great, forcing civilian administration officials to admit the limits of using force planning as a political tool. Clifford echoed these sentiments in an afternoon meeting on March 4: "The strategic reserves in the United States are deeply depleted. They must be built up . . . . We do not know what might happen anywhere around the world, but to face any emergency we will need to strengthen the reserve." According to Clifford, the rationale for mobilizing the reserves was no longer exclusively force requirements in Vietnam, but the preservation of U.S. security more broadly.[77]

As the president considered Clifford's recommendations, public pressure to end the war further complicated an already strained policymaking process. After receiving a brief bump in popular support during the weeks following Tet—the result of the "rally round the flag effect"—opposition to Johnson's policies bounced back, climbing higher

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[76] Draft Memorandum for President Lyndon Johnson, 4 March 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 314-315.

[77] Meeting Notes, 4 March 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 316-27; Clark M. Clifford and Richard C. Holbrooke, *Council to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991). See also, John Acacia, *Clark Clifford: The Wise Man of Washington* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 286.

than ever before. By the end of February, only 32 percent of the American public supported Johnson's handling of the war, down from 51 percent in November.[78]

Congress launched another series of attacks on the president's policies in the wake of Tet. Senator Robert Kennedy—a longstanding personal rival of the president—claimed that the Offensive had "finally shattered the mask of optical illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstances, even from ourselves."[79] Senator Mike Mansfield agreed, noting that "From the outset," the war in Vietnam, "was not an American responsibility, and it is not now an American responsibility." Fulbright went so far as to charge the administration with purposefully deceiving Congress about the Tonkin Gulf attacks of August 1964, suggesting that the entire war had been predicated on a lie.[80]

This congressional animosity deeply troubled Johnson who, by this point, had become convinced of the military necessity for mobilizing reserve forces to restore the depleted strategic reserve, an action that seemed increasingly politically infeasible—no longer simply unpalatable—given the legislators' hostility to current Vietnam policies.[81] Then the Sunday Edition of *The New York Times* delivered the administration a stunning blow. On March 10, the nation's most widely circulated newspaper led with the headline, "Westmoreland Requests 206,000 More Men, Stirring Debate in

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[78] Gallup Polling data cited in Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 71.
[79] "The Tet Offensive and the Media," ABC CLIO, accessed April 6, 2012, http://www.historyandtheheadlines.abc-clio.com/ContentPages/ContentPage.aspx?entryId=1194576&currentSection=1194544&productid=10. Senator Joseph Clark, Jr. (D-PA) entered Senator Kennedy's speech into the Congressional Record on the grounds that the "Nation is accustomed to viewing with special significance the comments of the junior Senator from New York [Mr. Kennedy] on Vietnam. See, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* (February 8, 1968): 2671.
[80] Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, 442; Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 73.
[81] Telephone Conversation Between President Lyndon Johnson and Richard Russell, 7 March 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 344-50.

Administration." The article suggested that not only would the current 525,000 force cap be exceeded, but that the U.S. Army was "essentially . . . fighting Vietnam's birth rate."[82]

The public went ballistic. Wheeler urgently cabled Westmoreland to alert him to the changing domestic environment: "The Secretary [of Defense Clifford] particularly stressed the impact of statements such as that appearing in the *Times* article on public opinion and in Congress in connection with your request for additional forces"—a request that, ironically, Westmoreland had been hesitant to make. "He pointed out that your programs will require the call-up of on the order of 240,000 reservists, extension of terms of service, and authority to call to active duty individuals in the reserve pool . . . . In this view, *these requests will be made much harder perhaps impossible to see if we do not adopt a sober and conservative attitude*."[83] Like the president, Clifford and Wheeler recognized that congress and the American public would not tolerate another large-scale escalation, supported by a mobilization, regardless of whether or not all of the forces were being deployed to Vietnam or used to reconstitute the strategic reserve. National opinion had turned against the war to such a degree that the challenge for the administration now lay in fortifying national defenses without provoking dramatic reactions on the Hill or in the streets.

In a meeting on March 13, the president decided to deploy only the 30,000 troops immediately necessary to meet Westmoreland's emergency request. The forces would be reinforced by two reserve call ups: one in March and another in May, supporting the

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[82] Special to The New York Times. 1968. Westmoreland requests 206,000 more men, stirring debate in administration. *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Mar 10, 1968. http://search.proquest.com/docview/118190776?accountid=14678 (accessed April 1, 2012).

[83] Telegram from Earle Wheeler to William Westmoreland and U.S. Grant Sharp, 8 March 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 353; On Wheeler's pessimism about further deployments in light of domestic opposition, see also, Telegram from Earle Wheeler to William Westmoreland, 9 March 1968, ibid, 357-58.

30,000 level force deployment to Vietnam and reconstituting the strategic reserve, respectively. Clifford formalized the decision the following day in a memo to Wheeler.[84]

But over the next two weeks—as Johnson nearly suffered a defeat in the New Hampshire primary to peace candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy, listened to the venerated "Wise Men" of U.S. foreign relations turn against the war, saw the dollar continue to devalue, and faced increasing hostility from the Hill—the president concluded that in order to preserve the country, he needed to make significant changes to his current Vietnam policy, including the downward revision of the reserve force mobilization outlined on March 13. Johnson lamented to Wheeler and incoming MACV commander, Creighton Abrams:[85]

> Our fiscal situation is abominable . . . They say to get $10 in taxes we must get $10 in reductions of appropriations . . . What happens when you cut poverty, housing, and education? . . . There has been a panic in the last three weeks. It was caused by Ted Kennedy's report on corruption and the ARVN and the GVN being no good. And now a release that Westmoreland wants 206,000 men, and a call-up of 400,000. That would cost $15 billion. That would hurt the dollar and gold.
>
> The leaks to the *New York Times* hurt us. The country is demoralized . . . A worker writes a paper for Clifford group and it's all over Georgetown. The people are trying to save us from ourselves . . . .
>
> I wouldn't be surprised if they [Congress] repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Senator Russell wants us to go in and take out Haiphong. Senator [Eugene] McCarthy and Senator Kennedy and the left wing have informers in the departments. The *Times* and the *Post* are all against us. Most of the press is against us . . . .
>
> We have no support for the war.[86]

Five days later, Johnson addressed the nation a humbled man. "Good evening, my fellow Americans: Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia," he began. While he maintained that Tet had been a Communist failure, the president claimed to hold no illusions of American victory. After announcing a

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[84] Pentagon Papers, Part IV C-6-c, 72.
[85] On March 23, 1968, Johnson informed Westmoreland that he would be relieved of his command as Commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam and reassigned as Army Chief of Staff. General Creighton Abrams officially succeeded Westmoreland on June 10, 1968.
[86] Meeting Notes, 26 March 1968, *FRUS 1964-1968-Vietnam* 6: 462-63.

coordinated peace effort, Johnson informed the public that he would be deploying 13,500 emergency forces, supported by an unspecified reserve force mobilization. The president then concluded the address with a bombshell announcement that surprised even his closest advisers who had written an alternate ending to the speech:

> With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office--the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.[87]

The Vietnam War had destroyed Johnson's presidency.

On April 2, Clifford sent the JCS the final force package for the upcoming mobilization, indicating that 54,000 troops would be called in two increments. The force level was once again revised downward two days later for fiscal purposes to include only the first increment, a total of 24,500 reserves—13,500 for deployment, 11,000 to reconstitute the strategic reserve.[88] Clifford announced the call up in a press conference the following week. "The president has signed an Executive Order under which I am proceeding to call to active duty approximately 24,500 men in some 88 units from the Reserve Components of the Army, Navy, and the Air Force . . . . Of the 24,500, 10,000 are scheduled for deployment to South Vietnam in consonance with the program announced by the president on 31 March. The balance will be used mainly to strengthen the strategic reserve."[89]

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[87] "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Address to the Nation Announcing Steps To Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection March 31, 1968," Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, accessed April 6, 2012, http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/680331.asp.

[88] Stuckey and Pistorius, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve* 63; Currie, "The Army Reserve and Vietnam," 79.

[89] "Army Reserve Units Respond to Call-up," *The Army Reserve Magazine* (May 1968): 6, quoted in Stuckey and Pistorius, *Mobilization of the Army National Guard and Army Reserve*, 67.

The call up shocked most of the activated reserve forces. A flurry of class action lawsuits followed in which whole units contested the legality of their mobilizations—all of which were defeated. By the end of 1969, all activated reservists had been converted back to Reserve status, thus ending the sole mobilization of the Vietnam War.[90]

Conclusion: The Depoliticization of Mobilization

From July 1, 1965 when McNamara initially raised the possibility of a reserve force mobilization with President Johnson, through early March 1968 when the president first began supporting a call up himself, Johnson conceptualized mobilization primarily as a political tool, rather than a tactical or strategic measure.[91] He believed that by calling up reserve forces and putting the country on a wartime footing, the administration would belie the depth of its military involvement in Vietnam to both the American public and its Communist adversaries. Whereas this had been an acceptable consequence, and even an intended outcome, of mobilization for former wartime presidents, Johnson sought to hide the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam for legislative, electoral, and geopolitical purposes. He hoped that by fighting a limited war "in cold blood," he could stymie domestic backlash against U.S. involvement and prevent an expanded war with the Communist superpowers.[92] Therefore, despite the military's strong recommendation that reserves be mobilized for tactical reasons—to send the most highly trained soldiers into the field and maintain total force strength—Johnson decided not to call up reserves during the first three years of the war.

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[90] Sorley, "Reserve Components," 21.
[91] In July 1965, Robert McNamara advocated for a call up on the grounds of his understanding of mobilization's military value *and* its political significance. He believed that calling up forces was not only tactically prudent, but that by going on a wartime footing, the U.S. would send a message of resolve to its citizens and its adversaries.
[92] On fighting a limited war in cold blood, see, Herring, *LBJ in Vietnam*.

Although the military was relatively insulated from political pressures—allowing the brass to make recommendations based on tactical and strategic value, top officials were cognizant of the domestic and geopolitical factors that shaped the president's mobilization policy. Military leaders disagreed, however, with several of the executive's assumptions about the nature of mobilization politics, including the beliefs that a call up would provoke a Chinese intervention and that mobilization would fuel antiwar sentiment. The Joint Chiefs argued that going on a wartime footing might actually deter superpower intervention through a show of strength and marshal domestic support for the U.S. cause by helping the American public to understand that the nation was truly at war, prompting an outpouring of patriotic support.[93]

Ultimately, however, the brass conceived of force planning, not as a tool of international and domestic politics, but as a matter of operational strategy. Military figures like Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Earle Wheeler understood that the decision to mobilize reserve forces affected not only superpower relations and the president's legislative and electoral prospects, but the lives of hundreds of thousands of American boys who had volunteered and been drafted to serve in the jungles of Vietnam. The brass believed that by deploying young, inexperienced soldiers to Vietnam in place of trained reservists, the administration had adopted a dangerous force planning model that undermined military efficiency and human safety. For this reason, military leaders worked feverishly within the administration to bring about a policy reversal, an outcome that many officials felt they never satisfactorily achieved.

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[93] On mobilization generating domestic political support, see, Sorley, *Honorable Warrior*, 216; Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 117.

Perhaps most frustratingly for a military that believed that it was being hamstrung in its wartime policymaking, the brass felt that it was also forced to bear the burden of American failure during the postwar era. In an effort to rebrand the Army and prevent future wartime presidents from treating force planning as a political tool to militarily deleterious ends, Army Chief of Staff General Creighton Abrams proposed a new force planning model in the last years of the Vietnam War which more fully integrates active and reserve units. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird announced the Abrams Doctrine—formally titled the Total Force Concept—in August 1970, a concept that the military continues to apply today and one that will hopefully prevent the superfluous loss of life caused by nonmobilization during the Vietnam War.[94]

[94] Sorley, "Reserve Components," 21; Sullivan, "The Abrams Doctrine," 2.

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