



The Bull's-Eye of Disaster

by James Bond Stockdale

For over a decade now, it's been commonplace for our leaders to urge us to put Vietnam behind us. My wife, Sybil, and I were face to face with our good friend George Bush when he said it again at his Inauguration in January. The Congressional Medal of Honor Society has front row seats at these affairs, and I swallowed hard when during what I would call his "plea for unity" acceptance speech he said, "Surely, the statute of limitations on Vietnam has run out." I was not the only one in the Medal of Honor section who decided to take that remark with a grain of salt. New Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey and I exchanged knowing glances.

In case you don't know, Bob Kerrey was a Navy SEAL team leader who lost a leg on a voluntary and highly risky midnight penetration of a VC island stronghold to abduct their political cadres for interrogation. In the pitch black melee, a hand grenade exploded right at Bob's feet. He refused medical treatment until his gang and their quarry were back down the high cliff, into the rubber boats, and away. Good work, but in hindsight, all for naught.

I think Bob and I and many of our cohorts think there is much more to be written and said before the nation puts that Indochina chapter of our history to bed. I *know* there is material yet to be released that belongs in the public record. The total Vietnam War story involves just too many fundamental breaks in our national integrity to be buried in

the vault. It is a package of lessons for the current age, and for the future.

I find that World War II guys, and, of course, President Bush qualifies as a hero among them, sometimes dust off the Vietnam experience as a one-of-a-kind mixup in which our civilian and military leaders misjudged the nature of the problem, and once in, sank into an unexpected quagmire that was beyond almost anybody's practical control. From my study — and intuition — I find that impossible to believe.

I was there for ten years, and taking in data all the time — one year just flying, two flying heavy combat, and seven and a half in prison — *not* "languishing," *not* "sitting out the war," as used to be said when American POW's had Geneva Convention protection, but fighting a torture battle — four of those years from a solitary cell in a penitentiary, surreptitiously commanding a secret and tricky underground organization, while regularly picking the brain of the prison-system commissar who sat on the North Vietnamese Army's General Staff. Altogether, I've come to realize that this talk about "surprise" at the resistance we met — at least among our senior leaders on the Joint Chiefs of Staff — is sheer bunk.

Books lead me to believe that the war held scarcely any surprises for the informed military. Their relationship with McNamara's whiz kids (who took over planning and running the war) was sort of like that of my prison pal who had come out of a dog fight in a parachute as the back seat (radar guy) of an F-4, with his front seat (pilot). The truth of the matter was that their plane came apart not as a result of enemy gunfire but because of a midair collision with one of their wingmen — a very rare event in that war, I assure you. One day years later I was sitting in a Hanoi prison cellblock

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while my pal's pilot was describing to the rest of us his surprise, while in violent maneuvering against a division of MIG's, to feel the unexpected impact of a blindside midair! "No surprise, Boss," interrupted the popular back seater, smiling and shaking his head in the spirit of sardonic fly-boy humor. "I knew what to expect right after I heard your briefing in the ready room. The flight was briefed like a midair, and it was flown like a midair."

A joke (sort of), but it was no joke with the Vietnam War as a whole. *It* was planned like a midair, and flown like a midair: a perfect disaster. But the planners didn't have to go to prison. They didn't even have to fight. They didn't even know *how* to fight. They just knew how to "thread the needle"—how to get an army out there that would satisfy our elders' drive, The Establishment drive, people like Dean Acheson's and John McCloy's *Wise Men's* drive—to meet Cold War verities, shackled sufficiently to keep the allies of the enemy below a high simmer, and our own general public in the dark and calm. No emotion, please. Early in the war Robert McNamara said: "The greatest contribution Vietnam is making is that it is developing an ability in the United States to fight a limited war, to go to war, without the necessity of arousing the public ire." Can you think of any action more inconsistent with the basic idea of a democracy than the launching of *the* ultimate public endeavor, the committing of a generation of its young men to battle, the quintessential emotional experience, under the guise of their merely acting out their parts in some new sort of sterile half-speed surgical intrusion and thus well enough served without the encouragement and support of the public sentiment?

Oh, there was no doubt in the minds of the insiders, or of those of us who were out there on the firing line before 1965, that a "land battle" was what was in the works. You notice that I said that the needle-threaders got an *army* out there and shackled it. Nobody who understood the problem wanted the US Army out there trying to win hearts and minds in the weeds—least of all the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After two years of study and God knows how many confrontations with the President's "defense intellectuals," our JCS's final formal recommendation (made in October 1964, just before "the" war shaping decisions were rendered by the Executive Department) hung in with the LeMay solution—to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong, back to the Stone Age if necessary; to keep the US Army out of the field except as a last resort; to "isolate" the battlefield and let the South Vietnamese have at it with the Communists in a fair fight. (There is data in the files that establish LeMay's rationale as not to glorify the Air Force, but to save the US Army from ruin.) Their plan, the JCS believed, best utilized America's military power, and best served her national purposes and well-being.

And take it from one who was there when the B-52's finally *did* bomb Hanoi for a few days eight years later: that would have done it. "The walls came tumbling down"—the loss of life, American *and* Vietnamese, was miniscule in comparison to the "land war" we bought into (at most, 1 percent of what was commonplace in World War II bombardments—100 per day in Hanoi vs. 50,000 a day at Dresden being a not-illegitimate contrast). The noisy Hanoi streets went absolutely silent. Their military officers were

first thunderstruck, then obsequious, setting our guards to the unprecedented task of making the rounds of the cellblocks with hot coffee at dawn before the daily barrage started. Within two weeks, their national authorities were back at the negotiating table, and, in so many words, in the process of surrendering.

The Chiefs' "short war" recommendation of October 1964 was handed over to the young Establishment Intellectual LBJ had asked to draft his strategy. His name was William Putnam Bundy, Dean Acheson's son-in-law. (Insecure Johnson had to have that old-boy Ivy League prestige behind him.) And according to the "25 years after" books coming out now, it was William Bundy who was arbiter of most things crucial during the "war shaping" period. (It was he who in May 1964 had drafted a "fill in the blanks" Congressional Resolution that became the Tonkin Gulf Resolution after the events of early August of that year; it was he who cooled the JCS idea of "keeping the pressure on with follow-up raids" while the iron was hot after our reprisal air strikes of August 5; he was a leader among those who insisted on not bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, raising the ludicrous flag of caution for fear of a China that was trying to get into America's orbit during those very early Vietnam War years—the start of China's political turnaround that took Nixon's and Kissinger's insight to recognize and capitalize on a few years later; and according to a good book entitled *Four Stars*, which came out this spring, it was this same William Bundy who rejected the idea of a clean declaration of war, something that public sentiment would probably have supported in that fall of 1964—a "bright line test" that would have assured our deploying soldiers of the congressional and public support they deserved in exchange for laying their lives on the line. Bundy rejected it (says the book) to save LBJ "an embarrassing pre-election political headache in his peace-oriented campaign against Goldwater for President."

Admiral Lloyd Mustin appeared before William Bundy's war strategy working group as advocate for the Chiefs' "short war" plan in November 1964. His words tersely described the distillation of JCS thinking: "Instead of working to buttress the South Vietnamese government in order to defend itself, the United States should take stern actions against North Vietnam to make that defense needless." (Over the years, the Chiefs had collected lots of data, including the horror stories of Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann's unsuccessful attempts in '62 and '63 to motivate or teach the South Vietnamese to fight "Western style.") But the "short war" plan went down the tubes on December 1, 1964, in a formal meeting with LBJ and his principal advisors: Rusk, McNamara, the Bundys, Rostow, McCone, Ball, and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor. A campaign of reactive (tit for tat) gradualism won—the strategy of the game-theory advocates who claimed that if you titted for tat long enough, you could eventually convince your adversary that his cause was hopeless. (The "Prisoners' Dilemma" game.) It seemed a "safer" theory—and by its implicit restriction of options to almost *none* except the stationing of our Army units right down there in the jungle, it had the old "morality play" aspect of compassionate paternalism—our troops acting out the theme of those

1950's books like *The Ugly American*, helping our friends help themselves at the grass roots level. "Limited War," they called it.

(If I sound cynical about grass roots support and "helping little people help themselves," I am skeptical about it from *both* the rational and emotional sides. Rationally, it is generally thought of as a poor utilization of our Army's fighting power. Our troops are *not* missionaries and to cast them in such roles is to get them into positions asking for the sort of abuse Sybil and I heard being poured on America at a conference in Paris a year ago last December. I can't forget the insults of the Parisian anticommunist Vietnamese. In so many words, these leading Vietnamese intellectuals, who had sponsored the South Vietnamese government, charged America with intruding into South Vietnam's internal affairs, and bringing about their country's descent into Communism. In short, they claimed America owed Vietnam another war. We got so close we got pinned with the blame from both sides.)

The reason I think this rehash and analysis is worthy of your time is that it exposes the insidious dangers of that gradualistic paternalism that is so attractive to the timid. It could happen again. Remember Winston Churchill's words in his introduction to *The Gathering Storm*?

It is my purpose, as one who lived and acted in these days . . . to show how the malice of the wicked was reinforced by the weakness of the virtuous, how the councils of prudence and restraint may become the prime agents of mortal danger . . . and how the middle course, adopted from desires for safety and a quiet life may be found to lead direct to the bull's-eye of disaster.

It's hard to believe, now, but "Limited War" was a new expression in early 1965. There was lots of discussion about it—just like when its modern counterpart, "Low Intensity Conflict," was introduced a few years ago. Either can get confusing if you try to apply it to yourself as an individual combatant. In April 1965, a few months after our national Vietnam strategy had been decided, I was heading westward on the aircraft carrier *Oriskany*—starting my third eight-month cruise that would mainly involve flying missions over Vietnam. I was forty-one-years-old and had climbed to the top of Navy flying—Air Group Commander, senior combatant pilot on the ship. This was to be a full combat cruise (since we had left the United States we had heard about the Marines landing near Da Nang, and the start of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign). Three things triggered a speech I gave to all my Air Group pilots a few days before we raised the Indochina coast. (The full text appears in Admiral Sharp's book, *Strategy for Defeat*.) The first trigger was informal chitchat among my squadron commanders about whether limited war required the same low altitude/high accuracy bomb drop patterns as regular war. "I heard some squadrons on other ships were thinking about pulling out high," some were saying. Second trigger: an easily detectable and understandable anxiety among my pilot population as a whole—85 percent of whom were facing their first combat. The majority (the juniors) were well educated, thoughtful, and sensitive—too young to remember the national fervor of World War II. (I still vividly

remembered the whispered concern among several just like them aboard the carrier *Ticonderoga* the previous summer as we eyed the still-wet bomb damage assessment photos of the flaming wreckage of the Vinh oil storage yard following our reprisal raid of August 5. "Yes, sure enough, there are *bodies* among that rubble.") The third trigger: a letter from a bright and highly respected former commanding officer of mine, wishing me well on the one hand, and surprising me on the other by suggesting that I might give thought to laying off pressing for Code of Conduct conformance of prisoners—that it was, after all, a *regular* war document.

I'll quote myself just enough to give you the drift, and the tenor of the times:

Where do you as a person, a person of awareness, refinement and education, fit into this "limited war," "measured response" concept? I want to level with you right now, so you can think it over here in mid-Pacific and not kid yourself into "stark realizations" over the target. Once you go "feet dry" over the beach, there can be nothing *limited* about your commitment. "Limited war" means to us that our target list has limits, our ordnance loadout has limits, our rules of engagement have limits, but that does *not* mean that there is anything "limited" about our personal obligation as fighting men to carry out assigned missions with all we've got. If you think it is right or sensible for a man, in the heat of battle, to apply something less than total *personal commitment*—equated perhaps to his idea of the proportion of *national* potential being applied, *you are wrong*. It's contrary to good sense about self-protection—half speed football is where you get your leg broken. It's contrary to human nature. So also is self-degradation. Don't think for a minute that the prisoner's Code of Conduct is just a "regular war" or "total war" document. It was written for *all* wars, and let it be understood that it applies with full force to this Air Group in this war. . . .

If you don't agree with *all* the above, *right now* is the time to turn in your wings. It's much less damaging to your pride if you do it here in mid-Pacific now, as a clearly thought-out decision, than after you see your shipmates get shot up over the beach. . . .

I hope I haven't made this too somber. I merely want to let you all know where we stand on Duty, Honor and Country. Secondly, I want to warn you all of excessive caution. A philosopher has warned us, that of all forms of caution, caution in love is the most fatal to true happiness. In the same way, I believe that "caution in war" can have a deleterious effect on your future self-respect, and in this sense, surely your future happiness. When that Fox Flag is two blocked on Yankee Station, you'll be an actor in a drama that you'll replay in your mind's eye for the rest of your life. Level with yourself now. Do your duty.

No one came forward to turn in his wings. By the time *Oriskany* returned to San Diego in December 1965, her

pilots had earned a record total of decorations for flight heroism. Of the 120 pilots addressed in this talk, 13 did not return with the ship. Nine were killed in action and four, including myself, were shot down and taken prisoner.

On the *Oriskany's* next cruise, during the summer of 1966, five more from my air group joined us in the Hanoi dungeons—their killed-in-action list higher yet than ours. And in the summer of 1967, still more prisoners, and still more lives and airplanes squandered running up and down the same restricted tracks in North Vietnam in that gradual escalation to nowhere. In four months of that 1967 cruise, the *Oriskany* had 40 percent of its deck load of airplanes shot out of the sky.

So much for “limited war”; so much for the pussyfooters and needle-threaders who wanted to finesse a war with game theory, without disturbing anybody important. I say to them what my North Vietnamese jailers frequently said to me: “The blood, the blood, is on your hands.”

Those of us who entered prison early actually saw three different wars. The first lasted 3 years and 2 months—the war of reactive gradualism decided upon by LBJ and his jolly gang on December 1, 1964; the war that ran its course as described above. Then there was a 3 year 2 month “hiatus” war—like the “limited” war, practically as long as America’s World War II—but no airplanes in the sky, absolutely no American actions that we could detect having any effect on us one way or another. It lasted from late ’68 to late ’71—I was in solitary for the first half of it, and I was brutalized more in 1969 than in any year in prison. Some don’t like to hear this, but on the whole, life was easier for us in prison when America was bombing and hammering at their gates. To have our bombing “paused” was somehow considered contemptible. And then the old JCS “short war” loomed into view in late 1971—the mining of the harbors, the tactical bombing of military targets in Hanoi and Haiphong, and the climax: seemingly endless streams of B-52’s bombing Hanoi and Haiphong military complexes starting on that wondrous night of December 18, 1972. In 11 days, North Vietnam was shut down completely.

That was commitment. A long time coming, and in hindsight, perhaps too late for an emotionally drained America. But for what it’s worth, I believe if the October 1964 JCS “short war” plan had been accepted and put in motion during that spring of 1965—a move that would have been perfectly natural and totally possible—then we would have a free and secure South Vietnam today; we would have about 40,000 fewer headstones in Arlington Cemetery right now; and we would have all been home before Christmas of 1966. What is known as the 60’s—antiwar disruption and all—would never have happened.

How did we get so screwed up? The American government tried to do something the Founding Fathers knew would never work: to send (“sneak” may be a better word) armies to war without a solid consensus of public support. Hear out two of my most trusted friends:

Ross Perot, a savvy patriot in everybody’s book, says, “If we didn’t learn anything else from Vietnam, it is that you don’t commit your men to the battlefield unless you commit the American people first. They fell just as dead in Vietnam as they did on Omaha Beach in Normandy. First commit

At the Van Gogh Museum

by Tom Disch

The lesson here? It’s very clear: we can
By making friends with you endure the whole
Mad scramble of life, the shoving and the shoveling,
Knowing through this friendship that every year
Will yield its blossoms and its beards, its spears
Of jade green thrusting from gnarled brown bulbs,
Its saturations of humanity’s and flowers’
Insistence on being *seen*, an insistence we must learn
After a time to put by, dropping the blossoms,
Cropping off an ear, because you, after all,
Are near—as a wind, a whisper, a glint in the eye
Of Baby Camille Roulin. Unhappiness
Is sure, but surer perhaps for the poor
Living far from the decorous interiors of Paris,
Their pain unrecognized as such, blessed
Only by their nearer proximity to you, who are
The last divinity left: Death. Dark blue Death
Stark behind the scumbings of the clouds,
Implicit in all greens, mocker of all *machers*,
Confounder of lust. All the golds of rich September
Turn to khaki at your touch, and lamplight
Is a feeble contradiction, books a fiction,
Flesh a fable that can only be recalled
In a dead Christ after Delacroix, in Rembrandt’s
Livid and unrisen Lazarus. The brushstrokes
Layer brushstrokes like an infinite regression
Of quotation marks telling us what men
Were once reported to believe. Just so,
In the Nieuwe Kerk our art historians
Discover crude Gothic angels beneath the reforming
Whitewash of the Protestants; just so, when Vincent
Wiped away each canvas’s white lie,
He found the sooty windows of his youth, the same
Warped faces and lightless spaces that first
Acquainted him with you—Prussian blue,
Phthalocyanine, cerulean Death!