Understanding the United States Marines’ strategy and approach to the conventional war in South Vietnam’s Northern provinces, March 1965 – December 1967

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UNDERSTANDING THE UNITED STATES MARINES’ STRATEGY AND APPROACH TO THE CONVENTIONAL WAR IN SOUTH VIETNAM’S NORTHERN PROVINCES, MARCH 1965 – DECEMBER 1967

By

Student # 1260366

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

King’s College London, War Studies Group
Defence Studies Department

June 2019

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UNDERSTANDING THE UNITED STATES MARINES’ STRATEGY AND APPROACH TO THE CONVENTIONAL WAR IN SOUTH VIETNAM’S NORTHERN PROVINCES, MARCH 1965 – DECEMBER 1967

Edward T. Nevgloski

Thesis Advisor: Robert Foley, PhD

Abstract

This thesis analyses the U.S. Marines’ operational approach to military strategy at the height of the Vietnam War. Although empirical evidence points to a Service-wide focus on the unconventional practice of pacification, this thesis suggests that conventional military operations and attrition were not only part of the Marines’ approach to fighting the war in South Vietnam’s five northern provinces, but that both played a much greater role in their overall strategy from March 1965 to December 1967 than the war’s vast historiography portrays. Unlike the incessant coverage of the Marines’ occupation of the populated coastal areas, their acts of kindness toward the South Vietnamese people, and their dismantling of the National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgency’s elusive village-level political infrastructure and armed organization, renewed interest by contemporary scholars skeptical of what they deem to be flawed interpretations of the Marines’ strategy and approach shaped not only by incomplete and outdated research, but by some of its opportunistic senior leadership is changing the way we look at how the Marines dealt with the NLF’s conventionally organized, trained, and equipped main forces as well as the larger and more lethal units of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

This thesis explores conventional military operations as an integral part of the Marines’ concept on fighting the war in the northern provinces. It challenges the assertions made by the
war’s historiography and the Marine Corps’ own Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak that pacification was the sole focus of their military strategy and that attrition of the main forces and NVA was incompatible with their operational approach to its implementation. Additionally, it rebuts Lieutenant General Krulak’s assertion that when the Marines did engage the main forces and NVA, they did so as a part of a compromise with senior U.S. civilian and military officials to produce more immediate and tangible results. The study of unexamined or overlooked primary source documents, such as the personal papers of Marine Corps Commandant General Wallace M. Greene, Jr., underscores the recent hesitancy to accept these many conclusions that to this day hinder ex-post analysis of certain critical aspects of the conflict.

Historians have yet to consider the war in the northern provinces from any perspective other than the Marines’ bias for pacification and their limiting operations to the coast. To fill the gap in the existing literature on the Vietnam War, this thesis examines the Marines’ conventional military operations against the main forces and NVA in South Vietnam’s populated coastal lowlands, rural countryside, and remote highlands, and explores how the Marine Corps in general viewed pacification and attrition as co-equal lines of operation. It neither argues the potential for a different outcome of the war nor attempts to dismiss the role pacification of within the Marines’ strategy and approach. Instead, this thesis stresses that pacification was a mechanism to hold areas cleared of the conventional and unconventional enemy forces threatening South Vietnam and enabled the creation of an environment secure enough for pacification to succeed.
On 19 August 1968, U.S. Marines from the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines began the second week of an operation aimed at interdicting NVA units infiltrating across the demilitarised zone into South Vietnam’s northern-most Quang Tri Province. The battalion’s specific task during was to protect the numerous resupply convoys transiting between the Dong Ha and Khe Sanh combat bases along Route 9, the provinces only east-west road. The Marines were making slow, but steady progress. During the previous week, the battalion discovered nearly 300 unoccupied enemy fighting positions and several bunker complexes—an ominous indicator of the NVA’s growing presence south of the demilitarized zone, though their exact location was unclear.

On the morning of 20 August, the battalion’s Company L occupied a clearing near the large rocky hill mass just north of Route 9 called the “Rockpile”. The company’s energetic commanding officer, Captain William B. Gray, immediately dispatched multiple security and ambush patrols north of the company’s new position. As patrols saturated the area, they ran into several small NVA ambushes. On the morning of the twenty-fourth, Company L discovered several more vacant bunkers surrounded by 55 smaller individual fighting positions or “spider holes” along with 200 pounds of uncooked rice. Accurate enemy mortar fire peppered Gray’s position and patrols, further convincing him that a large enemy was indeed close.

On the afternoon of 26 August, a Marine patrol fired on a group of NVA soldiers entering a previously searched bunker complex. Observing the enemy fleeing north to a large ridgeline known to the Marines as “Mutter’s Ridge”, Gray moved his entire company to the base of the terrain feature. Just before nightfall, while his Marines were frantically digging in, NVA artillery and mortar fire impacted Gray’s meager defences, wounding several of his men in the process. Two hours later, the company came under attack from a force of approximately 50 NVA soldiers
covered by their own artillery, mortar, and automatic weapons fire. “We were hit on all three sides”, Gray recalled of the six chaotic hours. The company’s forward listening post took the brunt of the enemy ground attack.

Positioned at the point of the main enemy thrust was 19-year old Lance Corporal Edward S. Day of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During the initial seconds of the attack, Day placed himself between the enemy and his fellow Marines, laying down a base of fire to buy time for them to withdraw to the relative safety of Company L’s position. As they made their way to the company position, an enemy machinegun team concentrated its fire on Day. Returning deadly accurate rifle fire, Day killed both members of the machinegun team before enemy fire cut him down as he moved to assist a wounded Marine. Despite being gravely wounded, witnessed reported that Day continued firing into the attacking enemy, stalling their advance.

Throughout the night, Gray and other Marines could hear single rifle shots coming suspiciously from Day’s last known location. Convinced it was Day attempting to identify his position and warn the company of a second enemy attack, the rifle fire ended abruptly, signaling to Gray that the enemy had located and killed Day. The enemy withdrew before sunrise, leaving eight dead Marines, including Day, in its wake. According to Gray, Day’s actions provided “us with enough time to set up a hasty defence and thereby saved the lives of a lot of fellow Marines”. Gray recommended Day for the Navy Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor. His mother, Mrs. Alma M. Day, a Second World War Marine herself and widow of an Iwo Jima Marine, accepted the medal from the Secretary of the Navy and Commandant of the Marine Corps on her son’s behalf during a somber afternoon ceremony in Philadelphia in 1969. I dedicate this thesis in his honour.
Acknowledgements

Two vastly different accounts of the Marines’ involvement in the Vietnam War are the impetus for this thesis. Francis J. West’s 1972 novel, The Village, and Richard D. Camp’s 1989 memoir, Lima-6, highlight the complexity of the war and the Marines strategy and approach to containing and defeating Communism in this part of the country.¹ In The Village, West captures the role 15 Marines had in helping the inhabitants of Binh Nghia village defend their home against the NLF insurgency in 1966. Detailing the hardships and dangers of protecting their families from the insurgency’s guerrilla forces, tax collectors, and partisans, West captures what the Marines considered the “other war” in the northern provinces. Many prolific Vietnam War historians argued later how winning this village war was the only way to bring about real peace and security in South Vietnam.

Conversely, Camp’s own recollections of the war stand in stark contrast to the battle for the population’s hearts and minds. Lima-6 recounts his time in command of an infantry company defending the Marine Khe Sanh combat base located in the country’s remote highlands from 1967 to 1968. Camp’s war entailed fighting the NLF’s main forces and NVA units infiltrating across the demilitarised zone to assist the insurgency. The same historians arguing in favour of the village-level war suggest Camp’s experiences were the result of the Marines conceding to the pressure of engaging the conventional forces and abandoning their better instincts on how to counter both the insurgency and North Vietnam.

The dualism of the Marines’ strategy and approach in the northern provinces is often the subject of immense debate due, in part, to misinterpretations and incorrect suppositions perpetuated by some of the war’s most notable historians and, specifically on the Marines’ views

on dealing with the main forces and NVA and on attrition. My years of research and analysis culminated in the realisation that our most accurate understanding of the Vietnam War, particularly in the northern provinces, is yet to come. The journey to complete this thesis and improve our understanding of the war could not have been possible without the assistance and perseverance of so many. Above all, I would like to thank my beautiful and understanding wife, Autumn, our handsome son, Edward Jr., our lovely daughter, Brooke, our late Labrador retrievers, Hoosier, Hanna, and Murphy, and our current cast of character, Maggie and Stanley. Their love, support, and patience are limitless.

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# Table of Contents

List of Maps and Figures .................................................................................................................. 09

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 14

Chapter One
Origins of the Marines’ Involvement in the Vietnam War .............................................................. 61

Chapter Two
The Offensive Enclave Concept ....................................................................................................... 100

Chapter Three
Westmoreland’s Rejection of the Enclave Concept and Push to Intensify Military Operations ........................... 138

Chapter Four
Securing and Improving the Enclaves, March - July 1965 ............................................................... 168

Chapter Five
Conducting Offensive Operations from the Enclaves, August 1965 - March 1966 .................. 218

Chapter Six
Securing Inland Bases and Enemy Occupied Areas, April 1966 - March 1967 ......................... 258

Chapter Seven

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 315

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................... 323
List of Maps and Figures*

Map 1: Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific Theater ................................................................. 10
Map 2: Indochina and the Ho Chi Minh Trail Network ................................................................. 11
Map 3: I Corps Tactical Zone and Northern Provinces ................................................................. 12
Map 4: Marine Combat Bases on the Demilitarised Zone ............................................................ 13

Figure 1: United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam ................................................. 98
Figure 2: Enemy Sea and Land Infiltration Routes and Base Areas .............................................. 128
Figure 3: Main Force Battalions in the I Corps Tactical Zone, 1965 ........................................ 181
Figure 4: 1st NLF Regiment’s Movement Patterns, May-July 1965 ........................................... 225
Figure 5: Operation Starlite, August 1965 ................................................................................... 226
Figure 6: Operation Harvest Moon, December 1965 .................................................................. 236
Figure 8: Main Force and NVA Battalions in the I Corps Tactical Zone, 1966 .......................... 248
Figure 9: NVA Plan on the Demilitarised Zone, 1966 ................................................................. 271
Figure 10: Operations Hastings, 1966 ......................................................................................... 273
Figure 11: The Second Front, 1966-1967 .................................................................................... 288
Figure 12: Main Force and NVA Battalions in the I Corps Tactical Zone, 1967 ....................... 290
Figure 13: Main Force and NVA Base Areas Neutralisation Operations, 1967 ........................ 295
Figure 14: Operation Buffalo, July 1967 ..................................................................................... 299
Figure 15: NVA Order of Battle in the Quang Tri Province, 1967 ............................................. 307
Figure 16: Population Increase in the III MAF Area of Operations, 1965 ................................. 312
Figure 17: Enemy Casualty Rates in the III MAF Area of Operations, 1965 to 1967 ............. 314

*Unless specified, all maps and figures are courtesy of the Marine Corps History Division
Map 1: Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific Theater
Map 2: Indochina and the Ho Chi Minh Trail Network
Map 3: I Corps Tactical Zone and Northern Provinces
Map 4: Marine Combat Bases on the Demilitarised Zone
Introduction

With his 2014 book *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, military historian Gregory A. Daddis joined the growing list of contemporary Vietnam War scholars coming to the defense of General William C. Westmoreland’s approach to military strategy while serving as the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV) from March 1965 to July 1968. Following the efforts of fellow historians such as Dale Andrade, Andrew J. Birtle, and Jonathan D. Caverley, Daddis’ work challenges John A. Nagl’s and Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr.’s assertions that Westmoreland did not understand the kind of war the North Vietnamese-backed NLF insurgency was waging in South Vietnam and how through a series of miscalculations and misinformed decisions the four-star Army general presided over a flawed military strategy there. The result, Nagl and Krepinevich contend, was a single-scope strategy centred solely on U.S. mobility and firepower, and the wearing down of the NLF’s conventionally organised and equipped main forces and, eventually, the larger and more lethal NVA. More specifically, they fault Westmoreland for devising a plan whereby U.S. ground combat forces searched endlessly and fruitlessly South Vietnam’s remote countryside and its porous mountain regions bordering Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam to locate and

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4 The North Vietnamese Army, known officially as the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), was a conventional or regular army trained and equipped by China and the Soviet Union. During the period 1964 to 197, NVA divisions and independent regiments infiltrated South Vietnam to back NLF main forces and the NLF in its effort to liberate the country. See Douglas Pike, *PAVN: The People’s Army of Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991).
destroy main forces and the NVA units in their base areas while at the same time restraining the American military’s involvement in pacifying and protecting a restless South Vietnamese population that was under constant persecution by both the insurgency’s political and military divisions. Westmoreland’s thinking, Nagl and Krepinevich conclude, was a by-product of his inability to see the conflict from anything other than a conventional military perspective due to his experiences from the Second World War and the Korean War and the U.S. Army’s warfighting doctrine of the time, or, the Army Concept.\(^5\)

In his 2009 article “The Myth of Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam”, Caverley argues that despite Westmoreland’s experiences, his proclivity to employ conventional military methods, and the perception that he opposed the U.S. military taking part in South Vietnam’s political and social struggles, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s reluctance to provide the resources necessary to support a strategy of pacification was to blame for Westmoreland’s otherwise narrow focus on attrition.\(^6\) Likewise, Daddis argues that historians siding with Nagl and Krepinevich actually present a flawed and inaccurate account of “what actually transpired”.\(^7\) Citing official messages between Westmoreland and his subordinate field commanders as scholarly evidence to support this rebuttal, the retired Army colonel and lifelong student of the war emphasises how the commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam directed explicitly that his subordinate field commanders adhere to established theories and principles of pacification and encourage their soldiers to incorporate civic actions whenever practicable.\(^8\) Daddis’ research reinforces Caverley’s position that pacification was in fact something

\(^5\) The Army Concept was the U.S. Army’s warfighting doctrine for conflict with near-competitors like the Soviet Union and focused on large divisions of heavy, mechanized infantry and armor in set-piece battles. Nagl and Krepinevich argue that the concept and the Army’s organization and thinking were not effective against insurgencies. See Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*; and Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*.


\(^7\) See Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, xxii.

Westmoreland believed in and revives ex-post analysis on the Vietnam War with a groundswell of new interpretations and analyses on the application of military strategy in the conflict.

Andrade, Birtle, Caverley, and Daddis are not the only contemporary historians challenging accepted scholarly assertions and conclusions on the war. Historian Nicholas J. Schlosser offered his own counterargument on an aspect of the war, namely the U.S. Marines’ strategy in the northern provinces. Schlosser’s specific argument is that the Marines’ strategy entailed neither the pacification-only approach nor a disregard for attrition and conventional military operations against the main forces and NVA that nearly every military historian, including some of the Marine Corps’ own official historians, depict. In his well-researched 2014 article “Reassessing the Marine Corps’ Approach to Strategy in the Vietnam War, 1965–1968”, Schlosser argues that although empirical evidence reveals the Marines paid particular attention to unconventional military aspects of the war, their approach to strategy entailed much more than dismantling the insurgency’s complex administrative and military apparatus, tactically defeating its guerrilla forces, and protecting the war-weary population.9

Concluding that his predecessors “exaggerated the differences” between the Marines and Westmoreland, Schlosser contends that while “Marine leaders favored focusing ground efforts on the coast” instead of operations in the country’s highlands initially, they “nevertheless agreed with Westmoreland that the VC main forces and NVA needed to be located and destroyed”.10

Referencing Marine Corps Commandant General Wallace M. Greene’s once-confidential

personal papers on the situation in South Vietnam, including several overlooked and unexamined executive position statements, Service-level studies, official correspondence, and hand-written notes and summaries, Schlosser adds that the Marines recognized that “securing the coastal population centres in South Vietnam was just one part of a much larger plan for fighting the war” and that a “combination of pacification and attrition” was critical to making their approach to strategy work. In the end, he insists that the Marines looked at a pacification-only strategy as one that was “no more likely to achieve victory” than a strategy focused exclusively on attrition.

11 Schlosser, “Reassessing the Marine Corps’ Approach to Strategy in the Vietnam War”. Gen Wallace M. Greene was Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) from January 1964 to December 1968. For the most complete account of Greene’s time as Commandant see Allan R. Millett’s and Jack Shulimson’s Commandants of the Marine Corps (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 381–401. His personal papers on the Vietnam War, The General Wallace M. Greene Papers: Notes on the Situation in South Vietnam, hereafter the Greene Papers, is a private collection maintained at the Marine Corps University’s History Division (HD) located in Quantico, VA. It contains personal notes, official correspondence, and Service-level studies and position papers pertaining to the Marine Corps’ involvement in the war.

12 Schlosser, “Reassessing the Marine Corps’ Approach to Strategy in the Vietnam War”.

13 The term enclave refers to “a country or part of a country lying wholly within the boundaries of another. A distinctly bounded area enclosed within a larger unit.” In South Vietnam, an enclave included cities and towns and the outlying villages and hamlets. See “enclave”, American Heritage College Dictionary, 4th Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 461. The enclave concept was the first military strategy applied by U.S. forces in 1965. Chapter one of this study presents a thorough explanation of the enclave concept and its origins. See Victor H. Krulak, First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 183; Fleet Marine Force Pacific (FMFPac), Operations of the U.S. Marine Forces Vietnam, March-September 1965, 33,
strategy offer the Marines’ insistence on prioritizing civic actions, village-level security, and both separating and protecting the population from the insurgency as proof of their reluctance to engage in attrition-centric conventional military operations. Juxtaposed with several primary source documents found in Greene’s personal papers, however, demonstrates the attrition of the main forces and NVA through conventional military operations was very much a part of their thinking and approach to strategy during the period March 1965 to December 1967.

Unfortunately, in his efforts to affect real change in the way historians look at the war in the northern provinces, Schlosser falls short of offering sufficient evidence and examples to back his position. This thesis, however, picks up where he leaves off and furthers the argument that pacification was not the sole focus of the Marines’ enclave concept and that attrition of the main forces and NVA was in fact compatible with their operational approach to its implementation. Additionally, it rebuts the assertion that the Marines’ entry into conventional military operations against the main forces and NVA was the product of compromise with Westmoreland and other U.S. civilian and military officials to produce more immediate and tangible results. This thesis shows the Marines did not limit their conventional operations to the populated coastal enclaves, as Schlosser suggests, and that they were as willing to fight in the highlands as they were on the coast.

Historians have yet to consider the war in the northern provinces from any perspective other than the Marines’ bias for pacification and their limiting operations to the coastal enclaves. To fill the gap in the existing literature on the Vietnam War, this thesis examines the Marines’ conventional military operations against the main forces and NVA in South Vietnam’s populated


18
coastal enclaves, rural countryside, and remote highlands, and explores how the Marine Corps in general viewed pacification and attrition as co-equal lines of operation.\textsuperscript{14} Through their “balanced” approach, the Marines used civic actions and counterguerrilla efforts by smaller Marine formations (squads, platoons, and companies) and conventional military operations (battalions and larger) as mutually supporting lines of effort.\textsuperscript{15} That said, this thesis neither argues the potential for a different outcome of the war nor attempts to dismiss the role pacification of within the Marines’ strategy and approach. Instead, it stresses what Lieutenant General Krulak sought originally, and that to use pacification as a mechanism to hold areas cleared of the conventional and unconventional enemy forces threatening South Vietnam and enabled the Marines to take the offensive against conventional Communist forces so as to create of an environment secure enough for pacification to succeed.

**Historiography**

In the nearly 50 years since the last of the American military personnel departed what was South Vietnam, the body of literature covering the U.S. military experience during the Vietnam War continues to grow.\textsuperscript{16} Many of the earliest works consist primarily of official military histories, the first-hand accounts of leading anti-war journalists of the time, and the

\textsuperscript{14} For the purposes of this discussion and to reduce redundancy, the term Marine Corps or Marine Corps leadership refers to General Greene, Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, and Major General Walt as they were of the same mind representing the Service’s action and role in South Vietnam. In most other instances, the Marines refers to Marine units operating in South Vietnam, unless the discussion focuses on a specific figure, which will be identified accordingly.

\textsuperscript{15} Krulak coined the term balanced approach during the initial weeks of the enclave concept. The “balance” he spoke of was the equal application of small unit counterguerrilla actions, pacification (civic actions, security, and support for local and national governance) and large unit operations with the Marines’ operational approach. He used the term to specifically characterise the flexibility needed to deal with the war’s complexities and adhere to Marine Corps doctrine, capabilities, and operating concepts. See Krulak, First to Fight, 183; Operations of Marine Forces, March–September 1965, 33; and Operations of U.S. Marine Forces in Vietnam, March 1965–September 1967 Historical Summary, Volume 1: Narrative, 2–1.

\textsuperscript{16} U.S. forces completed their redeployed from South Vietnam to the U.S. on 29 March 1973. The last U.S. servicemen departed the country on 30 April 1975 during the fall of Saigon, marking the official end of the Vietnam War.
perspectives of the most prominent U.S. government officials. With the declassification of a substantial volume of secret documents, studies, and reports in recent years, general surveys and detailed analyses on the war are again on the rise, thus making it arguably one of the most researched conflicts in modern U.S. military history. Essential to this study is an appreciation for the complete historiography in addition to understanding the long-lasting arguments such as the development and execution of American military strategy during the war. Problematic to the study of the military strategy was the scant availability of sources on the topic and even less on the Marines’ involvement. The result was a tendency for historians to perpetuate the idea that the Marines’ executed a distinctly different strategy than the Army between 1965 and 1968. Historians keep alive this tired argument even in this new age of access and enlightenment toward portraying the conflict with greater accuracy because its makes for an easy target for those that did not support the war (or at least America’s involvement) and to reinforce their supposition that the breakdown in the unity of effort between the services was a one of several reasons the war was as historian John’s Prados lamented, “unwinnable.”

Although there is no proof that contemporary historians are purposely sidestepping what seems to be an obvious inaccuracy and flaw in the historiography, there has been little effort in correcting this oversight. This perhaps has to do with the lack of knowledge of and access to the Greene papers. This study will do a great service in bringing attention to that collection. Perhaps the other reason is a reluctance by contemporary historians to challenge what anti-war favorites deemed the final word. That is not to say all contemporary historians are sidestepping the responsibility to dispel flaws or myths. The most recent example is Geoffrey W. Jensen’s and Matthew M. Stith’s Beyond the Quagmire: New Interpretations of the Vietnam War. In it they join a dozen other historians in recasting several age-old issues on politics and the war, China’s

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involvement, and even go as far as to insert gender issues into the historiography.\textsuperscript{18} In his 2017 study, \textit{The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War}, renowned Vietnam War historian Edwin E. Moise joined the list of skeptics dispelling coverage of the 1968 Tet Offensive.\textsuperscript{19} James S. Robbins did the same in 2012 with \textit{This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive}.\textsuperscript{20} Their arguments, however, are not entirely new and, therefore, attack soft targets. Taking a chance on righting a wrong and correcting a long-accepted position, however, is clearly for some historians not worth risking their reputations, particularly if it means dispelling conclusions by the most notable anti-war protagonists. In \textit{Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam Was, 1954-1965}, Mark Moyar boldly challenges two of the most renowned leading anti-war protagonists in Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam.\textsuperscript{21} For Moyar’s efforts resulted in his peers labeling him a “revisionist” scholar and a pariah.\textsuperscript{22} His treatment may very well lead to the creation of a new generation of bandwagoners reluctant to challenges past wrongs.

Historians to this day consider Sheehan’s and Halberstam’s reporting from the front as well as Sheehan’s subsequent book, \textit{A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam} to be the most authoritative commentary of the war.\textsuperscript{23} In terms of military strategy and the Marines’ role, Sheehan contends that pacification was more than just an idea to hold pacified areas; it was the only way the Marines envisioned winning the war. Although correct in observing that a large part of the enclave concept and winning the war was the people (and to a marginally lesser degree defeating the guerrilla forces), his point of view emphasises how most

\begin{itemize}
\item James S. Robbins, \textit{This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive} (New York: Encounter Books, 2012).
\end{itemize}
U.S. civilian and military officials viewed the Marines as not only strongest advocates for pacification, but as advocates for pacification at the expense of attrition. He posited that this was a deliberate decision grounded in the experiences of a “school of pacification strategists within the upper ranks of the Marine Corps” that were unwilling to apply their resources in any other way because, in Sheehan’s assessment of their thinking, “wars like Vietnam were wars of pacification”. The Marine Corps’ constant promotion of pacification encouraged historians like Sheehan to assume incorrectly that they “adopted an approach that emphasised pacification over big unit battles”.

Sheehan credits Marine maverick and counterinsurgency czar Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak with being one of a very few senior military officers with a true understanding of the Vietnam War and how best to win it. His accolades for Lieutenant General Krulak come from the Marine three-star general’s epiphany on the war and that the U.S. would never succeed militarily if it did not first succeed socially, culturally, economically, and politically, a position contemporary historian and U.S. Army officer John A. Nagl professed to be the recipe necessary for the American military to defeat the Al-Qaida-led insurgency in Iraq from 2003-2010. Krulak’s theories from the Vietnam War were on the minds of many Marine and Army officers like Nagl though few, if any, knew his full thinking toward winning in South Vietnam. What

24 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 632. For more information on Sheehan’s synopsis of the enclave concept and pacification over attrition, see pages 629–41, 646–47, 652–56, 680–86.
25 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 632.
26 LtGen Krulak commanded FMFPac, which was the Marine Corps service component to the U.S. Pacific Command based in Hawaii. Prior to taking command, he was the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities to the Joint Chiefs from 1962 to 1964. In this position, he travelled to South Vietnam more than a dozen times to assess progress in the war. While technically commanding all Marine Corps units in the Pacific, his authority extended only to the administrative and logistical support for Marine units in South Vietnam. Operational control of the Marines resided with Gen Westmoreland while their tactical control was under MajGen (later LtGen) Walt in Da Nang. This complex command relationship was a major competing factor in the relationship between the Marines and Westmoreland throughout the war. See Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 1965.
officers like and Nagl and British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert G. Thompson fail to realise is that in Malaya (1948-1960), Afghanistan (2009-present) and in Iraq, British and American forces faced classic insurgencies, whereas in South Vietnam, the U.S. insurgency was anything but.

In the minds of historians like Sheehan, Krulak saw eventually the war as they had; a battle for the people’s hearts and minds and not a war of attrition or a military conquest. The war “could move to a different planet today, and we still would not have won… [but] if the subversion and guerrilla efforts were to disappear, the war would soon collapse as the Viet Cong would be denied food, sanctuary, and intelligence”, Krulak wrote as his thinking evolved in late 1965.28 Previously, as Sheehan notes, Krulak was in line with the attrition strategy and with overpowering the conventional enemy forces. According to Sheehan:

As a good lawyer is impelled to approach each case as unique, the beginning of the American war in 1965 had inspired Krulak to look at the war in Vietnam anew. The attrition strategy of Westmoreland and DePuy that he had accepted so unquestioningly in Harkin’s time no longer made sense to him, particularly in view of the terrain and population features of the five northernmost provinces on the Central Coast (I Corps) where the Marines were being deployed.29

As this study demonstrates, Krulak was an officer of many talents, one of which was the gift of doublespeak. For all his experience and wisdom, Krulak was an opportunist and at various points in his career a protector of the Marine Corps. Biographer Robert Coram wrote once in the opening chapter of Brute: The Life of Victor Krulak, U.S. Marine, that Krulak “would tell his own version of his life story until the day he died”, of which the Vietnam War and the Marine Corps strategy for fighting it would play a major part. From his entry into the U.S. Naval Academy and struggle to gain a commission as a Marine officer to his heroics in World War II to

28 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 212.
29 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 629.
his membership among the exclusive few who were to ensure the Marine Corps was never to be absorbed into another service, the facts were never enough when it came to safeguarding his and the Marine Corps’ future. Krulak’s “tendency for exaggeration and the craving for approval,’ according to Coram, “was commonplace” among Marines of the time.”30 Many years later, in 1957, Marine Commandant Randolph Pate asked Krulak to answer the question “Why does the U.S. need a Marine Corps”? In his lengthy response Krulak noted that the country views the Marine Corps in an “almost mystical” sense, and when Marines go to war they will be “dramatically and decisively successful – not most of the time, but always”.31 Krulak spent the rest of his career believing failure was never an option, and as long as the something could not be proven false, what he presented as fact was, in fact, fact.

The Vietnam War was no different. When Krulak’s conventional approach came under scrutiny by senior civilian and military officials early in the war, his first inclination was to look for a way out of it and not the war. It wasn’t until the same officials started questioning American true military role in the war in late 1965 that Krulak changed his entire outlook on the war, despite the conventional battlefield victories against NLF main forces and NVA in August and November 1965. On the surface, he proclaimed the American military’s role had to change to match the nature of the war. Below the surface, however, Krulak continued to acknowledge the threat the main forces and NVA posed. When Westmoreland and his Army field force commands stuck to search and destroy approach and attrition strategy against the recommendations by civilian and military officials, Krulak saw an opportunity to advertise the

30 Robert Coram, Brute: The Life of Victor H. Krulak, U.S. Marine (New York: Little, Brown, 2010), 35. Krulak had to receive a height waiver to gain entry into both the Naval Academy and the Marine Corps as an officer. Later, as a lieutenant colonel, Commandant A.A. Vandegrift assigned Krulak to a select group of Marine officers tasked with defeating a measure aimed at abolishing the Marine Corps. Known as the “Chowder Society”, the group of officers worked behind the scenes with Congressman to defeat these measures and to ensure the Marine Corps, legally, never came under attack again. For more information see Coram’s Brute and Krulak’s First to Fight.
31 Coram, Brute, 246.
Marine brand of thinking by bringing to the forefront what else the Marines were doing other than conventional military operations. One of the top three senior lieutenant generals in the Marine Corps, it was no secret that Krulak wanted to be the next commandant. Concepts such as the Combined Action Program (CAP) and civic actions, though not new to the Marine Corps or the U.S. military, took on a life of themselves, and because they were so vastly different than anything the Army was doing at the time, became the face of the enclave strategy and the Marines’ way of war. Sensing there was more support for such new and innovative ideas, Krulak encouraged journalists to run with stories highlighting how Marines were fighting a different war, when in reality, their actual approach differed very little from Westmorland and the Army. Had journalists and senior U.S. officials looked deeper, they might have noticed how the structure of the two Marine divisions in South Vietnam was for offensive operations or that MajGen Walt, who endorsed Krulak’s new position on the war, was still committing 96 percent of his total resources to conventional operations and not pacification.32

Other general works and ex-post analyses by celebrated Vietnam War historians like Prados and George C. Herring share in the blame for perpetuating the myth of the Marines fighting a different war not because of what they say, but for what they do not say.33 Both Vietnam: History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975 by Prados and Herring’s America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975, written decades after the earliest and most impressionable works, provide a rich overview of the war beginning with the First Indochina War and ending with North Vietnam’s capture of Saigon in April 1975. Neither, however, come remotely close to challenging the military strategy debate, giving those like

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Sheehan and Halberstam a pass and keeping alive the idea that the American military exercised two distinct strategies. Two historians taking the opposite approach by providing well-researched studies with a deeper understanding of military decisions leading to the escalation of the war and which challenge our oldest understanding of the issues surrounding U.S. military strategy are H. R. McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* and Fredrik Longevall’s *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*.  

In 1996, McMaster became the first scholar to access and review General Wallace Greene’s then-confidential personal papers. A significant aspect of both his and Longevall’s research was their illustration of Greene’s staunch support for escalating America’s direct role with an extensive Marine Corps contribution. Greene, according to McMaster and Longevall, pressed hard for the enclave concept and expanding the war in the air and on the ground, outside South Vietnam’s borders. Greene, according to both authors, offered Marine ground units for operations to clear the enclaves of conventional and guerrilla enemy forces and for amphibious raids into North Vietnam on more than one occasion. Written roughly around the same time as both Prados’ and Herrings’ studies, McMaster and Longevall are the earliest major contributors to correcting the historiography by, albeit inadvertently, offering a much different perspective on how the Marines viewed their role on the conflict.  

It is an underestimation to charge that the preponderance of the literature emphasises the divergent thinking and perspectives on the war, particularly that of the U.S. military strategy.

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34 The Marine Corps History Division granted full access to General Greene’s Papers in 2011. For an analysis of Greene’s position on escalating the war see Greene Papers, 68, 144, 264, 268, 272–73; for Greene’s position on the enclave concept, see Greene Papers, 249, 303–4, 315; and for Greene’s support of expanding the war into North Vietnam, see in H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 86, 314; and Fredrik Longevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001).

35 See McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, 68; and Longevall’s *Choosing War*, 53.
With the release of several personal collections, such as General Wallace Greene’s personal papers, contemporary historians are casting new light on many unchallenged conclusions, presenting future scholars with endless research opportunities. Studies on the Marines’ emphasis on pacification and pacification’s role in the enclave concept continue to attract a great deal of attention to this day. In depth coverage of the Marines’ position on attrition and conventional military operations, however, exists nowhere in the war’s historiography.

The differing perspectives on how to fight the war will continued to be the subject of much discussion. Of the primary and secondary sources explaining these differences or addressing the challenges of developing the right military strategy, the one that best represents a new way of thinking about the Vietnam War is Greg Daddis’ *Westmoreland’s War*. His argument that Westmoreland pushed for pacification is a marked repudiation of Harry G. Summers’ *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the War in Vietnam*. Summers espouses that the U.S. military strategy during the war did not match circumstances on the ground and that both civilian and military officials failed to recognise the true nature of the war, which, in his judgement, was overwhelmingly a conventional one.\(^{36}\) Summers’ analysis is critical of pacification in that it haphazardly drew resources and attention away from the main forces and NVA and cutting the Ho Chi Minh trail.

A well-known counter to Summers is Andrew A. Krepinevich. In *The Army and Vietnam*, Krepinevich posits that the Army relied too much on conventional thinking and attrition and not enough on pacification. Had Westmoreland favoured a strategy putting the enclaves and people first, Krepinevich argues, the ARVN would have been in a better position to win the war years later.\(^{37}\) He enthusiastically credits the Marines for their counterguerrilla and pacification

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\(^{37}\) See Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*. 
practises and resistance to engage in Westmoreland’s big unit war and attrition strategy. Despite his research, Krepinevich’s analysis falls short of being complete and accurate in terms of the Marine Corps position on attrition and objective use of conventional military operations.

Aside from Nicholas Schlosser, only two other historians attempt to directly correct history’s account of the Marines’ approach to strategy. Michael A. Hennessy explains in *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965–1972* that, regardless of the fact Marines believed the “primary threat stemmed from local guerilla forces”, they did recognise the importance in eliminating the conventional military threats posed by both the NLF and North Vietnam.\(^{38}\) Throughout, Hennessy attempts to find a middle ground between Summers and Krepinevich by explaining America’s dilemma in developing a strategy to confront the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) and its guerrilla forces, to pacify the population, and to protect South Vietnam from the conventional threat.\(^{39}\) Hennessy credits the Marines with the wherewithal to recognize and attempts to exploit the co-dependence between the political and military branches of the VCI and disrupt their synergy. He highlights the enclave concept’s potential by offering that, had the Marines placed the same emphasis on the main forces as they did pacification and understood the NVA’s true role in the conflict, there might have been a different ending to the war.\(^{40}\)

Their research notwithstanding, neither Krepinevich nor Hennessey categorically attribute the attrition of the main forces and NVA through conventional military operations as an

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\(^{39}\) The Viet Cong Infrastructure, or VCI, was the political and administrative action arm of the NLF. A shadow government, VCI political/propaganda officers and tax collectors exercised control over the population by coercing village and hamlet chiefs to support the NLF or face retribution. Protecting were the main forces hidden in hills and mountain overlooking the villages. See Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong’s Big Unit-War against the U.S., 1965–1966* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011), and Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Technique of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 111–12.

intended or even integral part of the Marine Corps’ thinking, and undoubtedly encourages future historians and students to accept the enduring misinterpretations and flawed narrative this thesis challenges. One historian that does is Gary R. Hess. Given the limited resources the Marines committed to pacification in the northern provinces, Hess theorizes in *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, the enclave concept was actually more in line with Westmoreland’s thinking on attrition. In his final analysis, Hess is of the mind that Marine operations against the main forces and NVA were of a deliberate nature and that had they wanted pacification to be their primary focus, they could have easily done so by applying the requisite resources.⁴¹

The absence of a comprehensive study on the enclave concept highlights the fact that the same grave lack of understanding of the Marines’ rationale exists as much today as it did during the war. In addition to covering their unconventional biases, postwar historians analysing operations in the northern provinces limit their focus to two themes: how the enclave concept was an alternative to the attrition strategy and that the Marines’ approach was a lost opportunity to change war’s direction.⁴² Still others go as far as to depict Marine leaders as apathetic to fighting a conventional war because of their institutional bias for unconventional warfare and their belief that civic actions, not attrition, were the best way to defeat an insurgency.⁴³ Almost all compare and contrast the two strategies only to illuminate the dichotomy of thinking between the Marines and the Army and how this clash of ideas contributed to the war’s disastrous end. Harsher critics of the Marines’ way of war in South Vietnam tend to adopt Westmoreland’s theory that any strategy involving the enclaves was an “inglorious, static use of U.S. forces that

would leave the decision of where and when to strike to the enemy” and one devoid of the intellect reflective of a desire to confront the most obvious threat posed by the Communists. Historians accept this line of reasoning because they lacked an understanding of the enclave concept or a balanced approach and, most important, the Marines’ intentions.

When attempting to explain the enclave concept, historians often describe it as defensive thinking bound by tactics aimed at denying the main forces and NVA access to the physical (airfields) and human (hamlets, villages, cities, enclaves) terrain. Fixed-ring ed defences situated on hilltops overlooking major military airfields are the most common images portrayed. To keep the villages free of guerrillas, they note the CAP as the ideal alternative to attrition, big unit war, and search and destroy. In the hands of historians and scholars, the concept took on a life of its own, seen by many as potentially the only way with which to regain control of and, moreover, hold the populated areas for long-term pacification to work, the programme’s early success caught the attention of both the American media and civilian and military officials. According to Lieutenant General Krulak, “no single village protected by a Combined Action unit was ever repossessed by the Vietcong”. For this reason alone, the Marines lauded the CAP’s potential and expanded its size and scope not long after inception. Two books perpetuating this misinterpretation are William R. Corson’s The Betrayal and Michael Peterson’s The Combined Action Platoons.

The CAP was everything that large unit operations were not, particularly in the context of strategy. Marines assigned to a CAP (typically 13 Marines and a Navy corpsman) received

44 Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 141.
46 Krulak, First to Fight, 190.
language and culture training before joining a slightly larger, but ill-equipped and trained group of South Vietnamese local popular force soldiers from a designated village. Their task, though loosely defined, was to combine small unit counterguerrilla tactics with civic actions in hamlets and villages identified as cleared and pacified to prevent their falling back under the influence and control of the VCI and to defend against an attack by guerrilla or main force elements. A number of studies portray this programme in particular as a model strategy. This is not to say that CAPs were not an important part of the enclave concept. After all, it was by far one of the more innovative and promising concepts, and its expansion might have made a difference in other areas of the country if U.S. forces resourced and employed it properly. Inland and in the northern half of the Marines’ area of operations, however, the CAP was unlikely to succeed in defending against a main force or NVA attack. Knowing this, the larger Marine battalions and regiments remained close to pacified areas as a precaution, adding to the perception that the war for the people and the villages was the primary focus of the enclave concept. This, again, was a product of the Marine experience in war among the people.

Resentment by senior civilian leaders and military officers toward the Marine Corps’ defence of the enclave concept is a common theme in the war’s historiography. In Vietnam at War, Phillip B. Davidson wrote that opposition “sprang from the defensive nature of the strategy, and because it forced the United States forces voluntarily to give up the offensive and to surrender the initiative”. Davidson further explains that senior military officials believed it “violated the most cherished tenets of the military creed by which the army and marine generals lived”. One plausible reason for the disdain toward the enclave concept was the perceptions and experiences of many of the military’s senior officers. Considered by Westmoreland and

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49 Davidson, Vietnam at War.
nearly all of his senior Army field commanders to be a population-centric strategy and not one focusing on the defeat of the conventional threat, they saw value in combining what they considered a softer action with the more decisive and tangible offensive approach; a perception the Marine struggled to overcome throughout the war.

Indeed, the enclave concept did not attract aggressive and offensive-minded officers. Jeffrey Record stressed as much in *The Wrong War*. Record’s “nonescalatory” description of the enclave concept connotes it as passive and something attrition-minded veterans of World War II and Korea War found difficult to comprehend, let alone accept. He adds that the earliest proponents of the “population protection or pacification strategy” favoured it because of its antiattrition character. The criticism, though warranted to a degree, extended to the highest ranks of the Marine Corps down to its most junior tactical leaders. While it is true that the original intent of the enclave concept was to reduce casualties on both sides, the Marines’ interpretation and implementation of the concept, which this thesis will demonstrate, included an acceptable level of attrition based mostly on operations against main forces and the NVA. The top military officials supporting Westmoreland’s attrition-heavy strategy and search-and-destroy approach branded the enclave concept a failure long before it reached maximum implementation. According to Guenter Lewy’s analysis of the evolution of the American military strategy in *America in Vietnam*, officials early on “debated the wisdom of the enclave concept”, eventually ruling out the continuation of it and other similar delaying actions. Lewy, like so many others, made no effort to connect the Marines’ backing for the enclave concept and attrition other than to link them only by consequence of a compromise.

The Marines’ approach to strategy in South Vietnam was as much a product of the vision

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51 Record, *The Wrong War*.
of how the war should be fought by it leaders in Washington, DC, and Honolulu, Hawaii, as it was in Da Nang. Two very intriguing journal articles by Nicholas Schlosser address General Greene’s role, the first of which is “Reassessing the Marine Corps’ Approach to Strategy in the Vietnam War, 1965–1968.” In Schlosser’s estimate, internal documents show that the Marine Corps’ approach to strategy “did not differ substantially from Westmoreland’s”.53 His second article, “Counselor of War, General Wallace M. Greene Jr. and the Escalation of the Vietnam War, 1964–1965” in Marine Corps History details Greene’s role and tenure as Service chief and member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.54 Although the focus of the article is outside the scope of his role as Commandant and Service chief, it still provides new details on his thinking and aggressive position on the war. Greene and others expressed openly their displeasure with Westmoreland’s overt lack of confidence in the enclave concept and the challenges of hybrid warfare. Westmoreland’s (among others) disregard for the Marines’ because of their unwillingness to change became the root cause of the difficulties between the two Services during the war. His postwar perspectives, which this thesis draws from, are particularly intriguing.

Several officers involved in the U.S. effort in South Vietnam penned their memoirs following the war, all of which contribute to understanding the issues surrounding this thesis. In First to Fight, Krulak shared his personal thoughts on the Marine experience in the Vietnam War by describing the complexities associated with developing the right strategy and approach as well as the struggle to convince Westmoreland and others to embrace Marines’ way of thinking. Krulak does at times contradict himself, promoting long-term security through pacification and the CAP as the top priority, while at the same time explaining the need to deal with the main

forces and NVA. Again, his comments were more a matter of timing and sequence; secure the enclaves now and deal with the conventional threat as it surfaces or after bringing the population and villages under control.

History’s portrayal of Krulak as the Marine Corps’ chief attrition antagonist and pacification proponent creates an interesting wrinkle in this thesis. According to counterinsurgency expert and historian Max Boot, Krulak spent the better part of the war years trying to convince Westmoreland and other U.S. military and civilian leaders to embrace pacification. Boot backs his depiction of Krulak by, among other things, pointing to his insistence on keeping the focus on the people and his proclivity to derive his rationale from the writings of revolutionaries, such as China’s Mao Tse-Tung and North Vietnam’s Vo Nguyen Giap.\(^{55}\) Moreover, Boot casts Krulak and the Marines as bitter at Westmoreland for diverting attention and resources away from pacification efforts. He and others like Sheehan add that Krulak and Greene sought a compromise with Westmoreland before reluctantly conceding to his demands to leave the people and the guerrilla war to the ARVN and engage full-time in the big unit war.\(^{56}\)

General Westmoreland produced two sources useful to understanding his argument for attrition. The first was his assessment on the war. At the request of President Johnson, Westmoreland authored “Report on Operations in South Vietnam, January 1964–June 1968” shortly before he handed the war off to General Creighton W. Abrams in July 1968.\(^{57}\) Meant as a chronological review of his four years in command of U.S. forces, Westmoreland provides a

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\(^{56}\) For information on the Marine Corps’ position on attrition going against their tactical judgement, see Krulak, *First to Fight*, 198. *Big unit war* was a popular term used first by Gen Westmoreland and adopted by journalists and military historians to describe battalion and larger unit operations against the main forces and NVA, as opposed to the Marines’ purported small unit/counterguerrilla war in the villages. See William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 146–49.

detailed account of the ground war from his own personal perspective and one that explains the rationale behind his choosing an attrition strategy. The third substantive chapter of this thesis conveys in great detail Westmoreland’s perspective on the enclave concept and the Marine Corps’ approach. One of the most informative sources on his personal criticism of the Marine Corps way of thinking is his 1976 autobiography, *A Soldier Reports*. In it, Westmoreland explains that he entertained the enclave concept initially, though his Army field commanders opted instead to apply what they believed was the more aggressive and tangible strategy and approach. His chief concern was that the enclave concept consumed an enormous amount of time and resources and allowed the main forces and NVA to manoeuver at will and to build strength throughout the northern provinces.

Brigadier General William E. DePuy, Westmoreland’s operations officer and long-time confidant, was equally dissatisfied with the Marines and their enclave concept. His account, *Changing an Army*, proved to be a disparaging recollection of the Marine Corps, in general; his largest condemnation held that they Marine leaders were neither willing to see the war for what it was nor the true nature of the enemy. Historians capitalised on this resentment, which is evident in history’s depiction of the Marines and their part in the war.

Official military histories of the war typically do not side with any particular argument in terms of analysis and results. Strictly fact-oriented sources, their focus is the event and not what went wrong or could have been. The Marine Corps’ official history of the war, devoid of any in-depth analysis, does provide a great deal of information at the Service-level. The series *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, unfortunately, falls mostly in line with the general historiography in that Greene and Krulak compromised with Westmoreland on the dealing with the conventional threat. The series also points to the Marine Corps’ struggle to convince Westmoreland to adopt

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58 Brownlee and Mullen, *Changing an Army*. 
the enclave concept, while at the same time, depicts the Marines as being forced to implement a conventional solution to an unconventional problem. The Joint History Office’s series *Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam* was extremely helpful in explaining these background issues, particularly Jack Shulimson and Graham A. Cosmas’ three-part study, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960–1968*. Written extensively from previously classified documents, the series offers a historical perspective on the Joint Chiefs during the development of American military policy and influence on strategy, specifically those of General Greene. Both historians depict Greene as an advocate for U.S. involvement on the ground and for an aggressive and expansive strategy focused on the enclaves first.

The same can be said of two other official U.S. government studies. Cosmas’ *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* provided a wide-ranging strategic view of the war with particular emphasis on Westmoreland’s Joint headquarters and the rationale behind many of his operational decisions. Another study of interest was *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968* by Lieutenant General Willard Pearson. Pearson focuses primarily on the Army’s involvement in operations against the NVA in the northern provinces and under the direction of the Marines’ major component command.

A number of graduate-level academic studies are the impetus behind this thesis. In their own way, these studies perpetuate the misinterpretations and flawed narratives of the Marines’ supposed resistance and opposition to the conventional war. David Strachan-Morris’s doctoral thesis, “Swords and Ploughshares”, is but one example of how some at least recognised the

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59 The Marine Corps History Division published the full account of U.S. Marines in the Vietnam War in 12 volumes, of which volumes 2–5 proved most useful to this thesis.


Marines’ balanced intentions. In it, he explains that their thinking “evolved from a defensive posture, with units tied to the coast, into a hybrid pacification/attrition campaign that tried to balance the need to defend the coastal installations and orders from higher command to destroy the NVA regular units in the border areas”. A fairly accurate hypothesis in some respects, Strachan-Morris represents a small segment of scholars that understands how defeating the main forces and NVA were at least part of their thinking, though his chief argument terminates with the Marines favouring pacification and resisting large unit operations, only to eventually engage the main forces and NVA as a compromise with Westmoreland.

Don Blanchard’s 1968 thesis “Pacification” was the first all-encompassing academic study on the Marines’ approach to strategy in South Vietnam, but, not surprisingly, one focusing exclusively on pacification and the CAP. Blanchard, a Marine veteran of the war, makes little mention of attrition and large unit operations and no mention of the enclave concept. Instead, he decried pacification’s potential as a means to an end. Opposite Blanchard is Arrigo Velicogna’s 2015 thesis “Victory and Strategic Culture”, which explores the differences between the Army’s and Marines’ perspectives on the war from a counterinsurgency doctrine perspective. Specifically, Velicogna debunks the assumptions made by historians that through pacification the Marines “found the key to defeat the communist insurgency in Vietnam”. In doing this, he suggests that, although the Marines portrayed an institutional proclivity for civic actions and counter-guerrilla tactics, there is little evidence to prove that this was the direction they intended to take in the early years of planning or during their initial months in South Vietnam.

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65 Velicogna, “Victory and Strategic Culture”, 188.
Methodology

My research methodology comprised a contextual analysis of the war’s historiography with greater specificity on conventional military operations in the northern provinces. In contrast to the existing scholarship, it examines the offensive actions taken in support of enclave concept and Westmoreland’s attrition strategy to offer a relevant counter, vice a revisionist argument to critics of the way the Marines fought their share of the war. To do this, I emphasised the rationale behind developing the enclave concept and balanced approach. Because no available study precisely attempts to explain neither the concept nor the approach apart from their connection to pacification, I consolidated and synthesised information from dozens of secondary sources to evaluate the common interpretation of the two and to present my argument. My examination of secondary sources and previously unavailable primary sources represents the foundational perspective that the Marines fought the war in South Vietnam’s northern provinces much differently than historians contend.

A significant portion of my research comprised an examination of the Marine Corps History Division’s archival collection of personal papers. General Wallace Greene’s “Notes on the Situation in South Vietnam” (the Greene Papers) was the most prominent collection referenced as well as the personal papers of Lieutenant General Krulak and General Lewis W. Walt, commander of the Marine component to the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, the III Marine Amphibious Forces (III MAF), from 1965 to 1967. Since official histories make up a large part of the resource (particularly primary) pool for this study, it is worth noting that it was necessary to place great scrutiny on official Marine Corps sources given then potential bias toward success and against failure. Often times official histories produced by a services’ own historians (uniformed and contracted civilians) emphasise success in service concepts and
doctrine, not to mention the desired approach to strategy. In a charged environment where service rivalries, budgets, and warfighting concepts were almost as important as fighting the war itself, service equities rise above fact, forcing external historians to use great care when examining statistics and totals (body count, enemy in country, etc.). Examples are the Fleet Marine Force Pacific’s Operations of the U.S. Marine Forces Vietnam summaries or “Krulak’s Fables” as some Marines and Marine Corps historians referred to them during and after the war. Krulak intended the summaries to be detailed record of what the Marines were accomplishing in South Vietnam but, in reality, these reports served one purpose; to influence and sway civilian and military policy makers in Washington, DC and in Saigon.

The vast amount of information contained in these summaries focus almost exclusively on conventional offensive operations and the results of each. A large part of this information is statistical, such as the number of enemy soldiers killed and wounded. Enemy casualty numbers are the topic of debate considering many of the final tallies included estimates and not actual hard counts. The statistics on pacification efforts are marginal at best as these were also estimates and subject to bias given the population and enemy movement in and out of declared safe areas. The reports tend also to fill space and explain what Marines were accomplishing when not fighting the main forces and NVA, making the case that they were focusing equally on attrition of conventional enemy forces than they were winning the support of the people. In most cases, the official histories from Pacific Command and USMACV historians were invaluable when offsetting the potential for service bias within Krulak’s rather opportunistic and, at times, contradictory reports.

It is impossible to determine whether or not access to Greene’s papers, along with Krulak’s and Walt’s, might have produced or at least tempered the interpretations and
conclusions this thesis challenges. For reasons beyond the scope of my research, historians with access continue to reinforce the overstated assertions on the Marines’ proclivity for pacification and the disagreements between the U.S. civilian and military leadership over the policy of direct American military intervention. This thesis, however, is the first to cross-reference all three personal papers collections to develop a counterargument to critics of the enclave concept and balanced approach and to dispel the assertion that the Marines were resisting attrition and engaging in conventional military operations.

No study on the Vietnam War is complete without referencing the “Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force” (a.k.a. Pentagon Papers). This thesis is no exception. Commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in 1967, the report encompasses more than 7,000 pages of analyses and assessments pertaining to various aspects of the war from its origins following the Second World War through 1968, including the debates about direct U.S. military involvement and the crafting of an appropriate military strategy. Several versions of the report with additional analysis and commentary, such as Senator Mike Gravel’s four-volume Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of Decision Making on Vietnam, surfaced after its release. Although the Pentagon Papers keeps strategic foreign policy matters as its central focus, it does so in the context of the Department of Defense’s and Joint Chiefs’ development of a military strategy, which made it useful in determining the Marine Corps’ rationale for adopting and defending the enclave concept and balanced approach and helped shape the chronological framework of this study.

No larger collection of primary source documents outside that of the History Division or

Texas Tech University’s Vietnam Centre and Archive exists. Both repositories contain more than three million pages of documents ranging from combat after action reports, monthly command chronologies, maps, photographs, operations orders, official messages, and Service-specific studies and analyses to the personal notes and correspondence of most every senior officer involved in planning, executing, and overseeing Marine operations in South Vietnam. Much of this vast collection chronicles the day-to-day actions during the period this thesis examines as well as the official correspondence, reports, and personal notes drafted by the several of the most prominent and influential Marine leaders of the era.

To ensure equal consideration of the viewpoints other than that of the Marines, I included details resident within the Army, Navy, and Air Force official Service histories on the Vietnam War as well as the official histories of the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. Pacific Command, and the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Rounding out the research was a cross-referencing of a large volume of secondary sources, including dozens of general surveys, private studies, and graduate-level academic papers covering various topics on the war. Other repositories include the Library of Congress, the Historical Office of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint History Office of the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. Army Centre of Military History, the Naval History and Heritage Command, and the U.S. Air Force Historical Support Division—all located in Washington, DC—and the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.

Framework

This thesis covers the Marines’ conventional approach to containing Communism in the northern provinces with particular emphasis on conventional military operations and attrition to
secure and improve the coastal enclaves from March to July 1965; to secure the coastal lines of communications as they expanded their presence outside the enclaves between August 1965 to March 1966; to secure inland bases and enemy occupied areas from April 1966 to March 1967; and to occupy and improve inland bases from April to December 1967. Two sections and nine total chapters arranged chronologically make up the body of the text. The first section provides the details necessary to understanding both Westmoreland’s and the Marines’ positions. Specifically, it covers the Marines’ in the chronology of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War, focusing on the debate over military strategy and the criticisms and challenges levied against Marine leaders for adopting the enclave concept. The introductory chapter presents the topic, purpose, and methodology and reviews the war’s historiography. The first substantive chapter sets the stage for the rest of the thesis in that it introduces the Marines and the enclave in relation to American military planning for war.

The second chapter examines the origins and rationale for the enclave concept and how its intended use included offensive operations. The third chapter focuses on Westmoreland’s opposition to the enclave concept (and that of the Army’s senior leadership in Washington, DC, and in South Vietnam) and insistence that American ground forces should focus on attrition first before attempting to pacify the population. Several studies, including Army General Andrew J. Goodpaster’s “Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum 744–65: Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam, Strategy and Appraisal” (CM 744–65), are central to this chapter as are the arguments against the enclave concept (and balanced approach) in the early years of direct U.S. military involvement.68 Directed by the Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, CM

68 Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum 744–65: Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam, Strategy and Appraisal (CM 744–65). This document can be found at https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d69, accessed on 17 December 2017. Led by Gen Andrew Goodpaster, the Ad Hoc Study Group consisted of representatives from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s Office, the Chairman’s Special Studies Group, the
744 – 65 (a.k.a. the Goodpaster Study), was part of an effort to determine the feasibility of success and in determining the appropriate military strategy for South Vietnam. Final recommendations called for sweeping changes to the military strategy, some of which the Marines believed conflicted with their views on the war.

The second section and its four chapters cover the Marines’ phased expansion along the coast and inland through conventional military operations as well as the conclusion. The section highlights how the Marines applied an attrition to set the conditions for pacification. Each chapter presents the Marine Corps’ official Service-level response to Westmoreland and other critics of the enclave concept and balanced approach and offers specific operational concepts and examples of how the Marines viewed and applied attrition in the northern provinces. Like the Goodpaster Study, official documents contained in the Greene Papers and the other collections are essential to these chapters, as are the official Fleet Marine Forces Pacific’s operational summary reports and the command chronologies and after-action reports of Marine combat units. For example, the position paper Analysis of CM 744–65 counters the Goodpaster Study and emphasises the offensive character of the enclave concept. Two additional documents depicting the offensive character of the enclave concept include the “Memorandum: Mobilization and Deployment Concept for Marine Corps Units” written in July 1965, and a 1966 study titled “Force Requirements and Long-Range Estimates for I Corps Republic of Vietnam”. Krulak’s


“A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”, written in June 1965, and “A Strategic Appraisal, Vietnam” from December 1965, add to the role that operations against the main forces and NVA had in the enclave concept.71

The forth chapter covers the Marines’ actions to secure and improve the enclaves during the period March to July 1965. It includes an analysis of their initial expansion undertaken through a series of clearing actions outside the Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai enclaves. The opening phase laid the groundwork for large unit operations in the interior and ended with the Marine ground units poised for their first major offensive campaign against the main forces.

The fifth chapter covers conventional Marine operations from August 1965 to March 1966. This second phase highlights conventional military operations against the main forces as a necessary part of implementing the enclave concept. Amphibious operations constituted a large portion of these offensive efforts. The sixth chapter presents a similar analysis of conventional Marine operations to secure inland bases and destroy isolated main force units from April 1966 to March 1967. This period also marks the NVA’s increased infiltrations through the demilitarised zone to backfill main force unit losses and as the Marines turned their attention north to secure interior bases at Dong Ha, Con Thien, and Khe Sanh. The seventh chapter analyses conventional operations to occupy and improve interior bases in April to December 1967. It specifically redresses the Marines’ plan to confront NVA divisions massing south of the demilitarised zone. The concluding chapter offers final arguments from opponents and proponents as well as an analysis of the impact conventional operations had on the main forces and NVA and on pacification.

This thesis culminates just before the start of the Tet Offensive on 30 January 1968. My

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reason for ending it at this point was due the nature of the U.S. military strategy shifting entirely to a general war strategy. No longer were Army or Marine units concerned with pacification and counterguerrilla actions since North Vietnam’s intentions to seize South Vietnam were clear and present. Although the Marines would attempt to re-establish security in the coastal and inland areas through large unit operations, civic actions, and counterguerrilla activities in 1969, Marine commanders in the field, without question, dedicated the preponderance of their resources to defeating the NVA-led general uprising and general offensive of 1968.

Concepts and Terms

Before challenging the aforementioned interpretations and conclusions prevalent within the war’s historiography, there must first be a brief discussion on a few relevant concepts and terms as not all historians and scholars fully understand their meanings. This alone could be the root cause for many of the misinterpretations and flawed conclusions. The first term meriting further explanation and discussion is attrition. Defined as the “act or process of wearing away or grinding down by friction”, the concept is common throughout military history, with its primary purpose being to diminish an opponent’s will or ability to resist or fight. Military forces typically seek to achieve attrition through direct means such as the employment of large tactical formations and massive amounts of firepower. The goal is the physical destruction of an opposing force and not simply its defeat. Historians quite often misuse the term by referring to it in a metaphoric sense, such as the catastrophic results of single battle and engagement, which is actually an imprecise use as this excludes the idea of erosion over time or what historian Carter Malkasian believes can only occur through a “protracted, gradual, and piecemeal” process.

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There are unconventional methods to achieve attrition. For example, small unit guerrilla tactics in the form of ambushes and raids aimed at slowly reducing an opposing force’s strength is one. There are indirect means of achieving attrition within both conventional and unconventional environments as well. Isolating or cutting off a force from its physical and moral sources of supply and strength, including its access to the population, is the most preferred technique. In this instance, the isolated force either withers away or elects to strike back to regain access to its sources of supply. The Marine Corps as a Service did not disagree with attrition, in any form, from an academic perspective. It did, however, believe they was another way to approach the war that did not necessarily rely solely on attrition. The Marines’ concept and application of attrition, therefore, was altogether different.

Although Westmoreland acknowledged how enormously important winning the population was to the achieving U.S. political and military strategies, he believed that until there was a protective shield behind which they could live without fear of the reprisals by the NLF, this could not happen. Given his understanding of the NLF’s and North Vietnam’s convictions, attrition appeared to be the only way to both prevent them from capturing South Vietnam and doing so with a minimum cost in U.S. casualties. Attrition necessitated drawing both the main forces and NVA into conventional battles. Through vastly superior mobility and firepower, U.S. forces would repeatedly inflict a higher number of enemy casualties. Leaving the guerrilla war and civic actions to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), while isolating the main forces and NVA in the countryside, he reasoned, freed U.S. forces to target the insurgency and North Vietnam’s will to fight by inflicting losses in personnel and equipment so great that they eclipsed the number of available replacements. This “crossover point” Westmoreland sought was only possible if U.S. forces harnessed their advantage in technology and firepower and
capitalised on their ability to mass battalion, regiment, and division formations in the Communists’ base areas. In time, Westmoreland predicted NLF and North Vietnamese leaders would assess the rate of casualties as unsupportable and seek a settlement. Westmoreland’s attrition strategy relied not only on this theory; it depended upon such statistical measures as body counts and American-to-NLF/North Vietnamese kill ratios to demonstrate the enemy was suffering far greater losses and, therefore, losing the war.74

The Axis and the Allies applied their own variation of the attrition strategy with great success during the Second World War. Unlike with the fighting in Europe and the Pacific, where both sides applied a total-war concept, U.S. forces waged a limited war in South Vietnam. General Wallace Greene captured the war’s complex character when, at an annual convention of the American Legion in 1967, he explained that U.S. forces “were not conquering North Vietnam. We’re suppressing an insurgency in, and defeating an invasion of, South Vietnam. We are fighting a limited war, for limited objectives, in a limited area, and with limited means”.75 This included the people who, unlike the German and Japanese populations, were not viewed as a viable military target for destruction. In South Vietnam, U.S. forces also ignored the human element and the Vietnamese peoples’ determined efforts to gain their independence and to reunify (e.g., North Vietnam’s willingness to accept a high number of casualties). Conversely, the will of the American people to support an open-ended war was not as strong as Johnson and Westmoreland anticipated. Since the attrition strategy did not focus on seizing physical objectives or holding key terrain in the classic military sense, the loss of American lives with

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75 Blanchard, “Pacification”, 48. *Limited war* refers to one in which a warring party restricts or limits their application of resources (political, military, and economic). It avoids the total defeat of an adversary in favour of securing limited objectives with limited means. It is the opposite of *total war*, which includes the application of all resources, including the mobilisation of the population for the complete destruction of the adversary.
nothing tangible to show for hampered enthusiasm for the war. France’s struggles in both Indochina and Algiers as well as the British experiences in Malaysia were fresh in the minds of the American people for any U.S. political or military strategist to convince them otherwise.

Attrition and the attrition strategy conflicted with a major U.S. policy goal in South Vietnam: pacification. Applying an attrition strategy required large numbers of U.S. forces already engaged in efforts to protect and win the support of the South Vietnamese people. Instead, the strategy redirected American forces and supplies for a disproportionate amount of time. Westmoreland’s replacement, General Creighton Abrams, discontinued the attrition strategy in 1969 in favour of a broader pacification effort and turned conventional military operations over to the GCV and South Vietnamese military as part of President Richard M. Nixon’s “Vietnamization” process.76

What was attrition’s role in the enclave concept? As a policy, the Marines saw little value in attrition if it was the primary measure of determining success or if it did not support the overall objective, which was to pacify the population and restore security. If the plan entailed eliminating the main forces and NVA to weaken both the VCI and the guerrilla forces so that pacification had a chance to succeed, however, they did see great value in attrition. With that in mind, it is unclear why historians contend the Marines dismissed any connection between the enclave concept and attrition when the crux of the strategy revolved around creating a secure environment including the elimination of the insurgency’s guerrilla and main forces and the NVA. This study in certain ways attempts to resolve this very issue.

How did Westmoreland look to use U.S. forces to achieve attrition? For starters, he espoused three types of operations they were to engage in: clearing, securing, and search and

76 Vietnamization was a concept the Nixon administration hoped would help bring a faster end to the conflict in Vietnam by training, equipping, and expanding South Vietnamese forces so they could eventually take over the combat role from U.S. forces.
destroy. A clearing operation was one in which U.S. forces drove the “main force units out of a populated area so that pacification efforts could proceed”.\textsuperscript{77} Clearing had a physical, as well as a psychological, component. The physical consisted of offensive operations aimed removing armed resistance whether it was guerrilla forces or the main forces and NVA. The psychological component entailed counterpropaganda efforts aimed at educating the population on the pitfalls of the Communism and the benefits of supporting the GVN. It enabled also for U.S. forces to demonstrate and convince the South Vietnamese people that the NLF could be beat. There was also a physical aspect of the psychological component. Within this construct, American ground units engaged the main forces and NVA to convince the individual enemy soldier that he was no match and to demonstrate to the South Vietnamese people that the Communists cannot win.\textsuperscript{78}

Following a successful clearing action, Westmoreland directed securing operations to eliminate “local guerrillas and the Viet Cong underground” and to hold cleared area for the long term.\textsuperscript{79} Securing operations were principle to aiding U.S. forces in preventing areas from returning to NLF control. The focus here was on keeping hamlets and villages free of Communist influence and propaganda and required the constant presence of South Vietnamese and, in some instances, U.S. forces. The focus was also on the health and welfare of the inhabitants.

Last were search-and-destroy operations with the goal of “seeking, attacking, and destroying enemy units, base areas, and supply caches” to produce the attrition effect Westmoreland believed would achieve the cross-over point. Over time, search-and-destroy operations, Westmoreland judged, would keep the main forces and NVA focused on “defending


\textsuperscript{78} See Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.

themselves and their base areas and thus unable to disrupt pacification”.

The arrival of additional American combat forces in the late spring and early summer of 1965 enabled Westmoreland to relegate much of the clearing and securing to the ARVN, while U.S. forces assumed the lead in searching for and destroying the main forces and, when encountered, the NVA.

Search and destroy was a controversial tactic and best describes Westmoreland’s approach to attrition strategy. Specifically, this was how U.S. forces would inflict casualties on the main forces and NVA such that they were either unable or unwilling to continue fighting. Westmoreland believed U.S. forces’ superior equipment, technology, and training would overwhelm conventional enemy forces and sustain fewer casualties as a result. He intended for U.S. forces to walk or drop into enemy-controlled areas by helicopter to locate main force or NVA units and then fix and destroy them and their supplies. His objective was not to clear and hold enemy territory or a specific piece of ground, but to simply destroy who was occupying the ground. As mentioned previously, the measure of success in an operation was enemy body counts and the friendly-enemy kill ratio.

Search and destroy operations began mostly with little-to-no definitive information on the enemy. Westmoreland’s operations officer, Brigadier General William DePuy, explained that the process was to “go out and look for the bastards and try to destroy them”. Major border crossing points between South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or North Vietnam where the terrain and dense vegetation hid formations and supplies from view was the typically location for a search-and-destroy operation. Again, U.S. forces entered into these areas to find out exactly what was there. If found, U.S. forces used unlimited amounts of firepower to block the enemy force

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from escaping across the border or to manoeuvre to destroy it. Lasting weeks and sometimes more than a month at a time, search-and-destroy operations were intended to keep the main forces and NVA on the move and powerless to reconstitute their depleted ranks.

The Marine Corps, aside from its predisposition to protect the population, disapproved of Westmoreland’s approach for several other reasons. The endless stream of supplies coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail and from base areas across South Vietnam’s borders with Cambodia and Laos was one. To counter the growing conventional force and its abundance of combat supplies was more than what the Marines believed the meager number of American ground units allocated by President Johnson could handle. Second was that with this approach the main forces and NVA were in the best position to initiate and break contact to evade the main American force. When the main forces and NVA did engage, they had the freedom to wait until the last possible moment to initiate contact as a means to prevent the U.S. force from using air support, artillery, and naval gunfire or risk the chance of wounding or killing their own units. This “belt-buckle” tactic, historians argue, rendered the U.S. military’s advantage in technology and firepower insignificant.82 Warrant Wilkins’, in Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong’s Big Unit-War Against the U.S., 1965–1966, offers that despite the disadvantages in firepower and mobility, the main forces and NVA sought a quick and decisive victory predicated not on guerrilla warfare but big-unit war.83 This and other associated tactics were what the Marines warned Westmoreland of if he decided to shift to an attrition strategy and search and destroy tactics.

Not surprising, search-and-destroy tactics produced relatively fewer major engagements or measurable results, mostly due to the inadequate intelligence and the main forces and NVA

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83 Wilkins, Grab Their Belts to Fight Them.
unwillingness to commit to battle unless they had the tactical advantage and element of surprise. Critics correlated Westmoreland’s approach to the deliberate razing of hamlets and villages and the maiming or killing of innocent civilians, forcing him to argue against what he deemed “distortions” and what some called “aimless searches in the jungle and the destruction of property” by referring to search-and-destroy operations a standard practice similar to an offensive sweep, a reconnaissance in force, or a spoiling attack. Conventional military power alone would not be the deciding factor in South Vietnam, though it would play big part. Winning the war involved unique and innovative thinking, while at the same time, limitations on the use of force.

The physical carnage of the First and Second World Wars brought about the need for governments and their armies to rethink the irreversible effects of technology on modern warfare. Reminders of the human suffering and monetary costs of attrition from both wars kept most countries searching for ways to resolve issues before they reached the point of no return. Although the Second World War ended large-scale carnage and colonialism, it did nothing to prevent indigenous populations from seeking total independence from outside influences and, at times, exacting revenge for decades and centuries of maltreatment by their occupiers, oppressors, and cultural adversaries, which historian Max Boot insists are conflicts that can be as lethal and violent as conventional wars. A modern example of this is Africa. According to Richard A. Lobban Jr. and Chris H. Daulton’s *African Insurgencies: From the Colonial Era to the 21st Century* the present anticolonial insurgencies and the decolonization of Africa are the product of long-time tensions between ethnic peoples and foreign occupiers or their colonial loyalists

86 See Boot’s *The Savage Wars of Peace*. 
which, such as in South Vietnam, is leading to rebellions and revolutions.\footnote{Richard A. Lobban Jr., and Chris H. Daulton, \textit{African Insurgencies: From the Colonial Era to the 21st Century} (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017).} Specific to South Vietnam, anticolonialism there was as old as the country itself. To understand the Vietnamese war for independence, David G. Marr explains in \textit{Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925}, historians must first understand the nature of the Vietnamese identity. Only then will they realize, as the Marines did, that regardless of French efforts to appease the people, their presence fueled national resentment and violence, instead of quelling it.\footnote{See David G. Marr, \textit{Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925} (Oakland; UC Press, 1980).}

The alternative to ending “wars, fighting, or violence” through peaceful means, the French believed, could be done through pacification.\footnote{Pacification is an act of appeasement and process of reducing rebellious acts to a peaceful submission or a peace treaty. See “pacification”, \textit{American Heritage College Dictionary}.} Not a new tactic, the Marines used pacification during expeditions to Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic between 1915 and 1937. Following these expeditions, the Marine Corps captured and disseminated many of the lessons learned in the \textit{Small Wars Manual} of 1940 to espouse methods and techniques to “gain decisive results with the least application of force” with military force used only as a last resort.\footnote{Ed Gilbert, \textit{The U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War: III Marine Amphibious Force, 1965–75}, ed. Dr. Duncan Anderson (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2006), 15.}

This involved the full spectrum of people and enemy-oriented actions to accomplish a single military objective—restoring security and, in turn, stability. In the case of South Vietnam, this was the NLF.

Rather than attempting to engage the NLF, the initial priority was to use a more indirect approach through civic actions or “spontaneous acts of commiseration and charity towards a small population” with the aim of improving the average citizen’s quality of life and reinvigorating trust and confidence in the government, thereby neutralising the insurgency.\footnote{Specifically, the term \textit{civic actions} refer to “projects useful to the local population at all levels in fields such as education, training, public works, agriculture, transportation, communications, health, sanitation, and other}
the northern provinces, digging wells, building bridges and roads, inoculating citizens and livestock, securing rice harvests, and instituting land reforms were but a few examples of pacification programmes. Improving village, provincial, and national security by building military, paramilitary, and police capabilities so the people could go about their lives was another way in which the Marines set out to make progress. In theory, if it worked in the northern provinces, there was a good chance of it working in other parts of country.

Pacification, however, did not preclude or prohibit conventional military thinking and action; it simply meant the Marines had to be more selective in its application. As Boot emphasised, America’s minor conflicts also have been the bloodiest. Discussed previously was that Marine leaders viewed security in northern provinces as essential to defeating the insurgency. Whereas they recognised the support of the people to be an element of security, they understood more so that they could not win their support if the villages and enclaves were under constant threat of reprisals, including from main forces. Like Westmoreland, the Marines appreciated the role conventional military operations and attrition played in regaining control and protecting the people. For all the differences they had with Westmoreland on the best way to do this, the Marines agreed that to rid the northern provinces of those “living with the people” they could not ignore those “living off the people”.92 This meant saturating the enclaves with small patrols and using ambushes as the tactic of choice. It also meant searching dwellings for weapons and excessive amounts of rice and picketing routes leading to and from villages when not training local security forces. How, then, did the Marines expect to physically rid the people of both the guerrilla and conventional threats?

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The tactics the Marines adopted and those which were fundamental to the enclave concept was clear and hold. Clear and hold consisted of securing areas controlled by NLF guerrillas and main forces while continuing to win the support of the local population through civic actions. Critical to this was the stationing of Marine ground units at base areas (starting on the coast first) “cleared” of enemy and then “holding” these areas long enough for pacification efforts to exist and take hold without interference. In many ways clear and hold resembled conventional military thinking in that it consisted of seizing and holding select terrain. U.S. forces, or in this case Marines, seldom had difficulty clearing areas, though holding them proved to be more difficult. Guerrillas disguised as locals could move in and out of villages with ease; guerrilla units were small and agile enough that they could attack the Marines and escape with little trouble, only to return once the Marines departed. The main forces and NVA, though too large to hold up in a village, were never far away and used sympathetic villagers and guerrilla forces as guides and lookouts as well as for recruits and supplies.

Knowing the NLF and NVA were always near, revenge for cooperating with the Marines was always a concern for villages. To prevent guerrilla forces from returning or hiding among the people and the main forces and NVA from living off them, the Marines saw no other option but to build operating bases in areas cleared of guerrilla forces. This required a substantial increase in the number of Marine ground units as well as time for them to become acquainted with the area and to develop a relationship with the population. Their objective would be to hold these cleared areas until it was pacified. Doing this, Westmoreland argued, detracted from his ability to search for and destroy the conventional enemy.

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93 During the war, Marine Corps leaders chose to refer to their offensive efforts in verbal and written orders as clear and hold vice search and destroy. The purpose was to instill the philosophy that once an area is cleared of overt and covert enemy presence and forces, the intention was to always leave a security element in place, whether ARVN or Marine, to retain control or hold it so the enemy could not return.
Clear and hold encompassed more than tactics and initiatives aimed at liberating and protecting the population; it included efforts to remove the conventional threat from these areas as well. To do this, and because the main forces and NVA were never far from the people, the Marines envisioned a more tactical role for civic actions in that the people, examined properly, could become a source of information on enemy locations and their disposition. The Marines wagered the people would respond to their kindness by offering assistance and information. Realising this, civic actions and participation in the GVN’s broader national pacification programme evolved into an information-gathering apparatus. According to Captain Russel Stolfi, “Marine Corps infantry battalions which had won the confidence of the people by careful attention to their feelings and needs were sometimes rewarded with remarkably precise and valuable information”. A common practise, Stolfi went on to explain, was to measure the value of information which, in turn, had a direct impact on future civic efforts. If unable to confirm the enemy’s location and size, they continued acting on civic actions projects until receiving more reliable information. In instances where they deemed the information to be reliable enough on which to act and as long as the element of surprise was to their advantage, the Marines turned to planning large unit operations.

Civic actions played a significant role in separating the insurgency from the people, which in turn limited their ability to draw new recruits and food sources and left them isolated, weakened, and vulnerable to attack. Greene’s Mobility and Deployment Memorandum of 1965, outlining the Marine Corps concept noted that, aside from it being a population control measure, pacification also was a tool to “compress” NLF forces into the unproductive mountain areas or

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rendering them militarily ineffective”. Isolation, the Marine leaders argued, left the main forces and NVA with the option of leaving their base areas to fight and regain control of the population and its resources or wither away in the hills and mountains.

To the Marines, regardless of whether they attacked isolated enemy forces or reinforced their efforts to keep them cut off from resources, it did not altogether matter so long as the enemy’s destruction was possible. Unfortunately, developing human sources through civic actions required considerable time, which was something General Westmoreland argued the United States and South Vietnam did not have. What were large unit operations and what was their relationship to civic actions? By the standards of past conflicts in which Marine units fought as part of a multidivisional formation, the term and concept are unique to the Vietnam War. In South Vietnam, the term applied to operations of battalion size or larger to distinguish them from small unit (down to squad or fire team) operations. This thesis rationalises that acts of kindness created a pathway to large unit operations and improved security in the enclaves and throughout the northern provinces. The challenge was finding viable ways of ensuring large unit operations against the main forces and NVA did not detract from pacification and that civic actions did not lead them on fruitless large unit operations.

Although this chapter and the preponderance of this study will explain the enclave concept and strategy, it is important to introduce first the main points surrounding it. The first strategy or concept guiding U.S. forces in their daily actions and the goals and objectives of American civilian and military officials in 1965 centred on the enclaves. Favoured by civilian and military leaders, the intent was to limit American involvement in terms of interaction with the people and enemy forces, while at the same time reinforcing the GVN and South Vietnamese military. For those hesitant to support a direct American military action on the ground or

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90 Mobility and Deployment Memo, 1965, Section II, II-1.
believed only the South Vietnamese military could win the war, the enclave concept positioned U.S. forces at select areas along the South Vietnam’s densely populated coast. The expectation was that this would free South Vietnamese forces to fight both the main forces and NVA located in the countryside.  

Westmoreland deployed the first contingent of American combat units in South Vietnam in accordance with the enclave concept when more than 3,000 Marines arrived to secure the Da Nang airfield and other locations in the coastal enclave of Da Nang in March 1965. As the situation intensified, the Marines sought permission to expand their defences and to actively pursue guerrilla forces threatening the airfield and enclave. Going one step further than the Marines, Westmoreland rejected the concept because he argued that the people would view U.S. forces as an occupation force and because it limited (or eliminated altogether) their advantages in mobility and firepower. When South Vietnamese forces proved incapable of defeating the main forces and with NVA units infiltrating South Vietnam by the hundreds and thousands, U.S. civilian and military officials reconsidered Westmoreland’s views on the war and how to best fight and win it. Within a month, he received additional U.S. forces for the purpose of shifting to the attrition strategy and the seemingly more aggressive search-and-destroy tactic.

One question this thesis attempts to answer is why historians maintain the Marines were reluctant to engage in attrition or search and destroy. Part of the answer lay in the Marine Corps’ Service-wide study of the French defeat in the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954. Based on the lessons learned from Viet Minh tactics used against the French, Marine Corps leadership thought it prudent to engage in large unit operations only after confirming location, disposition,
and strength of a main force or NVA unit and if it was in their best tactical interest.99 Another lesson derived from the French defeat was the sequencing of operations. Despite his March 1965 plan calling for U.S. forces to secure and improve the populated coastal areas first, this took on less of a priority for Westmoreland over time. He directed instead that the Marines forgo operations in the enclaves and move directly into the countryside to attack the main forces and NVA in their base areas. Although securing the countryside was part of the long-term plan and “expanding beachhead” model, the Marine leaders attempted to persuade Westmoreland that clearing and holding the coastal lowlands before moving farther inland was the best way to prevent repeating French failures at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.100 A methodical increase in absorbing areas containing hundreds of hamlets and villages under NLF guerrilla and main force control would further enable U.S. forces to keep open their interior lines of communications and establish safe zones for civilians displaced by operations in the countryside. The French counterinsurgency theory and concept tache d’huile, or oil spot technique developed by Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey and Joseph Simon Gallieni as told by Kim Munholland in “‘Collaboration Strategy’ and the French Pacification of Tonkin, 1885–1897” would become the model from which the Marine Corps based its expanding beachhead model and enclave


100 “CMC Update on Situation in Vietnam”, May 1965, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 2. A beachhead is a naval term commonly associated with amphibious operations. Specifically, it is a “designated area on a hostile shore which, when seized and held, ensures the continuous landing of troops and material, and provides the maneuver space required for operations ashore”. It has no size limitations and might include the populace and infrastructure within its boundaries. See Landing Force Manual 28: Landing Force Planning (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1961), 3–7; and “CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees”, 9 August 1965, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 3, 4–6.
The second part of the answer is the Marines were demonstrating patience, not reluctance. Until they secured the enclaves, they did see the tactical benefits of focusing solely on the enemy occupied countryside. The only exception was if they obtained useful information on the main forces and NVA and were able to confirm its accuracy. Regrettably, when they did engage, most historians, including some of the Marine Corps’ own scholars, describe their actions as a compromise to appease Westmoreland so as to prevent his interference with operations against the VCI and guerrilla forces or to improve the quality of life in the villages. The Greene Papers, among others, illustrate this was not entirely the case and that the lasting conclusions of the Marines’ approach to strategy are incorrect, necessitating not only a reexamination of their thinking, but how the enclave concept and balanced approach played out.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS OF THE MARINES’ INVOLVEMENT IN THE VIETNAM WAR

From 1959 to 1962, amphibious ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet carrying Marines of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (9th MEB) responded repeatedly to Communist advances in Indochina. On each occasion, the Fleet acted according to contingency plans developed years earlier to counter aggression in the region. Determined to prevent America’s regional allies from falling to Communism, President John F. Kennedy kept close watch over Indochina and pledged to intervene, militarily, if necessary. During the Lao crisis of 1962, President Kennedy surprised one of his senior national security advisors, Walt W. Rostow, by telling him that if the United States were to commit military forces to Indochina to prevent it from becoming a collection of Chinese satellite states, it should do so in South Vietnam not in Laos.

Years later, Rostow recalled that Kennedy believed South Vietnam’s “direct access to the sea” permitting “American air and naval power to be more easily brought to bear” made it the more logical choice. A former naval officer and veteran of the World War II Pacific campaign, Kennedy understood the maritime aspects of warfare and the unique military advantages it offered to a conflict as complex as the one in Indochina. During the next three years, military planners would take into consideration Kennedy’s assessment and see the war from a naval or maritime perspective. U.S. Marine advisors would help build the South Vietnam’s Marine Corps and its amphibious capabilities while Marine helicopters joined the war against the NLF by ferrying the ARVN into battle. Marines, therefore, were certain to play a major role if American involvement increased, especially when the ability to bring ashore everything they needed to

fight either a convention or unconventional enemy or both was appealing to planners. To some involved in shaping American military policy in South Vietnam, this was not the case.

On the eve of the Da Nang landing in March 1965, Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton proposed to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and the Joint Chiefs that the Army’s 173d Airborne Brigade should take on the security mission at the airfield and other key facilities and installations instead of the 9th MEB. His sole reasoning was that any American military action in South Vietnam had to be inconspicuous so as not to attract attention for fear of further destabilizing the situation there. In McNaughton’s view, the image of Marines equipped with tanks and artillery pieces storming ashore from amphibious ships could do further damage. Conversely, he judged that Army airborne forces signalled a “limited, temporary nature of the U.S. troop deployment” since they carry less equipment and “look less formidable” than a Marine amphibious force.\(^{104}\) This is telling considering history’s portrayal of the Marines being less aggressive in their thinking and approach to strategy compared to the Army. If the Marines were not intending to take aggressive steps to defend the airfield, it is realistic to think Marine Corps leaders would have offered assurances. In the end, they indeed offered no such assurances.

McNaughton’s proposal received strong opposition from the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs and U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Maxwell D. Taylor, as well as from General Westmoreland and Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, the commander of all U.S. forces in the Pacific including South Vietnam. Admiral Sharp justified his rejection of McNaughton’s last-minute proposal by referencing the seven active contingency plans governing American military intervention in Indochina and which explicitly assign Marines to Da Nang. Sharp insisted that, because “the situation in Southeast Asia has now reached a point where the soundness of our contingency planning may be about to be tested”, there was neither the time nor the need to make

\(^{104}\) Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, 402.
changes to previously approved plans even if the political and military objectives were slightly different. In addition he argued that from a planning and preparation perspective:

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

Sharp’s intent was to ensure a smooth transition in the American military commitment if the decision was to increase the number of forces and expand the mission. Between 1954 and 1965, the bulk of the U.S. effort was on supporting the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) through advisory and assistance. During the first six years of the advisory and assistance mission, combat consisted mostly of counterguerrilla actions, pacification, and other psychological operations. The “special war”, as the Communists came to describe pacification, was having an impact on the NLF’s access and control over the population. To reverse the trend the insurgency sought to pull the ARVN away from of the villages and into open battle. Guerrilla units attacked remote ARVN installations at will and with the goal of baiting the ARVN into sending reactionary forces from the populated areas into the countryside in search of these guerrilla units, which was actually an advance element of a larger organized and equipped conventional force. Over time, this technique took a heavy toll on the ARVN and swayed the population in the direction of the insurgency.

As the conflict shifted from an insurgency to a conventional war in 1962, American military advisors started accompanying South Vietnamese units into combat with NLF forces. At

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105 Message from Commander in Chief, Pacific Command to the Joint Chiefs of Staff dated 1 March 1965, 3, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 3.
107 See Pike, Viet Cong, 55–56.
the same time American military assistance shifted from training the ARVN to operate in small units to providing advice on employing supporting arms (naval, air, and artillery), larger formations, and air-mobile tactics. The battle for Ap Bac in January 1963 was the turning point in which U.S. civilian and military officials envisioned the potential for an expanded military mission in South Vietnam for American forces.\textsuperscript{108} Marine helicopters started transporting South Vietnamese forces into combat while U.S. military planners reevaluated the American force lay down in South Vietnam, revisiting much of what Kennedy spoke to a year earlier. Planners tied the Marines to the narrowest portion of South Vietnam due to their reliance on naval logistics and supporting arms.\textsuperscript{109}

With a Marine helicopter squadron ashore at Da Nang and additional Marine command-and-control and logistics arrangements already in place there, Sharp deemed McNaughton’s request to replace the 9th MEB with the 173d Airborne Brigade “imprudent”, particularly since military planners determined this region of the country required a lighter, mobile, and more self-sustaining force.\textsuperscript{110} Like Sharp, Westmoreland argued also in favour of deploying Marines to Da Nang.

Almost all contingency plans developed through the years for Southeast Asia involved marines in the northern provinces of South Vietnam, and if one of the contingencies should come about, I wanted to go with the plan. In view of a lack of logistical installations or support troops, a marine force trained and equipped to supply itself over the beach was preferable to an airborne force lacking logistical capabilities.\textsuperscript{111}

President Johnson and McNamara agreed, ending McNaughton’s proposal. The 9th MEB proceeded to Da Nang as planners intended. Most interesting was not McNaughton’s proposal,

\textsuperscript{108} David M. Toczek, \textit{The Battle of Ap Bac: They Did Everything but Learn from It} (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001); and Sheehan, \textit{A Bright Shining Lie}, 204–12.
\textsuperscript{109} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 204.
\textsuperscript{111} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 149.
but his description of the Marine landing. McNaughton’s narrative was reminiscent of the Marine landing during the Second World War and the Korean War, which clarified the brigade’s preparedness for conventional military operations. Once Johnson made the decision to commit Marines, he did so with the idea that they might have to engage Communist formations not guerrillas.

A thorough analysis of the plans for South Vietnam highlights history’s flawed characterisation of the Marines’ subsequent three years of operations in the northern provinces. Understanding their strategy and approach to implementing these plans is difficult without first presenting an accurate and detailed portrayal of the origins of planning and thinking that went into their development. Even the most basic understanding of these plans highlights the significance of the enclaves and further demonstrates how the enclave concept and strategy from an offensive perspective was foremost on their minds when the Marines arrived in South Vietnam.

McNaughton’s expectation that a heavily armed Marine force would land at Da Nang had much to do with the most recent operations plans governing American military action in there. The complexity of the conflict, the Communist forces, and the actions detailed in operation plans dictated the Marines arrive ready to conduct conventional military operations as well as to counter an insurgency in the northern provinces. Willard Pearson describes the composition of the Marine force as heterogeneous.\(^\text{112}\) The enemy the Marines faced in the northern provinces was extremely difficult to find and even more so to identify. In Pearson’s analysis, “He [the Communists] possessed strong entrenchments in the villages, mountain hideouts, and jungle hideouts”.\(^\text{113}\) The enemy “merged into the civilian population as an agent or guerrilla”, but was

\(^{112}\) Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 5.

\(^{113}\) Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 4.
also a uniformed member of the regular North Vietnamese Army”. Typically, if the mission or enemy threat changes, the same force can adjust to the meet the modification. Given the nature of the enemy in the northern provinces and the probability of American ground forces having to engage in both conventional and unconventional operations, military planners agreed to assign Marines to this area of the country since their doctrine more easily allows them to employ a scalable force and pare down and build up as the situation and mission requires.

This chapter connects conventional military operation plans developed in the years prior to American ground combat operations and the Marines’ approach to strategy. As such, it proposes that these plans, among other things, not only influenced but drove the Marines’ toward a military strategy an operational approach inclusive of pacification and attrition. It adds that the enclave concept was an outgrowth of the plan to protect U.S. military base areas through unconventional and conventional methods.

U.S. Marines in Indochina War Plans

The relationship between U.S. Marines and the conflict in South Vietnam dates as far back as the First Indochina War between the Viet Minh independence movement and the combined French colonial forces, including those from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Viet Minh Offensive of 1954, featuring Chinese-made tanks and artillery, ended with several captured or abandoned French outposts north of Hanoi and a high command pulling its combat units closer to the capital to prevent its capture. After nearly eight years of fighting, France saw the war as unwinnable unless the United States and Britain provided direct military assistance. One such French request included “twenty thousand Marines” to seize the seaport at Haiphong before opening an escape route between Hanoi and the port for safe passage of French forces to Da

With the exception of the size of the Marine contingent, the request mirrored a study presented to the French three years prior in 1951. President Dwight D. Eisenhower concluded in both instances that, without concurrences from Congress or the support of U.S. allies, intervention was not in America’s best interest.

The 1954 Geneva Accords officially ended the war and partitioned Vietnam into two countries. The war’s end also marked the beginning of America’s deliberate planning to defend South Vietnam from an invasion by North Vietnam and China. Early plans for the commitment of U.S. forces entailed a substantial Marine involvement. Like plans for contingencies elsewhere in the world, the Marine Corps tied its doctrine, operating concepts, equipment acquisitions, officer education, and unit training to what it anticipated to be its role in South Vietnam. By 1962, the Marines were focusing on a conventional scenario, even though military planners on the Joint Chiefs’ staff shifted their attention to a Communist-inspired insurgency and U.S. support for a national pacification effort. Guerrilla forces and the population consumed a great deal of the Marine Corps’ attention, but not until the summer of 1965. Before that point, the Service envisioned deploying combat units to repel a ground invasion and engaging in sustained conventional military operations.

Civilian and military officials debated committing U.S. combat forces to end the stalemate and reunify the two Vietnams. Foremost on the minds of military planners was the potential for a North Korean-style invasion to seize South Vietnam’s major cities and seaports and the capital in Saigon. Agreements coming out of Geneva to hold national elections likely prevented an invasion, though few in President Eisenhower’s cabinet expected North Vietnam to

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116 *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War*.
117 *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War*. 
remain idle. Anticipating North Vietnamese aggression, Eisenhower’s national security team began work in 1955 on a security policy vis-à-vis an American military response. The result was National Security Council Memorandum 5602/1 and a U.S. Department of Defence initiative to develop contingency plans for direct military involvement. A planning cell under the supervision of the Joint Chiefs explored several scenarios requiring a direct U.S. military response. The cell formalised its findings in June 1956 with Limited War Plan–Indochina. Aimed at repulsing “overt aggression” by China and North Vietnam, the plan outlined the American military response in two distinct phases: a massive allied air bombardment of invading formations, including the potential use of nuclear weapons, and the introduction of U.S. and allied ground forces to seize select military objectives in South and North Vietnam.

Critical to the success of the opening phase was a South Vietnamese “delaying action from the 17th parallel to the hill mass around Tourane” to buy time for U.S. forces to arrive and form the counterattack. Three U.S. Army regimental combat teams along with two Marine regimental landing teams served as the vanguard of an American-led campaign estimated to take between 9 and 12 months to complete. The mission was to seize and defend the seaports and airbases at Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Saigon where additional forces and supplies were to arrive before counterattacking Viet Minh forces (and potentially Chinese) south of the 17th parallel.

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121 Tourane was the French name for Da Nang at the time. See Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 132.
parallel.\textsuperscript{122} Their objective was to destroy or push all Communist forces north of the 17th parallel and reestablish the demarcation line.

That same year, the Army conducted its own study of the situation in Indochina. Campaign Plan–North Vietnam, like Limited War Plan–Indochina, highlighted many of the same points and offered a few changes. In its plan, an Army division would lead the counterattack north of Da Nang in conjunction with amphibious landings by Marines in North Vietnam to cut off Viet Minh escape routes and to seize key military bases on the coast.\textsuperscript{123} Afterwards, the Marines would join the Army for a follow-on attack against the port at Haiphong before moving west along the Red River valley and seizing Hanoi.\textsuperscript{124} The end state was a reunified Vietnam under GVN control, thereby ending the conflict entirely and halting China’s advances in Indochina and Southeast Asia. Planners estimated the counteroffensive alone to take three months to complete with another eight months to clear and secure Viet Minh base areas in the mountains north of Hanoi.\textsuperscript{125}

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

\textsuperscript{125} Spector, Advice and Support, 271.
delegated sole detailed planning and coordination responsibilities to the Pacific Command’s multi-Service planning cell.126

OPLAN 46-56

With ownership of detailed planning and coordination, the senior joint U.S. military command in the Pacific theater began work on OPLAN 46-56.127 Defeating a ground invasion by a combined Chinese-North Vietnamese force or by North Vietnamese forces acting alone was still the primary concern as was the timely arrival of U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese holding actions between Da Nang and the demilitarised zone. Two major changes surfaced as a result of the Pacific Command’s more detailed planning effort. The first was that OPLAN 46-56, unlike its predecessors, restricted the use of nuclear weapons. The second was the realisation of a more complex Communist ground invasion scheme.

Based on their study of the terrain and geography, planners did not foresee the Communists limiting their invasion to one axis of advance, particularly if there was the potential for direct U.S. ground and air involvement. Instead, planners believed the Communists would rely on as many as three attack routes. The first and most direct route took invasion forces south across the demilitarised zone along National Highway 1 (the only north-south road in Indochina) to capture the major cities of Hue, Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, and Phan Thiet.128 Planners also envisioned that Communist forces would attack along a second route: the Lao panhandle along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network. With this particular route, invading forces

126 See Webb, The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam, 132; and Department of the Army, Limited War Plan–Indochina. All four Services had planners on the staff of the Joint Chiefs and at the Pacific Command to ensure their interests and capabilities were understood during planning.
127 A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning, 3-7 and 3-8. The final section of this chapter provides a breakdown of the organisational structure and the command relationships before and during the war.
could move south before turning east into South Vietnam at the central highlands and capturing the border towns of Kon Tum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot straddling National Highway 14. Planners assessed that the Communists’ goal was to cut the country in half. They considered yet a third route beginning in northern Laos and traversing the full length of the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the central and southern part of the country and into eastern Cambodia along the Mekong River, putting invading forces within easy striking distance of Saigon. Most expected enemy forces to use a combination of the three routes to deceive and overwhelm South Vietnamese and American command-and-control and defences.

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

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130 Cochran, “American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam”.
132 A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning, 3-7; and Spector, Advice and Support, 268–70.
remain at sea for use in amphibious landings at various points on the South and North Vietnamese coasts.¹³³

When planners surmised that the Communists might consider alternate and multiple invasion routes, they realised Saigon might not be the only seat of government at risk. The Thai capital at Bangkok and the capital of Vientiane, Laos, was also at risk of becoming a Communist target.¹³⁴ Their theory prompted senior military officials to consider drafting a more expansive plan and to include Thailand and Laos as part of their overall Indochina defence strategy. Events internal to South Vietnam and the greater Indochina region compelled Pacific Command to more critically assess North Vietnam’s intentions, as well as those of China, and the means by which the Communists might overcome the advantages the U.S. military had in technology and firepower.

**Same Enemy, New Look**

The rationale behind American plans centred on the type of conflict the Joint Chiefs believed U.S. forces were entering into. In 1959, the Communists started to view reunification in term of years and not as a result of a single overt military invasion. Graham Cosmas wrote in *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation* that North Vietnam recognised a conventional invasion, with or without China, would not achieve reunification. Instead, it would have to combine “large-scale military campaigns with widespread popular uprisings” to realise this goal.¹³⁵ Getting the support of the people would take time. Cognizant of America’s pledge to protect South Vietnam from invasion and its advantages in military technology and firepower, North Vietnam decided instead to present numerous conventional and unconventional challenges

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¹³⁴ Spector, *Advice and Support.*

¹³⁵ Cosmas, *MACV*, 72.
for the GVN, United States, and the other allies to resolve. Beginning first with the rise of the Communist Pathet Lao insurgency in Laos in 1957, North Vietnam put pressure on South Vietnam by creating instability on its borders. Then, in 1960, North Vietnam set conditions for war in South Vietnam when it revised its 1946 constitution. In it, the ruling Lao Dong (Vietnamese Workers) Party drafted a proclamation directing its forces prepare to defend the north (North Vietnam) and liberate the south (South Vietnam). The same decree gave formal rise the southern branch of the Lao Dong, known formally as the People’s Revolutionary Party (PRP), with the mission of undermining the GVN and stirring resentment among the South Vietnamese people toward their government and military.136

Recognising the United States was likely to suspect North Vietnam’s involvement in violating the Geneva Accords by undermining the GVN, Communist officials attempted to conceal their actions by encouraging nationalists and other non-Communist organisations to participate in reunification efforts. These groups formed the NLF in December 1960, the majority of which was Communist.137 The growth of the movement prompted the Lao Dong to form the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) to coordinate all political and military activities south of the demilitarised zone. Under COSVN’s direction, the NLF carried out day-to-day guerrilla actions against the GVN and South Vietnamese forces. Similar to the Mao’s “people’s war”, the NLF’s strategy consisted of military operations at the regional,

136 According to Douglas Pike, there are numerous interchangeable titles historians use to describe the political and military organisations associated with the war. The NLF, referred to by South Vietnamese officials as the “communist traitors to Vietnam”, or Viet Cong (VC), was a politico-military Communist-dominated nationalist insurgency seeking to liberate the country and reunify South and North Vietnam. It was the successor to the Viet Minh, which was a collection of Communist and nationalist organisations formed to oust the Japanese and French between 1944 and 1954. The official title of the NLF’s fighting arm was the People’s Liberation Armed Forces, or PLAF. See Pike, Viet Cong.

137 The NLF evolved out of the Viet Minh, which was a collection of Communist and nationalist groups brought together under a Communist banner to form a political organisation with the goal of evicting the French from Indochina shortly before the start of World War II. The Viet Minh contested Japanese occupation during the war, only to confront the French upon its return to Indochina in 1946. See Pike, Viet Cong, 82.
provincial/district, and village levels to wage a guerrilla campaign to gain the support of the population and control the countryside before “consolidating and expanding the base areas” and to strengthen “the people’s forces in all respects . . . in order to advance to building a large, strong armed force which can, along with all the people, defeat the enemy troops and win ultimate victory”. The result was a massive expansion of the NLF in just more than two years. According to Cosmas’ estimates, the NLF grew “from about 4,000 fulltime fighters in early 1960 to over 20,000”, with as many as “20 battalions, 80 separate companies, and perhaps 100 platoons of widely varying personnel strength”, the bulk of which COSVN deployed in and around Saigon. With ease they formed battalion-size units specifically to conduct conventional operations in the central highlands and northern provinces. Vietnam War historian and NLF expert Wilkins explains in *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them* that the NLF’s big war approach during this period, and which the Marines will experience in 1965, was not out of desperation, but a deliberate nature and acknowledgement of the Vietnamese Communists’ flexible brand of people’s war theory.

On the battlefield, the NLF adhered to the same tactics the Viet Minh used against the French. Fighting units consisted of three elements: main forces, provincial or district units, and local guerrilla forces. The uniformed and well-armed, organized, and equipped main forces consisted of battalion- and regimental-size units who took their orders directly from the COSVN and subordinate regional headquarters. These main forces were for major operations and attacks against large French (and later American) formations only. The provincial and district units were a composite of guerrilla and main forces units operating at the company and battalion-levels.

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139 Cosmas, *MACV*.
140 Cosmas, *MACV*.
Although equipped and organised similar to the main forces, these units were not nearly as capable. Their primary role was small-scale raids and other offensive actions.

The least capable armed component outside the “estimated 20,000 combat troops counted by the allies” was the village-level local guerrillas.\textsuperscript{142} Formed into platoons or smaller units, guerrillas received their orders from district and village officials. Ill-equipped and untrained, guerrillas lived among the people and harassed South Vietnamese, French, and American units as they moved through or nearby villages. Their greatest attribute was conducting reconnaissance for the main forces as well as providing logistics support and partially trained replacements.\textsuperscript{143} All levels of the Communist armed division relied upon the villages for food, clothing, recruits, labour, and medical supplies. Most of their weapons and ammunition, however, came from North Vietnam or were fabrications. As early as 1962, the NLF built base areas in the rural areas and outside the GVN’s sphere of control and influence. The Marines’ long-term plan in the northern provinces was to retake these areas, along with the enclaves, one at a time.

\textbf{OPLAN 32}

Successful incursions into Laos and inconspicuous interference in South Vietnam’s deteriorating domestic affairs shifted the momentum in favour of the Communists. Internal instability in South Vietnam increased as the Communist’s political cadres, educated and trained in North Vietnam just after the partitioning of Vietnam, returned to their hamlets and villages to play on the fear and anger of disenfranchised farmers and to challenge the legitimacy of the GVN.\textsuperscript{144} Promising sweeping land reforms in exchange for their loyal support—and punishment for their betrayal—the initial wave of political cadres made immediate gains among the people.

\textsuperscript{142} Cosmas, \textit{MACV}, 72–73.
\textsuperscript{143} Pike, \textit{Viet Cong}, 79.
\textsuperscript{144} Pike, \textit{Viet Cong}, 82.
living in the rural areas and away from the large and more prosperous cities. At the same time, Chinese and NVA advisors and equipment outfitted district and main force units. To ensure an endless flow of weapons and ammunition, the NVA carved out new infiltration routes leading to and from South Vietnam and expanded existing pathways.

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

The conditions in Laos, more so than in Cambodia and South Vietnam, convinced planners that a new and comprehensive series of plans reflecting simultaneous actions in different parts of Indochina was necessary. Known as Operations Plan 32: Defense of Indochina (OPLAN 32), the successor to OPLAN 46-56 was American’s first real attempt to bring together military forces from throughout Southeast Asia to contain Communism and, specifically, to prevent the invasion and other throw of Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam by allies of North Vietnam or China. The series of plans consisted of actions in South Vietnam to counter both a

145 The number 32 signifies the overall purpose of the plan, which was to defend Indochina. With each plans’ revision, planners attached the year in which the original work on the plan began (i.e., OPLAN 46-56 began in 1956). For specific situations in South Vietnam and in Laos that might be unrelated to the other, different numbering conventions existed. For example, OPLAN 37-64 was to stabilise South Vietnam, while OPLAN 99-64 was the effort to stabilise Laos, but only after a 1962 Geneva Accord made Laos off-limits to U.S. plans to protect South Vietnam. Each subplan provided specific guidance for confined mission or to achieve a specific result (e.g., OPLAN
conventional ground invasion and an insurgency, as well as actions to defeat North Vietnamese-backed insurgencies threatening Laos and Thailand. Actions specific to South Vietnam fell under OPLAN 32-59.

OPLAN 32 consisted of four distinct phases to counter or combat Communist aggression: Phase I-Alert; Phase II-Counterinsurgency; Phase III-Direct North Vietnamese attack; and Phase IV-Direct Chinese attack. In Phase I, U.S. forces were to assemble and make preparations to respond to deployment orders regarding either or both scenarios. Phase II “extended from the time the United States decided to take military action against a Communist insurgency until the friendly government regained control or the conflict escalated into a full-scale local war”.146 Although Phase III put American forces in action against North Vietnam specifically, Phase IV dealt with actions against China in the event of its direct involvement in any ground invasion.147 Concerning the Marines, Phase II entailed a “scaled-down version of the Phase III deployment, with a portion of the Marine force going to Da Nang and two Army brigades to the Saigon area”.148 In Phases III and IV, a full Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) would deploy to Da Nang, with an Army division deploying to Qui Nhon and the central highlands and an Army airborne brigade to Saigon.149 These forces were to assist South Vietnamese forces in blocking the Communist attack down the coast and against Saigon. Their principal mission was to defend the developed coastal areas, thereby freeing South Vietnamese units to take the offensive.

OPLAN 32 architects, unlike those of previous plans, conceded to idea that an insurgency was likely and that, by inciting instability in neighbouring country, the Communists were

34-64 Covert Actions in North Vietnam). Regardless of the specific situation, location, and mission, all plans fell under the overall OPLAN 32 construct. See A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning, 3–4.
148 Cosmas, MACV, 188.
149 Cosmas, MACV.
attempting to divert U.S. attention and, if possible, military resources away from South Vietnam.

The final draft of OPLAN 32 left open the possibility for American ground forces to “engage in unspecified counter-guerrilla activities” after turning back the anticipated ground invasion. In the event of calling on U.S. forces to counter an insurgency, planners decided the same enclaves used as part of the defensive and counterattack against the ground invasion would still serve as bases of operations.

The presence of Communist forces in Laos that had remained in place by the Geneva Accords left the Royal Lao Government (an ally to the United States) and neighbouring Thailand vulnerable to influence and attack. As the situation in Laos intensified, planners focused on developing a Lao-specific branch plan. With this in mind, the Pacific Command added OPLAN 32-59 (L) in June 1959 to prepare for unilateral U.S. military action to restore “stability and friendly control of Laos in the event it was threatened by Communist insurgency”. A theme common to all of the operation plans for Indochina was the rapid deployment of conventional military forces. OPLAN 32 (L) was no different. Only this time America’s quick response was for securing airfields and the Mekong River crossings points connecting Seno and Vientiane, Laos to Thailand. Those actions included a sizeable Marine air-ground commitment.

Preparing for War in South Vietnam during the Kennedy Years

President John F. Kennedy’s election in 1960 brought with it several dramatic changes to U.S. military policy toward Indochina. It also impacted joint military planning and the Marine Corps’ potential role in the war there. The first change came with President Kennedy’s pledge to

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150 Cosmas, MACV.
rebuild the U.S. Armed Services. Allan R. Millett explained in *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* that under Kennedy, the Marine Corps “began a five-year surge in readiness that brought it to its highest level of peacetime effectiveness by the eve of the Vietnam War”\(^\text{152}\). Kennedy’s rationale for restoring traditional military capabilities was to ensure the United States possessed both feasible and credible counters to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s encroachment into Western Europe. The most significant change, however, would be Kennedy’s pledge to counter Khrushchev’s declaration to support unconditionally wars of national liberation around the world. Indigenous rebellions and popular insurgencies in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and in other parts of Central America, Africa, and Indochina were but a few examples\(^\text{153}\).

Countering Soviet support for wars of national liberation was one of Kennedy’s first directives to the Joint Chiefs. He tasked the Service chiefs with developing and including special warfare and counterinsurgency doctrine in Service training and professional military education. At the same time, Kennedy increased defence spending to prepare the Services to fight conventional wars. The Services responded to Kennedy’s Flexible Response policy by overhauling Service-specific roles and responsibilities to meet his mandate for providing courses of action other than the nuclear option championed by President Eisenhower in his New Look initiative beginning in 1953\(^\text{154}\). Despite Kennedy’s interest in special/counterinsurgency warfare,


\(^{154}\) *Flexible response, or flexible deterrent options*, refers to a U.S. defence strategy that offered a wide range of diplomatic, political, economic, and military options to deter an enemy attack. The term *flexible response* first appears in Gen Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), which sharply criticised U.S. national security policy. Eisenhower’s New Look approach relied heavily on the capacity for a devastating assault with nuclear weapons—massive retaliation—to fight Soviet military provocations, regardless of
he and Secretary McNamara wanted a Marine Corps “capable of sustained combat” against a peer competitor and on land.\textsuperscript{155} The Marine Corps was already moving in that direction. A decade earlier, the 19th Commandant, General Clifton B. Cates, stressed that the Service build a “solid foundation of competence in conventional land warfare”, adding that “if the occasion demands it”, Marine forces will be “capable of moving in and fighting side by side with Army divisions”.\textsuperscript{156}

Since 1951, Marine Corps doctrine writers began emphasising a quick-strike capability as opposed to the Army’s heavier and more deliberate land warfighting doctrine focusing on both offensive and defensive thinking. Service doctrine under General Cates centred on creating a force capable of seizing and holding objectives, such as a seaports and airfields, to support the arrival of a larger Marine and Army forces. Under Flexible Response, however, the Marines would not return immediately to amphibious ships waiting offshore. Instead, they would continue limited offensive and defensive operations to support the larger ground campaign as well as keeping lines of communications and resupply routes open for Army forces fighting farther inland. Rather than operating from ships, base areas similar to the beachheads of the Second World War would provide the Marines with intermediate logistics support, artillery emplacements, and shore-based command-and-control nodes. With additional capabilities, the Marine force could extend or duplicate their beachheads farther inland, if necessary.\textsuperscript{157}

Geography played an important part in shaping how the United States viewed the conflict in Indochina. In 1962, President Kennedy told one of his senior White House aides, Walt W. Rostow, that if he were to commit U.S. military forces to Indochina to prevent the region from whether they involved nuclear weapons or not. The Eisenhower administration thought it could deter all forms of aggression by the Soviet Union and China without maintaining expensive, large conventional military forces.

\textsuperscript{155} Millett, \textit{Semper Fidelis}, 546.
\textsuperscript{156} John E. Greenwood, “The Pre-war Era”, \textit{Marine Corps Gazette}, 56, no. 9 (September 1972): 37.
\textsuperscript{157} Millett, \textit{Semper Fidelis}, 546–47.
becoming a collection of Chinese satellite states, he would do so in South Vietnam not in Laos. According to Rostow, Kennedy believed South Vietnam’s “direct access to the sea” and geography permitted “American air and naval power to be more easily brought to bear”, making South Vietnam the more logical choice.158 That same year, the Geneva Accords of 1962 (or Declaration of the Neutrality of Laos) prohibited all parties involved in the conflict from basing military forces and equipment there and shifted the U.S. military’s attention back to South Vietnam.

While the Marine Corps improved its warfighting capacity, Pacific Command planners considered with great certainty that a North Vietnamese-sponsored insurgency was now the most likely threat to South Vietnam and that the long-anticipated conventional invasion was less likely. Counterinsurgency warfare and military support to political, social, and economic concepts received greater attention. Up to this point, U.S. advisors concentrated on preparing South Vietnamese force to repel a conventional ground invasion. After conventionally organised and equipped NLF battalions routed ARVN units in 1961, Kennedy sent his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Maxwell Taylor, to South Vietnam to assess the situation and recommend a way forward. Taylor’s trip led to the establishment of a new command structure, the USMACV, and the quadrupling of American personnel supporting its mission. He brought back a profound understanding of the conflict and a cautious tone concerning America’s direct military involvement in the fighting.159

Unlike Taylor, the Joint Chiefs resisted widening America’s advisory-and-assistance role. Although Commandant General David M. Shoup had a close professional relationship with Kennedy, it did not stop him from being one of the more vocal opponents of America’s and the

158 Rust, Kennedy in Vietnam, 34.
Marine Corps’ potential involvement in the conflict, particularly in a counterinsurgency role.\textsuperscript{160} Shoup did just enough to convince Kennedy that the Marine Corps followed his directive to incorporate counterinsurgency warfare into its doctrine and training. Historian Howard Jablon observed in an article on General Shoup that, despite Shoup’s many accomplishments, he failed to convince Kennedy that “counterinsurgency warfare was unrealistic” and how the Marines were not suited for nation-building.\textsuperscript{161} Given the option, Shoup wanted to keep from involving Marines in these types of conflicts.

The Pacific Command offered few deviations to their theories on both an overt and covert Communist takeover of South Vietnam. With President Kennedy’s deep interest and concern that wars of the future will be both conventional and involve the people and guerrilla elements (as witnessed in Cuba, French Indochina and Algeria, and China), planners wanted to produce options in the event U.S. forces had to confront either or both. To be able to fight an insurgency, while at the same time having the resources in place to counter a conventional invasion, planners identified locations along the Mekong River stretching from Thailand across Laos and South Vietnam to the Tonkin Gulf and other positions south near the Cambodia-South Vietnamese border.\textsuperscript{162} This main line of resistance, supported by the other allied nations making up the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) included armour and infantry forces as part of an anti-infiltration scheme designed to halt the flood of Communist advisors and equipment entering the country from North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{163} These were the same locations planners considered to be potential border crossing points for the conventional ground attack, if it materialised.

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\textsuperscript{162} See Cochran, “American Planning for Ground Combat in Vietnam”.
\textsuperscript{163} Created in 1954, SEATO was a response to the demand that the Southeast Asian area be protected against Communist expansionism. \textit{A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning}, 3–8.
\end{flushleft}
In either instance, Marines would play a much larger and preemptive role than Pacific Command planners conceived and studied the idea of deploying U.S. ground forces in advance of an invasion and before the insurgency grew out of control. One plan called for a MEB to establish a “secure base areas” at Da Nang and other coastal locations.\textsuperscript{164} They also envisioned that a separate and larger MEF would either pass through Da Nang to carry out operations against the insurgency or stay “anchored on the coast to preserve additional amphibious option”.\textsuperscript{165} Meanwhile, a second MEF (minus the brigade at Da Nang) would remain at sea “to quarantine South Vietnam to degree necessary to significantly reduce Viet Cong sea infiltration”.\textsuperscript{166} They continued stressing the importance of amphibious operations against North Vietnam to draw Communist forces away from the demilitarised zone and Lao-Cambodian-South Vietnamese tri-border region. Roughly 205,000 U.S. combat and support personnel (six divisions) were to support to this plan, including nearly 85,000 Marines.\textsuperscript{167}

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

\textsuperscript{164} “Commandant of the Marine Corps’ Point Paper on Options in South Vietnam”, March 1964, Greene Papers.
\textsuperscript{165} “Commandant of the Marine Corps’ Point Paper on Options in South Vietnam”.
\textsuperscript{166} “Commandant of the Marine Corps’ Point Paper on Options in South Vietnam”.
\textsuperscript{167} Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, 108.
deployment of a reinforced MEF at Da Nang in an effort to stabilise and defend the enclave in the face of a growing insurgency and looming Communist ground invasion.168

Given the security situation, a common trend Shoup noted was that students saw pacification of the populated areas as a critical task and that it would require a significant number of Marines to secure and hold pacified rear areas. No less important was their regard for conventional military operations. When the 9th MEB landed at Da Nang in 1965, a large number of the Marine officers assigned to the command were uniquely familiar with the security situation in Da Nang and the tasks assigned to them as a result of their Cormorant planning experiences.169 Regardless, Shoup was no more willing to get Marines involved in a purely counterinsurgency role. Instead, he stressed the Marine Corps’ neutrality. “We do not claim to be experts in the entire scope of actions required in counterinsurgency operations. We do stand ready to carry out the military portions of such operations and to contribute to such other aspects of the counterinsurgency effort as may be appropriate”.170

OPLAN 32-64

In the aftermath of widespread civilian unrest brought on by the insurgency, religious indifferences, repeated changes in GVN and military leadership, and ongoing pleas for land and social reforms, U.S. planners replaced OPLAN 32-59 with OPLAN 32-64 in early 1964.171 The central theme of planning shifted from defending South Vietnam from an outside threat to stabilising the country in spite of several internal threats. At the same time, to increased pressure

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on North Vietnam to cease its support for the NLF the Joint Chiefs recommended an air campaign featuring a highly scrutinised list of 94 industrial and military targets to cripple the country’s economy and ability to provide the necessary warfighting materials and resources to sustain the war. Some of the perspectives from previous plans gained new life. In OPLAN 32-64, planners reintroduced three invasion routes planners identified in earlier plans, only this time they looked to these locations as crossing points for insurgents and NVA forces slipping into South Vietnam from North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The plan established border control points to monitor these areas specifically. OPLAN 32-64 called attention to several major sea and coastal infiltration points as well.

Pressure to involve American ground forces accelerated in 1964 after a series of ARVN battlefield setbacks convinced U.S. political and military officials that the GVN could not win the war. A once-cautious General Westmoreland, who assumed command of USMACV in June, contemplated implementing the defensive line outlined in OPLAN 32-59. In his proposal to the Joint Chiefs to consider the measure, he suggested deploying mobile light infantry units near the demilitarised zone to both delay invading forces and clear and hold guerrilla base areas and surrounding Saigon with an elaborate system of defences formed around air cavalry units and mechanised and armour divisions extending north and west of the capitol. In keeping with the plan, Marine forces would operate in the northern provinces, where they were to establish beachheads adjacent the largest enclaves and where any number of beaches could be used for landing Marines and resupplies. If the Communist ground invasion never materialised, the role of U.S. ground forces was to advise and build the South Vietnamese military’s fighting capacity

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172 Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, 108.
173 A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning, 3-10–3-12.
174 A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning.
175 A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Conduct of the War, 168.
in conjunction with support for national pacification programmes to reinforce the population’s confidence in the GVN. OPLAN 32-64 represented more than just a new plan; it reflected the way the United State viewed the evolving situation in South Vietnam.

The Johnson administration considered the NLF closer to overthrowing the GVN than at any time in the past decade, reigniting both private and public debates over America’s direct intervention. With each passing day, Communist political cadres and guerrilla forces seemingly increased in numbers, popularity, and overall strength. Hanoi viewed the NLF’s gains as an opportunity to increase pressure in the demilitarised region, infiltrating more than 12,000 soldiers in 1964 as compared to the 7,900 in 1963.\textsuperscript{176} In the northern provinces, the Marine Corps watched closely as the contact between the ARVN and the main forces and NVA increased in frequency and lethality. In areas where NVA units were purportedly infiltrating, Chinese and Soviet weapons and ammunition surfaced in large quantities, as did reports of soldiers in uniforms and equipment typically worn by the Chinese military.\textsuperscript{177} Official Marine intelligence reports described the once relatively quiet northern provinces as a flashpoint. Main force attacks there, compared with the rest of the country, increased from 6 percent in 1963 to 13 percent in 1964.\textsuperscript{178} Although the total number of enemy killed country-wide decreased from 20,573 in 1963 to 16,785 in 1964, the number killed in the northern provinces tripled from 664 to 1,887.\textsuperscript{179} During 1963, 10 percent of the ARVN soldiers killed came as a result of fighting there, an increase of nearly 25 percent.\textsuperscript{180}


\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965}.

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965}.

\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965}.

\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965}.
In light of the increase in NVA activity, Johnson approved Operation Desoto, which was intelligence collection operations off North Vietnam, over the demilitarised zone, and along the Ho Chi Minh trail. He also encouraged the GVN and South Vietnamese military to go on the offensive against the NLF. The results of the latter, however, were not what Johnson expected. American military advisors reported wholesale corruption and incompetence at the highest levels of the military and low morale in the ranks as the primary reason for the ARVN’s failures. Seeking a wider role for U.S. forces, the Tonkin Gulf incidents in August 1964 gave Johnson the justification he needed to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression”.181

The Military Situation at the Start of 1965

By the end of 1964, the South Vietnamese population’s diminished confidence in the GVN and ARVN was impacting the country’s daily affairs. The ever-present fear of yet another military coup, coupled with the continuing trend of battlefield defeats, threatened the decades-old American effort to build a strong central government and national military in South Vietnam. The consensus was that the country was sure to collapse if the GVN, with the assistance of the United States, did not reverse the “losing trend”.182 During an official visit in January 1965, one of President Johnson’s top national security advisors, McGeorge Bundy, remarked that “the situation in Vietnam is deteriorating and without new US action, defeat appears inevitable—

181 The Tonkin Gulf incident consisted of two engagements between North Vietnamese torpedo boats and American destroyers USS Maddox (DD 731) and USS Turner Joy (DD 951) off the coast of North Vietnam on 2 and 4 August. House Joint Resolution 1145 passed on 7 August 1964, permitting Johnson to take the necessary action to defend U.S. forces and South Vietnam from North Vietnamese aggression. Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Historical Series), vol. XX, 90th Cong., 2d Session, 1968 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 1.
182 Gen Westmoreland and other civilian and military officials frequently used this expression to describe the direction of the war.
probably not in a matter of weeks or even months, but within the next year or so. There is still
time to turn it around, but not much”.  

Still at an impasse as to the depth and degree of direct U.S. military involvement,
Johnson was nonetheless resolute in keeping South Vietnam free from Communism despite the
desperate political and military situations. He believed he was doing as much as he could
politically. Militarily, however, Johnson acknowledged that there was still more the United
States could, and would likely have, to do. He reached a decision point when the NLF attacked
U.S. forces based at Pleiku and Qui Nhon on 7 and 10 February 1965, killing a combined total of
33 servicemen and destroying or damaging 52 aircraft.  

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

Conscious of the fact that the war was changing faster than the GVN could grasp,
General Westmoreland agreed with Johnson that something more had to be done sooner rather
than later. All too aware of the changing dynamics of the ground war inside South Vietnam,

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Westmorland watched during his tenure as USMACV’s deputy commander as the NLF relied less on guerrilla actions and more on convention operations, which was a complete contradiction to the U.S. advisory effort to train the ARVN to fight as small units and to use counterguerrilla tactics. Throughout 1964 and into 1965, NLF main forces roamed the countryside in battalion and regimental strength in search of complacent ARVN units. Reports confirming the presence of two of the 325th NVA Division’s regiments in South Vietnam’s central highlands added to Westmoreland’s own speculation that the final phase of the insurgency was near. Once confident the GVN could adequately manage internal and external threats with minimal assistance from the United States, the NLF’s discernible increase in warfighting capacity and North Vietnam’s unfettered access to South Vietnam convinced Westmoreland that a major offensive was in the making and that it was the beginning of the end for South Vietnam if the ARVN did not defeat the Communists’ latest surge.

In keeping with National Security Action Memorandum 288 (NSAM 288) of 1964, Johnson reiterated that America’s principal strategic objective in Southeast Asia was to contain Communism, and in South Vietnam, to keep in place an independent, non-Communist government. To demonstrate his determination to see America’s obligations through, he endorsed a series of measures to increase U.S. military pressure on North Vietnam. Westmoreland oriented his command on deterring an all-out Communist invasion of South Vietnam, deterring North Vietnam’s direct supporting to the NLF, and to stem the spread of communism elsewhere in Indochina.

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189 NSAM 288, 290–98.
The potential for deploying U.S. combat forces marked the end of the advisory-and-assistance era and opened a new phase of American involvement with an expanded policy centred on four strategic objectives requiring the full spectrum of American military operational capabilities. Three strategic objectives guided the overall military effort: the long-standing global policy of containing Communism within its current boundaries, building and maintaining regional confidence in America’s ability to protect its Asian-Pacific allies from Communism and aggression, and avoiding a general war with the Soviet Union and China. The fourth, which was the political and economic advancement of South Vietnam and its ability to defeat any external military threats that might arise, applies to this study in that it generated the greatest amount of debate and discussion among the military Service chiefs as to the best approach to achieving success in South Vietnam.  

To link the tactical actions with strategic objectives, Westmoreland envisioned an operational design aimed at applying military force to secure South Vietnam “from large well organised and equipped forces including those which may come from outside the country” in addition to all “small internal threats”. To prevent North Vietnamese and Chinese direct involvement, President Johnson limited the scope of the war by authorising action against Communist forces inside South Vietnam and those infiltrating through the demilitarised zone, with the only exception being the air campaign against North Vietnam to reduce the will and morale of the people and government.  

Concerning U.S. ground forces, he believed their role was now to create conditions to allow the “government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and

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190 NSAM 288, 290–98.
192 Telegram from the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam to the Commander in Chief.
supported Communist subversion and aggression and to attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment”\textsuperscript{193} Central to this was the reduction of the NLF’s support base through unyielding American military action inside South Vietnam and in support of the GVN’s nationwide pacification campaign. Specific U.S. military’s objectives outlined by the Joint Chiefs charged U.S. forces with making it as difficult as possible for North Vietnam to continue support of the NLF and to cause North Vietnam to cease direction of the insurgency: defeating the NLF and expediting the withdrawal of the NVA; extending the GVN’s dominion, direction, and control; and deterring the China from direct intervention in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the western Pacific and to be prepared to defeat such intervention if it occurs.\textsuperscript{194} Devising the right strategy to meet these objectives was a challenge, but one which the Marine Corps believed it had the answer.

\textbf{Command and Control and Command Relationships}

The Services appreciated the military advantages President Kennedy spoke of concerning his willingness to commit U.S. forces to South Vietnam vice Laos due in large part to the consistent early operational planning undertaken by the Joint Chiefs, by each of the Services’ headquarters in Washington, DC, and by the Pacific Command and its subsidiary Service component commands at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Long before Kennedy’s edict on the value of naval power, studies prepared by military planners reached the same conclusions. As for the Marines, the Seventh Fleet’s numerous responses to event in Indochina were essentially rehearsals for these plans conceived and precursors to their eventual involvement.

\textsuperscript{193} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 69.
\textsuperscript{194} Gravel, \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, 290–98; and Chief of Naval Operations Memoranda, 1.
Without question, the American military involvement, whether extensive or limited, was sure to involve Marines for the reasons cited by Kennedy. Readiness and responsiveness to crises merit mention and should come as no surprise as the end of the Korean War brought with it a continuous need for forward deployed naval forces, especially Marines. The Marine Corps’ mission, functions, and doctrine of the time were reason enough to expect that Marines, if any of the Services, would land somewhere in Indochina. By time the Vietnam conflict reached the point of direct American involvement, plans to contain, deter, and defeat Communist forces in the northern provinces relied upon Marines to be the first ashore to fight a conventional, albeit limited, war.195

Operation plans dictated that the Marines assume responsibility of an area most planners considered an appropriate and necessary objective for an amphibious force, regardless of the Communist threat.196 Initial ideas involved Marines primarily because of the multitude of capabilities a forward-deployed amphibious air-ground force offered and the speed with which it could respond to crises. In a general war scenario, planners focused on Indochina’s geographic disposition and the promptness with which Marines could posture for defensive actions before taking the offensive or returning to sea for employment elsewhere. Planners used the same logic in a limited war scenario.

The Marines’ relationship with the other Services and the American military command structure in South Vietnam is a good point of departure for understanding the Marines’ roles in plans for ground combat in Indochina and South Vietnam. Command relationships were important aspects of planning and a great challenge for all military planners involved. To retain

196 A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, 3-1.
and maintain unity of command and a single commander for U.S. forces, President Johnson directed that all actions fall under the control of a single commander, regardless of their Service-specific functions and tasks.

As one can assume, inter-Service rivalries and misunderstandings naturally arose from this type of command structure. Although the Marines’ chain of command extended from Walt to Westmoreland, certain Service-specific functions and arrangements required that standard Service reporting protocols remain intact. At times, this process spilled over into operational planning and the operational and tactical employment of forces, sometimes leading to the Services conducting operations that did not complement the actions of the other Services and operational objectives. The Marines’ adoption of the enclave concept and balanced approach were examples of how command relationships contributed to disputes over Service perspectives and independent actions.

At the outset of direct involvement all plans were under the control with the Joint Chiefs in Washington, DC. The tyranny of distance, particularly in planning done by a staff located thousands of miles from potential battlefields rightfully raised the questions of relevance and accuracy in planning. The establishment of a joint or unified military command in the Pacific with subordinate Service component commands mitigated these concerns as plans developed by staffs with a first-hand understanding and focus on region-specific problems went into effect. This was not the standard approach years earlier.

Following World War II, the Joint Chiefs identified a requirement to reorganize and consolidate American military forces globally to improve command and control procedures, implement long-term strategies, and respond to crises that might arise at any time in single or multiple locations. America’s military relationships with allied countries in a given region and in
potential crisis areas grew in significance. The result was several regional “high level command arrangements for operational forces on a global basis”.197 Established first in the Pacific, this Unified Command Plan enabled the Joint Chiefs to achieve efficiency and unity of effort, particularly in the area of deliberate and crisis action contingency planning.198 A derivative of this initiative was the need to better understand command relationships between layers of commands functioning at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war.

Partially as a result of conditions in Europe and in the Pacific, regional-specific planning for contingencies came into existence in the 1950s. Events in Indochina increased the need for consistent regional-specific awareness. In an effort to establish a long-range planning construct for different regions and to at least have an initial plan in hand in the event of crisis, the Joint Chiefs issued the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan and “assigned tasks, allocated forces” and provided “guidance to commanders of unified and specified commands”.199 The Army went as far as to forecast potential security problems 10 to 15 years in the future and assigned specific military commands to support the plans for those troubled regions.200 Both efforts guided unified commands in developing or revising efforts “for areas of concern in their theaters” and to establish a working relationship with the forces assigned to carry out plans.201

With its creation in August 1949, the Department of Defense directed that the other Services also provide a list of commands and units for assignment to each of the unified commands responsible for a particular geographical theater of operations. Each unified command included Service component commands, which exercised tactical and administrative control over

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199 *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning*, 3-2.
200 *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning*.
201 *A Study in Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Planning*. 
the units of their respective Services. This system required deployed forces to use dual chains of command depending on the issue at hand. Whereas for operational matters the deployed force reported to the unified commander, who in turn reported to President Johnson through the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of Defense, for administrative and certain logistical issues the same force reported to its component command and on to their Service department.

The commander of the Pacific’s unified command, or Pacific Command, was responsible for promoting and defending the American political interests and promoting military cooperation with allied militaries throughout the Pacific. At Admiral Sharp’s disposal was a joint staff made up of members from each of the Services under his command as well as “component forces consisting of Army, Army Air, and Naval forces”. Sharp exercised control over all American forces in the Pacific and on the Asian mainland, including those engaged in the conflicts in Indochina and South Vietnam.

As stated earlier, Sharp exercised control through a variety of ways and means. For administrative and logistical matters, he exercised control primarily through three distinct Service component commands: U.S. Army, Pacific; the Pacific Air Forces; and the Pacific Fleet. The Marine Corps’ component command, the Fleet Marine Forces Pacific fell under the operational control of the Pacific Fleet and conducted parallel and integrated planning with the Navy staff, when necessary. Like the other Services, the Marine Corps maintained several representatives on joint and naval staffs to ensure clarity in their Service mission and roles and acceptance of Service interests and capabilities by the other Services during the development of

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204 Cole, History of the Unified Command Plan.
206 Eckhardt, Command and Control, 35.
207 Eckhardt, Command and Control, 78.
operation plans and potential responses to no-notice contingencies. On amphibious planning staffs, Marine planners fulfilled liaison duties to safeguard proper integration of Marine aviation and ground assets in support of a naval campaign. In most cases, they had a voice in the final tasks involving Marine personnel and equipment. At the joint level, including the Joint Chiefs and the Pacific Command, Marine planners weighed the appropriateness of the tasked assigned to Marine forces. Marine liaisons aided planners by coordinating and communicating official service responses and made recommendations for joint planning committees to consider.

For American forces operating in Indochina and South Vietnam, Sharp exercised direct control through a military assistance and advisory group, bypassing the Service component commands for operational matters only, though all administrative and logistic issues were the responsibility of the individual Services through their respective component commands.\textsuperscript{208} As America’s political commitment to Indochina increased, so did the military’s responsibilities. To keep abreast of the situation in South Vietnam, the Pacific Command established a formal command to oversee American interests throughout Indochina. On 8 February 1962, Pacific Command established the USMACV as part of the expanding effort to directly advise South Vietnamese military forces, supervise limited U.S. military operations supporting the South Vietnamese, and to assist in furthering U.S. political objectives in the country and throughout the region.\textsuperscript{209}

The Services rightfully took great interest in assigning their own personnel to Sharp’s and Westmoreland’s staffs to provide their own functional input and recommendations and to improve their position in operations plans. Although plans for the Korean peninsula, Taiwan,\textsuperscript{208} See Eckhardt, \textit{Command and Control}, 4.
\textsuperscript{209} Previous to establishing the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, the military effort in South Vietnam was under the control of the U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group, or USMAAG. See Eckhardt, \textit{Command and Control}, 7, 25–30.
Indonesia, and Malaysia were also under development, Indochina attracted the Pacific Command’s foremost planning attention. The relationship between the staffs of these commands was essential to implementing plans. How the staffs and their relationships came into existence and ultimately functioned is as complicated as the war itself.

When American forces took on a direct combat role in South Vietnam, the Sharp’s task was to provide the air and naval component commands. The air component commander directed all air operations within South Vietnam under the 2d Air Division and, later, the 7th Air Force.\textsuperscript{210} For naval forces, the Chief of Naval Advisory Group served as the overall naval component commander.\textsuperscript{211} After U.S. Army ground forces arrived between May and September 1965, Sharp and General Harold K. Johnson, the Chief of Staff of the Army, elected not to create a separate Army component command, but directed instead that Westmoreland serve in this capacity.\textsuperscript{212} The USMACV assumed overall command of all Army forces instead. The III MAF, based out of Okinawa, but with some of its forces coming from California, assumed responsibility for operations in the northern provinces.\textsuperscript{213}

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{210} Eckhardt, \textit{Command and Control}, 40.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Eckhardt, \textit{Command and Control}.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Eckhardt, \textit{Command and Control}, 50–51.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Dunn, \textit{Base Development in South Vietnam}, 15.
\end{footnotes}
Command relationships in South Vietnam were not without difficulties. As a subordinate commander to Sharp, Westmoreland controlled the planning and core actions of U.S. forces operating inside South Vietnam, but not in all of Indochina. To enable Westmoreland to focus on defending South Vietnam and containing Communism there, Sharp delegated certain functional activities outside South Vietnam’s geographic borders, air space, and national waters to the Service components. For example, the Pacific Air Forces and Pacific Fleet conducted all air and

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214 Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 56.
naval operations against North Vietnam and Laos.\textsuperscript{215} The Pacific Fleet’s provided also the naval gunfire support and aircraft for Marine and Army ground operations in South Vietnam. Westmoreland, however, owned the naval coastal patrol units operating in contiguous waters extending 30 to 40 miles off South Vietnam and riverine units operation on the country’s expansion river delta and river networks.\textsuperscript{216} Support activities dispersed among the Service components created problems in planning and, at times, during execution. Communication between the staffs and an understanding of Service roles were critical to making the overall joint command and operations process function properly. Inter-Service rivalries and a lack of understanding tended to cause the biggest problem, which the Marines realized not long after landing at Da Nang.

Ashore, command relationship issues were less volatile and complex. For U.S. ground forces operating in the area, Sharp delegated their direct operational control to Westmoreland, bypassing Service component commands on operational matters. All Service-specific administrative and logistic issues, however, were the responsibility of the component commands. To help shape solution before problems arose, the Services assigned subject matter experts to Westmoreland’s staff. Subordinate to Westmoreland was the 7th Air Force, three Army corps or field forces, and the III MAF.\textsuperscript{217} The commanders of each of these commands reported directly to Westmoreland on operational matters and retained the right to discuss issues with their respective component command, if necessary. Again, those issues involved, typically, administrative and logistic issues and, occasionally, issues related to the employment of units outside Service doctrinal norms.

\textsuperscript{215} Eckhardt, Command and Control, v. 35.
\textsuperscript{216} Eckhardt, Command and Control, 78–80.
\textsuperscript{217} Eckhardt, Command and Control, 59–59.
CHAPTER TWO
THE OFFENSIVE ENCLAVE CONCEPT

After leaving his post as the Marine Corps’ 22d Commandant in December 1963, General Shoup recalled how the Service’s senior-most general officers fretted over the “shooting war going on” in South Vietnam and concerns of the Marine Corps “being left out of it”. Shoup considered their anxieties were purely parochial and budgetary, and their desires to involve Marines had nothing at all to do with the “political or social problems of the Vietnamese people”. A firm opponent of direct U.S. military involvement in the conflict, Shoup rejected his generals’ pleas. Not long after his departure, the same generals approached his successor, General Wallace Greene, about securing for the Marine Corps a role “on a large scale” and ensuring Marines were the “first to fight” in South Vietnam.

Many early Vietnam War historians describe Greene as someone disinterested in the United States and the Marine Corps getting involved in a questionable war. Robert Buzzanco writes in Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era that Greene “rejected” American involvement explicitly. In a speech at the Army War College in 1963 in the capacity of the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, Greene likened the conflict to a “quagmire”. In a question-and-answer session with the Marine Corps History Division years later, however, Greene appears to be more amenable to U.S. involvement than Buzzanco recounts. At that time, Greene insisted that, “if we were, could, go into South Vietnam and do it

219 Shoup, “The New American Militarism”.
220 Shoup, “The New American Militarism”.
our way, I think we could maybe clear that situation up within a reasonable time”.222 Regardless of these vastly dissimilar attitudes or how historians portray him later, shortly after taking over as Commandant in January 1964, Greene realised the United States was out of options. Contrary to Buzzanco, Graham A. Cosmas notes in The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960–1968 that Greene favoured escalating U.S. involvement. Citing Service-level position papers as evidence, Cosmas explains that Greene pressed upon his fellow Joint Chiefs and President Johnson that it was time the United States made a “clear-cut decision either to pull out of South Vietnam or to stay there and win”.223 “If the decision is to stay and win, which is the Marine Corps’ recommendation” he offered, “this objective must be pursued with the full concerted power of U.S. resources”.224

As for the extent of the U.S. military’s role, particularly on the ground, Greene did not hesitate to recommend direct intervention. H. R. McMaster explains in Dereliction of Duty that Greene, unlike Shoup, had no “misgivings about entering a land war in Asia”.225 McMaster illuminates Greene’s growing aggressive stance by referring to a personal memorandum sent from the Marine general to the other Service chiefs outlining his preferences for an unrelenting air campaign against North Vietnam as well as the deployment of U.S. “ground, air, and naval units into South Vietnam to guarantee holding the country and the successful conduct of operations” to defeat NLF forces.226 Critical of the Johnson administration’s “half measures”

225 McMaster, Dereliction of Duty, 64.
226 McMaster, Dereliction of Duty; Commandant of the Marine Corps to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 24 February 1964, Archives Branch, History Division, Greene Papers, 3-6; and Walter S. Poole and Dale Andrade, Chairman in Crisis: Planning the Air War against North Vietnam, 1964, Special History Study 3 (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013), 19.
thus far, McMaster notes that Greene stressed in subsequent high-level meetings that only decisive military action would ensure victory in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{227}

Greene was purportedly equally aggressive in ensuring the Marine Corps played a major part in any U.S. military action. In early 1965, he ordered his staff at Headquarters Marine Corps in Washington, DC, to draft a list of options for U.S. military action to present to the Joint Chiefs and Johnson. Greene’s preferred course of action focused on air strikes and the establishment of six beachheads stretching “from Da Nang to the Mekong Delta, each occupied by US combat forces of appropriate size”.\textsuperscript{228} For the Da Nang beachhead, Greene suggested using a large Marine force to clear enemy presence and to secure bases there in advance of additional U.S. ground forces, which would eventually pass through and into the country’s interior to combat the main forces or NVA.\textsuperscript{229} His proposal also involved support for GVN-led pacification programmes designed to hold and improve the quality of life in the populated enclaves surrounding each beachhead following initial clearing operations.\textsuperscript{230} Greene’s aggressive attitude towards the conflict and defeating the NLF and North Vietnam would always entail both a conventional and unconventional military focus. His recommendations on how to best defeat Communism in South Vietnam were not solely products of his own predetermined strategy. Rather, they were in line with the discussion and debate between civilian and military officials on how they envisioned using Marines and U.S. forces short of activating the operation plans discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter explains these discussions and how this came to be.

\textsuperscript{227} Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense, 14 March 1964, \url{https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v01/d82}, hereafter JCSM–222–64; McMaster, \textit{Dereliction of Duty}, 64; and Poole and Andrade, \textit{Chairman in Crisis}, 6.
\textsuperscript{228} McMaster, \textit{Dereliction of Duty}, 69.
\textsuperscript{229} McMaster, \textit{Dereliction of Duty}.
\textsuperscript{230} McMaster, \textit{Dereliction of Duty}. 
The Struggle to Find the Right Military Strategy

Following a mid-February 1965 inspection tour of the military bases supporting Operations Flaming Dart I and II airstrikes, General Westmoreland’s deputy commander, Army General John L. Throckmorton, voiced his concerns about the security of these installations as well as the protection of U.S. servicemen and aircraft, citing the attacks at Bien Hoa, Pleiku, and Qui Nhon as evidence to back his concerns.\(^{231}\) Troubled by his deputy commander’s assessment, Westmoreland sought permission from Admiral Sharp to use the 9th MEB, afloat in the South China Sea since January, to secure the Da Nang airbase.\(^{232}\) In the aftermath of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents months earlier, Marines were at the top of a very short list of options should the situation reach the point of direct U.S. intervention. Westmoreland’s request to use the Marines—the second such request in three months (the first came after the Bien Hoa attack)—renewed the debate between civilian and military officials regarding the use of U.S ground forces and in what capacity they were to be used.

A veteran of the Second World War and the Korean War, Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, appreciated Westmoreland’s position. In his new role, Taylor was the first obstacle between Westmoreland’s request being approved or declined. As early as 1961, then-General Taylor urged American civilian leadership to resist directly involving U.S. ground forces in the conflict, despite cautioning them that, “if Vietnam goes, it will be exceedingly difficult if not impossible to hold Southeast Asia”.\(^{233}\) Aside from any situation warranting the activation of an operation plan, he did support, albeit tacitly, their use of the strategy centred on securing select coastal


\(^{232}\) USMACV 20 February memo; and Janicik, *Southeast Asia Force Deployment Buildup*.

areas and limited contact between U.S. ground forces and the South Vietnamese population. In a report forwarded to President Kennedy after visiting South Vietnam in October 1961, Taylor proposed several political and military actions to improve the situation there, most of which strengthened the U.S. advisory efforts. Only in the event of the advisory programme failing did he recommend using U.S. ground forces. In that event, he suggested their use focus instead on providing “a degree of assistance to SVN [South Vietnam] in regaining control of its territory and free SVN forces for offensive actions against the VC [Viet Cong]”. This option included basing U.S. ground forces at military bases in or near a select economic and population centres. Kennedy opted instead to review the advisory and assistance mission and increase the number of advisors in South Vietnam.

When Taylor accompanied Secretary McNamara to South Vietnam two years later in October 1963 to assess the advisory mission’s progress, he returned to Washington, DC, disappointed that the security situation changed little. His new recommendations to President Kennedy included a push for the South Vietnamese military to increase the operational tempo in all three corps tactical zones and to reduce the number of static defensive missions tying the ARVN to their bases. He also directed U.S. advisors to emphasise “clear and hold operations instead of terrain sweeps which have little permanent value”. Standing up hamlet militias to defend against guerrilla intimidation and attacks and was another of his recommendations. Aside from the operation plans under development, Taylor’s report marks the first mention of involving Marines in conventional military operation. According to Taylor’s report, if Kennedy decided to

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increase and expand the U.S. military commitment, he encouraged using “Marines and other U.S. ground forces against sources of aggression”.237

In the two years following the overthrow and assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem by political and military opponents, and the assassination of President Kennedy, both in November 1963, the military and political situations in South Vietnam spiraled out of control. The NLF increased its influence and popularity with the people along with its military strength, thanks in part to the assistance of North Vietnam. In January 1965, Taylor reintroduced several of his previous suggestions on using American ground forces, in addition to four alternative actions, in a memorandum to President Johnson including the results of a recent study Westmoreland’s staff produced on ways to reverse the momentum of the war. In his own assessment of the study, Taylor judged that the research explored specifically the “feasibility of stiffening the armed forces of Vietnam by introducing U.S. and possibly third country ground combat forces” as a substitute for activating U.S. and SEATO operation plans.238 As seen in the previous chapter, both the U.S. and SEATO plans earmarked Marines for use in conventional military operations.

The first of four alternatives offered by the study was for “Marine and infantry battalions under U.S. command and control to provide reserve striking forces capable of quick reaction to VC attacks and offensive operations against known VC forces and bases”.239 The second was to integrate U.S. battalions within ARVN regiments engaged in combat operations. In response to the first two courses of action, Taylor cautioned again about the dangers of involving U.S. ground forces. The third alternative offered was to establish

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237 “Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam”.
three coastal enclaves at locations such as Da Nang, Tuy Hoa and Phan Rang defended by U.S./GVN/multinational forces. The enclaves would be large enough for security of ports, airfields and local population centres. GVN force thus relieved could be available for counterinsurgency operations throughout the country. As a last resort these bridgeheads could be held by free world forces as spring boards for pacification or reconquest.\textsuperscript{240}

The problem, Taylor sensed, was the potential to revive memories of French colonialism. The fourth and final option was an increase in U.S. air and naval support. Although President Johnson chose the fourth, the first and third clearly put the Marines on the offensive and operating from coastal base areas, which General Greene and others sought to implement not just in the northern provinces but through all of South Vietnam months later.

Nonetheless, in response to Westmoreland’s March 1965 request to use the 9th MEB at Da Nang, Taylor communicated his strong reservations in committing U.S. ground forces in any role or capacity. Reversing America’s “long standing policy of avoiding commitment of ground combat forces” was not in America’s best interests.\textsuperscript{241} Taylor explained to Secretary of State David D. Rusk in a 22 February cable that this and a number of additional issues with Westmoreland’s request were his chief concerns. He added that, if Da Nang required increased protection, there was every reason to believe the airbases at Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, and Nha Trang would too.\textsuperscript{242} Additionally, an attack against an airbase or the Marines could pull the United States into a conflict it was not prepared for and actually knew very little about. The tone and purpose of his cable was not meant as a counter to Westmoreland’s request, however. In fact, Taylor did offer his support. Using Marines for security at the most vulnerable bases, he

\textsuperscript{240} Embassy telegram, January–June 1965.
\textsuperscript{242} Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 22 February 1965 found in Gravel, \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, Vol. 3, hereafter Embassy telegram, February 1965, 418.
relayed, could free up enough ARVN units to begin operations against main force units outside the bases and against the main forces held up in the rural areas and highlands. In the event of an invasion by North Vietnam or China, at least some portion of the requisite American contribution to OPLAN 32 would be in place to defend the enclaves and to mount a concerted counterattack.

Given the situation in Da Nang and the potential need to take more active measures to ensure the airbase’s security, the Marine Corps’ senior leaders were eager to take advantage of what they saw as an opportunity to gain approval to for taking more aggressive actions, if not the offensive. Proof was Taylor’s warning that the Marines were likely to contest predetermined limitations on what they could—and could not—do once ashore. Speaking from the perspective of an experienced military officer, Taylor laid out several potential outcomes he foresaw Marine leaders proposing. First, he anticipated they would want to create a security area around the airbase to keep the population at a manageable distance. To do this they were likely also to ask to engage the population as a means to ferret out guerrillas and guard against the insurgency using the villages and people as shields or as concealed positions from which mortars and rockets could be fired at the Marines’ defences and into the airbase. To prevent this, he reasoned, the Marines would emphasize the need to befriend the people.

In additional to taking aggressive actions, the Marines pushed for having enough combat units in place to take aggressive action in addition to adopting the more passive tactic of making friends, though, as the Marines demonstrated, was for the purposes of conducting spoiling attacks. Concerning this, Taylor estimated correctly that the Marines would want to “be in place

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243 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
244 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
245 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965, 419.
246 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
247 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
on ground in considerable strength”. Since hit-and-run tactics were the most-likely threat, deploying the entire brigade would not necessarily prevent such attacks unless the Marines actively pursued NLF forces. Defeating a large enemy ground attack, however, required the presence of the entire brigade, though such an attack was “extremely risky in [the] face of superior friendly air and ground fire” and, therefore, doubtful, according to Taylor. This would not deter the Marines. Even Taylor recognized so. As a precaution, he speculated, Marine leaders were certain to seek permission to actively patrol the hills and adjacent valley to provide a defence in-depth around the airbase. This, if nothing else, was a doctrinal procedure that Taylor, Westmoreland, and any experienced military official could obviously appreciate.

In closing, Taylor posited that permitting the Marines to do more than merely occupy static defensive positions at the airbase was worth exploring. Allowing them to conduct “mobile counter-VC operations has the attraction” of an active vice passive mission with “far greater appeal than that of mere static defense”. Using the Marines or any U.S. ground forces for any mission or strategy was still difficult to accept and a step in the wrong direction, Taylor argued. Unless the U.S. military policy towards South Vietnam changed, Taylor reiterated that

the only mission worth considering now for additional Marines in Danang [sic] area is to contribute to defense of base against mortar fire and ground attack. . . . Such force would strengthen defense of base and, at same time, would be [a] manageable force from [the] point of view of accommodating it on base and absorbing it into [the] Danang [sic] community. Such force with those Marines already present should remove any substantial danger of VC ground attack.

Marine leaders had plenty of support in seeking more aggressive steps in defending the airfield. Admiral Sharp in his own message to the Joint Chiefs on 24 February 1965 endorsed

248 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
249 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
250 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
251 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
252 Embassy telegram 22 February 1965.
Taylor’s recommendations and Westmoreland’s request to deploy the 9th MEB to Da Nang and encouraged the Joint Chiefs to seek permission for the brigade to enter into the security mission in conjunction with the mobile counter-guerrilla concept Taylor outlined.\textsuperscript{253} To give the brigade the a substantial offensive capability, he added that a squadron of fixed-wing aircraft earmarked in OPLAN 32-64 also deploy to Da Nang, something Lieutenant General Krulak would also press for in the months ahead.\textsuperscript{254} To this, he argued that the “vulnerability of the U.S. investment in Da Nang is as apparent to the VC/DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] as it is to us” and that only a strong mobile force, strong defence of the airfield complex, and the security of U.S. outlying installations would deter future attacks.\textsuperscript{255}

While Johnson and his civilian cabinet debated carefully the parameters of Westmoreland’s request, the Joint Chiefs discussed the adoption of a military strategy centred solely on the concept of security and whether it could achieve America’s chief strategic objective of maintaining an “independent and non-communist South Vietnam”.\textsuperscript{256} A more accurate characterisation of both discussions depended on the extent to which they were willing to involve U.S. ground forces. The concept of base security overlapped with the Joint Chiefs’ and the Johnson administration’s eagerness to punish North Vietnam for supporting the NLF, as well as its ability to infiltrate men and materiel into South Vietnam. In light of the February base attacks and North Vietnamese encroachment, Johnson’s closest advisors recommended he adopt a campaign of gradual sustained military pressure on North Vietnam to demonstrate American

\begin{footnotes}
\item[253] Telegram from Commander in Chief Pacific to Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 24, 1965 found in Gravel, \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, Vol. 3, 419.
\item[254] Telegram from Commander in Chief Pacific to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 420.
\item[255] Telegram from Commander in Chief Pacific to Joint Chiefs of Staff.
\end{footnotes}
resolve. Air strikes, the Joint Chiefs agreed unanimously, had always been the least risky option with the most support. Since 1964, the Joint Chiefs had pressed Johnson to attack high-value military and industrial targets in North Vietnam in retaliation for its support for the NLF. Up to this point, air strikes were the only option civilian and military officials could agree on.\textsuperscript{257} If the strikes neither ended the war nor brought all parties to the negotiating table, Johnson would have to reconsider his options, including the use of ground forces.

Sceptical of forcing a negotiated settlement through air strikes alone, Johnson reviewed all potential options, including the withdrawal of all U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam entirely, thus leaving the GVN to fend for itself. As part of the review, his advisors presented three courses of action and analyses of each. Withdrawal, they insisted, was the worst possible route to take and would signal America’s reluctance to stand with its allies. A wider air campaign also was an option; though Johnson already doubted he could end the war through the air alone. He did see the air campaign as a way to at least get North Vietnam to reconsider its actions and its support to the NLF. His concern was that a widened air campaign might instead solicit a reaction from China.\textsuperscript{258} Along with the introduction of U.S. ground forces, which was the third course of action offered, Johnson’s advisors added that any combination of the previous three remained a viable option.

In spite of his concerns that expanding the air campaign could provoke a Chinese response, Johnson broadened the list of targets to include those in Laos as well as those in North Vietnam. Selective targeting began on 2 March 1965 under the code name Operation Rolling Thunder.\textsuperscript{259} Johnson put his trust in the systematic destruction of North Vietnam’s industrial base and military to drive Hanoi towards a negotiated settlement and to further convince the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{257} The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 10, 148.
\bibitem{258} The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 45–65.
\bibitem{259} Schlight, The War in South Vietnam, 18.
\end{thebibliography}
insurgency that it could not win in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{260} At the same time, he trusted this decision would raise the GVN’s and South Vietnamese military’s morale.\textsuperscript{261} As for U.S. action on the ground, \textit{United States–Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967} suggests that, if nothing else, the NLF’s continued aggression in South Vietnam and North Vietnam’s resilience to Rolling Thunder fueled Johnson’s justification to escalate America’s commitment, including the use of ground forces. As for how and in what capacity, U.S. officials had yet to decide.\textsuperscript{262}

Days into the air campaign, intelligence sources confirmed that approximately 12 NLF battalions totaling roughly 6,000 main force soldiers were moving into place less than three miles from the Da Nang airbase.\textsuperscript{263} Given this new information and with Da Nang playing a central role in Rolling Thunder, Westmoreland believed an assault similar to the Bien Hoa Airbase attack was imminent. After consulting his cabinet, and upon Taylor securing approval from the GVN, Johnson approved Westmoreland’s request for the 9th MEB. Contrary to what the war’s historiography indicates, however, Johnson did not intend for the Marine deployment to signal an escalation of U.S. involvement. Rather, he ordered the Marines ashore to keep the United States out of the conflict, confident that a strategy built on security was the best option. Landing Marines, Johnson worried, might send the wrong message. In a discussion with Senator Richard Russell (D-GA), Johnson confessed: “I guess we’ve got no choice, but it scares the death out of me. I think everybody’s going to think, ‘we’re landing the Marines, we’re off to battle’”.\textsuperscript{264} Later, while talking to Secretary McNamara about the impact of landing Marines, Johnson stated: “The psychological impact [on the American people] of ‘the Marines are

\textsuperscript{260} Schlight, \textit{The War in South Vietnam}.


coming’ is going to be a bad one. . . . Every mother is going to say, ‘Uh-oh, this is it!’ And I know that what we’ve done with these [Martin] B-57s [Canberra bombers] is just going to be Sunday school stuff, compared to the Marines. . . . A Marine is a guy that’s got a dagger in his hand”.

The security mission and the decision to pursue a security strategy was a “necessary evil to meet an immediate need” and not a pretext for American ground action. Westmoreland agreed: “I saw my call for the Marines at Da Nang not as a first step in a growing American commitment but as a way to secure a vital airfield and the air units using [that] . . . airfield [are] essential to pursuing the adopted strategy”. This would not stop Westmoreland—and the Marines—from taking offensive actions or pursuing a more aggressive strategy.

**Renewed Focus on the Enclaves and on Offensive Operations**

On 17 March, a little more than a week after the 9th MEB settled into its defensive positions and the security mission at Da Nang, Westmoreland requested the brigade’s third battalion for an identical mission to defend and protect the military airfield and secret radar site located in the Phu Bai enclave. Ambassador Taylor agreed with his request. The call for more Marines coincided with the growing interest to deploy additional ground forces as part of a more active approach to reverse the deteriorating situation. This renewed interest was the product of two documents: Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson’s “Report on the Survey of the

268 The 9th MEB consisted of three battalion landing teams. The March landing involved only two of its three battalions; one from amphibious ships in the South China Sea and the other flown in from Okinawa. The third remained on board amphibious ships as the operational reserve. See Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 9–15.
Military Situation in Vietnam” and General Westmoreland’s “Commander’s Estimate of the Situation in South Vietnam”.

General Johnson’s report followed President Johnson’s order for him to visit South Vietnam to get a first-hand look at the situation there and, according to General Johnson’s recollections, to “get things bubbling”. Upon his return, General Johnson offered 21 specific actions the United States might take to help the GVN regain the initiative. Concerned primarily with undermanned ARVN units and their use, Johnson suggested using U.S. ground forces for two specific missions, both of which were in line with the tasks related to OPLAN 32-64 and the continuing discussions on the security strategy. The first proposal, in addition to keeping the Marines at Da Nang, was for a U.S. division to secure the coastal enclaves and airbases at Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, Qui Nhon, and Nha Trang and at the base at Pleiku in the central highlands. The benefit of securing the enclave and airbases in these locations was it was similar to Taylor’s reason for deploying Marines to Da Nang as it freed ARVN units for offensive operations in the countryside. It also matched what Westmoreland and his staff foresaw as the only real current option and a way to get ground forces in position should President Johnson elected to escalate American involvement. According to a 1968 study on the buildup of U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam by E.C. Janicik, Westmoreland outlined an enclave concept as the only alternative open under the circumstances and as a prerequisite to any future courses of action when conditions warranted. Envisioned was the establishment of a series of well-defended strong points, each with seaport and airfield accessibility, located in areas along the coast that offered

269 Gen Harold K. Johnson, Report on the Survey of the Military Situation in Vietnam, 14 March 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL), National Security Files (NSF), Vietnam Country File (VCF), Austin, TX, hereafter Chief of Staff memo to Secretary of Defense; and Gen William C. Westmoreland, Commander’s Estimate of the Situation in South Vietnam, 26 March 1965, LBJL, Westmoreland Papers, Austin, TX, hereafter Westmoreland’s Estimate; and Cosmas, MACV.


271 Chief of Staff memo to Secretary of Defense; and The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 161–63.

272 Chief of Staff memo to Secretary of Defense, 11.
the best prospects of maintaining U.S. military presence indefinitely and from which the offensive might later be regained. The concept presupposed large numbers of U.S., and possibly, Allied troops to hold and build up these bases.\textsuperscript{273}

A second option was deploying the same size force to the central highlands in Kon Tum, Darlac, and Pleiku ahead of the anticipated NLF offensive there.\textsuperscript{274} The advantage of doing this was that it not only provided greater security at the bases but made U.S. ground forces available for operations in the highlands to counter the offensive. The third option Johnson recommended was to build a combined ground force of U.S.-Free World Forces (FWF) that had been agreed to by SEATO to aid in interdicting Communist infiltration routes in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{275} U.S. forces of up to a division would join three FWF divisions to man and patrol a defensive belt running the length of the 17th parallel through to Savannakhet, Laos, and south by southeast along the Mekong River.\textsuperscript{276}

While awaiting a decision on his request for the third battalion of Marines, Westmoreland drafted his own appraisal of the situation with recommendations for future U.S. action. The immediate problem, he sensed, would continue to be security at airbases in the coastal areas due partly to the ARVN’s ineffectiveness and the restrictions levied upon the Marines by the GVN and the Joint Chiefs. From an intelligence perspective, the military situation was far worse than most thought. In the northern provinces, the NLF “succeeded in erasing the pacification gains made by the GVN prior to mid-1964”.\textsuperscript{277} American and South Vietnamese intelligence estimated

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\item \textsuperscript{273} USMACV Command History, 1965 (Alexandria, VA: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff 1965), 421–22; and Janicik, \textit{Southeast Asia Force Deployment Buildup}, 43.
\item \textsuperscript{274} Chief of Staff memo to Secretary of Defense, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{275} Free World Forces (FWF) consisted of military units from Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, and Spain. SEATO was an international organisation formed in 1954 and designed to counter and block the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia.
\item \textsuperscript{276} Chief of Staff memo to Secretary of Defense, 11; and Sorley, \textit{Honorable Warrior}, 197–200.
\item \textsuperscript{277} Westmoreland’s Estimate, 1.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
upwards of 25,000 guerrilla and main force combatants were ready to attack.\textsuperscript{278} Enemy force levels in other parts of the country were identical, particularly in the central highlands, where Westmoreland judged the ARVN to be “reluctant to engage in offensive operations”.\textsuperscript{279} His grim estimate continued.

The ARVN’s short-lived tactical successes plagued the American advisory effort struggling to professionalise it amidst the growing insurgency. Complicating the problem was the logistic pipeline stretching deep into North Vietnam, enabling the insurgency to fight more like a conventional army and less like traditional guerrillas. As for the future, the NLF held the initiative and was reinforcing existing units, in addition to building new ones, while at the same time “regrouping the main forces into larger formations” for future offensives.\textsuperscript{280} Westmoreland believed the NLF’s main forces would try to pull the ARVN out of the enclaves and into the countryside to destroy them, while the regional and local guerrilla forces reasserted their dominance in the coastal villages. He believed the potential to turn the war around remained a possibility, citing the deployment of the 9th MEB to Da Nang and potentially to Phu Bai as steps in the right direction. Real progress could only come with the deployment of more ground forces “for identical purposes” or to “prevent a collapse in some particular area at a critical time”.\textsuperscript{281} In addition, Westmoreland believed the time was right to discuss a more permanent and active military strategy. In the interim, he was confident the air campaign could achieve at least some of what President Johnson sought, which was to punish North Vietnam for its “supply and support of the insurgency” and lead to the “cessation of offensive operations” against the ARVN.\textsuperscript{282} The

\textsuperscript{279} Westmoreland’s Estimate, 1.
\textsuperscript{280} Westmoreland’s Estimate, 3.
\textsuperscript{281} Westmoreland’s Estimate, 7.
\textsuperscript{282} Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, Vol. 3, 463; and Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 145.
air campaign, he did not envision, would end the war. Only U.S. ground forces, Westmoreland emphasised, “together with basic bombing strategy”, could establish “the basis for ultimate victory”.  

With the Marines’ security mission at Da Nang underway, Taylor returned his attention to the enclaves. For obvious political, military, and economic reasons, the enclaves were still of vital importance. How to prevent them from falling to the NLF without the Marines or other American ground forces taking on the brunt of the fighting and casualties was not as obvious. Taylor insisted there was a way. Critical of both Generals Johnson and Westmoreland’s recommendations to commit additional American ground forces, Taylor reasoned that, if presented the option, he would side with any plan restricting ground forces to defending the coastal areas and the bases in and around Saigon, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, Da Nang, and Phu Bai. The idea appealed to Taylor mostly because it limited America’s direct involvement and the potential for casualties, but he offered Westmoreland several secure locations from which U.S. forces could quickly withdrawal if the political and military situations became untenable.

Taylor did question the validity of General Johnson’s highland option in a cable to Secretary Rusk on 17 March, even though he had come to the realisation that almost any option would include putting American ground forces in South Vietnam. His final assessment was that an enclave concept, though “simpler”, was also “less productive than the inland mission” Johnson recommended. The inland mission, Taylor went to explain, was “clearly the more ambitious” as well as “the more exposed” option and “permits one to entertain the possibility of a kind of Dien Bien Phu if the coastal provinces collapse and our forces were cut off from the

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283 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
coast except by air”.\textsuperscript{285} In contrast, he added, an enclave concept executed properly contributed more to the security and stability of the Da Nang area, which he saw as a higher priority at the time.

\textbf{The Marines Side with an Offensive Option}

If the Marine Corps opposed deploying forces to South Vietnam for conventional military operations, the leadership passed on its best opportunity to voice opposition in late March. In a follow-up cable to Rusk on 27 March, Taylor stressed the need for President Johnson to make his decision on a military strategy. In hopes of speeding up the process, he proposed four specific alternatives to General Johnson’s recommendations. The recommendations included a defensive and an offensive enclave concept, a territorial clear-and-hold strategy, and a mobile strike/general reserve mission. In a conversation with Lieutenant General Krulak in Hawaii a day later, Taylor explained the same alternative options in specific detail. On orders from Greene, Krulak was to inquire whether or not Taylor could get the entire brigade ashore in Da Nang along with a Marine fixed-wing attack aircraft squadron for defence of the airbase and for offensive operations. According to a secret “Marine Corps eyes only” message to Greene later that day, with a positive tone Krulak describes his conversation with Taylor, including the ambassador’s intention to ask for more American ground forces to cut into the falling ARVN-NLF force ratio. The clear indication was that Krulak assessed his conversation with Taylor represented a promising opportunity to get Marines involved in the fighting.

Troubled by ARVN casualties in the northern provinces, unless the United States took on more offensive responsibilities, the ratio would continue to fall in favour of the NLF. Taylor’s first solution was to activate a portion or all of OPLAN 32-64 and 200,000 U.S. personnel, which

\textsuperscript{285} Gravel, \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, Vol. 3, 58.
required justification that neither he nor President Johnson had. He did, however, raise other options. With enough support, Taylor envisioned using between 9 and 12 infantry battalions for one of four missions: to defend a series of coastal enclaves similar to the 9th MEB mission in Da Nang; to conduct offensive operations from the enclaves to help destroy fixed NLF targets; to deploy territorial clearing and pacification operations; or to use Marines in on-call air-mobile strike operations as a reserve force for ARVN offensive operations.

Krulak expounded on Taylor’s analysis of each option. The “defensive enclave concept” he spoke of was nothing more than what the Marines were already doing in Da Nang, which was to provide a token presence. It did, however, keep the Marines out of “guerrilla chasing, holds down U.S. losses, and avoids difficulties with the population”. The “offensive enclave scheme”, as Taylor described it, “orients on a secure base area, provides offensive opportunities, and although it would involve more U.S. casualties, avoids the problems of having to find the enemy”. The territorial pacification option gave the Marines unimpeded freedom of action, but also put them in the position to have to discriminate between a guerrilla and the average South Vietnamese citizen, of which Taylor had serious concerns they could do with any real accuracy. It required also extensive coordination with the GVN and ARVN, as well as securing lengthier interior lines of communication. Mobile strike operations, which the ARVN general reserve was conducting at the time, allowed the Marines to choose their targets and the time to attack. This option relied on ARVN intelligence and the risk of compromise by South Vietnamese soldiers sympathetic to the NLF’s cause.

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286 “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”, 29 March 1965, Krulak Papers, Archives Branch, History Division, 1.
287 “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”, 1–2.
288 “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”, 2.
289 “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”.
290 “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”.
291 “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”.
Taylor submitted to Krulak that the best option, for the Marine Corps, was the offensive concept because it allowed them to use the secure enclaves as anchor points. He recommended that the Marines avoid contact with the population and not remain in the remote interior or “back country” for extended periods.\textsuperscript{292} Krulak did not object. In his message to Greene, Krulak added that Taylor wanted to see the Marines apply the offensive concept in Da Nang and Phu Bai as a proof of concept first. If the experiment worked, he and Westmoreland would recommend to President Johnson that he allow them to extend the concept to other points on the coast, such as Qui Nhon and Vung Tau.

Seizing upon the opportunity, Krulak voiced his support for the offensive concept by offering to Greene that it made “good sense” for the Marines to take on this type of mission, particularly if Taylor was successful in getting the entire brigade and the fixed-wing squadron to Da Nang.\textsuperscript{293} Taylor reiterated his views at a National Security Council (NSC) meeting in Washington, DC, less than a week later, raising the prospects of a new strategy and the Marines’ involvement in operations against the main forces. Greene, fully aware of the impending meeting, made no effort to change Taylor’s mind or offer anything contrary to the offensive enclave concept.

On 1 April, President Johnson met with his NSC to discuss the situation in South Vietnam. Normally an important meeting to offer future courses of action, this particular gathering served merely to provide details to support Johnson’s decision. Under no illusions that Operation Rolling Thunder was achieving the desired result, Johnson explained that the time had come for American ground forces to take a more active role in South Vietnam. What that meant exactly would be left to Taylor and Westmoreland. Taylor again offered his endorsement of

\textsuperscript{292} “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”, 3.
\textsuperscript{293} “Secret Message from Krulak to Greene”.

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securing a series of protected enclaves—namely Chu Lai, Qui Nhon, Na Trang, Cam Ranh Bay, Vung Tau, Bien Hoa, and Saigon—to demonstrate to the Communists the extent of America’s resolve by using U.S. military power to contribute to the GVN and the ARVN’s efforts to retake the volatile countryside, all with the least possible loss of U.S. lives. From these particular locations, U.S. ground units could engage enemy forces offensively, if need be. Johnson’s top civilian advisors agreed that these particular areas were critical to South Vietnam’s future because of their long-term economic value; the Joint Chiefs viewed them as a necessary part of any American military effort.\textsuperscript{294} Johnson listened intently and suggested that Westmoreland take a closer look at Taylor’s recommendation as a way to “experiment prudently with United States forces in an offensive role”.\textsuperscript{295}

Upon receiving additional advice from his cabinet, Johnson announced on 6 April a series of expanded yet restrictive measures he wanted put into action immediately. Codified in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 328, he authorised the deployment of the 20,000 logistics and support personnel Westmoreland requested to meet the new demands placed on the advise-and-assist mission running, as well as to preempt any potential future courses of actions involving American ground forces and a change in their mission and the overall U.S. military strategy.\textsuperscript{296} Most important was Johnson’s endorsement of the plan to add two additional Marine battalions, a helicopter squadron, and the fixed-wing aircraft squadron, all of which Greene and Krulak wanted shortly after the March landing. This increase served two specific purposes. The first was to reinforce security at Da Nang and the Phu Bai airfields and, by extension, the enclaves. Second, it also permitted the Marines’ “more active use” in support of the offensive

\textsuperscript{295} Davidson, Vietnam at War, 346.
\textsuperscript{296} President Lyndon B. Johnson memo to the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Director of Central Intelligence, 6 April 1965, National Security Action Memorandum 328, LBJL Archives.
enclave concept. These were obviously welcome changes for Marine Corps leaders in Washington, DC, and in Da Nang as they offered no opposition.297

Although not spelled out in NSAM 328, Johnson approved the offensive enclave concept as an experiment.298 Although convinced the time was right for a change and for reasons unknown, he balked at giving his full endorsement, which gave the Marines an opportunity to shape and determine exactly what the concept should entail and how the war in the northern provinces and, potentially, all of South Vietnam should be run. Despite his approval, Johnson did not intend for American ground forces to take over the war. They were, however, to take greater initiative in securing the base areas and denying the insurgency access to the population, while at the same time providing the ARVN timely assistance during operations in the countryside. Johnson expected South Vietnamese forces would continue prosecuting the war against the NLF and absorbing the brunt of the casualties.

Westmoreland, despite his close relationship with Taylor, opposed any type of enclave concept. Concerned mostly with the ARVN being unable to stand firm in the rural areas and mountains, Westmoreland judged that under such a plan the ARVN “would be defeated and driven into the United States enclaves or destroyed and scattered”.299 Within months, he envisioned American ground units “surrounded in static defensive positions, subject to artillery fire and to massed attacks” by the main forces and, eventually, the NVA.300 Moreover, he worried that U.S. military personnel operating in too close a proximity to the South Vietnamese people for an extended period might exacerbate an already tense situation, which was something the French experienced during the First Indochina War (1946-54). In the end, Westmoreland

297 NSAM 328.
298 NSAM 328; and Cosmas, The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 272–74.
299 Davidson, Vietnam at War, 346.
300 Davidson, Vietnam at War.
judged that any strategy focused on the enclaves would render the American mission in South Vietnam vulnerable and do little to alleviate the country’s security problems.

With the countryside and border areas firmly under the NLF’s control, Westmoreland assessed that the Communists were preparing for all-out offensive against the ARVN in hopes of triggering the GVN’s final collapse. An enclave concept, he worried, would surrender the initiative to the NLF and do nothing to stop an insurgency “ready to move into Mao Tse-Tung’s Phase Three, the big unit war”, meaning the insurgency, after seizing control of the rural population and countryside, shifts focus from the people to achieving the decisive military defeat of a weakened adversarial government and its army. To save South Vietnam, he reasoned it was time the United States put its “own finger in the dike”. That meant shifting American combat units from a limited defensive posture around the bases to taking over the fight against the main forces and, potentially, the NVA.

The Marine Corps did not share Westmoreland’s conclusion that a concept or strategy centred on the enclaves meant settling for an exclusively static defensive strategy. Nor did they see it precluding U.S. forces from moving beyond the enclaves, particularly to engage conventional enemy forces threatening to attack the base areas. Although the Marines realised the danger the main forces—and the NVA—posed, they believed the war for the enclaves had to be won first. They were not alone in their thinking. The previous chapter demonstrated how military planners at the highest levels viewed the enclaves as being important enough that the opening

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301 Frank E. Vandiver, *Shadows of Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson’s Wars* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 99. China’s Mao Tse-Tung’s armed revolutionary struggle consisted of three phases: phase one was the organisation, consolidation, and preservation of base areas, usually in difficult and isolated terrain; phase two was a progressive expansion by terror and attacks on isolated enemy units to obtain arms, supplies, and political support; and the third and final phase was the destruction of large enemy formations in conventional battles. See Pike, *Viet Cong*, 36–40; and Mao Tse-tung, *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger, 1962), 21–22. North Vietnam and the NLF employed a variation of Mao’s theory called the Dau Tranh, which relies more on a people’s war concept or the mobilisation of all persons and families as part of the total war effort. See Pike, *Viet Cong*, 85–92.

phase of every operation plan developed between 1955 and 1964 involved U.S. forces clearing and securing these areas before moving inland.

Regardless of whether he saw any near- or long-term benefit in adopting an offensive enclave concept, Westmoreland accepted it for the time being. On 7 April, Westmoreland issued “Letter of Instructions, Expansion of the MEB Mission to Include Counterinsurgency Combat Operations” directing Brigadier General Frederick J. Karch to expand the 9th MEB’s mission beyond the “static defense of Da Nang”. Specifically, he was to “undertake in accordance with RVN [South Vietnam] I Corps, an intensifying program of offensive operations to fix and destroy the VC [Vietcong] in the general Da Nang area undertake offensive action as necessary” in support of South Vietnamese forces and “against VC and PAVN units”. Westmoreland’s intent was for the Marines to implement his instructions in three phases. In the first phase, the brigade would assume control of the high ground around Hue-Phu Bai airfield to detect and prevent enemy attacks much the same way the Marines were doing in Da Nang. At Da Nang, the Marines were to “undertake aggressive patrolling”. In the second phase, he wanted the Marines to “establish a deep reconnaissance system in to enemy avenues of approach to Da Nang” and to be “prepared to conduct offensive actions as a mobile reaction force within a 50-mile radius of Da Nang” in coordination with the ARVN and as part of the overall defence of enclave. In the third and final phase, the Marines were to expand their offensive actions against the enemy to include the “whole of the ICTZ [I Corps Tactical Zone]”.

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304 MEB Letter of Instructions, 1.
305 MEB Letter of Instructions, 2.
306 MEB Letter of Instructions.
Before the Marines could even begin to implement the enclave concept, Admiral Sharp held a planning conference in Hawaii during 9–11 April 1965. Based on the recommendation Westmoreland made in his March estimate and in more recent calls for more active use of U.S. ground forces, Sharp agreed to pursue additional forces. In a 12 April meeting with his national security team and the Joint Chiefs, Johnson approved the deployment of the U.S. Army’s 173d Airborne Brigade for tasks identical to the Marines at Da Nang and Phu Bai. Concerned that Johnson and Westmoreland were too eager to get U.S. ground forces in action, Taylor protested the deployment, arguing that “if the Marines demonstrate effectiveness in operating out of Danang”, only then would additional U.S. ground force establish “other offensive enclaves”.307 After the war, Taylor commented that, once Johnson authorised Westmoreland to commit the Marines, he was “anxious to get quick results”.308 General Greene, however, was not bothered by the changes. Upon returning from a command visit to Da Nang that same month, he voiced his support, explaining to a pool of journalists that “you can’t defend a place like that by sitting on your ditty box. You got to get out and aggressively patrol. The one thing I emphasized to them [the Marines] while I was out there was to find these Vietcong and kill them”.309

Phasing in the Offensive Enclave Concept

A week after Johnson approved the additional forces, Westmoreland forwarded to the Joint Chiefs his plan for implementing the offensive enclave concept. His plan, which had been approved by the Joint Chiefs and Secretary McNamara within days of receiving it, provided Marines the flexibility to use conventional and unconventional means with the conditions on the

ground determining the end of one phase and the beginning of another. The phases and tasks entailed:

Phase I – Secure bases by establishing coastal enclaves on the coast of SVN; improve the coastal enclaves.
Phase II – Conduct operations from the enclaves.
Phase III – Secure U.S. inland bases and areas.
Phase IV – Occupy and improve inland bases and conduct operations from them to extend areas of control.\(^3\)

In addition to the construct outlined above, Westmoreland directed that the Marines open a third beachhead. Intending to establish one 50 miles south of Da Nang at the Chu Lai enclave, the requirement to secure and defend Phu Bai depleted the 9th MEB’s available battalions. In light of that requirement and the one to undertake offensive actions, General Greene argued for an increase in the number of Marines in South Vietnam. To resolve these issues and NSAM 328, among other things, Johnson asked that McNamara and Army General Earle G. Wheeler meet with Sharp and Westmoreland. At the 20 April meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii, reports of the NVA’s stepped-up infiltration of full combat units and equipment into the northern provinces and central highlands through the Ho Chi Minh trail network and along South Vietnam’s porous coast by way of the South China Sea led the discussion. These reports were cause for alarm, as existing operation and contingency plans identified large infiltrations as the types of actions requiring a full American military response.\(^4\) The result of the meeting was to add another 42,000 personnel on top of those identified in the deployment order supporting NSAM 328, including a second brigade to open the Chua Lai beachhead totaling another 5,000 Marines.\(^5\)

\(^3\) The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 230; and Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, Vol. 3, 58; Janicik, Southeast Asia Force Deployment Buildup, Part 1, 65; and Commander-in-Chief, Pacific message to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 18 April 1965, Krulak Papers, Box 2, Archives Branch, History Division, 3.


\(^5\) The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 231; and Operations of III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March-September 1965, 29–30. The request for 5,000 additional Marines originated on 17 March by Gen Westmoreland. Approved by the JCS on 25 March, Secretary McNamara forwarded it to President Johnson for
With Johnson’s approval, Westmoreland opened beachheads at Quin Nhon, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh Bay, Vung Tau, and Bien Hoa as well.

**Seeking a Balance**

Given the military and political situations in the northern provinces, Greene and Krulak were well aware of the need to create security to pacify and, conversely, to pacify to create security. With Dien Bien Phu fresh in their minds, Greene and Krulak supported, in principal, Westmoreland’s phasing construct as it alleviated their concerns of being separated from the secure beachheads and naval logistics and fire support. Their vision of implementing these phases and the Army’s differed in that the Marines viewed pacification (and civic actions) as part of their daily operations with an eye towards developing intelligence on the main forces. Chapters 5 through 8 explain how the Marines implement these phases in greater detail and against opposition from the main forces and NVA. The Army, however, saw their part in implementing the strategy was to form a shield or screen behind which the ARVN would improve the enclaves and villages. Army field commanders, with Westmoreland’s clear encouragement, wanted to take back the initiative and force more conventional engagements. These subtle, but important, differences set in motion the divide between the Army and Marine Corps lasting long after the war’s end.

The perception that the Marine Corps leadership favoured pacification existed in the minds of Westmoreland and most of his Army staff and field commanders long before Johnson approved the enclave concept. This would not change in the aftermath of Westmoreland abandoning it, which subsequent chapters of this thesis will demonstrate. Although the

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313 Brownlee and Mullen III, *Changing an Army*.
perception of the Marines was more or less accurate, the agreement between the United States and the GVN, leading to the 9th MEB’s deployment to Da Nang, had more to do with this than the Marines emphasis on not leaving the people out of the concept. The new counterinsurgency combat mission spelled out by Westmoreland gave the brigade even greater flexibility to seek a balance in the application of the concept. Like everything else, the Marine Corps believed the balancing act had to begin on the coast.

In keeping with their naval traditions and their concept of an expanding beachhead, General Greene explained that the Marines intended to increase their presence the full length of the coastal plain first before entering into the countryside, eventually bringing the enclaves together to form a “single force beachhead” within a “secure amphibious enclave”. Their expanding beachhead model reflected their vision to resolve the entire problem confronting the northern provinces and that their thinking “treated the whole patient”, not just the symptoms. Due to the nature of the conflict, it was necessary to secure and improve the enclaves first by gaining a foothold and building combat power ashore—and presence—among the people before directly engaging the insurgency. The Marines stressed first the importance of understanding the geography’s influence on operations. Isolating the coastal plain and cutting off sea and land infiltration routes connecting North Vietnam and South Vietnam before establishing the beachheads in the largest enclaves were important initial actions. Only then could the Marines begin building combat power and turning their attention directly to the people and the insurgency. Doing so required the Marines to clear the NLF from their coastal sanctuaries,

314 CMC Update on Situation in Vietnam, May 1965, Wallace M. Greene Papers (3093), Box 2, Archives Branch, History Division, Quantico, VA.
315 Krulak letter to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, 9 May 1966, Krulak Papers, Archives Branch, History Division, Quantico, VA; and Shulimson, An Expanding War, 14.
balancing small unit actions, pacification activities, and large unit operations, which included amphibious landings at locations General Greene described as “key points along the coast”.  

Figure 3: NVA Sea and Land Infiltration Routes and Main Force and NVA Base Areas

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316 Amphibious operations conducted by Marines assigned to the Seventh Fleet’s Special Landing Force (SLF) and by Marine units already ashore under III MAF were critical to the success of the enclave strategy. See Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 14. Subsequent chapters in this thesis examine the role of the SLF and amphibious operations in greater detail.
Holding and improving the enclaves were critical for the transition from Phase I to Phase II. Until local governance made good on implementing and enforcing social and land reforms, and until the ARVN and police forces matured to the point of assuming the lead security role, the Marines believed they would have to take on this time- and resource-consuming initiative. This also included improving the population’s quality of life through medical and educational programmes or even relocating some from the enemy-controlled countryside to relatively safer coastal areas to ease restrictions on manoeuver and firepower and to reduce the potential for civilian casualties. Krulak, among others, lacked confidence in the GVN or ARVN’s ability to care for their own. In a letter to Greene in September 1965, Krulak explained to Greene why the Marines would have to assume a larger role, at least initially, in pacification, which, to Krulak, was a product of cultural understanding. Of the GVN and ARVN, he wrote:

Being Asians themselves, they are not instinctively sympathetic to the needs and wants of the people, nor can they—even if they try—live down the past reputation which they have earned with the people of being insensate and brutal. The fact is, we are better at pacification than they are, because our instinctive standards are higher.\textsuperscript{317}

Stage IV included an increase in large unit operations against the main forces and, potentially, the NVA. Operations were contingent upon receiving good intelligence. Success ultimately set the conditions for Phase III. At this point, Marines would establish and occupy inland bases and posture for Phase IV. In this final turn, the Marines would continue expanding the amphibious enclave through large unit operations from these bases and from amphibious ships. Reducing the insurgency in the northern provinces to a manageable level and pushing the NVA out would allow the Marines to transition full security responsibility of the provinces to the

\textsuperscript{317} Message from Krulak to Greene, 18 September 1965, Greene Papers (Box 3093), Box 3, Archives Branch, History Division, Quantico, VA.
South Vietnamese armed forces’ control and put the Marines in an overwatch or response posture vice in the lead, which was the original intent in 1965.

To understand why Westmoreland and military historians connected pacification with the enclave concept, one need not look any further than the many statements made by Greene, Krulak, and Walt between 1965 and 1967 concerning pacification, attrition, and the military strategy for South Vietnam in general. On the surface, their statements portrayed a bias towards pacification and an aversion to attrition. As explained earlier, this study exposes attrition as part of their thinking in the sense that it carried equal weight when implementing the enclave strategy and was necessary for pacification to take hold. In almost every instance where Greene, Krulak, and Walt made a statement about pacification, they rarely, if ever, dismissed attrition other than to refute it as the sole means to winning the war.

As early as 1964, Greene, though a firm advocate for aggressive action in South Vietnam as well as against North Vietnam, was equally in favour of a strategy inclusive of the people with pacification being the principle vehicle for winning the war. From “the very first, even before the first Marine battalion had landed in Da Nang”, Greene recalled that “my feeling, a very strong one which I voiced to the Joint Chiefs, was that the real target in Vietnam were not the VC and the North Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese people”.318 Michael Hennessy notes in Strategy in Vietnam that Greene insisted during an exchange with President Johnson in the summer of 1965 that Westmoreland’s plan to “find’m, fix’m and destroy’m” would eventually prove to be an insufficient approach to strategy if that was all U.S. forces were to do.319

During his many visits to South Vietnam, Greene came to realise that no single focus of effort could ensure success. Quick to point out that securing the coastal enclave was a start, he

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318 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 46–47.
319 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 75.
never stated that attrition did not have a valid place in securing them or within the U.S. military strategy. He did, however, offer that “Westmoreland’s shield should have been established on the perimetre of secured areas” instead of the countryside. He added that U.S. forces should have put more “effort devoted to bringing the people into the national fold” and to protecting the hamlets and villages. There was a balance to achieving both simultaneously. On the one hand, Greene assessed, “you could kill all of the PAVN and VC [Viet Cong] in the south and still lose the war” if that was the strategy. On the other, he acknowledged that attrition and engaging the main forces and NVA had its place. Historian J. Robert Moskin notes that, during a visit to Da Nang in June 1965, Greene responded sharply to a reporter’s question on the Marines’ mission in South Vietnam with “to kill Viet Cong”. This perspective was not new to the Marines. Two months earlier, after President Johnson lifted the restrictions preventing the Marines from being more active in their defence of the Da Nang and Phu Bai airbases, Greene boasted that he told the Marines after their first major operation against the NLF that “the one job I want them to do is to find Viet Cong and kill them”. He added that “we’re suffering casualties but we’re going to be dealing out more. We’re fighting a war here now. We’re off to a good start”.

The comments made by Krulak convinced Westmoreland that pacification was foremost on the minds of the Marine Corps’ leadership. Historians such as Boot and Sheehan, both of whom seem to commend the maverick Marine for his candidness and stern temperament towards Westmoreland’s strategy and approach, often refer to him as the Marine Corps’ spokesman for pacification and attrition antagonist. After all, at the height of the U.S. buildup in 1965, Krulak

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320 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 253.
321 Shulimson, An Expanding War.
322 Buzzanco, Masters of War, 250.
325 “Marines on the Move in Vietnam”.
326 See Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie; and Boot, Savage Wars of Peace.
declared “the Vietnamese people are the prize”, and set out to make certain that everyone who 
would listen understood how important pacification was and how little the Marines benefitted 
from attrition.\textsuperscript{327} A strategy that did not include the people and their loyalty, but focused solely 
on the main forces and NVA, Krulak professed, “promised nothing but a protracted, strength-
sapping battle with a small likelihood of a successful outcome”.\textsuperscript{328} Instead he petitioned for U.S. 
forces to “neutralize the subversion and comb the guerrillas out of the people’s lives. And then 
we must protect the people, surely and continuously, in order that they may establish a strong 
society”.\textsuperscript{329}

Throughout the war Krulak wrote appraisals, journal articles, and event sent letters to 
high-ranking U.S. civilian and military officials encouraging them to put the full weight of U.S. 
resources into pacification while at the same denouncing attrition as a measure of success or a 
separate strategy. What is seldom found in the historiography is that with many of his comments 
in support of pacification and condemnation of attrition came with the caveat that, when 
necessary and if the conditions were right, the Marines would freely engage the main forces and 
NVA in battle and that doing so was a part of the enclave strategy and balanced approach. 
Seldom did he express his views on pacification without linking it with attrition or that, to make 
pacification work, engaging the main forces and NVA was necessary and likely unavoidable. For 
example, in \textit{First to Fight}, Krulak described the war and the Marines’ strategy and approach as a 
“painstaking, exhausting and sometimes bloody process of bringing peace, prosperity, and health 
to a gradually expanding area”.\textsuperscript{330} In his appraisal of the U.S. strategy in 1965, he kept alive the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Krulak, “A Strategic Appraisal: Vietnam”, 12.
\item Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 221–26.
\item Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 186.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
option of involving attrition in the Marine Corps approach to strategy by insisting that “attrition alone” would not guarantee success in South Vietnam.\(^\text{331}\)

Like Greene and Krulak, Walt was supportive of pacification, but recognised that attrition was also necessary. Balancing the two was his greatest challenge as the tactical commander of all Marine forces in South Vietnam. Following his arrival in Da Nang to assumed command of III MAF in early May 1965, General Walt was unsure as to where and how his Marines should focus their attention and resources.\(^\text{332}\) Admitting that he knew very little about the people or the country, he did observe that the villages not far from the fence separating the Marines from the population was sure to play a big part in defending the airbase, as would the Marines’ relationship with the people. Walt’s observations on defending the airbase and nothing more, highlighted his realisation the Marines were now “into the pacification business”.\(^\text{333}\)

Walt’s book recounting the two years he spent leading Marines in South Vietnam speaks directly to the kind of war he believed the Marines were fighting. In *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, he explained the rationale behind his emphasis to take the appropriate steps to show “tolerance, sympathy, and kindness” towards the people and that U.S. forces were there to provide and improve upon the basic essentials of security.\(^\text{334}\) Hennessy portrays Walt’s thinking towards pacification as an example of the indirect approach and that pacification “was not


\(^{332}\) On 6 May 1965, advisors to the JCS sent a message to the USMACV staff urging them to approach General Westmoreland on reconsidering the unit designation of the Marine component command in South Vietnam. At the same time JCS advisors asked General Wallace Greene to consider the same. The issue was the potential for designation to not be regarded fondly by South Vietnamese who remembered the French Expeditionary Corps of the First Indo-China War (1946-1954). Days later, after consulting with LtGen Krulak, Greene approved the unit designation change from the “III Marine Expeditionary Force” to the “III Marine Amphibious Force”. Some of the document referenced in this study, however, do not reflect this designation change in their titles. See Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 36; Millet, *Semper Fidelis*, 565; and Edwin Simmons, “Amphibious becomes Expeditionary”, *Fortitudine*, Spring-Summer 1988, 3.


adopted by the Marines as an end in itself but was rather a means to an end—airfield security”. He concluded that Walt saw clearly that “security of installations and lines of communication remained the primary impetus for Marine Corps pacification efforts”. The assumption that could then be made was that Walt’s focus beyond the airfield was the conventional threat. His own personal experiences failed to convince him otherwise.

Two decades earlier, in 1942, Walt (then a major) found himself in a very similar situation when, as a battalion commander, he and his Marines were responsible for defending the outskirts of Henderson Field from attack by Japanese forces on the island of Guadalcanal. From September to December 1942, Walt and his Marines were successful in preventing the airfield from falling into Japanese hands because of their patience and willingness to develop intelligence on enemy intentions and movements. This was the case in South Vietnam as well. According to Otto Lehrack, author of The First Battle: Operation Starlite and the Beginning of the Blood Debt in Vietnam, when confronted with the option of either defending the Marine combat base at Chu Lai in August 1965 against an NLF main force regiment massing to the south or going on the offensive, Walt elected to seize the initiative “by carrying the fight to the enemy”. Although pacification was important in Walt’s mind, so was attrition of the enemy.

Reconciling the Advantages and Disadvantages of the Enclave Concept

From a strategic perspective, the enclave concept took on a different meaning based on the context and perspectives of its opponents and proponents. Concerning American efforts in Southeast Asia and the broader commitment of U.S. forces in Indochina to stop the spread of

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335 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 69.
Communism, it demonstrated the United States was now on the strategic offensive as a counter to the “Domino Theory”.\textsuperscript{338} Specific to South Vietnam, the concept was more an operational defensive as it safeguarded and protected key population and economic centres from Communist influence and attack. At the tactical level, where so many wars are won and lost, it is not hard to see why some perceived it as defensive since, like the air campaign, the enclave concept was slow to produce immediate tangible results.

As mentioned previously, Greene advocated for operating in and from the enclaves. With this guidance, planners at Headquarters Marine Corps responsible for carving out a Service-specific part in any strategy envisioned Marines establishing new beachheads as well as reinforcing existing coastal bases before conducting operations from them. From Greene’s perspective, an enclave concept provided the Marines several distinct operational advantages. First, it limited the NLF’s access to the population and disrupted the flow of materiel support (e.g., recruits, food, and water) the insurgency needed to subsist and survive. Second, he believed the resultant increase in security acted as stepping stones to mending the relationship between the people and the GVN and improving the average citizens’ quality of life, which would drive a wedge between people and the insurgency. To capitalise on this inherent divide, he anticipated the Marines using its relationship with the people to gain information on the NLF and its main forces, in particular, to improve their targeting in clearing operations as they expanding their presence the length of the coast and into the countryside.

\textsuperscript{338} The Domino Theory was a principle concern of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s administration in the mid-1950s and lasted well after America’s withdraw from South Vietnam in 1975. The theory held that, if one country fell to Communism, neighbouring countries would eventually fall. In this case, if South Vietnam fell to North Vietnam, then Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand would fall next. In a news conference in April 1954, Eisenhower referred to the theory while answering a question on American intervention in Indochina. “Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the ‘falling domino’ principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So, you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences”. See William Appleman Williams, Thomas McCormick, Lloyd Gardner, and Walter LaFeber, eds., \textit{America in Vietnam: A Documentary History} (New York; W. W. Norton, 1989), 156.
An enclave concept provided tactical benefits too. For example, the bases from which the Marines were to operate from lay dispersed along on the coastal lowlands bordering the South China Sea, which was under the control of the South Vietnamese Navy. A secure coast permitted the safe and orderly reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of Marines and supplies, much of which had to come initially come from amphibious ships. The Marines could also maximise a secure rear area and their link with the U.S. Navy for logistics and fire support during clearing operations. As they expanded their presence into the countryside, the Marines could continue to rely on the Navy to help secure the lines of communication connecting coastal and inland bases. Greene believed that a strategy centred on the enclaves could be successful, though time consuming, and a template for a strategy governing U.S. forces in ground operations throughout the rest of the country if President Johnson decided to increase the U.S. military commitment.

There were both tactical and operational disadvantages to an enclave concept as well. Keeping secure the lines of communication between the base areas was the first problem. Interaction with the people would certainly help, though many U.S. and South Vietnamese officials worried that the population might see U.S. forces as occupiers, as they did the French more than a decade earlier. An enclave concept would take time and patience—and a substantially larger number of American troops to win over a population and to protect the bases and lines of communication. Even if it took less time and fewer U.S. forces, it would likely not produce the immediate tangible results Johnson and Westmoreland sought. Another concern that had to be addressed was that basing operations in the enclaves probably gave the main forces the freedom to move anywhere in the countryside or wherever U.S. forces did not have a permanent commitment.

presence, and it increased the potential for U.S. bases to come under fire from artillery, rocket, and mortar fire or, worse yet, main force or NVA attack at a point and time of their choosing. This issue became the central focus of the public debate about U.S. military strategy in South Vietnam in 1966 and into 1967, which the next chapter explains in more detail.
CHAPTER THREE
WESTMORELAND’S REJECTION OF THE ENCLAVE CONCEPT AND PUSH TO INTENSIFY MILITARY OPERATIONS

Committing American ground forces to the war in any capacity other than the decade-old advisory and assistance mission was a contentious issue for both U.S. civilian and military officials throughout 1965. The advisory and assistance mission, however, was achieving minimal results due, in part, to the population’s distrust and lack of confidence in the GVN and ARVN. Add North Vietnam’s continued support to the insurgency and the NLF’s transition from a predominately guerrilla force to a conventional army, and the prospects of U.S. ground forces becoming involved directly grew with each passing day. It was clear that, unless they did, the GVN and ARVN faced a complete collapse. At the time of the 9th MEB’s arrival, South Vietnam was indeed facing a collapse. 341

In the weeks following deliberations to expand the Marines’ role in the northern provinces, the malaise infecting both the GVN and ARVN’s tactical failures frustrated Westmoreland such that by mid-May his personal view was that the war would soon be over if South Vietnam—and the United States—continued down the present path. 342 Rejuvenating faith in the GVN and correcting the ARVN’s systemic failures were important first steps to stabilising the country and creating some semblance of long-term sovereignty, though these were not Westmoreland’s most pressing concerns. His attention, instead, had shifted to halting the NLF’s summer offensive. Concerned for months that the NLF was planning a major military action,

341 See Westmoreland’s Estimate.
342 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 150.
Westmoreland weighed the GVN’s and ARVN’s chances of surviving the offensive with and without direct U.S. involvement on the ground.343

The same concerns and uncertainty whittling away at Westmoreland played on Johnson’s patience to see the enclave concept and air campaign through to the end. Although proceeding with the recommendation that he gradually increase the pressure on the NLF and North Vietnam, President Johnson grew increasingly confident neither the enclave concept nor the air campaign would change the outcome. Committing U.S. ground forces in a more direct way was something he contemplated. In a message to Ambassador Taylor weeks earlier, Johnson argued that he had reached a point where he was no longer confident the air campaign could produce any lasting results and that only a “larger and stronger use of . . . appropriate military strength on the ground and on the scene” can bring about a change in the war.344 “I myself am ready to substantially increase the number of Americans in Vietnam if it is necessary to provide this kind of fighting force against the Viet Cong”, Johnson explained.345 The GVN, according to Taylor and Westmoreland, however, were uncertain as to how an expanded and more direct American military fighting role would impact the population and the war. Until they were sure, Johnson’s only option was to stay the course.

In late May 1965, U.S. military intelligence officials estimated that, with the clear majority of the countryside now under NLF control, the main forces had complete freedom of movement and action, unlike the ARVN, who remained tethered to their coastal bases and powerless to mount any kind of counteraction let alone a counteroffensive. Dismayed, Westmoreland could only watch as main force battalions and regiments out-maneuvered ARVN

343 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
345 Sorley, Honorable Warrior, 193.
units with overwhelming speed and firepower, absorbing swaths of the central highlands and the northern provinces with relative ease. If the offensive continued, Westmoreland decided, the potential existed for the country to be physically cut in half at the central highlands, putting Saigon at significant risk.\footnote{Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 151–52; and McMaster, \textit{Dereliction of Duty}, 246–47.} Strategically, cutting South Vietnam in two would be a major setback for America’s long-term regional and global war against Communism. Something more had to be done to reverse the momentum.

Aside from tracking the NLF’s progress, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and local military intelligence analysts cautioned Westmoreland about North Vietnam’s encroachments and warned that the NVA’s presence just north of the demilitarised zone was a sure sign that the Communists intended to escalate the war. In addition to NVA officers advising and sometimes leading main force units, North Vietnam’s divisions and independent regiments were infiltrating South Vietnam and establishing logistics bases just north of the demilitarised zone and in the mountains along the tri-border area separating Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.\footnote{Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 152; and “Intelligence Memorandum: The Current Status PAVN Infiltration to South Vietnam” (memorandum Directorate of Intelligence, CIA, 9 April 1966), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000621151.pdf, hereafter CIA memorandum.} U.S. and South Vietnamese intelligence analysts estimated that the “increasing number of North Vietnamese units in the South could eventually mount regimental-size operations in all of the corps tactical zones and battalion-size ones in all of the provinces”.\footnote{Carland, \textit{Stemming the Tide}, 46.} In June, the CIA confirmed the presence of the entire \textit{325th NVA Division} in the central highlands and not just the two regiments it reported months earlier.\footnote{CIA memorandum.}

North Vietnam’s involvement not only encouraged the NLF to continue the offensive, it cast an air of uneasiness over the ARVN and South Vietnam. With the voluntary and involuntary
recruitment of hundreds of South Vietnamese men into service with the main forces, the CIA assessed the NLF was replacing its casualties and rebuilding depleted units faster than the ARVN could replace their own losses.\textsuperscript{350} Convinced an NLF “attack on the cities” was imminent, Westmoreland contemplated asking for American and allied forces to reinforce the ARVN and to intervene directly to halt the offensive in May 1965. Confident any attack against a major city would eventually fail, Westmoreland assessed the mere attempt could exasperate the population’s lack of faith in the GVN, leaving an irreversible psychological effect on the entire country.\textsuperscript{351} Historian Guenter Lewy wrote in \textit{America in Vietnam} that Westmoreland concluded that “the armed forces of South Vietnam did not have the capability of defeating the VC [Viet Cong] by themselves”.\textsuperscript{352}

\textbf{The Push to Do More}

In addition to his lack of confidence in the ARVN, Westmoreland concluded long before Marines began implementing the enclave concept that it would not be enough to halt the insurgency or the offensive, let alone deter North Vietnam and China from intervening or contain Communism in South Vietnam. Westmoreland argued against the concept from the start: “I disagreed with the enclave strategy. As my staff put it at the time, ‘it represented an inglorious use of U.S. forces in overpopulated areas with little chance of direct or immediate impact on the outcome of events’”.\textsuperscript{353} Limiting U.S. ground forces to the enclaves would only prolong an already deteriorating situation, not to mention that “it would position American troops in what

\textsuperscript{351} Lewy, \textit{America in Vietnam}, 43.
\textsuperscript{352} Lewy, \textit{America in Vietnam}.
\textsuperscript{353} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 156.
would be in effect a series of unconnected beachheads, their backs to the sea, essentially in a
defensive posture”.  

Historian Phillip Davidson notes in *Vietnam at War* that Taylor based his
counterargument to Westmoreland on the belief that, as far as ground strategies go, the enclave
concept was the least hazardous option in terms of U.S. casualties. As seen in the previous
chapter, however, it was the most flexible option if Johnson did decide to change his policy on
committing ground forces. Strategically, the enclave concept demonstrated to North Vietnam
and China that the United States was willing to use military force to defend South Vietnam. Most
important to Marine leaders was that the concept—as they saw it and as Taylor advertised it—
provided flexibility to shift focus based on the most visible and relevant threat to progress.
Though quick to point out Taylor’s resistance to any U.S. involvement on the ground, Davidson
adds in *Vietnam at War* that, no sooner had he pushed back on including American combat
forces to the extent Westmoreland wanted, Taylor suggested Johnson not restrict the Marines
from conducting offensive operations entirely and that he permit them to aggressively patrol the
hills and take limited action against guerrilla and main forces threatening the base areas and
enclaves. The following chapter of this thesis illustrates the Marine Corps’ position and how,
in many ways, it supported Westmoreland’s approach to strategy.

Despite Taylor’s perceived acquiescence and the optimism offered by advocates of the
enclave concept, in June 1965, Westmoreland informed the Joint Chiefs and President Johnson
that it was not working. Citing recent NLF main forces regimental-size attacks against the
ARVN and comments from American advisors assigned to ARVN battalions that tactical
ineptitude among South Vietnamese officers was the primary reason two ARVN battalions were

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354 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*.
356 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*. 

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decimated in May and June and was further evidence that the South Vietnamese military was not ready to fight a conventional war. The ARVN’s battlefield failures were also a testament to the strength of the main forces. Westmoreland judged that the only way to stop the offensive was to increase the number of U.S. ground forces, who would then take the lead in stopping the offensive and from preventing NLF and North Vietnam from strengthening further their positions in South Vietnam.\(^{357}\) In addition to American advisors reorganizing and training them to engage in a conventional war, the ARVN’s “superior knowledge of the population and the role of the Viet Cong”, Westmoreland insisted, made them the better choice for fighting guerrilla forces and securing the “populated areas”.\(^{358}\)

After meeting with his staff on 7 June, Westmoreland sent a telegram to the Joint Chiefs and Secretary McNamara to seek a greater role for the U.S. military. Westmoreland argued that the enclave concept, including the Marines’ expanded mission, enabled unimpeded enemy movement throughout the country.\(^{359}\) The idea that the “enclave concept implied that the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] would ultimately prevail” and that the “Viet Cong could never win as long as certain areas were denied to them” had yet to materialise.\(^{360}\) Instead, or at least in the view of the concept’s opponents, “it tacitly yielded the initiative to the enemy”.\(^{361}\) Until U.S. ground forces engaged the main forces in offensive operations in the countryside, the enclaves could serve neither America’s military objectives nor its long-term strategic end state. Westmoreland’s diminished confidence in the ARVN did not help the situation. In much the same way he elaborated in his March estimate, Westmoreland emphasised the continued destruction of ARVN units by main forces and the loss of district towns to the

\(^{357}\) Carland, *Stemming the Tide*, 45–47.
\(^{361}\) Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 3.
political cadres of the VCI. By concentrating U.S. forces in the enclaves and restricting operations there, the Communists were now free to choose when and where they attacked. Westmoreland went on to estimate that “although they have not yet engaged the enemy in strength, I am convinced that U.S. troops with their energy, mobility, and firepower can successfully take the fight to the VC”. In turn, U.S. ground forces could begin a wearing down process, which would stop the offensive and have lasting impact on the Communists’ ability to sustain the war. In time, the United States could commit resources to pacification and to counter the VCI. Unit then, and in “order to cope with the situation outlined above”, Westmoreland clarified with great confidence that there was no option except to reinforce our efforts in SVN [South Vietnam] with additional US or third country forces as rapidly as is practical during the critical weeks ahead. Additionally, studies must continue and plans [be] developed to deploy even greater forces, if and when required, to attain our objectives or counter enemy initiatives. Ground forces deployed to selected areas along the coast and inland will be used both offensively and defensively. The basic purpose of the additional deployments recommended . . . is to give us a substantial and hard hitting offensive capability on the ground to convince the VC that they cannot win.

In the coming weeks, months, and even years later, Westmoreland would reiterate that he had come to this conclusion in light of the NLF’s “shift to big unit war” and that the most appropriate role for U.S. ground forces at that point was to “assume the role of fighting the big units, leaving the… ARVN free to protect the people”. With that, he maintained that a winning

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363 USMACV 7 June telegram; Lewy, America in Vietnam, 48–49; and Vandiver, Shadows of Vietnam, 117–18.
strategy meant overlooking the niceties of a defensive posture. “We had to forget about enclaves and take the war to the enemy”, he insisted, to prevent South Vietnam from falling to the NLF and North Vietnam. 366

Although Johnson was desperate for a limited American ground forces role, Westmoreland persuaded him that “military victory was impossible” unless he compelled the Communists to “negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US”.367 As explained in the Pentagon Papers, Westmoreland’s strategy of taking a more conventional stance was “in keeping with sound military principles garnered by men accustomed to winning. The basic idea behind the strategy was the desire to take the war to the enemy, denying him freedom of movement anywhere in the country and taking advantage of the superior firepower and maneuverability of U.S. and Third Country forces to deal him the heaviest possible blows”.368 It also set in motion him increasingly favouring a strategy focused on attrition through search-and-destroy operations. He was not the only senior military official with this impression of the situation—the enclave concept—and the need for U.S. forces to take on a more aggressive lead role. The Joint Chiefs, including Greene, offered their support.

On 13 June, Westmoreland sent a message to Admiral Sharp in Hawaii explaining the range of discussions regarding a new U.S. ground strategy and what it would take to address the “VC/DRV threat, the requirement for US forces, the concept of their employment and the detail of their deployment”.369 His rationale for sending this message was to highlight the current deteriorating situation and the rash of desertions following a three-week period in which

366 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
368 Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, vol. 3, 395. Third Country forces, known also as Free World Forces, or FWF, consisted of military units from Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, South Korea, and Spain.
engagements with the main forces left five ARVN battalions combat ineffective. “Without substantial US combat support on the ground”, Westmoreland did not foresee the ARVN rebounding in the wake of the ongoing offensive, particularly if the NVA intervened on a full-time basis.370

To stave off the GVN’s collapse, Westmoreland reiterated his request to deploy the 3d Marine Division, among other forces, to South Vietnam. He added, however, that to defeat the insurgency, South Vietnamese forces must first secure “the country as a whole from large well organized and equipped forces including those which may come from outside their country” and then protect the population from the “guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer”.371 Convinced American forces had a better chance than the ARVN to succeed with the former than the latter, Westmoreland offered to combine U.S. forces with South Vietnamese units “against the hard core DRV/VC forces in reaction and search and destroy operations” and concentrate South Vietnamese forces “in the heavily populated areas along the coast, around Saigon and in the [Mekong] Delta”.372

Although Westmoreland indicated that it was not his intention for U.S. forces alone to take control of the fighting in any province or area, he did express his desire for them to do the bulk of the fighting against the main forces and NVA in the more remote regions of the country. This action was particularly critical, according to Westmoreland, now that the NLF’s focus was more on manoeuvring big units farther inland and less on the guerrilla actions on the populated coast. Eager to test his new authority, he directed the first major operation involving U.S. ground forces to begin on 27 June with the U.S. Army’s 173d Airborne Brigade penetrating deep into

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370 USMACV 13 June telegram; and Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, vol. 4.
371 USMACV 13 June telegram; and Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, vol. 4.
372 USMACV 13 June telegram; and Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, vol. 4.
War Zone D and a main force base area northwest of Saigon. Freed from its mission in the coastal enclaves, the brigade confiscated hundreds of weapons and tons of rice, but was unable to lure the enemy into battle. With the first of many big unit operations to come complete, Westmoreland determined that the next step was to decide how many U.S. and FWF battalions he needed to establish a baseline for future operations. In the interim, President Johnson contemplated deploying a total of 34 U.S. battalions (in addition to 10 FWF battalions) for future search and destroy operations.

The “Goodpaster Study”

Throughout June, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs deliberated Westmoreland’s many proposals, presenting their thoughts to President Johnson in a series of briefs on the matter. The Joint Chiefs not only backed Westmoreland’s force level request and expansion of a U.S. ground role, they revived a previous recommendation to deploy three combat divisions and added helicopter and fighter attack squadrons. With no end to the offensive in sight or the chance that the ARVN would turn things around, Johnson authorised Westmoreland to commit U.S. forces “in any situation . . . when in ComUSMACV’s judgement, their use is necessary to strengthen the relative position of GVN forces”. Although he did not offer explicit consent, the change meant Westmoreland could commit American ground forces to direct combat if he judged the situation warranted. Given the progress of the offensive, there was likely to be more scenarios requiring U.S. ground forces than not. More important, Westmoreland now had the

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377 Carland, *Stemming the Tide*, 47; and Cosmas, MACV, 240.
permission he wanted to get out of the enclaves, albeit for a limited time and in a limited scope, until Johnson made a final decision on his request.

In a series of meetings with Secretary McNamara and the Joint Chiefs in late June, Johnson announced that he was ready to commit ground forces in an unlimited and expanded role. Apprehensive at the action, Johnson consulted lawmakers in Congress as well as his closest political and military advisors on the matter. In a meeting with McNamara on 2 July, Johnson posed a single question. “Can we win in Vietnam”, Johnson asked, “if we do everything we can”? McNamara commissioned a study for the purpose of analysing the question and whether or not America’s direct and unlimited military involvement could guarantee victory. Further, he directed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Army General Earle G. Wheeler, to “prepare for his use an assessment of the assurance the US can have of winning in SVN if we do ‘everything we can’”. In addition, he asked that the assessment provide estimates concerning the total number of U.S. personnel and a deployment timeline. Wheeler, in turn, ordered his assistant chairman, Army General Andrew J. Goodpaster, to form a study group to answer this rather poignant question and, if the group in fact believed it possible, that it recommend changes and courses of action to ensure victory. Incidentally, Johnson’s question and the study McNamara commissioned coincided with Westmoreland’s appeal for a change in the military strategy in Vietnam and an increase in U.S. ground forces to support those changes.


380 Led by Gen Goodpaster, the Ad Hoc Study Group contained representatives from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s office, the Chairman’s Special Studies Group, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Joint Staff J-3 (Operations), and the Joint War Games Agency. The group also produced a parallel study called *Forces Required to Win in South Vietnam* as part of the second task assigned by McNamara. See Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 359–65.
On 14 July, just two weeks after Johnson asked what Goodpaster viewed as the most pivotal question of the war to date, the Ad Hoc Study Group presented its thoughts in *Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam, Concept and Appraisal*. In addition to a substantial expansion of the ongoing air campaign, the group recommended abandoning America’s military strategy centred on defending South Vietnam’s coastal populated areas in favour of locating and destroying Communist forces, bases, and major war-supporting organisations in the rugged and remote interior.\(^1\) It further suggested that, in exchange for moving into the interior, the ARVN assume “areas now held, and extend pacification operations and area control where permitted by the progress” of future American-led offensive operations.\(^2\)

The overall assessment Goodpaster endorsed was that there was no reason the United States could not defeat Communist forces in South Vietnam.\(^3\) The enclave concept, or at least the present course of logic and action, seemed to be the study group’s primary target, vaguely referring to it later in the report as “losing slowly” and “bogging down”.\(^4\) According to its findings, the group assessed that “within the bounds of reasonable assumptions there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will—and if that will is manifested in strategy and tactical operations”.\(^5\) Meaning, U.S. ground forces must realise a “substantial step-up in the scope and effectiveness” of operations.\(^6\) In particular, American forces should increase in number and capability. In addition, Goodpaster recommended the “removal of all restrictions, restraints and sources of delay and planning uncertainty” followed by “adoption of a strategy for

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\(^1\) *Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam*, ii.
\(^3\) *Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam*, ii.
\(^6\) *Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam*. 149
winning the war; such a strategy must be based on taking the offensive and gaining and holding the initiative”.\textsuperscript{387} His final recommendation was to adopt “a concept of tactical operations in SVN which exploits the offensive, with the object of putting the VC/DRV battalion forces out of operation”.\textsuperscript{388}

Using the remainder of the report to address specific areas requiring U.S. ground force action, Goodpaster focused on taking greater action against North Vietnam for its support to the NLF through the air, while at the same time committing ground forces to operations aimed at confronting the NVA and the flow of ammunitions and weapons across multiple border areas. Within South Vietnam, the objective should be to “locate and destroy VC/DRV forces, bases and war-supporting organizations in SVN”, identifying the northern provinces as one of two areas in which U.S. ground forces should take immediate action.\textsuperscript{389} Operations against North Vietnam, infiltration routes/zones, VC/DRV forces inside South Vietnam, and pacification, the reported noted, were all “principal lines of U.S./SVN action”.\textsuperscript{390} Of all the actions recommended by Goodpaster and his study group, the concept of tactical operations is one in which the Marine Corps later took umbrage with and argued that the enclave concept was, indeed, in the process of accomplishing. The actions in question were:

a. Operations to locate and attack VC/DRV units to destroy them or render them ineffective as fighting units.
b. Operations to clear and occupy the base areas from which VC/DRV units operate and are supported.
c. Operations to establish major areas of strength, such as in the central highlands or other major infiltration avenues, to interdict DRV support for the VC.\textsuperscript{391}

\textsuperscript{387} Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam.
\textsuperscript{388} Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam.
\textsuperscript{389} Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam, vii, D-2.
\textsuperscript{390} Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam, viii.
\textsuperscript{391} Intensification of Military Operations in Vietnam, vii.
“Closely connected with the foregoing concepts”, in addition to “putting the VC/DRV battalion-size units out of operation”, was to “provide security to the territory and the people of SVN”.392 (The following chapter provides General Greene’s and the Marine Corps’ official response to this and other elements of the Goodpaster Study.) The most alarming portion of the study came in the final section titled “Present Situation in SVN, Corps-by-Corps”. In it, the study group characterised the northern provinces as an area with a “sharp rise in the intensity and number of Viet Cong initiated activity in recent weeks, particularly in the coastal lowlands”.393 Most damning, and a point for which the Marine Corps would argue fervently against, was the final assessment that:

The Viet Cong have effectively cut most all transportation routes in the area; coastal Route 1 is impassible throughout much of the Corps area and the railroad is operable only between Hue and Da Nang. The US Marines have come under increased Viet Cong harassment in recent weeks. Government control in I Corps is presently limited to the major cities and their environs. The Viet Cong remain capable of launching multi-battalion size attacks at times and place of their choosing.394

A Concept Abandoned

Although there is no evidence suggesting Johnson ever read or received a brief on the Goodpaster Study, in light of the summer offensive and Westmoreland’s request to the Joint Chiefs and McNamara, he agreed that the only way to spare South Vietnam from collapse was by addressing the issue of the main forces and NVA. His first act was to order a review of his policy toward military action in South Vietnam and the enclave concept. As questions pertaining to the enclave concept surfaced, the Marine Corps argued that misinterpretations were driving misperceptions and, in turn, were creating a divide among senior official about how to fight the

war and were giving rise to questions that historians have yet to answer, let alone consider. The first is how the Marines concluded that the enclave concept enabled them to concurrently engage in pacification and operations against the main forces? Another is why Westmoreland and his Army field commanders interpreted the enclave strategy differently? The Pentagon Papers summarizes Westmoreland’s thinking on the matter in that the enclave concept was “a masterpiece of ambiguity” because it implied a greater commitment to the war on the part of the U.S., but simultaneously demonstrated in the placing of the troops with their backs to the sea a desire for rapid and early exit. While purporting to provide the basis for experimentation with U.S. soldiers in an unfamiliar environment, it mitigated against the success of the experiments by placing those troops in close proximity to the Vietnamese people, where the greatest difficulty would be encountered. In order to prove the viability of its reserve reaction foundation, it required testing; but the rules for commitment were not worked out until the strategy was already overtaken by events.395

With the decision to authorise U.S. ground forces into combat the air campaign and its goal of forcing a settlement took on a secondary role in support of search and destroy. The premise behind American involvement now was that, instead of strengthening the GVN and ARVN’s position or denying the main forces and NVA freedom to manoeuvre, it was to convince the Communists that they could not win. Johnson’s implicit endorsement of this approach demonstrated to all observers and the Communists that he saw this as the only way to achieve U.S. objectives in South Vietnam and that the enclave concept could not.

In addition to the role of U.S. ground forces, Westmoreland no longer had to content with predetermined size limits. According to Army historian John Carland, the size of the U.S. ground force depended upon the enemy’s build-up in response and willingness to fight.396 The Pentagon

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396 Carland, Stemming the Tide, 45–49.
Papers suggests the increase in the number of battalions in the summer 1965 reflected the desire to win the war vice seeking a settlement. The total “exceeded the amount forecast by the enclavists” for two reasons, with the first being that the Communists “by the end of June revealed that he was much stronger than had originally been surmised”. Second was that these battalions had two missions: “They were not only to hold the fort but were also to lay the groundwork for the subsequent input of forces to implement the next phase of the strategy”, which was attrition through search and destroy.

By August, dozens of Marine and Army battalions took ownership of the ground war in South Vietnam. Before leaving his post as ambassador, Maxwell Taylor argued against the new “strategy” and force totals one again, believing that neither would produce any greater result than the enclave concept, though it would cost more in terms of friendly and enemy casualties. His replacement, Henry Cabot Lodge, agreed. A proponent of what he called the “coastal strategy”, Lodge wanted a plan permitting U.S. ground forces to operate from coastal seaports and airfields, or both, helps the GVN “in pitched battles against large units of the Viet Cong and PAVN”, and allows for “occasional forays to attractive targets which can be reached from these places”. State Department official George W. Ball wrote that, even with the increase in the size and capability of American forces and the expanded and more active combat role, there was no assurances of defeating the enemy in battle or forcing him to the negotiating table. The increase in U.S. ground forces and the beginning of the search and destroy approach, to Ball, told anyone who was watching that U.S. efforts, in addition to the GVN’s, were failing. In the end,

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398 Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, vol. 3.
400 The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, 43–44.
Westmoreland determined that this was the beginning of a new war and one in which additional U.S. ground forces and his search and destroy approach was the first step to reversing the war in anticipation of a larger and more determined American military effort. “With enough force to seize the initiative from the Viet Cong sometime in 1966, Westmoreland expected to take the offensive” and, with additional U.S. ground forces, he could defeat the NLF and NVA “by the end of 1967”.402

**Criticism of the Enclave Concept and the Marine Corps**

Between July and September, Army battalions and regiments established the foundation of what was to become the big-unit war through a series of search and destroy operations deep into the countryside of the central and southern-most provinces. In the northern provinces, the Marines continued securing and improving the enclaves one village at a time and slowly expanding their presence inland from their coastal bases in an attempt to reduce the VCI’s influence over the population as well as eliminating guerrilla and main force control, venturing into the countryside to engage the main forces only when necessary served their purpose. Westmoreland viewed the Marines as reluctant to seize the initiative and looked to make changes by altering the mission. In the weeks ahead, he applied steady pressure on Major General Walt to get his Marines out of the beachheads and the enclaves and into the countryside with greater regularity. Despite his frustration, Westmoreland was quick to point out that he understood the Marines’ thinking and that the population’s support was critical to winning the war. His concern,

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however, was that the Marines would never be able to preserve their support if the main forces and NVA were free to interfere.\footnote{Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 201}  

The Marines did not disagree; rather, they believed protecting the population and removing the conventional threat could be done \textit{simultaneously}. That both Westmoreland and the Walt saw the protection and loyalty of the South Vietnamese population as a priority was clearly not the issue. The problem was their fundamental vision as to how to prosecute the war so that pacification could succeed. Westmoreland “believed the marines [\textit{sic}] should have been trying to find the enemy’s main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population” first.\footnote{Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}; and Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 13.}  

As for where the Marines should do this, Westmoreland wanted the Marines to move their operations away from the coast. Though unconvinced, he was confident he knew why the enclave concept attracted the Marines. By “remaining in coastal enclaves, [as] the theory had it, the Americans might secure critical areas while limiting their involvement and casualties, yet at the same time demonstrating to the North Vietnamese American determination to stay the course”.\footnote{Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 129.}  

This contradicted Westmoreland’s vision of demonstrating to the Communists America’s resolve. He did not hold back from voicing his concerns, adding that he had neither the time nor the patience to see the concept through. In his mind, it encouraged North Vietnam. Westmoreland appealed directly to the Joint Chiefs and Secretary McNamara to persuade President Johnson to abandon the concept not long after he approved it.  

Compounding Westmoreland’s annoyance was that he believed the enclave concept encouraged the NLF to continue the offensive and the NVA to support it without repercussions and that it “left the enemy free to come and go as he pleased throughout the bulk of the
Doing so was fine by the Marines, he inferred, because their focus was more on the population and the coastal areas. Westmoreland’s Army field force commanders fretted about the Marines’ actions, making it more difficult in the end, particularly if they continued to give the main forces and NVA unrestricted movement across the border areas and into the central highlands, which was having a direct effect on security in and around the other military regions not to mention Saigon.

Westmoreland spoke candidly during and after the war about his disagreement with Marine Corps’ leadership and their thinking on the war in general. Not wanting to create tension between the Services or single out the senior Marine commander, Westmoreland contended he granted Walt the flexibility to fight the war according to Service doctrine and his assessment of the situation in the northern provinces, so long as they continued to confront and reduce the conventional threat. “I had no wish to deal so abruptly with General Walt that I might precipitate an interservice imbroglio . . . as senior regional commander, General Walt had a mission-type order which by custom afforded him considerable leeway in execution”, he explained. Instead of directing him to intensify operations, Westmoreland chose instead to subtly influence Walt and his staff’s thinking as he “was very familiar with the doctrine approach of the Marines and their capabilities” and believed the Marines would fall in line once they saw the war for what it really was. When Walt did not favor Westmoreland’s approach, he “directed III MAF to conduct numerous studies and war games and reviewed and at time criticized the results” as well.

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406 Daddis, Westmoreland’s War, 80.
408 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 13.
409 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 201.
as requiring them “to plan for specific operations against enemy main force units and base areas in an effort to reduce what he thought was their excessive defensive-mindedness”\textsuperscript{410}

To Westmoreland, the Marines’ thinking not only restricted operations, but kept them close to the coast where he believed they felt more comfortable operating. When Ambassador Taylor first raised the idea of an enclave concept, Westmoreland perceived the Marines would jump at the opportunity because of their naval heritage and proclivity for counterguerrilla warfare and pacification, which were effective in this area of the northern provinces. Allowing Marines and U.S. forces in general to operate from the coast was in fact something Westmoreland saw as a necessity\textsuperscript{411}. In response to the suggestion that the Army take responsibility for the northern provinces instead of Marines, Westmoreland answered that because of the Marines’ organisational capabilities and their ability to resupply in the absence of port facilities, it was only logical for them to do so\textsuperscript{412}. Though his approach to strategy differed from Walt’s, Westmoreland respected the Marines enough that he continued to allow them to operate with little interference from him or his staff initially. This, however, would change.

General Greene countered much of the early criticism directed at Walt by explaining how the enclave concept allowed for them to intensifying military operations and that the concept Taylor envisioned—and they favored—was more offensive than Westmoreland realised. Because it relied on the slow and methodical expansion of secure areas instead of a direct and constant pursuit of main forces and NVA, Westmoreland’s saw it as a divergence in emphasis. Whereas he sought offensive operations before pacification, Marine leaders believed that pacification and security of the population in concert with combating the main forces and NVA was best. This line of thinking dated back to 1964 when Greene directed his staff to “prepare a

\textsuperscript{410}Cosmas, MACV, 334.
\textsuperscript{411}Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 204.
\textsuperscript{412}Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
series of proposals, the most significant of which was a twenty-four-point plan calling for U.S. forces to secure the coastal areas of South Vietnam in order to deny the Viet Cong access to a large percentage of the population”.  

The Pentagon Papers further highlights the accepted analysis of the time.

The Marine concept of operations has a different implicit time requirement than a more enemy-oriented search and destroy effort . . . is slow and methodical, requires vast numbers of troops, runs the risk of turning into an occupation even while being called “pacification/civic action,” and involves America deeply in the politics and traditions of rural Vietnam. The strategy can succeed, perhaps, but if it is to succeed, it must be undertaken with full awareness by the highest levels of the USG [U.S. government] of its potential costs in manpower and time, and the exacting nature of the work.

When Westmoreland made his decision to allow the Marines to continue fighting the war their way, and as long as they engaged the conventional threat, some saw it as compromise by Marine leaders. Michael E. Peterson explained in his book The Combined Action Platoons that the two parties reached a compromise when the Marines implemented a three-pronged effort comprising of “search and destroy missions, counter-insurgency operations and pacification” to appease Westmoreland so that he would not interfere with the Marines’ real interest, which was pacification. The compromise between Westmoreland (and proponents of the attrition strategy) and the Marines had more to do with misperceptions, both in and out of the Marine Corps, than reality. Marine Lieutenant General John R. Chaisson, who in 1966 served as both the operations officer for III MAF before taking over Westmoreland’s combat operations centre in

413 McMaster, Dereliction of Duty, 69
Saigon, insisted that “there wasn’t really a rat’s ass worth of difference between the major things that the Marines . . . were doing and the things that the Army was doing”.416

Because the Marines invested early on more of their time and resources in civic actions and the broader pacification effort, they absorbed a great deal of criticism and ire of those looking for immediate results. They also fed the impression that the enclave concept in no way involved conventional military operations. Westmoreland and many of his Army staff and field commanders, along with a host of civilian and military officials and journalists, censured the Marines for not maximising their conventional military capabilities or moving beyond their beachheads embedded within the populated coastal areas. Pressured by the Pentagon to get more involved in the war against the main forces and NVA prompted Marines like Lieutenant General Krulak to rail that “there was no virtue at all in seeking out the NVA in the mountains and jungle” and that, at least for the time being, the Marines and U.S. forces in general should focus on “the rich, populous lowlands”.417 The most critical commentary came from Westmoreland’s staff in Saigon. The director of U.S. operations recalled Westmoreland’s anger and frustration about the Marines’ approach. He was not the only one angry about that fact that “all but a tiny part of the I Corps area is under control of the VC”.418 Disturbed that the Marines “just came in and sat down and didn’t do anything”, Brigadier General DePuy pushed Westmoreland to order the Marines into action.419 The Marines, to DePuy, were mostly interested “in counterinsurgency of the deliberate, mild sort”.420 Major General Harry W. O. Kinnard, commanding general of the Army’s 1st Air Cavalry Division operating in the II Corps Tactical Zone immediately south of

416 Cosmas, MACV, 404; quote from LtGen John R. Chaissen, USMC, Oral History Transcript, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 222–23, hereafter Chaissen interview.
417 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 13.
418 “The Situation in I Corps, 15 November 1965”, 1965 Folder, Box 4, William E. DePuy Papers, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA; and as quoted in Daddis, Westmoreland’s War, 80.
419 Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 175.
the Marines, was even more critical and judgmental in his comments. Believing the enclave concept was responsible for allowing the main forces and NVA to move freely between his and the Marines’ areas of operations, Kinnard professed the type of thinking combined with a lack of action “absolutely disgust[ed]” him.421 “I did everything I could do to drag them out and get them to fight”, Kinnard recalled bitterly, in an interview with Andrew Krepinevich after the war.422 Kinnard felt “they just wouldn’t play. They just would not play. They don’t know how to fight on land, especially against guerrillas”.423

Westmoreland, like many Army officers, had an unobstructed view of his new authorities and the actions U.S. forces were to take. He voiced his concerns about whether the Marines truly understood the war and the enemy. In the Marines’ defence, Westmoreland admitted to challenges associated with adjusting from the security mission to one allowing them to engage in open combat, explaining that it “came as a surprise to me, for when President Johnson changed the mission of American units from a defensive posture and authorized them to engage in ‘counterinsurgency combat operations,’ that was to me a broad authority”.424 Under the impression there was now a clear expectation that the Army and Marines were to openly engage Communist forces, both conventional and unconventional, Westmoreland’s plan to employ U.S. ground forces was no less clear to the Marines, who believed they were acting in accordance with the guidance set forth in President Johnson’s authorisation to implement the enclave concept. Westmoreland recalled of his plan:

On May 8, I had forwarded to Washington my concept of how operations were to develop. In Stage One the units were to secure enclaves, which I preferred to call base areas, and in defending them could operate out to the range of light artillery.

In Stage Two the units were to engage in offensive operations and deep patrolling in co-operation with the ARVN. In Stage Three they were to provide a reserve when ARVN units needed help and also conduct long-range offensive operations. At the same time I pointed out that once the coastal bases were secure, the troops should move to secure inland bases and operate from those.\textsuperscript{425}

The earliest criticisms directed at the Marines had to do with the impression that they were not acting on this plan and that they preferred instead the original “defensive” enclave concept Ambassador Taylor recommended in high-level discussions that they started executing in March. Whereas the Marines’ aligned their approach with portions of Taylor’s earliest enclave model and thinking they did so only to the extent that they were not looking to rush blindly into battle, especially when the time and intelligence did not dictate the need for such action. Unknown to critics was that the Marines’ impression of the later version of the enclave concept was it allowed them to counter the insurgency where it hurt the most, which, during the initial American military buildup and Phase I operations, meant engaging the people and guerrillas in the process of securing and improving the base areas and enclaves. By August, when the entire American effort shifted to attrition, the Marines continued focusing on civic actions as a means to secure and improve the enclaves and gain information on the main forces.

In the coming months, when the Marines initiated offensive action, they continued committing resources to civic actions unless a lucrative conventional target appeared. During his discussions with Westmoreland, the Army general never ordered Walt to change his approach, though he did question his intentions. In an interview after the war, Marine Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, Walt’s operations officer in the III MAF, explained that during a command visit to the northern provinces to discuss Marine operations in the summer of 1965, Westmoreland raised the

\textsuperscript{425} A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam; Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 135; and Cosmas, MACV, 217. Although Westmoreland refers to the sequence of operations in his quote as “stages”, in his official concept and in other sources covering it, he uses “phases” to describe these actions.
question as to whether Walt intended to go on the offensive like the Army was doing in the three other corps tactical zones.\textsuperscript{426} Walt replied that he was making progress in the enclaves with respect to pacification and the counterguerrilla fight, which were critical in the each phase of the enclave concept and Westmoreland’s concept of operations. When Westmoreland asked again about the Marines doing more conventionally, Walt answered confidently, “Yes, I will engage the enemy’s main force units, but first I want to have good intelligence”.\textsuperscript{427}

Despite Walt’s expressed intent to engage the main forces, open opposition toward the enclave concept from Westmoreland and others increased throughout the spring and summer. Not taking the fight to the main forces, they insisted, emboldened the insurgency in ways that will be costly to the American effort. Although he approved of Walt’s approach to handling the guerrilla forces, he did not appreciate his prioritisation of the counterguerrilla war and civic actions above the threat posed by the conventional enemy forces. With this in mind, Westmoreland attempted to impress upon President Johnson and Secretary McNamara that the survival of South Vietnam hinged upon the combat power U.S. forces possessed and getting out of the enclaves and into the countryside. Acknowledging Walt’s desire for pacification and collecting intelligence before contacting the main forces, Westmoreland encouraged Walt to change the balance of his operations by putting conventional operations before pacification.\textsuperscript{428} At various times in 1965, Westmoreland agreed with aspects of Walt’s plan, but not always.

Walt’s view could not have differed more from the USMACV commander. Forcing battles, he judged, could play “into the hands of the enemy by incidents of non-combat casualties, destruction of property, and other acts that could be used to foster resentment toward

\textsuperscript{426} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 14.
\textsuperscript{427} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}.
\textsuperscript{428} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}.
us together with the government of Vietnam and its armed forces”. Derived from the lessons taught by Marine small war veterans like Merritt A. Edson, Lewis B. Puller, and Krulak, Walt viewed the conventional fight as the easier of the two methods to defeat an insurgency and that the difficulty lay in balancing how to engage the enemy and with protecting the population. According to the Marine Corps’ *Small Wars Manual*, which Walt referenced often:

In regular warfare, the responsible officers simply strive to attain a method of producing the maximum physical effect with the force at their disposal. In small wars the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and consequent minimum loss of life. The end aim is the social, economic, and political development of the people subsequent to the military defeat of the enemy insurgent forces.

The animosity between Westmoreland (and his Army field commanders) and the Marine Corps continued during the next three years, though both sides saw validity in the other’s thoughts and views. The prioritisation of forces, resources, and methods were all central to their differences. Westmoreland, unwilling to give the main forces and NVA even the smallest chance to survive, wanted immediate action and results; whereas Walt, who believed that giving the enemy even the slightest freedom of action would set the conditions, eventually leading the main forces and NVA to play into his hands vice the Marines playing into theirs. One major agreement between Westmoreland and Walt was halting the flow of NVA units and materiel into South Vietnam. Bringing both to an end would require a significant number of Marines and a plan that took into account the enemy and the people, both of which Walt viewed as equally important and could only be done by U.S. forces for now. Westmoreland disagreed. The Pentagon Papers assessed later that all sides saw what they wanted to see of the concept and that the

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enclave strategy was controversial and expectations for it ran the gamut from extreme optimism to deep pessimism. The Ambassador expected it to buy some time for the Vietnamese to eventually save themselves. General Westmoreland and other military men expected it to guarantee defeat for the U.S. and the RVNAF, who were already demonstrating that they were incapable of defeating the enemy.  

**Westmoreland’s New Plan to Take the Fight to the Enemy**

To direct the new course of the war and to accomplish the military objectives, Westmoreland’s staff drafted “A Concept of Operations in the Republic of Vietnam” and forwarded it to Admiral Sharp, the Joint Chiefs, and Secretary McNamara on 1 September 1965. The concept also was a framework for future force requests. Similar to the previous concept paper issued in April, Westmoreland envisioned a phased campaign with the objective being “to end the war in RVN by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US”. Although flexible, the expected timetable for the new concept and its phases was:

- **Phase I** – 1 September 1965 to 31 December 1965
- **Phase II** – 1 January 1966 to 30 June 1966
- **Phase III** – 1 July 1966 to 1 July or 31 December 1967

In the initial phase, Westmoreland wanted U.S. ground forces to invest their resources in halting “the losing trend by the end of 1965”. This included continuing the approach used by the Army and Marines since March, which was to secure and improve the base areas. For there

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433 USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965.
434 Committee on Foreign Relations, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 45; and USMACV, *Command History 1965*, 28. With certain exceptions, III MAF was to continue with the original enclave concept implementation timeline so long as it accomplished the mission within the prescribed 1 September concept of operations timeline. This was in keeping with Westmoreland’s intent to not get too involved with how his field commander’s implement his design.
435 USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 102; and Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 221.
to be any chance of success in the second phase—securing the base areas—according to Andrew Krepinevich, it was essential to stabilise the country and an important initial step to regain the initiative. Specifically, in Phase I, Westmoreland added that he wanted U.S. ground forces to:

1. Secure the major military bases, airfields, and communications centres.
2. Defend major political and population centres.
3. Conduct offensive operations against major Viet Cong base areas to divert and destroy Viet Cong main forces.
4. Provide adequate reserve reaction forces to prevent the loss of secure and defended areas.
5. Preserve and strengthen the RVNAF.
6. Provide adequate air support, both combat and logistic.
7. Maintain an anti-infiltration screen along the coast and support forces ashore with naval gunfire and amphibious lift.
8. Provide air and sea lifts as necessary to transport the necessary but minimum supplies and services to the civil populace.
9. Open up necessary critical lines of communication for essential military and civil purposes.
10. Preserve and defend, to the extent possible, areas now under effective governmental control.

If Phase I went according to plan, in addition to these tasks, Westmoreland wanted U.S. forces to begin deep patrols and “take the offensive in high priority areas to destroy the main forces and reinstitute pacification programs” as part of Phase II, which was to take place during the first half of 1966. The second half would be a continuation of the first, but only to the extent that the main forces resist. Phase II also entailed holding the enclaves and villages through quality of life improvements. With this, Westmoreland expected U.S. forces to support, not lead, efforts to revive the GVN’s national pacification program with village-level

438 USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965; Clarke, Advice and Support, 102; and Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 142.
439 USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965; Clarke, Advice and Support; and Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
440 USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965; Clarke, Advice and Support; and Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
civic actions and initiatives, such as land, social, and political reforms. He went as far as to prioritise support to the provinces requiring immediate attention with three of the top six provinces—Quang Nam, Quang Tri, Quang Ngai—residing in the northern provinces.\textsuperscript{441} If resistance was significant, Phase II tasks were to continue for another 18 months in Phase III.\textsuperscript{442} The specific goal of Phase III was to “destroy or render militarily ineffective the remaining organized VC units and their base areas”.\textsuperscript{443}

The primary focus of the concept paper was attrition of the main forces and NVA with search and destroy operations backed by the superior mobility and firepower of American ground forces taking a central role. Securing and holding the enclaves and outlying villages was now the responsibility of the ARVN and of little concern for U.S. ground forces. Westmoreland wanted operational tempo to be high and unrelenting and expected large units from battalion- to division-size to stay in the field for weeks or months at a time to prevent the main forces and NVA from using their established base areas or creating new ones. He directed his field commanders to keep the enemy on the move and off balance, guessing as to where and when the next United States attack might come. So persistent was Westmoreland to keep the operational tempo high and for large units to search for and destroy the main forces and NVA, his staff kept a record of the number of large unit operations conducted and days each battalion, regiment, and division spent in the field.\textsuperscript{444}

Before the Joint Chiefs reviewed in any real detail the concept paper, Westmoreland issued additional guidance on 17 September. The paper titled “Tactics and Techniques for

\textsuperscript{441} Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, vol. 4, 290–98.
\textsuperscript{442} USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965; Clarke, Advice and Support, 102; and Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 142.
\textsuperscript{443} USMACV, Concept of Operations, 1 September 1965; Clarke, Advice and Support; and Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports.
\textsuperscript{444} Hennessey, Strategy in Vietnam, 81; and Shulimson, An Expanding War, 143.
Employment of U.S. Forces in the Republic of Vietnam” spelled out his “policy guidance . . . for use in planning and conduct of operations by US Forces”. To it, he further explained that “the ultimate aim is to pacify the Republic of Vietnam” not through civic actions, but by “destroying the VC—his forces, organization, terrorists, agents, and propagandists”. To do this, he expounded upon the 10 tasks assigned in Phase I with greater clarity and detail. Of note was his explanation for conducting offensive operations against the main forces and their base areas both “with detailed intelligence” and “without detailed prior intelligence”. In addition to using aerial surveillance and ground reconnaissance, Westmoreland pointed to “locally available intelligence” as “most readily accessible and often the most accurate intelligence” that U.S. ground forces should exploit by working with regional and provincial local forces as well as village and district chiefs and the local population. The final section of the directive addressed the rural construction, or pacification, as a primary contributor to restoring security in South Vietnam. Although quick to point out the need for pacification, he addressed it as a task for the GVN and South Vietnamese military and police forces and not necessarily American forces alone. Rather, he viewed the role of American ground forces as one of coordination and cooperation and not as the executor of pacification efforts. The Marine Corps, obviously, had other plans.

446 USMACV, Tactics and Techniques, 2.
447 USMACV, Tactics and Techniques, 5.
448 USMACV, Tactics and Techniques, 6.
449 USMACV, Tactics and Techniques, 12.
CHAPTER FOUR
SECURING AND IMPROVING THE ENCLAVES
MARCH – JULY 1965

As discussed in the Introduction, the second section of this thesis analyses Marine operations in the northern provinces from March 1965 to December 1967 from a conventional military operational perspective. Whereas the previous section provided the background on the enclave concept and General Westmoreland’s rejection of the Marine Corps’ vision of how to fight the war and his rationale behind the decision to recommend that President Johnson adopt an attrition-based strategy and singularly focused search and destroy approach, this section presents the Marine Corps’ official counterargument and implementation of the enclave concept and balanced approach. This chapter covers the Marines’ task of securing and improving the enclaves beginning in March 1965. Although its centres on small unit counterguerrilla and civic actions, it does so from the standpoint that both were points of departure for success in future conventional military operations, or large unit operations, against the main forces and NVA and part and parcel to their attrition. The chapter culminates with Marines postured to foil a main force attack on the combat base at Chu Lai as a result of the information provided by local villagers. If anything, this chapter demonstrates the Marines understood that to be successful in the conventional war in South Vietnam they first had to pacify the population through acts of kindness and protection from guerrillas, both of which were critical lines of effort in securing and improving the enclaves.
A Phase I Template?

From 23 February to 9 March 1965, more than 20,000 Marines and sailors of Lieutenant General Krulak’s notional 3d Marine Expeditionary Corps (3d MEC) boarded amphibious ships off the southern California coast to participate in Exercise Silver Lance, the largest ever Navy and Marine Corps training exercise of its kind.\(^{450}\) Both General Wallace Greene and the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David L. McDonald, proposed to the Secretary of Navy Paul H. Nitze that the sea Services hold the exercise to showcase the current state of their warfighting capabilities against a mostly nonscripted, free-thinking enemy. Eager to demonstrate the Marine Corps’ preparedness for potential large-scale involvement in South Vietnam, in particular, Greene and Lieutenant General Victor Krulak recommended Marine planners pattern the exercise after the situation there and in other troubled parts of the world with conflicts encompassing the full spectrum of war.\(^{451}\) With this guidance, planners designed a scenario putting Marines in “situations involving the local civilian population; supporting training and cooperating with an indigenous military; dealing with diplomatic representatives; and meeting the challenge of a privileged sanctuary, where a bordering, ostensibly neutral country is used as a base and a route of approach by the enemy”.\(^{452}\)

Taken straight from the mythical Camelot storyline, planners placed the 3d MEC in position to respond to the fictitious country of Lancelot and its calls for American military

\(^{450}\) Gabrielle M. Neufeld, *A Chronology of the United States Marine Corps, 1965–1969*, vol. IV (Washington, DC: Historical Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1971), 1. The 3d MEC was not a standing organization within the Marine Corps and existed only for purposes of the exercise. Had a corps-level Marine force deployed to South Vietnam, however, its designation would have been the 3d MEC. For more on the exercise, see the “Exercise Silver Lance” file, Reference Information Branch, HD, Quantico, VA.

\(^{451}\) The term *spectrum of war* refers to the “full range or form which conflict can take”. It includes “the application of national power short of military force” or, Cold War on one end and the “unrestricted application of military force”, or general war on the other. In the centre of this spectrum lies a wide range of conflicts that might occur, also known as *limited war*. See *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1962), 4. After the war, Krulak stated that “Silver Lance was a fine rehearsal for our adventure in Vietnam”. See Leo J. Daugherty III and Rhonda L. Smith-Daugherty, *Counterinsurgency and the United States Marine Corps*, vol. II, *An Era of Persistent Warfare, 1945–2016* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 175.

\(^{452}\) Krulak, *First to Fight*, 181.
assistance following months of civil unrest and the near-constant threat of invasion by neighbouring Merlin. After Merlin-backed guerrilla forces seize control of the coastal enclave of De Luz Canyon (near Temecula) and install a shadow “people’s government”, Marines were to land and restore order.\footnote{Frank Beardsley, “Silver Lance”, \textit{Leatherneck}, June 1965, 26–27.} Like the 9th MEB awaiting orders off Da Nang, the first unit to respond to this crisis was the 13th MEB, the advance guard of Krulak’s corps.\footnote{Like the 3d MEC, the 13th MEB was not a standing organization.} Ordering the brigade to “clear” De Luz Canyon of guerrilla forces and then “hold” it in the event of their return, Krulak emphasized the importance of small unit actions as a means of securing the enclave in addition to providing medical assistance, food and drinking water, and repairing roads.\footnote{Beardsley, “Silver Lance”, 29.}

Just as the planners predicated, acts of good by the Marines will trigger guerrilla ambushes on their patrols, attacks against their base at De Luz Canyon and, ultimately, a ground invasion of Lancelot by conventional Merlin forces.\footnote{Beardsley, “Silver Lance”, 29–30.} When an enemy mechanised division encircled the 13th MEB, Krulak ordered the entire 3d MEC into action. In a matter of days, the Marines transitioned from countering an insurgency through small unit and civic action to a full-scale general war.\footnote{General war is a doctrinal term referring to an armed conflict in which the opposing powers or forces “employ all the means available to them” absent the restraints common in limited and small wars. General war typically includes large formations, massive firepower, and extensive operations to achieve a desired tactical, operational, or strategic outcome. See Operations, 5–6.} Executing a swift “pincer” movement, the ground component, the 1st Marine Division, broke the encirclement before blocking all routes leading north and destroyed the motorised enemy division, ending the exercise days earlier than planners scheduled.\footnote{Beardsley, “Silver Lance”, 31.}

Contrary to how Silver Lance concluded, historians contend its primary purpose was to expose Marines to the political and social challenges of modern insurgencies. Fighting guerrilla
forces, pacifying restless populations, and propping up weak national governments, far more than conventional military operations, were purportedly chief among Greene and Krulak’s priorities. Allan Millet notes in *Semper Fidelis* that the exercise represented “counterinsurgency to the core”. In *Counterinsurgency and the United States Marine Corps*, Leo Daugherty determined that Silver Lance was not just a primer for the war in Vietnam, but also demonstrated that the Marine Corps’ focus rested squarely on the counterguerrilla tactics and civic actions. Even Krulak’s operations officer, Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud Jr. in a *Marine Corps Gazette* article, adds to this when he explains that “comprehensive experience in coordination with and support of indigenous forces in matters of law and order; relationships with civilians; the protection and evacuation of U.S. nationals and, of course, operations against guerrillas” was, in fact, the exercise’s main objective.

When it came to conventional military operations, however, each neglected to mention that Greene and Krulak also directed that, in addition to Marines fighting “small bands of guerrillas”, planners include vignettes in which Marines engage “large units” as well. In fact, U.S. Navy and Marine officers appearing before Congress on 8 March 1965 highlighted the test of conventional capabilities as one of the many goals of the exercise and that the Services chiefs expected Navy and Marine units “to carry out short-of-war, limited, and general war commitments”. For the Marines specifically, their statements emphasised the complex nature of the “amphibious phase”, which planners divided into two parts:

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459 Millet, *Semper Fi*, 548.
460 Daugherty and Smith-Daugherty, *Counterinsurgency and the United States Marine Corps*, vol. II, 175.
462 Krulak, *First to Fight*, 181.
one executed in a short-of-war environment with a brigade of U.S. Marines landing for the purpose of evacuating American nationals, protecting property, and restoring law and order; the other involves landing the balance of the Marine Expeditionary Corps forces promoted by the all-out aggressive action of enemy forces surrounding the brigade. The Marine Expeditionary Corps will seek to destroy aggressor forces within the exercise zone and return the area to national control.464

While it is true that the Marines based their initial four months of operations in the northern provinces on the counterguerrilla/pacification lessons learned during Silver Lance, the exercise’s conventional learning objectives and the Marine Corps’ senior leadership’s arguments to lift the restrictions imposed by United States and GVN civilian and military officials during the same period embody an entirely different characterization of the Marines’ first four months in South Vietnam.

The Seeds of Pacification . . . and Attrition

The geographic, political, and economic troubles South Vietnam faced in early 1965 made it the ideal operating environment for Marines to apply similar tactics used during their expeditions to Central America and the Caribbean from 1915 to 1937. South Vietnam’s northern low-lying coastal plain, stretching some 160 miles from the demilitarised zone to the southern tip of Quang Ngai Province, accounted for more than 98 percent of that region’s population and thousands of square miles of agriculturally fertile farmland—the country’s economic lifeline.465

Dissent among the average South Vietnamese citizen and a fervent distrust of corrupt and inept district, provincial, and national political officials turned countryside villages into the perfect

464 *Hearings Before and Special Reports Made by Committee on Armed Services*, 926.
breeding ground for VCI cadres, guerrilla forces, logistics hubs for the main forces and, eventually, for NVA units based in the mountains south of the demilitarised zone.\textsuperscript{466}

The period from March to July 1965 marks not only the Marines’ introduction to the Vietnam War, it marks also a period of consolidation and growth in the wake of President Johnson’s decision to involve United States military forces and escalate the war. Following their initial landings and the restrictive base security mission in March, the Marines petitioned unsuccessfully for Westmoreland to allow them to consolidate the northern populated coastal areas under their protection and control. This was not for a lack of trying or effort. Limited to an initial area of operations totaling no more than eight square miles surrounding the Da Nang airfield and two square miles around the Phu Bai airfield, the ARVN I Corps commander, Major General Nguyen Chanh Thi, declined to grant the Marines flexibility in defending the airbase. Contact with the main forces, in addition to the population, the VCI and the guerrilla forces was something Brigadier General Karch and his 9th MEB expected upon arriving in Da Nang. Much to the disappointment and surprise of Karch, who planned to “immediately assume a tactical and logistical posture for the initiation of combat operations”, Westmoreland ordered instead that the Marines “occupy and defend critical terrain features to secure the airfield and, as directed, communications facilities, U.S. supporting installations, port facilities, landing beaches and other U.S. installations”.\textsuperscript{467} Adding insult to injury, the Joint Chiefs reinforced the change in mission when they sent a message to Westmoreland directing that “the Marines will not, repeat will not, 

\textsuperscript{466} Sheehan, \textit{A Bright Shining Lie}.  
\textsuperscript{467} For details pertaining to the tactical objectives and key installations assigned to the Marines upon landing at Da Nang, see the Marine Corps’ component order to the OPLAN 32-64, Military Actions to Stabilize the Situation in RVN; and Operation Plan 37-64 for RLT CO, 3d Marine Division, 18 August 1964, folder 025, U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Centre and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX. For the change in mission, see Joint Chiefs of Staff message to Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) 6 March 1965, quoted in Shulimson and Johnson, \textit{The Landing and the Buildup}, 16.
engage in day to day actions against the Viet Cong”.468 Hoping that even a limited security mission would afford him the opportunity to be more active in protecting the airbase, Karch explained to a reporter the morning of the landing that he and his Marines have “been ready to do this job for some time. I imagine the troops are exhilarated. There is a sense of relief at the prospects of getting some action”. He added in disappointment, that “we will be operating strictly in a defensive role. There will no doubt be patrolling, however, within the zone to which we are assigned”.469

That the Marines would remain restricted in their actions and where they could operations certainly was not the result of anything they planned for or wanted. Unsure as to how the population or even the NLF might react to a foreign military presence, United States and GVN civilian and military officials thought it best to limit the Marines to a sanitised eight-square-mile area free of people, guerrillas, and the main forces. For the next four weeks, they waited impatiently behind the airbase’s barbed-wire perimeter or in sand-bagged positions atop two remote hills west of the airbase. Historian John Prados described this period of “forced inaction” as one that “grated on Marines” and on Karch.470 Queried years later during an interview, Karch explained his frustration at the time and how it was not “a satisfactory arrangement” for him or his Marines.471 His response was certainly understandable considering the airbase’s obvious vulnerability to attack. Karch expected to at least secure permission to move some Marines outside the confines of the airbase or off the hilltops to form an active safe zone and interact with the population. This made perfect sense considering that as many as “150,000 civilians were living within 81mm mortar range of the airfield” according to Karch’s

468 Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*, 16.
estimates. With the NLF purportedly in control of much of the population and residing among the people in their homes, Karch believed interaction might produce enough raw information on the main forces to allow him spoil potential attacks against the airbase.

Karch had every reason to be frustrated. The idleness of occupying fixed positions, however, was not his chief complaint. The crux of his complaint lay with the restrictions that put him at odds with the mission and with American and South Vietnamese civilian and military officials to whom he reasoned he could not guarantee the airbase’s security and proper defence if his only task was to occupy high ground around the base or the base itself. “As a practical matter”, Karch continued, “there is no doubt the brigade commander would have been held responsible for any successful assault on the airfield” and should therefore have the freedom and flexibility to defend the airbase according to established military doctrine.

After pleading his case to Westmoreland, Karch received the same instructions and guidance from the day he arrived, and that was aside from providing security on Hills 327 and 268 overlooking the air base from the west and protecting the brigade’s engineer road construction project and the antiaircraft missile battery positioned atop Hill 327, “the overall responsibility for the defense of the Da Nang area remains an ARVN responsibility”. The only fight Karch did win was easing the rules of engagement for protecting the antiair battery and engineers. There, his Marines could patrol a short distance from these remote locations and, if fired upon first, could return fire. To Karch the entire situation, quite understandably, was unacceptable. Either Karch’s desire to be more active were lost on Westmoreland or he chose to

473 Prados, “The Marines’ Vietnam Commitment”.
475 Murphy, Semper Fi Vietnam, 9; and Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965, 5.
ignore it considering most every historian of the war portrays the base security mission as something the Marines embraced willfully. This, however, was not the case.

Karch was not alone in his frustration, disappointment, and desire to do more. Krulak wrote after the war that:

> We were not going to win any counterinsurgency battles sitting in foxholes around a runway, separated from the very people we wanted to protect. Furthermore, the air base was over-looked by hills to the west and northwest, giving the enemy a clear view of the field. On two sides, the airfield complex was cheek-by-jowl with the city of Danang, only a wire fence separating the base from two hundred thousand people—most of them suspicious of us, some of them hostile. ⁴⁷⁷

In Krulak’s judgement, if American and GVN officials did not permit the Marines to take the more aggressive action, this latest effort to stabilize and secure Da Nang “was never going to work” ⁴⁷⁸ He too pressed Westmoreland and senior ARVN officials to grant Karch permission to go beyond their modest positions and safe zone and allow his Marines to interact with the population in hopes of generating tactical intelligence on the enemy. Only with the right information and the freedom to attack them in their assembly areas, Krulak argued sternly, would the Marines be able to properly secure and defend the airbase.⁴⁷⁹ General Wallace Greene backed both Karch and Krulak. Senior civilian officials had different views on the situation. In a press conference covering the Marine deployment to South Vietnam Secretary of State Dean Rusk, in answering a reporter’s question regarding the Marines mission doubled down on the restrictions by explaining that they were not there to fight the insurgency or “to engage in pacification operations. The fact that they are going in there will make it possible for the South Vietnamese

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⁴⁷⁷ Krulak, *First to Fight*, 181.
⁴⁷⁸ Krulak, *First to Fight*.
⁴⁷⁹ Krulak, *First to Fight*. 
forces who have been responsible for the local close-in defense of Da Nang to undertake those (pacification) mission on themselves”.

Pacification, by way of civic actions, would become a hard line for the Marines and a task they assigned eventually to themselves, particularly when the GVN and ARVN proved incapable of doing both. The Marine Corps saw two explicit objectives in pacification and civic actions: first, to “instill in the population of Vietnam confidence in their duly constituted government”; and second, to “gain the confidence and the cooperation of the persons” living in the Marines area of operations. The latter equated to obtaining useful information on guerrilla and main forces from the population. In General Greene’s judgment, pacification and civic actions were going to be critical to the Marines’ success: “From the very first, even before the very first battalion landed at Da Nang, my feeling, a very strong one which I voiced to the Joint Chiefs, was that the real target in Vietnam were not the VC [Viet Cong] and North Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese people”. Doing so, the Marines believed, would better prepare them to engage—directly and indirectly—in the conventional war.

Greene Offers Marines for Offensive Operations

The obstacles limiting and restricting American combat units in South Vietnam had nothing to do with the Marine Corps or its choice of military strategy and operational approach, as the historiography of the war asserts. In fact, of all the Joint Chiefs, General Greene was the first to offer combat units for offensive operations. On the afternoon of 15 March 1965, Greene, along with the other Joint Chiefs and the Secretary McNamara, met with President Johnson at the

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480 Wheeler “No Leathernecks Hurt as Viet Cong Attacks Craft”, 1.
481 3d Marine Division Command Diary, September 1965, enclosure titled The Division Civic Action Program, 9 September 1965, Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection (1201), Vietnam Centre and Archive, Texas Tech University, 1
482 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 46–47.
White House to discuss the situation in South Vietnam. According to a memorandum Greene
drafted as a record of the meeting, after hearing updates on the situation, Johnson asked the
heads of each Service what more he or the ARVN could do to increase the number of “Viet Cong
killed”.483 Although Johnson did not specifically assert that any such action must involve
American ground forces, in Greene’s opinion, his point was obviously a signal that Johnson
wanted more action taken and that direct American military involvement was not out of the
question. Given the Marines’ orders were to defend the airbase and not to engage in operations
against the NLF, Greene pondered the question, but gave no response. At a follow-on gathering
of the Joint Chiefs, Greene announced that, at the next meeting with Johnson, he would propose
that the “9th MEB was prepared to commence offensive killing operations within 24 hours”.484

Upon returning to his office, Greene phoned Lieutenant General Krulak in Hawaii and his
Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Programs, Lieutenant General Henry W. Buse Jr., at
Headquarters Marine Corps to discuss the status of the 9th MEB and to alert them to a potential
change in mission. Four days later, on 19 March, Greene met with the Navy Policy Council
chaired by the secretary of the Navy, Paul H. Nitze. In the meeting, Greene “went on the record”
to emphasize that he “reviewed the combat readiness” of the 9th MEB and certified its
preparedness to “commence offensive killing operations within 24 hours after receiving the order
to do so”.485 Although not directed to do so, Greene wanted the Navy staff to understand that the
Marines were ready to fulfill the requirements expressed by the Joint Chiefs in three separate
messages to the defense secretary regarding their preparedness for “intensifying combat
operations”, and that Lieutenant General Krulak was on his way to South Vietnam to meet with

483 “Memorandum for the Record: Conference with the President 8 April 1965”, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 2, 3, hereafter Conference with the President memo.
484 “Memorandum for the Record: Navy Policy Council Meeting, Statement by the Commandant of the Marine Corps 19 March 1965”, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 2, 1, hereafter Navy Policy Council Meeting memo.
485 Navy Policy Council Meeting memo, 1.
Brigadier General Karch to ensure the brigade was ready “to commence carrying out the President’s directive to kill more Viet Cong when we receive the order”. In a separate meeting with Nitze the following day, Greene reiterated his awareness of Johnson’s query and that Karch completed the necessary steps to posture the brigade for actions to “kill more Viet Cong in South Vietnam”.

On the afternoon of 8 April, the Joint Chiefs and McNamara met again with Johnson. With NSAM 328 and the decision to expand the Marines’ mission only days old, Greene believed he had what details Johnson sought and that the option to use American ground forces to carry out his directive was a real possibility. Johnson opened the discussion with questions pertaining to the number of enemy, South Vietnamese, and Americans killed in South Vietnam since January. Before anyone provided Johnson the answer, he added that he wanted everyone in attendance to provide a response on how their respective Services were going to kill more of the enemy at the next week’s meeting. Seeing this as an opportunity to speak up, Greene asked Johnson for a couple minutes to explain how the Marines had the solution at least at Da Nang. Greene dictated his comments in a post-meeting memorandum:

Mr. President, the last time I came over here was last month on the 15th of March. When I left the meeting that day, I had a clear idea you wanted more Viet Cong killed. I thought that you really meant that, but here it is now almost a month later—the 8th of April—and we are just getting permission to modify our security mission to permit us to go out and kill Viet Cong. Furthermore, we’re just getting approval from the Vietnamese Government (my office notified me just before I came here that Premier [Phan Huy] Quat had given the approval of his government for the introduction of more Marines into the Danang [sic] area and also, I assume approval of a combat-killing mission for the Danang [sic] Marine Forces).

[486 Navy Policy Council Meeting memo.]
[487 “Memorandum for the Record: Summary of Conversation CMC with SecNav 20 March 1965”, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 2, 1, hereafter CMC Conversation with SecNav memo.]
[488 Conference with the President memo, 4.]
[489 Conference with the President memo, 4–5.]
Greene continued by providing Johnson and the other attendees the force laydown and the strength and capabilities of the 9th MEB. Concerning engaging the enemy, Greene moved forward with his strategy:

As soon as these troops have landed and been assigned their positions, the Marines can start combat patrols for the purpose of contacting and killing Viet Cong. The patrol operations will necessarily have to be small-scale at first, due to the security mission for which they are responsible. . . . As we contacted the Viet Cong, we could expand our operations, if necessary, by bringing in addition troops from the 3d MEF located on Okinawa and in Japan. These troops should be brought in as the Marine commander on the ground wants them, in order to expand his operations. ⁴⁹⁰

Greene ended his statement by requesting that Johnson approve the deployment of several Marine fixed-wing squadrons “to operate in close teamwork with our ground Marines” as well as the deployment of entire III MEF, including the 3d Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, in accordance with Krulak and Karch’s recommendations, bringing the total Marines deployed to South Vietnam to roughly 39,000. ⁴⁹¹ Following Greene’s comments, Johnson bellowed to the Joint Chiefs: “That’s the kind of information I want you to give me next Tuesday when you come back to talk again”. ⁴⁹² By the end of the month, Greene reported to Johnson, McNamara, and the other Service chiefs with great confidence that “considerable combat pressure is being exerted now” by the Marines, and their area of operations “can be readily expanded by the introduction of additional forces through the secure beachheads at Da Nang, Phu Bai, and Chu-Lai (to be established)”. ⁴⁹³

⁴⁹⁰ Conference with the President memo, 5–6.
⁴⁹¹ Conference with the President memo, 6. See footnote on page 126 of this thesis for an explanation of the unit designation.
⁴⁹² Conference with the President memo, 7.
⁴⁹³ “Memorandum for the Record: Commandant of the Marine Corps Outline Estimate of the Situation in South Vietnam Based on Specific Analysis of I Corps Area, 28 April 1965”, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 2, 1, hereafter Outline Estimate of the Situation in South Vietnam memo.
Fully aware of the complex and multifaceted problems consuming the northern provinces, Greene assigned one of the most experienced and capable Marine officers to command the expanding Marine force. Given the mission to secure airbase located in the country’s second-most populated cities and improve the enclaves, Major General Walt
acknowledged that he and his Marines, were “into the pacification business”. This, however, was in addition to taking on the main forces in offensive operations. Faced with a similar situation in 1942 in defending an airfield against Japanese forces on the island of Guadalcanal during the Second World War, Walt understood how the conventional war was as important as the unconventional: “It’s going to be a long, hard, drawn-out and hard-fought war. Ultimate victory depends on the Vietnamese. We can just provide the muscle”. Exactly how he was going to do this was clear. As he developed an understanding of the unconventional path ahead, he was quick to elaborate on the conventional approach.

We’re going to do a lot of night work. At Guadalcanal, practically all our work was at night. . . The heat and terrain bothers them just as much as it does us. . . You cannot move a large group of men in this kind of terrain. . . Got to find the enemy and fix him before he can strike. He’s got to mass before he can do any good. . . Got to get outposts out as far as terrain will allow. . . Keep ’em back 15–16 miles, they aren’t going to hurt us. . . I will keep pushing patrols out. Prevent the enemy from massing. It’s extremely important to prevent this. Got to keep them off balance.

Walt first, however, wanted to study the intricacies of the social and political conflict tearing apart the region, to which he confessed to having “neither a real understanding” of nor a “clear idea as to how to win it”. It took little time for him to reach the conclusion that what he owned was a “destructive mission and the constructive mission”, and that his Marines had “to do both jobs at the same time” if they were to secure and improve the base areas and enclaves of the northern provinces.

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496 Stibbens, “Pacific Command”.
498 Blanchard, “Pacification”, 42.
Organising for General War while Fighting a Limited One

During Phase I, the number of Marines in South Vietnam rose from just more than 5,000 to 25,964.\(^{499}\) The structure of the Marine Corps’ major coordinating command changed with each increase. In spite of labeling the population the ultimate prize and its pacification the ultimate objective, the Marine Corps kept the organisation and structure of its coordinating command and combat units oriented on conventional military operations. This is likely because the Marine Corps viewed civic actions and pacification as techniques and tasks that all combat units should be trained in and capable of doing. Greene’s predecessor, General Shoup, argued to Congress in 1964 that although the Marine Corps “recognized that fighting guerrillas is an inherent part of landing force operations”, the Service still had to be prepared for conventional military operations. His job, therefore, was to equip and train “tactical units to combat rabble, insurgents, guerrillas, or an enemy equipped with modern conventional or nuclear weapons”.\(^{500}\) The conflict in South Vietnam, from the Marine Corps’ perspective, was no different.

In advance of the remaining Marine aviation and ground combat units deploying to South Vietnam, Greene directed that Krulak establish an expeditionary force level command at Da Nang to oversee all Marine functions and operations. Taking command on 4 June, Walt absorbed the 9th MEB and assumed control of what arguably was the most powerful Marine forces assembled since the end of the Second World War.\(^{501}\) His principal ground combat organisation for engaging the enemy and the population was the 3d Marine Division, which he commanded in addition to the duties of commanding all Marines in the country until 1966. Inside the division, Walt had three infantry regiments (3d, 4th, and 9th Marines), each comprising three battalions,


\(^{500}\) Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 548.

and an artillery regiment (12th Marines) made up of four firing battalions.\textsuperscript{502} Separate armour, engineer, amphibian assault, and reconnaissance battalions rounded out the division’s capabilities.\textsuperscript{503} Arriving piecemeal, the division’s core was present, as was the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing’s aircraft and support squadrons.

Days into his new command, Walt’s study of intelligence reports and his personal observations led him to believe that the main forces and NVA were increasing their presence in areas close to the enclaves. Finding himself in the same conundrum that Karch faced two months earlier, Walt set out to expand his area of operations and adopt a more aggressive and offensive posture. During a staff meeting the III MAF operations officer, Colonel Hardy Hay, expressed his support for Walt’s desire to expand the area of operations, but warned they were unable to do this because their “hands were tied by ComUSMACV directives”.\textsuperscript{504} Walt petitioned General Westmoreland for a change in policy. On 15 June, Westmoreland authorised search and destroy operations immediately around the Marine bases, provided that these operations contributed to their defence.\textsuperscript{505} This was only part of Walt’s fight to get his Marines moving in the right direction.

The other fight Walt had to win was negotiating an expanded area of operations with the ARVN I Corps commander. Following the mid-April release of Westmoreland’s model for implementing NSAM 328 and the offensive enclave concept, Karch approached Major General Thi to expand the Marines’ area of operations and to secure permission for their more active use. Despite granting a modest four-kilometer increase, Thi authorized the Marines to patrol outside

\textsuperscript{502} Ed Gilbert, \textit{The U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War}, 19–34.
\textsuperscript{503} Ed Gilbert, \textit{The U.S. Marine Corps in the Vietnam War}.
\textsuperscript{505} Shulimson and Johnson, \textit{The Landing and the Buildup}, 46.
the airbase in the sparsely populated areas. Present at the meeting was a somewhat thankful, yet frustrated, Krulak. “Thi was opposed to any patrol or offensive action on our part outside the airfield perimeter”, Krulak recalled. “With respect to the area south of the field and on the bank of the Da Nang River”, Thi told them, “this is enemy country. Your Marines are not ready to operate there”. Karch’s senior Marine at Phu Bai, Colonel Edwin B. Wheeler, experienced relatively similar frustration in trying to convince his ARVN counterpart to allow the Marines to get out of their airfield perimeter defences. Wheeler eventually won approval for “quick reaction offensive moves” so long as they were part of the overall base defensive plan. These increases, however, brought with it 2,406 people in Wheeler’s area of operations and another 11,441 around Da Nang, whom Karch considered potential sources of information on a suspected main force battalions operating close to and within both enclaves. Now, it was Walt’s turn to get an expansion, which he did. By the end of June, III MAF had control of 170 square miles around Da Nang, a 61-square-mile area around Phu Bai, and upwards of 104 square miles around Chu Lai and permission to conduct limited offensive operations. Along with the increase in square miles came a dramatic increase in the population and the potential for improved intelligence collections. At Da Nang, the Marines operated among nearly 50,000 people, while at Phu Bai they had another 50,000 people. At Chu Lai, they interacted with a little more than 18,000 people. The increases, however, would take time to negotiate. Contrary to the historiography of the war, it was neither the Marine Corps nor the offensive enclave concept preventing the

507 Shulimson and Johnson, *The Landing and the Buildup*.
Marines from becoming more active and moving beyond the immediate areas surrounding their beachheads as Westmoreland so frequently argued.

Even with the Walt choosing to enter into pacification, with one minor exception the he kept the division’s task organization and that of its subordinate combat units structured for general war. To ensure pacification received proper attention, Walt added to the expeditionary force, division, and wing staffs a civic action staff section. Even with the Walt choosing to enter into pacification, with one minor exception the he kept the division’s task organization and that of its subordinate combat units structured for general war. To ensure pacification received proper attention, Walt added to the expeditionary force, division, and wing staffs a civic action staff section.513 Two months later, he added to each infantry battalion and regiment a staff section to plan, coordinate, and integrate independent civic actions into daily small and large unit operations as well as to report the impacts of civic actions on the pacification efforts within a given area.514 These changes, however, did not take effect until October and December, respectively. Until then, civic actions were “more of a spontaneous people-to-people effort carried out by the individual Marine” and not a specified task.515

As for day-to-day operations, while the overt focus might very well have been on the population, in reality the thinking was that the Marines had to be ready to engage the main forces or NVA. To be ready, Walt kept a regiment on a short tether to “render combat support” to the ARVN.516 Believing smaller units covered more ground at a much quicker pace than larger units, and to make it easier to interact with the people, he had the other regiments saturate the enclaves and outlying villages, hills, and valleys with squad-, platoon-, and company-size patrols. Navy corpsman attached to each patrol treated men, women, and children while the Marines provided security or searched for signs of guerrilla and VCI activity. Others repaired dwelling and distributed food, clothes, and soap. There were expanded civic action efforts as well. Infantry

514 Parker, U.S. Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps.
515 Parker, U.S. Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps, 6.
516 ComUSMACV ltr to CG III MEF, 5 May 1965, Subj: Letter of Instruction, encl. 11, III MAF Command Chronology, May 1965, HD 2; and Shulimson, The Landing and the Buildup, 236.
platoons and companies, when not patrolling, trained village-level security units, or Popular Forces, to defend the villages and hamlets. In addition to the foot bridges and wells installed, the division’s engineers repaired roads and trails. Medical officers held village-wide sick call, provided inoculations and dental services, and, when necessary, evacuated villagers in need of advanced medical care.

Walt’s emphasis on defending the population and using kindness went a long way to separate the people from the estimated 130,000 guerrillas moving freely between the enclaves and countryside and the 70,000 main force and NVA soldiers waiting for the opportunity to attack a complacent ARVN or Marine unit or intercede if counterguerrilla and pacification efforts proved successful.517 The fact that Walt wanted his Marines to show more compassion had no impact on his intention to use more lethal options to defeat whatever enemy force presented a target. According to journalist Joseph Alsop’s observations of Walt in February 1966, he “is naturally eager to make a large contribution to the forward strategy”.518 For the time being, and until presented with a viable conventional target, guerrilla forces and the VCI were the focus. Krulak’s theory was that the:

> common men-in-the-rice-paddy will testify that they have never seen an organized and uniformed Viet Cong unit. Most of them will express puzzlement when asked about invaders from North Vietnam. . . . And while he will probably be pleased to hear that ill has befallen the organized units, he will be eternally grateful to anyone who can lift from him and his family the millstone of guerrilla terror and enslavement.519

The gratitude he spoke of and that he, Greene, and Walt agreed would come was information.

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518 The “forward strategy” was the unofficial label given to Westmoreland’s search and destroy approach and plan to get soldiers and Marines moving out of the enclaves and into the countryside to engage the main forces and NVA. See Joseph Alsop, “Matter of Fact . . . General Gavin’s Dienbienphus” The Washington Post, 7 February 1966, A17.
Krulak’s Initial Perspective and Assessment

Despite the credit historians of the Vietnam War extend to Krulak for his insistence that the South Vietnamese people should be the focus and that only a pacification-oriented approach and strategy would win the war, in early June 1965, he urged Greene and Walt to move ahead with the offensive enclave concept in the absence of further instructions from President Johnson and General Westmoreland. Convinced also that Marine clear-and-hold operations in conjunction with their civic action efforts were making real progress, he believed that the results would provide them the leverage to influence the future course of the war on the ground. Quick to advertise their successes, Krulak summarized the Marines’ approach with the first of two assessments he drafted for Greene detailing how the Marines should fight the war in the northern provinces, with the intent that his 10-page “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam” serve as a template for United States to implement throughout the rest of the country.\footnote{520 Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”, 1.}

The concept Krulak envision focused more on the conventional military operations than anything else. The so-called “nonmilitary” aspects, such as the economic, political, social, and religious, he decided, should be “integrated, adequate and timely” with standard military efforts.\footnote{521 Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.

The plan he outlined consisted of an aggressive offensive approach to dealing with the main forces and NVA. Broken down into parts ranging from the military geography and aspect of terrain to opposition tactics, both conventional and unconventional, and ending with the countermilitary strategy and tactics the Marines should apply, Krulak laid out succinctly his thoughts on how to win the village war, but with more of an eye toward resolving the conventional threat resident in the countryside.
In his comments on the military geography, Krulak insisted on limiting Marine operations to the coastal plain and enclaves where the “concentrations of population . . . and wealth” were more important to the “current phase of the battle” than seizing or controlling terrain.\textsuperscript{522} This plan was important for two reasons. First, the coastal plain accounted for two-thirds of the population and three-quarters of the wealth.\textsuperscript{523} By securing and improving it and keeping the NLF out, the Marines “will have made a sound basic step in winning the counterinsurgency battle”.\textsuperscript{524} Second, by focusing on the coastal plain, the countryside and highlands lose much of their significance, which had very little already. The NLF, in Krulak’s view, would have to choose between subsisting on “grasshoppers and snakes in the mountains or to give up and become peaceful members of society”.\textsuperscript{525} If they elect not to join society, Krulak boasted, their only other option is to come out of the mountains and countryside and fight the Marines for access and control of the resources they desperately required to maintain the insurgency. Doing so played to the Marines advantage, which is what Krulak wanted.

The bulk of Krulak’s assessment emphasises his thinking towards an approach to strategy and the Marines’ mission, which was to win the support of the people and, more importantly, to take the offensive against Communist forces and destroy them. In his comments on strategy, Krulak acknowledges that its purpose is to redirect the population’s loyalties to the GVN as well as control of the country’s resources. The purpose, however, did not end here. After regaining the support of the people and control of resources, the Marines next objective should be to “expand further our military influence, compressing the VC [Viet Cong] into the unproductive

\textsuperscript{522} Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.  
\textsuperscript{523} Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”, 2.  
\textsuperscript{524} Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.  
\textsuperscript{525} Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.
mountain areas”. To prevent the NLF’s return, Krulak stressed Marine tactics “must be offensive in nature, aimed at tranquilizing areas of steady growth size, in order that the population thus liberated will provide, in growing measure, the essential intelligence we need to pursue the offensive battle”. The most effective way to accomplish this was through a series of secure strong points on the coast, which would serve as “bases for constantly expanding offensive operations”.

The strong points Krulak speaks to emphasises his and the Service-wide study of the NLF tactics dating back to the First Indochina War, as well as how to best maximise Marine Corps offensive doctrine. With each point, stretching from Hue to Qui Nhon secure, seaborne logistics in place, and no chance of the Marines being cut off from their resources, Krulak was confident that, “faced with the mobile aggressiveness on our part”, the main forces would be unable to implement the same tactics used against the French. Confronted with the fact that it no longer controlled the population or the resources it needs, and with the initiative belonging to the Marines, the main forces would have to attack the coastal base areas or the areas in between with the objective of interdicting the Marines’ supply lines and interior lines of communications. Either option was counterproductive to their survival because it meant they had to come to the Marines, “bringing them into the range of our concentrated fire power on terms unfavorable to themselves”.

A strong offensive posture presented by the Marines put the main forces at even greater risk. Krulak warned that the Marines should expect the main forces to do both, but that they can limit their effectiveness with sustained offensive operations from secure coastal bases. He went

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528 Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.
530 Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.
so far as to list the offensive actions the Marines should take: large day and night patrols and
ambushes to deny the enemy the initiative with close air support, artillery, and naval gunfire
available at all times. He recommended also developing a strong main line of resistance along
critical terrain features overlooking the base areas. Most important, he insisted on conducting
“aggressive search and clear operations, aimed at liberating areas under VC [Viet Cong]
domination”. He stressed further that, “by our own offensive action, there should be a gradual
and continual enlargement of the secure areas to the point where they unit with one another in an
identifiable area of friendly control”. Much of Krulak’s rationale was the result of his study of
British actions during the Malayan Emergency from 1948–60 and French operations during the
First Indochina War. He studies the writings of British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert
Thompson and pushed for the Marine Corps and Westmoreland to adopt Thompson’s
counterinsurgency theory and its basic principles.

Krulak concluded that the Marines currently under Walt’s command were already in the
process of applying aspects of this approach in the Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai enclaves with
positive results and should continue to do so for the unforeseeable future, inside and outside the
Marines’ area of responsibility, to create the oil-spot effect he and others desired. As Krulak
expected, the main forces reacted by moving out of the mountains and countryside and attacking
the Marines at and between the base areas, making them vulnerable to Marine supporting arms
and “offensive forces”. As for maintaining the initiative, Krulak advised that the Marines
should not fall into the trap of wasting resources in areas of little significance. Rather, they
should “continue fighting the battles we can win in the areas we need to hold now, in preference

531 Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.
534 Krulak, First to Fight, 180.
535 Krulak, “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam”.
to fighting battles which we will probably lose on terrain which is not at this time critical our survival”.

536 In a letter to Greene dated 19 June 1965, Krulak boasted about the progress of the approach he devised and Walt was using efficiently. “Our operations in Vietnam are going along satisfactorily” Krulak noted. 537 “We have killed a substantial number of VC [Viet Cong], and are killing them more and more as time goes on”. 538 Although aware of the need to track the progress of the nonmilitary aspects of the conflict and on the impact civic actions on the Marines’ success, it is clear Krulak also was enticed by progress against the main forces. By early July, not only was Krulak pleased with the progress Walt made in reducing the VCI’s influence and guerrilla activity in the coastal areas, he noted the gains made in halting main force freedom of movement in the countryside as well. To capture their progress, he tasked his staff with generating studies codifying the balanced fusion of civic actions and large unit operations.

A Marine Regimental Commander’s Perspective

Upon returning from South Vietnam, Colonel Wheeler articulated his thoughts on the Marines’ approach to securing and improving the enclaves in an article published in the Marine Corps Gazette in November 1965. From his observations, the campaign up that point, “with a few exceptions, was largely a company and platoon commander’s war of patrol actions”. 539 Aggressively attempting to take the night away from the guerrillas, small units occupied ambush sites and assembly areas in preparation for a larger clear and hold operation in a nearby villages the next morning. According to Wheeler, the Marine focus was two-fold: to “kill VC” and to

537 Krulak to Greene, 19 June 1965, HD, Krulak Papers, Box 1, Folder 3: Correspondence, 2.
538 Krulak to Greene.
“bend over backwards to avoid harming the people or needlessly damaging their property”. He added that a remarkable fact is that over the five-month period from April to August there were six civilians accidentally killed or injured during operations involving 300,000 Marine-days and resulting in over 500 VC casualties. This statistic reflects favorably on the remarkable discriminatory ability . . . especially since the Marine-day figure is based on rifle company strengths only, and that the Viet Cong casualties were inflicted during several hundreds of operations involving scores of village complexes.

From May through July, Wheeler’s battalion’s concentrated on flooding their area of operations with small unit patrols. Platoon- and company-size patrols intensified so much that “fifty percent of the strength of the infantry battalions and two-thirds of the reconnaissance unit were usually out on patrol at any given time”. Attrition, even at the small unit level, was no less important. Inflicting only moderate casualties, his headquarters reported that patrols accounted for at least 3 to 4 guerrillas killed and even brought back 6 to 8 bodies for intelligence gathering and exploitation. The largest number of enemy killed by a patrol, Wheeler recalls, was 16, though it did not include those the Marines targeted with mortars, artillery, and close air support. By the end of July, his regiment controlled more than 200 square miles around the Da Nang airfield. In addition to providing basic medical assistance, he relocated refugees away from NLF base areas, freeing the Marines to use supporting arms without fear of killing or injuring civilians or damaging property.

With large swaths of the population under his protection Wheeler and the rest of the division changed directions: “It became evident early in the game that the ultimate objective of

our operations was the people”.546 Convincing the people that the Marines were in South Vietnam to help, not to occupy the country or harm them was a difficult task. As more of the populated areas and key terrain came under his control, however, Wheeler recognized that to retain both “the destruction of enemy forces, when they could be found” was not only necessary, but “eagerly prosecuted” throughout his regiment.547

**Attack on the Da Nang Airfield**

On 1 July, despite the success of the counterguerrilla war and civic actions, the Marines’ realized their biggest concern over not having the flexibility to conduct offensive operations against the main forces and NVA held up in the countryside. Sometime on the night of 30 June, a main force special operations company of 85 soldiers armed with small arms, automatic rifles, and medium-range mortars crossed the Cau Do River south of the airbase and reached the southern-most perimeter just after midnight.548 While the company attacked the helicopter parking area with mortars and recoilless rifle fire, a 13-man NVA demolitions squad penetrated the outer and inner strands of protective wire and proceeded to the flight line where it damaged an Air Force Lockheed C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft and two Convair F-102 Delta Dagger fighter aircraft and destroyed a third fighter and two additional cargo aircraft—all with explosive satchel charges.549 One airman and three Marines died of their wounds as a result of the attack.550 The company and squad withdrew under fire from the Marine reaction force from the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines (3/9).551

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549 III MAF Command Chronology, July 1965, 3.
550 III MAF Command Chronology, July 1965, 3-4.
551 The next day the ARVN detained a wounded NVA intelligence officer that reportedly was part of the demolitions
Upon hearing news of the attack, Krulak boarded an aircraft in Hawaii and was in Da Nang by midmorning. Joining Walt and his senior Marine staff and commanders to discuss the matter, Krulak addressed the urgency in expanding the Marine area of operations and for ARVN approval to take offensive action. He later recalled that, in his judgement, “we had better get moving off the airfield perimeter or there would be more of the same kind of attack”. After an informal investigation, part of the reason the attack was so successful was the decision by Walt to divide 3/9, leaving only half the battalion available for the security mission. According to the battalion commander, in the end Walt believed “that the need for more sweeps and offensive action justified this thinning of the airfield defense”.

Krulak accompanied Walt the next day to discuss with General Thi the attack, an expansion of the area of operations, and getting the Marines involved in defending the airfield from the outside. Thi, concerned still with the Marines operating in the populated areas, asked that Walt put in writing his request for an expansion. Walt sent an official letter to Thi on 5 July, requesting an expansion of 4 miles south of the Cau Do River and 19 miles north to the Hai Van Pass. With Thi’s approval on 20 July, Marines could now conduct offensive operations anywhere inside the four ARVN-designated zones of this area both independent of, or, with ARVN forces. The Marines could now move among the people and assist in pacification as

squad. During questioning, the officer told the ARVN he was a member of the 3d Battalion, 18th NVA Regiment. See Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 37.


554 CG III MAF ltr to CG I Corps and Tac Zone I, Subj: Expansion to Tactical Area of Responsibility date 05 July 1965, HD, 1–2; and Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965, 3-1.

long as they did so “in a spirit of friendly cooperation”. Colonel Hay remembered later how he believed the attack convinced the ARVN’s senior leadership in the northern provinces that the time had come for an expansion of the Marine area of operations for offensive operations. “I believe what really got us going and extending out patrols was the attack on the Da Nang air base [sic]”, Hay recalled. “We then began to seriously hunt and destroy the enemy before he could bring his weapons to bear on our enclaves”.

While discussions were taking place, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines (3/3), became the first Marine unit to engage the main forces when, on 1 July, it assembled in a valley south of Da Nang for an operation along the Tra Bong River. Concerned with acting on little to no information on the enemy, for four days the battalion saturated the valley with day and night patrols and offered medical assistance to surrounding villages and hamlets—all in an attempt to confirm information reported by patrols.

During the first night, small enemy patrols probed the battalion’s defences. Convinced the information provided by locals was valid, the battalion commander planned a large unit operation for 5 July with the goal of destroying all “Viet Cong facilities within the area” and to “kill or capture all Viet Cong found”. The first large unit operation netted little enemy contact and few casualties during its first three days. On 8 July, action on the Trung Phan peninsula accounted for 11 enemy killed. It was unclear to the Marines as to whether those encountered were guerrillas or main force elements despite intelligence reports warning of the potential of

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556 CG I Corps and Tac Zone I ltr to CG III MAF, 3.
557 Hay comments.
558 Hay comments.
making contact with individuals or as many as “seven battalions” purportedly on the peninsula. On 13 July, the battalion faced a main force company of up to 200 soldiers, killing 48 at the expense of two Marines killed and three wounded. The operation was a sign of things to come.

**Operation Lien Ket IV**

A few short weeks following the success of 3/3’s operation on the Tra Bong River, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines (2/4) received a warning order to prepare to conduct a large unit operation south of Chu Lai in conjunction with an ARVN regimental size operation. The continuous reconnaissance of the area since 30 June indicated the battalion would be operating in an area that was home to “hard core VC or North Vietnamese troops” and that the small elements they might encounter are likely local guides or reconnaissance for a large force attempting to gain familiarity of the area for future operations.

Operation Lien Ket IV commenced on 28 July with an early morning helicopter insert. The battalion spent the entire first day sweeping west of its insert area, making contact with small main force units scattered along the approach route. As each of the battalion’s four companies advanced, it came under sporadic sniper and small-arms fire until reaching the location the fire came from, at which time the enemy would break contact and moved to higher ground. Company E made the most progress, when it caught a main force unit occupying Bien Yen village. With the support of mortar fire and close air support, the Marines assaulted the

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562 3d Battalion, 3d Marines Command Chronology, July 1965, encl. Intelligence Summary.
village and secured it later that evening before settling into defensive positions for the night. At first light, the battalion continued sweeping west without incident.\textsuperscript{566}

Aside from the light casualties suffered on both sides, there was several valuable lessons for the Marines to take with them from the operation. The first was the discipline demonstrated by the individual main force soldier. Not until the Marines were directly on top of an enemy soldier did he cease fire and give way to the assault.\textsuperscript{567} The second was the enemy’s appreciation for the terrain and vegetation, which he used to his advantage each time he evaded the assault. In each engagement, the enemy’s tactic was to draw the Marines in close and then use hand grenades to create confusion, and worse, casualties.\textsuperscript{568} Only when the situation was clearly to their advantage did the enemy stay and fight or counterattack. These and other were important lessons for the Marines as they continued to expound their presence outside the enclaves.

**Doubling Down on the Enclave Concept**

On 10 July 1965, General Greene attended a meeting between Secretary McNamara and the Joint Chiefs to discuss the escalation of American efforts and to give a report on the progress his Marines were having on securing and improving the northern provinces. McNamara opened the discussion by announcing that President Johnson informed him earlier that he “intended to move forward with in South Vietnam”. McNamara asked that each of the Services plan for “necessary action” and provide feedback on mobilisation, deployment, and employment options.\textsuperscript{569} For the time being, and based on the agreements made during the Honolulu conference in April, Johnson ordered McNamara to deploy 25 U.S infantry battalions (totaling

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{566} 2d Battalion, 4th Marines Command Chronology, July 1965, II-2.
\item \textsuperscript{567} 2d Battalion, 4th Marines Command Diary, 1–31 July 1965, II-1.
\item \textsuperscript{568} 2d Battalion, 4th Marines Command Diary, 1–31 July 1965, II-2
\item \textsuperscript{569} “Memorandum for the Record: Escalation of Effort in South Vietnam 10 July 1965”, HD, Greene Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, 1, hereafter Escalation of Effort memo.
\end{itemize}
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115,000 combat personnel) to South Vietnam by 15 September with a gradual build up to 34 battalions (totaling 175,000 combat personnel) by 1 November, though Johnson “had not yet decided on a specific program” or strategy.\textsuperscript{570}

While the Services formulated their plans to support a decision ranging from “the establishment of a ‘cordon sanitaire’ extending the length of South Vietnam and Laos at the 17th parallel” to a full invasion of North Vietnam, McNamara and the new ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, departed the United States on 14 July for a visit with Westmoreland to assess progress and recommend future courses of action to Johnson.\textsuperscript{571} McNamara expected Johnson to make his final decision within days of his return. In the meantime, Greene intended to reiterate to Johnson that the United States must stay the course and retain the enclave concept, though he convinced himself that McNamara had already decided on course of action and was only involving the Joint Chiefs because “he felt he had to”.\textsuperscript{572} Confident the idea of a new strategy and an increase in American ground forces had not been thoroughly studied, and that the Service chiefs would not be consulted, “the chances are that he is wrong or partially wrong in his proposed action”.\textsuperscript{573} Regardless, upon returning to his headquarters, Greene called a meeting with his chief of staff and his Joint Planning Group (JPG) to develop a mobilisation, deployment, and employment plan for presentation to the Secretary Nitze, first, and then to McNamara and the Joint Chiefs on 12 July.

The guidance Greene provided the JPG before it went into planning spoke more to providing Marine forces for a conventional fight than for pacification or even a counterinsurgency. Emphasising that he did not foresee the situation in South Vietnam

\textsuperscript{570} Escalation of Effort memo.
\textsuperscript{571} For the purposes of this discussion, the term \textit{cordon sanitaire} refers to a protective barrier, such as buffer states, against a potentially aggressive nation or a dangerous influence, such as an ideology. Escalation of Effort memo, 3.
\textsuperscript{572} Escalation of Effort memo.
\textsuperscript{573} Escalation of Effort memo.
improving in the next year, and that “there would be an even further commitment of U.S. strength”, Greene suggested the group look at moving the 7th Marines, an infantry regiment, from Okinawa, Japan, to South Vietnam as well as the remainder of the 1st Marine Division (comprised of infantry, artillery, and other combat and combat support units) from Camp Pendleton, California, to Okinawa in the event that the president escalated the American military role.\(^574\) In his own handwritten notes, Greene alerted the JPG to a separate conversation following the 10 July meeting, where McNamara asked Greene whether he foresaw the need to discontinue the Marine presence in the northern provinces and instead form a “quick reaction force” made up of Marines on board amphibious ships.\(^575\) Mentioning nothing about pacification, Greene replied that “unless a requirement developed for amphibious operations, Marine units should continue operations ashore”.\(^576\) Greene did, however, anticipate Westmoreland using Marines for amphibious operations “in both South and North Vietnam” for “small scale operations along the South Vietnamese coast and large scale against N. Vietnam”.\(^577\)

Two days later, the JPG produced a report detailing the Marine Corps’ support for the increase in force totals and a deployment timeline. In addition to his recommendations, the “Mobilization and Deployment Concept for Marine Corps Units” memorandum presented Greene’s perspective on how the war should be fought by stressing a continuation of operations to secure and improve the coastal base areas and enclaves. Of significant note, the brief geographic description of the northern provinces and its military significance on the human terrain (population) was included in this brief. In concert with what Greene stressed throughout 1964 and early 1965, the populated areas, aside from their recruitment appeal, remained areas of

\(^{574}\) Escalation of Effort memo, 4.  
\(^{575}\) Escalation of Effort memo, 6.  
\(^{576}\) Escalation of Effort memo.  
\(^{577}\) Escalation of Effort memo.
concentrated wealth where American combat units should focus their efforts first if they were “to gain the loyalties of the people” and control the production and flow of resources there.578

More important, the reports explained that the “prerequisite to achieving this basic purpose”, however, was “by conducting operations in the intermediate piedmont” and countryside.579 The JPG recommended that the Marines be “projected north to Hue/Phu Bai and Quang Tri to control the juncture of vital routes of communications in vicinity of the 17th parallel and the population concentration in those areas” as well as south “to Chu Lai and Quang Ngai to initially control Viet Cong egress from the northern portion of the central highlands and entry into the population centres in those areas”. The root purpose of Marines in both locations, according to the JPG, was the “destruction and/or expulsion of the Viet Cong from coastal areas” in addition to isolating NLF forces, inhibiting their reinforcement, and deterring North Vietnam from interfering in the war.580 As for amphibious operations, the JPG answered Greene’s intent by offering Marine air and ground units for naval operations aimed at sealing off the coast, the demilitarised zone, and those mountain passes where U.S. ground forces had a limited presence.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Chief of Staff of the Army General Harold K. Johnson informed Greene during a brief sidebar discussion that a “study group” was conducting a review of the “strategy” for South Vietnam.581 This revelation coincided with Lieutenant General Buse informing him just prior to the meeting that he received word of a secret study through his Air

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578 Mobility and Deployment Concept memo, 1965, II-1.
579 Mobility and Deployment Concept memo, 1965.
580 Mobility and Deployment Concept memo, 1965, II-2.
581 Greene’s handwritten notes on Escalation of Effort memo, 7. Greene often made notes or drafted questions on documents sent to him for final review and approval. These documents and notes are part of the Greene Papers and provide an insight as to what he was thinking at the time.
Force counterpart. An alarmed Greene called Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell upon returning to his office. McConnell informed Greene that:

Goodpaster had been assigned the job of determining what the “strategy” in Vietnam should be with present strength and with proposed increased strength—that this info was to be used to “answer questions during Sec Def trip to S Viet [South Vietnam] (starts Wed 14 July); that Goodpaster had selected certain officers from the Jt [Joint] Staff to help him with this crash study: that Army and Air Force officers were on the study panel but that no Marine Corps officers were members. The astounding thing to me about this is that the Chairman has not seen fit to mention this “study” to the Jt Chiefs (McConnell said it was being handled on a “hush-hush” basis—but that his AF officer was keeping him informed!) and that Goodpaster did not select a Marine officer member although USMC has most US combat troops in S. Vietnam.

Analysis of CM 744–65

Greene’s displeasure with the commissioning of what he concluded was a misinterpretation of the enclave concept was second only to his frustration over McNamara moving forward without a Marine officer in the group or, at a minimum, affording at least someone on Greene’s staff an opportunity to review and comment on the findings pertaining to the enclave concept before the report went forward. After hearing what Buse learned before the meeting, Greene was sure the study contained discrepancies that could negatively influence how McNamara and, potentially, President Johnson viewed progress in the war and also dull the prospects of applying the concept as a template for the future military strategy or, even worse, discontinuing it. Discouraged, Greene asked Buse to document what he knew of the study and

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582 Greene’s handwritten notes on Escalation of Effort memo.
583 Greene’s handwritten notes on Escalation of Effort memo.
examine CM 744–65 at once to prepare an official response highlighting the study’s major points (and flaws).\textsuperscript{586}

Although Greene was well aware of the criticism directed at the enclave concept before learning about the Goodpaster Study, he was obviously not aware of ongoing attempts to convince McNamara or Johnson to abandon the concept and commit U.S. ground forces to a strategy devoid of the responsibility to protect the population, secure the coastal base areas, and defeat the guerrilla forces and the VCI. After all, since the arrival of the 9th MEB, a large part of their mission was securing, improving, and, now, maintaining security of the enclaves and the surrounding areas. This, in Greene’s judgement, was an enduring responsibility and a necessary task if the Marines and the Army were to continue expanding the secure enclaves into the countryside, which this chapter points out.

On 17 July, Buse presented Greene with his analysis of CM 744–65. “Intensification of Military Operations, Concept and Appraisal” comprised commentary from Buse and three of his principal staff officers: the head of the JPG, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Aviation and the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-3 (Operations).\textsuperscript{587} His first and foremost concern was that the Goodpaster Study “was not coordinated with the services” or involved the Marine Corps in any way.\textsuperscript{588} This had an obvious negative impact on the Marine Corps in that it signaled a potential departure from the rationale behind implementing the enclave concept, shaping the current strategic vision for U.S. combat operations in South Vietnam. Buse’s recommendation that Greene brand the study “invalid” fueled the argument presented by Westmoreland and DePuy

\textsuperscript{586} Drea, \textit{McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam}.
\textsuperscript{587} Based on Memo from Buse to Greene, Tabs A, B, and C, Headquarters Marine Corps produced two additional documents summarising the points Greene wished to present to the Joint Chiefs and Secretary McNamara concerning the misinterpretations of the enclave concept within the Goodpaster Study. Those points became the foundation of the Marine Corps’ official rebuttal and response to opponents of the enclave concept and balanced approach. See “Study Entitled ‘Intensification of the Military Operations in Vietnam—Concept and Appraisal,’” 21 July 1965”, HD, Greene Papers, Box 3, Folder 4. hereafter HQMC Point Paper on CM 744-65.
\textsuperscript{588} Memo from Buse to Greene, 1.
that the Marine Corps was against attrition and offensive operations.\textsuperscript{589} Goodpaster tended to side with their assessments as well and labeled the enclave concept as “bogging down” and a recipe for “failing rather than winning”.\textsuperscript{590} Given the directness and details of Buse’s response, the study group’s mischaracterisations of the enclave concept were the likely impetus behind Westmorland’s insistence on changing the military strategy and Secretary McNamara’s directive to conduct the study.

The memorandum included a more detailed analysis and break down of each of the study group’s assumptions related to the enclave concept. Buse’s point-by-point response highlighted the group’s failure to understand the enclave concept and the Marine Corps’ position on offensive operations; the first of which was an oversimplification of “locating main force units” and presumption that the NLF will always operate in battalion or larger-size elements. This, by far, was not what the Marine Corps believed or had experienced in Vietnam to date. “If we could locate them at will”, Buse replied, “our troubles would be over that we’d win in a few months”.\textsuperscript{591} Realising this was not always going to be the case, and that the main forces were prone to breaking down into small units to evade contact with U.S. ground forces, locating, fixing, and destroying them would be difficult, making large unit sweeping operations a waste of time and resources and security important.\textsuperscript{592} The only way to know their exact location was by providing “protection to the population on a continuing basis” and “to procure their loyalty”.\textsuperscript{593}

They also discussed how Major General Walt could best employ his force against the hybrid enemy he was facing. The Marine Corps believed Walt could use standard infantry battalions in both a counterguerrilla and pacification role and transition them to conventional

\textsuperscript{589} Memo from Buse to Greene.
\textsuperscript{590} Memo from Buse to Greene.
\textsuperscript{591} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab A, “JPG Bucktag Comment on JCS 2343/630”, 2.
\textsuperscript{592} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab A, “JPG Bucktag Comment on JCS 2343/630”.
\textsuperscript{593} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab A, “JPG Bucktag Comment on JCS 2343/630”.

204
operations when necessary. Buse noted, like Greene, that the study underestimated the number of battalions required to secure an area as large and complex as the northern provinces and the population’s support prior to going on the offensive.\textsuperscript{594} To this he offered that such an assumption would result in U.S. ground forces reacting to guerrilla attacks on key installations or on conducting blind sweeps, both of which were assessed to be inefficient and unproductive options.\textsuperscript{595}

The sequence of operations was something the Marine Corps emphasised as much as it did a balanced approach to the enclave concept. The study’s recommendation to forego Phase II and III operations in favor of immediately assuming the Phase IV tasks of occupying and conducting offensive operations from inland bases was a point Buse addressed. Overlooking Phase II and III operations, he assessed, would do little to keep the population secure and impact the quantity and quality of information the Marines collected on the main forces and NVA.\textsuperscript{596}

Greene’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Aviation provided his perspective on the study’s comments on the Marines’ employment of aviation assets, noting that there were discrepancies in both the number of assets as well as the number of monthly sorties required.\textsuperscript{597} The figures provided in CM 744-65 reflected a static mission sortie generation rather than an operational effectiveness assessment, which in turn drove an inaccurate assessment of the number and type of squadrons required to support future Marine operations.\textsuperscript{598} The study provided neither depth to the analysis of the core functions of Marine aviation to date nor measured the effectiveness of assigned assets in an offensive capacity.

\textsuperscript{594} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab A, “JPG Bucktag Comment on JCS 2343/630”.
\textsuperscript{595} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab A, “JPG Bucktag Comment on JCS 2343/630”.
\textsuperscript{596} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab A, “JPG Bucktag Comment on JCS 2343/630”, 3.
\textsuperscript{597} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab B, “DC/S Air Comments on CM-744-65”, 1.
\textsuperscript{598} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab B, “DC/S Air Comments on CM-744-65”.

205
Buse ended his analysis with the charge that the study sold short the enclave concept. In reply to the suggestion that the United States abandon the concept because it limited progress, he emphasised that, while it involved defending the enclaves against the VCI, from his standpoint it permitted offensive operations against main forces and the NVA where and when necessary. Based on their long-term vision to expand each of the three beachheads and early indications of success, Buse recommended that Greene “reaffirm the validity of the enclave concept and oppose” in principle the new military strategy “and concept for ground operations” proposed by both Westmoreland and Goodpaster. 599

Still agitated about the entire issue, Greene asked Buse to continue looking into the study and its origins. Specifically, he wanted Buse to find out whether General Wheeler received any directive to prepare the study and, if so, by whom. 600 Greene was determined to learn “what staff members produced” the study and “were all Services represented”. 601 Greene’s resentment came mostly from his and his staff’s exclusion and not being able to review the study’ conclusions before Goodpaster distributed his findings. The final task for Buse was to determine the status of the study and the “action resulting thereafter”. 602

Adding to his retort, Buse further clarified that the only way to implement the enclave concept was by securing the coastal bases and the multiple lines of communications running between them first. To do that, the Marines had to actively pursue and dismantle the VCI; only then could they focus on establishing interior bases and lines of communications, which required the precise location and destruction of the main forces and base areas. As with the first phase, the second phase would take time and patience. The Marines’ most recent actions to implement the

599 Memo from Buse to Greene, 1.
600 Greene’s handwritten notes on Memo from Buse to Greene, 1.
601 Greene’s handwritten notes on Memo from Buse to Greene.
602 Greene’s handwritten notes on Memo from Buse to Greene.
enclave concept’s four phases following Westmoreland’s letter of instructions, in Buse’s judgement, invalidated the study’s bogging down charge. More important, it signaled the Marines were already engaging in big-unit war.

Greene Reaffirms Position on Conventional Military Operations

With Greene’s review of the Goodpaster Study and Buse’s memorandum came the opportunity to once again clarify the Marine Corps’ position on attrition and offensive operations, as well as to enlighten those still harbouring their misunderstandings of the Marine Corps’ approach to strategy in the northern provinces. In addition to providing Buse several handwritten questions and comments on the study, Greene offered his reaffirmation of the enclave concept as an offensive strategy and that the Marines in South Vietnam were ready and willing to engage conventional enemy forces.\(^{603}\) He directed his staff to concentrate on Annex C to Section I of the study “to demonstrate the fallacies therein as they apply to I Corps area” and the Marines’ role there.\(^{604}\) Wanting to remove any potential doubt in light of the Goodpaster Study, he added a concept of operations for inclusion in the Marine Corps’ response to explain how the Marines were fighting.

The first point of contention Greene raised was the number of infantry battalions the Goodpaster Study assessed the Marines needed for operations in the northern provinces. Greene asked Buse to review the study’s suggestion of six battalions.\(^ {605}\) Based on his “arithmetic”, what the study recommended amounted to a reduction of two battalions for each coastal base area, which conflicted with Walt’s concerns about not having enough battalions, particularly at Chu

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\(^{603}\) Handwritten comments from Greene to Buse regarding JCS 2343/630 (JSC message on Goodpaster Study), 18 July 1965”, HD, Greene Papers (3093), Box 2, 1, hereafter CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study.  
\(^{604}\) CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study, 1.  
\(^{605}\) CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study.
Of this point, Greene wrote that “no consideration is given to [the] BLT [battalion landing team] requirement to expand the present 3 secure areas into a single enclave with beneficial results therefrom. This is a serious omission”. His most pressing point was that the study focused solely on the Marines “fixing and destroying VC [battalions] and larger units” and not on their large-scale guerrilla operations or a “combination of the two (i.e. large scale and/or guerrilla)”, which is what Greene had been pushing for all along.

Another example of Greene’s reaffirmation of the enclave concept being offensive was his comments on the Marines’ role in intensifying operations. Convinced the concept was working and that Marine operations against the main forces were not just permissible under the current construct, but were successful thus far in dealing a significant blow to them in casualties as well as from blocking their access to the people and resources, he offered that the objectives of U.S. military operations “should now be to whip the [North Vietnamese] as well as the VC [Viet Cong] instead of seeking to ‘demonstrate’ that they can’t win—or to bring them to the table to negotiate”.

Concerning the Marines actions to date, Greene wanted military operations intensified immediately within the I and II Corps Tactical Zones. This would allow the Marines and Army to extend the number of coastal enclaves in addition to expanding each in size in the two most contested regions of the country. Civic actions would help keep the line of communications (roads and railroads) between the base areas as secure as the enclaves along the coast and into the interior. Secure inland base areas supported by line of communications and communications and

\footnotesize{606 CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study.}
\footnotesize{607 CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study.}
\footnotesize{608 CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study, 2.}
\footnotesize{609 CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study.}
\footnotesize{610 CMC to Deputy C/S regarding Goodpaster Study.}
“airheads” would allow the Marines to continue driving a wedge between the people and the insurgency.\textsuperscript{611} In a separate memorandum, Greene summarised Marine operations by explaining:

At the present time the Marines hold three secure beachheads in I Corps (Danang, Phu Bai, and Chu Lai). There is an urgent requirement that these beachheads be expanded as soon as possible and prior to the commencement of the rainy season (September) into a single secure amphibious enclave (Force Beachhead) . . . If this “enclave” is established, the main coastal highway, the railroad and 20% of all the civilian population in South Vietnam will be secured, a firm block will have been established just below the DMZ (17th parallel) and the amphibious enclave concept will have been clearly validated for use in the other three Corps areas.\textsuperscript{612}

**Greene Goes the Public**

While Greene disputed the findings of the Goodpaster Study, *Life* magazine published an article about America’s growing commitment in South Vietnam. The 23 July piece titled “Better Dilemmas and a New U.S. Strategy” focused specifically on the military strategy and the model United States forces were using to “meet the objectives set by President Johnson”.\textsuperscript{613} The body of the article included a brief explanation of the latest strategy, which it dubbed the “offensive enclave concept”. Below the article, a full-length graphic outlined the country with each of the major coastal enclaves (identified by a red dot with arrows pointing inland) highlighted and the caption “Beachheads for Counteroffensive”. \textsuperscript{614} The article described the beachheads and the concept as a “system” of strategic points on the coast.\textsuperscript{615} As for the strategy, it explained:

\textsuperscript{611} Greene’s handwritten notes on Memo from Buse to Greene, 1. An airhead is a major military facility capable of receiving any type aircraft for use in military operations.
\textsuperscript{612} “Commandant of the Marine Corps Update to Secretary of the Navy on Situation in I Corps, RVN”, 8 June 1965, HD, Greene Papers, Box 3, File 2.
\textsuperscript{614} Included with this graphic was the caption: “The map above shows the enclaves (in red) the U.S. is building up to bolster South Vietnam against Vietcong attacks and to serve as springboards to launch future offensives. Except for the airbase at Bien Hoa, the enclaves are all coastal expanding beachheads that can be supplied and defended from the sea with the help of the Seventh Fleet. The bases are rapidly being readied for handling the large influx of U.S. troops”. See “Bitter Dilemmas and a new U.S. Strategy”, 57.
\textsuperscript{615} “Bitter Dilemmas and a New U.S. Strategy”, 57.
In accordance with the principles of amphibious warfare, these enclaves, most of them in populated areas near the sea, are “expanding beachheads,” supported and defended by the might of the U.S. Seventh Fleet. From them, U.S. forces will be able to move out, launch attacks against the V.C. [Viet Cong] and eventually link up with other enclaves.616

The Life magazine article was the first of its kind openly linking the enclave concept with offensive operations and attributing Marines as part of an offensive strategy. As the media covered more of the enclave concept, Greene made the most of each opportunity to speak about not only what the Marines were doing in South Vietnam, but how they were doing it. In another meeting on 22 July to discuss Westmoreland’s request for an increase in American combat units to support his plan to intensify military operations and regain control of the countryside, President Johnson queried the table for input. Never one to yield time to express his views, Greene opened with his determination that the situation in South Vietnam was “worse today than at any time in the past since we entered the country”, but he added there was still hope.617

With U.S. prestige and national security and South Vietnam’s future at stake, he recommended America stay in South Vietnam, but with a strategy “necessary to win”.618 Offering his thoughts on how the United States could move in that direction, Greene broke down a proposed approach for military actions in North Vietnam and in South Vietnam. In the north, he recommended targeting fuel and oil storage locations in Hanoi and in the Haiphong harbour as well as the blockade of the harbour to prevent the Soviets and Chinese from delivering weapons, ammunitions, and other supplies for the war.619 Greene turned his attention to South Vietnam and the strategy he was certain would win the war. Reiterating the strengths of first

616 “Bitter Dilemmas and a New U.S. Strategy”.
617 “Memorandum for the Record: Record of the Conference on Southeast Asia held at White House, 22 July 1965”, HD, Greene Papers, Box 3, File 1, 3, hereafter CMC Memo on Conference on Southeast Asia.
618 CMC Memo on Conference on Southeast Asia.
619 CMC Memo on Conference on Southeast Asia.
securing the coastal base areas, he added that with 100,000 Marines in South Vietnam, Walt could meet the goal of expanding each to form the single coastal enclave.\textsuperscript{620} With the success Walt and III MAF were realising, he offered his thoughts on it use elsewhere.

I feel this enclave technique can likewise be applied to the other CORPS areas, that it will take more men and time to establish adequate enclaves. I realize that because of the more unfavorable terrain conditions in the other CORPS areas that it will take more men and time to establish adequate enclaves. However, I firmly believe that this method can be applied successfully to all four CORPS areas. In addition to this military strategy, the Civil Action Program in First [I] CORPS area should also be considered. In fact, I believe this to be as important as the military action. At the present time Marines in I-CORPS are distributing food, clothing, medical attention, and are rebuilding villages, bridges, digging wells, and performing other actions to help the villagers within the liberated enclave area. Through this action the people are becoming convinced that the Marines are here to help them, and as a result, the people are turning over Viet Cong to the Marines, or telling Marines were the Viet Cong forces are located.\textsuperscript{621}

Greene finished by adding, “I feel that it will take a minimum of 5 years and will require at least 500,000 U.S. troops”; and though more time than Johnson wanted to spend in South Vietnam, if he told the American people the urgency of the situation, the majority would support his actions.\textsuperscript{622}

**Civic Actions Begin to Pay Off**

The Marine Corps’ challenge, as Greene and Krulak saw it, was linking the potential for success with the adopted approach to strategy in the northern provinces. To track and document progress, the Fleet Marine Forces Pacific staff produced monthly operational and statistics

\textsuperscript{620} CMC Memo on Conference on Southeast Asia, 4.
\textsuperscript{621} CMC Memo on Conference on Southeast Asia.
\textsuperscript{622} CMC Memo on Conference on Southeast Asia, 5; and George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 35.
reports on Marine actions.\textsuperscript{623} In the March–September 1965 report, Krulak attempted to draw a correlation between civic actions and the Marines’ success, noting that by no means have the gains “been a one-way street” and that the Marines also benefited from them.\textsuperscript{624} “Aside from the real sense of accomplishment that comes with successful civic action” he wrote, “the Marines have received tangible aid and support from the civilians…in the form of increased and more accurate enemy intelligence, with the increase starting about the middle of June”\textsuperscript{625}

If the Marines’ goal was to convince the enclave concept pessimists that would not benefit from civic actions, the first 120 days of operations in the northern provinces was as good a place as any to start. For example, Marines operating at Phu Bai explained how residents told them how they and the local police chief were subjected to VCI threats of physical retribution if they did not feed and care for NLF soldiers before the Marines arrived. With the Marines actively pursuing NLF forces, the threats stopped and the guerrillas and main forces were no longer visible except for in small numbers.\textsuperscript{626} According to the FMF Pacific reports, the were being “turned away because the people feel confident that the Marines will help them”.\textsuperscript{627} Other examples of information provided by the people included a main force company based just outside Thinh Tay village. Another villager reported that at least “one hundred VC armed with small arms, one automatic rifle and one grenade per individual passed her home in Kinh Thanh” dressed in “black uniforms and carrying rice in a long cloth roll”.\textsuperscript{628} On 25 July, villagers in Hoa Chau village told a Marine patrol of three separate locations close to them that were platoon base

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\item[623] As noted in the methodology section of the Introduction, David Strachan-Morris in his unpublished doctoral thesis refers to these reports as Krulak’s Fables and credits Robert Klyman’s thesis from the University of Michigan in 1986 as the first to openly refer to the reports in this manner. See Strachan, “Swords and Ploughshares: An Analysis of the Origins and Implementation of the United States Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Strategy in Vietnam between March 1965 and November 1968”, 17.
\item[627] \textit{Operations of the III Marine Amphibious Force Vietnam, March–September 1965}.
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areas for a main force company. Villagers of Phong Bac told the ARVN and Marines that “sixty VC were hiding in the vicinity of Num Bac village”. These reports, according to Krulak, “were just a few of the many intelligence reports which are received and subsequently exploited” by Marine patrols, ambushes and, later, were the target of a “full-scale regimental size amphibious assault”.

In terms of consolidating the population under their control, the total number of people in areas under the direct control of III MAF (namely the three base areas around the airfields) doubled during this period from 100,000 to more than 200,000. As villagers under NLF control began to take note of the improved security and quality of life in those hamlets and villages just outside the beachheads, they abandoned their ancestral villages until theirs could be liberated. Much of the improvements noted were the results of the constant pressure the Marines put on the guerrillas. The constant presence of Marines patrols and the potential to run into an ambush reduced NLF freedom of movement as well as cutting guerrillas and main forces off from their support networks. To keep the pressure on, the Marines amassed nearly 500 patrols and 129 ambushes in addition to some 40 company-size operations, resulting in close to 100 guerrillas killed and another 20 captured. In addition, they distributed more than 60,000 pounds of food, clothes, and soap, provided medical care to more than 17,417 people, evacuated another 1,581, and even instituted a program to train internal village medical assistants.

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The intelligence picture III MAF was developing on enemy main force locations, strength, capabilities, and limitations in late July was only starting to become clear when various intelligence sources alerted General Westmoreland to the possible movement of a main force regiment east of the Chu Lai beachhead. For the last three months, various signals and human sources in the southern-most portion of the northern provinces implied that it was becoming a staging area for main forces and the NVA to threaten the security postures of both the I and II Corps areas of operations. Classified signals collection radars run by the CIA and National Security Agency accounted for much of the early intelligence on the regiment’s movements. Much of the information gleaned from the signals intercepts, however, III MAF was able to corroborate and confirm through their engagement with villagers as a result of the Marines’ civic actions efforts.

The information Westmoreland had on a possible buildup near Chu Lai pointed to the 1st NLF Regiment, though official confirmed reports suggested the regiment 30 to 40 miles away. The regiment was a veteran fighting organization with a lineage including combat against the French Far East Expeditionary Corps during the French Indochina War and the epic siege at Dien Bien Phu. The unit’s most recent action involved routing an ARVN battalion and inflicting significant casualties on a second battalion at Ba Gia in the Quang Ngai province in late May, convincing Communist officials in Hanoi to intensify the ongoing summer offensive against South Vietnam. Believed to still be in the mountains overlooking Ba Gia, low-level

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635 “Operation Starlight: A Sigint Success Story”, Cryptologic Spectrum 1, no. 3 (Fall 1971).
637 “Operation Starlight”, 10. The 1st NLF Regiment (based on the historian) is most often referred to as the 1st Viet Cong Regiment.
reports were that the regiment moved off the high ground and into the several hamlets on the coast. Each of its three battalions totaled roughly 650 men each and with Chinese-made rifles, light machine guns, and light and medium mortars.\textsuperscript{639} The regiment’s intentions, however, were unclear.

As Walt and Westmoreland contemplated the possibility of a buildup outside Chu Lai, a combined main force/NVA division-size force struck at an ARVN headquarters just across the South Vietnam-Cambodia border, while a purported main force division attacked and overran several towns north of Saigon.\textsuperscript{640} Believing all three battalions could be near Chu Lai, Westmoreland expressed to Walt on 21 July that he anticipated an NLF attack there next, but not necessarily in the immediate future.\textsuperscript{641} In the interim, he envisioned small hit-and-run attacks to test the Marines or even a Da Nang-style attack on Chu Lai’s new airfield.\textsuperscript{642} Regardless, he left it to Walt to decide what action to take.

In a follow-up meeting on the situation on 30 July, Walt articulated to Westmoreland that he was in the process of confirming the latest reports of the buildup around Chu Lai and, if confirmed, he would attack.\textsuperscript{643} First, however, he wanted confirmation. In the 10 days since they last spoke, Marine units patrolling outside Chu Lai had yet to make contact with a sizeable enemy force. Westmoreland responded that he expected Walt would have taken offensive action by now. A surprised Walt explained that Westmoreland’s 6 May Letter of Instructions bound the Marines to offensive operations as a reserve/reactionary force in support of the ARVN unless approved by him.\textsuperscript{644} Westmoreland responded by telling Walt he believed “these restraints were

\textsuperscript{640} “Operation Starlight”, 9.
\textsuperscript{642} Shulimson and Johnson, \textit{The Landing and the Buildup}, 69.
\textsuperscript{643} Simmons, “Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam”, 18.
\textsuperscript{644} Simmons, “Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam”.\textsuperscript{215}
no longer realistic” and that the Marine general was welcome to help rewrite the instructions and include whatever “authority he thought he needed” to take action. Walt did just that.

While III MAF turned its attention towards developing a detailed large unit operation aimed not at confronting the 1st NLF Regiment, but destroying it, the war in the northern provinces was in a period of transition. Civic actions were providing ample information for Walt to begin his pivot from securing and improving the enclaves to conducting operations from them and against the main forces and NVA based in the more remote areas of the Marine area of operations. Convinced the counterguerrilla war was moving along as planned and that acts of kindness was bringing the population closer to realising the benefits of siding with the GVN and against the VCI and Communism, Walt was ready to shift focus and take the offensive, but without abandoning the enclaves, as Westmoreland was pressing him to do. Greene, Krulak, and, most especially, Walt, believed this was possible and were ready to make good on their guarantees made during the last 120 days.

Although III MAF was entering into a new phase of the campaign, the counterguerrilla war and civic actions aimed at pacifying the population would continue. Only now, instead of merely setting up large unit operations, both would have equally footing as a collaborative, yet distinct line of effort. In his monthly operational and statistics reports on Marine actions in South Vietnam, Krulak summarised the Marine Corps’, his own, and III MAF’s perspective on the first four months of operations as well as their outlook on the future when he announced that the “III MAF program is a balanced approach, exploiting the convergent virtues of large unit operations, small unit operations, and pacification. It is growing steadily in intensity and scope, and has

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645 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 69.
already caused the tide of battle to shift in I Corps. Our side has begun very slowly to win in this critical region”.

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CHAPTER FIVE
PHASE II: CONDUCTING OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS FROM THE ENCLAVES
AUGUST 1965 - MARCH 1966

On 27 July, a little more than three months after approving the enclave concept for experimental purposes, President Johnson dashed Marine optimisms of transforming operations into a permanent military ground strategy when he approved General Westmoreland’s end strength increase request of up to 44 battalions to support his plan for transitioning American ground forces to Phase II and conventional military operations. Johnson’s decision came in response to Westmoreland’s repeated declarations that the time had come for American ground forces to protect, but not lead, GVN pacification efforts and to curtail the Communists’ ongoing summer offensive. This change in strategy relieved the Army and the Marines of the responsibility for securing and improving the populated coastal areas so that they could focus solely on the main forces and NVA hidden in their remote countryside and mountainous base areas. Under this new strategy, Westmoreland wanted Army and Marine combat units searching for, fixing in place, and destroying the main forces and the NVA to the degree that the RVNAF could resume the lead in combating them. Additionally, he recommended the ARVN take over the task of securing and improving the enclaves, siding with Ambassador Taylor’s earlier assessment that South Vietnamese, not American soldiers, were best suited for pacification and fighting guerrillas given the cultural difficulties that arise when foreign armies interact with indigenous populations, not to mention the challenges associated with differentiating friend from foe.

648 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 146; and Embassy telegram 22 February 1965, 3.
Frustrated by the change in the war’s direction, both Greene and Krulak pressed Westmoreland (and anyone who would listen) to give the enclave concept time, particularly since, in their interpretation, it provided already the flexibility for American ground forces to take on the main forces and NVA as well as overseeing pacification efforts.\textsuperscript{649} In addition to sticking with the enclave concept, Greene and Krulak were unsure as to whether the time was right for transitioning to Phase II. The latter led to Westmoreland perceiving that the Marines were more comfortable, not to mention more interested, in small unit actions and pacification than dealing with the large and more conventional threats.\textsuperscript{650} The point this chapter makes and that historians have yet to understand is the Marines were neither against transitioning to Phase II tasks entirely nor convinced security of the coastal areas was complete. On the one hand, the Marines believed civic actions were working and valued the information on the main forces and NVA being provided by the South Vietnamese. On the other, they recognised that main forces and NVA were becoming more overt and aggressive, the enclave concept was no less relevant. In the final analysis, this study posits that Westmoreland failed to see the problem for what it was—a difference in interpretation, which according to historian Adrian R. Lewis was the “war within the war” plaguing the American military effort.\textsuperscript{651} That the Marines sought a true balance of actions was not lost on journalist Neil Sheehan:

Main Force Viet Cong and NVA were not to be left entirely at peace in the rain-forest and mountain fastnesses. Krulak wanted to track them by every possible mean of intelligence and to “attack them continuously by air.” He was willing to join the battle in these sparsely inhabited regions when intelligence promised “benefits . . . overwhelmingly in our favor and when to do so will not consume forces needed for protection of cleared areas”.\textsuperscript{652}

\textsuperscript{649} Memo from Buse to Greene, Tab B, 4.
\textsuperscript{650} Westmoreland, \textit{A Soldier Reports}, 165–66.
\textsuperscript{652} Sheehan, \textit{A Bright Shining Lie}, 631.
Westmoreland’s attrition-focused thinking opened the next round of debate and criticism over American involvement in the war, but not until 1967. Before then, he enjoyed the support of Army officials on the Joint Staff and elsewhere in the Pentagon, including Secretary McNamara. McNamara judged the strategy would “break the will of the DRV/VC [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] by denying them victory. Impotence would eventually lead to a political solution”.

He elaborated later that he believed Westmoreland’s was correct in his aim “to create conditions for a favorable settlement by demonstrating to the DRV/VC that the odds are against their winning”. Just how he chose to do this would become the source of contention between him and the Marines.

The Marines, however, believed they struck the right balance of civic and counterguerrilla actions and large unit operations, supporting both the requirement to attrite and pacify. Regardless of the differences in interpretations, by later summer 1965, Major General Walt was reporting steady growth in the state of Marine areas and the scope of Marine influence, as well as erosion of enemy infrastructure. Westmoreland, while not ignoring Walt’s and the III MAFs successes, assessed that the Marines had done what they could do and needed to take the fight to the real enemy and to allow the ARVN to assume the role of continuing to secure and improve the enclaves.

Greene and Krulak failed to recognise that, no matter how successful they were, Westmoreland was never going to see their points because he rejected every aspect of the enclave concept and saw no other path to victory other than through the conventional war. In his defence, Westmoreland did not altogether turn them away. Acknowledging that it would take

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654 McNamara Memo for the President, 26 June 1965.
655 Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 347.
time for planners to identify American combat units, for them to complete training and other deployment preparations, and to arrive in South Vietnam and begin the transition to the attrition strategy, Westmoreland allowed the Marines to continue with the enclave concept as long as they did not ignore or avoid the main forces or NVA. 656 This decision served as a lightning rod for additional criticism from civilian and military officials who did not understand the enclave concept or the role attrition played in it; however, the also received similar rebukes from those claiming they did understand but believed the concept to be too costly in terms of time and resources and that it would fail to create an environment secure enough for pacification to take hold. 657 While this chapter does not dispute that the Marines did not favour moving solely towards engaging the main forces and NVA, the evidence does demonstrate that conventional military operations and attrition, albeit in conjunction with civic and counterguerrilla actions, were a central part of their focused efforts.

**Greene Promotes the Marines’ Application of Pacification and Attrition**

While still attempting to convince Johnson, McNamara, and Westmoreland to continue with the enclave concept, Greene took a different approach to garnering support when he met with an audience of newly promoted Navy flag and Marine general officers in Washington, DC, on 9 August. Instead of discussing institutional issues traditionally impacting the relationship between the naval Services, Greene shared with the officers in attendance his thoughts on the military “problem of South Viet Nam” and how the Navy-Marine Corps team was going about the business of projecting “sea power, and action ashore”. 658 In his opening comments on what

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658 “CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees, 9 August 1965”, HD, Greene Papers, Box 4, File 2, 4, hereafter CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees.
he called the “amphibious enclave concept”, Greene explained how the Marines, with the Navy’s assistance, were striving not to “do what the French did” at Dien Bien Phu. Instead, the Marines’ objectives were to and secure an inland beachhead and to improve it before moving inland. This, in Greene’s judgement, was the only way to get at the main forces and NVA without losing 10,000 men by being surrounded and cut off from their coastal bases, reinforcements, and supplies.659

Specifically, Greene explained how the Marines were “getting at the Viet Cong principally by using the same tactics” the enemy was using, which was pacification. In his estimation, this was “sound and will bring us success”.660 By working with the South Vietnamese people and securing the base areas, he clarified, the Marines will ultimately help them “organize to take care of themselves”.661 With additional American ground forces and new and secure beachheads, Greene emphasised that the Marines will be able to do so much more to answer the conventional threat. Explaining how the Marines were using guerrilla tactics as well as basic conventional operations, he highlighted one particular technique that was helping the Marines in their fight against the main forces:

We are also, during the daylight, using an operation, an old one, known as the hammer and anvil system. When we know where there is a Viet Cong position, we may lift in two companies by helicopter and set up a blocking position. Then we start pushing with, say, a battalion against the blocking position, against the anvil. And we are having good luck in that we are killing thirty, forty, fifty Viet Cong in each of these operations.662

Greene was quick to point out that the Marines were successful in these operations only because civic actions were paying off: “These people are turning in Viet Cong to us. They are telling us

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659 CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees, 4.
660 CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees, 9.
661 CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees.
662 CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees.
where these bastards are so we can kill them. That is what civic action is doing”. Still in agreement with Krulak and others that civic actions and the greater pacification was necessary and that the people were key to winning the war, it was clear that Greene wanted to do more to remove the conventional threat. According to one of Greene’s post-speech memorandums recounting a defence budget meeting between the Joint Chiefs and President Johnson on 10 December 1965, he expressed his concern that pacification, although a priority, was detracting from the resources Walt needed to engage and defeat the main forces. The “follow-up action of rural construction (pacification—civic action) required large numbers of additional Regional and Popular Forces (local militia) and U.S. civilians in order to eliminate the present diversion of Marine forces to this secondary, but most important job”. In the coming weeks, Greene, Krulak, and Walt would be vindicated for the arguments presented on behalf of their thinking on the enclave concept and balanced approach.

**Operation Starlite: Proof of Concept**

Completion of Chu Lai’s expeditionary airfield in early June brought with it around-the-clock operations by III MAF to expand its presence from the coast to the countryside for the foreseeable future. More important, it meant III MAF was in position to freely engage conventional enemy forces from all three enclave base areas. Despite the fact that the Marines were already doing this, Westmoreland and his staff were growing increasingly impatient with the Marines and the time it was taking for them to produce real tangible results. What he and his staff failed to realise was that the enclave concept was doing exactly what Krulak stressed it

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663 CMC Address to Flag Officer/Brigadier General Selectees, 11.
664 “Commandant of the Marine Corps Memorandum on Defense Budget Meeting between the Joint Chiefs and President Johnson, 10 December 1965”, HD, Greene Papers, Box 4, File 3, 3.
665 “Commandant of the Marine Corps Memorandum on Defense Budget Meeting between the Joint Chiefs and President Johnson, 10 December 1965”.

223
would in his June 1965 strategy paper; the Marines were forcing main force and NVA units out of their base areas to fight and regain control of the enclaves and villages. The additional benefit was that Marine battalions and regiments were not searching aimlessly for a battle that had little chance of materialising. As troubling as it was to see and hear of the insurgency inflicting retribution (e.g., intimidation, abduction, and murder) on the population for refusing support, those acts were doing more damage to the NLF than good. While some sided with the insurgency purely out of survival, others did not, leaving some villages to quarrel amongst themselves. The VCI-spurred turmoil between villagers stood as a positive example of how civic action aided in pushing more of the neutral segments to favour the Marines. The 1st NLF Regiment’s presence near Chu Lai in July 1965 was the result of VCI’s inability to counter the Marines and offer anything better. To date, the main forces were able to avoid the Marines with great success. Their luck—and that strategy—were about to change.

In the weeks following the initial report of the 1st NLF Regiment’s movements towards Chu Lai, sporadic contact between the Marines and main force elements were increasing in regularity. Despite the contact and signals intercepts, Walt was skeptical of a buildup or the enemy’s intentions and wanted something more tangible before he acted. On 15 August, he got exactly what he was looking for when a main force deserter revealed to his ARVN capturers the 1st NLF Regiment’s location and aims. According to Private Vo Tho of the 1st NLF Regiment, he was part of a plan to attack Chu Lai on or around 19 August in celebration of the Communist’s Revolutionary Day. The ARVN turned this information over to Walt immediately. After explaining to Westmoreland that he wanted to act quickly, Walt decided on a

spoiling attack to begin within the next 96 hours. With his decision made, Walt’s only concern now was tipping his hand to the enemy and losing the element of surprise.

In much the same way Brigadier General Karch wanted to do six months earlier at Da Nang, Walt wanted to prevent the 1st NLF Regiment from attacking Chu Lai. With the element of surprise in his favour, his hopes were to not only spoil the enemy’s plans, but to destroy the
regiment in the process and to set the tone for the future. In doing this, he moved a company overland from Chu Lai the night before the attack to act as the stationary blocking force north of the enemy. At dawn, two battalions, one in helicopters and the other in armoured amphibious assault tractors, would land behind the enemy, thus preventing its escape inland. Once in place, the same two battalions would attack northeast, pushing the enemy towards the South China Sea. A third battalion, on board amphibious ships, would remain at sea as the operational reserve.

Figure 5: Operation Starlite, August 1965

669 Peatross, “Victory at Van Tuong”, 3
670 Peatross, “Victory at Van Tuong”.
671 Peatross, “Victory at Van Tuong”.

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Operation Starlite began just before dawn on 18 August. After a naval and artillery barrage reminiscent of the Pacific campaign during the Second World War and a full morning of near-continuous fighting, the Marines secured most of their D-day objectives by midafternoon and with relatively few casualties. The fighting, visible to Marines waiting off the coast, was like a “scene out of a movie” for some.\(^{672}\) Explosive shells fired from U.S. Navy cruisers and destroyers pounded enemy positions far inland. Marine attack aircraft flying from both Chu Lai and Da Nang followed closely behind the Navy’s cover fire. Large pillars of thick black smoke drifting high above the vibrant green trees outlining the coastline.

Walt’s plan to pinch the enemy worked as he intended. Although the bulk of the fighting was over by the next morning, the Marines cleared numerous villages used by the 1st NLF Regiment as staging areas for their impending attack on Chu Lai during the mop-up phase of the operation. Inside villages, the Marines uncovered a network of elaborate trench lines complete with bunkers, weapons, ammunition, and rice.\(^{673}\) Main force soldiers hid inside man-size spider holes to evade the Marines while others used camouflaged caves and tunnels to bypass Marine blocking positions and return to the hamlets to retrieve weapons and ammunition or to hide amongst the people.\(^{674}\) Operation Starlite ended on 24 August. Official Marine Corps records indicate the Marines killed 641 enemy soldiers and captured 42, all of whom provided information on their parent units as well as to where the regiment withdrew.\(^{675}\) The operation validated the process of using civic action to collect information from the population and the vital relationship the Marines believed existed between pacification and attrition.

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674 HQMC Point Paper “Operation Starlite”.
675 HQMC Point Paper “Operation Starlite”.
Rice as a Weapon

One of the most unique and innovative techniques instituted by III MAF during the war were a series of rice harvest protection operations named Golden Fleece. The concept came about when a patrol from the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines (1/9) killed roughly 30 guerrillas near Hoa Hai village. Impressed with the patrols actions, the village chief approached the battalion to ask for assistance during the next rice harvest. The chief explained to 1/9’s intelligence officer that each rice season the VCI taxed a large percentage of his village’s harvest and then forced the villagers to transport the taxed share to another enemy occupied village or remote base area. On other occasions, the VCI, with the assistance of a main force battalion, would stop villagers on the way to their consolidation points or local markets and confiscate all or a large percentage of the rice on the spot. In his conversation with the intelligence officer, the village chief queried whether the battalion could offer protection from NLF’s taxation process.

In mid-August, 1/9 devised a plan aimed at visibly securing select rice fields in their area of operations including the routes villagers used to get the rice to storage areas and nearby markets. The operation began with Marines providing security for the physical loading of rice onto trucks and amphibious tractors for delivery to its destination. In the past, villagers claimed the process took several days with only a quarter of the rice arriving at its final destination as a result of taxation. Under Marine escort and security, the battalion estimated it could guarantee 100 percent of the rice arrived safely and within hours. Golden Fleece was not just a civic action performed by the Marines. Rather, it was a large unit operation, and eventually a large

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677 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 139.
678 The purpose of the taxation was to reduce the logistics burden of transporting rice down the Ho Chi Minh trail and into South Vietnam from North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Although they lived in base areas hidden in the most difficult terrain or underground, it was impossible for them to spare the personnel to harvest and distribute their own rice stores.
679 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup, 139.
680 Shulimson and Johnson, The Landing and the Buildup.
unit campaign, with an element of attrition in that with the Marines involved in the physical
loading and escort duties on the ground, the likelihood of a larger guerrilla force or a main force
battalion trying to interdict the process increased exponentially. To meet this threat, one to two
battalions cordoned the area to defend against an attack.

The operation had an adverse effect on the enemy in several ways, with the most obvious
being the impact it had on food supplies. Golden Fleece, when successful, put an incredible
strain on enemy logistics as well. A third effect was that, by eliminating rice taxation altogether,
the Marines scored a huge propaganda victory against the VCI and took yet another step closer to
winning the support of the population.

The first iteration of Golden Fleece took place in September 1965 at Hoa Hai. The result
was exactly as the Marines expected. With security on hand to oversee the harvesting, loading,
and relocation of the rice, the village chief alerted 1/9 to an approaching main force battalion on
12 September. The battalion commander displaced his headquarters, three of his companies,
and a platoon of tanks to meet the main force head on. Fighting raged throughout the
afternoon before breaking contact late that night, leaving 2 of its dead and another 23 wounded
behind. The Marines captured 7 enemy soldiers as well. Following the first iterations, Walt
directed the 3d Marine Division to incorporate the operation as stand-alone event or in
conjunction with other large unit operations. In terms of contact with main force elements,
Golden Fleece operations achieved varying degrees of success from 1965 to 1967. The
Conclusion chapter of this study addresses its successes more specifically.

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682 1/9 AAR 2-65.
683 1/9 AAR 2-65.
Exploiting Starlite

Starlite marked the start of a sequence of large unit operations aimed not only at pushing main force units from their coastal base areas but destroying them as well. Convinced the 1st NLF Regiment did not intend to fight when the situation became untenable, Walt surmised that subsequent operations to continue rooting out remnants of the regiment and to prevent it from consolidating and regaining strength would be necessary. In the days following the Starlite, emphasis on civic actions and collecting information showed that the regiment was in fact consolidating on the Batangan Peninsula for a major counterattack. Instead of waiting for more tangible evidence, Walt initiated contact with remnants of the 1st NLF Regiment. Taking advantage of the South China Sea yet again, Walt ordered a second regimental-size helicopter/surface assault with ground and amphibious Marine forces on 7 September. Catching the enemy completely by surprise for a second time, Operation Piranha accounted for another 178 enemy soldiers killed during three days of intense combat.684

Piranha marked the start of three months of battalion- and regimental-size large unit operations, stretching from Phu Bai and Chu Lai, and with the goal of eliminating the main forces there. During 22–25 October, Marines swept the coast between Da Nang and Phu Bai as part of Operation Red Snapper. Although the operation ended with meager results, III MAF actions sent a message to the main forces in that it would not be able to remain static or occupy coastal base areas. Follow-on large unit operations during November, such as Lien Ket 10, Black Ferret, and Blue Marlin I, targeted main force base and staging areas north and south of Chu Lai. Resulting in few enemy killed or captured, much of this had to do with the main forces units staying on the move. Villagers under the threat of guerrillas backed by main force units provided

information to Marines on the size, direction of movement, and morale of these units. The biggest benefit was that a main force battalion on the move was easier to spot and target than if it was stationary. Staying on the move depleted resources, was tiring, and force units to live and fight in unfamiliar areas. Proof of this was Operation Blue Marlin II during 16–19 November. Catching a main force battalion transiting from one base area to another on the coastal corridor between Da Nang and Chu Lai, a Marine battalion, with the aid of two ARVN Ranger battalions, trapped and killed 25 enemy soldiers and captured another 15.  

**Westmoreland Targets the Marines . . . and They Respond**

Beginning in November, with the tension surrounding American involvement in the war starting to rise, the Marines and their continued insistence on using the enclave concept was the primary source of the growing animosity inside the assistance command headquarters in Saigon. Even with Westmoreland seemly basking in the war’s progress, and as he looked forward to the rest of 1965 and 1966, the enclave concept remained the focal point of negativity. Westmoreland finalised his intent, with input from the Joint Chiefs, and issued *Letter of Instruction to CG, III MAF* on 21 November 1965, putting in writing the changes he addresses in his September concept of operations. The reason for the delay was the slow arrival of the U.S. Army forces he needed to put the attrition strategy into action. Now, in addition to defending the coastal base areas, Westmoreland wanted all American ground forces, especially the Marines, conducting search and destroy and clearing operations, full time, and in the rural countryside. Absent was any mention of pacification, though it did task the Marines to expand their area of operations to

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include all of the northern provinces and support GVN efforts to protect the population thorough its rural construction program.  

Specific tasks for American ground forces still included long-range reconnaissance and combat patrols, ambushes, and both day and night attacks against the main forces and their base areas. “Overall security”, according to the letter, “would be provided by vigorous offensive action to preclude the dissipation of III MAF combat units in a static security role”. The letter ended with explicit instructions for Walt to acknowledge receipt of tasks in his monthly command report to Westmoreland and to ensure Walt understood that Westmoreland was clearing the Marines “for combat operations not only against VC [Viet Cong] forces which place an immediate threat to established bases, but against remote areas in order to eliminate the VC from the I Corps area”. Westmoreland’s discontent with the Marines did not end there. John A. Nagl explains in Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam that, in December 1965, Westmoreland could not break from his fixation on the issue:

The Marines have become so infatuated with securing real estate and in civic action that their forces have become dispersed and they have been hesitant to conduct offensive operations except along the coastline where amphibious maneuvers could be used with Naval gunfire support which is available. Over the last several months, this matter has been discussed with General Walt and I have written two letters to him emphasizing the importance of having adequate reserves to take the fight to the enemy.

Despite Westmoreland’s concern for the Marines, Walt apparently understood his orders and was already moving out. Without any instructions from Westmoreland, he met with Major General Thi to discuss the fighting at Hiep Duc, now in its second full week. Walt expressed his

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687 USMACV Command History 1965, 144–45.
688 III MAF Command Chronology, November 1965, 4.
689 Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, 157.
own concerns and offered Thi Marines for ongoing operations to retake the valley. Aware that any action on his part detracted from pacification and potentially overextend the 3d Marine Division, Walt stuck with his offer. Overextending the 3d Marine Division was of little concern to Lieutenant General Krulak as it did nothing to stop him from offering Walt suggestions on how he might go about dealing with the 1st NLF Regiment. From his headquarters in Hawaii, Krulak’s suggested to Walt in a secret message that Walt using the Communist’s own baiting tactic of drawing the enemy out to attack a visibly weaker unit was actually “loaded for bear”. Walt agreed.

The 21 November letter released the Marines to operate independently throughout the entire area encompassing the northern provinces and required that Walt only coordinate with his ARVN counterpart. Emphasised throughout this thesis is that scholars view Westmoreland as the driving force behind the Marines moving out of the enclaves and into the rural countryside to combat the main forces and NVA. For example, historian David Strachan-Morris automatically points to Westmoreland’s instructions as evidence that he had to exhort “the Marines to expend more effort in large operations against Main Force and NVA units rather than concentrating (as the Marines were at the time) on pacification in its coastal enclaves”. While true that Walt weighed his instructions with concern for overextending his force to the point that it might pull resources away from pacification, Walt never questioned the instructions, at least not openly. Instead, he explained vehemently that he judged the “real strength of the Viet Cong is ground forces. They are well armed, well trained, and damn good troops on the battalion and company level. . . . But

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the Viet Cong are not supermen. My Marines are better fighters, they are better led, and damn well better supported. I think he [the Viet Cong] has more problems than I do”.

Considering the high operational tempo of III MAF before and at the time Westmoreland sent the letter of instructions to Walt, the Marines’ primary focus was keeping the main forces on the move, particularly south and west of Da Nang, preventing the 1st NLF Regiment from reorganizing. Since Operation Piranha, the only means Walt had at his disposal to keep the pressure on the regiment was getting his Marines back in the villages. Although pleased with his efforts since August, Westmoreland wanted Walt to keep his battalions in the field hunting the main forces. The 1st NLF Regiment’s attack on an ARVN outpost at Hiep Duc (situated between Da Nang and Chu Lai in the agriculturally important Que Son Valley) prompted Westmoreland to pressure Walt on continuing to do more. The ARVN repulsed the attack, but the 1st NLF Regiment remained in control of the high ground overlooking Route 1. Throughout the rest of November, III MAF provided the ARVN with helicopters and close air support to help flush out the enemy battalion, choosing to do this instead of committing Marines in hopes of building ARVN credibility. For weeks, the ARVN held the outpost but withdrew after sustaining too many casualties. The resilience of the enemy regiment concerned Walt, who reconsidered whether Starlite and Piranha affected it to the extent he thought. Radio intercepts, however, told a different story. In an interview with Colonel Don P. Wyckoff, the 3d Marine Division’s operations officer, explained that that 1st NLF Regiment were directing “local guerillas to stick it out on their own until help came down from the north”. Wyckoff stated specifically that the regiment’s “resurgence as a fully active unit was the result of reinforcement of North Vietnamese

Regulars”. This came as no surprise to Walt, since his Marines engaged elements of the 18th NVA Regiment only weeks earlier.

**The 1st NLF Regiment Returns**

The Marines’ last major operation of 1965 took place between 9 and 20 December, a few weeks after Westmoreland released his latest instructions directing Walt to “conduct search and destroy operations against more distance VC [Viet Cong] base area to destroy or drive the VC out”. On 5 December, the III MAF staff met with the ARVN I Corps staff in Da Nang to plan Operation Harvest Moon. To keep as much of the 3d Marine Division focused on both pacification and large unit operations elsewhere, Walt stood up an ad hoc command, Task Force Delta, to plan, coordinate, and execute III MAF’s share of the combined operation with the ARVN. Task Force Delta comprised two battalions—the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines (2/7), and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines (3/3)—and artillery batteries from both the 11th and 12th Marines. The SLF’s 2d Battalion, 1st Marines (2/1), and its helicopter squadron would remain off the coast in an operational reserve role. The plan Walt and Thi approved directed the 5th ARVN Regiment to move into the Que Son Valley on 8 December and take up positions southwest of Route 1. Expecting the 1st NLF Regiment to watch, but not engage until the following day, 2/7 would move in behind the 1st NLF Regiment and push them east into the 5th ARVN Regiment. On Walt’s order, 3/3 would insert by helicopter to reinforce 2/7.

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694 Wyckoff comments.
695 Wyckoff comments.
696 COMUSMACV LOI-4, 2.
The operation did not go as III MAF and the ARVN planned. While moving into position on the first day, an ARVN Ranger battalion supporting the 5th ARVN Regiment came under surprise attack by an independent main force battalion hidden in the valley. After a couple unsuccessful attempts to extract the mauled battalion, the ARVN regimental commander ordered one of his battalions to intervene. The fighting lasted through the night and into the next morning. As the ARVN regimental command group entered the valley, it and its subordinate battalions came under attack from the 1st NLF Regiment and several local main force units, destroying it and killing dozens more.\textsuperscript{699}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{harvest_moon_map.png}
\caption{Operation Harvest Moon, December 1965}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{699} Schlosser, \textit{In Persistent Battle}, 16–18.
To relieve the pressure on the ARVN, the Task Force Delta commander, Brigadier General Melvin D. Henderson, committed 2/7 and 3/3 on 9 December to “fix and destroy organized elements of the VC [Viet Cong] in the Que Son–Viet An–Hiep Duc Valley complex”. Reinforced by 2/1 the next day, all three battalions swept the valley for a week, engaging multiple main force battalions with telling results. More than any other large unit operation to date, Harvest Moon was the first operation in which the Marines applied all elements of the air-ground force. In the worst fighting the Marines experienced in the war to date, jets flew close air support mission a few hundred meters in front of friendly positions, while helicopters delivered Marines on top of enemy formations, forcing the 1st NLF Regiment from its valley stronghold. The Marines killed 407 main force soldiers and captured 33 more, including 4 NVA advisors.

As for regaining control of the valley, the ARVN and Marines established a presence in an area that was long a haven for rebellion and anticolonialists. Even more important, it gave the Marines an idea of the area in terms of the population, the terrain, and enemy disposition; all components of assessing the potential for future base areas for Phase III of the enclave concept. Harvest Moon, however, was a decision born of Walt and not through orders by Westmoreland. Reaping the benefits of the previous three months of large unit operations, Harvest Moon was a continuation of Walt’s approach to keep the main forces on the move in addition to getting III MAF into areas where the NLF had complete control and the Marines had yet to go.

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700 Schlosser, In Persistent Battle, 18; and AAR Harvest Moon, 3.
701 Schlosser, In Persistent Battle, 47; and AAR Harvest Moon, 14.
**Krulak’s Strategic Appraisal**

Around the same time Harvest Moon was culminating, Krulak offered his perspective on the war. With dozens of trips to South Vietnam to assess progress and the performance of American advisors and that of the Marines to his credit, Krulak penned his thoughts on the war and observed that a purely offensive and attrition-based strategy would soon become a dilemma for South Vietnamese and American military forces. With each visit, the population’s needs and country’s economic stability took on greater meaning, and whereas the enemy’s organised conventional forces were the country’s larger concern, to the individual citizen, who received little or no support from Saigon, the VCI and guerrilla were the greatest enemies. With this in mind, Krulak drafted “A Strategic Concept for the Republic of Vietnam” to align his thoughts on strategy with the progress the Marines made in the eight months since implementing the enclave concept. What is important to note is that this was an appraisal of the current situation. Nowhere does Krulak not that this is a revision or replacement of his original assessment from six months earlier. His goal here was both to lay out the next phase of actions for areas cleared or with a significant reduction in the main force presence and activity, and also to determine how the United States might implement a strategic approach to assist in achieving the greatest results.

Civic actions in the cleared areas, one might imagine, took on a much larger meaning in Krulak’s thinking than they had before. To simply move farther inland and chase the main forces without leaving the proper security infrastructure behind to protect and maintain the separation between the population and the guerrilla opened the door for the VCI to return and reassert control. The ARVN and GVN, he stressed, were not ready to take on pacification efforts independent of the Marines, nor were they ready to rejoin the fight against the main forces of
NVA alone.\textsuperscript{702} The Marines and Army, Krulak argued, had to do both simultaneously and for the foreseeable future so as not to lose the gains earned thus far. That was not all that was concerning him.

His main point was that the attrition strategy alone was inadequate and, to be successful, the United States needed to first understand the NLF’s and North Vietnam’s own strategy, which Krulak believe they were neither hiding it nor that it was a “mystery”.\textsuperscript{703} Rather, he maintained the South Vietnamese people were the target and the battlefields were the hamlets, villages, and eventually the enclaves. To accomplish this, the NLF waged a guerrilla war on the people, seeking to subdue them through terrorism and murder, while at the same time extorting their resources and sapping their subsistence by taxation and by kidnapping their youth for recruitment.\textsuperscript{704} Their military objective was to erode the strength of the South Vietnamese military through guerrilla tactics and large engagements. The same actions were meant to have a psychological effect on the population, the combination of which would erode the population’s confidence in the GVN.\textsuperscript{705}

To better orient followers in the direction he believed the war was heading, Krulak reduced it to an arithmetic problem, arguing first that NLF and NVA were willing to simultaneously engage in an attritional war because they believed it too would erode American morale at home.\textsuperscript{706} Focusing second on American-to-NLF/NVA kill ratios, in conjunction with North Vietnamese and NLF manpower resources compared to those of the United States, he warned that “we must not engage in an attritional contest with the hard-core just for the sake of attrition; nor should we react to the Viet Cong initiatives or seek them out juts to do battle. The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{702} Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{703} Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{704} Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 5–6.
\item \textsuperscript{705} Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 6–7.
\item \textsuperscript{706} Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 9–10.
\end{itemize}
attrition ratio under these conditions is not going to favor us, and this form of competition has little to do with who ultimately wins anyway.”  

If the military strategy centred on attrition alone, Krulak judged, it was likely to fail since the numbers required to do so were not to America’s advantage. Emphasis on material attrition at certain economic pressure points, however, did promise tangible benefits. 

Although Krulak envisioned the main forces and NVA sought violent, close-quarters combat, he did not think they wanted to defeat entire American units. They wanted to inflict enough casualties and raise the cost so high that it damaged American public support. To avoid this situation, Krulak advised, American military commanders had to address the South Vietnamese population’s social and economic grievances and their safety and security. Civic actions would solve existing social and economic grievances. Safety and security, in the form of the CAP and large-unit operations, could stop the main forces and NVA from interfering in the process and exacting revenge. Krulak’s interaction with the population convinced him they had little regard for the ARVN and the GVN, which for years the NLF exploited. He saw how the NLF lashed out at the people for succumbing to government taxation and the rising cost of renting plots from land owners, while at the same time levying extortionate pressures upon them in the form of rice and tribute. Any future ground strategy, in his judgement, needed to include the people as a military objective and the understanding that South Vietnam was a complex battlefield.

To move forward, Krulak presented a series of recommendations to combat the Communists’ strategy and to realign United States priorities. The first was to neutralise the subversion by removing the VCI from the villages and to protect the people. “Comb the guerrilla

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707 Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 8.
708 Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 9.
709 Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 7.
out of the people’s lives”, he reasoned, while selectively seizing the initiative and avoiding attritional contests for the sake of attrition.\(^{710}\) He believed this could be done by not reacting to main force initiatives or seeking them out just to do battle. Failing to win the hearts and minds of the people would be the result of a disorganised U.S.-GVN pacification campaign and the continuation of the current strategy focusing on the main forces and NVA and ignoring the population.\(^{711}\)

The appraisal, however, did not dismiss offensive operations or the concept of attrition when put to proper use. In fact, Krulak deemed that “this is not to say we should not take the offensive to hurt or destroy the main force elements, when circumstances are abundantly in our favor, or that we will not find it necessary to engage them to prevent damage to population centres of invasion of rice-rich areas”.\(^{712}\) Maintaining contact with conventional enemy forces was an important part of Krulak’s appraisal and rationale. As part of clearing operations, he would promote the fact that Marines continue to “attack main force elements on the ground when the convergence of intelligence establish that the benefits promise to be overwhelmingly in our favor” and, in all cases, “continually from the air”.\(^{713}\) In the end, to ensure success in South Vietnam, the United States had to “shift the thrust of the . . . ground effort to the task of delivering the people from guerrilla oppression” and to use attrition to destroy the sources of material introduction, fabrication, and distribution, which would negatively impact the main forces’ ability to sustain operations.\(^{714}\) Sea ports, rail lines, and power and fuel stations were but a few examples of high value targets for American aircraft. He concluded that a strategy failing to consider the enclaves and a balanced approach was impulsive and left the population

\(^{710}\) Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 8.
\(^{711}\) Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 8.
\(^{712}\) Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 13.
\(^{713}\) Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 8.
\(^{714}\) Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 14.
susceptible to a reconstituted VCI and ceded the initiative and advantage to NLF and its main forces. “Until we reorient our strategy more directly upon the people and their local security”, Krulak proclaimed, “the battle is not going to go well for us”.715

Conversely, Krulak favored civic actions, almost to a fault; though, he advised Walt about the dangers of getting too focused on civic actions and remaining stationary for too long. In two classified messages Krulak sent to Walt as he was drafting his appraisal in November 1965, Krulak, like Greene, compared the Marines’ situation to that of the French at Dien Bien Phu. In a 1 November message, Krulak ended with an assessment of future NLF actions and offered his thoughts on the offensive tactics, tactics Walt was already employing to counter the enemy.716 In a second message dated 22 November 1965, he provided similar advice, but added that these “are just ideas—nothing more—which I offer for you to consider. You do not have to agree with me. I well realize that it is you who have the responsibility, and whatever you do gets my 100 percent backing”.717 It is safe to say that Krulak, although wanting Walt to make his own choices on the best way to fight the war, demonstrated that he was willing to intervene if the choice was not to his liking. That said, there were few times, if any at all, when Krulak intervened other than to show support for Walt’s decisions. The fact that Walt used to his greatest extent a balanced approach to target all aspects of the insurgency and the conventional threat and that neither Krulak nor Greene were unhappy with the way Walt was dealing with the 1st NLF Regiment and the main forces in general shows that large unit operations and attrition were major elements of the war in the northern provinces.

715 Krulak, A Strategic Appraisal, 13.
717 “INCOMING MESSAGES, 22 November 1965”, Folder 002, Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection (1201), Vietnam Centre and Archive, Texas Tech University.
Combining Pacification and Attrition

As the Marines’ first year in South Vietnam ended, civic actions were becoming more a tactic for attrition than for achieving pacification. Krulak, who like Greene saw civic actions as a multifaceted tool, favored using them against the enemy as much as he did to resolve the country’s social and political ills. As for its use as a weapon, Krulak believed that, “while we cannot leave any operational sector untended, all of them being important, the main target is still the man in the black pajamas with his burp gun. The war turns primarily on his destruction, and this can be achieved only by a painstaking program that aims first and foremost to separate him from the people upon whom his survival depends”.718 The indirect route, Greene and Krulak decided, involved taking away from the main forces and NVA what they needed to survive until it causes them either wither away or come out of their base areas and fight. “It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people”, Krulak envisioned, “we will automatically deny larger units the food and intelligence and the taxes and the other support needed”.719

Although he did not desire to allow the main forces and NVA to move freely throughout the countryside, Krulak thought it best to remove the main forces and NVA’s eyes and ears (i.e., the VCI and guerrillas) and its provisions (i.e., people and food) first or until weakening it to a point of exhaustion and collapse. Searching blindly for big battles against an army with endless resources and control of the people and terrain was not in the Marines’ best interest. Krulak believed that “you cannot win militarily. You have to win totally, or you are not winning at all”.720 To this point, Krulak argued that the Marines could use superior firepower to attrite the main forces and NVA, while securing the coastal areas or until the information gained through

719 Krulak’s comments as quoted in Shulimson, An Expanding War, 13; and Coram, Brute, 304.
720 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 13; and Coram, Brute, 13.
civic actions was significant enough to merit a ground attack. Unit then, if “the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among the mountains”. In the event this were to transpire, the Marines were ready.

Throughout 1965, civic actions were tools to validate and confirm the need for an operation and a tool to reward the population for its support. By 1966, they were also tools to continue an operation if/when the enemy breaks contact and a tool to pursue the enemy in a follow-on operation. To put civic action and their application into the proper perspective, the Marines considered the concept as a distinct a warfighting function and equal to, if not more important, than fire support and logistics. To them, “fighting units complete with supporting arms and CAS strike out from secure bases and coastal enclaves, e.g. Da Nang Camp, to fix and destroy the enemy wherever it can be found. Vital to such far ranging operations is improving intelligence information”. In other words, “the Vietnamese people provide the ‘fix’. US and VNVN Marines take it from there”.

With attrition and offensive operations taking up more of III MAF’s attention and resources, in a meeting with Secretary McNamara during his trip to South Vietnam to check on the progress of the war, Lieutenant General Krulak recommended that the Marine Corps increase the number of infantry battalions in the country from 12 to 18. General Greene, agreeing with Krulak, advised both McNamara and President Johnson to deploy the 1st Marine Division to South Vietnam. Within days, the division received its official orders to deploy in January.

Walt Continues to Seek Conventional Battle

721 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 13; and Coram, Brute, 13.
723 Anonymous, “Fix and Destroy Pattern Emerges”.

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With the 1st Marine Division preparing for its deployment to South Vietnam, III MAF started planning for the largest amphibious operation since the 1950 Inchon landing during the Korean War and the largest ground action since the Marines arrived in South Vietnam.724 Wanting to continue with the earlier effort to clear the area between Da Nang and Chu Lai of main force units attempting to infiltrate back into old base areas, Walt reactivated Task Force Delta to plan and execute Operation Double Eagle in January and February after receiving several confirmed reports that the 18th and 19th NVA Regiments were occupying mountain positions 10 miles inland in support of the 2d NLF Regiment.725 Backed by approximately 600 guerrillas, the two enemy regiments were making their way out of the mountains and back to the coast.726 Eager to prevent their return was the more than 5,000 Marines assigned to Brigadier General Jonas M. Platt’s task force, including four infantry battalions from 2d Battalion, 3d Marines (2/3); 3d battalion, 1st Marines (3/1); 2d Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9); and 2/4.727 The entire force, minus 2/9, would come from amphibious ships off the coast. The concept of the operation was for the amphibious force to land after an extensive reconnaissance of the area and sweep the coastal plain for any signs of the main forces or NVA. Convinced the main forces and NVA would attempt to engage Task Force Delta after a couple days, Platt wanted to pull his battalions back towards the coast after making contact to draw the enemy regiment into the open and use Boeing B-52 Stratofortresses or “Arc Light” strikes to do the most of the damage.728

Operation Double Eagle, mostly due to the weather and command and control issues between Navy and Marine commanders, produced moderate results for the time and resources

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725 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 19–21.
726 AAR Double Eagle I, 36–38; and Shulimson, An Expanding War, 23.
727 AAR Double Eagle I, 1–6.
728 AAR Double Eagle I, 7–8.
committed, though this was not what was most intriguing. Most intriguing was concept of using a large unit operation to draw the main forces and NVA out of their base area and then attack their formations with from the air. Considering the plan, Double Eagle was purely an attrition-oriented operation, as was the follow-on action that was to take place quite unexpectedly 50 miles to the north. Operation Double Eagle II began on 17 February when Platt received an order from III MAF to enter the Que Son valley to confirm sightings of the *1st NLF Regiment* just west of the Harvest Moon area of operations.729 Eager to reengage the enemy regiment, Task Force Delta moved north to sweep the area. The Marines spent the next week engaging small bands of guerrillas (possibly acting as scouts), but never found the regiment. Double Eagle II did, however, account for 125 guerrillas killed in addition to the 312 main force soldiers killed during Double Eagle.730 More important, neither operation attributed, or at least not directly, to pacification.

**A Glimpse of Phase III**

Among the same time Task Force Delta started Operation Double Eagle, another operation roughly 20 miles southwest of Da Nang was to play an important role in both pacification and as Phase III was getting underway. Situated at the confluence of the rivers Thu Bon and Vu Gia and at the foot of the Annamite and Que Son mountain ranges, the Dai Loc district caught the attention of the GVN as a potential site for future industrialisation.731 Opened in 1962 as the An Hoa Industrial Complex with the aid French and German loans, the GVN marked the district as home for a new power plant and transmission line to provide electricity to areas south of Da Nang along with an irrigation pumping stations for farming and agricultural

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729 AAR Double Eagle II, 9.  
730 AAR Double Eagle I, 4; and AAR Double Eagle II, 12.  
731 Shulimson, *An Expanding War*, 40.
projects.\textsuperscript{732} Engineers built a road connecting the complex to Da Nang along with a 2000-foot runway for single-engine planes that same year.\textsuperscript{733}

During the first week of January 1966, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (1/1), conducted a limited initial sweep of a small portion of the district. During a three-day operation called Long Lance, the Marines encountered only scattered guerrilla resistance.\textsuperscript{734} Local villagers reported to the battalion that up to two platoons of guerrillas were in the area, but nothing more.\textsuperscript{735} The site of several main force actions during the past year, Walt decided to sweep the district in force to see if the guerrillas served as the reconnaissance for a much large force.

From 10 to 17 January, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines (3/7), the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines (1/3), and one company from the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9), entered the Dai Loc again, this time for Operation Mallard, marking III MAF’s first major penetration into the An Hoa Basin. Intelligence reports identified the area as home to a main force battalion and an estimated battalion’s worth of guerrillas.\textsuperscript{736} Not surprisingly, however, contact with the enemy during Mallard was minimal. Villagers observed and reported to the Marines that the main forces occupying the areas fled to the mountains a day earlier. After welcoming the Marines, as many as 300 villagers approached the battalions asking to be evacuated and not to return until the NLF was gone.\textsuperscript{737}

\textsuperscript{732} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 41.
\textsuperscript{733} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}.
\textsuperscript{734} 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Command Chronology, January 1966, HD, Folder 019, Box 1, 20.
\textsuperscript{735} 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Command Chronology, January 1966, 21.
\textsuperscript{736} 1st Battalion, 1st Marines Command Chronology, January 1966, 21–25; and Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 41.
\textsuperscript{737} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 43; MajGen Walt, Address to Marine Corps Schools, March 1966, HD, Walt Papers, Box 1, hereafter Walt address to MCS; and MajGen Oscar F. Peatross, USMC, Oral History Transcript, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 12 April 1975, 38–39, hereafter Peatross interview.
Meeting with the industrial complex supervisor, Le Thuc Can, a few days into the operation and seeing its potential impact on the northern provinces and the country in general, Walt offered his assistance to clear the area and identified the industrial site as a location for a
Phase III base area.\textsuperscript{738} The operation, in some respects, was a glimpse of what was to come, particularly since additional main force battalions and reports of NVA units infiltrating from Laos were on the rise. To be sure and, in some respects, to confirm or even make his own intelligence, Walt wanted to make contact with these suspected enemy units. Once initiated, he could start the process of planning operations to clear and attrite them.

Even with Operations Starlite almost a year behind him, Walt viewed the An Hoa project as a test bed for the Marines in that the area had no Marines or ARVN presence and operations there would be the first attempt to clear an area infested with main force and NVA units. Walt would take his time and apply the process as it was meant; clear through conventional actions, conduct civic acts, leave forces behind for security, and repeat in an effort to hold the area.\textsuperscript{739} Outside of Le My, III MAF had yet to apply these steps in their entirety, until now.

\textbf{The Media and Congress Weigh in on the Strategy Debate}

By 1966, the Marines were using a balanced approach and implementing the enclave concept with the full understanding that they could continue to do so as long as they conducted operations against the main forces and their remote base areas. Objections among Westmoreland’s primary staff about Walt’s continued insistence on the enclave concept were rising to the level of controversy, even though he argued the concept had more in common with the attrition strategy than most staffers realised. Westmoreland acknowledged that the Marines were fulfilling their duties; however, he could not play down the question from his staff concerning the amount of progress they might achieve if they committed every Marine and their resources to sweeping the remote countryside in search of the main forces. The dilemma reached

\textsuperscript{738} Walt address to MCS.
\textsuperscript{739} Anonymous, “Civic Action Revitalizes Areas Won By Combat”, Marine Corps Gazette June 1966, 2.
lawmakers in Washington, DC, as well. While civilian and military leaders sought to provide Westmoreland with what he wanted and when, he was nonetheless scrutinised by Congress for his seeming lack of military success in the big-unit war.  

When he insinuated that he needed additional ground forces and equipment to produce more results, there was always the concern that the Marines were not helping his plea, particularly with the perception that they were dedicating so much to the CAP and civic actions.

American casualties as a result of the transition to search and destroy operations rose sharply between September and December 1965. The potential for more to be killed in action in 1966 and concerns about the military strategy raised the ire of congressional leaders as well as several retired senior military officers, namely Army General Matthew B. Ridgway and Lieutenant General James M. Gavin. Gavin caught the attention of the American media after the New York Times obtained a copy of a letter he wrote to Harper’s Magazine on 16 January. A proponent of the United States cutting its losses and handing the war back to the GVN and ARVN, Gavin suggested President Johnson consider a “holding strategy” whereby U.S. ground forces return to “several enclaves on the coast of South Vietnam where [U.S.] sea and air power can be made fully effective” as opposed to stretching resources “beyond reason in our endeavors to secure the entire countryside of South Vietnam from Vietcong penetration”. He also argued for the same defensive belt running the full length of the 17th parallel that both Generals Harold Johnson and Westmoreland suggested less than a year earlier. The holding strategy was to last until a Geneva-sponsored settlement between all warring parties was possible.

740 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 166.
741 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 166.
When *Harper’s Magazine* appeared on 17 January, the idea of a holding strategy had already gained support. Ridgway offered his support in a letter to the magazine. Support for an enclave-type strategy was nothing new to the *New York Times*. The paper’s editor endorsed the idea in July 1965, when the Marines were pushing for the enclave concept to become the permanent U.S. military strategy. American foreign policy expert Hans J. Morgenthau and newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann endorsed it openly in articles published in *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Milwaukee Journal*. When the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations began hearings on the war in January 1966 to better understand the role of American ground forces and to keep a closer watch on President Johnson’s decisions to escalate involvement, a military strategy based on the enclaves was an important topic of discussion throughout the year. Known as the Fulbright Hearings for the committee chairman J. William Fulbright, Gavin not only testified but also reiterated the same point to the committee that he made in his article.

The strongest condemnation and criticism of Gavin’s statements came from Maxwell Taylor: “It is interesting to reflect that the French once tried out this defensive enclave concept at a place called Dienbienphu [sic] and the result should not encourage us to imitation”. In a piece written in the *Washington Post* on 4 February 1966, Taylor went so far as to state that he “knew of no other officer with current responsibility that shared the enclave theory”. In a speech he gave in New York City days earlier, Taylor offered that the “holding strategy being recommended by some would mean the acceptance of a crushing defeat of international

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748 Staff Write “Gen Taylor Raps ‘Holding Strategy’.”
proportions when there is no reason for capitulation”. The article titled “Gen. Taylor Raps ‘Holding Strategy’” also contends that Gavin’s idea received public condemnation from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle G. Wheeler, and General Wallace Greene, both of whom considered Gavin’s reasoning and proposal “militarily unsound”. Greene’s criticism, however, centred on the idea that U.S. ground forces would wage a static defence of select enclaves if they were to go with Gavin’s recommendation. Unlike what Greene and the rest of the Marine Corps argued for throughout 1965, Gavin neither recommended an offensive variation of his idea nor one in which Marines expected to be able to counter the main forces and NVA with offensive operations from the enclaves or through amphibious landings against enemy-held areas. This point alone represents the starkest difference between what Gavin proposed and what the Marines, and Taylor, wanted. To this point Greene believe the idea being pushed by Gavin was militarily unsound”. Unfortunately, Gavin’s idea, and not Greene’s, is exactly how Westmoreland viewed the enclave strategy.

The Joint Chiefs Debunk Gavin’s Enclave Concept

As the debate about the potential of the enclave concept played out in the media and between Westmoreland and Walt, the Joint Chiefs reviewed and prepared an assessment of their own, further spurred by Gavin’s article and statement to Congress. Captured in a memorandum to Secretary McNamara on 3 February, the Joint Chiefs offered their own military analysis of the enclave concept that Gavin and others proposed. In their analysis, they assessed the enclave concept, given Gavin’s comments and testimony, was a defensive strategy for the purposes of seeking a stable, non-Communist government in South Vietnam, assisting the GVN in defeating...
the NLF, and extending governmental control throughout the country, but not for defeating the NLF.  

Keeping this in mind, the first point offered by the Joint Chiefs was that the “political/military structure of the GVN is likely to collapse under the resulting stresses” that would come from a defensive strategy. Four very specific subpoints were: the GVN was certain to “lose existing support and measure of control in areas outside enclaves”; that without military presence, the communication and movement of the population between the enclaves, as well as the day-to-day economy and function of government “would essentially cease”; that military coordination between the United States and South Vietnamese forces would cease; and if South Vietnamese forces withdraw to the enclaves, they would abandon the population and all governing bodies “in areas outside the enclaves to the enemy and permit the communists to consolidate their control over the entire countryside beyond the enclaves”. The final and most troubling subpoint was the “obvious and prolonged concentration of US forces in defensive enclaves could incite anti-US sentiment”.  

In terms of American ground force totals and actions, the Joint Chiefs argued that Gavin’s call for 200,000 or fewer combat personnel committed to the enclave concept was not enough and would not ensure the security of the base areas, nor would that number be sufficient to protect the population and food-producing lands. Restricting U.S. ground forces to the

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753 JCSM–76–66 memo, 2.
754 JCSM–76–66 memo, 2.
756 JCSM–76–66 memo, 2.
enclaves, the Joint Chiefs stressed, would not reduce the number of American casualties either.\textsuperscript{757} In fact, they assessed that Gavin’s plan

might well result in casualties on at least the same scale as a more balanced strategy. In the “enclave” strategy, loyal Vietnamese, particularly local officials, must either flee to the enclaves or face VC reprisals. Permitted to consolidate their forces, their supply system, and their base areas, the VC and PAVN units would be in a position to launch more carefully-planned and highly-selective attacks—probes or large-scale efforts—against the enclaves. To the degree we surrender control of the countryside to the VC/PAVN, we facilitate their capability to employ longer range weapons. In addition, there probably would be a heavy influx of refugees, thus offering a channel for VC infiltration difficult to close. Such infiltrators could increase casualties.\textsuperscript{758}

As for outside interference, particularly from China, the Joint Chiefs judged the “defensive nature of the enclaves might further stimulate rather than discourage the ChiComs [Chinese Communists] to exploit what they could regard as a weakening of US resolve in Southeast Asia”.\textsuperscript{759} Rather than encourage the Communists to openly test American resolve, only “the balanced strategy outlined” in the JCSM–652–65 memorandum “Concept for Vietnam” and the JCSM–811–65 memorandum “Future Operations and Force Deployments with Respect to the War in Vietnam” will “achieve US national objectives and to assure that, if the United States enters into negotiations to achieve these objectives, it does so from a position of strength”.\textsuperscript{760} The enclave concept Gavin proposed would, in the opinion of the Joint Chiefs, leave the United States in a position of weakness.\textsuperscript{761} They agreed unanimously that Gavin’s ideas would lead to a

\textsuperscript{757} JCSM–76–66 memo, 2.
\textsuperscript{758} JCSM–76–66 memo, 2.
\textsuperscript{759} JCSM–76–66 memo, 3.
\textsuperscript{761} JCSM–76–66 memo, 3.
political and military defeat for South Vietnam and the United States to such an extent that the
Joint Chiefs could not

support such an “enclave” strategy since it contains significant deficiencies, and
the advantages claimed are more illusory than real. By forfeiting the initiative,
abandoning solid negotiating leverage, conceding large land areas to the enemy,
and alienating the GVN and other friendly governments, the “enclave” strategy, in
effect, abandons national objectives. The military consequences would, in their
judgment, lead to US/GVN defeat in SVN or ultimate US abandonment of
Southeast Asia.762

Large Unit Operations Increase

From January to the end of March 1966, III MAF moved deeper into the countryside to
identify areas that needed the most attention, namely areas Marines and the ARVN had no
presence or control over, and for possible future inland bases. The movement into An Hoa was
just the first. Another came during 4–7 March. At this time, the 7th Marines planned and
executed Operation Utah south of Da Nang and the Tra Bong River. After receiving intelligence
from locals that North Vietnamese soldiers were in the area, the 7th Marines commanding
officer, Colonel Oscar F. Peatross, joined with 2d ARVN Division and planned a deliberate
clearing operation aimed at uncovering and destroying what intelligence officials identified as
the 21st NVA Regiment. After four days of brutal combat, Peatross’ regiment accounted for 350
NVA killed at the cost of 73 of his own Marines.763 This was the first large unit operation pitting
the Marines directly against an NVA unit. From this operation, one of Peatross’ battalion
commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Leon N. Utter, learned that the NVA were “not supermen. But
they can fight. And they will fight when they are cornered or when they think they have you
cornered”. The fighting did not end there.

763 7th Marines Command Chronology, March 1966, 9, located at
A few short weeks after Operation Utah ended, Peatross’ regiment was back in action against III MAF’s seemingly favorite target, the *1st NLF Regiment*. After the enemy regiment attacked and penetrated an ARVN outpost near Chu Lai, the Marines and ARVN joined together again to retake the outpost and clear the enemy from the area. In Operation Texas from 20–25 March, the Marines aim was to do just that. In five bitter days of fighting, 7th Marines and the ARVN retook the outpost and scattered the enemy regiment across the coastal plain. The *1st NLF Regiment* suffered another 405 killed. One Marine battalion found 168 enemy dead in Phuong Dinh village, one of the two most heavily contested areas of the operation. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Paul X. Kelley, summarized his and III MAF’s position on the previous months of fighting and what was to come as the Marines continued the process of conducting offensive operations from the enclaves as well as from secured inland bases for future offensive operations in enemy occupied areas:

> The overriding problem in Operation Texas was one which had plagued the Marine Corps for many years: how to inflict maximum loss on a determined, well-entrenched enemy with complex defensive positions at a minimum loss to one’s own forces. In the case of Phuong Dinh (2) over 2,500 rounds of artillery and innumerable airstrikes with napalm and heavy ordnance were called. The next result, however, indicated that the enemy in well-constructed bunkers, in holes with overhead cover and 20-feet deep tunnels was not appreciably hurt by our preparatory fires and had to be killed in his positions by infantry actions at close range.

Even with the Marines moving closer to what Westmoreland wanted in terms of full-time operations against the main forces and NVA, pacification was still their focus in uncontested areas. Between August 1965 and March 1966, Lieutenant General Walt increased the tempo and number of named large unit operations and several unnamed large unit sweeps to prime areas in

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765 Shulimson, *An Expanding War*.
need of clearing\textsuperscript{766}. The areas Walt selected to clear first were those his intelligence officers identified as new enemy base areas and were close to III MAF base areas inside the enclaves or just inside the coastal plain. In the areas cleared already he began civic actions despite the fact that he knew the guerrillas, main forces, and much later, the NVA, would attempt to overtake them once the Marines left. In the interim his shift from the coast and coastal plain to the rural countryside was not to satisfy Westmoreland. Rather it was to meet the objectives laid out in the enclave concept.

\textsuperscript{766} Major General Walt received his promotion to lieutenant general in March 1966. See the Walt Papers.
CHAPTER SIX

PHASE III: SECURING INLAND BASES AND ENEMY OCCUPIED AREAS

APRIL 1966 - MARCH 1967

The period from April 1966 to March 1967 proved to be a momentous yet frustrating time for the Marines in South Vietnam and for the Marine Corps in general. Based on the conditions on the ground in the northern provinces, vice Westmoreland’s unrelenting pressure to deviate entirely from the enclave concept and balanced approach, Walt transitioned III MAF to Phase III. Unlike Army units in the other three corps tactical areas, the Marines maintained that they did not see the immediate requirement to change their current course since the end state was still pacification. Phase III, however, continued where the previous phase left off with the Marines engaging in more large unit operations as they cleared the coastal areas and set their sights on securing inland bases and territory within the main force and NVA-occupied rural areas. Counterguerrilla and civic actions remained a key part of the phase, but to a lesser degree as the inland and occupied areas contained fewer villages and, ultimately, less people. The focus, therefore, was more on controlling the critical terrain and pushing the main forces and NVA farther away from the population and into the mountains or destroying them if they chose to fight. Before concluding Phase III, the Marines realised the benefits of combining pacification with attrition when they incorporated population control methods, rudimentary civic actions, and counterguerrilla tactics into large unit operations.
More than Meets the Eye

After committing a significant amount of resources to large unit operations in 1965 and early 1966, Walt directed his field commanders keep in mind the villages in their areas of operations, including those that had yet to clear and offer civic actions to further divide the people from the insurgency. New operational innovations, such as Operation County Fair, provided another means to force the main forces to fight while at the same time earning winning over the population.

On the surface, Operation County Fair was a battalion-level civic action meant to determine VCI influence and control of villages but with the makings of a conventional large unit operation. County Fair operations started just before dawn, when teams of ARVN and GVN officials entered a designated village unannounced, with instructions on what was to happen during the next several hours. In an orderly manner, Marines escorted villagers from their dwellings to another location about a mile away. At this second location, the people gathered in tents where GVN officials verified the identity of every man, women, and child, provided health screenings, presented lectures on recent government reforms, and offered a meal along with additional stores of rice, water, and occasionally livestock to take back to their village. In some instances, a Marine band entertained the children while GVN officials screened and questioned the adults. Marine and ARVN civic actions teams surveyed the village for projects as well. The most important part of the process was the screening done by matching

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768 Jack Shulimson and Edward F. Wells, “First In, First Out”, Marine Corps Gazette 68, no. 1 (January 1984): 38; Stolfi, U.S. Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam, 75; Shulimson, An Expanding War, 232; and “County Fair”.
769 Shulimson and Wells, “First In, First Out”; Stolfi, U.S. Marine Corps Civic Action Effort in Vietnam, 76; Shulimson, An Expanding War, 232; and “County Fair”.
770 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 232; and “County Fair”.

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identification cards issued to adults during a previous operation with a census report to account for permanent members. ARVN officials escorted those without an identification card or those deemed suspicious to a third location for further questioning. Officials updated the village’s census report and issued new identification cards to those who passed the screening. There was, however, much more to the Operation County Fair.

Back at the village, a Marine platoon conducted a thorough search to identify possible indicators of VCI and guerrilla presence. Large rice stores, additions and vacant living spaces, a disparity in the number of authorised weapons for a given village, and anything resembling a fighting position or tunnel was cause for immediate concern and a more thorough search. Marines detained everyone found in the village, particularly if they did not possess an identification card. Just outside the villages, another platoon formed an inner cordon made up of a series of access control points. Their task was to stop anyone attempting to leave or to enter the village. This inner cordon also included concealed overwatch positions.

Most important, the outer cordon or blocking force, typically made up of multiple companies or even a battalion, combed the surrounding area for weapons caches and tunnel complexes leading back into the village and patrolled the high ground overlooking the village and screening areas. Like Operation Golden Fleece, the outer cordon was responsible for sealing off the area and preventing it from a main forces attack. At the completion of the screening and search process, the Marines escorted the villagers back to their dwellings. Depending upon the size of the village, the operation took as many as two days to complete. If the screening and search revealed the VCI’s presence, a CAP occupied the village for an undetermined length of

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771 See “County Fair”.
772 See “County Fair”.

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time. If GVN officials declared the village free of VCI, the Marines added the village to the civic actions projects list.

Battalions conducting County Fair operations, particularly those on the outer cordon, usually came under some kind of sporadic enemy attack. In April 1966, while conducting County Fair south of Da Nang, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9), and an ARVN battalion surprised a main force battalion occupying a village. Several hours of intense fighting resulted in 45 enemy killed and 17 prisoners. Other iterations resulted in similar or less main force contact.

**McNamara Questions the Marines’ Actions in South Vietnam**

Lieutenant General Krulak spent the majority of 1965 and early 1966 answering questions related to how the Marines were fighting in the northern provinces and why they chose to implement a strategy different from what the Army was doing in the other three Corps Tactical Zones. According to Krulak, senior and influential Army general officers such as Major General Kinnard and Brigadier General DePuy cursed the Marines for remaining “wedded to their enclaves” and “absorbed in caring for the people and in training the native militia” or that they “preferred to leave the unhappy task of going after the large enemy units to others”. Newspapers put an additional spotlight on the issue, pointing out the differences in strategies used by the Marines and the Army. Both General Greene and Krulak took advantage of the coverage to explain the merits of the enclave concept and balanced approach, which journalists interpreted as another example of the bitter rivalry plaguing the two Services.

Pacification received a disproportionate amount of attention in late 1965 and during the first half of 1966 compared to large-unit operations, which is what the Marines were really

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spending most of their time, energy, and resources on. In *Our War Was Different*, author Al Hemingway contradicts the media coverage and the popular histories on the war by explaining that the Marines’ own constraints, not Westmoreland’s, the CAP concept was neither as large as historiography portrays nor did it actually get the resources needed to make it the strategy Krulak and the Marine Corps give it credit. According to Hemingway, a former CAP Marine, the program “never exceeded 2,500 [Marines] at any time” in spite of the approximately 80,000 Marines in South Vietnam at the height of the war. Yet, the majority of the news coverage on the war in the northern provinces during this period focuses on innovative concepts like the CAP, cordon and search operations such as Operation County Fair, and rice harvest protection/escort actions like Operation Golden Fleece. These operations and concepts, though focused solely on the population, also had a conventional military component. In Washington, DC, however, only the aspects that set them apart from attrition and search and destroy made the news, causing officials to questions what the United States military strategy entailed.

Just as they had in 1965, Greene and Krulak made great efforts to convince their critics that the enclave concept, if applied as the Marines envisioned, offered the United States the best chance of achieving its political and military objectives in 1966. In early May, a conversation with Secretary McNamara ended with the Krulak fretting over comments McNamara made about him not offering a proper explanation as to what in the northern provinces has the Marines seeing the war differently than in other parts of the country. Troubling Krulak further was that, on most every occasion, he was always able to articulate his thoughts concerning the net impact of the enclave concept and approach balanced. Duty bound to provide a more complete answer to McNamara’s questions, Krulak sent a letter to him on 9 May detailing the Marine Corps’ position.
The first issue Krulak sought to resolve was the pace of Marine operations. To this, he answered that, although progress was slow and would take more time and a larger number of Marines to accomplish, they were seeing “visible, measurable progress, not only in terms of enemy dead—which may in some respects be delusive—but in terms of bringing some peace and stability to an area where none existed before”.  

The second point he raised in response to those questioning the enclave concept and the Marines’ interpretation of it was that the Marines did not choose how the war was to be fought and that the choice between clear and hold and search and destroy was not an “either/or matter”. Instead, Krulak suggested, the decision was a product of the type of enemy, the terrain, and the mission assigned the Marines that, together, dictated their tactics. He spent a good part of the letter explaining how the Marines were fighting differently in two parts of their area of operations because of the characteristics of the enemy in each; in this instance, roughly 11,700 main force soldiers were located in the inhospitable and unpopulated mountains, where “anything that moves is hostile” and the war was a conventional matter—“maneuver, attack, kill, destroy and control real estate”.

On the other front, Marines battled 18,000 or more guerrillas and VCI operatives, who were “woven deeply in the fabric of the society”, where the battlefield was the people, not a hill, and the necessary resources were provided by the seacoast area they called home. Although Krulak acknowledged that controlling the people was the Marines’, the NLF’s, and North Vietnam’s primary objective, he refocused his comments on the conventional threat and how the main forces, without the guerrillas, would lose “most of its rice, as well as its prime intelligence

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775 Krulak letter to Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, 9 May 1966, HD, Krulak Papers, 1, hereafter Krulak letter to McNamara.
776 Krulak letter to McNamara.
777 Krulak letter to McNamara, 2.
778 Krulak letter to McNamara.
source”. To win both fronts, he explained in his letter, the Marines therefore had to do four things.

First, rooted in the Marines’ original mission, the Corps had to protect the coastal base areas, with Da Nang being especially important considering its location, size, and vital function. From the start of the conflict, the Marines, like Westmoreland, voiced their concerns about attacks against all of the major airfields supporting the air campaign. Although a ground attack by the main forces or NVA was unlikely, sabotage and suicide attacks were a common technique for NLF guerrillas, with the 1965 Bien Hoa, Pleiku, and Qui Nhon attacks being the most notable examples.

Regarding large unit operations, Krulak was emphatic about Marines making it a part of their strategy. He argued that the Marines “must go after the enemy main forces and his hinterland base areas, to keep him off the back of the ARVN, to diminish the hazard to district towns and to punish the VC [Viet Cong] by grinding down his resources”. In addition, he remarked that the Marines intended to “pursue this continually and intensively”. As for their commitment to engaging the main forces, Krulak underscored the fact that the Marines conducted 88 operations at the battalion, regiment, and division levels in 1965 alone, totaling 301 days in the field. The objective of each of these operations was to “strike the main force where the likelihood of doing him substantial hurt was great; not just to trade manpower with him”. The results, according to Krulak, were 3,600 enemy killed (some of whom were guerrillas) with another 450 captured and 700 weapons and 300 tons of rice seized. Clearly

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Krulak letter to McNamara.
Krulak letter to McNamara.
Krulak letter to McNamara.
Krulak letter to McNamara, 3.
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Krulak letter to McNamara.

angered, he stressed that the Marines were not interested in “addressing one part of the problem”, but were instead “covering each of the four important bases. It is not a matter of their being bemused with handing out soap or bushwhacking guerrillas at the expense of attacking the main force units. To the contrary, they are treating the whole patient in the manner that the patient—the I Corps area—demands”.

Third and fourth were Krulak’s focus on the counterguerrilla war and stabilising the South Vietnamese population. With the VCI being omnipresent, those siding with the GVN were under the constant threat of retribution, though you could not discount the undecided, who were also under observation and NLF pressure to support their cause. Combined with the ARVN’s inept approach to pacification, internal village turmoil spoiled much of what the Marines accomplished through civic actions, leaving them no choice but to stay close to the villages and to increase their involvement in civic actions. This detracted from large unit operations against the main forces.

Krulak concluded his letter by making the same point that Marines stressed early on concerning the search and destroy approach Westmoreland encouraged—without the right intelligence of the main forces, knowing whether what lay in a particular area was friendly or not was hard to determine. What the Marines did know was the people living in the countryside, though greatly dispersed compared to those in the enclaves, were at greater risk of being affected by American military mobility and firepower since there were fewer restrictions. To this point, he warned that not using a balanced approach made to cure all of the ailments causing the war was a recipe for failure. In doing this, they “measure progress toward our true objective, perhaps better than the raw figure of VC [Viet Cong] killed, which can be a dubious index of success

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785 Krulak letter to McNamara, 4.
786 Krulak letter to McNamara.
since, if killing is accompanied by devastation of friendly areas, we may end up having done more harm than good.\textsuperscript{787} This was not his only letter to a senior executive explaining the Marines’ way of war and that it indeed entailed conventional thinking.

### The Expansion Inland and North

Starting in mid-April, Lieutenant General Walt made good on his promise to Le Thuc Can that the Marines would return to clear and defend the An Hoa basin and industrial complex. The complex itself would become III MAF’s first inland base and set in motion Phase III of the enclave concept and efforts to secure inland bases and enemy occupied areas. On 20 April, 3/9 seized the runway at the industrial complex.\textsuperscript{788} Within hours, Air Force Fairchild C-123 Provider cargo aircraft delivered a battery of artillery cannons. This was in preparation for Operation Georgia, which would begin the next morning when 2/4 and 3/9 arrived by helicopter and amphibious tractors from Da Nang.\textsuperscript{789} Cargo aircraft brought in a second artillery battery as well.

For the next 20 days, the three battalions, all under the command of the 9th Marines, swept from the base to distances up to 10 miles away for the purposes of “eradicating” enemy forces in the immediate area.\textsuperscript{790} At the start of the operation, intelligence officials determined that the area was under the control or observation of the 5th NLF Battalion.\textsuperscript{791} Clearing as many as 20 company tactical zones, each battalion incorporated rice harvest protection/escort duties (Golden Fleece) and census/medical visits (County Fair) in the dozens of villages surrounding

\textsuperscript{787} Krulak letter to McNamara, 5.
\textsuperscript{788} Shulimson, An Expanding War, 93.
\textsuperscript{790} Shulimson, An Expanding War; and 3/9 AAR Operation Georgia, 2.
\textsuperscript{791} Shulimson, An Expanding War; and 3/9 AAR Operation Georgia.
the new combat base. This was the first time the Marines deliberately incorporated pacification with attrition in the same operation. In most instances, III MAF used civic actions to gain information needed to confirm the enemy’s presence and for planning large unit operations. In other cases, civic actions followed a large unit operation. In Georgia, the Marines used civic action in stride with their clearing actions. By the operation’s conclusion, III MAF opened its first inland base from which it could now conduct operations into enemy occupied areas.

At the same time Walt started his push to clear and build the An Hoa Combat Base and as Marine large unit operations around Da Nang and Chu Lai increased with greater intensity, Westmoreland voiced his concerns about a potential NVA plan to seize the ancient capital at Hue, located roughly five miles from the Marine combat base at Phu Bai. Under the impression that the NVA was in the process of building up for a major offensive in the two northern-most provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, Westmoreland redirected military intelligence to the demilitarised zone and mountainous areas west of the coastal plain spanning the two provinces. Walt was not fazed by Westmoreland’s gestures and demonstrated strong confidence in his strategy and approach. The enemy buildup would be handled in time, Walt stressed to his staff and the Washington Post. “We are not worried about the main forces”, Walt explained. “We have shown that when we can find them we can stop them. We did it last summer and we did it last month. We can do it anywhere in the Corps”.795

Sparse enemy contact around Phu Bai convinced Walt and his staff that there was little proof that an enemy build-up was underway. In discussions with Westmoreland on the results

792 Shulimson, An Expanding War; and 3/9 AAR Operation Georgia, 3.
793 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 139.
of several long range patrols he sent into Quang Tri and Thua Thien, Walt commented that “if they [the NVA] were there, that they were hiding in the mountains not far from the Laos border”. Not wanting to draw resources away from pacification and large unit operations taking place in the central and southern portions of his area of operations, Walt expressed his reluctance to act on unconfirmed reports. Regardless, and to allay Westmoreland’s fears of an NVA build up, Walt sent the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (1/1), north to sweep the hills surrounding the U.S. Army Special Forces camp at Khe Sanh 14 miles south of the demilitarised zone in April. The multiday action, Operation Virginia, produced no enemy contact.

Meanwhile, the 4th Marines, responsible for the Phu Bai base area and enclave, increased the number of large unit operations aimed at locating and drawing the NVA out of the mountains and into battle during the period from April to June, producing very little contact and few enemy killed. Farther north, however, the NVA attacked the ARVN outposts at Gio Linh and Con Thien, less than five miles from the demilitarised zone. The attacks, combined with the aerial reconnaissance of the area, showed extensive military vehicle traffic in southern North Vietnam. Additionally, reports that an NVA regiment infiltrated south and was now west of the ARVN combat base and airfield at Dong Ha. At the same time Walt received the warning order from Westmoreland to put a battalion on short notice to move north, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, General Wood B. Kyle ordered 2/4 to displace to Dong Ha and join the ARVN on an 11-day sweep of the area from late May to 8 June. Operation Reno netted three

797 CGIIIMAF message to CGFMFPac; and as quoted in Shulimson, An Expanding War, 140.
801 3d Marine Division Command Chronology, May 1966, 9; and 3d Marine Division Command Chronology, June 1966, 9–12.
NVA killed, but little else, including signs of a major build up.\(^{802}\) It was clear to Walt, however, that the NVA were in fact operating in South Vietnam.

Marine large unit operations in Thua Thien in June and July triggered the response Walt was hoping to get. Although producing little contact, Operation Florida in early June confirmed the presence of the *6th NAV Regiment* near the narrow Hue-Phu Bai corridor.\(^{803}\) Operation Jay, from 25 June to 2 July, brought two Marine battalions, 2/4 and 2/1, in direct contact with the enemy regiment’s *802d, 806th, and 812th Battalions*.\(^{804}\) After a week of fighting, the operation claimed 82 enemy killed.\(^{805}\) The Marines learned later that the *812th Battalion* “literally ceased to exist”.\(^{806}\) Amid reports that the *802d Battalion* returned to its mountain base area, Walt sought to destroy the battalion by ordering B-52 strikes on its suspected positions.

Back near the demilitarised zone, ARVN units reported a large NVA presence just south of the Ben Hai River. Convinced the *324B Division* was now inside South Vietnam (after purportedly arriving in southern North Vietnam weeks earlier), Westmoreland took a more deliberate approach to uncovering the enemy’s intentions. Instead of ordering a big unit search and destroy operation, he instead ordered a thorough reconnaissance of the area to confirm the division’s presence. In what seemed to be a page out of Walt’s playbook a year earlier, Westmoreland explained to a correspondent with the *New Yorker* that “I didn’t want to react too quickly, and I wanted to be sure we had enough intelligence to guide us”.\(^{807}\) Rather than hurriedly ordering a battalion to the scene, “I had to have more intelligence on what was going

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\(^{802}\) 3d Marine Division Command Chronology, June 1966, 8, 10.
\(^{803}\) 3d Marine Division Command Chronology, June 1966, 7–8.
\(^{804}\) 3d Marine Division Command Chronology, June 1966.
\(^{806}\) 4th Mar AAR, Operation Jay.
on up north, and there was no better way to get it than by sending in reconnaissance elements in force”.

Throughout nearly all of July and the first few days of August, reconnaissance patrols from the 3d Reconnaissance Battalion saturated areas south of the demilitarised zone in search of the 324B NVA Division. Between 6 and 9 July, ARVN patrols captured two NVA soldiers near a remote reconnaissance outpost west of Dong Ha named the Rockpile. The first soldier stated that he was a member of the 324B’s 5th Battalion, 812th NVA Regiment. The second, an officer, admitted he was also with the enemy regiment. With this information, Brigadier General Kyle recommended that Walt allow him to “move troops north to try to get them [the North Vietnamese] out of there and drive them back”. Agreeing with Kyle’s recommendation, Walt contacted Westmoreland to explain that he was now turning his attention to securing inland bases and enemy occupied areas in the north to stunt what he saw as North Vietnam’s plan to seize the eastern half of Quang Tri province and, potentially, to overrun the second largest logistics base in the northern provinces at Dong Ha.

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808 Shaplen, The Road from War.
809 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 160.
810 MajGen Wood B. Kyle USMC, Oral History Transcript, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC 9, 12, and 16 June 1969, 185, hereafter Kyle interview.
Operations Hastings and Macon

Marine large unit operations accounted for at least 1,039 enemy soldiers killed in July and August 1966.\textsuperscript{811} In addition to these confirmed figures, Walt field commanders estimated their units killed an additional 1,392 main force and NVA troops, raising probable total enemy killed to more than 2,400.\textsuperscript{812} Eight large unit operations contributed to these figures, spanning 165 miles from the demilitarised zone to Chu Lai. The majority of the confirmed enemy killed (977 to be exact), resulted from two offensive actions: Operation Hastings from 15 July to 3 August and Operation Macon from 4 July to 28 October.\textsuperscript{813} Separated by 150 miles, the two operations demonstrated Walt’s intent to make good on the Marine Corps’ position on engaging in conventional operations as a means to enforce the phased construct of the enclave concept as

\textsuperscript{813} Operations of U.S. Marine Forces Vietnam, July 1966, 8.
well as to seek contact with the main forces and NVA when the time and intelligence picture war
right.

During planning for operations in Quang Tri province and the demilitarised zone, intelligence sources confirmed the 324B NVA Division was using the Song Ngan Valley west of Cam Lo to infiltrate and stage for an attack on Dong Ha and, potentially, against the provincial capital at Quang Tri City. Before the enemy settled into its positions, Walt, in much the same way he handled the 1st NLF Regiment at Chu Lai, ordered Kyle to conduct a spoiling attack. With the 3d Marine Division’s Task Force Delta as the lead element, its commander, Brigadier General Lowell E. English, organized four infantry battalions (2/1, 1/3, 2/4, and 3/4) and an artillery battalion (3/12) under the control of Colonel Donald W. Sherman’s 4th Marines. English moved his command post to the small ARVN outpost at Cam Lo, seven miles west of Dong Ha. Sherman established his command post at Dong Ha. The airfield was to serve as the jumping off point for Operation Hastings. In addition to the Marine battalions, the 1st ARVN Division contributed a regiment to the operation. To prevent the NVA from using the coastal as an alternate infiltration route, English requested the SLF’s 3d Battalion, 5th Marines (3/5), to land and block any movement south.

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815 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 161.
816 Operations of U.S. Marine Forces Vietnam, July 1966, 9; and Shulimson, An Expanding War, 163.
From 15 July to 3 August, III MAF executed the largest combined offensive of the war to date. The operation represented a collection of brief but sharp engagements with an occasional larger encounter. The most significant engagement occurred on 18 July, when 3/4 made contact with an NVA force estimated at 1,000 soldiers. Catching the enemy force by surprise, 3/4 used close air support and artillery to do most of the damage. The battalion confirmed 138 enemy killed in direct fighting but estimated several hundred more likely fell as a result of supporting arms. Walt, Kyle, and English assessed that the caught elements of the 324B Division off guard the first day of the attack and that the enemy was unable to organise anything larger than a regiment for a counterattack. The extent of the surprise was unknown until Marines spoke with villagers in the area, who claimed the NVA forced them to dig numerous graves. By the end of

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273
the operation, Marine commanders reported more than 700 NVA soldiers killed in addition to the hundreds of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition captured.\textsuperscript{819}

In the days and weeks following Operation Hastings, Westmoreland and Walt discussed the situation on the demilitarised zone. Concerned that this was the just the beginning of a large NVA attempt to seize Quang Tri Province, Walt debated whether to establish a permanent presence in the north. Having to choose between the potential of not having enough forces engaged in the enclaves and populated countryside in the south and fighting a conventional campaign in the north, Walt kept a small force (2/4, 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, an artillery battery from 3/12, a tank platoon, and a combat engineer detachment) at Dong Ha and Cam Lo to monitor the situation.\textsuperscript{820} Despite reports of two additional NVA divisions, the 304th and 341st, were occupying positions just north of the Ben Hai River, until they crossed into South Vietnam and he confirmed their location, Walt insisted that III MAF continue to concentrate on clearing and securing the enclaves, namely the areas west of Da Nang and Chu Lai, as well as establishing the new combat base at An Hoa.\textsuperscript{821} In the meantime, the Marine contingent remaining behind would reinforce the combat bases at Dong Ha and Cam Lo for future operations.

Although less intense, Operation Macon inflicted substantial damage on the main forces operating 16 miles south of Da Nang on the banks of the Thu Bon River in the Quang Nam Province. Five battalions participated part in this action designed to consolidate Marine influence in this densely populated area surrounding the new An Hoa Combat Base.\textsuperscript{822} The large unit

\textsuperscript{819} “Operation Hastings” file; and Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 176.
\textsuperscript{820} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 177.
\textsuperscript{821} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}.
operation consisted on the continuous but relatively light contact with main force battalions operating in company strength (at times less than 100 soldiers). Unwilling to engage the Marines for an extended period of time, the enemy broke contact within minutes, forcing the Marines to use artillery and air strikes. Supporting arms accounted for a large number of the enemy dead. By the end of July, the Marines reported 208 enemy killed and another 423 suspected dead.

**Team Primness and Stingray Operations**

Although not a large unit operation per se, during idle periods of Operation Hastings, the Marines devised a new technique to achieve attrition outside the normal parameters of a battalion or large action when Marine commanders looked for ways to maintain contact with an enemy scattered along the demilitarised zone and attempting to consolidate for a counterattack or move back across into North Vietnam. To prevent either from happening, the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company sent 7–10 man teams out to set up small defendable positions atop hills and mountains overlooking the demilitarised zone. Their mission was to locate and report on NVA movements. One patrol answering to the call-sign Team Primness moved atop a piece of high ground overlooking a major trail leading north. Within hours, the team spotted an NVA company of 200 or more soldiers moving below their observation post. Realising the enemy had no idea of his team’s presence, the patrol leader, Sergeant Orest B. Bishko, requested an artillery mission directly on top of the complacent enemy force as it walked along a trail. With artillery fire impacting the company within a minute of his request, one of its platoons attacked uphill toward Bishko’s team. Midway up the hill, a Marine Vought F-8 Crusader dropped its

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825 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 175.
bombs on top of it the enemy platoon, leaving few survivors.\textsuperscript{826} With the hill unscathed, Team Primness became the example for what the Marines came to know as Stingray operations.

That same month, Marine reconnaissance teams of varying sizes established observation posts in carefully selected remote areas with expected enemy activity. Using prepositioned artillery and aircraft in direct support of their outposts, the objective was to inflict heavy losses on the enemy at little cost to the Marines. An associated task for Stingray teams was to report the strength and location of an enemy force and guide an infantry battalion into the area to attack the unmindful force. Between May 1966 and September 1967, Stingray teams accounted for more than 1,678 main force and NVA soldiers killed compared to the 56 Marines lost during these operations.\textsuperscript{827} The problems the Marines faced with using this concept was the risk of having a team captured or overrun by a larger enemy force or, even worse, having a Marine quick reaction force annihilated while attempting to extract a Stingray team. The following year, similar patrols by Team Killer Kane added to the total number of enemy killed in areas saturated with main force and NVA units, namely in the Hiep Duc Valley south of Chu Lai.\textsuperscript{828}

\section*{Nitze Joins McNamara in Challenging the Marines}

Two months after his response to McNamara, Krulak took exception to comments made by Navy Secretary Paul Nitze concerning the Marines’ strategy in South Vietnam. Concerns over Nitze’s “apparent lack of understanding of the way the Marines are pursuing their task in the I Corps area”, Krulak penned a letter to the secretary explaining yet again what the Marines were

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{826} Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}.
\item \textsuperscript{827} \textit{Operations of U.S. Marine Forces Vietnam, September 1967}, 33.
\end{itemize}
accomplishing and how, on 16 July, a mere day after Operation Hastings started.\textsuperscript{829} In his response, he attacked Nitze’s characterization of the Marines as unaggressive and more interested in “handing out soap to the natives”.\textsuperscript{830} Krulak added that the purpose of the letter was to change the “incorrect interpretation” of Marine Corps operations and the progress they were making in the region.\textsuperscript{831} Wanting to dispel Nitze’s slanted observation that the pace of offensive operations in the northern provinces was “inordinately slow” and that the Marines were failing to pursue large operations, therefore carrying less of the burden, Krulak writes that the Marines are indeed carrying their share.\textsuperscript{832} With this, he listed in order of priority the Marines daily efforts to include large unit operations, the defence of two major airfields and vital communications installations, intensive counterguerrilla operations, and a vigorous civic actions program.\textsuperscript{833}

At the expense of counterguerrilla operations and the civic actions program, which Krulak contends “Marines are the only ones who are conducting programs of the types described in the other three fields”, he begins his rebuttal with large unit operations against the main forces.\textsuperscript{834} “An essential component of the overall effort”, if planned and executed properly, is that large unit operations “punish the organized enemy, deny him initiative, and erode his means”.\textsuperscript{835} As a measure of activity, he provides the percentage of operations and results produced by the Marines as part of the overall U.S. effort. According to his records and the data III MAF provided, their efforts resulted in:

\textsuperscript{829} Krulak letter to Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze, 16 July 1966, HD, Krulak Papers, 1, hereafter Krulak letter to Nitze.
\textsuperscript{830} Krulak letter to Nitze.
\textsuperscript{831} Krulak letter to Nitze.
\textsuperscript{832} Krulak letter to Nitze.
\textsuperscript{833} Krulak letter to Nitze.
\textsuperscript{834} Krulak letter to Nitze, 2.
\textsuperscript{835} Krulak letter to Nitze.
- 21 percent of the U.S. and free world ground forces in Vietnam were Marines. However, they furnished 28 percent (19 out of 66) of the manoeuver battalions.

- 54 operations of battalion size and larger were initiated by U.S. forces in the past three months. Of these, 21 (or 39 percent) were launched by Marines.

- Since 1 January 1966, 30 major offensive operations (where more than 125 enemy were killed) were carried out by U.S. and free world forces. Of the 30, 11 (or 35 percent) were carried out by Marines.

- These 30 operations accounted for 8,493 enemy troops killed. 2,365 (or 28 percent) were killed on Marine operations.\(^836\)

In addition, Krulak relayed that, in the “precise area where the Marines are sometimes alleged not to be carrying their share, they have exceeded the contribution which might have been expected of them”.\(^837\) Although the rest of his rebuttal focused on the strengths of the base defence, counterguerrilla, and civic actions missions, Krulak’s objective was to point out that the Marines recognised the importance of large unit operations and attrition and were contributing to the effort. He offered later that, even if they did enter into a war of attrition against their better judgement, doing so was still a critical element if the goal was still to pacify the northern provinces.\(^838\)

**Operations Prairie I-IV**

From 6 to 8 August, a Stingray patrol operating on the demilitarised zone north of the Rockpile engaged NVA forces encamped south of the Ben Hai River. Their mission, as part of Operation Prairie I, was to continue reporting on and engaging enemy elements infiltrating into South Vietnam. Two days of bitter fighting to withdrawal the patrol after it came under attack

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836 Krulak letter to Nitze.
837 Krulak letter to Nitze, 2–3.
838 Krulak letter to Nitze, 3–7.
prompted Colonel Sherman to order 2/4 to conduct a reconnaissance of the area followed by a large unit operation. For six days, the battalion engaged elements of the 803d NVA Regiment. By 24 August, 21 Marines were dead, but only after they killed more than 100 of the enemy. The enemy responded with a multiple company attack on the combat outpost at Cam Lo on 26 August with telling results. The artillery battery based there happened to capture an NVA soldier claiming to be a member of the 812th NVA Regiment, 324B Division.

The 324B Division, by all accounts, was still in South Vietnam, and although this would be the last significant action during August, it was clear that the enemy was now testing the Marines to determine their disposition and strength in the aftermath of Operation Hastings. Walt’s reaction was swift. Determined to maintain contact with at least elements of the division, Walt requested the SLF’s 1st Battalion, 26th Marines (1/26), to land and appraise the extent of the enemy’s activities along a suspected infiltration route between the small ARVN outposts at Con Thien and Gio Linh between 15 and 25 September. Located on the flat coastal plain, these outposts straddled National Highway 1, blocking a major enemy avenue of approach leading directly to the Dong Ha Combat Base. During its 10 days ashore, 1/26 accounted for 254 enemy killed while losing 36 of its own. Throughout the next six months, Marine large unit operations inside the quadrant bound by Cam Lo, Con Thien, Dong Ha, and Gio Linh became known as Leatherneck Square. As the NVA’s presence increased and the fighting intensified, Walt moved addition battalions into the area. The Prairie operations were no longer named

841 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 186–87.
843 TG 79.5 SLF AAR “Operation Deckhouse” and “Operation Prairie”, 15.
operations but an area of operation as more Marine battalions deployed to the demilitarised zone to meet the NVA head on between September 1966 and March 1967. Lieutenant General Krulak noted that the overall result of Prairie and North Vietnam’s demilitarised zone campaign “was a mixture of costly defeat and marginal success. It was costly, in that he suffered severe losses, both in attack and defence. When he probed or patrolled, he was pursued by Marine infantry-heliborne or on the ground—and was pounded by air, artillery, and naval gunfire”.

To the west of the Prairie area of operations, 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines (1/4), continued engaging pockets of NVA north of the Rockpile. Concerned that NVA units might attempt to move through Laos and into South Vietnam along infiltration routes taking them south of Route 9 to avoid Marine operations on the demilitarised zone, General Westmoreland suggested that Lieutenant General Walt consider expanding the combat base at Khe Sanh and displacing at least one battalion there to block the enemy. Walt and his field commanders resisted. Occupying Dong Ha and Cam Lo, as well as planning operations near Con Thien and Gio Linh, were understandable considering their proximity to the coast and the U.S. Navy’s ability to support Marine large unit operations there. Moving Marines to Khe Sanh, where naval gunfire and logistics could not support them, and with all areas in between the austere combat base and the coast saturated with enemy forces was disconcertingly similar to the situation the French found themselves in during 1954. Appreciating this and having argued along with General Greene and Lieutenant General Krulak in 1965 that it was necessary to secure the coast and interior lines of communications first before moving inland, Walt was unsuccessful in

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845 Shulimson, An Expanding War, 195.
getting Westmoreland to see it from this perspective. On 29 September, Walt moved 1/3, along with a detachment of combat engineers, to Khe Sanh.\footnote{Shulimson, \textit{An Expanding War}, 196–98.} The base’s expansion began in earnest.

**Greene’s Force Requirements and Long-Range Estimates for 1967**

While Walt expanded his influence into the rural areas and near the demilitarised zone and Krulak fought off critics in the Defence Department, Greene directed Lieutenant General Buse and others on his staff to conduct an internal Service review and to produce an estimate with the force requirements needed to successfully prosecute the operations in northern provinces in 1967. The data that planners sifted through came primarily from 1965, but also included information from the first six months of operations in 1966. Greene received the final report titled “Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for the Successful Prosecution of the War in I Corps, RVN” in mid-October 1966 with copies delivered to the Joint Chiefs.\footnote{“Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for the Successful Prosecution of the War in I Corps, RVN, October 1966”, HD, Greene Papers, Box 4, File 2, 1, hereafter “Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for RVN”.

Of great importance to this study was the concept of operations and mission analysis that planners developed as part of the review to ensure the Marines were operating in concert with Westmoreland’s intent as expressed in his 21 November 1965 instructions. Both provided Walt guidance for organizing (and reorganizing) and tasking his ground combat units to accomplish both conventional and unconventional military objectives. The primary question Marine planners pondered was whether United States policy dictated whether American ground forces were to fight the main forces and NVA exclusively or were they to focus on the entire “spectrum of war”, including guerrilla forces and the VCI.
According to their assessments, officials in Washington, DC, and in Saigon favored the entire spectrum of war—the chosen course of action of the Marines since arriving a year earlier.\textsuperscript{848} Even in a full spectrum conflict, however, planners envisioned Marines in large unit operations even though they identified that the guerrilla forces would eventually become their primary obstacle to securing the northern provinces.

The objectives for defeating the NVA, the VC main force units and VC guerrillas must be stated in a more specific, quantifiable manner. The defeat of the NVA will probably provide a semi-classic, semi-conventional force response. Units will be rendered combat ineffective and, withdrawal of fragments of the units back into Laos or North Vietnam for reconstitution will occur. Eventually, however, substantial remnants of organized units will be assimilated into VC main force units and VC guerrilla forces.\textsuperscript{849}

Greene, Krulak, and Walt recognized and agreed that conventional large unit operations were necessary and would be so for some time to come. Not until the defeat of the main forces, did the guerrilla become “our ultimate enemy force objective”, the document detailed.\textsuperscript{850} The war, however, would not end there as remnants of the main forces would “be almost completely assimilated into the fabric of the guerrilla force”, taking the level of war from a “semi-conventional threshold to the classic guerrilla campaign”.\textsuperscript{851} Planners expected Marines would continue to balance their use of counterguerrilla operations with large unit operations so long as remnants of defeated main force and NVA units remain available as replacements for lost fighters. Based on this report, the Marines concluded that offensive operations and attrition of the main forces and NVA remained necessary components of the enclave concept and balanced approach throughout the rest of 1966 and into 1967. In the interim, III MAF should continue to

\textsuperscript{848} “Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for RVN”, 9–10.
\textsuperscript{849} “Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for RVN”, 11.
\textsuperscript{850} “Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for RVN”, 12.
\textsuperscript{851} “Long-Range Estimate and Force Requirements for RVN”.

282
view enemy forces (e.g., main forces, guerrillas, and NVA) as a single entity and, most important, that the “defeat of the residual guerrilla will not take place until the main forces are defeated”.852

The Second Invasion of South Vietnam

With North Vietnam pursuing a higher than expected level of direct involvement for the fourth straight month, III MAF had no other alternative than to confront the NVA, head-on, vice and indirect approach. During Phase III, North Vietnam made two attempts to establish strongpoints in Quang Tri Province. The first was the 324B Division’s invasion in July, which was the target of Operation Hastings. After Hastings, the enemy division withdrew to positions inside and immediately north of the demilitarised zone, where it continued to pose a threat to Quang Tri and the other four northern-most provinces. Walt decided to keep three to four battalions in the northern half of the province as insurance and to respond immediately to the first sign of the enemy. In September, the 324B Division crossed into South Vietnam, for a second time, into the hills north of Cam Lo and the coastal plain northeast of Dong Ha, prompting the Prairie operations. These costly engagements forced the bulk of the invaders to withdrawal northward and, by the end of September, contact was between the Marines and NVA returned to brief firefights between small unit patrols.

North Vietnamese military incursions into the northern provinces resulted in the relocation of at least six battalions from the central and southern I Corps Tactical Zone to bases and areas stretching the full length of the demilitarised zone. What started as a reconnaissance in force and subsequent large unit operation in early summer evolved into a continuing string of similar actions aimed at securing the porous border region, which included the expansion of the

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Khe Sanh Special Forces camp on Route 9 into a full combat base and the open-ended assignment of one Marine battalion there. The task of defending the demilitarised zone, although additive to the commitment of forces to other large unit operations elsewhere, had a noticeable impact on the counterguerrilla war, civic action, and the defence of base areas. The Marines, however, anticipated this could happen. The arrival of the 1st Marine Division in the central and southern provinces of the III MAF’s area of operations was in keeping with the potential to shift of Marine forces elsewhere or to capitalise on gains made in either pacification or attrition. What the Marines likely did not anticipate was the need to displace elements of the 1st Marine Division northward to reinforce the 3d Marine Division on the demilitarised zone.
The Second Front and the Expansion North

Phase IV of the enclave concept began much the same way Phase III ended in that large unit operations were, in a very deliberate way, foremost on the minds of Marine leaders and, therefore, attracting much of III MAF’s resources. This imbalance in terms of the Marine Corps’ lines of efforts during the previous six months was a product of three issues. The first was Lieutenant General Walt’s expressed willingness to engage the main forces and NVA if the information on their whereabouts and disposition was accurate. The growing intelligence picture confirming a grossly overt NVA presence on the demilitarised zone and the subsequent engagements with the 324B Division throughout late 1966 gave Walt what he insisted he needed in terms of taking the offensive. His actions required minimal direction from Westmoreland, though this had more to do with timing and sequence and the size of the force Walt felt comfortable moving out of the central and southern part of the I Corps and away from pacification and operations against the main forces and NVA around Chu Lai, Da Nang, and Phu Bai and the new combat base at An Hoa. Walt’s operations officer at III MAF, Colonel John Chaisson, recalled that Walt and his commanders resisted any effort to “get us extended” permanently away from pacification in the central and southern I Corps.853

The second issue causing the imbalance was North Vietnam’s ability to convince both Westmoreland and Walt to cover down on the demilitarised zone. The 324B Division’s May

853 Chaisson interview, 376.
1966 cross-border invasion, the attack on Cam Lo, and Westmoreland edginess over the potential for an attack against the Khe Sanh combat base, in particular, led Walt to rethink his efforts there on a permanent basis or risk losing the northern half of Quang Tri Province altogether.\footnote{854 See Chapter Six.} The Marine Corps’ official history asserts that Walt’s decision was, in large part, a reaction to Westmoreland pressuring him to into taking more aggressive action in the north and in what was to become a static defensive posture at the detriment of pacification, the VCI/counterguerrilla fight, and large unit operations around the base areas and at identified rural areas such as An Hoa. In retrospect, however, Walt’s assessment of where the Marines were with regards to Phase III had as much to do with his predicament than Westmoreland’s pressures to move north.

The third issue, of course, had to do with the established phasing of the enclave concept. With the An Hoa Combat Base under construction and the combat bases at Quang Tri, Dong Ha, and Khe Sanh undergoing expansion, Walt was now able to spread the 3d Marine Division out and occupy these areas as well as the outposts at Gio Linh, Con Thien, Cam Lo, and Camp Carroll. The arrival of the 1st Marine Division in January 1966 assisted greatly in allowing him to do this as its regiments would backfill the vacancies at Chu Lai, Da Nang, and Phu Bai. With the conditions of Phase III accomplished (new bases in the north and in the rural areas identified), Walt moved III MAF into Phase IV, which meant offensive operations from these bases could begin. From the reported locations of enemy battalions in the northern provinces, Walt had plenty of options to choose from.

The enemy’s uncontested dominance of the rural countryside prior to Westmoreland issuing his November 1966 instructions was a major factor in his continued frustration with the enclave concept, General Walt, and III MAF. For proof that the concept and balanced approach were achieving better results than Westmoreland was willing to acknowledge, one need not look
any further than North Vietnam’s actions in January 1966 when it started massing several divisions on the demilitarised zone at locations just north of Ben Hai River in addition to infiltrating several independent regiments deep inside the mountainous regions of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Their intent was to slowly pull the Marines into the countryside, leaving the coastal populated areas open for the NLF to reestablish control. The initial phase of this “second front” sent numerous NVA battalions, preferably undetected, into base areas west of the enclaves. At the same time, main forces battalions took up positions just outside the enclaves while guerrilla forces prepared to reenter villages and towns. Simultaneously, large NVA formations of up to division size entered the demilitarised zone and conducted demonstrations and feints just south the zone to lure Marines away from the coastal areas for extended periods of time. Their goal was to get Walt to vacate the populated areas and to leave the weaker and less observant and engaged ARVN to protect the people, allowing guerrilla forces to reseed. If the ARVN attempted to intervene, main force battalions were in place to block and attack. By time the Marine units returned from operations on the demilitarised zone, the NLF expected the progress of the previous 18 months to be reversed.

The Intelligence Picture

In early 1967, III MAF intelligence reported as many as 30 NVA battalions operating inside the northern provinces with upwards of 13 battalions located deep inside the western mountains of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces alone.\(^{858}\) Enemy totals in the central and southern regions of the I Corps area were increasing with each passing day as well with the infiltration of the 2\(^{d}\) NVA Division for operations in the Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces.\(^{859}\) According to estimates, the NLF increased its number of main force battalions to 19 battalions,

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bringing Communist conventional force totals to more than 43,000 soldiers in the northern provinces. Unlike in the other three southern-most provinces, pacification in Quang Tri and Thua Thien proved to be far more difficult due to the inherently smaller number of people living there due to the rugged terrain and the harsher climatic conditions and weather patterns, especially during the monsoon seasons.

As the second front entered its fourth month, the tempo and intensity of the fighting increased substantially. Despite the casualties, material losses, and perceived stalled progress in pacification, Walt’s willing focus on large unit operations spelled future problems for the NVA and the NLF. Operations along the demilitarised zone, around Da Nang and Chu Lai as well as the continued efforts to clear the An Hoa basin were taking a toll on the main forces and NVA and forcing more North Vietnamese to make the difficult movement down the Ho Chi Minh trail network to compensate for heavy losses in the south. Regardless of the decreased pace of pacification, the main forces and NVA were no longer getting the support they once had, putting even greater strain on Hanoi to support the war. Based on the NVA’s actions across the I Corps, the NVA was striving for a major military victory. April appeared to be the month to start the process with the demilitarised zone and An Hoa industrial areas being the two locations the main forces and NVA were willing to make a stand.

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Unfortunately for the Marines, the U.S. air campaign against the Ho Chi Minh trail, albeit constant and aggressive, was struggling to slow North Vietnam’s infiltration of its combat units and the buildup of supplies for the estimated 20,000 soldiers already in the tri-border region.\textsuperscript{861}

That failure, and the sustained fighting, contributed to Westmoreland’s concern that a major offensive across the demilitarised zone and on the Laos-South Vietnamese border was imminent. Walt’s intelligence estimates, especially west of Phu Bai in the mountainous A Shau Valley, however, portrayed less substantial buildup there than in Quang Nam, which is where Walt believed he needed more forces. Where and when the next offensive was to unfold neither Walt nor Westmorland could readily answer. The 324B Division’s infiltration north of Cam Lo and east of Dong Ha was a clear sign of the next move and which Walt was in the act of answering. Westmoreland pondered whether the NVA might try to move directly through the Khe Sanh valley. To do that required the NVA to seize control of the high ground surrounding the combat base and valley to directly support a push south or seize the base itself. With this thought, Westmoreland alerted Walt to posture III MAF to repel any report of increased NVA activity. Marine reconnaissance teams observing Leatherneck Square, the Prairie area of operations, and around Khe Sanh gave Walt the time he needed to initiate contact when the moment came. Until then, he wanted to continue with pacification in the south, clear the An Hoa basin, and protect progress made there despite the arrival of the 2d NVA Division.

The Hill Fights

Early on 24 April, a Marine patrol confronted an NVA force less than five miles northwest of Khe Sanh. What the Marines determined to be just another brief engagement was actually the initial contact of what was to be one of the costliest battles of the war for the NVA. Before the battle ended on 6 May, NVA losses totaled 940 confirmed killed. Unlike previous

862 Murphy, The Hill Fights, 7.
engagements in the area, this time the enemy demonstrated it intended to hold its ground instead of fleeing back across the border into the mountains. In retrospect, and based on the intelligence analysis of the events, it appeared that this time the NVA had an elaborate plan involving actions as far east as the coast and the seizure of the Khe Sanh combat base.\textsuperscript{864} To do this, the NVA first had to isolate other key locations—which they did. Artillery and mortar attacks on the combat bases at Dong Ha, Gio Linh, Con Thien, and Camp Carroll signalled the start of the offensive. Even Phu Bai, home to the preponderance of the helicopters supporting large unit operations on the demilitarised zone, factored into the attack and shut down air transportation options. To control overland movement on Route 9, enemy demolitions teams cut key stretches of the route to isolate Khe Sanh.\textsuperscript{865} A diversionary attack would be carried out against the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei, four miles west of Khe Sanh so as to distract Walt.\textsuperscript{866} These actions in total supported the main ground attack on Khe Sanh from NVA forces moving southwest from the mountainous Laos-South Vietnam demilitarised zone region.\textsuperscript{867}

With all actions proceeding according to plan, the main effort attacked prematurely, allowing the Marines and ARVN in the area to act according to their own defence plans. In the initial contact on 24 April, the Marines apparently caught the NVA force off guard and reluctant to fight. Another Marine platoon that was to relieve the platoon in contact surprised a second NVA force attempting to move into place. Both Marine units tried to maintain contact with the NVA who were likely trying to “not to expose the overall plan for the ground attack”.\textsuperscript{868} By this time, however, it had become apparent that a larger enemy force was present in the hills north of

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Khe Sanh, allowing Walt to steal the initiative away from the enemy. Seeing an opportunity to spoil the attack and potentially trap the enemy, Walt ordered 3/3, based at the Dong Ha combat base, to move immediately to Khe Sanh.

By the evening of 25 April, it was clear that 3/3 was in contact with an enemy battalion and possibly a regiment occupying prepared defensive positions. Recognising the potential impact of trapping a much larger force, Walt asked for the SLF battalion, located east of Quang Tri City, to reinforce 3/3. At the same time, he moved the 3d Marines headquarters and its 2d Battalion, 3d Marines (2/3), from Dong Ha for an attack on Hill 861 west of Khe Sanh. On the evening of 27 April, the two battalions seized the hill. After two days of mopping up enemy positions and preparing for the next attack, 2/3 and 3/3 assaulted Hill 881N, located two miles to their northwest, and Hill 881S roughly three miles to the west. On the 30 April, Walt ordered a coordinated attack against an estimated NVA regiment dug-in on both hills. Fighting on and around the hills went on for four days. Walt was able to break the stalemate on 1 May with more than 1,000 fixed-wing sorties against fortified enemy positions, the highest number flown in support of one battalion in a single day since Operation Starlite in August 1965.869 On 6 May, the Marines reported the hills secure. Walt and his field commanders, though certainly concerned with their losses, had to be content with defeating a sizable NVA force with the resources available at Dong Ha and elsewhere along the demilitarised zone and without having to detract from pacification efforts to the south. After all, this was exactly what the Marines had been arguing for since 1965, which was to engage the main forces and NVA when the intelligence was right and they had the advantage. The other stipulation was that it did not interfere, at least not on a permanent basis, with pacification efforts.

Base Area Neutralisation Campaign

While occupied with countering the conventional threat on the demilitarised zone, Walt continued operations to degrade enemy base areas to “destroy NVN/Viet Cong bases and to deny him access to the heavily populated coastal plain and its spring rice harvest” near Phu Bai, south of Da Nang, and west of Chu Lai, proving once again that he wanted a plan complimentary of attrition and pacification. Operation Union was the source of most of the enemy killed and were in keeping with Walt’s intent to operate from inland base areas. Union began on 22 April, when a battalion from the 1st Marines found a main force base area 29 miles southwest of Da Nang near An Hoa. Occupied by a main force battalion, the four-day operation netted 282 enemy killed. Even before Westmoreland approached Walt with his concerns about intelligence indicating an enemy buildup west of Phu Bai, III MAF was already planning to enter the suspected base area. With only so many battalions available for missions other than base security, pacification, and to be on call in the event he can confirm information on a main force or NAV unit, Walt had to choose wisely when to commit forces to a named operation.

Nonetheless, Walt continued pushing battalions and regiments into uncleared areas to keep the enemy guessing. His intent was to neutralize specific main force and NVA base areas on the coast and in the rural areas, particularly since he had the forces to do so with the arrival of the 1st Marine Division. Army reinforcements in the coming months would allow both divisions to put more Marines in the field and begin clearing untouched areas. One example was Operation Shawnee. A day after Union got underway, the 4th Marines, with its ARVN counterparts, led an offensive against a major enemy base area northwest of Phu Bai. The largest penetration into the western portion of the Thua Thien resulted in light contact with small pockets of main force

871 Lehrack, Road of 10,000 Pains.
resistance. As the operation continued, ARVN forces uncovered a main force regimental headquarters and seized large quantities of communications equipment and rice. Pushing further into the base area, the Marines confronted larger pockets of resistance, killing 47 enemy during Shawnee.\textsuperscript{872}

\begin{figure}
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\caption{Main Force and NVA Base Areas Neutralisation Operations, 1967}
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\textsuperscript{872} Operations of U.S. Marine Force Vietnam, April 1967, 35.
South of Da Nang and west of Chu Lai, the 1st Marine Division’s summer large unit campaign was taking a heavy toll on the 2d NVA Division and its subordinate 3d and 21st Regiments as well as the 1st NLF Regiment. To reassert the increasingly tenuous influence in this rice-rich region and to bolster the guerrilla forces there, the 3d NVA Regiment entered South Vietnam a little more than a year earlier, operating principally in the southern Quang Nam Province. In September 1966, the 21st NVA Regiment completed its infiltration into South Vietnam and joined the 1st NLF Regiment in Quang Ngai Province. Although the Marines and ARVN confronted elements of the 2d NVA Division in the Nui Loc Son basin in June 1966, the 21st NVA Regiment was the first enemy regiment to occupy and operate in that area. The two other regiments followed months later. Intelligence officers in III MAF confirmed that the headquarters of the 2d NVA Division was in the basin in July 1966. Marine large unit operations against the 2d NVA Division in 1967 were nonstop, killing 4,222 of its soldiers, most which occurred in the fight to clear the Nui Loc Son basin. The result of these operations was III MAF assessing the 2d NVA Division as only marginally combat effective. Contact with them was in all actuality a continuation of the pattern Walt established with his pursuit of the 1st NLF Regiment in August 1965. In the succeeding two years, the NVA reconstituted the regiment several times. To prevent another reconstitution, Hanoi sent the 21st and the 3d NVA Regiments to relieve the pressure on the 1st NLF Regiment and placed it under the operational control of the 2d NVA Division.

873 Lehrack, Road of 10,000 Pains, 46.
874 Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, Fighting the North Vietnamese, 63–64.
III MAF Rebalances as Cushman Assumes Command

Convinced the NVA would continue to encroach upon South Vietnam from across the demilitarised zone, Westmoreland formed and displaced the nine-battalion Task Force Oregon to Chu Lai and in Duc Pho (Quang Ngai Province) in mid-April. By the end of the month, nearly 10,000 U.S. Army soldiers relieved three Marine battalions of their base security tasks for use in large unit operations where directed. As a result, Walt rebalanced his approach by getting Marines back into the villages and on the offensive in the south, while at the same time strengthening his position along the demilitarised zone. In the more secure areas, the continuation of Operations County Fair and Golden Fleece inflicted extensive damage to enemy recruitment and supply networks, while large unit operations greatly reduced the enemy’s freedom of movement. With nearly two American divisions (3d Marine Division and Task Force Oregon) engaged on the demilitarised zone, North Vietnam increased its force totals in South Vietnam to match the U.S. buildup.

On 1 June, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman Jr. replaced Walt as the senior Marine in South Vietnam. His command of III MAF and his approach to strategy would not differ in the slightest from Walt’s. Cushman, a decorated officer and Second World War veteran, faced manpower issues and troublesome directives from Westmoreland in the same manner as Walt in that his priority was to continue with the balanced approach. Fortunately for Cushman, Phase IV of the enclave concept was already underway when he assumed command, which allowed him to continue where Walt left off. Unfortunately, the NVA’s unfettered access to the demilitarised zone and repeat attempts to seize key terrain inside northern Quang Tri Province and mountains west of Phu Bai required he move the whole of the 3d Marine Division and elements of the 1st

878 Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, Fighting the North Vietnamese, 91.
Marine Division farther north and on a full-time basis. In addition, to meet the requirements of the Dye Marker barrier project, he had to request additional forces from Westmoreland, who responded by sending him an additional brigade.

**Con Thien**

After a short reprieve, the NVA increased its operations in the demilitarised zone and south in Quang Nam Province. From 1 June to 30 September, 57 percent of the enemy killed in South Vietnam occurred in engagements in the northern provinces. Of all the American deaths, 56 percent of all U.S. losses in South Vietnam occurred in the northern provinces. When the NVA attempted its next invasion of South Vietnam (the third time in six months), it was apparent the enemy force was still suffering from a near state of combat paralysis in the aftermath of the battles in September and early October.

The minor lull in fighting after Operation Hastings, however, was anything but an end to enemy operations south of the demilitarised zone. Despite Hastings, the NVA demonstrated its willingness to absorb heavy casualties. With the benefits of a sanctuary and shortened lines of communication, Cushman did not suspect the NVA would forego control this region anytime soon. In fact, three months into his command the NVA continued with its plan to seize Quang Tri Province. The bulk of the activity took place in a geographic area of about 20 square miles and generally around the small 158-meter-high hill called Con Thien. Not much more than a Marine battalion occupied the outpost at a time. Most of the action, and the resulting Marine

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879 Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 4–5.
880 Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 92–93; Memorandum from Commandant of the Marine Corps to the Secretary of the Navy on “Force Requirements DMZ Area” dated 4 January 1967; and LtGen Louis Metzger, “McNamara’s Wall”, *Marine Corps Gazette*, 83, no. 9 (September 1999): 82–87.
casualties, actually occurred as a result of contact between Marine units manoeuvering outside the outpost to ward off NVA forces preparing for a major attack.

During Operation Buffalo in July, three Marine battalions (1/9, 3/9, and 1/3) engaged a large NVA force concentrating outside Con Thien. In nearly two weeks of continuous fighting, the Marines confirmed the death of 1,290 enemy soldiers. Subsequent efforts were no more profitable to the NVA than previous ones. Marine units operating south and southwest of Con Thien engaged several small NVA units in bunkers. Between 7 and 10 September, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines (3/26), made heavy contact with an NVA unit less than three miles south of Con Thien.

Figure 14: Operation Buffalo, July 1967

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Reinforced by a second company and employing tanks, artillery, and close air support, Marines killed another 51 enemy in five hours of fighting.885 It was evident to Cushman that the 3d Marine Division’s continuous patrols exposed and foiled a major attack aimed at Con Thien. In late October, NVA activity around Con Thien decreased, permitting the construction of the Project Dye Marker strong points between Con Thien and Gio Linh to continue.886

With a break in the fighting, instead of reinvesting resources in pacification, Cushman refused to give ground and turned his attention to engaging the NVA both east and west of Con Thien. Operation Ardmore to the west provided nonstop surveillance of Khe Sanh with the aim of halting enemy infiltration, at least in large numbers. Sharp engagements of short duration kept the NVA guessing about how many Marines were in the area. Operation Fortress Sentry, a combined amphibious/heliborne assault against enemy positions east of Con Thien, did much the same. Lieutenant General Krulak, in his monthly reports on Marine activities in South Vietnam, elaborated on the benefits of the ongoing large unit campaign near the demilitarised zone. Aside from blocking an NVA invasion and protecting Route 9, the Marines’ presence there provided the “shield against North Vietnam, and behind which other, vital internal, military, civil and political programs in South Vietnam can proceed”.887

**Nui Loc Son Area and Operations in Quang Tin Province**

Like Westmoreland, Cushman measured III MAF’s success in terms of enemy killed. In September, he continued the offensive campaign to destroy enemy forces in the densely populated, agriculturally rich Nui Loc Son basin where the 2d NVA Division was attempting to

885 Telfer, Rogers, and Fleming, *Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 132.
886 Metzger, “McNamara’s Wall”, 82–87.
block III MAF’s advances inland from Chu Lai. Cushman maintained pressure on the 2d NVA Division by interlacing the Nui Loc Son basin and contiguous areas with large unit operations from the north and by coordinating operations with the Army’s II Corps Field Force headquarters just to the south. From June through August, the 1st Marine Division’s offensive routed the 2d NVA Division, causing it to displace south and regroup in the hill mass west of Chu Lai, where Army units inflicted additional losses before the enemy escaped north.

The 2d NVA Division’s move north triggered a coordinated III MAF/ARVN offensive. During the first 36 hours of Operation Swift, the 5th Marines, supported by artillery and air, killed 190 NVA alone. When Cushman terminated Swift eight days later, the Marines confirmed 571 enemy killed with an undetermined amount killed when the Marines collapsed several tunnels and bunkers. Believing the 1st NLF and 3d NVA Regiments were fleeing south, III MAF passed this the information to four Army battalions conducting Operation Wheeler. Although there were no large engagements, Wheeler produced significant results throughout the month. Despite the enemy’s unwillingness to commit large units to battle during October, large unit operations accounted for 16,420 main force and NVA soldiers killed in the northern provinces.

**Johnson and the JCS Reconsider the American Military Strategy**

Tension over military strategy continued into 1967, as did the high rate of U.S. casualties, prompting President Johnson to take yet another look at the attrition strategy and enclave concepts. On 4 October 1967, the Joint Chiefs sent a memorandum to Johnson with their

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thoughts on the enclave concept. Specifically, the memorandum was an opportunity for the Service heads to justify their recommendation for not adopting the concept. Using the argument that the concept leaves U.S. ground forces “generally confined to the defense of a specifically limited area”, adopting the enclave concept allows the “unmolested use” of “base areas in which he [Viet Cong] can train his forces, rest and refurbish his units, tend to his wounded, develop and rehearse his plans, and build up his stores of supplies”. Mobile operations in which U.S. ground forces operate outside the enclaves and in the countryside will “deny him this freedom”. To justify their position, the Joint Chiefs highlighted five key disadvantages:

1. Initiative is relinquished to the enemy. He is permitted to attack at places and times of his own choice. He has complete access to the people and food growing outside of the enclaves. He has the option of massing major elements of his force against a single enclave.
2. Important intelligence is denied to friendly commanders because intelligence gathering is restricted.
3. The defense of an enclave is costly in terms of casualties and resources.
4. An enclave defense ties down an excessively large number of troops in proportion to results achieved; nation-building, pacification, and Revolutionary Development cannot be conducted in areas outside the enclaves.
5. The enclave concept offers no opportunity to force a decision.

The Joint Chiefs went on to explain how the success of “large-scale sustained operations over the past two years have inflicted heavy damage to enemy main forces, destroyed or disrupted many of his base areas” and reduced NLF and NVA capabilities such that GVN control over the countryside is increasing. Only behind these U.S-led operations can the GVN continue to rebuild the country.

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891 Joint Chiefs Memorandum to the President, “The Enclave Concept”, 4 October 1967, National Archives and Records Management, hereafter JCS Enclave Concept memo, 1.
892 JCS Enclave Concept memo, 1.
893 JCS Enclave Concept memo, 1–2.
894 JCS Enclave Concept memo, 2.
The final part of their justification for not adopting the enclave concept and remaining with a more offensive-focused strategy is to prevent the enemy from regaining control of the population and countryside through its use of guerrilla and main forces. An “effective strategy should keep the enemy’s main forces in sparsely populated and food-scarce areas” and not be permitted freedom of action or to “neutralize the pacification efforts in populated areas”. In closing, they recommended that, “as long as the enemy poses a substantial threat, it is important that we should devote priority to offensive operations designed to disrupt” its main forces. Much, if not all, of the memorandum reflects the Marine Corps’ argument in 1965 and 1966 for adopting an offensive enclave concept in that it includes the need to protect the population by separating it from the insurgency, preventing enemy interference with pacification, collecting intelligence that can be of use in attacking the main forces, and dealing with the main forces and NVA as long as they pose a threat. As a signatory to this memorandum, General Greene was obviously aware of its language and that this proposal aligned with his arguments for an offensive version of the enclave concept.

**November Rain**

Contact with the NVA toward the end of 1967 took place predominately north of Da Nag in the area of the demilitarised zone the Marines were calling the Kentucky area of operations. Characterised by infrequent small unit engagement near Con Thien and the man-made clearings extending eastward towards Gio Linh, the enemy’s reluctance to fight, noted first in late September and continuing through October, was evidence that the northern large unit campaign

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895 JCS Enclave Concept memo, 2.  
896 JCS Enclave Concept memo, 2.
significantly damaged the NVA’s ability and desire to continue at the presence pace. According to Krulak’s operations reports:

...damage to the enemy’s force structure in the DMZ area is apparent; since January, he [NVA] has lost over 9,000 troops, along with correspondingly heavy losses in material. More significantly, the troop losses were suffered by elements of his elite front line divisions and represent a deficit of a large segment of trained and experienced personnel. North of the Ben Hai river, the enemy’s sanctuary, to which he returns to refurbish and restock his units, has been the target of a combined supporting arms effort of artillery, air and naval gunfire. Coupled with the monsoon rains, this attack by fire has made his marshalling of troops and movement of supplies difficult. In short, the enemy has been hurt, and the continuing combined arms effort has made his recovery difficult and costly.

The Media Continues to Track the Strategy Debate

While some American journalists, many of whom served the Marine Corps well during the bitter period of defence unification following the Second World War, failed to understand the significant difference between the concept proposed by Taylor and the Marine Corps and the defensive strategy Lieutenant General Gavin and others endorsed, others did not. Journalist Howard K. Smith, who openly criticised President Johnson and General Westmoreland for the lack of a single coherent strategy in his 1967 article titled “Vietnam War Solution Not Enclave Strategy”, noted that the absence of noticeable progress in American involvement in the war turned Westmoreland and others against anything associated with the enclaves. Unlike Westmoreland, however, Smith seemed to possess a much better understanding of the concept. In his article, he captured the concept not as a defensive scheme, but as a strategy featuring an offensive arm as well.

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Instead of furthering the notion that the enclave concept restricted the American military’s advantage in mobility and firepower or that it ultimately left them isolated and vulnerable to enemy firepower and ground attack, he presented the enclave concept the way the Marine Corps envisioned it. Smith explained that “our forces would reconnoiter extensively outside their enclaves, would send out patrols everywhere, and when they find the enemy concentrating, they would ’copter out large units to attack the enemy and prevent him from taking the initiative against our enclaves”.

In his final analysis, Smith believed the little support for the enclave concept that did exist was the result of frustrated Americans willing to see U.S. forces settle into a defensive posture if it meant bringing the war to a conclusion. This frustration, in turn, was the result of misperceptions and misrepresentation by those in favour of a purely conventional strategy and approach.

The idea that there were no commonalities between the enclave concept and conventional offensive operations and attrition lingered in the media as well. In an article published on the topic of strategy and South Vietnam, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Joseph Kraft opined that, of the two military strategies applied, only the Army engaged in the defeat of conventional enemy forces. In “McNamara’s Testing to Be in Strategy”, Kraft specifically explained that:

The idea is to seek out enemy units, and inflict maximum punishment upon them in order to break the capacity and will of the other side to keep on fighting. . . . But it meant that large [numbers of] American forces had to be committed to wasteland areas, constantly searching for the enemy, and often without making contact. . . . They have had to fight in conditions of supply and terrain highly favorable to the enemy.

Kraft’s reference to what he viewed as the alternative was actually just one-half of the enclave concept. From his perspective, the enclave concept was a strategy focusing not on

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898 Smith, “Vietnam War Solution Not Enclave Strategy”, 10A.
899 Smith, “Vietnam War Solution Not Enclave Strategy”, 10A.
900 Joseph Kraft, “McNamara’s Testing to Be in Strategy”, Eugene (OR) Register-Guard, 13 July 1967, 8A.
offensive operations against the main forces, but on establishing expanding beachheads in the coastal enclaves to create a visual and physical presence among the people with the goal of separating them from guerrilla forces. He added that, through constant patrolling, civic actions, and the partnering of small units with local South Vietnamese village-level defence forces, the Marines were slowly expanding their presence along the coast and into the interior, with the areas now firmly under their control spreading like an ink blot until they merge into a single secure area. Skeptical of the current situation on the ground, Kraft posited that the Marines’ approach left small units vulnerable to attack by large concentrations of main forces and, in the long run, to defeat in the northern provinces. The argument about the Marines’ involvement in offensive operations and the role offensive operations played in the enclave concept continued with no end or understanding in sight.

**Before Tet**

Throughout 1967, III MAF dedicated the majority of its resources to the 116 large unit operations, with 13 of those operations taking place on the demilitarised zone (with support from the SLF) and enemy base areas north of Da Nang in December alone. With the great potential of a major enemy offensive against any of the Marine combat bases and outposts in northern Quang Tri Province (Dong Ha, Con Thien, Gio Linh, Cam Lo, Camp Carroll, and Khe Sanh) Lieutenant General Cushman’s real concern was the large-scale buildup of NVA forces near Khe Sanh. Relatively quiet since III MAF repulsed the enemy invasion there in late April and early May, the combat base was once again a focal point of activity in December 1967. Aerial reconnaissance detecting heavily used trails in South Vietnam and Laos, more frequent patrol

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901 Kraft, “McNamara’s Testing to Be in Strategy”, 8A.
encounters, and reports by the few villagers in the areas pointed to another attack on the base. Consequently, on 13 December, Cushman reinforced Khe Sanh with an additional battalion.

That conventional enemy forces would attempt a major offensive in the western part of the province was logical. After a year of fighting and heavy losses on the predominately flat and open stretch of the demilitarised zone, Hanoi’s goal of a major ground victory intensified each time the Marines turned them back. The offensive pattern there cost the NVA 6,884 confirmed killed and the high probability of even more since its first penetration in July 1966. This depletion in trained soldiers represented a significant loss to the NVA’s ability to sustain its campaign.

Figure 17: NVA Order of Battle in the Quang Tri Province, 1967

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It appeared that the Khe Sanh Combat Base, surrounding by thickly vegetated mountains and valleys, offered main force and NVA units the best chance of achieving a military advantage. Using relatively secure routes to march to and from North Vietnam and Laos, conventional enemy forces can easily infiltrate large numbers of troops, heavy weapons, and supplies close to Khe Sanh without fear of American aircraft targeting them. Controlling access to Khe Sanh and the base itself benefited the main force and NVA in that it sits astride a major infiltration corridor and facilitates invasion efforts made difficult by the heavy Marine presence in the eastern demilitarised zone area. This was likely the case given that one NVA division, the 324B, was unable to establish a permanent foothold in South Vietnam without being engaged immediately by III MAF. The new move against Khe Sanh, while appearing similar to the one in the spring, is much greater in scope and was yet to be confirmed. On the eve of the Tet Offensive, elements of at least two NVA divisions were in the immediate area with a third division operating near Camp Carroll and Cam Lo to the east. The likely mission of the latter was to interdict Route 9, with a strong possibility also of an attack against Camp Carroll, in an attempt to neutralise artillery support in defence of Khe Sanh.

Cushman’s northern and southern offensives paid big dividends in one critical pacification category: the September national election. Accordingly, the III MAF counterguerrilla campaign and ARVN pacification efforts made great strides in eroding the NLF’s influence in the northern provinces such that the GVN reported exceptionally heavy voter participation rates across the region. Upwards of 86 percent turned out to vote, attesting to the GVN’s growing ability to protect and serve the population.904 This was certain to make the GVN and the population a high priority target in 1968.

Fruits of the Protective Shield

By design, this thesis provides very little in terms of the impact pacification had on the war in the northern provinces from March 1965 to December 1967 as a number of studies in circulation already do this. There is a way, however, to include this type of information to determine the success or value of pacification within the enclave concept and civic action and counterguerrilla tactics as part of the balanced approach, and that is by identifying up front that Marines conducted nearly 150 large unit operations during the period this thesis examines.905 Each of these operations helped establish the protection shield needed to allow the GVN and ARVN to get back into the villages to win the trust and support of the South Vietnamese population. These same operations enabled the Marines to reduce the main forces and NVA such that they were no match for the ARVN. The Tet Offensive of 1968 interrupted the process. In his 1994 book, After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam, historian Ronald H. Spector contends that instead of describing the offensive as the turning point of the war, scholars should see it as merely the beginning.906 Focusing on the period from roughly May 1968 to May 1969, Spector views this as a period in which North Vietnam pulled out all the stops from January to April to ensure the NLF was victorious once and for all.

Before the offensive, the popular overtones were that, regardless of the casualties and the increase in American military end strength in South Vietnam, American ground forces and the ARVN were winning the war. Statistics proved as much. With large swaths of the northern provinces purportedly under GVN and III MAF control, many of the restrictions on Marines entering the demilitarised zone lifted; and with NVA units being defeated in detail, there was reason to believe the reports of victory were correct. For III MAF, the figures showed little other

than the fact that pacification was working because the main forces and NVA were being defeated. As 1967 drew to a close, III MAF began to look at what had gotten it to this point as a means to determine the path for 1968. The following is what Greene, Krulak, and Walt assessed large unit operations helped them achieve.

By anyone’s standard, the period under examination reflected a significant improvement in security and quality of life due in part to the Marine Corps’ combined emphasis on attrition and pacification. What cannot be left out of the discussion is the impact conventional military operations had on these improvements. By emphasising both attrition and pacification, the Marines changed the war’s focus and direction in that they forced North Vietnam to increase its infiltration rates and commit more resources to the conflict than imagined, which in turn strained the NLF. Higher rice taxation, consumption of local resources (e.g., food and water), and the conscription of able-bodied men into service with the main forces as a result of casualties helped widened the gap between the population and the NLF.

While this was happening, the CAP became the most expedient way to hold down cleared populated areas with small units so that large units could continue clearing other areas. From June 1965 to June 1966, the number of CAPs grew from 1 to 39 and included nearly 800 Marines and 1,494 Popular Force soldiers.\(^{907}\) Equally important was that the CAPs contributed to both local governance and overall enemy attrition levels. According to one Marine Corps study on security from December 1965 to January 1967, villages with an independent Popular Force lost 157 soldiers but killed 499 guerrillas; a kill ratio of three to one.\(^{908}\) In villages with a CAP, that ratio increased to 14 to 1, or 154 guerrillas killed compared to 6 Marines and 5 Popular


Force soldiers. Security contributed directly to an increase in the numbers and percentages of villages with functioning governing councils vice those without. In villages without a CAP, only 28 percent had a functional council. In villages with a CAP, 82 percent had functioning councils; a significant statistic considering the VCI controlled most villages for more than a decade and imposed brutal consequences on village elders attempting to assume leadership roles in their absence. With Marine large unit operations clearing the main forces and NVA from the populated areas and further into the remote interior, the less of a chance the VCI and guerrilla forces had to retain their grip on the villages and enclaves.

Basic civic actions improved the quality of life for the South Vietnamese people as well. By late 1965, III MAF provided medical care to more than 16,000 villagers. These numbers increased annually as III MAF expanded its presence and replaced the VCI with a CAP. In late 1966, medical assistance projects provided care for more than 300,000 villagers. In 1967, that total grew to more than 2 million as did the number of villagers provided medical training (2,288), the number of villagers medically evacuated (8,111), and the number of villagers fed (7,579,415). Improved population dynamics attributed to the enclave concept’s success in the first two years of operations as friendly pockets of the population in III MAF’s area of operation

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grew from 100,000 to more than 600,000.\textsuperscript{915} That number continued to grow well into 1967. The Marines had an enormous psychological impact on the VCI and guerrillas as well.

During the period studied, III MAF facilitated the return of thousands of guerrillas and main forces soldiers to their ancestral villages through the \textit{Chieu Hoi Program}, averaging 102 returnees per month in 1965, 145 per month in 1966, and 200 per month in 1967.\textsuperscript{916} Each provided invaluable intelligence on main force and NVA dispositions and operational patterns, which III MAF exploited with great success. In addition to enticing enemy soldiers to come back and to train and employ them with ARVN and American forces, Operations County Fair and Golden Fleece inflicted extensive damage to the main forces and NVA during this period too. In two years, III MAF conducted 101 County Fair operations and accounted for more than 200 enemy killed with nearly 300 captured.\textsuperscript{917} Golden Fleece proved equally productive in that it

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{population_increase.png}
\caption{Population Increase in the III MAF Area of Operations, 1965}
\end{figure}


kept more than 870,000 pounds of rice, or 30 percent of crops, out of the enemy’s hands.\textsuperscript{918} Prior to this, roughly 90 percent of the rice harvest made its way to the main forces and NVA.\textsuperscript{919}

While the population remained the Marine Corps’ primary objective, conventional military operations increased in number and intensity, which to most was a signal that the NLF and North Vietnam believed pacification was paying off. As the Marines hoped, pacification was forcing the NLF to abandon its own pacification/counterpacification efforts in favour of taking a more direct conventional approach. The result was more than 9,600 main force soldiers killed in 1965 and 1966 combined.\textsuperscript{920} The high number of main force casualties forced the NVA into a direct role, prompting Walt to increase his large unit tempo. The number of NVA soldiers killed after 1966 rose dramatically. One reason was the location of the majority of the engagements between the Marines and NVA. Along the demilitarised zone, where fewer people lived, restrictions on direct and indirect fire weapons systems were not where near as prohibitive as in the central and southern portions of the I Corps.

Rather than prioritising pacification over attrition and vice versa, the Marines continued touting the successful integration and synchronisation of the two activities to maximize progress and productivity in both areas of the war. Marine leaders did, however, track the number of main force and NVA soldiers killed as a means to convince senior civilian and military officials that they too were looking to achieve attrition, albeit in a mutually supporting way and not as a stand-alone strategy.

\textsuperscript{918} Krulak, First to Fight, 191.
Although promising and most certainly the reason scholars refer to pacification as the better strategy, the above statistics were part and parcel to realising true security in the region. Most of the data collected made little difference if the main forces and NVA retained completed freedom of movement or attacked at a time and location of their choosing. It was the protective shield provided by conventional military operations and the measured approach to the attrition of main force and NVA units enabling the Marines to keep the cleared areas secured. Without reducing the conventional threat, there was little chance that pacification would work. This thesis asserts that Greene, Krulak, Walt, and later Cushman, all of whom valued pacification’s role, also believed that the main forces and NVA had to be dealt with if they were to be successful in winning South Vietnamese hearts and minds.
CONCLUSION

It is a historian’s responsibility to organise facts, figures, and statistics and analyse the authenticity and relevant significance of each to present a realistic and accurate narrative of major events and periods in time. Given the recent challenges from scholars sceptical of the conclusions presented in the Vietnam War’s immense historiography, one can only surmise that our most accurate understanding is yet to come. Many bourgeoning historians are just now starting to question their predecessors for what this study views as blind acceptance of flawed interpretations, particularly as it pertains to the Marines’ approach to strategy in the northern provinces. Gaining access to unexamined or overlooked documents is part of their approach to realising a more thorough accounting. The other is demonstrating the courage to contest the incomplete research and misinterpretation of arguably the most divisive and misunderstood conflict in American military history.

What today’s historians are just starting to consider is that failing to include the enclaves and population in the military strategy was impulsive and left South Vietnam susceptible to a reconstituted NLF. In his book Strange War, Strange Strategy, Walt explains that the real war was indeed “in the rice paddies—in and among the people, not passing through, but living among then night and day—a journey with them towards a better life long overdue”. In other words, pacification was the day-to-day fight and a chief determining factor in winning or losing the long war. That said, it by no means or suggests that Greene, Krulak, Walt, and, eventually, Cushman did not view the NVA and main forces as the greater threat to South Vietnam or that the attrition of both through conventional military operations in the near was incompatible with

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921 See the Introduction in this work.
922 Walt, Strange War, Strange Strategy.
the thinking on winning the war. Those who disagree need only to examine the primary documents presented in the substantive chapters of this thesis.

Conversely, to say that pacification alone could win the war presupposes that “North Viet Nam’s role in the war was primarily supportive, rather than dominant”, which historian Michael Hennessy attributes as the Marine Corps’ rationale on the war.923 Important to the argument presented by this thesis is Hennessy’s final charge that the “American strategy failed to adjust to the dilemmas posed by the dual conventional and guerrilla threats in Viet Nam [sic]”.924 This thesis contends that the Marines did adjust to the dual threat and applied attrition and conventional military operations when the time was right. Furthermore it demonstrates how, above all else, the enclave concept and the balanced approach did more to solve the dilemma Hennessey highlights than could search and destroy operations and a purely attrition strategy.

The enclave concept and the balanced approach took into account the conventional war in South Vietnam’s northern provinces. At its core, this study reveals as much and the extent to which Westmoreland and the aforementioned historians misunderstood and misinterpreted the Marine Corps’ rationale, more important, its approach to strategy. That the Marine Corps’ leadership doggedly resisted attrition or search and destroy alone was not a rejection of the conventional military threat. Rather, it meant they believed there was greater potential in directly committing time and resources to both, simultaneously, or at times more so in favor of one, to indirectly influence the other. One the one hand, Greene, Krulak, and Walt believed that civic actions and CAP would in the long term adversely impact the main forces and NVA who, in turn, would have to either give battle or wither away. On the other, however, defeating the main forces and NVA weakened the VCI/guerrilla forces and created a protective shield for

923 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 182.
924 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, preface.
pacification to continue. Short on tangible results, this process allowed for progress in the two most critical areas of the war and, in the Marines’ judgement, was the best way to bring about real peace and security in a shorter period of time.

Walt’s—as well as Greene’s and Krulak’s—willingness to engage in the conventional war was evident and explained to Westmoreland in very clear terms very early on. In response to his impudent position towards protecting the enclaves in July 1965, the Marines attempted to convince Westmoreland of the GVN and ARVN’s inability to protect their own people from the VCI and guerrilla forces, let alone the entire country from the main forces and NVA. Walt voiced apprehension in vacating the enclaves entirely following the Johnson’s decision to abandon the enclave concept for fear that Communists would return in greater strength and take revenge against the population. Abandoning the enclaves was sure to do this, in Krulak’s assessment. His fear was not engaging in the conventional war, which the enclave concept permitted the Marines to do, but rather in whether the GVN and ARVN could make good on the Marines’ gains. Krulak explained as much in his monthly operation reports to Greene that:

While accomplishing all this the Marines were feeling, with growing impact, a cardinal counterinsurgency principle: that if local forces do not move in behind the offensive effort, then the first line forces must be diverted to provide the essential hamlet security, police, and stabilization . . . so the Marines can maintain the momentum of their search/clear/pacification efforts.⁹²⁵

From the start, Westmoreland vetoed emphasizing any strategy aimed at disrupting the VCI and guerrilla’s control of the enclaves and winning the trust of the population at the expense of engaging the main forces and NVA. After the war, Krulak stated that Westmoreland’s biggest shortfall was that he made the “third point the primary undertaking, even while deemphasizing

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⁹²⁵ Gravel, *Pentagon Papers*, 569.
the need for clearly favorable conditions before engaging the enemy”. He added that he explained the Marine Corps’ “efforts belonged where the people were, not where they weren’t. I shared these thoughts with Westmoreland frequently, but made no progress persuading him”. It is possible that Westmoreland understood and agreed but lacked the tactical and operational patience to convince his civilian masters in Washington, DC. This is likely not the case since, in reflection, Westmoreland stated:

I was concerned with the tactical methods that General Walt and the Marines employed. They had established beachheads at Chu Lai and Da Nang and were reluctant to go outside them, not through any lack of courage but through a different conception of how to fight an anti-insurgency war. They were assiduously [sic] combing the countryside within the beachhead, trying to establish firm control in hamlets and villages, and planning to expand the beachhead up and down the coast.

After the war, Krulak reasoned that he, Greene, and Walt actually put more emphasis on large unit operations and attrition than they probably should, and that they did so because of their perceived need to appease Westmoreland in exchange for him allowing Walt to continue, in some way, with pacification and implementing the enclave concept. Nonetheless, Krulak still held great concern for the conventional threat. In his 1966 Marine Corps Gazette article “The Guerrilla and Reality” Krulak presented the Marine dilemma to readers, speaking favourably on protecting the people and ridding them of the shadowy insurgency. His thoughts, however, were still very much on the conventional fight, which this thesis insists was a major factor in Greene and Walt’s minds as well. His conclusion explains as much.

But what of the main force units? Is it intended to imply that they not formidable or that they should be left undisturbed? Of course not. We have to go after them. They cannot be allowed to run loose, grinding up Vietnamese outposts and district

926 Krulak, First to Fight, 198.
928 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 165.
towns. But as we go after the Main Force elements, it is good to remember that destruction of the guerrilla menace automatically takes away much of the Main Force intelligence. But beyond this, and even more important, it deprives them of their prime food source too, since nobody has yet suggested that Hanoi is feeding the insurgents.  

Many a historian learn early that what Krulak wrote or expressed during and after the war should be taken in stride. A “dedicated partisan” according to Nicholas Schlosser, Krulak “was rarely an impartial and critical analyst of the Marine Corps”. His writings, even up to his death in 2008, shows that he had a penchant for casting judgements in retrospect in confidence that the Marine Corps landed on the preferred end of an issue, especially concerning the Vietnam War. In a 1970 interview, Krulak criticised the Marine Corps’ willing emphasis on large unit operations and that they were “unwise and unproductive”. The Marines, Krulak explained, would have “done better to let the enemy come across the Cambodian border and extend his lines a bit” before engaging them. Almost a decade later, Krulak downplayed the balanced approach by calling it a compromise “designed to pacify all shades of strategic thought; that if we persisted in such a compromise, we would bleed ourselves—and we did”.  

As much as he pushed back on attrition, Krulak never once disputed the fact that the main forces and NVA were the greater threat and that the Marine Corps would eventually have to resolve the issue, one way or another. In other words, there was always an escape from his most recent judgement. In First to Fight, published in 1984, he wrote the complete opposite:  

The Marines’ concept, from the start, involved fighting the Vietnam battle as a multipronged effort. They aimed to bring peace and security to the people in the highly populated coastal regions by conducting aggressive operations against the
guerrillas and expanding the pacified areas as rapidly as they were totally secured. Finally, the Marines were determined to go after the larger organized units whenever they could be definitely located and fixed.934

The Marine Corps’ rebuttal of a single-scope strategy like attrition centred on the principal idea that focused purely on the conventional threat before securing and improving the enclaves would put American ground forces in an identical situation as the French in 1954. Holding to their convictions that, while the enclave concept overtly supported the greater national pacification effort, it also allowed for the Marine Corps to take a more aggressive stance against the main forces and NVA when the situation and intelligence picture warranted such action. By implementing a plan to expand the beachheads and with III MAF’s task organisation tailored for conventional military operations, Greene, Krulak, and Walt were confident the information gathered from interacting with the population would inevitably lead them to a more precise targeting, allowing Walt to get the most out of every large unit operation vice having his battalions and regiments blindly searching the countryside for an enemy that was not there or attacking when the conditions were clearly not in their favor.

As for the long term, the Marine leaders believed conventional military operations and attrition would neither contain, deter, nor defeat the Communists unless linked to a more comprehensive and balanced operational approach focusing their resources against the NLF’s (and North Vietnam’s) many complex fronts. This was the result of their attempting first to understanding the root problem before laying out a plan to solve it. In terms of the attrition of the main forces and NVA, whether Marine ground units would engage them was never an issue; it was a matter of when. Greene and Krulak argued repeatedly that, once the coastal areas (enclaves) were clear of the VCI and guerrilla forces, they would become points from which

934 Krulak, First to Fight, 183.
Walt would commit battalions and regiments to large unit operations in the interior against massing conventional Communist forces. Until civic actions produced reliable information on the main forces and NVA, the goal was to absorb as much of the population and vital terrain as possible, leaving the enemy to waste away in the mountains or until compelled to attack. The enclave concept did not prioritise civic action and counterguerrilla tactics over large unit operations or pacification over attrition as the war’s historiography and popular narratives tend to portray. Instead, it allowed for a phased construct based on time and conditions, namely the NLF and North Vietnam’s reaction to the process.

There are still some historians today that view the enclave concept and balanced approach, or at least some variation of them, as a valid strategy and approach. They do so, however, with the impression that attrition and conventional military operations were in no way connected. Lewis Sorely and Mackubin T. Owens, for example, assess that when General Abrams’ assumed command of USMACV in July 1968 and put in place his “one war” policy of integrating the political, security, social, and economic aspects of the war with the military resources that he was fighting “a better war” in which the United States and South Vietnamese were creating the conditions necessary for the GVN’s survival long after American forces were gone. This policy, as seen in this thesis, was identical to the enclave concept in every way. The only exception was that it was the Marines conducting offensive operations and not the ARVN. One cannot help but to wonder if, in 1965, had Westmoreland adopted the same line of thinking

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and not “squandered four years of public and congressional support for the war” whether he could have changed the outcome.\textsuperscript{936} That question is ripe for consideration and debate.

Five decades after the war, even with the statistics squarely favouring the Marines enclave concept and balanced approach, historians are still trying to understand exactly what went wrong in South Vietnam, both politically and militarily. America’s lack of appreciation for the South Vietnamese people and culture, not to mention the country’s complex internal politics, remain the primary reasons for the war’s outcome. The lack of a comprehensive military strategy comes in a close second. For current and future Vietnam War historians, the latter point is becoming increasingly more difficult to argue because, as this thesis reveals, the real difference between the Marines strategy and approach to the war in the northern provinces and Westmoreland’s and the Army’s attrition strategy and search and destroy approach in the other corps tactical zones had far more to do with emphasis than substance.

\textsuperscript{936} Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 94.
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