

Part IV: What None Knew: Misinterpretation and Failed Diplomacy

By late 1965, the Vietnam War was no longer primarily a civil war involving South Vietnamese forces. Instead, it had become a conflict between the United States and North Vietnam.

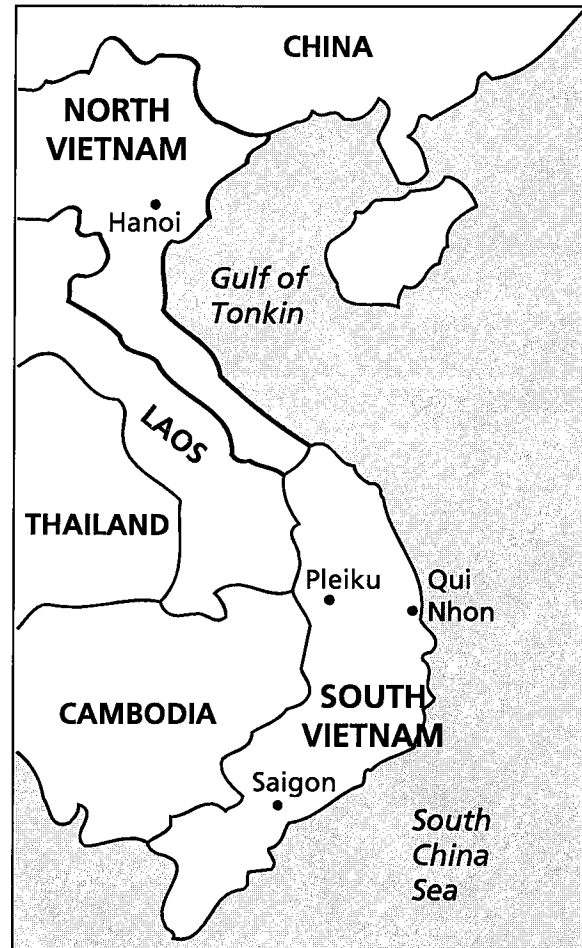
Leaders in Washington and Hanoi had long sought to avoid a direct confrontation between their two countries. Each side launched several efforts to open peace talks in the early and mid-1960s. Yet serious negotiations did not begin until 1968 and were then to drag on for nearly five years before the two sides reached a final settlement. In the meantime, both countries were devastated by a seemingly endless war.

Many historians believe that the gap in communication and understanding separating the United States and North Vietnam prolonged the Vietnam War. Top U.S. policymakers during the war had little knowledge of Vietnamese history or culture. Most viewed North Vietnam as a pawn of the Soviet Union or China. Likewise, the North Vietnamese leadership lacked a firm grasp of the motives and goals of their American counterparts. For much of the war, they were preoccupied with the day-to-day challenges facing their country.

In this reading, you will explore the Vietnamese and American perceptions of each other's intentions in greater detail. You will examine two crucial events in 1965—a Vietcong artillery attack and a secret diplomatic initiative—to gain a deeper insight into how misinterpretation and the failed diplomacy of both sides affected the course of the war.

Case Study 1—Pleiku

By early 1965, North Vietnam had stepped up its commitment to the war in the south to match increased U.S. involvement. Hanoi, however, recognized that getting caught up in a conflict with the United States would complicate relations with the Soviet Union and China. The Soviets were not eager for a con-



frontation with the United States in Southeast Asia. In addition, they increasingly saw China as their most dangerous foe. North Vietnamese leaders were suspicious of the Chinese as well. They worried that Chinese troops would overrun their country if U.S. forces brought the war close to China's border. Nonetheless, Hanoi relied on China as its main source of military supplies.

Hanoi's Strategy

The North Vietnamese concluded that they needed to defeat the government in South Vietnam before the full weight of the United States tipped the balance of power on the battlefield. Their strategy called for send-

ing more regular North Vietnamese troops to bolster Vietcong forces. They hoped that the Vietcong would then be able to overcome the South Vietnamese army in the countryside quickly. Military success, according to their plan, would set the stage for Vietcong uprisings in the cities. As the control of the South Vietnamese government crumbled, Hanoi would put pressure on the diplomatic front to organize a neutral government in Saigon. The United States, in the view of the North Vietnamese, would have little choice but to accept the outcome.

As part of its bolder strategy, North Vietnam encouraged Vietcong field commanders to intensify attacks against enemy military targets in the northern part of South Vietnam. The goal was to split the country in two.

Aside from laying out a broad strategy, Hanoi lacked the means to direct the operations of Vietcong. Communications in Vietnam in the mid-1960s were poor under the best of circumstances. The war only made the situation worse. Typically, messengers travelling by bicycle or on foot for hundreds of miles delivered orders. Field commanders often had no contact with military leaders in Hanoi for weeks or even months at a time.

On February 7, 1965, roughly thirty Vietcong troops launched artillery strikes against an air base and a helicopter base built by American advisers at Pleiku. Nine U.S. soldiers were killed in the shelling.

What the Vietcong were not aware of was that President Lyndon Johnson had sent a high-level U.S. delegation to Saigon at the time. (In fact, they were not sure that U.S. military advisers were at Pleiku.) The delegation, headed by McGeorge Bundy, Johnson's special assistant for national security affairs, had been instructed to evaluate U.S. options in Vietnam.

U.S. officials assumed that Hanoi had engineered the attack at Pleiku to send a message during Bundy's visit. Before Bundy's departure, U.S. intelligence sources had warned that the Vietcong might attack an American target,

possibly at Pleiku, while Bundy was in South Vietnam.

Soon after news from Pleiku reached Saigon, Johnson called a meeting of the National Security Council in Washington. After four lengthy telephone conversations with Bundy, he ordered bombing strikes against North Vietnam. In the afternoon of February 7, forty-nine U.S. Navy jets took off from aircraft carriers in the South China Sea to attack a guerrilla training base just north of the border dividing North and South Vietnam.

Meanwhile, Vietcong field commanders in the north-central region of South Vietnam continued to seize the initiative. On February 10, they struck at Qui Nhon, killing 23 U.S. soldiers and wounding 21 other Americans. Again, U.S. officials viewed the operation as directed against U.S. forces. This time, Johnson decided that the United States needed a stronger response. After ordering a bombing raid on February 11, he met with his military advisers to devise a much more extensive air campaign. The result was what the president called a "program of measured and limited air action" against North Vietnam. Johnson's bombing policy, which came to be known as "Rolling Thunder," remained in effect well into 1968.

In Hanoi, North Vietnamese leaders were just as shaken as their U.S. counterparts by the sudden turn of events. They refused to believe Washington had begun heavy bombing of their country because of the U.S. losses suffered at Pleiku and Qui Nhon. Rather, most were convinced that the bombing campaign had long been part of America's strategy, and that the Pleiku and Qui Nhon attacks simply provided a convenient excuse to put the plan into action.

Case Study 2—Failed Diplomacy

The beginning of Rolling Thunder forced North Vietnamese leaders to reassess their stance. Most were convinced that the United States had embarked on a "war of destruction" aimed at annihilating North Vietnam. Many

feared that Washington ultimately sought to impose colonial rule over South Vietnam, much as the French and the Chinese had done to Vietnam in the past.

Yet the North Vietnamese had no hope of defeating the United States militarily. Rather, they believed that they could prevail only by demonstrating to Washington their determination to fight back.

Four Points

North Vietnamese leaders also recognized that achieving their goals would eventually require negotiating with the United States. To prepare for that day, they held nearly two months of meetings to develop their position on ending the war. The document that resulted, approved April 7, 1965, came to be known as the “Four Points.” In brief, the Four Points called for...

- an end to U.S. bombing of North Vietnam;
- the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam;
- the creation of a South Vietnamese government “in accordance with the program of the National Liberation Front [of which the Vietcong was the military arm];”
- the reunification of Vietnam, to be decided by the South Vietnamese people without foreign interference.

“Everything depends on the Americans. If they want to make war for twenty years, then we shall make war for twenty years. If they want to make peace, we shall make peace and invite them to tea afterwards.

—Ho Chi Minh,
President of North Vietnam

Developing a negotiating position, however, proved much easier than carrying out diplomacy with a global superpower. At the time the Four Points were issued, the North Vietnamese foreign ministry was lacking in both experience and expertise. Not a single

North Vietnamese diplomat was well-known among his counterparts in the West, other than in France.

Moreover, North Vietnam’s intelligence service could provide the foreign ministry with only the barest information about U.S. policy. Much of their knowledge came from monitoring British radio newscasts. Even obtaining copies of American newspapers on a regular basis was not possible. Hanoi could have turned to the Soviet Union or China for help and advice in conducting diplomacy, but the North Vietnamese wanted to deal with the United States directly.

On the U.S. side, Rolling Thunder also marked a turning point. Within weeks of the start of the bombing campaign, U.S. officials concluded that air strikes alone would not stop the progress of the Vietcong. They suggested that the United States would need to commit sizeable ground forces to prevent the fall of the South Vietnamese government. President Johnson, however, favored launching a diplomatic offensive before sending troops.

Over the following weeks and months, the United States tried several different approaches to draw Hanoi to the negotiating table. The most serious effort took place in May 1965, consisting of a pause in Rolling Thunder and an invitation to pursue a peace settlement. The U.S. initiative was rejected. The North Vietnamese resented the conditions attached to the bombing pause and were wary of U.S. attempts to use the Soviets as intermediaries. Convinced that Hanoi was not interested in a peaceful settlement, the United States resumed bombing North Vietnam on May 19. That same day, however, Hanoi put forward a diplomatic initiative of its own. Mai Van Bo, the highest-ranking North Vietnamese diplomat in France, asked the French foreign ministry to inform U.S. officials that Hanoi was indeed open to negotiations based on the framework of the Four Points.

Just as the North Vietnamese had done a week earlier, Washington turned a cold shoulder to the opening. Nearly a month passed before Bo again asked the French about the

U.S. response to his message. An international businessman also stepped in to arrange discussions between Bo and Americans in Paris.

President Johnson soon took an interest in promoting the talks. He appointed a former U.S. foreign service officer who had served in Vietnam, Edmund Gullion, to follow up with Mai Van Bo. In August 1965, Gullion and Bo met three times. Bo emphasized that the Four Points should be seen as general principles for negotiation, not an inflexible set of prior conditions. He also addressed Gullion's concern about the third point, which U.S. officials had interpreted as demanding the establishment of a communist government in the south.

By the end of the third meeting, Gullion was optimistic that the North Vietnamese were prepared to consider peace talks. When Gullion and Bo met on September 3, however, the discussions broke down. Bo insisted that the "bombings must stop unilaterally, immediate-

ly, totally, and definitively" before negotiations could begin. Bo cancelled a meeting that had been scheduled for September 7. Later U.S. attempts to restart the discussions were rebuffed.

While the Americans were bewildered by the collapse of the Bo-Gullion exchange, the North Vietnamese assessed the results of the meeting very differently. Hanoi felt that the meetings had served to clear up confusion about the Four Points. At the same time, they looked to the battlefield for signs of America's readiness to pursue peace talks. What they saw was steady escalation of the U.S. war effort. As a result, Hanoi believed that North Vietnam had to increase its commitment to the war. Before the year was out, Hanoi found itself in the situation it had hoped to avoid. North Vietnamese and American troops were fighting head-to-head over the future of South Vietnam.