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Why did McGeorge Bundy make his first trip to Vietnam with his mind already made up?

Late in January [of 1965], after conferring with McNamara, he [Bundy] addressed a memorandum to Johnson stressing that "both of us are now pretty well convinced that our present policy can lead only to disastrous defeat." (Stanley Karnow, Vietnam: A History, page 427.)

How could an American policy of providing "advisory" assistance to South Vietnam lead to "disastrous defeat?"

To expect the emergence of a stable regime in Saigon was futile. The Vietcong, encouraged by America's "unwillingness to take serious risks," was "gaining in the countryside." The worse course was to continue "this essentially passive role." The United States could either negotiate and "salvage what little can be preserved," or resort to armed power "to force a change" of Communist strategy. They favored the military alternative, though, they added, other plans ought to be "carefully studied." Either way, "the time has come for hard choices." (Vietnam: A History, page 427.)

Knowing today what Bundy and McNamara knew as early as 1963 makes one question how they could have favored "the military alternative." Even senior military leaders disagreed with that option.

For one thing, the people of Vietnam did not care who won the war. They just wanted peace. The U.S. government knew two more crucial facts: The Viet Cong were "putting up a formidable fight" and the South Vietnamese could not win without American assistance.

During October and November of 1965, the Johnson Administration learned another critical fact. Whenever the NVA needed to regroup, they fled into eastern Cambodia. They didn't cross the border again until they were rested and ready to fight.

What were U.S. forces allowed to do about that? American political officials, concerned that China would retaliate if the U.S. bombed the NVA while in Cambodia, were reluctant to allow the American military to respond during the mid-1960s.

But there was something else American political officials did not-yet know. The North Vietnamese (unlike the American public) were willing to accept catastrophic loss of life in their war against the South.

They would get their first taste of that in the Battle of Ia Drang.

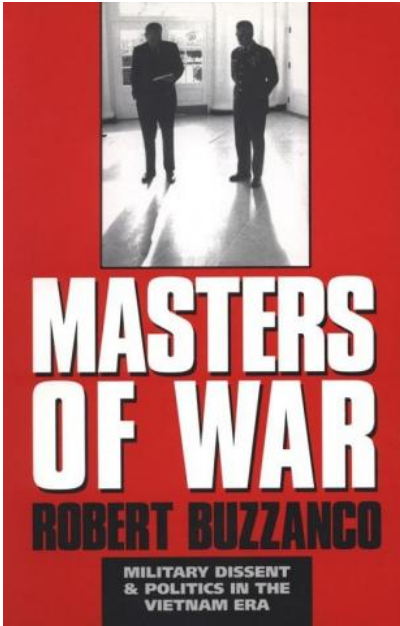
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Media Stream



Masters of War

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