

Research Article

UNITED STATES MILITARY AID TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM DURING THE 1965-1967 PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in 1965, the United States increased military aid to the government of the Republic of Vietnam with the aim of reversing the military balance in South Vietnam. Direct military aid was the largest component, encompassing: salary payments for the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), infrastructure construction, weapons procurement, and military training. As a result of U.S. aid, the ARVN was expanded and modernized. However, U.S. assistance failed to help the United States achieve victory in the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Republic of Vietnam, United States, Vietnam War, military aid.

INTRODUCTION

On November 1, 1963, the government of Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown with the acquiescence of the United States (Trần Nam Tiến, 2019, pp. 78-86). The Republic of Vietnam fell into a crisis marked by successive coups. By early 1965, the U.S. "Special War" strategy was on the verge of failure. The United States decided to deploy combat troops directly to South Vietnam, an intention consistent since the administration of President John F. Kennedy (Marvin L. Kalb, 2013, pp. 59-60). To create a basis for intervention, the U.S. manufactured the "Gulf of Tonkin" incident in August 1964, escalated the bombing of the North, and mobilized its allies to participate in the war in South Vietnam. On March 8, 1965, two U.S. Marine battalions landed in Đà Nẵng, and in April 1965, U.S. Air Force jets landed at Đà Nẵng airport, marking the beginning of direct U.S. involvement. Concurrently, the U.S. accelerated military aid to the government of the Republic of Vietnam to strengthen its armed forces. This article focuses on presenting the process of U.S. military aid to the Republic of Vietnam during the 1965-1967 period.

CONTENT

On November 1, 1963, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), under the command of General Dương Văn Minh, overthrew President Ngô Đình Diệm with tacit approval from the United States. Subsequently, the Saigon government fell into a prolonged crisis characterized by numerous coups and power struggles. From November 1963 to June 1965, there were 14 coups; in 1964 alone, there were 5 coups and 9 attempted coups (Lam Vinh The, 2010). Governments changed continuously until Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ assumed power on December 20, 1965. The political situation only stabilized after the election of the Constituent Assembly (September 3, 1967) and the promulgation of the Constitution of the Second Republic (April 1, 1967). The Second Republic of Vietnam was established (November 1, 1967), transitioning from a civilian puppet government to a military one, and eventually a combination of both.

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was also assassinated; Vice President Johnson assumed power. In his address to the U.S. Congress on November 27, 1963, U.S. President Johnson declared his commitment to upholding the unfinished pledges of the preceding Kennedy administration, continuing to support the Saigon government: "*This nation [the U.S.-Author] will keep its commitments from South Vietnam to West Berlin,*" and continuing to implement the "Special War" strategy. However, the actual situation in South Vietnam deeply concerned President Johnson. Following an inspection trip in mid-December 1963, U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara reported to President Johnson: "The situation is very disturbing"... "current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead at best to neutralization or more likely to a Communist-controlled state." (McNamara, 1996, p. 105). The U.S. war effort in South Vietnam could not succeed without a major escalation of force.

In contrast to the RVN government, the revolutionary forces in the South grew progressively stronger. The South Vietnam Liberation Army (Quân Giải phóng miền Nam Việt Nam) achieved successive victories in battles such as Ap Bac, An Lao, Ba Gia, and Đông Xoai, inflicting heavy losses on the RVN army and causing the failure of the strategy. The RVN army, despite being reinforced, equipped with modern weapons, and strengthened with advisors by the U.S., proved increasingly ineffective against the attacks and uprisings of the liberation armed forces and the people of South Vietnam. By early 1964, approximately half of the rural population and land in South Vietnam was under the control of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF) to varying degrees. In a report to President Johnson on March 16, 1964, U.S. Secretary of Defense McNamara presented a bleak overview: "*In terms of government control in the countryside, about 40% of the territory is under Viet Cong control or predominant influence. In 22 of the 43 provinces, the Viet Cong control 50% or more of the land, including 80% of Phước Tuy; 90% of Bình Dương; 75% of Hậu Nghĩa; 90% of Long An; 90% of Kiến Tường; 90% of Định Tường; 90% of Kiến Hòa; and 85% of An Xuyên*" (U.S. Government, 1971).

By the end of 1965, the United States had begun implementing the "Local War" strategy against the military and populace of South Vietnam. The objective of the U.S. "Local War" strategy was to defeat the Southern revolution within 25-30 months (from mid-1965 to 1967)

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through a three-phase plan: One, disrupt the rainy season plan of the Southern forces and people, "halt the losing trend," and deploy expeditionary forces in the South; Two, launch counter-offensives to find and destroy the main revolutionary forces and control rural areas; Three, complete the destruction of the revolutionary main force, continue pacification of the South, and withdraw U.S. troops by the end of 1967 (Steering Committee for War Summary, 2015, p. 65).

To clear the path for deeper involvement, on August 7, 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (H.J.Res.1145, Public Law 88-408) with a vote of 416-0 in the House and 88-2 in the Senate. The resolution declared that "the United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. *"It granted President Johnson the authority"* to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression" (U.S. Congress, 1964). Arguably, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution created a "legal facade" for the U.S. to intervene directly in South Vietnam. It allowed the U.S. to send hundreds of thousands of troops to the battlefield, expanding the war on a large scale.

In June 1964, General William Westmoreland officially assumed command of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). By January 1965, many senior U.S. Defense Department officials believed that the Republic of Vietnam would collapse without a change in policy. McNamara informed President Johnson of the choices: "increase military support, add 23,300 U.S. troops in Vietnam, or withdraw" (Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011, p. 22). On February 2, 1965, Johnson dispatched a delegation led by McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor, along with John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASD(ISA)); Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Leonard Unger; Lieutenant General Andrew Goodpaster, Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS); Chester Cooper of the National Security Council (NSC) staff; and Colonel Jack Rogers, Executive Director of International Security Affairs (ISA), to Saigon to assess the situation directly. In his report, McGeorge Bundy warned President Johnson that "the collapse of South Vietnam in 1966 was inevitable without a significant increase in U.S. military and other support" (Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011, p. 22).

On April 6, 1965, National Security Action Memorandum 328 (NSAM-328) was issued, marking a significant turning point in the U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War. NSAM-328 included 11 key points, among which were several decisive orders: Reinforce U.S. military forces with an additional 18,000 to 20,000 troops for logistical and support roles for the RVN government. Deploy combat troops: 2 Marine battalions and one jet fighter squadron were deployed to South Vietnam. Expand the alliance: Negotiate with SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) member nations, calling for manpower contributions to the Republic of Vietnam. Expand the war: Increase bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail within Laotian territory to cut off the supply route from the North to the South. U.S. Army and Marine forces would engage in direct combat, rather than solely fulfilling support roles as before. NSAM-328 was a critical juncture in the Vietnam War, signaling a sharp U.S. escalation and the increasing complexity of the conflict (Johnson Library, 1965).

In reality, U.S. military aid to South Vietnam officially began in 1950 through formal relations between the U.S. and the State of Vietnam government under Bảo Đại, via the French Government. From 1955, with the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam, the U.S. Government began providing aid directly to President Ngô Đình

Diệm's administration. Following the "Concerted Uprising" of 1960, the U.S. Government decided to implement the "Special War" strategy, which involved intensifying military aid and increasing the number of U.S. advisors to the RVN government. From this point, U.S. military aid to the RVN government would be tightly controlled by the U.S. Congress (U.S. Congress, Committee on International Relations, 1976, p. 91). On September 4, 1961, the U.S. Congress enacted the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, providing the legal basis for the U.S. Government to conduct aid programs for its allies worldwide (U.S. Congress, 1961).

U.S. military aid to the Republic of Vietnam, managed by the U.S. Department of Defense, played the dominant role in total U.S. aid to the RVN. It comprised two main forms: Direct costs to maintain U.S. troops in South Vietnam. Training for the RVN army, and direct military activities such as bombing and counter-guerrilla campaigns. Indirect costs, including war support programs for infrastructure construction, consisting of projects to restore or develop infrastructure necessary for rural development, such as bridges, roads, canals, and airports.

For the Republic of Vietnam, military aid was divided into two parts: Funds drawn from the Counterpart Fund, which was established from the sale of U.S. commodity aid to the RVN. The RVN government used this fund to cover war-related expenses, such as procuring weapons and military equipment. The second part was direct aid in the form of materials, various weapons, military equipment, ammunition, fuel, construction materials, etc. In addition to material aid, a U.S. advisory system was present in almost every aspect of the economic and political life of the Republic of Vietnam. In essence, these advisors wielded enormous power. It was likened to a "State within and above a State" (Đặng Phong, 2004, p. 111).

On February 8, 1962, a U.S. military agency called the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was formed with the purpose of preparing for the direct engagement of U.S. troops in South Vietnam. This was a military organization under the command of the U.S. Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), responsible for commanding all U.S. military forces operating in South Vietnam. MACV operated independently of MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group), another organization headed by Paul Harkins, the chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam.

From 1965, as the U.S. massively introduced its own and allied troops into South Vietnam, the advisory system also became much larger than in the previous period and penetrated deeper into every sector and level of the Republic of Vietnam. During this period, besides MACV, there were agencies such as CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), which directed the pacification apparatus of the Saigon government from the central to the hamlet level; ⁷⁵JUSPAO (The Joint United States Public Affairs Office), specializing in directing psychological warfare propaganda; and SAAFO (Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations), the U.S. Embassy's special assistant's office for rural activities... Facing the increasingly evident failure of the RVN government, in early 1965, the U.S. Government decided to commit troops to direct combat in South Vietnam and to escalate the "war of destruction" by air and naval forces against North Vietnam, thereby officially initiating the "Local War" strategy in Vietnam. On this basis, the U.S. Government also decided to increase military aid to the RVN government to enhance the "strength" of the Saigon Armed Forces, serving as support for U.S. and allied troops in "search and destroy" operations and attacks on "Viet Cong Holy Lands" in South Vietnam.

Direct military aid was the largest component, far exceeding the total of all economic aid combined. Although the absolute figures are difficult to determine precisely, data from various years and periods clearly show that military aid was consistently greater than the total value of all types of economic aid. The concept of "military aid" is also relative, as it only comprises a part of the total assistance serving military needs. The entire payroll for the Saigon army was not included in military aid but was instead classified under economic aid. According to U.S. law, military aid must also be quantified in monetary terms and approved by the U.S. Congress. However, there were many instances where aid was not accurately valued in monetary terms nor authorized by the U.S. Congress (Đang Phong, 2005, p. 758).

In May 1965, the U.S. government's budget authorization bill for Department of Defense needs was passed by both the House and the Senate. The President requested and received an additional \$700 million for use in Southeast Asia. In August, he requested an additional \$1.7 billion in funding. Congress also approved this. In January 1966, President Johnson again requested additional funding for economic aid amounting to \$415 million. (Holbik, 1968, pp. 242-246).

During the "Local War" period, U.S. aid to the RVN increased rapidly. "U.S. aid in the three years from 1965-1967 amounted to \$2.495 billion, an average of \$642 million per year, more than double the annual aid in previous years" (Trần Văn Thọ, 2000, p. 124). In March 1966, the funding source for military aid to the Republic of Vietnam was transferred from the Military Assistance Program (MAP) budget to the U.S. Department of Defense budget. This move allowed the aid to bypass the ceiling restrictions imposed by Congress (Collins, 1975, p. 56). The amount of military aid to the Saigon government and the direct costs for the U.S. increased rapidly during this period. This aid was used for paying soldiers' salaries, building ports and logistical systems, modernizing weaponry, constructing barracks, etc., to serve the war needs of the U.S., its allies, and the Republic of Vietnam: "Barracks construction: completed 6,349 projects, finishing 30,314 barracks for officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers. Additionally, 18 sub-sector infirmaries and 18 district-level military medical stations were built... Airfield and bridge expansion: Repaired 23 light airfields, 18 medium airfields, 1,779 km of roads, and 4,332 bridges; constructed 14 new light airfields, 7 new medium airfields, 179 km of roads, and 3,908 bridges. Major overhauls are underway for 1,500 km of damaged roads, and 8,600 bridges (35 and 50-ton capacity) are being built. Additional prisons are being constructed, such as Bien Hoa (completed), Đa Nang, Pleiku, and Can Tho (phase 1 completed), with Quy Nhon and Phu Quoc (construction started). The logistical system was augmented with 13 new types of military equipment..." (National Archives Center II, 1967, File 353).

Along with the increase in troop numbers, the U.S. provided the Republic of Vietnam with a large quantity of weapons. Upgrading to more modern equipment: "Supplied the Saigon army with 25 A-1H aircraft to replace the T-28s, M113 armored personnel carriers, river patrol boats, and \$5 to \$10 million for other equipment..." (Ministry of Defense, Vietnam Institute of Military History, 2013, p. 33).

With the reinforcement of U.S. forces, the Saigon army continued to expand, reaching a strength of 273,000 Army, 15,000 Navy, 13,000 Air Force, and 7,100 Marines by March 1966. Including 135,000 Regional Forces and 137,000 Popular Forces, the total force numbered 520,000 troops (Harper, J, 2020, p.163). The ten regular divisions of the RVNAF were positioned throughout South Vietnam, with 20 Ranger battalions also deployed to the Corps. The Airborne

and Marine divisions formed the strategic reserve, ready for deployment across South Vietnam. All these infantry forces were equipped with M-16 rifles and LAW (Light Anti-tank Weapon) anti-tank weapons, the most modern U.S. personal weapons at the time (Ngo, 1980, p. 141).

With the aim of developing combined arms and joint operational capabilities for the Saigon army. The Marine Corps was doubled in size to two brigades, each with three battalions. The regular divisions of the Army, Airborne, and Marines were all reinforced with 105mm self-propelled artillery battalions and 155mm long-range artillery battalions at the Corps level. The Armored forces were expanded to eleven mixed squadrons of armored personnel carriers and tanks, and were upgraded to M41 light tanks. The Navy was also rapidly increased to 637 vessels by 1967 (U.S. Navy, n.d.). The Air Force doubled in size to five fighter and attack squadrons, four observation squadrons, five helicopter squadrons, and three transport squadrons, accompanied by the modernization of fighter and reconnaissance aircraft. During the 1965-1967 period, the RVN Air Force (VNAF) "increased its personnel by 40%, established many new units for combat and support, the newest being the F-5 supersonic jet fighter squadron, operated entirely by Vietnamese pilots and technicians" (National Archives Center II, 1967, File 353).

Through these efforts of providing the highest level of military aid in equipment and organization to the RVN army during 1965-1967, it was remarked that: "...South Vietnam, a nation about the size of New Mexico, had the fourth largest army, the fourth largest air force, and the fifth largest navy in the world" (Jespersen, 2002, p. 443), with the goal of crushing the revolutionary forces and achieving a swift victory. However, on the night of January 30th and the early morning of January 31st, 1968, the revolutionary forces launched a general offensive and uprising against most cities, towns, and military bases throughout South Vietnam, especially targeting Saigon - the political and military nerve center of the U.S. and the Saigon government. This offensive defeated the strategic objectives of the U.S. "Local War," forcing the U.S. to de-escalate the war.

Table 1. U.S. Aid to the Saigon Government and Direct U.S. War Costs (Unit: billion USD)

Fiscal Year	Military Aid to the Saigon Government	Direct U.S. Costs
1965	0.3	0.2
1966	0.862	11.8
1967	1.2035	38.1

Source: Steering Committee for War Summary, affiliated with the Politburo (2000, pp. 500-501).

CONCLUSION

As remarked by Nguyen Ba Can, Prime Minister of the Republic of Vietnam under the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu administration: "Our combat soldiers were 100% dependent on aid, from the rifle to the bullet, from the steel helmet to the pair of boots, including the salary in their wallets" (Nguyen Ba Can, 2003, p. 173). It is evident that without U.S. military aid, the army of the Republic of Vietnam could not have existed. From 1965-1967, with the objective of achieving a quick victory and crushing the revolutionary forces in a short time. The U.S. direct combat intervention and intensified military aid caused enormous upheavals in the social and economic life of South Vietnam. The urban centers in South Vietnam, the full pockets of over a million military personnel, the sources of military supplies, war surplus, and war-related construction projects... created an abnormal

"prosperity," painting a two-sided picture. The presence of the expeditionary army provided "jobs" and income for millions of people. Hotels, restaurants, dance halls, refreshment stands, and other service establishments sprang up like mushrooms; the bourgeoisie in the South grew most rapidly during this period. Meanwhile, millions of people saw their homes and families destroyed by the ferocity of the war.

However, this abnormal situation could not be sustained. The 1968 Spring Offensive by the liberation forces on all fronts was a surprising answer to the United States: even as the U.S. applied maximum war pressure, the revolutionary forces still advanced steadfastly. The "Local War" was considered a failure, compelling the U.S. to de-escalate the war and change its strategy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author of this article certifies that there is no conflict of interest in its publication.

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