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Tet and the Year of the Monkey, 1968

If this is a failure, I hope the Viet Cong never have a major success.
—Senator George Aiken, February 1968

Hugh Thompson, Jr.

War confronts men with stark realities that often demand searing and prompt moral choices. The West Point Cadet Prayer addresses the issue: "O God. . . . Make us choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong, and never be content with a half truth when the whole can be won." The cadets and soldiers who live by the code seek the strength to do what is right regardless of the consequences. Repeated in chapel, the demand seems reasonable. But unless it is part of a soldier's character, it is too often forgotten in the heat of battle.

The ethics behind the prayer were part of the make-up of Hugh Thompson, Jr. Born in 1943 and raised in the country around Stone Mountain, Georgia, Thompson enlisted in the navy when he was eighteen, serving in a Seabee construction unit. After leaving the navy and spending a brief time as a civilian, he enlisted in the army and qualified as a helicopter pilot. Sent to Vietnam in late 1967, he quickly gained a reputation for bravery, decisiveness, and honor. He was the sort of pilot who would fly into a hot LZ to rescue wounded soldiers or deliver needed supplies. But he would never engage an unarmed enemy or open fire on unidentified targets. He demanded that his gunners see enemy weapons before they fired.

His greatest crisis came on the morning of March 16, 1968, when he had to choose between the harder right and the easier wrong. Flying

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James S. Olson and Randy Roberts.

support for an operation in Quang Ngai province near My Lai 4, he noticed a group of wounded Vietnamese and marked their location with green smoke. When he returned after refueling he discovered that the Vietnamese were now dead. He also saw that the area was spotted with other groups of dead Vietnamese as well as dead water buffalos. It was an odd, troubling sight.

Then Thompson and his crew witnessed a small force of American soldiers approach a wounded Vietnamese woman. An officer with captain bars walked over to the woman, prodded her with his foot, and then shot her. At about the same time Thompson spied another group of Vietnamese, mostly old men, women, and children, in a ditch, and he feared for their lives. He approached the area, landed, and asked if there was anything he could do to help. He was brushed aside by the captain. As soon as Thompson took off, American soldiers began to shoot the unarmed Vietnamese. All Thompson could think of were the atrocities committed by Nazi troops in World War II.

Thompson was furious, and he had seen enough to know exactly what was happening in the village of My Lai. Seeing another group of fleeing civilians he landed his Huey "bubble ship" between the American soldiers and the civilians. As he went to rescue the civilians, he told his gunners to cover him and to shoot the Americans if they opened fire on the villagers. Because of Thompson's actions, a handful of lives were saved.

Thompson also reported what he had seen to his superiors, who attempted unsuccessfully to cover up the entire affair. But the truth came out, and true to his personal code, whenever Thompson was questioned about the event he gave an honest, unvarnished account of what he had seen. What he had to say aroused controversy, and he received hate mail and death threats.

In 1998 Thompson and his crew were awarded the Soldier's Medal, the army's highest distinction for bravery not involving direct contact with the enemy. The crew's actions, one U.S. Senator commented, demonstrated "true examples of American patriotism at its finest."

It was January 24, 1968, and in Saigon, Robert Komer offered an assessment of the war at the "five o'clock follies," when the press gathered to hear the latest "General Blimp" reports. Komer was at his optimistic best: "We begin 1968 in a better position than we have ever been." At the White House, Lyndon Johnson was in his bathrobe, unable to sleep, pacing the floor as he read the cables on Khe Sanh. A Pentagon photographic analyst was on hand waiting for one of the president's requests to explain something in an aerial photograph. A table model of Khe Sanh, with small flags posted on the periphery, indicated the presence of several NVA divisions. In the middle,

poised on the plateau, were the insignia of marine battalions. Khe Sanh was Johnson's obsession. "I don't want any damn Dinbinphoo," he told Earle Wheeler.

William Westmoreland was no less obsessed. The border battles of late 1967 and early 1968 at Con Thien, Loc Ninh, Dak To, and Khe Sanh had convinced him that the enemy shift to conventional warfare was at hand; the invasion would begin just south of the Demilitarized Zone. For two months Westmoreland transferred combat units north. By early January 1968 more than half of all American combat units were in I Corps.

The real target was not Khe Sanh. It was all of urban South Vietnam.

In mid-1967 North Vietnam had contemplated a major attack. American firepower was inflicting massive casualties on communist troops, and the Thieu-Ky government seemed to be stable. North Vietnam was weary of the bombing and yearned for peace. United States troops controlled the cities, and the narrowness of the country, along with the recent innovations in helicopter and air cavalry operations, allowed the Americans to attack a wide range of targets and to do so at their pleasure. Hanoi also worried about a possible American invasion of North Vietnam. Rapid urbanization in South Vietnam was shrinking the number of people available in the countryside for Vietcong recruitment. The communists wanted a dramatic military event that would undermine the Saigon regime and force out the United States.

The nature of that event was intensely debated. Nguyen Chi Thanh went to Hanoi in June 1967 to call for a massive attack on the cities of South Vietnam using local Vietcong guerrillas, Main Force Vietcong, and NVA regulars. He predicted tactical as well as strategic success. Thanh felt sure the communists could inspire a peasant uprising in South Vietnam, undermine the Thieu-Ky regime, force an ARVN surrender, secure a military foothold in the major cities and provincial capitals, and inflict enormous casualties on Americans. Thanh also wanted to bring the war home to the South Vietnamese cities. In the Politburo, Le Duan supported Thanh, but Vo Nguyen Giap opposed him. The United States was at the height of its power. If the massive attack failed and Main Force Vietcong and NVA units were destroyed, the revolution would be set back years. Giap offered an alternative. NVA troops would create diversions in border areas, drawing American combat units out of the cities, while Vietcong guerrillas, with some Main Force support, launched the general offensive. Thanh retorted that Giap was sacrificing the Vietcong, most of them southerners, while North Vietnamese regulars were safe in diversionary activities. The debate was intense until July 6, 1967, when Thanh died suddenly. Giap's view prevailed.

North Vietnam also devised a series of diplomatic diversions. In the fall the National Liberation Front initiated secret contacts with the United States embassy and mentioned the possibility of peace talks. In December 1967 Pham Van Dong announced Hanoi's intention to sit down and talk about the war once the United States stopped the bombing. The North Vietnamese were trying to drive a wedge between the United States and South Vietnam,

which did not want peace talks of any kind, and to raise hopes among Americans that a negotiated settlement was near.

Late in July the Politburo voted to launch the attack early in 1968. By September the North Vietnamese were infiltrating huge volumes of supplies and hiding them near provincial capitals and major cities. More than 84,000 Vietcong troops moved into position while NVA troops distracted Westmoreland with the border battles. Tran Van Tra headed Vietcong forces in South Vietnam. He had first assumed command of Main Force Vietcong in 1963. Nguyen Chi Thanh took over in 1964. When Thanh died, Tra was back in power. As operational planner of the offensive, Tra selected Tran Do, a commander beloved by his troops because of his willingness to live in the field with them.

American intelligence realized that more supplies than ever were moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the specialists were convinced the attack would come at Khe Sanh. As the end of the year approached, the communists appealed to the ARVN and MACV for a ceasefire during the Tet holiday so that Vietnamese could celebrate the New Year. Believing in the sincerity of the foe, South Vietnam sent half of the ARVN troops home for the holidays. That was a mistake. The Vietcong had infiltrated five armed battalions into Saigon alone. In the week before Tet they drifted into the city on foot, bicycles, and mopeds. The leadership established a central command post and a field hospital underground at the Phu Tho racetrack in Cholon.

Just after midnight on January 30, 1968, the Vietcong attacks began. In addition to assaults on thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals and five of six major cities, they struck the United States embassy, Tan Son Nhut air base, the presidential palace, and the South Vietnamese general staff headquarters. In I Corps they hit Quang Tri City and Tam Ky, seized Hue, raising the National Liberation Front flag over the Citadel, and attacked the marines at Chu Lai and Phu Bai. II Corps was shaken by assaults on Tuy Hoa and Phan Thiet as well as the American bases at Bong Son and An Khe. In III Corps the Vietcong went after ARVN headquarters at Bien Hoa and United States Field Force headquarters at Long Binh. The attacks in IV Corps—the Mekong Delta—were fierce. The Vietcong hit other provincial and district capitals. The extent of the surprise is caught in a comment to reporters by General John Chaisson, an aide to Westmoreland, three days after the beginning of the Tet offensive: "Well . . . the intelligence did not indicate that we were going to have any such massive attacks as this. . . . We were quite confident that something would happen around . . . Tet . . . but . . . intelligence at least never unfolded to me any panorama of attacks such as happened this week."

The most spectacular attack was on the American embassy in Saigon. At 1:30 a.m. on January 31, the Vietcong blew a hole in the embassy wall and poured through carrying explosives and automatic weapons. All night long a battle raged between guerrillas and the troops from the 101st Airborne, who helicoptered onto the embassy roof. By 9:00 a.m. the embassy was

secure. Bodies littered the compound. Bloody footprints marched up the external stairway. Reporters were everywhere. Kate Webb of the UPI described the scene as "a butcher shop in Eden." Westmoreland marched into the compound at 9:20 and claimed an American victory, insisting that the communists were being slaughtered throughout the country and the attack on Saigon was only a diversion before the main attack near Khe Sanh. The journalists were dumbfounded. How could the commander claim a victory when the Vietcong had gotten into the embassy compound, supposedly the single most secure place in South Vietnam? The next day General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, head of the South Vietnamese police, saw ARVN troops escorting a Vietcong soldier down the street. Loan walked up to him, placed a revolver to his temple, and blew his brains out. Eddie Adams, an Associated Press photographer, and a Vietnamese cameraman for NBC News filmed the whole incident. Millions of Americans watched the killing in their living rooms that night or read about it the next morning. Together with clips of Westmoreland on the embassy grounds, the image of the shooting became symbolic of the Tet offensive.

The battle to drive the Vietcong out of Saigon was bloody. More than 10,000 ARVN troops moved into Cholon in a house-to-house search. On

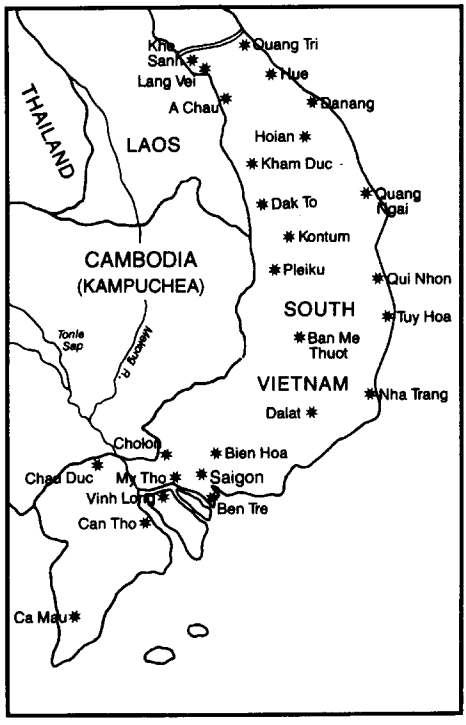
Figure 8.1 February 2, 1968—ARVN Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan pulls out his pistol and executes a Vietcong on the spot with a single shot to the head. (*Courtesy, Library of Congress.*)

February 3 MACV declared much of Cholon a free fire zone and told civilians to get out. The next day American and South Vietnamese aircraft conducted a massive bombing of Cholon to dislodge the enemy. After six days of bombardment, the 199th Light Infantry Brigade moved into the neighborhood, attacked the Phu Tho racetrack, and wiped out the rest of the Vietcong. Much of Cholon lay in rubble.

In Hue, where the bloodiest fighting occurred, 7,500 communist troops went on the offensive. Most of them were NVA regulars. Formerly the imperial capital of Vietnam, the center of Vietnamese cultural life, Hue was the leading symbol of Vietnamese nationalism. It was cosmopolitan and exotic, famous for its wide boulevards and pagodas. It was also difficult to defend. Isolated by the Annamese mountains and bordered by Laos to the west and the Demilitarized Zone to the north, Hue had no access to a major port. Just before 4:00 a.m. on January 30, North Vietnamese artillery began blasting away. The NVA 6th Regiment attacked MACV headquarters in Hue and the field offices of the ARVN 1st Division. Other NVA troops blocked Highway 1 north and south of Hue. When dawn broke, the gold-starred flag of the National Liberation Front was waving above the Citadel, the centuries-old home of the Vietnamese imperial family. Hue had fallen. The bloodbath began immediately. The communists rounded up 2,800 citizens of Hue—intellectuals, government officials, random civilians, and religious leaders—and systematically slaughtered them. Instead of leaving the bodies on public display, as they had always done in the past for political assassinations, they buried the victims in shallow graves. Another 2,000 people were never seen again. Local Vietcong cadres, not NVA regulars, carried out the massacre. Most victims had connections to the South Vietnamese army or government or worked for the American military.

Within hours elements of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division, the ARVN 1st Division, the 1st Marine Division, and ARVN rangers and marines began a house-to-house assault on Hue. For more than three weeks the artillery barrage continued, reducing Hue to rubble. On February 24, 1968, Westmoreland declared victory. By that time little was left. More than 10,000 civilians were dead, killed by enemy terrorism or random American bombardment. Half the buildings in the city were destroyed, and 116,000 of the city's 140,000 people were homeless. The communists suffered 5,000 combat deaths, to 216 for the United States and 384 for the ARVN.

After the recapture of Hue, the Tet offensive stuttered and declined. The Vietcong started a new series of attacks beginning February 18, but they were primarily rocket and mortar bombardment. They launched "Tet II" in May and a smaller offensive in August, but American and ARVN forces easily beat them back. Giap was right. The American military had proved far more responsive than Nguyen Chi Thanh ever thought possible. When the Tet offensive was over, as many as 40,000 Vietcong were dead, compared to 1,100 Americans and approximately 2,300 South Vietnamese. The civilian



Map 3 Major battles of the Tet offensive, January 1968.

toll was even worse. Up to 45,000 South Vietnamese were dead or wounded, and more than one million people had lost their homes.

The Tet offensive was a tactical disaster for the communists. They achieved none of their major objectives. The South Vietnamese did not rise up and welcome them as liberators; the government of South Vietnam did not collapse; ARVN soldiers did not surrender; and the cities did not fall under communist control. When Tet started, ARVN troops left the countryside to fight in the cities, and when they withdrew from villages, Vietcong political cadres headed into the vacuum to recruit peasants. But ARVN and American forces quickly returned to the villages, and Vietcong agents were exposed and many arrested. That process, as well as their horrendous battlefield casualties, badly debilitated the Vietcong. In fact, they never again fielded full battalions. After the Tet offensive, NVA regulars assumed a far greater role in the fighting. For South Vietnamese communists, it was about time. They resented Giap for not committing the NVA divisions to the campaign. Had Nguyen Chi Thanh lived, they believed, the offensive would have been a different story.

But tactical disaster did not mean strategic defeat. Tet was an overwhelming, if unforeseen, strategic victory for the communists. General Tran Do

recognized the contradiction: "We didn't achieve our main objective, which was to spur uprisings throughout the south. . . . As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result." Americans were in no mood for more talk about victories. Johnson's pronouncement at a press conference on February 2 that "we have known for some time that this offensive was planned by the enemy" convinced very few people.

Tet stirred Capitol Hill. Senator Robert Kennedy declared that it "has finally shattered the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstances, even from ourselves." For Senator Mike Mansfield, Tet was the disaster he had been anticipating. "From the outset," he said, the war "was not an American responsibility, and it is not now an American responsibility, to win a victory for any particular Vietnamese group, or to defeat any particular Vietnamese group." If Tet was supposed to have been a communist failure, observed Senator George Aiken of Vermont, "I hope the Viet Cong never have a major success."

Reaction in the press measures the effect of Tet. The usually conservative *Wall Street Journal* argued that "the American people should be getting ready to accept . . . the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed." Tet, observed the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, had revealed "the hollowness of the Saigon government's pretensions to sovereignty . . . the fraud of our government's claims of imminent victory, and the basic untenability of the American military position." Art Buchwald parodied Westmoreland's claims of victory, titling his column, "We Have the Enemy on the Run, Says General Custer." The greatest defection was Walter Cronkite, the dean of American broadcast journalists and anchor of the CBS Evening News. His explosive response to the news of Tet—"What the hell is going on? I thought we were winning the war—" amounted to a news story in itself. After a few days, Cronkite went to Vietnam for his own look. When he returned he issued on the evening broadcast of February 27 his personal opinion: "We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds. The bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate." There would be no military victory. Cronkite wanted peace negotiations. The president was watching the broadcast. "If I have lost Walter Cronkite," he said, "I have lost Mr. Average Citizen." Johnson and Westmoreland were victims of their own rhetoric. Ever since 1962 American leaders had predicted an enemy collapse and an imminent military victory. When the Tet offensive exposed the rhetoric, reporters knew they had a story, comparing the strength of the enemy with MACV's descriptions of its weakness. In a matter of days, Tet had turned from an American victory to a political disaster.

Johnson also had to deal with Earle Wheeler and William Westmoreland. Wheeler cabled Westmoreland on February 9 that the "United States is not prepared to accept a defeat in South Vietnam. In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them." Westmoreland came back with a request for 206,000

troops. He also asked Johnson to mobilize the reserves, permit an invasion of Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, and expand the air war. His new proposal was Operation Complete Victory. So Johnson found himself dealing with the old question: whether to widen the war and raise American troop levels.

At a special meeting of his top advisers on February 9, Johnson listened to them talk about Westmoreland's proposals. Earle Wheeler, who was playing no small part in Westmoreland's troop requests, knew the war was stretching American military resources to the limit. He wanted a national mobilization, a call-up of reserves, and a declaration of war. Dean Rusk disagreed. Opposition to the war, which had prevented Johnson from even raising taxes a few years before, was more severe than ever.

By this time there was a new secretary of defense, Clark Clifford. A Kansas native and a graduate of the Washington University Law School, Clifford had been special counsel to Harry Truman in 1946 and became Truman's most trusted adviser. Tactful but tough, he headed the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in 1961, serving as the official watchdog over the CIA. He had a special ability to sniff out exaggeration, hyperbole, and bureaucratic dissembling. Clifford directed Lyndon Johnson's election campaign in 1964 and for several years was a leading hawk. Early in 1968 Clifford replaced Robert McNamara as secretary of defense, and within weeks he heard "Blimpies" coming out of Saigon. In the middle of Earle Wheeler's plea for more troops and fewer restrictions, Clifford voiced his concern: "There is a very strange contradiction in what we are saying. . . . I think we should give some very serious thought to how we explain saying on one hand that the enemy did not take a victory and yet [we] are in need of many more troops and possibly an emergency call-up." Johnson was quick to see Clifford's shrewdness. The press would have a fine time with the rhetoric of victory accompanied by a massive additional deployment of troops. The president asked Clifford to review the proposals and "give me the lesser of two evils." Clifford insisted that Westmoreland specifically describe what he would do with the 206,000 troops, what results he would achieve, and when he would achieve them. He asked Alain Enthoven, a senior assistant and systems analyst in the Defense Department, to evaluate American strategy. A few weeks later Enthoven presented a scathing attack on Westmoreland's notion. The troop requests would not shorten the war, and 206,000 new troops promised "no early end to the conflict, nor any success in attriting the enemy or eroding Hanoi's will to fight." And a troop buildup on that scale would completely Americanize the war and create a tremendous political backlash at home.

Enthoven proposed a new strategy. Military victory was out of the question. Westmoreland was never going to reach the crossover point. Instead, Enthoven wanted to deploy American troops in areas where they could provide "population security," stop any major communist attacks, and keep the enemy off balance with limited offensive operations. In the meantime,

the ARVN must take the offensive and reverse the Americanization of the conflict. The proposal became known as "Vietnamization." It was actually little different from what the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations had tried to accomplish years before. Upon its completion, the United States would seek a negotiated political settlement and withdraw, leaving South Vietnam to its own destiny.

Those were the choices Johnson faced, and none of them was really palatable. The sum of Westmoreland's tactical victories between 1965 and 1968 had been zero. "If capturing a section of the American embassy and several large cities constitutes complete failure," remarked Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, with the Democratic presidential primary in New Hampshire a few weeks ahead, "I suppose by this logic that if the Viet Cong captured the entire country, the administration would be claiming their total collapse."

Before being elected to Congress in 1948, Eugene McCarthy had been a professor of English. Ten years later he won a seat in the Senate. More mystic than politician, McCarthy seemed to belong in coffee shops discussing philosophy instead of working the halls of Congress. In the journalist Theodore White's characterization, McCarthy might "have love in his heart—but it is an abstract love, a love for youth, a love for beauty, a love for vistas and hills and song. . . . All through the year [1968] one's admiration of the man grew, but one's affection lessened." Early in 1967 McCarthy called for an end to the war. On November 30, 1967, he decided to take on Johnson in the upcoming presidential primaries. Few paid any attention until Tet. But by February thousands of college students, freshly shaved, trimmed, and dressed in shirts and ties—part of a "Get Clean for Gene" campaign—were walking door-to-door in New Hampshire garnering votes for McCarthy in the March 12 primary. The results were astonishing. McCarthy took 42 percent of the vote to 48 percent for Johnson. For the presidential incumbent and the party's nominal leader, the narrow victory was equivalent to a defeat.

Four days later Senator Robert Kennedy of New York declared for the nomination. McCarthy's supporters were outraged. Kennedy seemed a rank opportunist willing to enter the fray only after the shift in the political mood. Johnson was just as outraged. He hated Robert Kennedy. The Kennedy administration had taken the first major step in escalating the conflict in Vietnam, and Robert Kennedy, having promised in 1962 that the United States "would remain there until we win," now wanted an end to the war. McCarthy and Kennedy both opposed Lyndon Johnson on the ballot of the April 2 presidential primary in Wisconsin.

Johnson was a larger-than-life figure who personalized everything around him. On one occasion when an aide tried to direct him to one of several helicopters, saying "Mr. President, that's not your helicopter." Johnson replied, "Son, they're all my helicopters," Vietnam was his war. He brooded about it all the time. One observer described Johnson's role:

> He made appointments, approved promotions, reviewed troop requests, determined deployments, selected bombing targets, and restricted aircraft sorties. Night after night, wearing a dressing gown and carrying a flashlight, he would descend into the White House basement "situation room" to monitor the conduct of the conflict. . . . Often, too, he would doze by his bedside telephone, waiting to hear the outcome of a mission to rescue one of "my pilots" shot down over Haiphong or Vinh or Thai Nguyen. It was his war.

But if it was his war, Johnson did not want to be alone. Obsessed with consensus, he wanted agreement from everyone. Johnson was a great giver of gifts, especially presidential gifts—lighters, tie clasps, bowls, cuff links, electric toothbrushes, waterproof watches, and silk scarves, all with the presidential seal. Anyone who traveled with Johnson aboard Air Force One or a presidential helicopter received a certificate commemorating the event. To show his appreciation for his staff, Johnson gave "CARE" boxes filled with favorite candies. He gave and gave. Some people's gifts come with strings attached; Johnson's came with steel chains. In return he demanded gratitude, love, and, most of all, loyalty. If his gifts were not paid with the proper emotional interest, he was deeply hurt. Now, with so many people turned against him, Johnson angrily asked a friend, "How is it possible that all these people could be so ungrateful to me after I have given them so much?" His need for approval translated into a need for consensus, and seeking consensus required charting a middle course between the liberals and right-wing anticommunists. That meant that in place of seeking a victory or accepting withdrawal, Johnson would end up settling for a stalemate. And for the United States, stalemate meant defeat.

Nor did the midcourse bring any real political gain at home. On March 10 the *New York Times* released the news that Westmoreland wanted another 206,000 troops. Senator J. William Fulbright opened new hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and 139 members of the House signed a petition asking Johnson to reevaluate Vietnam policy. On the NBC Evening News, Frank McGee told the nation that 206,000 more troops would only result in more destruction, not peace and victory. "We must decide whether it is futile," McGee said, "to destroy Vietnam in an effort to save it." By mid-March public opinion polls indicated that only one-quarter of Americans supported Johnson's conduct of the war.

Westmoreland was not going to get the 206,000 troops, but Johnson had to decide whether to endorse the strategic proposals of Alain Enthoven and Clark Clifford. Once again he turned to the Wise Men. Just four months before, back in November 1967, all of them except George Ball had told him to stay with it and force North Vietnam to the negotiating table while turning more of the war over to the ARVN. Johnson now hoped simply that they could see a way out of the quagmire, a "peace with honor." State Department officials had used the phrase for years, referring to "peace with honor" as

the "number of days between the departure of the last Marine and the rape of the first nun."

On March 25, 1968, the Wise Men gathered at the State Department. It was essentially the same group that had supported Johnson back in November: Dean Acheson, Clark Clifford, Abe Fortas, McGeorge Bundy, Maxwell Taylor, Omar Bradley, Robert Murphy, Henry Cabot Lodge, Douglas Dillon, and George Ball. The retired army general Matthew Ridgway was there, as was Cyrus Vance, a former deputy secretary of defense and adviser to Johnson. The event was the Wise Men's swan song. The elaborate network of military bases, regional alliances, and global commitments they had created after World War II was stretched to the breaking point. Perhaps the United States was just not capable of stopping aggression everywhere in the world. The North Koreans had helped prove that point. On January 23, 1968, while Johnson and Westmoreland watched Khe Sanh, North Korean naval forces seized the USS *Pueblo*, a highly sophisticated intelligence-gathering ship plying the waters off the coast of North Korea. In the attack one American died and the ship and crew were taken captive. Johnson sent 350 aircraft to bases in South Korea as a show of force, but Vietnam had drawn his resources too thin. The *Pueblo* crew would languish in a North Korean prison for nearly a year. There were limits to American power, and the Wise Men were called to evaluate them.

In the first day's session, Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, United Nations Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, and CIA director Richard Helms listened to Generals Earle Wheeler and William DePuy, together with Philip Habib of the State Department. To DePuy's announcement that 80,000 Vietcong had died during Tet, Goldberg raised his eyebrows. He wanted to know how many Vietcong were still left in the field, and DePuy put the estimate at 230,000. Goldberg started doing a little arithmetic. "I am not a great mathematician," he responded, "but with 80,000 killed and with a wounded ratio of three to one, or 240,000, for a total of 320,000, who the hell are we fighting?" When General Wheeler argued that the United States should not seek a negotiated settlement, for "this is the worst time to negotiate," Henry Cabot Lodge leaned over to Dean Acheson and observed, "Yes, because we are in worse shape militarily than we have ever been." When Wheeler said that it might take five to ten years to win the war, Douglas Dillon thought, according to his later reconstruction: "In November, we were told that it would take us a year to win. Now it looked like five or ten years, if that. I knew the country wouldn't stand for it."

The next morning the Wise Men met alone with Johnson. Wheeler was there at the beginning of the meeting, claiming that the Pentagon was not seeking a "classic military victory in Vietnam," which prompted an incredulous Dean Acheson to ask, "Then what in the name of God do we have five hundred thousand troops out there for? Chasing girls?" Johnson waved Wheeler out of the meeting and went around the table. He received a lot of counsel but no reassurance. McGeorge Bundy then presented the collective

wisdom of the group: "The majority feeling is that we can no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left. . . . We must begin to take steps to disengage. When we last met we saw reasons for hope. We hoped then there would be slow but steady progress. Last night and today the picture is not so hopeful." Walt Rostow "smelled a rat . . . a put-up job. . . . I thought to myself that what began in the spring of 1940 when Henry Stimson came to Washington ended tonight. The American Establishment is dead." So was Operation Complete Victory. Westmoreland would get neither his 206,000 new troops nor his invasions of Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. When the meeting was over, Johnson concluded that "The establishment bastards have bailed out."

Dean Rusk had also wavered, although he would never do it publicly. His sense of loyalty ran too deep. He had pushed the war for seven years, always with the conviction that it was necessary to save the world from "a billion Chinese armed with nuclear weapons." Johnson had a deep-seated trust for Rusk, a trust born of shared rural beginnings. When Rusk urged Johnson to consider a partial bombing halt over North Vietnam as a start to a new peace initiative, Johnson listened, even though he remained skeptical. But in case there was even a glimmer of hope that Ho Chi Minh would respond, he wanted to try. "Even a blind hog," the president said, "sometimes finds the chestnut."

Lyndon Johnson was a broken man. His memoirs register that moment: "They were intelligent, experienced men. I had always regarded the majority of them as very steady and balanced. If they had been so deeply influenced by the reports of the Tet offensive, what must the average citizen be thinking?" Suddenly a president who lived to achieve consensus saw himself as a hated man. The near defeat at the hands of Eugene McCarthy in New Hampshire, the entrance of Senator Robert Kennedy into the presidential race, and his own private polls indicating defeat in the upcoming Wisconsin primary convinced him that he had to take another look at Vietnam as well as his own political career. Johnson was feeling old in the spring of 1968, tired and finished.

Johnson's health was a recurring anxiety. It was not uncommon for him to undergo physical examinations every week or call in a physician to look at him every day. His heart attack thirteen years earlier still frightened him. He had abdominal and throat surgery in 1965 and 1966, and during the course of his presidency more than forty precancerous lesions and one small malignant tumor were removed from his skin. Johnson was convinced he would not live out a second term. He even had a secret actuarial study predict his longevity: "The men in the Johnson family," he said, "have a history of dying young. . . . I figure with my history of heart trouble I'd never live . . . another four years. The American people have had enough of presidents dying in office."

Long before the Tet offensive, Johnson was giving serious consideration to retiring. Tet confirmed what his own body told him. The war was a cancer

consuming his health, his political career, and his beloved Great Society. The idea of running again for president, of facing a full year of hostile crowds shouting obscenities, was unthinkable. Like few other presidents in American history, Johnson always had his nose to the political winds, and the spreading stink was undeniable. To avoid a divisive political campaign and prove his sincerity in seeking an end to the war, Johnson delivered a speech on the evening of March 31, 1968, that stunned the whole country. He told the American people that he was "reducing . . . the present level of hostilities. . . . I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in partisan divisions that are developing. . . . Accordingly, I will not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for . . . President."

Hanoi's leaders shouted for joy at the news. The war was over, if not militarily then certainly politically. Ho Chi Minh's prediction that the United States would not sustain the war had materialized. In an interview with a French journalist in 1968, Giap defined Tet as "the most tragic defeat for the Americans. The Tet offensive marked a turning point in this war. . . . It burst like a soap bubble the artificial optimism built up by the Pentagon. . . . Gone, and gone for good, is the hope of annihilating the Liberation forces. . . . Gone are the pacification projects. They would have to start all over from scratch." On April 1, 1968, Lyndon Johnson stopped all Rolling Thunder raids north of the nineteenth parallel, and two days later the North Vietnamese accepted the invitation to discuss the war. They were not serious, of course, any more than they had been in 1954 when they offered to talk to the French about Dienbienphu. Diplomacy was simply another tool in bringing about the final expulsion of the United States from Indochina.

But Johnson's announcements did not constitute a real change in strategy, just tactical adjustments. Along with Walt Rostow, William Westmoreland, and Earle Wheeler, he still wanted to achieve the original goal of establishing a stable, noncommunist government in Saigon. The thrashing Westmoreland had given the communists at Tet was proof of American military superiority. That the ARVN had fought its Tet battles with courage and discipline was even more encouraging. The weak link in the strategy was politics at home, Johnson believed. Withdrawing from the presidential race, rejecting the requests for more troops, and limiting the bombing of North Vietnam, Johnson hoped, could buy political time for his basic policies to succeed.

William Westmoreland also had to go, another political victim of Tet and, like his predecessor General Paul Harkins, a fatality of the General Blimp image he had self-destructively embraced. Johnson brought Westmoreland home in April 1968 and named him army chief of staff. Before he left Vietnam, Westmoreland said that the "war cannot be won in the classic sense, because of our national policy of not expanding the war . . . [but we] denied to the enemy a battlefield victory . . . and arrested the spread of communism." He returned to Washington unreconstructed. Johnson replaced him with General Creighton ("Fighting Abe") Abrams.

While limiting the air war over North Vietnam and preparing the way for negotiations in Paris, Johnson was doing everything possible to shore up the political and military situation in Saigon.

At first the center of attention was the A Shau Valley, actually a series of several valleys and mountains in Thua Thien Province. By 1968 the A Shau Valley had become one of the principal entry points into South Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the staging area for most enemy attacks in I Corps. More than 6,000 NVA troops were in the valley, and Westmoreland and Abrams worried that they were ready for a second offensive. Designating the attack on the A Shau Operation Delaware, Westmoreland had B-52s pound the valley for a week in mid-April before sending in elements of the 1st Cavalry (Airmobile) Division, the 101st Airborne Division, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, and the ARVN 1st Division to attack the enemy troops, supply caches, and bunkers. The battle raged for three weeks, costing the United States more than sixty helicopters. But the campaign killed 850 North Vietnamese troops, compared to 139 Americans, drove them out of a region they had controlled for years, and captured an unprecedented number of weapons.

By the time Operation Delaware was winding down in the north, Tet II was under way farther south. With the peace talks just weeks away, enemy troops maneuvered for position. On May 5, 1968, the communists launched 119 attacks on provincial and district capitals throughout South Vietnam. They attacked Saigon and Tan Son Nhut air base and got two regiments into the northern suburbs of Saigon and back into Cholon. They also fired 122-mm rockets into Saigon for several days. The U.S. 25th Infantry Division fought back, and tactical air strikes eventually dislodged the enemy. When the fighting ended, 160,000 more civilians were homeless.

By that spring Khe Sanh was becoming an embarrassment. The Tet offensive had distracted American attention from the outpost, but Westmoreland would not back away from his prediction that it was the real communist objective. The marines repulsed NVA infantry assaults on March 16–17 and again on March 29, but Giap was already in the process of withdrawing his troops from Khe Sanh. American troops were there without an enemy to fight, and Creighton Abrams wanted to get them out of Khe Sanh for use in other battles. In Washington there was concern about the political fallout of withdrawing from Khe Sanh. Clark Clifford, sensing the mood of the nation, wondered about "all the hoopla last year, the talk of Dienbienphu, of Khe Sanh as the western anchor of American defenses in I Corps, the doorway to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. How's it going to look when we pull out?" Vo Nguyen Giap understood the dilemma: "As long as they [the Americans] stayed in Khe Sanh to defend their prestige, they said Khe Sanh was important; when they abandoned Khe Sanh, they said Khe Sanh had never been important." Still, Abrams did need the men. The marines and air cav troops left Khe Sanh on June 13, 1968. General Rathvan Tompkins described what was left of the place: "Khe Sanh was absolutely denuded. The trees were

gone . . . everything was gone. Pockmarked and ruined and burnt . . . like the surface of the moon."

After Tet, Washington stressed the importance of shifting responsibility to the South Vietnamese. The ARVN went from 798,000 to 850,000 troops, and Creighton Abrams conducted increasing numbers of joint American–ARVN military operations. ARVN troops received crash training programs in the latest military technology and equipment. It was not an easy task, for the South Vietnamese did not mind having the United States doing the fighting. After a visit to South Vietnam in July 1968, a frustrated Clark Clifford complained that it was still largely an American war and that "the South Vietnamese leaders seemed content to have it that way."

The pacification programs were also expanded. The Vietcong had suffered terribly during Tet and might be vulnerable to a political as well as military offensive. Robert Komer left South Vietnam later in 1968 to become ambassador to Turkey and was replaced by William E. Colby.

Colby, born in St. Paul in 1920, had graduated from Princeton in 1940 and spent World War II in the Office of Strategic Services fighting with the French Resistance. After the war he earned a law degree at Columbia and in 1950 joined the CIA. In 1959 he became CIA station chief in Saigon. After three years there he returned to Washington to head the CIA's Far East Division. A devout Roman Catholic, Colby saw life as a struggle between good and evil. In the sixteenth century, as Neil Sheehan perceived him, he would have been perfect as a soldier for Christ in the Jesuit order. Now the embodiment of evil was communism, and Colby viewed himself as an anticommunist crusader, a civilian soldier fighting for a free world.

Colby's Phoenix Program put South Vietnam, with the assistance of CORDS and the CIA, to eliminating the Vietcong leadership through arrest, torture, conversion, or assassination. The South Vietnamese implemented the program aggressively, but it was soon laced with corruption and political infighting. Some South Vietnamese politicians identified political enemies as Vietcong and sent Phoenix hit men after them. The pressure to identify Vietcong led to a quota system that incorrectly labeled many innocent people as the enemy. By 1972 as many as 20,000 people, many of them Vietcong, had been assassinated. Phoenix undoubtedly hurt the Vietcong, though not nearly so much as the military campaigns during Tet and afterwards.

As the Phoenix Program was going after the Vietcong infrastructure, Colby launched the Accelerated Pacification Campaign to win over the loyalties of the 1,200 villages controlled by the communists. Using local militia to provide security and differentiate between Vietcong and nonpolitical families, the program set about land reform and economic development—clearing roads, repairing bridges, building schools, and increasing rice production. The program lasted until early 1970. By that time the Accelerated Pacification Campaign had redistributed more than 2.5 million acres of land to peasants and armed over 500,000 militia to protect villages from Vietcong attack. Those were substantial achievements, but they failed to counterbalance the

destruction and dislocation that the killing machine was bringing to South Vietnamese peasants.

Back home the war was also taking its toll on American politics. It had destroyed Johnson, and was tearing up his party.

The heir to the Johnson wing of the party was Vice President Hubert Humphrey, born in South Dakota in 1911 but seasoned in the progressive Democratic politics of Minnesota. In 1944 he had become mayor of Minneapolis. He gained a national profile at the 1948 Democratic convention when he campaigned for a strong civil rights position in the party platform. Humphrey won a seat in the United States Senate in 1948 and was reelected in 1954 and 1960, firmly defining himself as a Democratic party liberal, an advocate of civil rights, Medicare, and labor legislation. He made an unsuccessful bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 and in 1964 accepted the vice presidential spot. The next four years were the worst in Humphrey's life. Johnson was contemptuous of him, calling him a "little boy who cries too much." Shortly after the inauguration in 1965, Winston Churchill died, and instead of sending Humphrey to the funeral, Johnson asked Chief Justice Earl Warren to go. Humphrey never forgot the insult. Humphrey worried about escalating the war, and in retaliation Johnson froze him out of policy making discussions. Yet as a loyalist, he did not go public with his doubts, and when Johnson withdrew from the race, Humphrey stepped up.

From the beginning of the campaign for nomination, Humphrey was in trouble. For three years, despite private misgivings, he had publicly supported administration policies in Vietnam. If he continued to back the idea of military victory, he would not enjoy any support from insurgent Democrats ready to split the party in two. But if he made public his personal opposition to escalation, he risked Lyndon Johnson's wrath. Johnson no longer had the power to designate his successor, but he could veto Humphrey. In any event, as the campaign developed Humphrey would come to be defined as the surrogate for the president who had taken pleasure in despising him.

Further roiling the Democratic party were peace negotiations with the Vietnamese communists, now at last under way. The talks began in Paris on May 13, 1968. W. Averell Harriman represented the United States. North Vietnam sent Xuan Thuy. One of the earliest anti-French Vietnamese nationalists, Thuy had spent years in French prisons. Between 1963 and 1965 he served as foreign minister of North Vietnam. Nguyen Thi Binh represented the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Vietcong. She had been a strident student nationalist, imprisoned between 1951 and 1954. She joined the National Liberation Front in 1960 and was soon traveling the world promoting Vietcong goals, a political journey that had now taken her to Paris. South Vietnam sent Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky to head its delegation.

Saigon was in no mood to compromise. Any accommodation with the communists, the South Vietnamese leaders knew, would eventually send them

to labor camps or worse. The United States approached the talks believing it held the advantage in Vietnam, while the North Vietnamese were just as certain that the Americans had suffered a strategic defeat. From the beginning Johnson insisted that Harriman take a hard line: Leave the Thieu-Ky government in place, deny representation for the National Liberation Front, implement mutual withdrawal of all North Vietnamese and American troops, and exchange prisoners of war. Xuan Thuy, just as adamantly, articulated the North Vietnamese position: Cease all bombing raids over North Vietnam, withdraw all American troops from South Vietnam, remove the Thieu-Ky government, and create a coalition government in Saigon that included the National Liberation Front.

The American delegation spent the first few weeks quartered in the plush fifth floor of the Crillon Hotel, but after a few meetings with Xuan Thuy, the delegates moved down to the cheaper first floor and brought their wives from Washington. It was going to be a long stay. Throughout 1968 the impasse found expression in a debate over the size and shape of the negotiating table. Ky refused to sit at the same table with Nguyen Thi Binh, especially if her place indicated equal status with him. Binh, of course, insisted on equal status. Harriman had to think of a table design that would satisfy both. The world press corps descended on Paris to report the talks but ended up taking pictures again and again of the table. Art Buchwald observed that once they finished the six-month debate over the shape of the table, the diplomats would have all of 1969 to decide on "butcher block, Formica, or wood finish."

Harriman considered Nguyen Cao Ky an impossible, petulant hack who made the communists look like paragons. One member of the American delegation drew a laugh out of Harriman when he suggested that they solve the problem of the size and shape of the table by using "different size chairs, with the baby's high chair reserved for Ky." More than one observer noted that during debate about the table, 8,000 Americans died along with 50,000 North Vietnamese and perhaps another 50,000 South Vietnamese civilians. Throughout 1968 the Paris peace talks spent their energies in pointless procedural arguments, deepening the cynicism with which Americans viewed the war.

The presidential candidates running against the war made the most of the stalled negotiations.

Senator Robert Kennedy of Boston, Humphrey's strongest opponent, was then in his mid-forties. Kennedy had graduated from Harvard and from the University of Virginia Law School. He masterminded his brother's successful 1960 bid for the presidency and then became attorney general. Robert Kennedy was a man of intense passion and brutal honesty. Tact was not his strong suit. Joseph Kennedy, the patriarch of the family, who considered John too forgiving of other people, said of Bobby that "when he hates you, you stay hated." After his brother's assassination, Kennedy served as attorney general for a few more months, but his dislike for Lyndon Johnson was

matched only by Johnson's loathing for him. Much in agreement in their domestic-policy liberalism, they were nevertheless hopelessly divided in personality, the newly genteel Irish wealth of Massachusetts against the earthy poverty of the Hill Country. Kennedy left the Justice Department in 1964 and won a United States Senate seat from New York.

After the assassination, Robert Kennedy was a different man. Well before, he had lost his cockiness and became introspective, reading deeply in philosophy, tragedy, and religion. He questioned the existence of God in a world that killed the innocent. Moved by the writings of Albert Camus, he wrote in his notebook, "Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured, but we can reduce the number of tortured children." By 1966 he was concluding that the war had gotten out of control, that the United States was seeking a military solution to a political problem. "I have tried in vain to alter our course in Vietnam before it further saps our spirit and our manpower, further raises the risks of a wider war, and further destroys the country and the people it was meant to save," he said on March 26, 1968, in his announcement for the presidency. His campaign was an immediate success. The Kennedy mystique was a powerful force in 1968, as were Kennedy money and ties to the party machine. Eugene McCarthy commanded the respect of the antiwar movement, but its heart was with Kennedy. Kennedy defeated McCarthy in the California primary in June, but on the night of his victory he was assassinated in Los Angeles. His death put the nomination in the hands of Humphrey, who had gathered delegates from states where the party establishment rather than the voters made the selection. The Democrats then headed for their national convention in Chicago.

The Republican campaign was also fixing on the war. Nelson Rockefeller, heir to the Standard Oil fortune and governor of New York, hoped for the GOP nomination. But Republican conservatives hated him, not only for his moderate liberalism but for his clear distaste for the nomination of Barry Goldwater in the election of 1964. Governor George Romney of Michigan, a former president of American Motors, was another liberal Republican. Although GOP conservatives rejected many of Romney's positions, they did not detest him as they did Rockefeller. But Romney made one devastating rhetorical slip. During the New Hampshire primary campaign in late February, he confessed to having been "brainwashed" by MACV during a visit to Vietnam in which he was assured of the war's progress. Politicians cannot speak of themselves with so naive and simple an openness. Romney lost the New Hampshire primary. Out of the squabblings among the Republicans emerged Richard M. Nixon.

Between 1953 and 1961 Nixon had served as vice president under Dwight D. Eisenhower. After losing the 1960 presidential election to John F. Kennedy and suffering another loss in the 1962 California gubernatorial election, he practiced law and spoke on behalf of Republican candidates, building up a long list of political IOUs that he called in during the 1968 election. In the vaguest terms, Nixon criticized Johnson's conduct of the war and promised

that he could do better. On the eve of the New Hampshire primary he made his "pledge to [the voters] that new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific." When Humphrey demanded that he spell out his peace plan, Nixon responded, "No one with this responsibility who is seeking office should give away any of his bargaining position in advance. . . . Under no circumstances should a man say what he would do next January." The remark did not awaken the skepticism it came close to inviting. Nixon easily won the nomination.

Neither Nixon's vague peace plans nor Humphrey's equally vague promises satisfied the nation's young peace activists. For three years their calls for an end to the war had increased in stridency. Government officials and agents ignored their demands, infiltrated their organizations, and expressed contempt for their political and cultural style. For a brief time some saw a glimmer of hope in Eugene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy. But McCarthy seemed almost determined to distance himself from the public he was soliciting, and Kennedy was dead. At his funeral Tom Hayden, a leader of SDS, wept. Across the country other students shared his grief. "As I look back on the 60s," mused Michael Harrington, whose writings a few years earlier had brought poverty back to the attention of Americans basking in the prosperity following World War II, Robert Kennedy "was the man who actually could have changed the course of American history."

The passing of Kennedy deprived young protesters of their only powerful political voice. He might have been elected president. He might have made a difference. The remaining politicians were establishment figures who cared little for the dreams of the young. To register their protests—to voice their disenchantment with the political process that was excluding them—members of various student organizations decided to go to the National Democratic Convention in Chicago. Some represented factions of the New Left. Many were committed Marxists, wedded to revolutionary change. Others were apostles of the counterculture whose politics were as nebulous as their religious beliefs. The only conviction they shared was the notion that liberal politics were moribund.

The establishment Democrats should have known what was in store. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in April 1968, racial rebellion broke out in the nation's cities. Late in April, when Columbia University's president Grayson Kirk held a memorial service for King, the local SDS disrupted the gathering, accusing Columbia of being insensitive to the needs of black people and of supporting the Vietnam War through its membership in the Institute for Defense Analysis. As anger swept the university, students occupied several buildings on campus, including Kirk's office, and pictures of them smoking his cigars and drinking his sherry made all the wire services. The dispute went on for three weeks before New York City police forcibly cleared the campus.

The protest movement then shifted to Chicago. Orthodox urban politicians there, as throughout the country, cared little for the creed of the New

Figure 8.2 August 28, 1968—Police squirt mace into a tightly packed crowd at an antiwar demonstration outside the Conrad Hilton hotel in Chicago. Hundreds were injured in the bloody clash. (*Courtesy, Library of Congress.*)

Left and the politically outrageous. Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley mobilized 12,000 police and prepared to call out national guardsmen. He denied demonstrators the right to protest or march. Short, barrel-chested, with the jowls of a big city boss, Daley promised that he would not allow any "long-haired punks" to dirty the city where he attended mass every day and decent people lived. The novelist Norman Mailer caught Daley's disdain for the eastern press and the counterculture: "No interlopers for any network of Jew-Wasp media men were going to dominate the streets of his parochial city, nor none of their crypto-accomplices with long hair, sexual liberty, drug license and unbridled mouths."

Given Daley's attitude and the determination of the protesters, violence was certain. The Youth International party, or Yippies, led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, urged people to "vote Pig in '68." They nominated their own candidate—"Pigasus," a fat pig they paraded through the streets. They demanded legalization of marijuana and "all other psychedelic drugs," an "end to all censorship," total disarmament of all people "beginning with the police," and abolition of money and work. "We believe," Point 15 of their manifesto stated, "that people should fuck all the time, anytime, whomever

they wish." Such appeals were not part of the establishment's vision of a better nation, and it was emphatically not Mayor Daley's. Police repeatedly clashed with the demonstrators. They fired tear gas into groups of protesters. "We walked along," as Sol Lerner of the *Village Voice* would remember it, "hands outstretched, bumping into people and trees, tears dripping from our eyes and mucus smeared across our faces." The police, armed with clubs, waded into the demonstrators, one of whom "saw a cop hit a guy over the head and the club break. I turned to the left and saw another cop jab the guy right in the kidneys." Demonstrators fought back, threw rocks, overturned cars, set trash cans on fire. Reporters and photographers became victims of what was later termed a "police riot." Nicholas von Hoffman of the *Washington Post* reported police attacks on news photographers: "Pictures are unanswerable evidence in court. [The police had] taken off their badges, their name plates, even the unit patches on their shoulders to become a mob of identical, unidentifiable club swingers." But the television cameras did not blink, and the violence became entertainment in millions of homes. Disgusted by the police, Walter Cronkite told his prime-time viewers, "I want to pack my bags and get out of this city."

The violence in the streets spilled into the convention center. Several delegates were assaulted outside the convention hall. When Mike Wallace of CBS questioned the suppression of dissent, a cop slugged him on the jaw. Speaking from the podium, Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut condemned the "Gestapo tactics" of the Chicago police. His remarks brought Daley to his feet, shaking his fist and calling Ribicoff a "motherfucker." Amid all this, Hubert Humphrey—whose theme was "The Politics of Joy"—received the nomination for president.

The debacle in Chicago doomed Humphrey's chances for the election. A further complication was the candidacy of George Wallace, capable of drawing both blue-collar Democratic votes and the ballots of hard-right Republicans. Born to poor sharecroppers, Wallace was a populist who opposed civil rights legislation and called for a military victory in Vietnam. When he received no support from the regular Democratic party, Wallace created the American party. He drew substantial sympathy in the Deep South and among some white ethnic workers in the North, two constituencies Humphrey needed for victory. For his vice presidential running mate, Wallace selected Curtis LeMay, a retired air force general whose formula for the Vietnam War was quite simple. In 1967 he had argued that the United States "must be willing to continue our bombing until we have destroyed every work of man in North Vietnam if this is what it takes to win the war." At the press conference when he accepted the nomination, he was equally blunt. In response to a question about how to end the war, LeMay instantly said that he "would bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age."

Throughout most of the fall, Humphrey tried to rid himself of the Vietnam millstone without alienating Johnson. Richard Nixon kept promising an honorable end to the Vietnam War. Not until late October did Humphrey

openly call for a negotiated settlement. On October 31 President Johnson, hoping to breathe some life into the peace negotiations and the Democratic candidacy, ended all Rolling Thunder bombing raids. He had little choice. Nguyen Van Thieu, suspecting that he might get better treatment from Richard Nixon as president than from Hubert Humphrey, refused to engage in serious talks in Paris. The bombing halt was too little and too late. Nixon won by a narrow margin. He received 43.4 percent of the popular vote and 302 electoral votes to 42.7 percent and 191 electoral votes for Humphrey, while Wallace gathered 13.5 percent and 45 electoral votes.

By the 1966–1967 season, as the malaise infecting politics invaded popular culture as well, television programs favoring the military lost their appeal. Americans could watch a real war every night on the six o'clock news. During 1964–1965, the Nielsen ratings had put *Combat!* in tenth place among popular television shows. Although its ratings slipped modestly in the next two seasons, the show still garnered a profitable share of the television audience. But *Combat!* was canceled at the end of the 1966 season. Several of the series' stars, including Vic Morrow, attributed its demise to the growing criticism of the war in Vietnam. By 1966, *Mona McCluskey, Convoy, McHale's Navy*, and *Wackiest Ship in the Army* were gone. *Twelve O'Clock High* disappeared the next season. When the 1968 fall season opened, only *Gomer Pyle* and *Hogan's Heroes* survived.

In the early years of the war, references to Johnson's policies occasionally appeared on the controversial *That Was the Week That Was*, which aired from January 1964 until May 1965. Other shows offered antiwar sentiments in more subtle forms, including one concerning a real-life frontier American. *Daniel Boone* aired from September 1964 through the spring of 1970. Barry Rosenzweig, supervising its writers, instructed them to portray the Revolutionary War by "making it Vietnam, with the colonials as the Vietcong and the English as the Americans." *Star Trek* consistently aired story lines condemning war and stressing the Federation command that star fleet captains avoid interfering with the internal affairs of new civilizations they encounter. Even the characters in *Mission Impossible* stopped overthrowing foreign governments and switched to more domestic missions, such as fighting organized crime.

One program, at least, was not so subtle. The Smothers Brothers were a singing comedy team who gained national fame during the popularity explosion of folk music in the early 1960s. In a midseason attempt to steal viewers from NBC's *Bonanza*, CBS gave them their own weekly variety program on Sunday nights. Tommy and Dick Smothers soon became heroes to antiwar activists. In September 1967, they invited Pete Seeger to appear on the show. The famed activist and folk artist was scheduled to perform his antiwar song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," but the network cut the segment when Seeger, backed by the Smothers Brothers, refused to cut the most controversial verse. In February 1968, after a long battle with CBS, Tommy Smothers once again introduced Seeger on the show, and this time Seeger was allowed

to perform the song in its entirety. The Smothers Brothers continued to battle the network and its censors, but CBS finally canceled them in 1969, even though their ratings were excellent, after they featured an interview with Joan Baez in which she made a reference to her husband's prison term for draft evasion.

Opposition to the war also found expression in a number of popular novels published in the mid-1960s. Most of the fiction portrayed Indochina as a place alien to American culture, interests, and knowledge.

John Sack's *M*, published in 1967, was one of the first of the antiwar novels. It follows M Company, an army unit, as it goes from basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, through several months of combat in Vietnam. Against the warrior idealism of Specialist 4 Demirgian, Sack sets the corruption of ARVN troops, the inability to distinguish between Vietcong and civilians, and the unbelievably poor morale among United States soldiers. The novel climaxes in the killing of a Vietnamese girl by an American grenade lobbed into a shelter to kill Vietcong.

One Very Hot Day, published by David Halberstam the same year as *M*, is a tale of several American advisers who are trying to train the South Vietnamese army. Captain Beaupre, the central character, is a veteran of World War II and Korea who has no illusions about the Vietnam War. His only objective is to stay alive in the hot, sticky, despair-ridden madness. Beaupre's second-in-command—the young, idealistic Lieutenant Anderson—has high expectations of successfully training the South Vietnamese soldiers and winning the war against communism. In the end, the South Vietnamese troops fail to fight, Beaupre manages to survive, but Anderson dies in a firefight. Beaupre is unable to find any reason for his death, any meaning for an American to be dead in a nowhere-place called Ap Than Thoi.

Incident at Muc Wa is the title of Daniel Ford's novel about the Vietnam War, which also appeared in 1967. The book centers on Corporal Stephen Courcey, a demolitions expert who has just arrived in Vietnam. Along with several other American soldiers, he establishes an outpost at Muc Wa. The novel proceeds to expose the absurdities of the war through tragicomedy. Courcey's girlfriend from the States shows up at Muc Wa as a war correspondent, but she is unable to meet him because he is off in the jungle with a visiting general and army captain who are trying to earn their Combat Infantry Badges. The novel provides a caricature of stupid officers fighting a war for the wrong reasons. In the end, the troops at Muc Wa fight off a Vietcong attack, and the Vietcong, in Ford's words, "exfiltrate" the area. In the course of this absurd episode, Courcey is killed in action.

Yet another work published in 1967, Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is actually set not in Indochina but in Texas, New York City, and the Brooks Range of Alaska. A cast of characters—D. J. Jellicoe, Rusty Jellicoe, Alice Lee Jellicoe, Medium Asshole Pete, Medium Asshole Bill, and Tex Hude—end up in the wilderness on a hunting trip. There, in a pristine and naturally savage environment, they use all the hunting technology they

can muster and slaughter wolves, caribou, bighorn sheep, and bears. The carnage is extraordinary and, for Norman Mailer, symbolic of what American military technology was doing to the life and habitat of Southeast Asia.

James Crumley's novel *One Count to Cadence* and William Eastlake's *The Bamboo Red* both appeared in 1969, in the wake of the Tet offensive. *One Count to Cadence* tells of a ten-man communications detachment stationed first at Clark Air Base in the Philippines and then in Vietnam during the early stages of the war. Sergeant "Slag" Krummel is the narrator, and his foil is Joe Morning, a self-destructive loser. The novel exposes the gratuitous violence of military life—bars, brothels, fights, and profanity—as well as the futility of the war in Vietnam. The sergeant eventually betrays a best friend and buddy, and the team is decimated. The novel ends with the unit returning to the Philippines, where Joe Morning joins the communist Huk Rebellion. In *The Bamboo Red*, a surrealistic condemnation of the war, Eastlake draws on incongruous fantasies: peace-loving hippie flower children wandering aimlessly through the Indochinese jungles; helicopter pilots having sex with medevac nurses while airborne; American Rangers topped with Roman helmets and accompanied by drummer boys airlifted into French-Vietnamese villas. Like the images in *The Bamboo Red*, the Vietnam war cannot accord with any rational world.

Even comic books reflected the increasing depth of antiwar sentiment in American popular culture. Comic book readers had become too sophisticated about the Vietnam War to accept the stereotypes. Dell Comics' *Jungle War Stories*, which featured Vietnam War themes, had failed commercially in 1966, proving that the war was going to be difficult to sell to the American people. *Tales of the Green Berets* was dropped by most newspapers in 1967. In 1968 Marvel Comics abandoned Cold War and Vietnam themes altogether, shifting the focus of Iron Man's exploits to such domestic issues as race relations, environmental problems, and crime.

How times had changed from the confident naiveté of 1965! The treatment of the Green Berets in American popular culture captures the shift in the public mood.

During the Kennedy years, the Green Berets had been perceived as missionaries with muscle and brain. They received training that conformed to the prescription in *The Ugly American*. In theory, to be considered for the Green Berets Special Forces a volunteer had to be qualified as both Ranger and airborne, physically fit, and able to speak at least one foreign language. Once accepted into the outfit, he was trained to proficiency in "skills such as demolition, communications and field medicine . . . unarmed combat, SCUBA diving and mountaineering, and . . . all kinds of weapons." And he had to know his enemy. At their training center at Fort Bragg, Green Berets read the works of Mao Zedong and Vo Nguyen Giap while preparing their bodies to meet the enemy in battle. In Robin Moore's *The Green Berets* the "ugly American"—that is, the plain common-sense technician as Lederer and Burdick had favorably presented him—is transformed into a bright and shining

knight, a warrior for democracy. The novel was a huge financial success. Published in 1965, it rocketed onto the *New York Times* bestseller list. Although Moore upset government officials by portraying Green Berets taking part in forays into North Vietnam, his attitude toward the war was that of American officialdom. When asked why he is in Vietnam, a Green Beret replies, "First, I am a professional soldier and I take orders and do what I am told. Second, I don't want my children fighting the Communists at home." Once again the vision of toppling dominoes is conjured. And between Indochina and California, Moore posits the Green Berets, "a potent new weapon against the Communists." Describing the Green Berets in *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam wrote reflectively of what these striking figures out of the Kennedy era were supposed to be: "They were all uncommon men, extraordinary physical specimens and intellectual Ph.D.s, swinging through trees, speaking Russian and Chinese, eating snake meat and other fauna, springing counter-ambushes at night on unwary Asian ambushers who had read Mao and Giap, but not Hilsman and Rostow."

Three years after the publication of Moore's work, John Wayne translated the novel onto the screen as an unabashedly direct propaganda movie for which he had bought the film rights in 1965. It is "extremely important," Wayne wrote to President Johnson, that "not only the people of the United States but those all over the world should know why it is necessary for us to be there." Recalling the role of the film industry during World War II, he proposed that he "tell the story of our fighting men in Vietnam with reason, emotion, characterization and action. We want to do it in a manner that will inspire a patriotic attitude on the part of fellow-Americans—a feeling which we have always had in this country in the past during stress and trouble." Johnson's aide Jack Valenti advised the president that Wayne would be "saying the things we want said," and with this assurance Wayne received administration support for his project. Much of the film was shot at Fort Benning, and the army contributed Huey helicopters and technical advisers.

The result was a controversial movie that faithfully presents the administration's position. The focus of the film is the awakening of a "liberal" journalist—played by David Janssen—to the real nature of American involvement. At first the journalist is skeptical; he doubts the domino theory, the threat of communism, and the viability of the government in South Vietnam. But after following the activities of the Green Beret lieutenant colonel Michael Kirby—played by John Wayne—he reverses his earlier opinions. Nevertheless, even the journalist realizes that the liberal bias of the American press will make it difficult to tell the true story of the war in Vietnam. "If I say what I feel," he informs Kirby, "I may be out of a job." In the end the film suggests that the biggest fight will be against not the North Vietnamese but the liberal establishment. In most respects *The Green Berets* was a typical John Wayne war movie. It could have been set in the Pacific during World War II or in the West during the Indian wars. The Vietnamese in the film even speak the pidgin English of the Indians in early Hollywood westerns.

At one point a South Vietnamese tells Kirby, "We build many camps, clobber many V.C."

Unfortunately for Wayne, by the time the film was released in the summer of 1968 most Americans no longer believed the official administration line. Critics received *The Green Berets* in the spirit of disillusion Renata Adler expressed in the *New York Times*:

> *The Green Berets* is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false . . . that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers in Vietnam or for Vietnam (the film could not be more false or do a greater disservice to either of them) but for what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus. . . . Simplicities of the right, simplicities of the left, but this one is beyond the possible. It is vile and insane.

Even trade journals criticized the film. *The Hollywood Reporter* called it "a cliché-ridden throwback to the battlefield potboilers of World War II, its artifice readily exposed by the nightly actuality of TV news coverage."

At the end of 1968 there were 536,000 American troops in Vietnam, along with another 65,000 military from South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. ARVN troops totaled 850,000. More than 30,000 Americans were dead. Fear, misery, dislocation, and death inflicted by both sides to the conflict were making a wreckage of Vietnamese society. The communists, convinced that they would always enjoy the tactical initiative and could decide when and where to engage American troops, were waiting for the American people to tire of the war. Time for Richard Nixon to deliver.