

# Vietnam War

Author: [Sam Mittelsteadt](#)

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## Retreat From Victory

by John F. McManus

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Always in war when I visited my wounded in the hospital, I could look them in the eye, no matter what their condition or how tragic their wounds, knowing that our country had backed them to the hilt. But when I went to see my Korean wounded, I just couldn't look them in the eye, knowing that they had been forced to fight with one hand tied behind their backs .... I am convinced I was restrained in Korea by some secret Administration policy directive or strategy about which I was not informed.

— General Douglas MacArthur

Anyone who has ever participated in war would concur with Union General William Sherman's famous dictum that "War is Hell." But saving your nation, your loved ones, and your very way of life from an enemy who wishes to destroy all three is certainly worth putting oneself temporarily into such hell. This is why men willingly go to war, to preserve what they treasure by defeating a would-be conqueror. And defeating that enemy is what makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

Soldiers put themselves in harm's way to win, and to return to their homes as they left them. Governments — moral ones that is — send men to fight for such a clearly specified goal. It is therefore unthinkable that a government would send anyone into war's hell for anything else. As General Douglas MacArthur said so well, "In war, there is no substitute for victory."

UN in Command

Five months prior to the outbreak of the hostilities in Korea into which our nation's leaders sent hundreds of thousands of Americans, a Soviet General named Vasilev was serving as the chairman of the UN's Military Staff Committee at UN headquarters in New York. On January 19, 1950, Vasilev and several other Russian officials stormed out of their offices in protest over the seating of a delegate from Nationalist China (Taiwan). It was later learned that Vasilev promptly proceeded to North Korea, where he directed the military buildup of North Korea's forces. A Department of Defense release dated May 15, 1954 claimed that Vasilev actually gave the order for the North Koreans to attack South Korea on June 25, 1950. Once the war had begun, Vasilev's Soviet comrades in New York returned to their posts at the UN and his place was taken by another Soviet general named Ivan Skliaro.

Like the Persian Gulf War or the intervention in Somalia, the Korean War was fought under the auspices of the United Nations. During this war (called a "police action" by President Truman), all military orders and directives sent from Washington and the Pentagon to the American commanders in Korea were first supplied to several offices at UN headquarters, including those of the Military Staff Committee. Before being forwarded to Korea, these orders were subject to approval by these persons at the UN who actually had authority to amend them. As might be expected, Vasilev in North Korea received them from his Soviet comrades perhaps even sooner than did our own commanders in the field. It was therefore not surprising when General Lin Piao, the commander of the Red Chinese troops who poured across the Yalu bridges into Korea, was able to boast in a leaflet distributed in China, "I would never have made the attack and risked my men and military reputation if I had not been assured that Washington would restrain General MacArthur from taking adequate retaliatory measures against my lines of supply and communication."

The communist forces knew what our troops were doing, or about to do, all during the war! And they knew that, no matter what happened, the combined U.S. and South Korean troops would not be allowed to triumph. General MacArthur was correct: There was a secret arrangement about which he had never been informed. And he was not alone in realizing the betrayal.

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After the war had ended, Congress investigated. General Mark Clark told the committee empaneled to review what had happened: "I was not allowed to bomb the numerous bridges across the Yalu River over which the enemy constantly poured his trucks and his munitions, and his killers." General James Van Fleet said: "My own conviction is that there must have been information to the enemy from high diplomatic authorities that we would not attack his home bases across the Yalu." Air Force General George Stratemeyer added: "You get in war to win it. You do not get in war to stand still and lose it, and we were required to lose it. We were not permitted to win." And General MacArthur then summarized: "Such a limitation upon the utilization of available military force to repel an enemy attack has no precedent, either in our own history, or so far as I know, in the history of the world."

## Proud Profession Subverted

As in all human endeavors, the conduct of war has to be based on sound principles. Unfortunately, among numerous attacks on the military, some of America's leaders — in and out of uniform — have done their best to convert this eminently proud profession into something that is altogether unworthy of praise. In what follows, we are condemning those who distorted the military's purpose, not those who carried the rifles and endured the hell of war.

As we noted above, the communist forces of North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. With a meager force and under UN oversight that he would later learn was determined to see him lose, General MacArthur assumed command of the anti-communist resistance to the North Korean advance. Greatly outnumbered, and with their backs to the sea at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, the combined U.S./Republic of Korea (ROK) troops were actually facing annihilation.

Then, in one of the greatest military maneuvers in all history, MacArthur attacked his enemy's rear with an amphibious assault at Inchon, far up the Korean peninsula. With that one brilliant stroke, our forces severed the supply lines of the communist forces. In less than two months, the North Korean army had been defeated, driven not only out of South Korea but out of control of North Korea as well. The allied forces completely occupied North Korea, all the way up to the Manchurian border. The war had been won.\* Why MacArthur's plans regarding the Inchon landing were not provided to Vasilev and his North Korean comrades remains a mystery. Because the war was still in its infancy, it is possible that the UN-to-North Korea transmission network had not been completely established. What is certain is that MacArthur, who did not have it within himself to refuse to follow military protocol, supplied his superiors with complete details about his plans.

No one denied that MacArthur had displayed unparalleled military competence. But, for the most part, the fact that he had defeated his adversary with a minimum loss of life and limb on both sides became lost in the adulation he received.

At this point in the war, however, hordes of Chinese communist troops stormed across the Yalu River from Manchuria, and the war began again in earnest. MacArthur was denied permission to destroy the bridges over the river across which poured men and supplies destined for use against his men. He protested to no avail and was soon relieved of command by President Harry Truman, whom the Chicago Tribune stated at the time wasn't worthy to shine the general's shoes.

Command of the U.S./ROK forces was turned over to General Matthew Ridgway. He immediately altered the method of fighting. In his own book, *The Korean War*, Ridgway stated that his first task on assuming MacArthur's command was "to place reasonable restrictions on the Eighth [U.S. Army] and ROK Armies' advance." Then he drafted detailed orders to field commanders containing such passages as, "You will direct the efforts of your forces toward inflicting maximum personnel casualties and material losses on hostile forces in Korea .... Acquisition of terrain of itself is of little or no value."

Classic military strategy includes the taking and holding of terrain until so much of it has been acquired that the adversary is forced to sue for peace. But this was no longer allowable strategy in Korea. Even worse, our men

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were told that killing was to be their main goal. A morally sound military principle holds that removing an enemy's capability to impose his will should be the goal — and killing him is not always necessary. Which is precisely what MacArthur had demonstrated with the successful landing at Inchon.

Eventually the war in Korea degenerated to two years of fighting over relatively inconsequential hills near the 38th parallel. Bitter hard-fought battles would be waged by our troops to take a particular objective. Then, after success had been achieved with plenty of casualties on both sides, orders from on high would require them to abandon the terrain they had just won.

From the victory that had been gained after Inchon, our forces were required eventually to settle for a stalemate. But they also saw the beginnings of a change that sought to have them abandon their traditional role as upholders of the very finest moral traditions of the military. They were ordered to become killers, a change that would be demanded of them even more in Vietnam. It was not the fault of the men in the field. The blame has to be placed at the feet of men such as General Ridgway, a political type whose eventual membership in the Council on Foreign Relations came as no surprise.

In Vietnam, our men were again forced to operate under similar rules. They were repeatedly sent out on "search and destroy missions" and again were regularly pressed into fighting for an outpost or a piece of terrain which they would win at great cost only to receive subsequent orders to abandon it. Many men came home from Vietnam psychological wrecks. Is it any wonder? Seeking out the enemy to destroy him, with neither the interim goal of acquiring territory or the overall goal of victory to make war's horror worthwhile, can take its toll on anyone. Year after year, search and destroy missions were the order of the day. As a method of conducting war, this is barbarism.

## Other Kinds of Treachery

Although the UN involvement in the Vietnam War was not nearly as obvious as it had been in Korea (where the UN flag had been prominently displayed), our forces went to South Vietnam under authority stemming from our involvement in the UN's SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) treaty. Secretary of State Dean Rusk stated on November 26, 1966, "It is this fundamental SEATO obligation that has from the outset guided our action in South Vietnam." Earlier, on September 15, 1965, the State Department announced: "The Government of the United States has informed the Security Council promptly and fully of all our major activities in Vietnam."

In addition to the way they were forced to fight, the men in Vietnam were betrayed in other ways by their leaders. On July 23, 1966, during a speech at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the home of one of the divisions in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson stated:

Our fighting men have turned the tide of battle [and as they] make a military conquest impossible for the communist forces in the field, our diplomats are probing for a way to make an honorable peace desirable to the communist leaders in Hanoi.

Desirable to the communist leaders in Hanoi! Is that what Americans were dying for? The men in uniform who heard that statement must have known at that point that their comrades under arms in faraway Vietnam were not receiving the full backing of this nation's leaders. Many who heard it, of course, would soon find themselves in Vietnam. But they would not be allowed to win.

Then, in his State of the Union message on January 10, 1967, Mr. Johnson said there would be "more cost, more loss, more agony" in Vietnam. At the same time, he outlined a broad program of trade, credits, cultural exchanges, consular agreements, and other openings to the communist leaders in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. These were the nations that were supplying North Vietnam with the wherewithal to kill Americans.

Widespread awareness about U.S. aid and trade with communists during this period (it grew in size and strategic importance in succeeding years) led the Richmond (Virginia) News Leader to declare in an editorial published on

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November 2, 1966: "Every communist bullet that tears into American flesh in Vietnam bears the brand of LBJ."

The men knew they were not being permitted to win. But none knew how detailed were the rules of engagement under which they were forced to fight. In March 1985, after employing all the clout he could generate, Senator Barry Goldwater was able to have the actual rules of engagement declassified by the Defense Department. He hurriedly placed them in the Congressional Record (March 6, 14, and 18, 1985). Here are some of the restrictions placed on U.S. pilots:

- SAM missile sites could not be bombed while they were under construction, but only after they became operational.
- Pilots were not permitted to attack a communist MiG sitting on the runway. The only time it could be attacked was after it was in the air, had been identified, and had shown hostile intentions.
- Military truck depots located just over 200 yards from a road could not be attacked and trucks that drove off the road were safe from bombing.
- If a South Vietnamese forward air controller was not in an aircraft, it was forbidden to bomb enemy troops during a fire fight even though the communist forces were clearly visible and were being pointed at by an officer on the ground.

On the ground the rules of engagement were: Don't shoot until shot at; don't chase the enemy across borders or into his privileged sanctuaries; don't hit him where it will really hurt; and don't win. There could hardly have been a greater betrayal of brave combat forces in all history.

## Change of Tune

Beginning with the Korean War, top-ranking military leaders who spoke about the no-win policies forced on them began to find themselves forcibly retired. Douglas MacArthur was the first to go. During the war in Vietnam, more top-ranking military leaders who protested the restrictions placed on them were sent home. Marine General William Walt was expected by many military leaders to be named commandant of the Marine Corps. His outspokenness about the way the troops were being treated caused him to be passed over and retired.

As the years have passed, political types in uniform have been promoted to the top positions in each branch of the services. Only a few years ago, the name of each member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff could be found on the rolls of the Council on Foreign Relations. Retired General Colin Powell is not the first Joint Chiefs chairman to hold membership in the CFR.

The change in the military from top brass who are pure military men to those who are politically correct explains why there has been so little protest about the current use of America's military in humanitarian, nation-building, UN-promoting, and other missions which they should never have been forced to undertake. America's service personnel are still the best in the world. But they exist to protect the vital interests of the United States and nothing more. They are not the Red Cross; they are not the UN's globocops; they are not the Peace Corps; and they are not any President's plaything to use in whatever manner he wishes.

Reinstituting the military's sole mission of defending the United States is vitally important. Military personnel cannot do this of themselves, however. What they need, and what our nation needs, is a rising tide of public awareness about deep treachery at the top of our government.