By early 1968 Robert McNamara could no longer contain his frustration. The bombing of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam (DRV), or Operation Rolling Thunder, was then in its third year and showed no signs of success. Rolling Thunder’s goals were threefold: to cut off the southward infiltration of men and materiel from the DRV to the Republic of (South) Vietnam (RVN), pressure Hanoi into peace talks, and bolster RVN morale. Despite dropping more bombs than in Europe during the final year of the Second World War, Rolling Thunder at most accomplished its last goal of improving RVN morale. Infiltration never slowed, and Hanoi’s will to finish the war only hardened. On November 1, 1967, Defense Secretary McNamara sent President Lyndon Johnson a memorandum in which he recommended handing over most of the responsibility for the war to the RVN, along with ending the bombing campaign as an overt gesture to peace talks with Hanoi. Johnson rejected this proposal and ousted McNamara by nominating him to the Presidency of the World Bank.¹ In a cabinet meeting on February 27, 1968, two days before his tenure as Secretary of Defense ended, he made his position clear when he exclaimed, “The goddamned Air Force, they’re dropping more on North Vietnam than we dropped on Germany in the last year of World War II, and it’s not doing anything!” He then turned to his incoming replacement, Clark Clifford, and blurted, “We simply have to end this

thing. I just hope you can get hold of it. It is out of control."\textsuperscript{2} Such an outburst was not only uncharacteristic of the famously unemotional Defense Secretary, but it also showed how much McNamara’s thinking had changed since early 1965, when he had been one of Rolling Thunder’s foremost backers.

This initial support contravened the findings of the American intelligence community. In particular, the assessments of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) were generally pessimistic about Rolling Thunder and produced copious analyses showing the bombing’s ineffectiveness.\textsuperscript{3} Yet it was not until late 1966 when McNamara lost faith in Rolling Thunder for good. A key reason was his reading of a report not by any American intelligence agency, but rather the JASON division of the Institute for Defense Analyses, an intelligence-oriented Washington, DC, think tank.\textsuperscript{4}

On August 30, 1966, JASON released its annual “Summer Study,” which was fiercely critical of Rolling Thunder.\textsuperscript{5} The study used American intelligence, as well as interviews with U.S. policymakers and military officials, as source material. JASON argued that the bombing had not achieved any of its primary strategic goals, nor was it likely to ever do so. It recommended that the United States end infiltration principally by relying on a system of mines and sensors installed throughout Southern Vietnam and Laos.\textsuperscript{6} McNamara vigorously advocated adopting most of the

\textsuperscript{2} Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, 	extit{Counsel to the President: A Memoir} (New York: Random House, 1991), 484–85. The official record notes McNamara’s statement as “We are dropping ordnance at a higher rate than in last year of WWII in Europe. It has not stopped him.” See Notes of Meeting, 2/27/68, FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. VI, Vietnam, January–August 1968, Doc. 89, 262.

\textsuperscript{3} As the United States’ primary civilian intelligence agency concerned with national security, the CIA reported to the president and National Security Council. INR reported to the Secretary of State and also acted as a liaison between the State Department and the intelligence community. McNamara created DIA in 1961 as a means to centralize the Defense Department’s intelligence gathering and analysis in the wake of the missile gap controversy of the late 1950s, when the armed service intelligence branches produced disparate estimates of the number of operational Soviet ICBMs. See Michael B. Petersen, “Legacy of Ashes, Trial by Fire: The Origins of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Cuban Missile Crisis Crucible,” 	extit{Defense Intelligence Historical Perspectives}, No. 1 (2011), 2–3.

\textsuperscript{4} IDA’s JASON division is a research group meant to bring university physicists into defense research. See Ron Theodore Robin, 	extit{The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Industrial Complex} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 53–54. In this case, the term “JASON” is not an acronym, but instead a reference to the character Jason of Greek mythology.

\textsuperscript{5} JASON publishes most of its work in an annual study at the end of each summer.

report’s recommendations, even going so far as to reprint many of them verbatim in several memos to Johnson and the Joint Chiefs in the fall of 1966.\(^7\)

Scholars such as Mark Clodfelter and Edward Drea have established that the JASON report proved an epiphany for McNamara, but why the intelligence community’s findings failed to have a similar effect has gone understudied. The Pentagon Papers argue that McNamara favored the JASON report due to his respect for the individual scientists involved.\(^8\) In *Vietnam at War*, Phillip B. Davidson argues that McNamara harbored an antipathy toward many of the military officials in the Johnson administration, and because JASON was staffed entirely by civilian academics, their report served as a “weapon” for McNamara in this rivalry.\(^9\) In *The Blood Road*, John Prados argues that McNamara embraced the barrier concept due to his affinity for leading-edge technology.\(^10\) While these explanations help to explain why McNamara favored the JASON study, they do not account for why he disregarded the intelligence community’s findings on the bombing for so long. The JASON study used much of the same evidence that the CIA, INR, and DIA did, and came to many of the same conclusions that those agencies had defended for well over a year by August 1966. Examining why an outside think tank had a greater impact on McNamara’s thinking than the CIA, INR, and DIA reveals much about the intelligence-policymaking nexus during the Vietnam War, a topic that has received scant scholarly attention.

Although the secondary literature dealing with the war is voluminous, intelligence plays a remarkably small role in most of it.\(^11\) Apart from the Pentagon Papers, few

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works examine the degree to which Vietnam-era policymakers used intelligence during the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{12} The scholarship that does examine this topic, while valuable, is generally limited to case studies focusing only on the CIA or intelligence division of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (the U.S. military mission to Vietnam, also known as MACV).\textsuperscript{13} Or they concentrate on intelligence’s role in policy implementation, most notably regarding the CIA’s covert operations in Laos and pacification and counterinsurgency operations such as the Phoenix Program.\textsuperscript{14} Notwithstanding the importance of intelligence, at least in theory, to the decisionmaking process, its relationship to the formation of policy during the war has been understudied.

I argue that McNamara only admitted in late 1966 that Rolling Thunder had failed to achieve its primary objectives due to his strongly held preconceptions about the value of the bombing campaign. While the intelligence community’s findings led McNamara to experience mounting doubts about how quickly the bombing would work, he clung to the preconceived belief that Rolling Thunder would work eventually, rather than admit having been wrong. I further argue that McNamara embraced the JASON study because he thought it would allow him to regain lost influence with Johnson. McNamara was one of Johnson’s most


trusted advisors in early 1965, but by late 1966 he had lost much of his clout to National Security Advisor Walt Rostow. McNamara saw the JASON report as a means by which he could re-establish himself in Johnson’s good graces. From McNamara’s perspective, JASON’s barrier concept represented a change in policy that LBJ could accept, as it proposed replacing an ineffective bombing campaign with an inventive new strategy that promised to be far more efficient than Rolling Thunder in restricting infiltration.

McNamara’s Initial Support of Bombing and Distrust of Intelligence

McNamara was an ardent supporter of bombing at Rolling Thunder’s inception in spring 1965. In April of that year, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs agreed that bombing would likely not begin to turn the tide for at least six months, due to the depth of DRV resolve and the tattered state of the Saigon government.\(^{15}\) Still, McNamara thought that the initial round of air strikes resulted in “a somewhat favorable change in the overall situation.”\(^{16}\) The bombing was at first limited to specific military targets, and McNamara was the first of Johnson’s key advisors to recommend striking 56 additional targets that included bridges, roads, and railroads (as well as mining DRV ports).\(^{17}\) CIA analysts considered McNamara’s plan too aggressive, but he failed to acknowledge their skepticism. The final draft of McNamara’s memo to Johnson recommending increased bombing quoted a recent CIA report that seemed to reinforce his reasoning even as it omitted any references to the agency’s criticism.\(^{18}\) Further, Johnson’s National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Undersecretary of State George Ball all wrote separate memoranda to LBJ arguing that McNamara’s plan went too far.\(^{19}\) And McNamara changed his mind after a trip to Saigon in mid-July during which RVN Ambassador Maxwell Taylor urged him not to expand the bombing until the ground forces had made more progress.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 69.

McNamara’s propensity to disregard intelligence became especially obvious after the September 22, 1965, publication of Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 10-11-65. This estimate argued that Rolling Thunder had shaken Hanoi’s confidence, and that bombing industrial targets in the DRV’s populous northeast quadrant might lead the Communists to shift toward negotiations. INR dissented from the entire estimate. In an eight-page footnote, INR Director Thomas L. Hughes argued that any increase in bombing would not only fail to achieve the desired objectives, but it also would likely antagonize China. While the Joint Chiefs favored extending operations to the northeast quadrant, McNamara consistently argued against such a course. But despite this common ground with INR, McNamara ignored their dissent. In a meeting on September 29, he summarized the SNIE as arguing that “Hanoi’s attitude was hardening, largely because we were not rough enough in our bombing.” McNamara claimed that the estimate was flawed because it was not produced with the input of “experts in the government” such as Ambassador at Large Llewellyn “Tommy” Thompson and Taylor, who had recently become a special consultant on Vietnam for the president. McNamara commissioned a study of Hanoi’s attitude featuring Thompson and Taylor. He therefore not only ignored INR’s conclusions, but also discredited the rest of the estimate.

McNamara’s rejection of SNIE 10-11-65’s principal findings shows how aggressively he was prepared to defend his argument. While the estimate noted that Hanoi might simply absorb whatever damage increased bombing caused, it ultimately concluded that stepping up the bombing was somewhat more likely to “convince them that the US intended to escalate the air war indefinitely, if


22 While NIEs are supposed to be consensus documents, individual agencies often dissent from specific conclusions. Until the reforms of 2004 culminating in the formation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, these dissenters appeared in the documents as a footnote.


24 Drea, McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 63.

necessary," which would in turn cause the regime to move toward negotiations while its position in the south remained strong.26 That finding, however, came with an important qualification. The estimate stated that even if the DRV moved toward negotiation in response to increased bombing, they would probably only do so after reverting to hit-and-run tactics for an undefined period of time. While McNamara could have used this caveat as a means to argue against intensified bombing, he instead took the offensive by discrediting the entire estimate and calling for another study.

McNamara rejected SNIE 10-11-65 due to a combination of his own predispositions and bureaucratic interests. There is no evidence to indicate that he ever addressed the estimate’s argument or sources in detail. Instead he argued that it was flawed because it lacked testimony from Thompson and Taylor, without specifying how either was qualified to address the question of how Hanoi might react to further bombing. McNamara likely favored their participation because both men opposed the sort of attacks that the estimate claimed might help convince Hanoi to negotiate.27 The Joint Chiefs had been pushing for intensifying the bombing in the weeks leading up to SNIE 10-11-65’s release, and McNamara almost certainly wanted more ammunition to counter their efforts. And although his stance was similar to INR’s, McNamara ignored the bureau’s dissent. A deep antipathy between him and Hughes likely played a major role in that decision.

McNamara and Hughes had been at odds since the beginning of McNamara’s tenure as Defense Secretary, when Hughes was Deputy Director of INR. Almost immediately after joining the Kennedy administration, McNamara began “exuberantly intervening in just about everything with enormous self-assurance,” according to Hughes.28 While McNamara did not hesitate to interfere with other departments, he aggressively protected the Defense Department’s prerogative as much as possible. In October 1963 INR published RFE-90, a research memorandum that cast doubt on the American war effort’s prospects. McNamara and the service chiefs accused INR of having interfered in military matters without consulting DIA or any of the service intelligence branches. McNamara even sent Dean Rusk a note stating, “Dean . . . if you were to tell me that it is not the policy of the State Department to issue military appraisals without seeking the views of the

26 SNIE 10-11-65, 8.
27 Drea, McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 63.
Defense Department, the matter will die.” ²⁹ McNamara’s criticism baffled Rusk, Hughes, and INR analyst Lou Sarris (RFE-90’s author) because the memorandum used statistics that DIA had compiled from MACV field reports. DIA and MACV had used the same statistics to reach more optimistic conclusions, and it is likely that McNamara’s anger stemmed from State having the temerity to contradict the Defense Department on military matters. ³⁰ Indeed, SNIE 11-11-65 was not the first time McNamara rejected intelligence for personal and bureaucratic reasons.

McNamara’s propensity for intimidating the dovish members of Johnson’s administration throughout much of 1964 and 1965 also contributed to his poor relationship with Hughes. Both Hughes and Ball suffered from the Defense Secretary’s tendency to, as Ball put it, “shoot down in flames” pessimistic arguments on the war effort during cabinet meetings on the war’s escalation. ³¹ Even more galling for Hughes and Ball was that McNamara would occasionally agree with dovish analyses in private before ripping apart those same analyses in meetings with Johnson. This behavior caught on among several of McNamara’s subordinates. Despite harboring his own doubts about the war, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton often vilified dovish analysts during meetings, and once insulted Hughes on the presentation of a pessimistic INR analysis to a group of Pentagon officials in 1965 by saying, “Spoken like a true member of the Red Team.” ³²

The overall atmosphere was one of open intimidation against any analyst who dared to suggest that Vietnam was a lost cause. That included INR analyst Allen Whiting and Vietnam Working Group Chairman Paul Kattenburg, both of whom

²⁹ Note from McNamara to Rusk, 11/7/63. Roger Hilsman Papers, Box 5, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), Boston, MA. The note also bears a handwritten response from Hughes reading, “Mr. Secretary – You may certainly say this.”


issued prescient warnings on Vietnam only to have McNamara disregard them. Although Whiting remained at INR, Kattenburg suffered several career setbacks, culminating in early retirement as a result of his dovishness. McNamara was not the only Johnson administration official who contributed to this poisoned climate. LBJ’s leadership style was another major factor, as Johnson often greeted dissent with hostility. But by continually trashing pessimistic State Department analyses of the war effort, McNamara’s relationship with Hughes, and INR more generally, suffered.

**Failure of the December-January Bombing Pause**

McNamara received differing assessments of Rolling Thunder in October 1965. On October 11, Thompson produced the report that McNamara had requested in September. The study recommended maintaining the bombing at its current level rather than expanding it, mainly because “our present activities, while not destroying the military and economic capacity of North Viet-Nam, are causing great stress . . . the effects of our present attacks are to some extent cumulative and are bringing a steady increase of pressure on Hanoi.” Thompson also recommended a bombing pause as a prerequisite to beginning negotiations with Hanoi. He published his study at the same time as the first of a monthly series of CIA/DIA bombing assessments, also undertaken at McNamara’s request. The October assessment was strongly negative on the bombing, noting that it had done little damage to Hanoi’s warmaking capabilities because much of the DRV’s economic and transportation infrastructure lay within restricted areas.

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35 See Paper by the Ambassador at Large (Thompson), 10/11/65, FRUS, Vietnam, June–December 1965, Doc. 164, 442–45. A covering note indicates that McNamara saw the study on October 26. While Thompson wrote the study, Taylor, McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy, and Bundy’s deputy Leonard Unger reviewed it prior to publication.

36 McNamara likely made this request out of a longstanding distrust of the service intelligence branches. McNamara’s intention when creating DIA in 1961 was to centralize military intelligence gathering, and he displayed a consistent desire to streamline the intelligence community’s operations while Secretary of Defense. Having DIA and CIA collaborate on monthly bombing analyses would give him a steady stream of information from agencies that were ostensibly more reliable than the service branches.

McNamara favored Thompson’s report. He continued to recommend new bombing targets and also became the foremost proponent of a bombing pause, starting with a memo to LBJ on November 30. 38 This approach represented McNamara’s attempts to show that American determination was limitless while at the same time giving the DRV a way out. Hanoi had previously made clear that it would not negotiate until the bombing stopped. McNamara’s perspective was that bombing could bolster U.S. leverage, while a pause would be necessary as an overture to negotiations. Further, McNamara had come to realize that a purely military victory in the South would be more difficult than he had previously thought. In a December 18 meeting he argued that the prospects of such were “one out of three or one in two.” 39 Any permanent solution to the conflict would have to be diplomatic. But he also argued that if the pause failed, the United States could bomb the DRV’s petroleum, oil, and lubricant (POL) stocks. Therefore, while McNamara was becoming more pessimistic about the war effort in the South, he had not lost faith in bombing the North. McNamara also dismissed the Joint Chiefs’ objection that the DRV would take advantage of a pause to refit as “baloney.” 40 Although Johnson agreed with the Chiefs’ concerns, he grudgingly permitted the pause to go forward.

The pause failed, embarrassing McNamara. It went into effect on December 24 and lasted until January 31 the following year. Contrary to McNamara and Thompson’s reasoning, Hanoi made no efforts at peace negotiations after the bombing stopped. On January 11 the CIA noted that Hanoi was moving a new batch of combat troops southward and could infiltrate an average of 4,500 troops per month into the RVN throughout 1966. 41 CIA reports from later in the month indicated that the DRV had indeed taken advantage of the pause to ship in more Soviet weaponry and repair damaged infrastructure. 42 Johnson ordered the bombing resumed in response. This failure hurt McNamara’s standing in the Johnson administration. 43 An important personnel change compounded his troubles.

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38 Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, 11/30/65, FRUS, Vietnam, July–December 1965, Doc. 212, 591–94.
40 Ibid., 658.
43 David Milne, America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War (New York: Hill and Wang,
McGeorge Bundy resigned as National Security Advisor in December 1965 and officially left the office in February 1966. After a six-week interim period during which NSC staff member (and later chief of pacification in Vietnam) Robert Komer took the job, Johnson selected Policy Planning Council Chairman Walt Whitman Rostow as Bundy’s permanent replacement. Rostow combined unflagging support of the war effort, and bombing in particular, with absolute loyalty to his president. Johnson prized both qualities, and Rostow quickly became one of LBJ’s closest confidants.

Renewed Bombing, the POL Debate, and Increased CIA Pessimism

Rostow and McNamara disagreed on how the bombing should proceed. While Rostow favored immediate escalation that included POL targets, McNamara thought that the air strikes should focus on “perishable” targets of a military nature (such as trucks and supply roads), while leaving out POL for the time being.44 McNamara favored striking POL at some future point, but not immediately. He thought it more important that Rolling Thunder be a “cumulative and sustained effort” that focused on restricting infiltration over the long term.45 McNamara also wanted to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible, while Rostow did not share this concern.

While McNamara had become more doubtful than Rostow about American prospects in Vietnam by early 1966, he continued to push for more bombing and more troops. The failure of the pause, as well as Hanoi’s ability to withstand the American onslaught, led him to realize that a military victory would be much harder than he had thought in the spring of 1965. But at the same time he continued to insist that eventual victory was possible if the United States could show Hanoi that American determination to win had no limits. In a memo to Johnson on January 24, McNamara argued that the best hope for the American war effort lay in increasing bombing from 3,125 sorties per month to 4,000, conducting day-and-night

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45 Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, 1/24/66, FRUS, Vietnam, 1966, Doc. 36, 114.
Seeking a Second Opinion

armed reconnaissance of road and rail lines (except those near cities and the Chinese border), and committing “perhaps 600,000 men or more” until the cumulative effect forced Hanoi to submit. This outcome was uncertain, McNamara warned; the odds were “about even” that the United States would find itself in a stalemate by the following year. But unwilling to confront the alternative, he pushed for further escalation.

Although McNamara had realized that the bombing was not working the way that he thought it would in April 1965, his plan still stood apart from the intelligence community’s findings. Several reports from early 1966 painted a bleak picture for any continuation of Rolling Thunder. In particular, a CIA memo dated January 19 compared three different possible courses of air attacks and concluded that even the maximum level of attacks would likely not “have a critical impact on the combat ability of the Communist forces in South Vietnam.”

SNIE 10-1-66, published on February 4, argued that while more bombing would complicate matters for the DRV, they would still be able to move “substantially greater amounts” than in 1965. And a February 11 CIA memo warned that to do lasting damage to the DRV’s POL supplies, any potential strike program would probably have to include continuous sorties near cities, which McNamara had argued should remain off-limits. To be sure, none of these products evaluated the plan that McNamara sent to Johnson on January 24, and there is no evidence

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46 Ibid., 116.
47 Sherman Kent, “Reactions to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV,” 1/19/66, 14. Estimative Products on Vietnam.
showing that the community knew of his plan. But McNamara never reevaluated his proposal in light of their findings.

McNamara’s plan did not even square with the occasional hawkish analysis. In March 1966, the CIA published a report sharply critical of the bombing restrictions. This report went much further than most intelligence products in that it crossed the line into outright policy advocacy.\(^{50}\) It argued for removing most of the restrictions, bombing POL supplies as well as lines of communication into China and instituting continuous armed reconnaissance to prevent the DRV from rebuilding any damaged infrastructure.\(^{51}\) McNamara never made a similar argument. Instead, he favored keeping most of the restrictions in place, in hopes of preventing more civilian casualties. The March report was, instead, closer to what the service chiefs wanted.

McNamara’s bombing plan emerged as a response to Rolling Thunder’s failure combined with Walt Rostow’s elevation. After the pause failed, the embattled Defense Secretary did not pivot to angrily demanding that the bombing be increased. Doing so would have made him an adjunct to Rostow. Further, Rolling Thunder’s ineffectiveness had become more difficult to ignore by early 1966. Being “rough enough” risked war with China, while giving Hanoi a way out in the form of a pause had not worked. As a result, McNamara split the difference and advocated for a middle course. By doing so he sought to preserve the Defense Department’s prerogative, something that his feud with Hughes shows he took very seriously. But at the same time he refused to admit that he had been wrong about bombing. McNamara also reacted to the pause’s failure by seeking opinions on the bombing from outside the U.S. government. Earlier that year, Roger Fisher of Harvard Law School had sent a short letter to John McNaughton positing that a barrier of barbed wire, mines, and chemicals across Southern Vietnam might be effective in stopping infiltration.\(^{52}\) Six weeks later McNaughton passed the idea along to McNamara, who liked it enough to request that the service chiefs examine the

\(^{50}\) Intelligence analysts do not (or at least should not) make firm policy recommendations. Instead, they provide policymakers with more insight for their decisions by identifying trends that can be transformed into opportunities. See Mark M. Lowenthal, “The Policymaker-Intelligence Relationship” in The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence, Loch Johnson, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 437–52.


\(^{52}\) United States-Vietnam Relations, Part IV-C-7-a, pp. 145–146. Fisher was a part-time consultant to McNaughton during the latter’s tenure in the Pentagon.
feasibility of such an idea. In turn, the chiefs passed the concept to Pacific Fleet Commander in Chief Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, who concluded in April that a barrier like the one Fisher proposed would require 3\(\frac{1}{2}\) years to build, between seven and eight divisions to man, and would be prohibitively expensive. Not satisfied with Sharp’s answer, McNamara turned to the JASON researchers, who agreed to examine the barrier concept over the summer of 1966.\(^{53}\)

As Rolling Thunder proved ineffective once more during the first few months of 1966, the debate over bombing the DRV’s POL supplies heated up. Rostow and the chiefs remained strongly in favor, with McNamara, Rusk, and Ball in opposition. Rostow argued that bombing DRV POL would limit Hanoi’s ability to support the National Liberation Front (NLF). McNamara, Rusk, and Ball opposed such a course because they feared a potential international and domestic backlash from civilian casualties. This division within Johnson's cabinet, however, did not last long.

By June 1966 McNamara’s opposition to POL attacks had faded. In an NSC meeting on June 17, he stated, “Strikes on POL targets have been opposed by me for months. The situation is now changing . . . The military utilization of these targets has been greatly increased.” McNamara went on to say that bombing POL would limit infiltration.\(^{54}\) This argument was likely McNamara’s way of trying to re-establish his credibility with Johnson. He had previously said that striking POL would be necessary at some point; evidently that point had arrived. And by describing POL sites as military targets, he framed his argument in terms similar to that of Rostow, who had supplanted McNamara in Johnson’s estimation for

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Ibid, 148.

several months. McNamara also noted that bombing POL would be the “least costly” way of exerting pressure on Hanoi. Framing the debate in such analytical language was a McNamara signature, and it likely represented yet another effort to wrest ownership of the move to bomb POL sites from Rostow. But his arguments had nothing to do with intelligence. A CIA/DIA report published on June 8 argued that striking enemy POL stocks would likely not significantly curtail infiltration. The planned attacks would leave Hanoi with enough POL to last for 60 days, which the report contended would likely be enough time for the Russians and Chinese to restore any lost supply.

POL attacks did not have the positive effect that their proponents argued they would. The strikes began on June 29, and Hanoi quickly responded by dispersing its POL into 55-gallon drums placed along roads and throughout the countryside. Such massive decentralization meant that U.S. aviators could not possibly destroy even a small fraction of DRV POL. The border between the DRV and China remained open, as did the major ports. True to the CIA and DIA’s arguments, Russia and China were able to replace the POL that Hanoi lost in the strikes of summer 1966. Much like the December-January bombing pause, there was no denying that the strikes had failed.

The CIA’s pessimism deepened after the failure of POL strikes. On August 26 (four days before the JASON study was published), the agency distributed a 315-page study examining Hanoi’s “will to persist.” Like most of the CIA’s products from the previous 15 months, this study argued that while American military pressure had greatly complicated the DRV war effort, it could only slow, not stop, Hanoi’s efforts to reunify Vietnam, and that the regime remained confident of victory over the long term. As evidence, the study used previously published DRV order-of-battle estimates (many of which the study’s authors revised upward), Communist public statements, captured enemy documents, and interviews with enemy prisoners of war, as well as RVN civilians fleeing the NLF. The study also used intercepted messages, but because DRV encryption consistently bested the National Security Agency’s code breakers throughout the war, communications between decision-makers in Hanoi or Communist military commanders were

55 Ibid.
57 Prados, Vietnam, 162.
58 CIA Intelligence Memorandum, “The Vietnamese Communists’ Will To Persist,” 8/26/66, Estimative Products on Vietnam.
inaccessible. As a result, the intercepts used in the August study were letters from DRV civilians or low-level bureaucrats, as well as messages from neutral countries such as France mentioning Hanoi’s capabilities. While these messages provided some idea of conditions in the DRV, they did not give American intelligence agencies a direct window on Hanoi’s thinking, and as such the CIA did not rely heavily on them. McNamara read the report and shortly thereafter met with CIA analyst George Allen to discuss the agency’s conclusions.

McNamara’s meeting with Allen demonstrates that while the Defense Secretary did not ignore the CIA’s conclusions as he had INR’s in SNIE 10-11-65, he was still unwilling to countenance an end to the war in August 1966. McNamara called the CIA’s conclusions “very interesting” and pressed Allen for policy recommendations several times during the meeting. Allen demurred, arguing that as an analyst, it was not his place to offer such counsel. McNamara assured Allen that he was only asking for his personal views rather than the CIA’s official stance. Allen found that assurance satisfactory enough to recommend that the United States halt the bombing and troop buildup immediately, as well as negotiate a cease-fire. The two men argued for an hour and a half, with McNamara unwilling to break the U.S. commitment to the RVN even in the face of clear policy failure. He was also, according to Allen, skeptical that another bombing cessation would lead Hanoi to negotiate, noting that the previous pause had failed to precipitate talks. The meeting ended without either Allen or McNamara conceding ground.

The JASON Report and “McNamara Line”
The JASON 1966 Summer Study was published on August 30, and it left McNamara ready to throw in the towel on Rolling Thunder. The study proposed that an electronic barrier would be more effective at stopping infiltration. The authors based this conclusion on an interpretation of the intelligence community’s findings that relied on using a combination of U.S. technology and the rough Indochinese terrain to America’s advantage. JASON recommended that the barrier be a field of mines and sensors that would take advantage of bottlenecks created by natural formations such as


60 See George W. Allen, None So Blind: A Personal Account of the Intelligence Failure in Vietnam (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 213–17, for the account of this meeting, which Allen also notes was the only meeting he had with a cabinet official during his career with the CIA.

61 Ibid., 215–16.
mountains and valleys to limit infiltration. Aerial bombing had been too cumbersome and slow, the study contended, and the barrier system could react more quickly to changes in the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and NLF movements. On September 15 McNamara instructed Lt. Gen. Alfred Starbird of the Defense Communications Agency to begin planning the

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barrier’s construction. McNamara also attached a section of the JASON report to his memo to Starbird to summarize how the barrier would work.63 He did not alter JASON’s language in any way, showing that he took the barrier idea very seriously.

From McNamara’s perspective, the JASON report had several advantages that set it apart from most traditional intelligence products, including the CIA report on Hanoi’s will to persist. First, JASON was permitted to make clear policy recommendations. Second, these recommendations allowed McNamara to break from pro-bombing policymakers without recommending that the war effort be abandoned. That the barrier came courtesy of well-respected civilian academics rather than the military made it easier for McNamara to accept the concept. The military never lost faith in the bombing, and neither did Walt Rostow. Promoting the barrier concept gave McNamara the chance to break from Rostow and perhaps rebuild his relationship with Johnson by proposing an innovative technological means for accomplishing what the bombing did not. He argued in an October 14 memo to Johnson that the barrier take precedence over Rolling Thunder, which, he reasoned, needed to be stabilized at its present levels and eventually terminated as part of peace negotiations. He also no longer believed that 600,000 men would be necessary to finish the war. Now, he argued, no more than 470,000 would be needed, since the barrier would allow for more efficient uses of friendly troops. McNamara’s faith in the barrier was such that he believed “even the threat of its becoming effective” would cause serious damage to DRV morale.64

McNamara also chose to use the intelligence community’s findings on bombing to help bolster his arguments in the October 14 memo. He noted that the intelligence community had found that Rolling Thunder had not cracked Hanoi’s morale or significantly affected infiltration. Indeed, McNamara stated that there was “agreement in the intelligence community on these facts.”65 As evidence, he attached excerpts from the JASON study, the most recent CIA/DIA monthly bombing appraisal, and the March CIA report urging increased bombing (although the quoted section merely dealt with the bombing’s

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65 Ibid., 728.
failure). McNamara’s describing the community’s findings as “facts” shows a disregard for the sort of language that the intelligence community used. While intelligence estimates had argued that the bombing was ineffective, they almost always expressed this conclusion in terms of probability, rather than as a “fact.” Intelligence analysis pioneer Sherman Kent argued in a 1964 essay that using probabilistic language in estimates and other intelligence products was necessary because “To the extent that [the enemy’s] security measures work … your knowledge must be imperfect and your statements accordingly qualified by designators of your uncertainty.” McNamara’s lack of respect for Kent’s reasoning shows that intelligence estimates were useful to him mainly as means to win the argument over bombing, rather than as impartial guides to forming policy. He had previously ignored the intelligence community’s findings when doing so was convenient. Now, he seized the opportunity to use the community’s pessimistic conclusions on the bombing to his advantage.

The barrier never worked as a means to end infiltration. Widely known as the “McNamara Line,” it encountered frequent implementation delays and consumed hundreds of millions of dollars. The system was never fully implemented as McNamara expected before he resigned. An October 1968 study noted that the barrier had had a negligible effect on infiltration. Despite the delays, McNamara continued to defend the concept even as it proved increasingly expensive and impractical. Indeed, he defended the project as late as September 11, 1967, which was only seven weeks before he recommended that Johnson hand off responsibility for the war to the RVN and end the bombing campaign.

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66 Ibid., 736–37.
68 Drea, McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 179; Prados, The Blood Road, 376. For overviews of how the barrier was constructed, see Prados, The Blood Road, 213–20; and Seymour J. Deitchman, “The ‘Electronic Battlefield’ in the Vietnam War,” Journal of Military History, 72, No. 3 (July 2008): 869–87.
69 See Memorandum from McNamara to Johnson, 9/11/67, no subj., National Security Files, Country File Vietnam, Box 74, LBJL.
Conclusion
For Robert McNamara, his own preconceptions on bombing mattered far more than the intelligence community’s findings during Rolling Thunder’s first few years. His analytical convictions, poor relationships with some of the State Department’s best analysts, and focus on currying favor with LBJ aggravated these preconceptions and made it harder for him to admit that the bombing was not working as he thought it would. Only an outside think tank could convince McNamara that a drastic course of action was necessary. While McNamara may have admitted that the bombing would not work quickly in response to the intelligence community’s arguments, the JASON report led him to argue that it would not work at all.

The report had this effect, not because it came to different conclusions than the intelligence community regarding the bombing, but because it proposed an innovative change in strategy for which McNamara could take credit. While McNamara was a brilliant quantitative analyst who could evaluate the data and reasoning behind potential policies, he was often less successful at the sort of contingent thinking required for creating new strategies or programs. McNamara preferred, instead, to have policies proposed to him. This preference manifested itself well before the JASON report with the conflict between Ambassador Thompson’s study on Hanoi’s attitude toward bombing versus SNIE 10-11-65. Given the choice between a clearly written study with specific policy recommendations that people McNamara respected had produced versus a conflicted estimate featuring a long dissent by an agency with whom he had often feuded, McNamara picked the former. For McNamara, intelligence was a tool to be used when he deemed it necessary and discarded otherwise.

McNamara’s use of intelligence was characteristic of larger problems within foreign policy-related decision-making during the Johnson administration. LBJ, like Kennedy before him, favored an informal approach to conducting foreign relations. Both presidents preferred to discuss policy in ad hoc meetings with

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a select coterie of advisors. McNamara’s feud with Hughes was far from the only instance in which poor personal relationships or bureaucratic territorial protection hampered policy formation under this informal scheme. When Vice President Hubert Humphrey sent Johnson a long memorandum criticizing U.S. escalation in Vietnam in February 1965, the president replied, “Hubert, we don’t need all these memos” and banned him from Vietnam-related meetings for a year. John McConne, Director of Central Intelligence from 1961 through April 1965, also fell out of favor with Johnson in part due to his pessimism on the war effort, and found himself similarly shut out of most policy discussions for much of his last year as DCI.

In such an atmosphere, intelligence that contravened policymakers’ preconceptions could, and often did, go unread or ignored. Indeed, the intelligence community’s pessimism did not stop at Rolling Thunder. The CIA and INR were especially doubtful about the United States’ ability to achieve most of its goals from an early stage in the conflict. Yet Johnson, along with many of his key advisors, disregarded most of the two agencies’ judgments. Richard Helms, Director of Central Intelligence from 1966 through 1973, once recalled LBJ complaining about intelligence analysts’ inconvenient conclusions at a private dinner:

Let me tell you about these intelligence guys. When I was growing up in Texas we had a cow named Bessie. I’d go out early and milk her … One day I’d worked hard and gotten a full pail of milk, but I wasn’t paying attention, and old Bessie swung her shit-stained tail through that bucket of milk. Now, you know, that’s what these intelligence guys


73 Helgerson, Getting to Know the President, 56; Rovner, Fixing the Facts, 84–85; Christopher Andrew: For the President’s Eyes Only: Secret Intelligence and the American Presidency from Washington to Bush (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 321; David Robarge, John McConne as Director of Central Intelligence, 1961–1965 (Wash., DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 352–54.

74 Ford, CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers; Rovner, Fixing the Facts, 49–88; Prados, “The Mouse That Roared.”
do. You work hard and get a good program or policy going, and they swing a shit-stained tail through it.  

To be sure, policymakers are under no obligation to use all, or even any, of the intelligence that may come across their desks. But by favoring intelligence based on factors such as personal relationships, bureaucratic imperatives, and deeply held preconceived notions about American power, McNamara, Johnson, and many other hawkish policymakers failed to properly understand the depth of resistance they faced in Vietnam. As the United States continues to engage in major foreign interventions, its leaders would do well to consider the grave consequences that ignoring intelligence for personal or political reasons can precipitate.

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*Photo credits:* Robert McNamara, JASON report map, meeting, Johnson and Rostow, from the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library and Museum; Ho Chi Minh trail, Thomas F. Pollock Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

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