

JFK: “In the 1940s and early fifties, the great danger was from Communist armies marching across free borders, which we saw in Korea. . . . Now we face a new and different threat. We no longer have a nuclear monopoly. Their missiles, they believe, will hold off our missiles, and their troops can match out troops should be intervene in these so-called wars of national liberation. Thus, the local conflict they support can turn in their favor through guerrillas or insurgents or subversives. . . . It is clear that this struggle in this area of the new and poorer nations will be a continuing crisis of this decade.”

THE DEBATE:

Some historians, including Andrew Krepinevich (*The Army Concept of War*), argue that the US erred by not pursuing a counter-insurgency strategy which concentrated on the insurgents (VC), “village war,” and “pacification.”

Colonel Harry Summers (*On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*) argues that the US devoted too much attention to counter-insurgency, instead of fighting a conventional war against PAVN [North Vietnam’s army].

Eric Bergerud (*Dynamics of Defeat*) argues that a counter-insurgency strategy would have dispersed American troops into small units which could be easily routed. A more aggressive conventional strategy would have been more effective but could not have won the war.”

Mid-intensity or conventional war relies on firepower to minimize casualties -- influenced by 20th-century conflicts and political necessity of keeping American casualties down (“It is better to send a bullet than a man”).

Counterinsurgency requires light infantry, firepower restraint, resolution of political and social problems, and population protection . . . not destruction of insurgent forces.

“Any good soldier can handle guerrillas”

“The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military”

“just a form of small war”

“North Vietnam is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing.”

(McNamara and Rostow to JFK, Oct. 1961)

“. . . the source of guerrilla aggression [is] in North Vietnam” (McNamara and Rostow to JFK, Oct. 1961)

“The loss of South Vietnam would make pointless further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the Free World; we would have to face the near certainty that the remainder of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would move to a complete

accommodation with Communism, if not formal
incorporation within the Communist bloc.”
(McNamara and Rusk to JFK, Nov., 1961)