‘Whose Vietnam?’ - ‘Lessons learned’ and the dynamics of memory in American foreign policy after the Vietnam War

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Publication date
2012

Citation for published version (APA):

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5. Powell’s journey from Vietnam to the Gulf War

Colin Powell is one of the most prominent examples of an individual who illustrates the full scope of collective, institutional, and personal memories of the Vietnam War. His well-documented life-story reads like a metaphor for the American Dream, in which the Vietnam War is an episode of challenge to be overcome. After a popularity peak in the 1990s his star has faded somewhat since his term in the George W. Bush administration, yet he has remained ranked among the most popular Americans for two decades now.¹ His rise from a poor Jamaican immigrant family from the South Bronx to the highest echelons of American power fits the mold of successful American biographies almost perfectly. The Vietnam War has a prominent place in that story, and although the impact of wartime experiences on an individual can never be a truly upbeat story, Powell’s Vietnam War chronicles largely a positive learning experience instead of a tragedy.

The urge to learn the lessons of Vietnam dominate in many respects Powell’s post-Vietnam career. The experiences shaped his perception of and response to international crises to a large degree, and his rise to power placed him in positions where his personal memories made an impact. They guided his actions, they matched or contrasted the institutional legacies of Vietnam which he encountered throughout his career, and they fueled his concern with the national struggle to deal with the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

Many of his posts involved a position between the military and civilians, as a translator and guide between the two communities in the post-Vietnam era. Ideological at heart, yet sobered by Vietnam, he often advocated the pragmatic and cautious approach in foreign affairs in all Republican administrations since Reagan’s. Throughout his career, the lessons of the Vietnam War have guided his actions from an individual, institutional, and collective point of view, illustrating both the successes and limitations of those lessons.

Colin Powell’s perception of the Vietnam War, at the time and afterwards, was heavily influenced by his devotion to his career in the Army. That career started in 1954, when he joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) at the City College of New York. He recalled in his 1995 autobiography *My American Journey* the moment he first enlisted as a turning point in his life: “The uniform gave me a sense of belonging, and something I had never experienced all the while I was growing up; I felt distinctive.”² The camaraderie, meritocracy, and emancipating opportunities that the Army provided to Powell were all prime reasons why he embraced Army life wholeheartedly.

After four years in the ROTC, Powell decided upon a career in the Army. As he stated: “for a black, no other avenue in American society offered so much opportunity.”³ After a tour in West Germany and several specialized training assignments, he was sent to Vietnam in December 1962. At that time, those who were sent to South-Vietnam were regarded within the Army as “comers, walk-on-water types being groomed for bright futures.”⁴ Powell was excited to go, but recalled later with some irony that his enthusiasm sprang partly from naïveté:

By God, a worldwide communist conspiracy was out there, and we had to stop it wherever it raised its ugly head. I had helped man the frontiers of freedom in West Germany. Now it was time for me to man another frontier in the same fight on the other side of the world. It all had a compelling neatness and simplicity in 1962.⁵

As Powell stated in another interview, the war “had a coherency. We all thought it made sense.”⁶

He arrived in Vietnam in December 1962 as part of a group of American military advisors. By that time, the handful of advisors that started in 1950 had grown into a group of around 16,000, mainly supporting and training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Powell was stationed at a base in the A Shau Vally, close to the Laotian border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail that supplied the Vietcong guerillas. The goal of the ARVN base was to interdict and disrupt that flow of supplies, and Powell experienced close combat in the field and frequent shelling of his

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⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Powell and Persico, *My American Journey*, 75.
base. Moreover, he was wounded during that first tour when he stepped into a Vietcong booby-trap – a hole in the ground filled with so-called punji-sticks, sharp bamboo spikes dipped in dung to create an infectious wound.

Even though Powell agreed with the ideological tenets of American foreign policy, he never gave it much thought at the time. He was there because it was a logical step in his career. As part of a group of young captains of infantry, he recalled: “we don’t worry about [politics]. Just tell us what the job is.” However, politics were inescapable in Vietnam. Powell started to doubt the coherency of American policy when he talked to his South Vietnamese counterpart Captain Vo Cong Hieu, the ARVN officer he advised in the A Shau Valley. When Powell asked why their outpost was located at a fairly vulnerable location, Hieu answered that the outpost was very important to protect the nearby airfield. When Powell asked why the airfield was there, Hieu replied: “To supply the outpost.” It was Powell’s personal version of the “destroy the town in order to save it”-logic that seemed to illustrate the Vietnam War best. Powell felt likewise discouraged in the summer of 1963, when the political situation in South Vietnam was very tense. The Diem regime could collapse any time, and the military leaders of the ARVN were withholding their allegiance until a new leader emerged. Powell and other American advisors observed the ARVN’s inaction with increasing frustration while the communist forces strengthened their positions undisturbed.

However, it was not his experience with the enemy that caused Powell to doubt his initial faith in the American enterprise in Vietnam. The biggest shock was his realization that American civilian and military leadership were not facing up to the truth. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in particular, came to epitomize this false faith in the technological and systematic approach to warfare, and Powell criticizes him often in his memoirs and interviews. When McNamara visited Vietnam during Powell’s first tour, the secretary concluded optimistically: “Every quantitative measurement (...) shows we are winning the war.” Retired Colonel Joseph Schwar, who knew Powell from his training in Fort Bragg, was stationed in Vietnam at Khe

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7 Ibid.
8 Powell and Persico, My American Journey, 81
Sanh, about 25 miles from the A Shau Valley. When Schwar learned that McNamara had declared the war almost won, he radioed Powell with the news. Schwar recalled Powell’s reply: “You tell Mr. McNamara to come and see where I am, because someone is shooting at me.”

His experiences in the A Shau Valley could have turned him into a cynic on the war, but they didn’t. Certainly, in his memoir My American Journey Powell is very critical of Robert McNamara and the attitude of the Army at the time. There was a “conspiracy of illusion” fabricated by “McNamara’s slide-rule commandos” and “slide-rule prodigies” that were able to “measure the immeasurable.” He categorically called the strategic-hamlet program, the body count, and the search-and-sweep initiatives “nonsense, all of which we knew was nonsense, even as we did it.” Yet despite these critiques, Powell remained, in his own words, “a true believer. I had experienced disappointment, not disillusionment.”

When Powell came back to the United States, he continued his promising career. He was now a Vietnam veteran who had been awarded a Purple Heart for the booby-trap injury. He became a test officer for Infantry equipment, received more training in the Infantry Officer Advanced Course, and was promoted to Major – an unusually fast rise that indicated his potential for further advancement. Nine months after leaving the Army Infantry School as a student, he returned as an instructor. In August 1967, Powell became a student again, now at the United States Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, where he graduated second from a group of 1,244 officers in June, 1968. One month later, Powell was sent on a second tour to Vietnam.

Despite some sobering experiences during his first tour, there is no evidence that Powell voiced any critique during the war. Powell himself explains this by stating that among Army officers, debating the moral or political implications of the war would not help them with a job they were simply assigned to do. As he recalled: “I do not recall a single discussion on its merits among my fellow officers all the while I was in Vietnam.” Yet at the same time, open criticism would be seen as disloyalty to the Army and would endanger Powell’s career perspectives. His behavior with regard

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11 Powell and Persico, My American Journey, 103.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., See for a similar quote from an earlier interview: “I thought it was right, and I still think it was right at the time.” Means, Colin Powell: Soldier/statesman - statesman/soldier, 132.
14 Powell and Persico, My American Journey, 134.
to his personal misgivings fitted with his increasingly political approach to his job and perhaps with the loyalty he felt towards the Army as well. In fact, the role as adviser during his first tour in Vietnam had been a very political assignment and carefully navigating a complex military-political field became one of Powell’s specialties.

By the time Powell arrived in Vietnam in July, 1968, the war had changed drastically. Mass protests against the war, still sparse in 1963, had reached a high point in 1968 after the Tet offensive surprised the Americans in January of that year. The so-called credibility-gap had widened profoundly as a result, and the hopelessness of the war had convinced President Lyndon Johnson not to seek re-election. Powell remained silent at the time, but he resented particularly the political mismanagement of the war. He blamed the Johnson government for trying to fight a war with as little inconvenience to the public as possible, by allowing college students to receive deferments for the draft and refusing to officially declare war, call up the reserves, and muster up support for the war as a united, national effort. As a soldier, Powell felt isolated from the rest of society: “as far as the rest of the country was concerned, we were doing it alone.”15 Years later, he would wholeheartedly embrace and strongly advocate Weinberger’s emphasis on national support for future wars as stated in his 1983 list on the uses of military power.

Powell was assigned to the 23rd infantry Division or Americal Division, whose headquarters were in Chu Lai, South-Vietnam.16 After a brief period of administrative duties at nearby Duc Pho base, Powell was assigned to the planning staff of General Charles Gettys, the commander of the Americal Division in Chu Lai. After reading a publication in the Army Times about Powell’s academic achievements at Fort Leavenworth, Gettys specifically requested Powell as his staff officer for operations and planning – a job normally reserved for those of higher rank.17

Overall, Powell’s second tour in Vietnam helped him to further advance on his already impressive career path. He held a prestigious job on the general’s planning staff, where his efficiency reports were favorable. After his tour, he was awarded the

15 Ibid., 129.
16 The epithet ‘Americal’ was a reference to the history of the division that had been formed in 1942 on the Pacific island of New Caledonia. The division name represented a contraction of American, New Caledonian Division.
17 The operations and planning officer is one of five staff officers on a division commander’s staff. In military jargon, it is called G-3. G-1 is assigned to personnel affairs, G-2 for Intelligence, G-4 for logistics, and G-5 for civil affairs. According to Powell’s own assessment, G-3 is the most coveted job on a commander’s staff, normally reserved for promising lieutenant colonels. At the time, Major Powell was still one rank lower, but he got the job nevertheless. See Ibid., 135.
Legion of Merit for his services and the Soldier’s Medal for “heroism not involving actual conflict with an enemy” for an incident where Powell’s helicopter crashed. Surviving the crash but suffering a broken ankle, Powell dragged General Gettys and two others from the burning helicopter. After returning in July, 1969, Powell concluded: “Judged solely in professional terms, it was a success.”

Judged in all other terms, the Vietnam War was, of course, not a success. Powell left Vietnam a second time with even harsher judgments on the war. His 1995 memoir is full of laments about the “euphemisms, lies, and self-deception,” the “macabre statistical competition” of the body counts, the inflated reports, and a “corrosive careerism” that Powell admitted to being a part of, deflating the value of the Legion of Merit he received. During Powell’s first tour around 16,000 advisors were in Vietnam, and he estimated at the time that it would take half a million men to defend South Vietnam against northern aggression. When he left in 1969, that number of Americans was actually in the country, but later Powell concluded that “no defensible level of U.S. involvement would have been enough.”

His strongest critique would be reserved for the “raw class discrimination” that had allowed for exemptions from the draft but also for what he perceived as a failure of leadership within the armed forces. Top military leaders had failed to stand up against politicians who wanted to fight an unwinnable war. As Powell stated, and the revolution of the military in the 1980s illustrated, his generation of officers “vowed that when our turn came to call the shots, we would not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support.”

Yet the Vietnam War did not only lay bare mistakes in the civil-military relations that Powell focused on, concerned as he was with the Army as an institution. To many, the Vietnam War also illustrated a failure in morality and ideology, of which attrition warfare, the body counts, the use of Agent Orange, and discrimination within the armed forces were just a few examples. No other event during the war seemed to illustrate that apparently lost morality better than the My Lai massacres that

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18 In addition to saving his general, Powell also dragged out Jack Treadwell, a World War Two Medal of Honor recipient. See the Military Times “Hall of Valor” website: http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=100351 (last accessed June 14, 2011).
19 Ibid., 144.
21 Powell and Persico, My American Journey, 147. Powell devotes pages 144 to 149 to his objections about the Vietnam War in powerful language.
22 Ibid., 149.
occurred on 16 March, 1968. They were conducted by soldiers from the Americal Division that Powell joined during his second tour, and although the massacres happened before his arrival in Vietnam, Powell became involved with the attempted cover-up.

**My Lai**

According to military historian Shelby Stanton, the Americal division was stationed in a particularly rough area in Vietnam that remained a Vietcong stronghold throughout the war, despite a continuous American and ARVN presence. The division had a tough reputation, and Powell’s 11th infantry Brigade had a nickname as the “Butcher Brigade” because of their frequent violent encounters with the enemy. Tim O’Brien, who captured the horror and absurdity of the Vietnam War as one of the prime American novelists after the war, would be part of the Americal Division a year after Powell. Norman Schwarzkopf, with whom Powell would oversee the Gulf War of 1991, would be part of Americal as well. Its most infamous member was Second Lieutenant William Calley, who would be convicted of murder for the My Lai massacre.

Three months before Powell arrived for his second tour, William Calley and his platoon from the Americal Division raped, tortured, and killed 347 to 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the My Lai and My Khe hamlets of Son My village. Almost a year later in March 1969, Powell, now at the Americal headquarters, was ordered to look up the after-battle reports of that day for an investigator from the inspector general’s office. Powell did not know the importance of the reports at the time, but in his memoir he claims that after journalist Seymour Hersh’s disclosure of the massacre on November 12, 1969, he realized what the investigator had been looking for.

Powell does not mention that he had seen reports strongly suggesting malpractices much earlier. In November 1968, Specialist Fourth Class Tom Glen, who was on his way home from a tour in the same brigade as Calley’s wrote a very

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24 The number of deaths is contested. The sanitized press release from the Americal Division headquarters mentioned 128 dead “enemy in a running battle.” See James Stuart Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 27. A later official Army estimate puts the number at 347. However, the memorial at the site of the massacre in Vietnam, based on a Vietnamese estimate, mentions the number of 504.
critical letter to the commander of American forces in Vietnam General Creighton Abrams. The letter accused entire American units of unprovoked insulting, shooting, torturing, and killing of Vietnamese that “acquire the aspect of sanctioned policy.” Moreover, Glen stated that:

It would indeed be terrible to find it necessary to believe that an American soldier that harbors such racial intolerance and disregard for justice and human feeling is a prototype of all American national character; yet the frequency of such soldiers lends credulity to such beliefs. (...) What has been outlined here I have seen not only in my own unit, but also in others we have worked with, and I fear it is universal. If this is indeed the case, it is a problem which cannot be overlooked.

The letter did not specifically mention My Lai or Calley’s platoon, and it is unclear whether Glen had knowledge of that specific massacre. Since the letter concerned the Americal Division, it was forwarded to Powell with the request to come up with a draft response. Powell contacted Glen’s supervisor, who told him that the soldier was not close enough to the frontline to reach these conclusions. Without consulting Tom Glen about this assertion, Powell drafted his response letter for Abrams. He wrote that there may have been isolated incidents but ended by stating “In direct refutation of this [Glen's] portrayal is the fact that relations between Americal soldiers and the Vietnamese people are excellent.” Powell’s argument was copied into the eventual official response to Glen.

So Powell was aware of allegations of severe misconduct before the My Lai story was disclosed, in contrast to his claim in his memoir. Powell does not mention Tom Glen’s letter in his memoir at all yet does describe an episode intended to explain the context in which My Lai happened. Powell referred to the dangerous nature of the area, which was notorious as a Vietcong stronghold, and the poor

26 Mann, Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet, 43. See for a more complete report from the investigations by General William R. Peers the website of the law department at the University of Missouri-Kansas City:
http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/mylai/MYL_Peers.htm (last accessed June 14, 2011). Similar accusations were later voiced by the Winter Soldier investigations and the VVAW, and most famously in John Kerry’s testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

27 See the story on Powell’s My Lai on Consortiumnews.com, the website of Robert Parry, former AP and Newsweek journalist: http://www.consortiumnews.com/archive/colin3.html (last accessed June 14, 2011). He bases his assessment on the book Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Four Hours in My Lai (New York: Viking, 1992), which I have been unable to obtain.

28 Ibidem.

29 Mann, Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet, 43.
training the junior officers received by that time. That response was very similar to what many of the accused in subsequent My Lai trials used in their defense. Also, Powell recalls the practice of looking for ‘military-age males’ (MAM’s) from a helicopter. If found, the crew fired first in front of him. If he moved, he was shot at. “Brutal?” Powell asked “Maybe so (...) The kill-or-be-killed nature of combat tends to dull fine perceptions of right and wrong.” In an interview taken three years before the publication of his memoir, Powell gives a similarly harsh explanation that borders on excuse. “it was lousy Indian country. I don’t mean to be ethnically or politically unconscious, but it was awful (...) I’m not excusing what happened, but when you went in there, you were fighting everybody.”

Later in his career, Powell had to defend himself against the accusation of being part of ‘white-washing’ the My Lai massacre. Although there is plenty of evidence that proves an attempted cover-up by the Army, Powell’s role had been only a minor one. Nevertheless, as his conduct in response to Tom Glen’s letter indicates, Powell was more concerned about his loyalty to the Army and his career perspectives then he was inclined to seriously investigate the uncomfortable but serious and well-founded accusations. After all, Powell was one of the first in the Army to learn about the letter, and his draft response was instrumental in its dismissal.

Yet while the My Lai massacre serves as an example of unmistakably evil acts, Powell’s response to the atrocities also illustrated the complexity that troubled more people with regard to My Lai in particular and the Vietnam War in general. Time magazine ran a cover-story in 1971 on the Calley trial titled: “Who shares the guilt?” In the article, Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer is quoted as saying: “Who is at fault? The people who gave the orders or the people who fought?” That essential element turned the Calley trial into a debate on responsibility for the

30 Powell refers to the “instant non coms” (non-commissioned officers or NCO’s) like Calley as “Shake-and-bake sergeants”: “Take a private, give him a little training, shake him once or twice, and pronounce him an NCO.” Powell and Persico, My American Journey, 144.
31 Ibid.
Vietnam War in general. Many Vietnam veterans, increasingly derided as ‘baby-killers’ after Ronald Haeberle’s My Lai pictures were used as anti-war posters, felt the same type of isolation that Powell described prior to his second tour, an isolation exacerbated by vilification by anti-war protesters.\textsuperscript{36} The sentiment that veterans and the U.S. armed forces in general were held responsible for a crime they did not commit, or at least not willingly, resonated from the Calley trial to the scapegoat theme of the Oliver North trial in the Iran-contra affair in the late 1980s. It was debated in Army journals like \textit{Parameters} and popularized in television series such as \textit{The A-team} and movies like \textit{Rambo}.\textsuperscript{37} The controversy that existed over who was responsible for atrocities in Vietnam is illustrated by the sentencing of the accused. William Calley was first sentenced to life in prison for his involvement in the My Lai massacre. However, the sentence was later reduced after an intervention from President Richard Nixon to three-and-a-half years’ house arrest in military quarters at Fort Benning, Georgia. Nixon intervened in part because of several thousands of letters sent to him requesting the reduction. A similar ambiguity can be observed in the sentencing of the participants in the Iran-contra affair, in which no one convicted served any time and the main participant, Oliver North, was transformed into a celebrity.\textsuperscript{38}

Powell’s reputation remained relatively untouched by his oblique association with the scandal. Particularly at the time, no one took note of the role Powell, then a successful but unknown career officer, had played.\textsuperscript{39} Upon his return from Vietnam, Powell went to George Washington University in Washington D.C. to obtain an MBA degree. He graduated in 1971, received a promotion to lieutenant colonel, and became


\textsuperscript{37} Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown, eds., \textit{Assessing the Vietnam War: A Collection from the Journal of the U.S. Army War College} (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon / Brassey's International Defense Publishers, 1987). The phrase “held responsible for a crime they did not commit” was part of the opening of every A-team episode. It referred to the creation of the A-team itself that was formed after its members, all Vietnam veterans, were wrongly accused of a crime, but it implied that all veterans were wrongly accused.

\textsuperscript{38} Only Albert Hakim, partner of The Enterprise, was fined for $5000. All other sentences were either overturned on appeal or those convicted were pardoned by George H.W. Bush in the last days of his presidency.

General William DePuy’s speechwriter at the Pentagon. DePuy stood at the frontlines of the Army reforms of the 1970s, attempting to institutionalize lessons of Vietnam while the war was still going on. Powell’s time in DePuy’s office exposed him to a reformist group within the Army that included Creighton Abrams and Bruce Palmer. Throughout most of the rest of his career, Powell would be surrounded by reform-minded people from the military, influencing Powell’s thinking and facilitating his rise to the top.

Post-Vietnam
Shortly after Powell started working on DePuy’s staff, he was invited to apply for the prestigious White House Fellowship program. He entered the program in the class of 1972-1973. The previous year, the future national security advisor Robert McFarlane had been a White House Fellow. That job lay in Powell’s future as well. The intention of the Fellowship program was to expose promising young leaders to the process of high-level policymaking, and Powell called the experience a turning point in his life. Most importantly, it introduced him to two powerful Washington mentors in the Office of Management and Budget where he spent his year as a fellow, director Caspar Weinberger and his deputy Frank Carlucci. The two men would be instrumental in Powell’s rise to the top in national security affairs and play defining roles in shaping foreign policy based on lessons of Vietnam.

Before Powell returned to work for Carlucci and Weinberger, he spent some more time in the Army. The aftermath of the Vietnam War was ever-present, directly and indirectly. While commanding a battalion in South Korea, Powell witnessed the challenges that resulted from the abolition of the draft in January 1973, transforming the Army into the All-Volunteer Army (AVA). Drugs, racial tension, and low discipline were key problems while educational standards dropped to keep conscription at a sufficient level. However, Powell again served under a highly motivated reformer, Major General Henry E. “Gunfighter” Emerson, who was adamant about bringing discipline and morale back into the Army. When Powell returned to Washington D.C. and entered the National War College (NWC), he met similar reformist zeal in the academic aspects of military life as his stay at NWC.

41 For a brief history of the Program, see the website of The White House, http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/fellows (last accessed June 14, 2011).
42 Ibid., 161.
coincided with the reappraisal of Clausewitzian theory. Powell was deeply impressed by the ideas of the old strategist and applied them, like many others in the military at the time, to understand the mistakes in Vietnam. As he wrote in his memoir:

That wise Prussian Karl von Clausewitz was an awakening for me. His *On War*, written 106 years before I was born, was like a beam of light from the past, still illuminating present-day military quandaries. “No one starts a war, or rather no one in his right senses should do so,” Clausewitz wrote, “without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to achieve.” Mistake number one in Vietnam. Which led to Clausewitz’s rule number two. Political leaders must set a war’s objectives, while armies achieve them. In Vietnam, one seemed to be looking to the other for the answers that never came. Finally, people must support a war. Since they supply the treasure and the sons, and today the daughters too, they must be convinced that the sacrifice is justified. That essential pillar had crumbled as the Vietnam War ground on. Clausewitz's greatest lesson for my profession was that the soldier, for all his patriotism, valor, and skill, forms just one leg in a triad. Without all three legs engaged, the military, the government, and the people, the enterprise cannot stand.  

Powell would make sure that he understood the other two pillars as well. After the National War College, he became military assistant to his former supervisors Caspar Weinberger and Frank Carlucci, both of whom he knew from the White House Fellow program. The two men were now secretary and deputy secretary of defense in Reagan’s first administration. By that time, Powell was very much a product of both the institutional and academic lessons that the Army focused on after Vietnam.

As the secretary’s military assistant, Powell experienced the 1983 Lebanon bombing, an episode which reinforced the distaste he picked up in Vietnam for the State Department’s “antisepctic phrases (…) for foreign interventions which usually had bloody consequences for the military.” In Lebanon, marines were deployed for largely diplomatic purposes, without a clear military goal. Powell felt that Weinberger had given in too easily to Reagan’s wishes, which resulted in the devastating bombing. The same weekend Powell also experienced the Grenada invasion. In contrast to the heroic and successful event Reagan portrayed it to be, Powell stated that it was a “sloppy success” and “hardly a model of service cooperation.” Other

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43 Ibid., 200, 207 See also the chapter ‘Rebuilding the forces.’
44 Ibid., 291.
than that, Powell did not deem these two episodes - Lebanon and Grenada - important enough to spend more than two pages on in his 600-plus-page memoir. That may be surprising, particularly since the Lebanon mission was the direct impetus for Weinberger to set down his rules on the application of military force that Powell would use later in the Gulf. However, Powell’s relative lack of interest in Lebanon itself only emphasizes the fact that especially to him and his peers, the Weinberger doctrine was all about Vietnam, not Lebanon.

At Powell’s own request, he parted from Weinberger with whom he had developed a relationship he now called “almost sonlike.” But in order to further his military career, he needed to command a division. He was transferred to Germany, but soon after taking over command, Powell was summoned back to Washington, much to his dismay. His other former boss, Frank Carlucci, had become Reagan’s new national security advisor charged with bringing back order after Robert McFarlane, his successor John Poindexter, and their activist staff member Oliver North had brought chaos to the NSC with the Iran-contra Affair. Carlucci and Powell profoundly reorganized the NSC, abolishing North’s overstretched “political-military bureau,” eliminating an NSC role in covert actions and bringing in a lawyer to regularly check the constitutionality of its activities. In fact, Powell and Carlucci took careful note of the Tower Commission report that had investigated the flaws of the NSC that resulted in the Iran-contra Affair and followed its recommendations almost to the letter. When Carlucci moved on to become secretary of defense, replacing Weinberger, Powell moved up to become the first African-American national security advisor.

McFarlane and Oliver North had made use of the unsupervised NSC to refight the Vietnam War in Central America on the basis of their memories of Vietnam. Powell imposed his own ‘lessons learned’ on the NSC, with distinctively different results. To Powell, two crucial lessons of the Vietnam War were particularly relevant at this stage in his career. First, the generals in the Joint Chiefs of Staff had refused to object to a policy they did not believe in, while it should have been their job to inform

46 Ibid., 313.
the presidents about the inconsistencies and impossibilities of the course they wanted in Vietnam. Second, as a result the credibility of the foreign policy apparatus was lost at home and abroad. Powell was convinced that presidential decisions during the Vietnam War had been clouded by groupthink and military yes-men. As a result, he felt very strongly about the need for an ‘honest broker’ in the decision-making process – a role he could play as national security advisor but also as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In fact, many of his post-Vietnam positions had involved an advisory function, translating between the military and civilians.\(^{49}\) Only with the assurance that the president was receiving impartial advice would the foreign policy process regain its stature. As Frank Carlucci stated: “[Powell and I] set out to restore credibility of the [NSC], to restore it to its proper role as an interagency body – that is its ‘honest broker’ role.”\(^{50}\) The transition from the ‘rogue’ NSC that had been responsible for Iran-contra into the ‘stable’ NSC of the Powell-Carlucci days was successful, and at the end of Powell’s tenure as national security advisor he was even dubbed “Antidote to Ollie North.”\(^{51}\) Powell’s success also coincided with a slow but steady general shift in the Reagan administration. The prominence that the more convinced ideologues or “Reaganauts” enjoyed in the early 1980s diminished, and a more pragmatic team emerged.

Yet the fact that Powell did not share the stark ideology of Oliver North and others did not mean he felt uneasy with the ideological premises of Reagan’s foreign policy. In fact, Powell’s most public moment during his term under Reagan related to Central American policy, considered to be the domain of the “Reaganauts.”\(^{52}\) It was on the issue of aid to the Nicaraguan contras that Powell played a defining role in convincing Congress of the need to continue funding. Ironically, while Congress had previously halted Reagan’s Central American policies largely due to bad memories of Vietnam, Powell now persuaded the senators by alluding to the memories of Vietnam as well.

After the Boland Amendments, whose restrictive powers only worked in fiscal years 1984 to 1986 and included only military aid, legislation for continued aid to the

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\(^{49}\) Because of his lifelong insistence on this ‘honest broker’ aspect, Powell’s critics and disillusioned admirers alike pointed to his controversial speech before the National Security Council prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the moment when Powell lost the balance between being the critical advisor and the loyal team player.


\(^{51}\) Ibidem.

\(^{52}\) See the chapters in this dissertation on El Salvador and Iran-contra.
contras was brought to Congress frequently. Nicaraguan aid continued to be a sensitive issue, even within the Reagan administration, but many agreed that the contras deserved at least minimal support from the United States. Powell, for instance, had not agreed with Weinberger’s and Reagan’s romantic vision of the contras as freedom fighters, but took a more pragmatic approach based on balance of power. He acknowledged that “in the old days of East-West polarization, we worked with what we had.”

During Powell’s tenure at the National Security Council, congressional support for nonlethal aid had already been reinstalled. Lethal, or military, aid was still a problem, and Powell was sent to Congress to testify on the issue. Powell told the Congressmen:

Let me tell you a story. I’ve been in the jungle. I’ve been where the contras are now, except that it was in Vietnam in 1963. You can’t imagine how desperately we waited for that Marine helicopter to supply us every two weeks. Our lives, not just our comfort, hung on that delivery. It’s no different for the contras today (...) We’re talking about whether men who placed their trust in the United States are going to live or be left to die.

Powell’s speech was not unlike many of the pleas for support to El Salvador and Nicaragua that had been heard in the early 1980s - filled with Vietnam references that either fell on deaf ears or provoked fierce opposition. This time, it proved to be the last push needed for the approval of military aid to Nicaragua. What had changed? Part of the explanation can be found in the personal stature of Powell – by now a three-star general, credited with bringing order to the NSC. He did not flaunt the strong ideological convictions of some of the others who had invoked Vietnam before Congress, and he could rely on an impeccable service record. Moreover, the acceptance of Powell’s references was also a testimony to the changed attitude towards the Vietnam War over the course of the 1980s. If Oliver North, portrayed as a victim during his trials, could successfully appeal to the emotional ambivalence towards the military after the Vietnam War, then Powell’s references were certainly accepted - a far better spokesperson for the armed forces than North had been.

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55 In a 1983 Esquire article, Christopher Buckley refers to ‘Viet Guilt’ that is supposedly felt by those who evaded service and later realized they missed the central experience of their generation. As quoted
probably the most important difference between North and Powell was that North seemed to remember Vietnam as an episode in which civilian and congressional oversight had obstructed the soldiers and limited America’s ability to fight its enemies, whereas Powell became convinced after Vietnam that good civil-military relations and support from Congress and the public were crucial to successfully conduct foreign policy.

**Institutionalized lessons**

Colin Powell achieved success by imposing his lessons of Vietnam on the NSC. At his next job, Powell again was both a beneficiary of lessons already institutionalized and a promoter of further healing after Vietnam. After the Reagan years, Powell returned to the Army, now a four-star general in command of the one million troops stationed in the United States. After Powell had served only a few months in the job, the new secretary of defense Dick Cheney recommended him to President Bush to become the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

From its creation in 1947, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) played an advisory role to the president on all military affairs. However, the several branches of the armed forces were traditionally in competition with each other on many levels, from the prestige of leading an operation to the allocation of money and personnel. Moreover, the advice that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff could give to the president and the secretary of defense had to represent the consensus between the several branches. With that consensus often lacking, recommendations often turned out to be watered down and uncritical. To many critics, including Colin Powell, that institutional set-up was one of the main reasons why the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not forcefully speak out against the unclear military objectives they were given by the civilians during the Vietnam War.\(^{56}\)

The situation was not addressed until 1982, when departing chairmen General David Jones spoke out against it. The Air-Land Battle doctrine formulated after

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\(^{56}\) The best-known military critique that argues this point is Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984). Palmer was also one of the reformers whom Powell met while he worked in the office of General DePuy.
Vietnam devalued counterinsurgency while re-emphasizing a conventional and integrated approach to war. It laid bare the lack of cooperation between the military branches. The Grenada invasion of 1983 also illustrated how inter-service rivalry considerably hindered rational success.\textsuperscript{57} To improve the situation, Senator Barry Goldwater and Congressmen William Nichols sponsored the passage of the Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, better known as the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

As the Weinberger principles were formulated after Lebanon but were actually the result of ‘lessons learned’ from Vietnam, so was the Goldwater-Nichols Act a response to Vietnam via Grenada. General Bruce Palmer had most famously criticized the conduct of the United States armed forces in Vietnam in his account \textit{The 25-year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam}. Palmer stated that the civilian and military chains of command were flawed and unnecessarily complex, resulting in a faulty strategy and subsequent American defeat that could have been avoided.\textsuperscript{58} The failed rescue mission during the Iran hostage crisis and the hitches in the Grenada invasion further underscored what was seen as a vital problem of the military chain of command: the several branches of the military could not effectively operate jointly. The main transformation that the Goldwater-Nichols Act effectuated was to shift responsibility from the individual military branches to the officials who coordinated their joint operations.

The Act greatly enhanced the position of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, elevating his position to the principal advisor to the President and his cabinet without the need for consensus in the JCS. While the Weinberger doctrine, as an institutionalization of the lessons of Vietnam, never was officially adopted as a doctrine, the Goldwater-Nichols Act codified its own set of lessons of the Vietnam War into law. Colin Powell agreed with and benefitted from both institutional changes. He became the first chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to serve a full term under the new Goldwater-Nichols Act. Benefitting from the enhanced power of that position, he was enabled to implement the Weinberger principles as his own, bringing the official and officious lessons of Vietnam together.

Powell’s first test as chairman would be the operation to capture Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. Noriega was a notorious free agent, who had been on the

\textsuperscript{57} See the chapter in this dissertation on Grenada/Lebanon.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid. See for a later, also highly influential critique along similar lines H. R. McMaster, \textit{Dereliction of Duty : Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam} (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).
CIA payroll for his aid in transporting weapons to Nicaragua but also made large profits in the drug trade. In December 1989, the situation in Panama deteriorated with several incidents, one of which led to the death of a U.S. Marine. Bush agreed to an invasion, which resulted in a successful regime change and, after a somewhat embarrassing two-week manhunt through Panama, got Noriega arrested on American drug charges.

The Noriega problem had been on the NSC’s agenda during the Reagan administration as well, but while at the NSC Powell had resisted taking any action against the Panamanian dictator. Powell was particularly critical of a State Department proposal to support the deposed President Eric A. Delvalle that would have resulted in a government viable only through continued U.S. military support – a situation that eerily resembled the South Vietnamese regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. According to Lou Cannon of The Washington Post, Powell and Carlucci were at the time the deciding voices against the plan.59

However, after the incidents in 1989, Powell’s opinion changed. What was seen as Panamanian provocations made the Noriega issue a serious problem for the freshly installed Bush administration. Now, Bush’s ability to promote democracy in Latin America, fight the war on drugs, and, most importantly, manage the end of the Cold War was challenged as well. In what is considered a crucial meeting on December 17, 1989, Bush asked his advisors if a small operation by Special Forces would not be enough to arrest Noriega. Powell resisted, following the Weinberger guideline of overwhelming superiority. A large-scale military operation was necessary for success, Powell argued, and he won the argument.60

After the Panamanian operation, Powell wrote:

The lessons I absorbed from Panama confirmed all my convictions over the preceding twenty years, since the days of doubt over Vietnam. Have a clear political objective and stick to it. Use all the force necessary, and do not apologize for going in big if that is what it takes. Decisive force ends wars quickly and in the long run saves lives.

Whatever threats we faced in the future, I intended to make these rules the bedrock of my military council.⁶¹

Yet in an interview with Kenneth Adelman in 1990, Powell emphasized also the uniqueness of the Panama intervention, cautioning against drawing too many lessons to apply blindly in new situations. According to Senator John McCain, that sensitivity showed him that Powell had learned what he called “the summary lesson of sorts” from Vietnam: “learn the lessons of that war but don’t overlearn them.” McCain recalled a December 1990 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that surveyed the potential use of force against Iraq:

We had witness after witness who had been in the Vietnam War (...) saying, “We can’t do it. There will be all these bodybags.” That’s understandable among people whose life’s experiences were defined by the Vietnam War. [Powell] also watched soldiers die in combat, in a war for which there was no blueprint for victory, but rather than react by believing that we should never embark again in military operations outside the continental limits of the Unites States, his thinking matured to the degree where he was convinced we should never embark into conflict again without a clear blueprint for victory and without devoting whatever resources are necessary to winning.⁶²

When Powell supervised the war against Iraq in 1991, he did bring such a blueprint for victory, firmly based on his lessons from Vietnam. The invasion of Grenada and the debates within the military about the lessons of Vietnam during the 1980s had accumulated into a strategic vision that dominated the 1991 Gulf War. Powell personified those lessons and memories. He remembered his personal experiences during the Vietnam War as instrumental lessons in the need for honest assessments and clear communications between the military and the politicians. He could place those observations within a strategic context when he learned about the ideas of Clausewitz that were part of the institutional revolution in the military after Vietnam. Powell became particularly aware of the importance in warfare of what Clausewitz called the three pillars: the military, the politicians, and the public. In his career after Vietnam, he would witness the military reforms from up close in the office of General

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⁶¹ Powell and Persico, My American Journey, 434.
DePuy. Subsequently, he occupied several advisory roles to the top of the civilian leadership.

Powell’s learning process based upon his own personal experiences coincided with the institutionalization of ‘lessons learned’ based on memories of Vietnam. The Goldwater-Nichols Act, designed in part to overcome the institutional infighting displayed during the Vietnam War, greatly enhanced the power of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff – and Powell was the first beneficiary of those enhanced powers. When he was an aide to Defense Secretary Weinberger, he heard the secretary deliver his speech on the uses of military power: the unofficial ‘lessons learned’ from the armed forces that the top military leadership had adopted. Those institutionalized memories were first known as the Weinberger doctrine, but after Colin Powell applied them during the Gulf War, they would bear his name in later years. The application of those lessons was possible after more than a decade of debate and institutional change but depended also on a president who would allow the military to apply its lessons. Before I analyze the memories of the Vietnam War in relation to the Gulf War, I therefore first turn to George H.W. Bush’s ‘Vietnam’ in the next section.