



Open Letter

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Washington.

Dear Mr. President: (R 8 3)

As you may remember, I served under General Marshall when he was Secretary of Defense during the Korean War, and so, like you, I came to know most of the top brass in all branches of the Armed Forces.

I never met a finer group of men—brave, loyal, sincere. Very few were experienced in international diplomacy or politics, but you expected that. The surprise was the discovery that many of them did not know their own military trade very well.

These remarks are prompted by the testimony of Gen. Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, before the Armed Services Committee. As you know, Gen. Wheeler has recommended that we resume bombing North Viet Nam, and the reports are that you are about to act on this advice.

I don't know how seriously you take your generals (every President does at first), but in weighing their recommendations, I thought it might be helpful if I drew your attention to the past performance sheet.

You were the (Vice President) back in 1961 when the Joint Chiefs gave President Kennedy the green light on the Bay of Pigs, so you will remember how he stood up and took all the blame when the military calculations went wrong. But, as an insider, you know how in private he later said in anguish, "How could I have been so far off base? All my life I have known better than to depend on experts. How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead?"

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But he did not make the same mistake twice. He discovered the difference between advisers and Presidents. The Joint Chiefs, he was to say, "advise you the way a man advises another one about whether he should marry a girl. He doesn't have to live with her."

Your great friend, President Truman, also learned about generals the hard way. Mr. Truman did not want to escalate the war in Korea; he was reluctant to let MacArthur sweep North for fear the huge Chinese army would then enter the war and overwhelm our forces.

But at the historic Wake Island Conference in October 1950, Gen. MacArthur flatly advised Truman "that if any Chinese were to enter Korea they would face certain disaster, but he did not expect them to try anything that foolish." When the roof fell in, Truman, like Kennedy, accepted the blame, as he should have. After all, he was the boss.

President Eisenhower was faced with the same kind of advice from Admiral Radford, his Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who strongly urged U.S. military intervention in Indochina in 1954. Eisenhower was gravely tempted, but, knowing the military better than most Chief Executives, he cautiously held off. Meanwhile, Vice President Nixon incautiously revealed that the U.S. was considering "putting our boys in." The public reaction was violent; Eisenhower quickly dropped all ideas of intervening.

Now we come to 1961 and the crisis over the Communist threat to Laos. General Lemnitzer, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, after a trip to Laos, approved limited intervention. In his biography of Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger quotes the President as saying, "If it hadn't been for Cuba, we might be about to intervene in Laos." Kennedy waved a sheaf of cables from Lemnitzer, and said, "I might have taken this advice seriously." Shortly thereafter Kennedy solved the Laotian situation by

negotiation.

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I would like to conclude, Sir, by reminding you just a year ago the military advised you that bombing North Viet Nam would bring Hanoi to the negotiating table under circumstances favorable to the U.S. Well, that's not all the military has had to say. Here are a few other notable observations worth recalling:

Gen. J. W. O'Daniel (April 8, 1961)—“The Communists now realize that they can never conquer free Viet Nam.”

Adm. Harry D. Felt, Commander in Chief Pacific (Jan. 12, 1963)—“I am confident the Vietnamese are going to win the war. The Viet Cong face inevitable defeat.”

Gen. Paul D. Harkins, then U.S. Commander in South Viet Nam (Oct. 31, 1963)—“I can safely say the end of the war is in sight.”

Brig. Gen. Ellis Williamson (July 5, 1965)—“We can go in and tear pure hell out of the Viet Cong.”

Gen. Westmoreland, now the U.S. Commander in South Viet Nam (July 5, 1965)—“If we can get the Viet Cong to stand up and fight we will blast him . . .”

There is the record, Mr. President. Everybody agrees that your military advisers are good patriotic men. They should be listened to carefully and courteously. But, Sir, you don't have to believe everything they say, do you?