

## PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

# General John Vogt and Nixon's Vietnam War

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General John Vogt (USAF) was one of a kind—unique in his pathway to high command, in his methods of leadership, and in his strengths and weaknesses in conducting operations. President Richard Nixon selected Vogt as commander of Seventh Air Force in April 1972, as North Vietnam's Easter Offensive broke across South Vietnam, threatening the collapse of South Vietnam and with it, the entire edifice of Nixon's foreign policy.

### Vogt's Path to High Command

Vogt reached the pinnacle of command through a unique pathway. Raised in New Jersey, he joined the Army Air Corps in mid-1941, convinced that war was imminent and wanting to be part of it. He deployed to England in early 1943, flying P-47 Thunderbolts under the command of the legendary Hubert "Hub" Zemke (Colonel, USAF). Vogt became an ace, with eight kills, and was selected as squadron commander in February 1944. But in the autumn of 1944 his squadron was committed to the defense of the Arnhem bridgehead, the storied "bridge too far," and his squadron was decimated by German anti-aircraft fire. Vogt broke down under the stress, suffering from what then was known as "combat fatigue." He was relieved from command, along with his operations officer, and invalidated back to the United States in October 1944. His wife later recalled, "the Johnny that came back was not the boy I sent to war."

In mid-1945 Vogt was reactivated and sent to command a transfer airfield in Brazil, part of the air bridge bringing the Army Air Force units stationed in Europe back home to prepare for the expected invasion of Japan. Vogt spent three months in command of the airfield and then returned home, resigning his commission in November, expecting to join the Foreign Service. But having married in April 1946, and needing immediate income, Vogt rejoined the Air Force and completed his bachelor's degree at Yale—the first of three Ivy League schools that he would attend. After a brief stint as an intelligence officer, he returned to academics, earning a degree from Columbia University in 1955.

From there Vogt began a remarkable climb through the ranks. Given his medical history, he was ineligible for operational commands, and he never served in an operational unit between 1945 and 1972. Nor did he ever command a unit or return to flying status throughout that time, as he ascended from major to lieutenant general. Instead he advanced through a sequence of increasingly responsible staff positions—on the National Security Council staff in

the early 1950s, in the Pentagon as director of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Policy Planning Staff, and as Pacific Air Forces director of operations during the three years of Operation Rolling Thunder. In June 1968 he returned to the Pentagon—first with a tour on the Air Staff, and then in August 1969 moving to the Joint Staff as the director of operations. Finally in July 1970 he was appointed as director of the Joint Staff.

In these positions on the Joint Staff, Vogt served through every crisis of the Nixon presidency and through the grinding routine of the Joint Staff at war. He worked closely with Nixon's National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and with Admiral Tom Moorer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. By early 1972 he was slated to move to Belgium as the NATO Chief of Staff, a four-star position that would lead to a comfortable but obscure retirement.

At that point fate intervened forcefully, in the form of a massive, "go for broke" offensive by North Vietnam, seeking to crush the South Vietnamese military and end the war. The long-awaited offensive broke March 30, 1972, as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched a three-front offensive across South Vietnam. For Nixon, this offensive threatened every aspect of his presidency, with the upcoming presidential election looming in November, and the complicated triangular diplomacy with the Soviet Union and Communist China resting on America's ability to achieve an honorable end to the war in Vietnam. By this point in the war, Nixon had completely lost confidence in the Air Force and in General Creighton Abrams, the commander of U.S. forces in southeast Asia. He and Kissinger equally mistrusted Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, fearing that he would never permit the sort of aggressive response to the North Vietnamese offensive that Nixon considered imperative. Already on the first day of the offensive, Kissinger commented, "It's my instinct...there's some blight on that operation...I think Laird has drilled into their heads to do nothing."

In that tension-wracked setting, Vogt arrived at the White House on April 5 to provide Nixon and Kissinger an update on operations. While there, he commented to Kissinger that he was "terribly distressed with the way the military and especially the Air Force were handling the Vietnam situation... and an even worse failure to come up with any ideas on their own on how things ought to be handled." Seeing a solution to the command problem in Southeast Asia, Kissinger recommended Vogt to the president, and within minutes, Vogt was assigned command of Seventh Air Force.

The next day, Nixon set aside time to talk with Vogt and make sure that the general understood the president's expectations. The president considered Abrams "tired, unimaginative," and emphasized that "What's going to decide this is not what Abrams decides, because he's not going to take any risks at this point, but what you decide." In Nixon's words, Vogt was going out to Southeast Asia on "a rescue mission." Vogt would be Nixon's man in theater—a status that would surely complicate his relations with Abrams.

### Vogt's War: A Summary

Vogt arrived in Saigon on April 10, 1972 and commanded Seventh Air Force through the end of America's war in early 1973. Throughout that time, he had two major operational challenges. Within South Vietnam, U.S. air power would serve as the primary instrument in crushing the NVA offensive. That would demand effective tasking and employment of the hundreds of fighter aircraft—Air Force, Navy, and Marine—committed to the campaign. Simultaneously, Vogt and his staff would orchestrate air offensives against North Vietnam, into the teeth of the most intense air defense environment on earth—first with Operation Freedom Train, a limited offensive against southern North Vietnam, and then starting on May 10, the massive escalation of Operation Linebacker and the mining of North Vietnam's ports.

Air power stagnated the NVA offensive by late June, forcing North Vietnam's leaders to engage in serious negotiations toward a peace settlement. Kissinger's negotiations with North Vietnamese envoy Le Duc Tho stagnated in early December 1972, forcing Nixon to direct a massive offensive against North Vietnam's heartland, Operation Linebacker II. Remembered today as the "Christmas bombing," Linebacker II was probably the most intense air campaign in history. More significantly, it led to a peace settlement, enabling the U.S. to recover its prisoners of war and exit the war on acceptable terms.

### Vogt in Command: A Study in Leadership

Vogt's style and performance in command stemmed from his basic character. His dominant characteristics were his rigid sense of duty, his resilience, and his self-confidence. He felt bound always to reach for higher responsibility and to never turn away from work or risk. What might be seen as naked ambition, as with his request to take command of Seventh Air Force, could more accurately be attributed to his sense that a bad situation existed in Southeast Asia and that it was his duty to do something about it.

As would be expected given his unusual career path, Vogt had some distinctive strengths and weaknesses in command. On the positive side, he maintained effective working relations with the president, the national security advisor, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—a result of his years of experience in multi-service and high-level environments. However, he had spent much of his career in joint assignments, and his means of seeking and gaining command of Seventh Air Force did nothing to strengthen his ties with the Air Force leadership. He had never had any interest in service politics; he had no reservoir of good will among other Air Force leaders and no cadre of trusted subordinates to bring into his command. His relations within the formal chains of command

would have been complicated in any case—he worked for General Abrams in conducting the war in South Vietnam, for Pacific Air Forces commander General Lucius Clay for operations against North Vietnam, and for Air Force Chief of Staff General John Ryan for all kinds of support—all the while knowing that his real bosses were in the White House. His working relationship with the senior Air Force leaders he dealt with were marked by friction at all points.

Vogt was an effective speaker and advocate, a skill honed throughout his career and especially valuable given Abrams's estrangement from both the media and the White House. Moorer asked Vogt to report daily on the state of air operations, and to make himself available to reporters. Vogt was assiduous about both tasks, spending most afternoons in conversations with newsmen. For Moorer, Vogt's ability to articulate the accomplishments of the air war was especially important in maintaining Nixon's patience with military operations.

Vogt was aggressive and optimistic in integrating new technology into operations, eager to take advantage of the cascade of new capabilities developed over the course of the war. The months of the Linebacker air campaign can be viewed as the dawn of contemporary warfare, with the advent of precision weapons, satellite-based imagery and communications, night vision equipment, digital fire control systems, intelligence fusion centers, and computer-based mission planning all coming together in this theater-wide battlespace. Vogt was uniformly optimistic about these new capabilities and inventive in employing them. But he often overestimated their capabilities and the ease with which they could be integrated into the battle. As an example, Vogt built his attacks on North Vietnam around laser-guided weapons, but in some ways these weapons were more sensitive to weather than the unguided bombs used earlier during Rolling Thunder. Moreover, their employment demanded the construction of

attack packages from bases all across Southeast Asia, an inherently complex strategy rendered even more difficult by the inadequate radios of the attack fighters.

At the time when he was appointed to high command, Vogt had devoted his career for a quarter of a century to staff work, and had no experience in the detailed, complex processes involved in commanding a major air campaign. He exacerbated that problem on his first day of command in Saigon by eliminating the planning processes that had been employed since the first days of the air war. It is a mark of Vogt's self-confidence that he took this step, undeterred by the fact that he had never directed so complex an operation.

The inevitable result of Vogt's abolition of existing management processes was disarray in the air war against North Vietnam, manifested by an unfavorable kill ratio against the North Vietnamese fighters and an apparent inability to solve recurring problems in the attack missions. It eventually required direct intervention by the Chief of Staff, General Ryan, to get the Linebacker air campaign on its feet. Disturbed by the lack of improvement in Linebacker operations, Ryan flew out to Saigon in early July 1972 to get a first-hand view of the operation. Unable to take action against Vogt, given Vogt's standing in the White House, Ryan instead fired Seventh Air Force's chief of operations, instituted the practice of theater-wide debriefs after every Linebacker mission, and set in motion the establishment of an intelligence fusion center, codenamed Teaball, to provide warning for Air Force pilots operating over North Vietnam. These measures, combined with the inexorable attrition of North Vietnamese pilots, eventually swung the exchange ratio in favor of the Air Force.

Finally, like any general operating at his level, Vogt operated within an environment established by political leaders on both sides. He was fortunate in commanding under Nixon, who brought a sense of absolute urgency

to the 1972 campaigns that had been so grievously missing under Lyndon Johnson. Conversely, in North Vietnam Vogt faced an extraordinarily resilient, resourceful, and committed adversary, fully mobilized and backed by superpowers in Beijing and Moscow. The North Vietnamese managed to turn the Linebacker campaign into a battle of attrition, a far cry from the overwhelming, cataclysmic defeat that Nixon intended to inflict on them.

General Vogt is little remembered in today's Air Force, a remarkable situation given his role in the momentous climax to the war in Vietnam. He deserves better, though he had his flaws—for the resilience he displayed throughout his career, for his leadership in the dramatic end game of the Vietnam War, and for his role in advancing the technological frontier of air warfare.

### Questions for Reflection:

While there are certainly many different leaders that can be reviewed from a historical perspective, the point with these Profiles in Leadership is to not only review what the leader did, but to also see how that can inform our own personal leader development. In order to facilitate some of that reflection, the following questions are offered:

- General Vogt recovered from a devastating psychological wound in WWII to reach the pinnacle of his profession. How did he achieve this remarkable feat of resilience?
- Vogt's ability to advocate a position was critical to his advancement as a leader. In his case, this was a product of long practice and confidence. How would you assess your capability in this area?
- What would you identify as the lessons that could be learned from Vogt's reliance on advanced technology?

For those who are interested in finding out more about Gen Vogt and his leadership, the following titles are recommended for further reading:

Michel, Marshall L. *The Eleven Days of Christmas: America's Last Vietnam Battle*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002.

Randolph, Stephen P. *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

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