John F. Kennedy: President of the United States (1960-63). Inherited the Vietnam “problem” from President Eisenhower. Believed communism should be stopped using small counter insurgency actions. Favored development of US Special Forces. He was assassinated before he could develop a clear policy on Vietnam and Laos.

Lyndon B. Johnson: became President upon the assassination of Kennedy and won another term in 1964. Increased the American commitment to South Vietnam. Despite his primary concern with social welfare (The Great Society) programs, he became more consumed by the Vietnam War. His policies provided for a gradual but significant escalation of the war and a major US military involvement in Vietnam.

Richard M. Nixon: elected President of the United States (1969-74). Promoted the policy of Vietnamization. Increased the bombing campaigns while the troops were being brought home on a gradual basis. Developed the so-called Nixon Doctrine of gradual withdrawal of US troops and increased aid to the South Vietnamese. His policies embroiled Cambodia into the Vietnam situation and, along with his National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia in an effort to stave off North Vietnam’s conquest of the South. Eventually his withdrew all US combat troops (1972) from S. Vietnam. Resigned because of the Watergate scandal.

General William Westmoreland: commanding general MACV (1965-68). Favored increased use of US combat troops to guard US installations and conduct “search and destroy” operations against the VC and NVA coming into South Vietnam. His idea that attrition of enemy forces would cause the North Vietnam government to abandon their goal of unification with the South. He favored large unit operations to seek out and destroy the VC and NVA base camps and staging areas.

General Creighton Abrams: commanding general MACV (1968-72). Unlike Westmoreland, Abrams favored small unit operations and increased emphasis on pacification programs. Oversaw the gradual Vietnamization of the war and the withdrawal of US troops.

McGeorge Bundy: Special Assistant to the President for National Security under both Kennedy and Johnson. A brilliant but somewhat arrogant man, he was one of the Ivy League “whiz Kids” brought into government from academia by Kennedy. He favored participation in the war during the early stages and helped develop the policy of gradual escalation and bombing campaigns directed at North Vietnam. He became unhappy with the increased US military role and favored more efforts at pacification. He resigned when he felt that the US military role was showing no signs of ending the war.

Robert Komer: head of the US pacification effort in South Vietnam (1967-68). Acting as a civilian deputy for pacification under General Westmoreland, Komer was the deputy chief (under Westmoreland) of the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development) Program. His efforts did not generate much success. He developed the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) to attempt to statistically evaluate village pacification.

Henry Kissinger: National Security Advisor under President Nixon (1969-73). He was a brilliant academic who advocated bombing while talking strategy. He was the US chief negotiator at the Paris Peace talks with Le Duc Tho (the North Vietnamese representative). He, along with Nixon, ordered the secret bombing program of Cambodia (OPERATION MENU) to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail and help the process of Vietnamization. He eventually helped the US reach an agreement with N. Vietnam and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973. He became Secretary of State in 1973.
George Ball: Under Secretary of State during the Kennedy administration. He was always an opponent of the bombing of North Vietnam and an early critic of US policy in Vietnam. He was a member of the group called “the wise men” who advised Lyndon Johnson to disengage from Vietnam and concentrate more on domestic policies and Europe.

Henry Cabot Lodge Jr.: Ambassador to South Vietnam (1963-64 and 1965-67). He was also competed with Barry Goldwater for the Republican candidacy for President (1964). He concurred un the coup plot against Ngo Dinh Diem. He resigned more in discouragement over the political climate in Saigon.

Maxwell Taylor: former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. He was a close advisor to the Kennedy administration and later became Ambassador to South Vietnam (1964-65). He voiced opposition to the increase use of US troops in offensive operations in South Vietnam. Taylor supported a limited role and advocated the “enclave strategy” of protected US air bases and populated coastal areas. He was extremely impatient with the political machinations of the ARVN generals.

Sharp, Ulysses Simpson Grant: an Admiral and Commander in Chief Pacific Command (CINPAC), the largest unified US command. He was the person in charge of Operation ROLLING THUNDER. Sharp advocated unrestricted bombing of North Vietnam and was strongly opposed to the gradualist, limited air campaign against the North.

Walter Whitman Rostow: Chairman, State Department Policy Planning Council(1961-66). He was a strong advocate of US military presence in SE Asia and Vietnam in particular. Rostow thought that increased military force would force North Vietnam to give up the fight against the South. He eventually advocated the policy of reduced US military role proposed by McNamara in 1967-68.

Robert Strange McNamara: Secretary of Defense for the Kennedy and later Johnson administrations (1962-68). He was a “numbers crumper” who believed military and political progress in Vietnam could be statistically quantified. He proposed the “flexible approach” to US commitment and the policy of gradual bombing campaigns to convince the North of the futility of taking over South Vietnam. Initially in favor of US troop deployments to South Vietnam, he became disenchanted with the results and privately advocated a policy of negotiations and withdrawal. He inconsistent stances prompted President Johnson to replace him as Secretary of Defense. He became the President of the World Bank.

Paul Harkins: US General, head of MAAG (later MACV) from 1962-64. An eternal optimist, he downplayed South Vietnam’s poor record against the Vietcong. He was in favor of the Diem regime and encouraged a military defeat of the Vietcong insurgency before political reforms. He was in favor of the Strategic Hamlet program and the use of napalm against VC controlled villages.

William Bundy: brother of McGeorge Bundy (see above). He was a middle level bureaucrat who nevertheless had a great influence on the policies of the US in Vietnam. He was a strong advocate of US intervention in South Vietnam. He coauthored the Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964). A proponent of graduated response and the interdiction of North Vietnam’s war-making potential by bombing Haiphong. He eventually despairs of achieving military victory after the Tet Offensive (1968).

Edward Lansdale: Air Force Colonel who was one of the more influential people during the early stages of the Vietnam War. He was a confidant of Diem and came to Vietnam with a reputations as a counter insurgency specialist, based upon a success against an insurrection against the Philippine government. He worked as a CIA operative and helped plan secret subversion and sabotage missions to North Vietnam. He eventually returned to Vietnam in 1968 as part of a pacification effort but had little influence.

Melvin Laird: US Secretary of Defense under President Nixon (1969-73). He was a consummate political insider who advocated Vietnamization and US troops withdrawals. His point of view differed from National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and Laird was often bypassed when military policy decisions were made during the later stages of the US-Indochina War.