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Matthew Ridgway and the Value of Persistent Dissent

Conrad C. Crane

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ABSTRACT: Army General Matthew Ridgway's actions throughout his career provide a valuable example of the appropriate time and place for serious dissent by military leaders. Ridgway demonstrated the importance of selectively and pragmatically expressing open disagreement in response to operational decisions a military leader deems unnecessarily risk American lives and economic resources.

An article in a recent edition of *Parameters* described General Matthew Ridgway as a model of the traditional American approach to military advice to civilian authorities, an officer who provided unquestioning support for the final national security decisions of his civilian leadership. Ridgway's memoir states his civilian superiors: "could expect fearless and forthright expressions of honest, objective professional opinion up to the moment when they themselves, the civilian commanders, announced their decisions. Thereafter, they could expect completely loyal and diligent execution of those decisions."¹ In the memoir paragraph before, however, Ridgway notes: "civilian authorities must scrupulously respect the integrity, the intellectual honesty, of its officer corps. Any effort to force unanimity of view, to compel adherence to some political-military 'party line' against the honestly expressed views of responsible officers . . . is a pernicious practice which jeopardizes rather than protects the integrity of the military profession."²

Ridgway elaborated on this position in later pages. "I learned early in my career that it is not enough, when great issues are involved, to express your views verbally and let it go at that. It is necessary to put them down in writing, over your signature. In that way they become part of the historical record."³ Ridgway believed civilian leaders had the authority to disagree with military advice and take a different course, but he also believed they should bear the responsibility for any outcomes. He condemned "a deliberate effort to soothe and lull the public by placing responsibility where it did not rest, by conveying the false impression that there was unanimous agreement between the civilian authorities and their military advisers."⁴

1. John C. Binkley, "Revisiting the 2006 Revolt of the Generals," *Parameters* 50, no 1 (Spring 2020): 25, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol50/iss1/1/>.

2. Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway as Told to Harold H. Martin* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 270.

3. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 287.

4. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 288.

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Here Ridgway was specifically referring to his open disagreements with the Eisenhower administration on its New Look defense policies, which led to his tenure as chief of staff of the Army lasting only two years. As he also stated in his memoir, “Under no circumstances, regardless of pressures from whatever source or motive, should the professional military man yield, or compromise his judgment for other than convincing military reasons.”⁵

He applied similar logic to his treatment of directives from his military superiors. In 1966, Ridgway gave an address at the US Army Command and General Staff College in which he counseled the assembly about opposition to orders. He acknowledged military services properly

deal harshly . . . with failure to carry out orders in battle. . . . Yet when faced with different situations from those anticipated, as well as in the transition from plans to orders, there sometimes comes the challenge to one’s conscience, the compelling urge to oppose foolhardy operations before it is too late, before the orders are issued and lives are needlessly thrown away.⁶

Ridgway asserted the hardest decisions to make were “those involved in speaking your mind about some harebrained scheme which proposes to commit troops to action under conditions where failure seems almost certain, and the only results will be the needless sacrifice of priceless lives. . . . For a battle commander to ever condone the unnecessary sacrifice of his men is inexcusable.”⁷ Quoting General George C. Marshall, he observed, “‘It is hard to get men to do this, for this is when you lay your career, perhaps your commission, on the line.’”⁸ For Ridgway, it did not matter if the “harebrained scheme” came from civilian or military leaders.

In his 1966 address, Ridgway cited two examples where he battled to stop “needless sacrifice[s]” while commanding the 82nd Airborne Division in Italy. In one case, he opposed a proposed attack by his division across the Volturno River, over open ground with enemy fire from both flanks and the front, which he considered a suicide mission with only a small chance of success. He initially discussed his opposition with General Lucien Truscott of the 3rd Infantry Division, who agreed with Ridgway’s assessment. Following that discussion, Ridgway took his complaints to his corps commander, and then to the Army commander, before finally getting the operation cancelled.⁹

And opposition based on best military judgment did not cease just because a decision had been made to execute the operation. In the second example, Ridgway’s division received orders to drop on Rome in September 1943 for Operation Giant II, in support of landings in Salerno. General Sir Harold Alexander, 15th Army Group commander, told Ridgway he should expect ground forces to link up with him “in

5. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 272.

6. Matthew B. Ridgway, “Leadership,” *Military Review* 46, no. 10 (October 1966): 44–45.

7. Ridgway, “Leadership,” 45.

8. Ridgway, “Leadership,” 45.

9. Ridgway, “Leadership,” 45.

three days—five at the most.”¹⁰ Assumptions included light opposition despite six German divisions near the city, and help from the Italians who were ready to sever their alliance with Germany.

Ridgway was appalled. The mission would place his division outside the range of supporting fighters and dive-bombers. Moreover, he knew ground forces would never reach the city in time to save his soldiers from a dreadful mauling. While his troops continued to prepare for the operation, Ridgway mounted his campaign to stop it. He reached out to a strong proponent of the operation, General Walter Bedell Smith, then chief of staff for the theater commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Bedell Smith recommended Ridgway approach Alexander. While he did not cancel the drop, Alexander did approve the dispatch of a clandestine delegation, led by Ridgway’s artillery commander Brigadier General Maxwell Taylor, to Rome to assess Italian preparations. Taylor was horrified by what he found and sent four cables supporting cancelling the operation, the last one mere hours before the first aircraft were to take off.¹¹

By this time, Eisenhower had received further intelligence about the lack of Italian capability and readiness, and after Taylor’s last message, Alexander sent an order to Ridgway cancelling Operation Giant II. But no acknowledgment was received. Eisenhower ordered Brigadier General Lyman Lemnitzer, Alexander’s American deputy, to deliver the cancellation order personally to Ridgway by air.

Sixty-two transports were already circling the airfield at Licata when Lemnitzer arrived, and he started frantically shooting flares to get everyone’s attention. The takeoffs stopped, Lemnitzer landed, and he found Ridgway wearing his parachute, preparing to climb into a C-47. Ridgway had spent the day reconciling himself to an operation that would destroy his division, after his failed attempts to dissuade his leadership from this course of action. Immediately, Ridgway recalled paratroopers in the air, while the rest were returned to their bivouacs. “Exhausted and relieved, Ridgway stumbled into a tent where one of his officers sat trembling on a cot. Ridgway poured two drinks from a whiskey bottle, and as darkness fell and calm again enveloped Licata South, they sat slumped together, silent but for the sound of their weeping.”¹²

Limits of Airpower

In his memoir, Ridgway expresses great pride in contributing to another of “that list of tragic accidents that fortunately never happened,” namely, an American intervention to bail out the French in Indochina in 1954, initially with major air attacks.¹³ The series of events that led to the

10. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 81.

11. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 80–82; and D. K. R. Crosswell, *Beetle: The Life of General Walter Bedell Smith*, American Warrior Series (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 502–3.

12. Crosswell, *Beetle*, 504; and Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943–1944* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 194–95.

13. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 278.

death of Operation Vulture began in April 1951 when General Douglas MacArthur was relieved of his command of UN forces in Korea. Though UN forces and their airpower had been successful initially in destroying most of the North Korean People's Army and reaching the Yalu River, massive Communist Chinese intervention had driven MacArthur's command back down the peninsula in November and December. Only in February had the rejuvenated Eighth Army under Ridgway begun to regain the initiative.

By April, public anxiety was high in the United States. Public opinion polls revealed most Americans favored air attacks on Manchuria, and a third of those polled advocated general war with China. President Harry Truman ordered Strategic Air Command bombers with atomic weapons to Okinawa on April 6, 1951, in response to a buildup of Soviet forces in the Far East and ominous Chinese air and ground preparations for their spring offensive. MacArthur's firing raised fears the Communists might escalate the war to take advantage of opportunities created by the change in UN command to Ridgway. But in May the new commander's forces stopped the massive Chinese fifth-phase offensive and began a series of vigorous counterattacks. Ridgway's slow but inexorable advance was only stopped by the opening of armistice negotiations in July.¹⁴

After replacing MacArthur and stopping the Communist advance, Ridgway faced the challenge of negotiating with a difficult enemy while his military options for leverage at the peace table were limited. Once battle lines stabilized along an entrenched front and armistice talks began, he determined airpower would be his best option to exert coercive military pressure on the enemy. On July 13, 1951, he instructed his Far East Air Forces (FEAF) and naval air units, "desire action during this period of negotiations to exploit full capabilities of air power to reap maximum benefit of our ability to punish enemy wherever he may be in [Korea]."¹⁵

Though Ridgway believed ratcheting up bombing would produce results at the peace talks, he still had to deal with American leaders in Washington who did not want to escalate the war any further. They were particularly sensitive about attacks on major North Korean cities. On July 21, Ridgway informed the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) that a key part of his plan "for unrelenting pressure on Communist forces" was "an all out air strike on Pyongyang" with 140 medium and light bombers and 230 fighters, to be executed on the first clear day after July 24. This operation would "take advantage of the accelerated buildup

14. Mark Andrew O'Neill, "The Other Side of the Yalu: Soviet Pilots in the Korean War, Phase One, 1 November 1950–12 April 1951," (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1996), 273–74; Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988–1989): 69–79; Roger M. Anders, "The Atomic Bomb and the Korean War: Gordon Dean and the Issue of Civilian Control," *Military Affairs* 52, no. 1 (January 1988): 1–3; and Conrad C. Crane, "Killing Vultures, Containing Communism, and Venting Pressure: International Impacts of the Korean War," *Annual War History Research Report* 10, no. 3 (2007): 90.

15. Ridgway to Hickey, message, UNC-071, July 13, 1951, file K720.1622, 1950–51, Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), Maxwell Air Force Base, AL.

of supplies and personnel” in the area, “strike a devastating blow at the North Korean capital,” and make up for the many recent sorties canceled by bad weather.¹⁶

Ridgway’s concerns about bad weather proved well founded. When the all-out attack on Pyongyang was finally mounted on July 30 after approval by the JCS, deteriorating weather conditions forced the diversion of light and medium bombers to secondary targets, while smoke and cloud cover made any assessment of the 620 fighter and fighter-bomber sorties very difficult. Results were deemed indecisive, so another full-scale assault on the capital by FEAF Bomber Command was carried out on August 14, 1951. Two Strategic Air Command B-29 wings had to use radar to deliver bombs through cloud cover. Ridgway was disappointed with the poor results and collateral civilian casualties, instructing FEAF to wait for excellent weather for any more major raids.¹⁷

Encouraged by his success in gaining JCS permission to bomb Pyongyang, Ridgway revisited a proposed attack of the port of Rashin, a city close to the Soviet border. Aerial reconnaissance revealed an extensive buildup of materiel and supplies that could be funneled south through the highway and rail complex there. In reply to queries about his specific plans, Ridgway assured the Joint Chiefs that he would not violate the border with air strikes.

In this endeavor, Ridgway had the strong support of the US Air Force Air Staff who thought the raids would hamper enemy supply buildup and pressure Communist negotiators at the armistice talks by proving “all of their sanctuaries [were] not privileged.”¹⁸ Rashin was also considered “the last major profitable strategic target in Korea.”¹⁹ The Air Staff discounted diplomatic concerns because the Soviets had not responded to similar attacks. The Joint Chiefs agreed and obtained presidential approval to authorize the bombing raid. Naval aircraft provided cover for 35 B-29s who pummeled the port with 300 tons of bombs on August 25 in good weather. No follow-up raids were necessary.²⁰

16. CINCFE to Subordinate Commands, message, CX 60410, April 19, 1951, section 45; CINCFE to Subordinate Commands, message, C 61367, April 30, 1951, section 46, box 31; CINCFE to Subordinate Commands, message, C 67474, July 21, 1951, section 54, box 33, geographic file 1951–53, 383.21 Korea (3-19-45), record group 218, National Archives II, College Park, MD; Ridgway to Hickey, message, UNC-071, July 13, 1951; and Crane, “Killing Vultures,” 91–92.

17. CINCFE to JCS, message, C 68064, July 31, 1951, box 1, incoming messages, May 29, 1950–August 3, 1951, RG 218; Terrill to Power, letter, August 16, 1951, file B-12789, box B198, Curtis LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Matthew B. Ridgway, notes on conference with General Weyland, August 30, 1951, folder, special file April 1951–January 1952, Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, US Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC), Carlisle, PA.

18. Joseph Smith to General Vandenberg, memorandum, “Removal of Restriction against Attacks on Najin (Rashin),” file OPD 381 Korea (May 9, 1947), section 12, box 894, RG 341.

19. Joseph Smith to General Vandenberg, memorandum (May 9, 1947).

20. JCS 1776/244 with enclosures, “Removal of Restriction Against Attacks on Najin (Rashin),” August 10, 1951, section 57, box 33, geographic file 1951–53, 383.21 Korea (3-19-45), RG 218; Joseph Smith to General Vandenberg, memorandum (May 9, 1947); *United States Air Force Operations in the Korean Conflict, 1 November 1950–30 June 1952*, US Air Force Historical Study No. 72 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: US Air Force Historical Division, Air University, July 1, 1955), 145.

Ultimately, the increased use of airpower had no impact on the armistice talks. Even after his attempts to influence negotiations that summer, Ridgway's air priorities remained focused on coercing through interdiction, a difficult task in Korea in 1951, but the best he thought he could accomplish with the limitations on military operations imposed by the Joint Chiefs. The FEAF did not have enough aircraft or the proper technology to interdict at night, while the enemy had plenty of labor to repair damage to communication lines.²¹ Further, the reduced military activity during the armistice negotiations meant the Communist adversaries required fewer supplies.

UN air forces did their best to meet Ridgway's expectations. With US Navy air support, FEAF tried three different programs in 1951 to interdict the logistics of Communist armies, yet they all failed, and for different reasons. The first, Interdiction Plan No. 4, targeted North Korean rail lines but was too ambitious. Bomber Command successfully closed 27 of 39 assigned marshalling yards and took out 48 of 60 targeted bridges, but B-29 losses were heavy, and the rail system proved too resilient to be paralyzed effectively.

When the massive spring offensives showed the inadequacies of that approach, FEAF shifted to Operation Strangle, focusing primarily on the North Korean road network. US Navy, Marine, and Air Force aircraft were assigned different sectors to bomb. They cratered roads, dispersed tetrahedral tacks to destroy tires, and dropped delayed action bombs to deter repair crews, with more disappointing results. The enemy bypassed blockages, accepted casualties to complete repairs, and exploited the lack of effective UN night bombing capability by moving after dark. The FEAF came to regret the name of the operation, as it raised exorbitant expectations.

In August 1951, still another campaign was initiated, the Rail Interdiction Program, though many Air Force officers and the press still referred to it as Strangle. This effort was better organized and more effective. Carrier aircraft targeted east coast rail lines while Bomber Command attacked bridges. Swarming FEAF fighter bombers cut lines all over North Korea. Some rail lines were abandoned as enemy repair crews could not keep up with the pace of destruction. Far East Air Forces planners began to believe that limited Communist truck resources might force the enemy to pull back from its positions along the 38th parallel.²²

But that was not to be, as enemy countermeasures, such as building duplicate bridges at key crossing points and caching whole bridge

21. Eduard Mark, *Aerial Interdiction: Air Power and the Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1994), 289–319.

22. Mark, *Aerial Interdiction*; O'Neill, "The Other Side," 281–85; US Pacific Fleet Commander in Chief, *Interim Third Evaluation Report, 1 May–31 December 1951* (Washington, DC: US Naval Historical Center), 10-45–10-46; HQ Far East Air Forces (FEAF), *FEAF Report on the Korean War, 25 June 1950–27 July 1953*, book 1, 77, file K720.04D, AFHRA; "The Aerial War during Operation Strangle," vol. 1, 12–17; and "Notes on Use of the Term 'Operation Strangle,'" vol. 3, appendix 2, in *History of the Fifth Air Force, 1 July–31 December 1951*, file K730.01, AFHRA.

sections for quick repairs, again turned the tide. Intelligence reports estimated as many as 500,000 soldiers and civilians maintained transportation routes. Increased antiaircraft defenses appeared around key targets, and enemy MiG jet fighters operating from Manchuria became more aggressive. By September 1951, Soviet and Chinese MiGs outnumbered F-86 Sabres in the theater 500 to 90. The enemy interceptors drove back FEAF fighter-bombers, shooting down enough B-29s by October to force Bomber Command from the daytime skies. These actions further reduced Ridgway's ability to maintain pressure effectively on enemy forces and supply lines and thus to influence negotiations.²³

Ultimately, Ridgway's hopes he could use airpower to prevent the enemy from building up supplies proved false, and he became disillusioned with Air Force capability claims. He once told his air commanders, "If all the enemy trucks you report as having destroyed during the past ten days or so were actually kills, then there would not be a truck left in all of Asia."²⁴

Further, the ineffectiveness of interdiction campaigns was not the only reason Ridgway disagreed strongly with Air Force claims of its decisive role in the Korean War. He noted ground forces accounted for 97 percent of battle casualties, and their performance "determined the success or failure of the United Nations effort, which in turn determined the course of United States and United Nations policy."²⁵ In his Korean War memoirs, he gave the Air Force credit for its essential support to ground operations and saving UN forces from disaster early in the war, but he also cautioned against expecting "miracles of interdiction" from airpower in future conflicts.²⁶

As the months passed, Ridgway's frustration with the armistice talks persisted. His battles with the Joint Chiefs over the bombing of Rashin and Pyongyang and the ineffectiveness of the interdiction campaigns had tempered Ridgway's initial determination to use airpower to coerce enemy negotiators. The Communist armies twice broke off talks, citing air attacks on the site of the talks—once due to apparently faked evidence and once because of an actual UN bombing error—and Ridgway was thereby reluctant to raise the stakes and risk further stalled negotiations. Accordingly, he would not approve orders to expand target sets to include hydroelectric dams along the Yalu River, courses of action his successor, General Mark Clark, would pursue.

23. William F. Dean, *General Dean's Story* (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 272–73; J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime: The History and Lessons of Korea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 313; Mark, *Aerial Interdiction*, 312–14; Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950–1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 176–81; and Brigadier General Joe Kelly to LeMay, letters, October 29, 1971 and November 7, 1951, file FEAF 1, box 65, Curtis LeMay Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

24. M. B. Ridgway to Colonel Paul Carter, letter, December 15, 1976, folder C, 1964–1983, post retirement A–G, Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, USAHEC.

25. Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War*, repr. (New York: Da Capo, 1986), viii.

26. Mark, *Aerial Interdiction*; M. B. Ridgway to Colonel Paul Carter, letter, December 15, 1976; and Ridgway, *Korean War*, 191, 244.

In May 1952 Ridgway left the Far East to become Supreme Allied Commander Europe. He retained a strong skepticism about the utility of airpower alone that would have a significant impact on his future actions.²⁷

As chief of staff of the Army from 1953–55, Ridgway’s disillusionment with the capabilities of airpower in limited war was evident in his attitudes about New Look defense policies favoring the Air Force and possible intervention in Indochina to assist the French. Upon learning the Eisenhower administration was considering air intervention alone to save the beleaguered French garrison at Dien Bien Phu and help them defeat the Viet Minh, he expressed fears the United States had already forgotten the “bitter lesson” from Korea “that air and naval power alone cannot win a war and that inadequate ground forces cannot win one either.”²⁸ He was determined to avoid “making that same tragic error” in Indochina.²⁹

Killing the Vulture

Planning for Operation Vulture (Vautour) began in earnest in mid-April 1954. On a routine liaison visit to Vietnam, FEAF commander General Earle Partridge was informed by the French that the aerial operation to save Dien Bien Phu had been cleared through diplomatic channels. Partridge had received no information regarding the approval of the operation; nonetheless, he ordered the chief of FEAF Bomber Command, Brigadier General Joseph Caldera, to prepare a contingency plan. Bomber Command still had its wartime contingent of B-29s for a mass strike, but Caldera foresaw many problems with the operation when he flew to Vietnam to confer with the French, including the fact there were “no true B-29 targets” in the area, and bad monsoon weather necessitated the use of radar guidance systems the French did not possess.³⁰

Opposition to Vulture, however, would soon obviate the need for such planning. Ridgway led the effort against it in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, galvanized by the fact that the chairman, Admiral Arthur Radford, supported the mission. Radford’s high-handed tactics to coerce Ridgway to accede to New Look policies had poisoned relations between the two men. Ridgway considered the New Look “a misguided policy that endangered the nation’s security.”³¹ He forthrightly expressed

27. Ridgway, *Korean War*, 200, 202, 244.

28. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 277.

29. Ridgway, *Korean War*, viii; Ridgway, *Soldier*, 277.

30. Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 205–6; and George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950–1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 1986), 31.

31. A. J. Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986), 22.

such opinions in congressional hearings, which pleased Democratic opposition and eventually made him *persona non grata* with Eisenhower.³²

Ridgway was just as forthright about his position on helping the French in March 1954 when the issue arose at a gathering for General Paul Ely, the French chief of the armed forces staff, at Radford's home. Ely was in Washington to garner additional aid due to the dire situations at Dien Bien Phu and in Indochina. When the supportive Radford asked if the French just needed more airpower for success, Ridgway challenged the assertion before Ely could reply. He noted in his diary afterward, "the experience of Korea, where we had complete domination of the air and a far more powerful air force, afforded no basis for thinking that some additional air power was going to bring decisive results on the ground."³³

Ridgway then mobilized the rest of the Joint Chiefs so when Radford advocated his proposition to support the French a few days later, they were unified in opposition to it. The chairman then asked for the written views of each chief. Ridgway's carefully crafted argument about the costs and strategic risks of possible involvement in Indochina was eventually sent to the secretary of defense. Ridgway also ordered his director of operations, Major General James Gavin, to send a team to the theater to gauge its conditions. They returned with a bleak report highlighting inadequate support facilities, massive logistic difficulties in the theater, the number of troops required for operations, and the impact on strategic reserves.

Implicit in these calculations was the assumption that airpower alone would not save the French and defeat the Viet Minh. Ridgway exploited his connections in France from his time as the Supreme Allied Commander Europe to monitor additional French requests for support, using the inside information to keep the other chiefs aligned with him, especially Air Force Chief of Staff General Nathan Twining. Eventually Ridgway prepared a briefing for the National Security Council and asked to deliver it with President Eisenhower in attendance. When Ely returned to make a final plea for support after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in May, Ridgway still did not trust Radford. Consequently, he convinced the other chiefs to agree that no member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff could meet with Ely alone.³⁴

Ridgway's arguments from the June 1954 National Security Council briefing, which could be summed up as "ten divisions and ten years"

32. Bacevich, *Pentomic Era*, 41; and A. J. Bacevich, "The Paradox of Professionalism: Eisenhower, Ridgway, and the Challenge to Civilian Control, 1953–1955," *Journal of Military History* 61 (April 1997): 303–33.

33. Matthew B. Ridgway, memorandum, "Conversation at Home of Admiral Radford, March 22, 1954," Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, USAHEC.

34. Arthur Radford, memoranda for the secretary of defense, March 31 and April 22, 1954; Matthew B. Ridgway, memoranda for JCS, April 2 and 6, 1954; James M. Gavin, "Military Consequences of Various Courses of Action with Respect to Application of U.S. Military Forces in Indochina"; Matthew B. Ridgway, memoranda for record, April 28 and May 17, 1954; and Matthew B. Ridgway Chief of Staff of the US Army to Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 7, 1954, "Projected Conversations Here with General Ely, French Army," Matthew B. Ridgway Papers, USAHEC.

to win in Indochina, even without Chinese intervention, appeared in an article in *US News & World Report* that same month. The article argued more soldiers would be necessary to fight in Indochina than in Korea, and defense budgets would skyrocket while draft requirements quadrupled. The lack of reliable allies and bases would complicate “almost insurmountable” logistic problems, while jungle warfare would nullify any American advantages in “mechanized, mobile equipment.”³⁵ Ridgway’s comments were probably leaked by members of Eisenhower’s staff, to use the arguments of another respected military commander to support the president’s decision not to intervene.

Ridgway was not the only leader in Washington strongly opposed to unilateral aid to the French. Key congressmen in early April 1954 also showed little confidence in the air option, warning, “once the flag is committed, the use of land forces would surely follow.”³⁶ They also demanded Great Britain and other Allies participate in a collective intervention. Democratic Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia led the congressional opposition to Operation Vulture. Ridgway viewed him as an ally in his efforts to stay out of Indochina, as Russell certainly remembered the acrimonious debates about inflated expectations of airpower when he chaired the May 1951 joint hearings following Truman’s firing of MacArthur.³⁷

The death knell for Operation Vulture was the refusal of Great Britain to be drawn into “Radford’s war against China.”³⁸ American and French talks on intervention continued after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in early May, but no serious plans resulted. Historians such as George Herring and Richard Immerman believe Eisenhower was more willing to intervene than he admitted later in his memoirs.³⁹ Others, such as Melanie Billings-Yun, think Eisenhower never wanted to intervene militarily but could not afford to take that position openly without weakening France’s motivation to win the war and without bringing into question America’s commitment to the security of Southeast Asia.⁴⁰

If Billings-Yun is right, lessons of the Korean air war were fresh enough in 1954 to help inspire a vocal opposition that reinforced the president’s inclination to avoid direct military involvement in Indochina. If Herring and Immerman are correct, then that opposition may have

35. “What Ridgway Told Ike—War in Indo-China Would Be Tougher Than Korea,” *US News & World Report*, June 25, 1954, 30–32.

36. George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: ‘The Day We Didn’t Go to War’ Revisited,” *Journal of American History* 71, no. 2 (September 1984): 353.

37. United States Senate, “Constitutional Crisis Averted,” Historical Highlights, May 3, 1951, United States Senate (website), https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Constitutional_Crisis_Averted.htm; and Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea 1950–1953* (Topeka: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 74–75, 179–80.

38. Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 360.

39. Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 346–63; and Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change 1953–1956* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963).

40. Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

changed his mind by demonstrating just how perilous and divisive even a limited aerial intervention would be. Ridgway wrote of his role:

When the day comes for me to face my Maker and account for my actions, the thing I would be most humbly proud of was the fact that I fought against, and perhaps contributed to preventing, the carrying out of some harebrained tactical schemes which would have cost the lives of thousands of men. To that list of tragic incidents that fortunately never happened I would add the Indo-China intervention.⁴¹

Leadership Legacies

A decade later when problems in Indochina again tempted American involvement, Ridgway was no longer in a position of responsibility or influence. His independence and outspoken ways as Army chief of staff led to his early retirement in 1955, his fate an echo of Marshall's warnings about strong dissent. Ridgway's only available option was to warn belatedly in articles and a book about unclear political objectives and caution about the limitations of airpower and difficulties of operations in Indochina.⁴²

It is ironic that the retired Army general who had the ears of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson was instead Taylor, Ridgway's successor and an enthusiastic advocate of intervention in Vietnam. As Army chief of staff, Taylor also opposed Eisenhower's New Look policies, but he was not as openly combative. Instead he let Gavin lead the opposition and had a clandestine group of colonels in the G-3 write articles and leak information to undermine the president's security initiatives. Eventually the officers were discovered, and Taylor was told to relieve them. He did, but he also gave them plum follow-on assignments, appreciating the fact they had taken the fall for him. Due to these firings and his more muted dissent, he was able to maintain his position in both Kennedy's and Johnson's inner circles when important decisions were being made about Vietnam in the 1960s.⁴³

In retrospect, US involvement in Vietnam may have proved more efficacious in 1954, when Communist forces were not as organized or well supplied and China was still reeling from the Korean War. But the United States was not prepared for a major conflict there. All Ridgway's arguments against intervention in 1954 remained valid 10 years later, but he was no longer in a position to make such a pitch to national leaders. One of the other cautions about persistent and career-risking dissent on important issues is that the effort can turn into "falling on your sword," and you can only do that once.

Yet there are times when such risks should be taken, especially in the face of significant risks to American lives and resources. In January

41. Ridgway, *Soldier*, 278.

42. Matthew B. Ridgway, "Pull-out, All-out, or Stand Fast in Vietnam?" *Look*, April 5, 1966, 81–84; Ridgway, *Korean War*, 244.

43. David T. Fautua, "The Inconsonant Culture: Ridgway, Taylor, and the Proper Role in Civil-Military Relations" (paper, Conference of Army Historians, June 19, 1996); Bacevich, *Pentomic Era*, 42–46.

2004, Michael O’Hanlon strongly condemned Army leaders for carrying out a plan to invade Iraq they knew was deeply flawed. He argued they knew the post-conflict preparations were lacking and were obligated to find some way to fix Operation Iraqi Freedom or refuse to execute it.⁴⁴ Even Ridgway would not have advocated that course of action, but perhaps General Eric Shinseki, who voiced his concerns about occupation forces in an infamous February 2003 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, could have benefitted from adopting some aspects of Ridgway’s 1954 playbook.

As with any historical analogy, there are many key differences. Post Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the Army chief of staff position has not been as powerful as it was in 1954, and in 2003, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld kept a tight rein on information flow in the Pentagon. But perhaps Shinseki could have mobilized the other chiefs in support of his position and prepared a strong memorandum about his concerns for the historical record. He also might have considered Senator Carl Levin—chair of the committee—who asked the hard questions during the February hearing, as an ally in his efforts to adjust force levels.

There might have been career implications, but Shinseki had already been all but fired and his successor designated. The Army chief, however, instead chose to follow the “traditional model,” and after the Senate hearing kept the rest of his concerns private even after scathing public rebuttals from the secretary of defense and his key subordinates.⁴⁵ We will never know whether more persistent and open dissent could have made a difference or not. It may have forced adjustments to the invasion plan, or such dissent may have soured civil-military relations further.

Too much dissent certainly has the potential to make the deliverer appear to be obstructionist or not a team player. Even Ridgway advocated strong resistance in only extreme cases. But there are times when a military leader’s responsibility to the nation and their profession to give best military advice and preserve precious lives and economic resources outweigh operational or political considerations. Such occasions are rare, but the consequences of weak acquiescence in these situations could be catastrophic. The careful allocation of dissent is yet another burden strategic-level leaders must bear as they rise in the ranks of national decision making.

44. Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Iraq without a Plan,” *Policy Review*, December 1, 2004, <https://www.hoover.org/research/iraq-without-plan>.

45. Binkley, “Revolt of the Generals.”