Because of those inherent flaws, the command structure during the Vietnam war almost defies description. The Vietnam command, which eventually included nearly one-fourth of all U.S. military personnel, remained, as it began, a sub-command under the U.S. Pacific Commander [located in Hawaii] who is responsible for "the entire Pacific Ocean from the Aleutian chain through the Strait of Malacca and most of the Indian Ocean." As the war escalated, the Army proposed that the Vietnam commander should be a full unified commander reporting directly to the Secretary of Defense and JCS. But the issue was too tough for the JCS to handle and formal command arrangements remained unchanged. As a result, a second, less official but more authoritative, direct command link between Washington and Saigon emerged.

Divided overall command was further complicated by the arrangements for air forces. The Vietnam commander was responsible for air operations in Vietnam. The Pacific commander conducted air operations against North Vietnam and the Laotian panhandle through separate subordinate Navy and Air Force commands. When B-52s were introduced, they remained under the direct command of the Strategic Air Command, headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska.

Thus, the U.S. fought four air wars in Southeast Asia, and top commanders responded to two redundant chains of command. No service was willing to relinquish a part of its control in order to further the joint war effort. The JCS, a committee of service chiefs, was structurally unable to iron out command differences. And even if it could have done so, the JCS lacked the clout to enforce its conclusions.

The American withdrawal from Vietnam was followed by more limited U.S. military operations—such as the Mayaguez and Desert One affairs—that focused attention on the problems of defense organization. Analyst Jeffrey Record went so far as to indict the 30-year record of American military prowess since that system had been set up:

> Not since the Inchon landing has a significant U.S. military venture been crowned by success. On the contrary, our military performance since September 1950 suggests that we as a society have lost touch with the art of war. Inchon was followed by the rout of American forces along the Yalu; Yalu by the Bay of Pigs fiasco; the Bay of Pigs by disaster in Indochina; Indochina by the fizzled raid to retrieve U.S. POWs thought to be confined in North Vietnam's Son Tay prison camp; Son Tay by the abortive assault on Koh Tang Island in search of the crew of the hijacked Mayaguez; and Mayaguez by the debacle in the Iranian desert.

In February 1982, General David C. Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, kicked off the current JCS reform debate in an appearance before the House Committee on Armed Services. Following his testimony, he wrote an article entitled, "Why The Joint Chiefs of Staff Must Change". He called for three changes: strengthening the role of the JCS Chairman, limiting service staff involvement in the joint process, and broadening the training, experience and rewards for joint service. He also struck a sobering note in describing why these changes were necessary: