

WILLIAM CONRAD GIBBONS

The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War

*Executive and Legislative Roles and
Relationships, Part III*



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THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND THE
VIETNAM WAR

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Executive and Legislative Roles
and Relationships

PART III: JANUARY-JULY 1965

WILLIAM CONRAD GIBBONS

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To

F. Palmer Weber
1914–1986

for his steadfast commitment
to freedom, justice, and peace

PREFACE

This third part of *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*—a study of policymaking during thirty years of U.S. involvement, 1945-1975—covers the watershed period from the decisions in February-March 1965 to launch the air war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and to begin sending U.S. ground forces to the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), to the decision of President Lyndon B. Johnson in July 1965 to commit United States ground forces to defend South Vietnam. "We did not choose to be the guardians at the gate," he announced on July 28, "but there is no one else. . . . We will stand in Vietnam."

Following a brief review in chapter 1 of the developments in 1964 that affected the choices made in 1965, including approval by the President in early December 1964 of a two-stage plan for "measured" military pressure against North Vietnam, the study discusses the developments in 1965 that culminated in the decision to use large-scale U.S. forces.

On January 26, 1965, amid signs of a growing threat from the Communists, another coup took place in Saigon as Nguyen Khanh, the head of the Armed Forces Council that effectively controlled the government, and his supporters, backed by the Buddhists, voted to remove the civilian Premier, Tran Van Huong. The United States had been supporting Huong, and U.S. officials were concerned that Khanh, who at the time was not considered a reliable ally, was preparing, with the Buddhists, to move toward neutralization or negotiations with the Communists. There was considerable support from the U.S. Mission in Saigon and within the Far East Bureau of the State Department for replacing Khanh, but the reaction of President Johnson (who had opposed the U.S.-supported coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963), was to continue supporting Khanh rather than to risk creating an even more unstable political situation.

On January 27, McGeorge Bundy, the President's National Security Adviser, and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara sent the President a memorandum urging him to use American power "to force a change of Communist policy," and at a meeting with them and Secretary of State Dean Rusk the President said that after U.S. dependents were removed from Vietnam, "stable government or no stable government we'll do what we ought to do. . . . *We will move strongly*" (emphasis in original).

At the meeting it was agreed that McGeorge Bundy and a small group would visit South Vietnam for a report on the situation.

On February 7, 1965, just before Bundy and his group returned to Washington, the Communists attacked a U.S. base at Pleiku. The U.S. Mission in Saigon as well as Bundy and his group recommended retaliation, and the President, after a meeting with advisers that included key leaders of Congress, approved U.S. bombing strikes on North Vietnam.

In his report on the trip, Bundy said that "the international prestige of the United States, and a substantial part of our influence, are directly at risk in Vietnam." The situation was deteriorating, he said, and unless the U.S. acted, "defeat appears inevitable." A negotiated withdrawal would mean "surrender on the installment plan."

Bundy stressed the need to demonstrate that the U.S. had the "will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course." He recommended that the U.S. should begin "sustained reprisal" against the North, both to affect the will of Hanoi, and, more importantly, to affect the will of the Communists in the South, and to boost the morale of the South Vietnamese.

Toward the middle of February 1965, the President decided to begin Phase II ("sustained reprisal") and approved a continuing program of bombing North Vietnam. Khanh was persuaded to step down, and the U.S., which had deferred acting until Khanh had been replaced, began regular bombing of the North. A few days later, the President also approved the deployment of a Marine combat unit, the first U.S. ground forces to be sent to South Vietnam, despite objections from Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor.

In mid-March 1965, the President sent General Harold K. Johnson, U.S. Army Chief of Staff, to meet with Taylor and the U.S. Commander in Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, and to tell them that he was "prepared to act immediately and favorably on any recommendations" which they and General Johnson made.

While General Johnson was in Vietnam, McGeorge Bundy, after meeting with Rusk and McNamara, told the President the three of them agreed that "... the brutal fact is that we have been losing ground at an increasing rate in the countryside in January and February," and that "every conceivable effort" needed to be made in the pacification program. For the first time, Bundy said, McNamara expressed the opinion that the military had been "going at this thing the wrong way round ... they have been concentrating on military results against guerrillas in the field, when they should have been concentrating on intense police control from the individual village on up."

Bundy also reported that he, Rusk, and McNamara agreed on the need to explore, despite Taylor's objection, the possibility of sending a large allied force to the central highlands (an area in the midsection of South Vietnam) as a show of force that could act as a deterrent.

In a meeting with the three advisers several days later, the President commented that although others had favored the idea of using U.S. forces more strongly than he had, "... I did *cross bridge* in my own mind in December" (emphasis in original). But, he said, "If you can show me any reasonable out I'll grab it."

He continued (as recorded by McGeorge Bundy in informal notes):

To give in = another Munich.
if not here—then Thailand.

Come hell or high water, we're gonna stay there.

In his report a few days later on his trip to Vietnam, General Johnson said that "time is running out swiftly in Vietnam," and recommended that a U.S. combat division be deployed to the central highlands and that an international or all-U.S. force of four divisions be sent to the area around the demilitarized zone between North and

South Vietnam. In addition, he recommended twenty-one other steps "to arrest the deterioration."

On March 15, 1965, the President met with General Johnson, and although there apparently are no notes of that meeting, according to General Andrew J. Goodpaster (who was then assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and had been with General Johnson on the trip), General Johnson told the President that it could take 500,000 men and five years to win the war.

The President approved General Johnson's twenty-one recommendations, but apparently did not at that time explicitly approve the recommendation for U.S. combat troops.

A month later, however, after General Westmoreland and the JCS had requested two divisions of U.S. troops, and amid reports that a North Vietnamese battalion had moved into the central highlands, the President (again over the objections of Ambassador Taylor) approved requests for additional U.S. ground combat forces. This increased the number of troops approved for deployment to Vietnam from 65,700 (there had been about 20,000 in the U.S. military advisory group at the beginning of 1965) to 82,000. He also approved limited use of U.S. forces in direct combat against Communist forces, but directed that this be kept secret.

Although the news media carried stories on these developments, some of which were quite accurate and complete, Congress was given very little information, and there were renewed questions from the Foreign Relations Committee about consultation with Congress before escalating the conflict.

Faced with growing congressional and public discontent—the first Vietnam protest march in Washington took place in mid-April 1965—the White House began to organize a publicity campaign, and the President, rather than moving toward greater consultation, sent Congress a request for a special appropriation for Vietnam with the statement that the approval of the request would constitute approval of U.S. policy. A number of members complained about this procedure and stated that in voting for the bill they were not approving U.S. policy; but the bill passed quickly, with only seven dissenting votes in the House and three in the Senate.

On June 7, 1965, General Westmoreland requested additional U.S. forces "to take the war to the enemy": 100,000 troops immediately, with more to follow. The President's principal advisers (with the exception of Under Secretary of State George W. Ball) supported the idea; however, William P. Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, favored holding the line at approximately 100,000 troops (about 18,000 more than were then authorized) until the end of the monsoon season (October), and then taking stock again. After several weeks of discussion, during which the President continued to approve the deployment of additional combat units, McNamara was again sent to Vietnam in mid-July, and in his report he recommended approval of Westmoreland's request. The situation in South Vietnam was critical, McNamara said, and more U.S. and other outside forces were needed to prevent a Communist victory.

The President then spent the week of July 21-28, 1965, discussing the report with his advisers. Although he apparently already decided to approve Westmoreland's request, several important questions were still being considered. Would the Communists wage primarily

a guerrilla war for which U.S. forces might not be well suited? Yes, said the intelligence community (the CIA and the intelligence offices in the other agencies and departments), but McNamara and the military took the position that harassment by U.S. troops would force the Communists "to come out and fight," and even if they did not, that "U.S. forces can engage guerrillas as well as the main force units." Rusk also thought that if the Communists were forced to fight a guerrilla war this would have the advantage of "removing their capability" to use main forces.

If the U.S. added more men, would the Communists do the same? Yes, the intelligence community said. Yes, the military also said, but they argued that North Vietnam could not match the U.S. buildup; therefore the escalation of U.S. forces would "turn the tide," and "sooner or later we will force them to the conference table."

Could the U.S. "win"? The President and his associates, as well as various defense strategists, apparently assumed that there would be a "breaking point" at which the Communists would yield. A JCS study on the question, "Can we win if we do everything we can?" concluded that under certain stated assumptions about the behavior of other parties to the conflict, the U.S. could "win if such is our will—and if that will is manifested in strategy and tactical operations." ("Winning" was defined as the achievement of a state of affairs between on the one hand, an end to the insurgency, and, on the other, containment of the insurgency without the need for further involvement of "substantial" U.S. forces.)

Was the government of Vietnam strong enough to do its part? McNamara doubted whether the South Vietnamese government, which he called a "nongovernment," could "push forward with any major program." Henry Cabot Lodge, the new U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, who had held the same post in the Kennedy administration, said: "If the area is important to us, we must do what is necessary regardless of the Government."

How much would the war cost? McNamara estimated that it would cost \$12 billion in 1966, and add only one or two points to the cost-of-living index. In actuality, it cost \$25 billion in 1966, and added six points to the cost-of-living index in 1966 alone.

Would the public, the President asked his advisers, support a war that might require "600,000 people and billions of dollars spent 10,000 miles away"? The only answer on record was that a Gallup poll indicated public support for the U.S. "commitment." According to McGeorge Bundy, "The country is in a mood to accept grim news." (In a meeting in Washington on July 8-9, 1965, a group of sixteen prominent American leaders, the "Wise Men," who had been asked by the President for their advice, replied that the "stakes were very high indeed," and that the President should send whatever additional combat forces were required to prevent the Communists from taking control of South Vietnam.)

During the meetings of July 21-28, the President told his associates he regretted that the U.S. was involved in the war, but "we are there," he said, and he could see no choice other than to approve the request for more forces. At the same time, he stressed the need for vigorous diplomatic efforts to end the war, apparently assuming that a military victory was unlikely and that, after the Communists were

convinced that they could not win, they would cease fighting and there would be some kind of political settlement.

Rusk stressed the importance of U.S. credibility, especially with the Russians and the Chinese. "It would be dangerous," he said, "if the Communist leadership became convinced that we will not see this through."

On July 28, 1965, the President announced that 50,000 more U.S. forces would be sent to Vietnam, but that he would not call up the Reserves as recommended by McNamara. Additional forces would be needed later, he said, and they would be sent as requested.

Although this was a decision to go to war, it was not treated as such by the President, both to avoid arousing Congress and the public—the President especially wanted to protect his domestic "Great Society" program—and to keep from creating the impression of a crisis that might excite the Communists as well as U.S. allies and lead to an escalation of the war that might hamper the prospects for a diplomatic solution. A declaration of war did not appear to be necessary, and it was argued, especially by the Justice Department, that the existing Gulf of Tonkin Resolution constituted whatever congressional approval was needed. Although there was some consideration of a new resolution, which would more clearly authorize large-scale U.S. military action, the Majority Leader of the Senate, Mike Mansfield (D/Mont.), who opposed the war, warned the President that a request for a new resolution could result in a debate that would adversely affect presidential leadership and programs.

There was very little public or congressional reaction to the President's decision. According to a Gallup poll, 61 percent of the public supported the decision. In Congress, several senators and at least twenty-five representatives indicated their opposition, but, with the exception of Senator Mansfield, the elected Democratic and Republican leaders of the House and the Senate supported the decision in a meeting with the President on July 27. There was however, a strong undercurrent of opposition among five of the most respected senior members of the Senate in a private meeting that day with Senator Mansfield, at which, as Mansfield reported to the President, the group felt that "we are deeply enmeshed in a place where we ought not to be; that the situation is rapidly going out of control; and that every effort should be made to extricate ourselves."

Although this third part of *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War* is based on extensive research (including a number of documents that were declassified at the author's request) and hopefully is accurate in most respects, many important documents remain classified or unprocessed and classified. They are releasable only at a fixed date in the future, or, in the case of congressional materials, inaccessible until some future date. Several important collections of documents, including the papers of Presidential Assistant Bill Moyers, have been retained by the individuals in question and have not been made available for research. In several cases, most notably that of Dean Rusk, documents that could be very valuable in the study of policymaking have been destroyed. According to Rusk (in Interview I, July 28, 1969, for the Johnson Library), each participant in the small group "Tuesday Lunch" meetings with the President "took notes on decisions made on matters for which we were responsible

and went back to our departments and put them into effect." Rusk's notes apparently are not contained in the classified files of the State Department, however. Dr. John Glennon, the editor-in-chief of the department's historical series, says that State Department historians have not found these notes during their research. According to Rusk's associate, Thomas J. Schoenbaum (*Waging War and Peace*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 12), when Rusk left the State Department he "systematically destroyed records of confidential conversations with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson." Presumably this included notes of Tuesday lunches. It is not known whether other participants in the Tuesday lunches made notes of those meetings and, if so, whether these have been retained.

Notes of many of the Tuesday lunches, especially in 1967-1968, were taken by the President's press secretary, Tom Johnson, but most of these have not yet been made available by Mr. Johnson.

Documentation of other presidential meetings and of the thoughts and actions of the President is also lacking or inadequate. In part, this is due to Lyndon Johnson's penchant for talking rather than writing, and for private conversations and unrecorded small group meetings. Because of the President's concern for maintaining maximum security of information and decisions, records of his meetings and conversations were, except for the formal NSC meetings, frequently unsystematic, informal, or nonexistent. Those notes that were taken are generally desultory and incomplete, and two sets of notes on the same meeting can be different, inconsistent, or contradictory. As Dr. David C. Humphrey, Senior Archivist at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, explained in his interesting and informative article, "Searching for LBJ at the Johnson Library" (*Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*, June 1989), "... meeting notes must be used with care. They may be extremely useful in revealing patterns in the president's interaction with his advisers, for instance, but one should not pin too much on the exact wording of a particular statement or claim unequivocally, based on the notes, that an issue was not raised or that an individual did not speak."

One of the most useful sources of information is the collection of informal handwritten notes that was kept by McGeorge Bundy of meetings with the President, including some of the Tuesday lunches in 1965-1966. In a number of cases, including several important meetings at which key decisions on Vietnam were made, these apparently are the only notes that were taken. (Readers will observe the frequent use of the word "apparently" in this volume, especially in relation to notes of meetings, to indicate that documents may exist that, although presently unavailable, may some day provide additional information.) David Humphrey has said that "while sometimes sketchy and fragmentary, the [McGeorge Bundy] notes capture more fully than formal notes the flavor of the president's comments, questions, and concerns." Here again, however, these notes must also be viewed cautiously and used with care. They were kept by McGeorge Bundy for his own use, and, among other limitations, were not intended to convey a full sense of the meeting or to record comments except those that Bundy decided to jot down.

In historical research based on extensive use of written materials there is also the problem of giving greater attention to the views and

roles of those persons or groups who were the most prolific producers of documentary material and less attention to the views and roles of those who frequently communicated their positions orally and privately in unrecorded conversations, or who have, as in Rusk's case, seen fit to destroy records of such communication. Preserving the writings and oral histories of participants in policymaking, as well as manuscript reviews by such participants, can help to some degree in avoiding the pitfalls this problem presents; but, at best, it remains a problem.

There is also the question of how much attention and weight one should give to the views of those who played lesser roles in policymaking. Such views can be useful in indicating differences of opinion or judgment, as well as disagreements at various levels within the policymaking system. They also help to explain what views and information the more important policymakers were receiving from their associates, and give credit where it is due for insightful analysis and accurate prediction, regardless of rank or position. It is important for the writer to acknowledge the context of this input in terms of the role and rank of the person in question, as well as the action undertaken and the results, if any, of the comment or recommendation.

A number of persons have contributed to this part of the study, including many of those who assisted with Parts I and II, and I would like to thank all of them for their help. The continued support of the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Claiborne Pell, and of the Staff Director, Geryld B. Christianson, is deeply appreciated, as well as the very competent help of the committee's editor, Uwe Timpke.

Special thanks also go to the former editor-in-chief of Princeton University Press, Sanford Thatcher, and his associates.

Reviewers of Parts I and II who also examined this part were Mr. William P. Bundy, General Andrew J. Goodpaster, Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson, and Mr. Boyd Crawford. (For a brief description of their credentials, see the preface to Part I.) Other reviewers of this part were Norvill Jones, a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the 1960s and later its chief of staff; and Chester L. Cooper. (While serving in the Central Intelligence Agency, Cooper was a member of the U.S. delegation to the 1954 and the 1961-1962 Geneva Conferences, after which he functioned as the principal assistant for Asian Affairs in the National Security Council. In 1966 he served as Special Assistant for Vietnam Negotiations to Ambassador W. Averell Harriman.)

Professor Fred Greenstein of Princeton University, who is the coauthor of an excellent new book that in part deals with the period covered in this volume (see page 1, note 1), also provided a very useful review, as well as several documents, and I deeply appreciate his advice and assistance.

At the Congressional Research Service, special thanks go to the Director, Joseph E. Ross; the Chief of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Dr. Stanley Heginbotham, who was replaced by Dr. Robert G. Sutter; and section heads Robert L. Goldich and Charlotte P. Preece (now the Assistant Chief of the division), as well as the very able reviewer, Joan M. Davenport.

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professor, continues to make a substantial contribution to this project, and I would especially like to thank Dr. Harold F. Gortner, Chair of the Public Affairs Department; Mary F. Blackwell, Coordinator of Office Support Services; and Michael T. Fish, Director of the Office for Research.

A number of others have made important contributions, including Ambassador John R. Burke, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and those in his office who facilitated access to the department's files and who reviewed and processed material for declassification; Dr. John P. Glennon, Editor-in-Chief of the State Department's *Foreign Relations* series; W. M. McDonald, Director of Freedom of Information and Security Review in the Department of Defense; historian Vincent H. Demma, in the U.S. Army's Center of Military History; and Col. Rod Paschall, Director of the U.S. Army's Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and his associates.

At the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, there was excellent support from Harry Middleton, Director; Tina Houston, Supervisory Archivist; Dr. David Humphrey, Senior Archivist; and archivists Nancy Smith, Linda Hanson, and Regina Greenwell. David Humphrey's friendly guidance and assistance were also invaluable and greatly appreciated.

Finally, I am very pleased to acknowledge once again the work of my assistant, Anne G. Bonanno, an Information Specialist in the Office of Support Services at George Mason University, who deserves major credit for the production of this part of the study, as well as of Parts I and II. She has been associated with the project from the beginning, and her dedication and hard work, not to mention her remarkable equanimity and good will, continue to be indispensable.

Note:

In Part I of this study, page 313, note 89, Professor Robert Scigliano was erroneously identified as the author of an article in the December 11, 1966, *New York Times Magazine*, "We Cannot Accept a Communist Seizure of Vietnam" (the author of which was Professor Robert Scalapino), and it was also incorrectly stated that Professor Scigliano was a leader in the defense of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s by the Michigan State University group.

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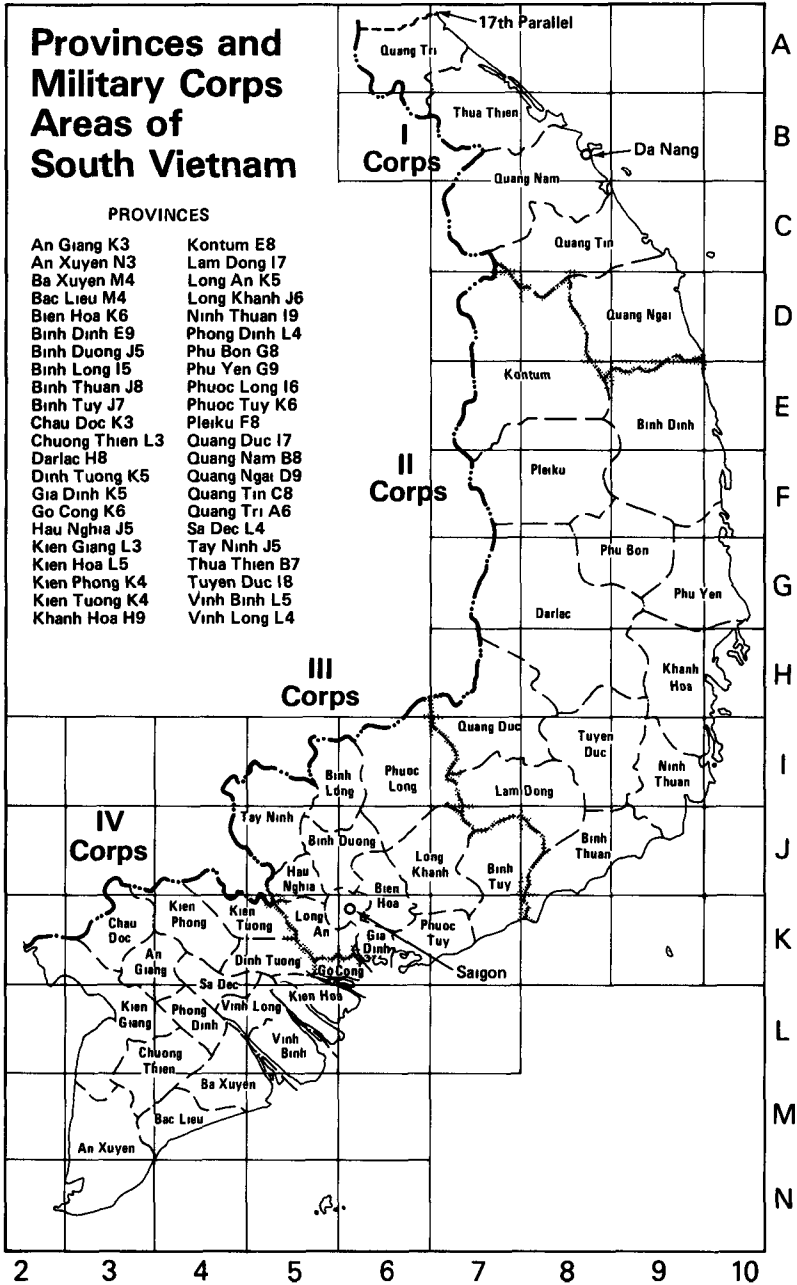
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Provinces and Military Corps Areas of South Vietnam

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Bac Lieu M4	Long Khanh J6
Bien Hoa K6	Ninh Thuan I9
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Binh Duong J5	Phu Bon G8
Binh Long I5	Phu Yen G9
Binh Thuan J8	Phuoc Long I6
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: 1964, PROLOGUE TO WAR

On November 3, 1963, the Premier of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, was assassinated in a coup which had been fully encouraged and supported by the United States.¹ A military junta, the Military Revolutionary Council, headed by Gen. Duong Van Minh, assumed power and appointed Diem's Vice Premier, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, as Premier.

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and was succeeded by Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. In a meeting on Sunday, November 24, with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John A. McCone, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, and Presidential Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson was told by Lodge that the change in the South Vietnamese Government had been an improvement, and "he thought by February or March [1964] we would see marked progress."² McCone said, however, that the CIA's estimate of the situation was "somewhat more serious," and he could not give a "particularly optimistic appraisal of the future."

President Johnson said he "approached the situation with some misgivings." He noted that many people had questioned the overthrow of Diem (Johnson himself had been strongly opposed to the U.S. decision to support a coup) and that "strong voices in Congress felt we should get out of Vietnam." But the coup was over, and "we have to see that our objectives are accomplished."

¹ For a more detailed discussion of 1963-1964, see pt. II of this study. For significant works published since the publication of pt. II, see Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: Dutton, 1987); George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986); Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1987); Thomas J. Schoenbaum, *Waging Peace and War: Dean Rusk in the Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Larry Berman, *The Planning of a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

See also the excellent forthcoming study by John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, with the collaboration of Larry Berman and Richard Immerman, comparing and contrasting the handling of Vietnam in 1954 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson: *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989).

Two volumes of R. B. Smith's pioneering study of the war from an international perspective have been published: *An International History of the Vietnam War*, vol. 1: *Revolution versus Containment, 1955-61* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), and vol. 2: *The Kennedy Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

Also useful is Neil Sheehan's, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

² Johnson Library, Meeting Notes File, "Memorandum for the Record, Subject: South Vietnam Situation," Nov. 25, 1963. This memorandum, the only known notes of the meeting on November 24, was prepared by the Director of Central Intelligence, John McCone, and was declassified in 1985, subsequent to publication of pt. II of this study.

McNamara said he had examined the economic situation and he felt that the U.S. should "give generously of economic aid," but "must not ask the South Vietnamese government to do the impossible at this particular time." The President said he supported McNamara's position, "but at the same time he wanted to make it abundantly clear that he did not think we had to reform every Asian into our own image. . . . He was anxious to get along, win the war—he didn't want as much effort placed on so-called social reforms."

"I received in this meeting the first 'President Johnson tone' for action as contrasted with the 'Kennedy tone,'" McCone observed in notes which he took at the meeting. "Johnson definitely feels that we place too much emphasis on social reforms; he has very little tolerance with our spending so much time being 'do-gooders'. . . ."³

Some years later, Presidential Special Assistant Bill D. Moyers recounted his conversation with the President after the meeting:⁴

Nov. 24, 1963. Lyndon Baines Johnson has been President barely two days. This Sunday afternoon he has spent with his national-security advisers, being briefed on South Vietnam by the United States ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge. Now the meetings are over, and the President, alone with an aide, is tilted back in the big chair behind the desk in the office he occupied for three years as Vice President. His feet are propped on the wastebasket and he is clinking the ice cubes in a pale-colored glass.

"What did Lodge say?" the aide asks.

"He says it's going to be hell in a handbasket out there."

"What's happening?"

"He says the army won't fight. Says the people don't know whose side to be on. If we don't do something, he says, it'll go under—any day."

"So?"

The President stares at his glass. "So they'll think with Kennedy dead we've lost heart. So they'll think we're yellow and don't mean what we say."

"Who?"

"The Chinese. The fellas in the Kremlin. They'll be taking the measure of us. They'll be wondering just how far they can go."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give those fellas out there the money they want. This crowd today says a hundred or so million will make the difference."

"What did you say?"

"I told them they got it—more if they need it. I told them I'm not going to let Vietnam go the way of China. I told them to go back and tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word, but by God, I want something for my money. I want 'em to get off their butts and get

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bill Moyers, "Flashbacks," *Newsweek*, Feb. 10, 1975. In Moyers' account, as can be seen, Lodge is quoted as being much more pessimistic than in McCone's account.

out in those jungles and whip hell out of some Communists. And then I want 'em to leave me alone, because I've got some bigger things to do right here at home."

"I hope they will," the aide replies.

The President swivels back and forth in the chair, silent again. He is looking at the far corner of the high ceiling. Finally, he answers, "So do I. But right now I feel like one of those catfish down in your and Lady Bird's country—down there around the old Taylor store."

"How's that?"

"I feel like I just grabbed a big juicy worm with a right sharp hook in the middle of it. . . ."

On November 26, 1963, President Johnson reaffirmed U.S. policy toward South Vietnam by approving National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 273, which stated in part: "It remains the central object of the United States in Vietnam to assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy."⁵

In mid-December, McNamara and McCone, along with William P. Bundy, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, William E. Colby, former CIA Station Chief in Saigon who was then Chief of the Far East Division in the CIA's Directorate of Plans (covert operations),⁶ and Gen. Victor H. Krulak, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency, went to Vietnam for a brief review of the situation. In a cable to Lodge, McNamara stressed the importance of receiving promptly from the country team (consisting of Lodge and the other top U.S. civilian and military officials in Saigon) their plans and recommendations for increased efforts to win the war, especially covert operations against North Vietnam by South Vietnamese forces in which U.S. forces would be used "as is necessary." "Plans for such operations," McNamara told Lodge, "should include varying levels of pressure all designed to make clear to the North Vietnamese *that the US will not accept a Communist victory in South Vietnam and that we will escalate the conflict to whatever level is required to insure their defeat.*"⁷ (emphasis added)

In his report to the President on December 21, McNamara said, "The situation is very disturbing. Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralization at best and most likely to a Communist-controlled state."⁸

⁵ Johnson Library, NSF National Security Action Memorandums. By approving NSAM 273, Johnson confirmed and continued the position taken by Presidents Harry S. Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, that the U.S. should seek to prevent Communist control of Vietnam. For Truman's position, see the National Security Council (NSC) policy paper approved on Apr. 24, 1950: NSC 64, "The Position of the United States With Respect to Indochina," and NSC 124, "United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia," June 25, 1952. For Eisenhower's position, see NSC 5405, Jan. 16, 1954, with the same title as NSC 124, and NSC 5429, "Review of U.S. Policy in the Far East," Aug. 12, 1954. For Kennedy's position, see the NSC policy paper—which beginning with Kennedy was called National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM)—NSAM 62, "Report of the Vietnam Task Force," May 11, 1961. All of these are discussed in pts. I and II of this study.

⁶ In 1973, the Directorate of Plans, which was also referred to as the Clandestine Service, became the Directorate of Operations.

⁷ Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, McNamara to Lodge, DIASO-3 4783-63, Dec. 12, 1963.

⁸ The text of the report is in the *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 494-496 (hereafter cited as *PP*). This edition of the *Pentagon Papers* was published in 1971 in four volumes by the Beacon Press of Boston, based on material made available by Senator Mike Gravel (D/Alaska).

At a meeting that day with McNamara, the President approved the recommendations in the report, and General Krulak was made chairman of an interdepartmental committee to draw up plans for covert operations against North Vietnam.

In early January 1964, President Johnson approved the new covert operations plan, OPLAN 34-A, which by the use of "progressively escalating pressure," would seek "to inflict increasing punishment upon North Vietnam and to create pressures, which may convince the North Vietnamese leadership, in its own self-interest, to desist from its aggressive policies."⁹

In late January 1964, there was a coup within the military junta, and Gen. Nguyen Khanh became Premier. Gen. Duong Van Minh became the figurehead Chief of State.

The worst fears of those who had opposed the coup against Diem were apparently being realized as the Communists, aided by the unstable political situation, were moving rapidly to strengthen their hold on the countryside. After a survey by a high-level team, the CIA reported in early February 1964 that the situation was, "... very serious and prospects uncertain. Even with U.S. assistance as it is now, we believe that, unless there is marked improvement in the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government and armed forces, South Vietnam has, at best, an even chance of withstanding the insurgency menace during the next few weeks or months."¹⁰

Some U.S. officials, concerned that the U.S. would become more involved, and that this could lead to costly and ineffective military intervention, took the position that it was up to the South Vietnamese to win the war and that the U.S. should avoid assuming further responsibility. One of these was Senator Richard B. Russell (D/Ga.), the powerful, highly-respected chairman of the Armed Services Committee, who had been Lyndon Johnson's mentor in the Senate. Russell, an opponent of U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the early 1950s, is reported to have told Johnson in late 1963, when the President asked him what he would do about Vietnam: "I'd spend whatever it takes to bring to power a government that would ask us to go home."¹¹

Another was Senator Mike Mansfield (D/Mont.), the majority leader of the Senate (and former Senate majority whip when Lyndon Johnson was majority leader), a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee known for his knowledge and long experience with respect to Asia. In memoranda to the President on December 7, 1963 and January 7, 1964, Mansfield urged a "diplomatic offensive," with the help of the French, to reduce the conflict between South and North Vietnam "on terms which reduced our influence (and costs) *provided* it also inhibited Chinese political domination."¹² (emphasis in original) He said that Cambodia, which considered itself neutral, was the "principal prototype of any eventual peace for Southeast Asia." The goal, he said,

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹¹ Quoted by Tom Wicker, *New York Times*, May 1, 1966.

¹² Mansfield's memoranda of Dec. 7, 1963 and Jan. 7, 1964 are in the Johnson Library, NSF Aides Files, McGeorge Bundy Memos to the President.

should be an "independent Southeast Asia, not dependent on a costly U.S. prop."

Rusk, the President's principal foreign affairs adviser, as well as McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, disagreed with Mansfield's position.¹³ Rusk called the proposal for neutralization "a phony," which would lead to a Communist takeover. Moreover, there could be a diplomatic settlement, he added, "only after the North Vietnamese become convinced that they cannot destroy the Republic of Vietnam by guerrilla warfare." McNamara and Bundy agreed that neutralization would lead to Communist control, which in turn would seriously affect the rest of Southeast Asia and the U.S. position in Asia and the world. McNamara said that "the stakes in preserving an anti-Communist South Vietnam are so high that . . . we must go on bending every effort to win." Bundy said, "If we neutralize, it should not be because *we* have quit but because *others* have." "The right course," he added, "is to continue to strengthen our struggle against the Communist terror. . . ." (emphasis in original)

Although there is no record as to whether or what the President replied to Mansfield, he apparently agreed with his advisers (or they with him), and in a conversation with Mansfield's assistant he said, referring to the conquest of China by the Communists (which many Republicans had blamed on the Democrats), ". . . we do not want another China in Vietnam."¹⁴

On January 31, 1964, the day after the Khanh coup, President Charles de Gaulle of France again proposed a unified, independent Vietnam, and President Johnson replied that neutralization did not appear likely, and that the course the U.S. was following was "the only course for us to follow. . . . We plan to pursue it diligently and, we hope, successfully on a stepped-up basis."¹⁵

Stepping up U.S. actions in the war was, indeed, what the President was considering. The military, as Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in an important JCS memorandum on January 22, 1964, were urging "bolder actions which may embody greater risks."¹⁶ Arguing that the key to controlling the insurgency in the South was to stop its support by North Vietnam, the Chiefs proposed using South Vietnamese forces, as well as U.S. forces as necessary, in attacks on the North: bombardment by air, mining of harbors, commando raids against critical targets, and ground attacks across the Laotian border on the Communist supply line through Laos—the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They also proposed that the South Vietnamese should let the U.S. assume tactical direction of the war in the South, and that the U.S. commander should have full responsibility for all South Vietnamese and U.S. operations against the North.

Walt W. Rostow, Director of the Policy Planning Council of the Department of State, who during the early Kennedy period had been heavily involved in Vietnamese matters while serving as a deputy to McGeorge Bundy and was an active proponent of a

¹³ The memoranda from Rusk, McNamara and Bundy, which were sent to the President by Bundy on Jan. 9, 1964, are in the Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mansfield's memorandum to the President, Jan. 7, 1964.

¹⁵ For further comments on de Gaulle's proposal, see pt. II of this study, pp. 219-223.

¹⁶ PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 496-499.

stronger U.S. role in Vietnam, also argued for bolder action in a memorandum to Secretary of State Rusk on February 13, 1964.¹⁷

On February 18, 1964, the President directed that planning for additional actions in Vietnam should be stepped up, and that, "Particular attention should be given to shaping such pressures so as to produce the maximum credible deterrent effect on Hanoi."¹⁸ The result was a report from a State Department study group led by Robert H. Johnson, Rostow's deputy in Policy Planning (who, like Rostow, was also a former Kennedy NSC staff member working on Vietnam), under the general auspices of the newly-established interdepartmental Vietnam Coordinating Committee chaired by William H. Sullivan, a veteran Foreign Service officer with extensive experience in dealing with Vietnam. Basing its analysis on the strategic concept that the North Vietnamese would be concerned about destruction of their industrial achievements, as well as about whether possible Chinese help could lead to Chinese control, the study group said that there were five objectives of "measured pressure" against North Vietnam: "(1) induce North Vietnam to curtail its support of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam; (2) reduce the morale of the Viet Cong; (3) stiffen the Khanh government and discourage moves toward neutralism; (4) show the world that we will take strong measures to prevent the spread of communism; and (5) strengthen morale in Asia."¹⁹ In addition, pressure on the North could improve the U.S. negotiating position. And negotiations, the report said, were "virtually inevitable."

In terms of directly affecting the situation in South Vietnam, however, the report took the position that pressure on the North would be "no substitute for counterinsurgency in South Vietnam":

It is not likely that North Vietnam would (if it could) call off the war in the South even though U.S. actions would in time have serious economic and political impact. Overt action against North Vietnam would be unlikely to produce reduction in Viet Cong activity sufficiently to make victory on the ground possible in South Vietnam unless accompanied by new U.S. bolstering actions in South Vietnam and considerable improvement in the government there. The most to be expected would be reduction of North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong for a while and, thus, the gaining of some time and opportunity by the government of South Vietnam to improve itself.

NSAM 288

In mid-March 1964, President Johnson again sent McNamara, accompanied by McCone and JCS Chairman Taylor, to Vietnam for a report on the situation. On March 17 he endorsed their report and directed that its text should become NSAM 288. This document, which became the basic policy guideline for subsequent Vietnam decisions of the Johnson administration, declared that the U.S. ob-

¹⁷ For further details, see pt. II of this study, p. 231.

¹⁸ *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 154.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155. The report, "Alternatives for Imposition of Measured Pressure Against North Vietnam," is discussed in pt. II of this study, pp. 235-236. See also the article by the study group's coordinator, Robert Johnson, "Escalation Then and Now," *Foreign Policy* 60 (Fall 1985), pp. 130-147.

jective was "an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam."²⁰ Failure to achieve that objective could have serious repercussions in Asia:

Unless we can achieve this objective in South Vietnam, almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance (all of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), accommodate to Communism so as to remove effective U.S. and anti-Communist influence (Burma), or fall under the domination of forces not now explicitly Communist but likely then to become so (Indonesia taking over Malaysia). Thailand might hold for a period with our help, but would be under grave pressure. Even the Philippines would become shaky, and the threat to India to the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north and east would be greatly increased.

Moreover, failure to prevent Communist control of South Vietnam could have broader repercussions for U.S. security interests, especially the reputation of the United States as a guarantor against Communist invasion or subversion of other countries. Following the position taken by the Kennedy administration, the NSAM stated that "the South Vietnam conflict is regarded as a test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of liberation.'"

On April 17, 1964, pursuant to NSAM 288, the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed a three-phase plan of military action for applying graduated pressure on North Vietnam: (1) air and ground strikes against targets in South Vietnam, and hot pursuit into Laotian and Cambodian border areas; (2) "tit-for-tat" airstrikes, airborne and amphibious raids, and aerial mining operations against targets in North Vietnam; and, (3) increasingly severe airstrikes and other operations against North Vietnam.²¹

This JCS plan, OPLAN 37-64, which included a list of 94 key bombing targets in North Vietnam (the "94 target list"), served as the blueprint for the U.S. air war against North Vietnam beginning in 1965.

In May 1964, as the military situation in South Vietnam and in Laos was considered to be growing more serious, and Premier Khanh was advocating "going north," President Johnson asked his advisers to prepare two action plans, one military and the other political. On May 25, McGeorge Bundy sent him a draft memorandum, "Basic Recommendations and Projected Course of Action on Southeast Asia," which Bundy said represented his understanding of the thinking of Rusk and McNamara. The memorandum recommended U.S. action against North Vietnam if other measures failed:²²

It is recommended that you make a Presidential decision that the U.S. will use selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam, under the following conditions: (1) after appropriate diplomatic and political warning and preparations, (2) and unless such warning and preparations—

²⁰ For the text of NSAM 288, see *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 499-510.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

²² Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

in combination with other efforts—should produce a sufficient improvement of non-Communist prospects in South Vietnam and Laos to make military action against North Vietnam unnecessary.

The use of military force by the United States would be based on the following premises:

(1) that the U.S. cannot tolerate the loss of Southeast Asia to communism;

(2) that without a decision to resort to military action if necessary, the present prospect is not hopeful, in South Vietnam or in Laos;

(3) that the decision to use force if necessary, backed by resolute and extensive deployment, and conveyed by every possible means to our adversaries, gives the best chance of avoiding the actual use of such force.

Force was not to be used “as an end in itself,” however, but as a way of threatening the North Vietnamese and thereby persuading them to cease their support of Communist insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos. “We intend that Communism shall not take over Southeast Asia, but we do not intend or desire the destruction of the Hanoi regime. If terror and subversion end, major improvement in relations is possible. It is only if they do not end that trouble is coming.”

The memorandum proposed that after taking certain preliminary steps at the United Nations and with other members of the Southeast Asia Treaty, the U.S., joined by such allies as would participate, should deploy its forces in South Vietnam—“on a very large scale . . . so as to maximize their deterrent impact and their menace”—after which a supporting resolution would be sought from Congress, followed by further deployments and an initial airstrike against North Vietnam “designed to have more deterrent than destructive impact.” At the same time, U.S. dependents would be withdrawn from South Vietnam and there would be “active diplomatic offensives” in the U.N. and/or a Geneva conference “aimed at restoring the peace throughout the area.”

McGeorge Bundy’s memorandum also discussed the risks involved:

It is the hope and best estimate of most of your advisers that a decision of this kind can be executed without bringing a major military reply from Red China, and still less from the Soviet Union. It is also the prevailing estimate that selective and carefully prepared military action against North Vietnam will not trigger acts of terror and military operations by the Viet Cong which would engulf the Khanh regime. *Nevertheless, it is recognized that in making this decision we must accept two risks:* (1) the risk of escalation toward major land war or the use of nuclear weapons; (2) the risk of a reply in South Vietnam itself which would lose that country to neutralism and so eventually to Communism. (emphasis in original)

At a meeting of U.S. civilian and military officials in Honolulu on June 1-3, 1964, to discuss these proposals, it was agreed, however, that military action against North Vietnam was not immediately necessary and that U.S. objectives and plans needed to be re-

fined before such action was taken.²³ It was also agreed that Congress and the public were not yet prepared to support further U.S. involvement in the war, and that a campaign should be launched for the purpose of obtaining such support.

On June 3, President Johnson met with his advisers and approved the recommendations of the Honolulu meeting.²⁴

During and after the Honolulu Conference there was discussion among the President's advisers of the need for a congressional resolution endorsing the President's position and supporting such military action as the President deemed necessary. By June 11, 1964, a resolution had been drafted, but on June 15 the advisers decided that a resolution was not necessary at that time, and that, "in the absence of a considered decision for a sustained course of action," it would be difficult to explain and defend such a proposal. President Johnson, preparing for his 1964 campaign against Senator Barry M. Goldwater (R/Ariz.), also did not want the war to interfere with his election. Thus, with the exception of additional limited political-military actions and the campaign to gain public and congressional support, further actions and decisions were deferred until after November.²⁵

The South Vietnamese, however, were becoming impatient with the lack of U.S. action. During July, there was again talk in Saigon about "marching North," and on July 25 the new U.S. Ambassador, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, fearing that Nguyen Khanh might resign and that this could encourage neutralist tendencies, recommended joint (U.S.-South Vietnam) contingency planning for bombing North Vietnam. At about the same time, the JCS proposed air-strikes against targets in North Vietnam, including torpedo boat bases, by unmarked planes flown by non-American crews. (In June, Ambassador Lodge had also recommended attacking torpedo boat bases.)²⁶

The Gulf of Tonkin Incidents

Meanwhile, covert military operations against North Vietnam continued under the OPLAN 34-A program approved by President Johnson in January 1964. One such operation involved attacks on the coast of North Vietnam by high-speed boats manned by commandos from South Vietnam and other countries who had been recruited and were supported and led by the CIA with assistance from the U.S. Navy. Another operation, the DE SOTO patrols, involved the use of U.S. destroyers equipped with special electronic gear which was manned by personnel from the National Security Agency (NSA, which intercepts, processes, analyzes and disseminates information derived from communications of other countries) to gather information on North Vietnam's radar and communications systems, as well as to conduct a "show of force" off the North

²³ Ambassador Lodge favored bombing the North but was opposed to the use of U.S. ground forces in the South. In a letter to President Johnson on June 5, 1964, he said that this would be a "venture of unlimited possibilities which could put us onto a slope along which we slide into a bottomless pit." Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

²⁴ For the Honolulu decisions see PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 323-325, and vol. III, pp. 171-176.

²⁵ For an explanation of these developments see pt. II of this study, pp. 266-274.

²⁶ Johnson Library, NSF NSC History, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, Saigon to Washington 214, July 25, 1964; and the *Pentagon Papers as Published by the New York Times* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 258.

Vietnamese coast. As will be seen, these patrols were also viewed as a means by which to provoke the North Vietnamese to take actions to which the U.S. and South Vietnam could then react.

On July 30, 1964, there was a 34-A raid against the North Vietnamese coast. The next day, the U.S.S. *Maddox* began a DE SOTO patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin in the area near the raid. On August 2, the *Maddox* was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. In a meeting that day with Rusk, Ball, Cyrus Vance (Deputy Secretary of Defense), McGeorge Bundy, and Gen. Earle C. Wheeler, the Chairman of the JCS (replacing Taylor), the President ordered an augmented patrol, and the *Maddox* was joined by the U.S.S. *Turner Joy*. He also approved another previously scheduled 34-A raid against North Vietnam on the night of August 3.²⁷

On August 4, the commander of the DE SOTO patrol reported that the ships were under attack but several hours later, while U.S. officials were preparing to retaliate, he expressed doubts that an attack had actually occurred. President Johnson, however, after assurances by military leaders and Secretary McNamara that an attack had occurred, ordered U.S. planes to retaliate against North Vietnam.²⁸ One of the principal targets was the torpedo boat bases

²⁷ In a "Top Secret—No Other Distribution" memorandum to Rusk on Aug. 8, 1964, which was declassified in 1987 by the State Department at the author's request, Michael V. Forrestal (formerly on the NSC staff, who had moved to the State Department in 1964 to become head of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee) stated: "One thing that may be troubling you, as it has troubled me, is that some of us did not know that the OPLAN 34-A actions against the Vinh Son radar post and Ron on the night of August 3rd (about the same time as the second destroyer incident) had been authorized. I checked this on August 4th with Cy Vance and Mac Bundy, both of whom told me that these actions had been approved at the White House on the previous Sunday, August 2nd. The implication was that the [State] Department had acquiesced at that time." He added: "I think it is very important for the Department to review its own procedures for handling 303 Committee [see below] actions, so that somebody who is responsible for the area passes on all these activities just prior to an executive order. At present, many of these activities are planned weeks or even months in advance, and the opportunity for review in light of any changed political circumstances is not adequate." U.S. Department of State, Central File, Pol 27 Viet S. The 303 Committee of the NSC, which authorized U.S. covert operations in other countries, was composed of the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Vance), the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (U. Alexis Johnson), the Deputy Director (Plans) of the CIA (Richard Helms), and the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (McGeorge Bundy).

Note: In pt. II of this study, p. 286, it was stated that at a meeting of the President and his advisers on the afternoon of August 3, the 34-A operation scheduled for that night was discussed, as well as the addition of more targets for that operation, and that Rusk subsequently sent a cable to Taylor stating that more targets would be added. This is incorrect in part. The meeting took place from 6:25 p.m. to 7:15 p.m. (following, not prior to, as stated on p. 287 of pt. II, a briefing of Senate leaders which occurred at 3:00 p.m.), and by that time the 34-A raids on August 3 had already occurred (it was then 6:25 a.m. on August 4 in Saigon). The 34-A operations of August 3 were discussed at the meeting, but the discussion of additional targets, and Rusk's reference to this in his cable, had to do with future 34-A operations rather than those of August 3.

²⁸ These events are discussed at length in pt. II, ch. 5 of this study. New evidence made available in 1988 suggests that the President and his principal advisers recognized, at least as of August 4, that the North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. ships were caused by the 34-A raids, even though they may not have been a "sufficient cause" for those attacks. In handwritten notes by McGeorge Bundy on the luncheon of the President with Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara on August 4 (Johnson Library, McGeorge Bundy Papers)—the only notes which appear to have been taken at that meeting—Bundy states, without indicating who made the comment, "What is 34-A role in all this? *Must be cause*; no other is rational. But not a sufficient cause?" (emphasis in original).

Since pt. II of this study was published, the second volume in the U.S. Navy's history of the war has been published: Edward Marolda and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *From Military Assistance to Combat, 1959-1965*, vol. II of *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Gov. Print. Off. for the Naval Historical Center, Dept. of the Navy, 1986). This valuable work contains (pp. 394-453) a detailed discussion of the DE SOTO patrols and of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents of August 2 and 4, 1964. Based on the available evidence the authors, after a rather strained interpretation in which contrary evidence is only mentioned in passing, con-

which both the JCS and Ambassador Lodge had recommended attacking.

The President also used the occasion to obtain the congressional resolution which had been discussed in June. In the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by the House of Representatives 416-0 and by the Senate 89-2 (Senators Wayne Morse [D/Ore.] and Ernest Gruening [D/Alaska] voted no), Congress declared that "The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia." The President was authorized "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."²⁹

During August-September 1964, while President Johnson made the keeping of peace and avoidance of U.S. troop commitments to Vietnam central themes in his election campaign, his advisers continued to prepare for further use of force against North Vietnam. In mid-August, W.W. Rostow proposed, as he had on several previous occasions, a program of "limited, graduated military actions," reinforced by other forms of pressure, to force the North Vietnamese, out of self-interest, to withdraw their support of the insurgency in the South.³⁰

On August 11, the State Department circulated a plan, "Next Course of Action in Southeast Asia," drafted by William Bundy, under which the U.S. would pursue a three-phase course of action:³¹

Phase One—Military Silence (through August)

Phase Two—Limited Pressure (September through December)

Phase Three—More Serious Pressures (January 1965 and following)

In Phase Two, the U.S. would continue tit-for-tat retaliation against the North, which could include bombing of POL (petroleum, oil, lubricants) sites and the mining of the harbor at Haiphong. DE SOTO patrols would continue, but Bundy said that, "Both for present purposes and to maintain the credibility of our account of the events of last week [during the Gulf of Tonkin debate], they *must* be clearly dissociated from 34-A operations both in fact and in physical appearance." (emphasis in original) Other actions would include limited cross-border bombing operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos by U.S. and/or South Vietnamese planes.

In Phase Three, the U.S. would attack infiltration routes and facilities in the southern part of North Vietnam and move northward, followed by attacks on military-related targets in the area around Hanoi and Haiphong.

clude that there was an attack on August 4. They also assert (p. 435): "... American leaders did not seek to provoke a North Vietnamese reaction to secure a *casus belli*, as often has been alleged." Yet they have not fully examined the making of the decision to send the DE SOTO patrol and they offer no evidence to support this assertion.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of the Gulf of Tonkin incidents and the resolution, see pt. II of this study, ch. 5.

³⁰ PP, Gravel ed., vol. V, pp. 336-337. See also pt. II of this study, pp. 345-346.

³¹ PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 524-529.

Ambassador Taylor, who had cabled Washington on August 9 proposing that OPLAN 37-64 (the JCS plan of April 1964 for graduated military pressure against North Vietnam) should be implemented beginning January 1, 1965, agreed with Bundy, but said that the U.S. should proceed with caution "until we have a better feel of the quality of our ally [the Khanh government]." ³²

The JCS, as well as Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Jr., Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), who was in direct command of all U.S. forces in Vietnam, while generally agreeing with Bundy's proposal, recommended that the U.S. should establish a base at Danang, and should move more quickly and firmly to position its forces for undertaking major action against North Vietnam, beginning with the deployment of U.S. ground as well as additional air forces to provide for protection of U.S. units already stationed in South Vietnam.³³

The JCS, in its response to State's memorandum, again emphasized their view that the U.S. should apply the force necessary to compel the North Vietnamese to cease supporting the insurgency in South Vietnam and in Laos. Stronger U.S. action against the North was "urgent," the Chiefs said. "... accelerated and forceful action with respect to North Vietnam is essential to prevent a complete collapse of the US position in Southeast Asia."

In the latter part of August 1964, there was a new political crisis in South Vietnam. At the time of the Gulf of Tonkin attack, Khanh had declared a state of emergency giving him virtually absolute power. On August 16, with the approval of the Military Revolutionary Council, he announced a new constitution (the Vung Tau Charter) by which he became President, replacing Chief of State Gen. Duong Van Minh. There was a strong reaction, especially from some of the military and from the Buddhists, and in late August Khanh withdrew the charter and acceded to a triumvirate consisting of himself, General Minh and Gen. Tran Thien Khiem which would rule until the council could form a new government. The general reaction in Washington as well as among U.S. officials in Saigon was that the United States might have to move more quickly and vigorously than the State Department had suggested in William Bundy's memorandum of August 11. In a memorandum on August 31, which he prepared for a meeting that day attended by Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and others (the President did not attend), William Bundy felt, according to his own description several years later, "that by the end of the week it would be generally thought that the situation was desperate . . . [and] even if Khanh recovered, the situation would have been seriously weakened and the odds had become 'very great' that without some major new element the situation could simply come apart some time between now and November." ³⁴ This memorandum, Bundy said, was his first expression of the possibility that the U.S. might "lose" in Vietnam, and that, in order to prepare to defend Thai-

³² Johnson Library, NSF NSC History, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, Saigon to Washington 364, Aug. 9, 1964; and Saigon to Washington 465, Aug. 18, 1964, the text of which is in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 545-548.

³³ For the views of CINCPAC and the JCS, see *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 542-545 and 550-552.

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, Lot File 85 D 240 (William Bundy Papers), notes made by William Bundy in 1969 for preparation of a history of the war.

land and other Asian countries, it "would be much stronger to go down with our guns firing."

Bundy proposed that if a semblance of cohesion could be reestablished in South Vietnam, the U.S. might consider trying some 34-A actions and a DE SOTO patrol in a "defensible but challenging mode" to provoke the North Vietnamese to react, thus giving the U.S. an excuse for bombing the North again, and more strongly than before. If this produced greater cohesion in the South, the U.S. could then consider applying more systematic military pressure, against the North, possibly sooner than his August 11 memorandum had proposed, "but hopefully," he added, that decision would not have to be made "for a couple of months."³⁵

There are apparently no notes of the meeting on August 31, but afterward a cable was sent to Saigon stating that, if possible, Khanh should be restored to power. The cable, according to William Bundy, did not reflect the "underlying gloom in my memo."³⁶ Apparently, Rusk and McNamara did not think the situation was so serious as to warrant the provocative actions suggested by Bundy.

In a memorandum to the President after the August 31 meeting, McGeorge Bundy said that there was some question as to Khanh's ability to control the situation, but that, "The larger question is whether there is any course of action that can improve the chances in this weakening situation."³⁷ Various measures were being discussed, but he thought that "before we let this country go" the U.S. should consider using its own forces against Communist insurgents in the South. He said he did not think the use of U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam would be a "repetition of Korea," and he told the President: "It seems to me at least possible that a couple of brigade-size units [an Army brigade is approximately 4,500] put in to do specific jobs about six weeks from now might be good medicine everywhere."

Another proponent of increased pressure on North Vietnam was John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (replacing William Bundy), who concluded in a memorandum in early September, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam," that the Government of South Vietnam was so weak that the U.S. could succeed only if it used its own ground combat forces in South Vietnam and took further action against the North.³⁸ He proposed that, beginning around October 1, the U.S. should seek "by doing legitimate things to provoke a DRV response and to be in a good position to seize on that response, or upon an unprovoked DRV action, to commence a crescendo of GVN-US military actions against the DRV."

On September 7, the JCS also called for provocative actions by the U.S. which could provide the basis for launching systematic air attacks on the North.³⁹

³⁵ Bundy's memorandum of Aug. 31, 1964 is also in Lot File 85 D 240.

³⁶ Same location, 1969 Bundy notes.

³⁷ Johnson Library, NSF Aides Files, McGeorge Bundy Memos to the President.

³⁸ For the text of the second draft of McNaughton's memorandum, Sept. 3, 1964, see PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 556-559.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193, from JCS "talking paper" for the Chairman of the JCS, "Next Courses of Action for RVN," Sept. 7, 1964.

On September 6, Ambassador Taylor cabled Washington that as a result of the political turmoil—Khanh had regained power on September 4, but the situation remained unstable—it was clear that “we now have a better feel for the quality of our ally.”⁴⁰ (On August 18 he had taken the position that the U.S. should proceed with caution until it could get a “better feel.”) “Recent events,” he said, “have revealed the weakness of our ally. . . .” Rather than waiting for improvements in the Government of South Vietnam before taking stronger action against the North, he now thought that the U.S. should plan to begin its graduated pressure plan a month earlier (December 1) than he had recommended on August 9. To wait, he said, would be to risk further political turmoil and the development of a “popular front,” which might have the effect of forcing the U.S. to withdraw from South Vietnam. If the U.S. were to “leave Vietnam with our tail between our legs, the consequences of this defeat in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be disastrous.”

On September 8, a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), “Chances for a Stable Government in South Vietnam,” concluded that, “At present the odds are against the emergence of a stable non-Communist regime in South Vietnam.”⁴¹

On September 9, 1964, President Johnson took time from his political campaign to discuss with his advisers the uncertain situation in South Vietnam and the question of applying additional military pressures on North Vietnam. Prior to the meeting, the President received a memorandum drafted on September 8 by William Bundy and Michael V. Forrestal (head of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee) summarizing the view of Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, and General Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, that the Government of South Vietnam was functioning minimally and that the U.S. should increase its pressure on North Vietnam. The memorandum proposed the resumption of the DE SOTO patrols and 34-A operations (but proposed a clear separation of the two), both of which had been suspended after the Gulf of Tonkin incidents, as well as limited air and ground operations by South Vietnam in the border area of Laos where infiltration was occurring, and tit-for-tat air-

⁴⁰ Saigon to Washington 768, Sept. 6, 1964, in *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 336-337.

⁴¹ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Central File, SNIE 53-64, Sept. 8, 1964. At that time, National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) and Special National Intelligence Estimates (SNIEs) were drafted by the Board of National Estimates, a group of 10 or 12 CIA intelligence officers, and then reviewed by other intelligence offices (primarily the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) in the State Department, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in the Defense Department, and the intelligence offices of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, with participation on some issues by the National Security Agency, the FBI, and the Atomic Energy Commission). After interagency review and whatever revisions had been agreed upon, estimates, (with dissenting footnotes if the difference of opinion had not been resolved through revision) was sent for approval to the United States Intelligence Board (USIB), consisting of representatives of each of the agencies, and chaired by the Director of Central Intelligence.

In 1973, the Board of National Estimates was replaced by a system under which 15 or so National Intelligence Officers (the number has varied) are responsible individually for managing the drafting and interagency review of estimates. They operate individually rather than as a board, although their collective existence was recognized with the establishment in 1980 of the National Intelligence Council, of which they are members. After estimates have been drafted, and after interagency review and revision have been completed, the estimates are approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board (NFIB), which was the name given to the interagency group previously known as the United States Intelligence Board.

The author is grateful to his colleague, Alfred B. Prados, formerly a military intelligence officer who is now an intelligence analyst in the Congressional Research Service, for his help with this explanation.

strikes against North Vietnam in the event of any additional Communist attacks on U.S. units or any significant attacks on targets in South Vietnam. The memorandum said that actions designed to provoke the North Vietnamese into attacking should not be attempted, however, "while the GVN [Government of Vietnam] is struggling to its feet," but that by early October such actions might be recommended, depending on progress in South Vietnam and the reaction of the North, especially to the DE SOTO patrols.⁴²

At the meeting on September 9, 1964, President Johnson asked if anyone disagreed with the recommendations in the Bundy-Forrestal memorandum.⁴³ Except for a division within the JCS, where the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Commandant of the Marines argued that the U.S. should take prompt action to carry out extensive airstrikes against North Vietnam, there was no disagreement with the proposed program.

Ambassador Taylor was asked by the President why he did not favor more drastic immediate action, and he replied that it was important not to act when the government was in such an uncertain condition. The President expressed a similar opinion, saying that, "the proper answer to those advocating immediate and extensive action against the North was that we should not do this until our side could defend itself in the streets of Saigon."

The President asked the group "if anyone doubted whether it was worth all this effort."

Ambassador Taylor replied that we could not afford to let Hanoi win, in terms of our overall position in the area and in the world. General Wheeler supported him most forcefully, reporting the unanimous view of the Joint Chiefs that if we should lose in South Vietnam, we would lose Southeast Asia. Country after country on the periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area. Mr. McCone expressed his concurrence and so did the Secretary of State, with considerable force.

Thus, the reason for waiting, the President noted, "must be simply that with a weak and wobbly situation it would be unwise to attack until we could stabilize our base."

The President, as well as Rusk and McNamara, reemphasized that "money was no object," and Rusk, observing that it had cost \$50,000 to kill a single guerrilla during the Communist insurgency in Greece in 1947-1948, said it would be "worth any amount to win." Taylor responded, however, that there was no shortage of funds.

The President added that "what disheartened him was that we had our best team out there for 60 days and had lost ground." (Taylor and his top associates, U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and William Sullivan, had taken their posts in July.) Taylor said he thought the President had the wrong impression. There had been military progress "at the grass roots," he said. "Our current problem is political."

⁴² Johnson Library, Meeting Notes File. The fourth page of the memorandum appears to be missing from the copy in this file, but the *Pentagon Papers*, (Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 561-562), reprinted the entire memorandum.

⁴³ Johnson Library, Meeting Notes File, McGeorge Bundy notes of the meeting on Sept. 9, 1964.

The President concluded the meeting by approving the recommendation in the memorandum, reemphasizing that money was no object, and telling General Wheeler to explain to his JCS colleagues "that we would be ready to do more, when we had a base." He said he "did not wish to enter the patient in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round. We should get him ready to face 3 or 4 rounds at least."

The President's decisions were promulgated by NSAM 314, September 10, 1964, which directed that the additional steps be taken, but added: "... the first order of business at present is to take actions which will help to strengthen the fabric of the Government of South Vietnam; to the extent that the situation permits, such action should precede larger decisions. If such larger decisions are required at any time by a change in the situation, they will be taken."⁴⁴

On September 13, there was an attempted coup against Khanh by other members of the Revolutionary Council, led by Gen. Lam Van Phat, then Minister of Interior in the Khanh government. After strong intervention by the U.S., which led to a "heated" three-hour "conversation" between Phat and U. Alexis Johnson (Taylor was in Washington), Phat yielded and the coup was called off.⁴⁵

Between the promulgation of NSAM 314 on September 10 and the Presidential election on November 3, 1964, the U.S. continued to apply increasing pressure on North Vietnam as well as on the Government of South Vietnam, and the President's principal advisers continued to consider further action. In early October, there were reports that some of those advisers were openly advocating an expansion of military action.

In a memorandum on October 1 in preparation for a Presidential press interview, McGeorge Bundy suggested to the President that he should "give a hint of firmness," adding, "It is a better than even chance that we will be undertaking some air and land action in the Laotian corridor and even in North Vietnam within the next two months and we do not want the record to suggest even remotely that we campaigned on peace in order to start a war in November."⁴⁶

The President ignored Bundy's advice and continued his campaign for peace and against sending U.S. troops to Vietnam. On October 21, for example, he said in a speech in Akron, Ohio: "Sometimes our folks get a little impatient. Sometimes they rattle their rockets some, and they bluff about their bombs. But we are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."⁴⁷

On October 14, Ambassador Taylor warned that the political situation was becoming more critical and that infiltration was increas-

⁴⁴ For the text of NSAM 314 see PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 565-566.

⁴⁵ U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp. 414-415.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1964, and Johnson Library, NSF Aides Files, McGeorge Bundy Memos to the President.

⁴⁷ U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service), Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, pp. 1390-1391.

ing. "I feel sure," he cabled Washington, "that we must soon adopt new and drastic methods to reduce and eventually end such infiltration if we are ever to succeed in South Vietnam."⁴⁸ The JCS agreed with Taylor, and in a memorandum on October 27 they urged that the U.S. attack the problem at its source—North Vietnam—through increased military pressure, including airstrikes on the North by South Vietnamese and unidentified U.S. planes (this time, contrary to their proposal in April, they proposed using U.S. pilots).⁴⁹

On October 19, 1964, William Bundy sent a long memorandum, "The Choices We Face," to Rusk, McNamara, Ball and McGeorge Bundy for their consideration. These were the subjects it covered:⁵⁰

- (1) Deterioration in SVN [South Vietnam] and increased toughness of NVN [North Vietnam] and China, with U.S. public wanting out
- (2) US stakes in SVN and Laos
- (3) Options open to US
- (4) Likely developments in SVN under present policies
- (5) Effect of low-risk actions outside SVN
- (6) Option A: Continue present policies indefinitely
- (7) Option B: Systematic military pressures against NVN
- (8) Option C: Continue present programs, but wink at intra-Vietnam negotiations
- (9) Option D: Continue present programs, but take a negotiating initiative ourselves
- (10) Option E: Continue present programs but add actions to convey a believable threat of force, then negotiate
- (11) Shoring up the next line of defense if SVN cannot be saved.

There is no available documentation with respect to what action, if any, was taken on Bundy's memorandum, but in early November he became head of a working group to propose a course of action for the U.S.

Planning for U.S. Attacks on North Vietnam

On November 1, 1964, the Communists attacked the air base at Bien Hoa, killing five Americans, wounding 76, and destroying or damaging 27 of 30 U.S. B-57s. Taylor and the JCS urged the President to retaliate with airstrikes on the North. With the election two days away, the President preferred to wait. Instead of retaliating, he suggested to Taylor that U.S. dependents should be withdrawn before bombing the North, and that it might also be desirable to deploy some U.S. ground forces to provide better protection for U.S. personnel and bases. Taylor replied that ground forces were not needed. He was "greatly surprised," he said later, "that the offer of ground troops was made so casually, as it seemed to me

⁴⁸ *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 207.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, Lot File 85 D 240 (William Bundy Papers), notes made by William Bundy in 1969 cited above. Bundy said in a cover memorandum that it was a "think-piece" in response to a long memorandum by Ball on October 5 (see pt. II of this study, pp. 360-362) questioning U.S. policy. "The choices we face," Bundy said, "are clearly in the Hobson class, and I have not tried to arrive at any recommendation as to which is the least bad." The text of Bundy's responses, except for the first four pages, has been declassified and is in U.S. Department of State, Lot File 79 D 212.

a much more difficult decision than the use of our air forces against military targets north of the seventeenth parallel.”⁵¹

On November 3, 1964, the day he was elected, President Johnson directed his advisers to prepare alternative courses of action for the U.S. According to a memorandum from the chairman of the interdepartmental Working Group, William Bundy, “Bien Hoa may be repeated at any time. This would tend to force our hand, but would also give us a good springboard for any decision for stronger action. The President is already thinking in terms of maximum use of a Gulf of Tonkin rationale, either for an action that would show toughness and hold the line till we can decide the big issue, or as a basis for starting a clear course of action under the broad options.”⁵²

During November, there was an intensive discussion of the three principal options which were being considered by the Working Group:

Option A—To continue present policies indefinitely, including covert actions by the South Vietnamese against the North, and reprisals against the North by the U.S. and South Vietnam for any additional Communist “spectaculars,” such as Bien Hoa.

Option B—To add to present actions a systematic program of military pressure against the North, to be continued rapidly until objectives were reached. (This was called “full/fast squeeze” by McNaughton.)

Option C—To add to present programs a combination of diplomatic moves indicating willingness to negotiate and graduated military moves against North Vietnam. (This was called “progressive squeeze and talk” by McNaughton.)

Toward the end of November, the Working Group gave its report to the President’s top advisers, and after further discussions they recommended to the President a two-phase plan of action consisting of elements of Option A and Option C.⁵³ Phase I, which was to last for 30 days but could be extended, would involve increasing military pressure through present programs, as well as armed reconnaissance strikes (attacks on “targets of opportunity”) in Laos against North Vietnamese infiltration routes and South Vietnamese and possibly U.S. “tit-for-tat” airstrikes in the southern part of North Vietnam (below the 19th parallel) in response to Communist attacks. At the end of Phase I there would be a “transition phase” in which, if the Communists had not begun to yield, additional pressure would be applied by attacks on infiltration routes in the southern part of North Vietnam, among other things. If the Communists still did not appear to be yielding, Phase II would begin, and for the next two to six months there would be progressively more severe airstrikes on targets in North Vietnam, beginning in the southern part below the 19th parallel and working north, until, if necessary, all targets on the “94 target list” drawn up by the JCS in April 1964 had been attacked. In addition, the report sug-

⁵¹ Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 325.

⁵² PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 593.

⁵³ For the text see *ibid.*, pp. 678-683.

gested that North Vietnamese ports could be mined and the U.S. Navy could establish a blockade.

The "Position Paper on Southeast Asia" which outlined this plan, drafted by William Bundy on November 30, 1964 and formally approved by President Johnson on December 7, also provided that during the period the U.S. would "... continue to press the South Vietnamese Government in every possible way to make the government itself more effective and to push forward with the pacification program. We will also press upon leaders and members of all groups in that country the overriding need for national unity."

U.S. objectives, the paper stated, "are unchanged":

1. Get Hanoi and North Vietnam (DRV) support and direction removed from South Vietnam (SVN), and, to the extent possible, obtain DRV cooperation in ending Viet Cong (VC) operations in SVN.

2. Re-establish an independent and secure South Vietnam with appropriate international safeguards, including the freedom to accept US and other external assistance as required.

3. Maintain the security of other non-Communist nations in Southeast Asia including specifically the maintenance and observance of the Geneva Accords of 1962 in Laos.

Although there were some differences among the President's civilian advisers, they generally agreed with the proposed plan. The military, however, while approving increased pressure on North Vietnam, preferred a stronger, faster use of military force based on applying "maximum practicable conventional military power in a short time."⁵⁴

On December 1, 1964, President Johnson met with Vice President-elect Hubert H. Humphrey, Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, Taylor, McCone, McNaughton, and General Wheeler.⁵⁵ Taylor began by saying that pacification was "bogging down"; the Communists were stronger; the South Vietnamese Government was weaker and more unstable. He called the situation a "losing game." "Who do you talk to?" the President asked, Taylor replied, "You have to identify focal points—military, Catholics, Buddhists, labor, and 'ambitious politicians' on the High National

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 290. The definitive JCS position was stated in JCSM-955-64 (*ibid.*, pp. 628-630), and repeated in JCSM-982-64, Nov. 23, 1964, which is still classified. The JCS plan was summarized on Nov. 29, 1964 by William Bundy in his draft NSAM (PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 679):

"The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend immediate initiation of sharply intensified military pressure against the DRV, starting with a sharp and early attack in force on the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam—North Vietnam], subsequent to brief operations in Laos and US low-level reconnaissance north of the boundary to divert DRV attention prior to the attack in force. This program would be designed to destroy in the first three days Phuc Yen airfield near Hanoi [North Vietnam's major air field], other airfields, and major POL [petroleum, oil, lubricants] facilities, clearly to establish the fact that the US intends to use military force to the full limits of what military force can contribute to achieving US objectives in Southeast Asia, and to afford the GVN [Government of Vietnam—South Vietnam] respite by curtailing DRV assistance to and direction of the Viet Cong. The follow-on military program—involving armed reconnaissance of infiltration routes in Laos, air strikes on infiltration targets in the DRV, and then progressive strikes throughout North Vietnam [attacks on the 94 targets proposed by the JCS on Apr. 17, 1964]—could be suspended short of full destruction of the DRV if our objectives were earlier achieved."

⁵⁵ There are no prepared notes of this meeting by someone designated to be the notetaker. There are, however, three sets of handwritten notes: McNaughton's, which are in the Johnson Library, Meeting Notes File; McGeorge Bundy's, which are in the Johnson Library, Papers of McGeorge Bundy; William Bundy's, which are in his papers in U.S. Department of State, Lot File 85 D 240. The quotations used here are taken from all three sets of notes, but primarily from McNaughton's notes, which are the most complete of the three sets.

Council." "Where are the Communists?" the President asked, "In the Buddhists?" Taylor replied that the Communists were using the Buddhists. "Basic to all we do," the President said, "is pulling South Vietnamese together." "You know my views of Diem. Don't want another Diem." "How [can we] bring these people together," he asked, adding, "if it takes all SO [Special Operations—covert U.S. activities] and Rockefeller money. They do it or else. No point hitting North if South not together." "What more can we do?" the President asked. "It's hard," Taylor replied. The President: "Can't we say we just can't go on. Can't we have a warning?" Taylor: "Wonderful, but can we mean it?"

Saying, "Do we have any clout—have we played every card we've got and moved our stack?" the President asked Taylor whether the Pope could be used to influence the Catholics. "Maybe," Taylor said. What about the Buddhists, the President asked. "What on earth can we do with them—any way to get to them?" Taylor replied that this involved three or four Buddhist leaders, and that, "CIA sees no way to work with them. Don't want to exile them." "Let's get thinkers to work on ABCD's to Buddhists," the President responded. What about the military? the President added. "Have we oversold them on the notion that we are bound to be a power in the Pacific?"

The President then asked Taylor whether the U.S. had done everything it could. "If dollars, give 'em. [I do] not want to send widow woman to slap Jack Dempsey [a famous American boxer]." The "day of reckoning" was coming, he said, but he wanted to be sure that everything possible had been done. The U.S., he said, "could have kept" Diem. "Should we get another one?" Taylor replied: "We need one. Maybe [Premier] Huong and [Deputy Premier] Vien together may be a Diem."

What about contributions from U.S. allies? the President asked, saying he was not sure that the U.S. had been "tough enough with our allies—it's shocking we've done so little." He asked Taylor for a list of what he needed from other countries and asked Rusk to develop a plan for getting more help.

General Wheeler then spoke, urging firm action, and the President said he agreed but wanted first to have everything in order.

Taylor asked the President whether he approved the program drawn up during November, and the President replied that he did, but that he would decide "exactly what at the time." He said he was, "never reluctant to stand up, but must do damndest in SVN," get as many allies as possible, and plan to get U.S. dependents out. "Before Wheeler saddles up, try everything."⁵⁶ "If more of the same, then I'll be talking to you, General [Wheeler]."

President Johnson then met on December 3 with Ambassador Taylor to discuss what Taylor would say to the South Vietnamese. There are no available notes of that meeting, but written instructions from the President to Taylor on December 3, 1964 stated that there were two primary causes for the lack of progress in South

⁵⁶ In pt. II of this study, p. 376, this quotation was given as follows: "Before Wheeler saddles up [and U.S. Army goes in] try everything." The author is grateful to Army Historian Vincent Demma for pointing out that there is nothing in the notes on the meeting to support this suggestion that the phrase "saddles up" referred to the U.S. Army. Rather, it would appear that the President was speaking more generally about the use of U.S. forces.

Vietnam: first, governmental instability in Saigon, and, second, continued reinforcement and direction of the insurgents by the North Vietnamese.⁵⁷ "It is clear, however," the instructions stated, "that these factors are not of equal importance. There must be a stable, effective government to conduct a successful campaign against the Viet Cong even if the aid of North Vietnam for the VC should end. . . . Since action against North Vietnam is contributory, not central, we should not run the risks which are inherent in such an expansion of hostilities until there is a government in Saigon capable of handling the serious problems involved in such an expansion and of exploiting the favorable effects which can be anticipated from an end of support and direction by North Vietnam."

The instructions went on to suggest "certain minimum criteria of performance in South Vietnam which must be met before new measures against North Vietnam would be either justified or practicable":

At a minimum, the government should be able to speak for and to its people who will need guidance and leadership throughout the coming critical period. It should be capable of maintaining law and order in its principal centers of population, make plans for the conduct of operations and assure their effective execution by military and police forces completely responsive to its authority. It must have the means to cope with the enemy reactions which must be expected to result from any change in the pattern of our operations.

Taylor was also instructed to urge the South Vietnamese to concentrate their efforts on eight specific areas, which, the paper stated, were not only important for purposes of the pacification program, but could also serve as indices of the ability of the government to perform effectively:

1. Improve the use of manpower for military and pacification purposes.
2. Bring the armed forces and police to authorized strength and maximize their effectiveness.
3. Replace incompetent officials and commanders. Freeze the competent in place for extended periods of service.
4. Clarify and strengthen the police powers of arrest, detention and interrogation of VC suspects.
5. Clarify and strengthen the authority of provincial chiefs.
6. Make demonstrable progress in the Hop Tac operation around Saigon [a program to pacify an area in which the Communists were well-entrenched].⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The text of the President's instructions to Taylor is in the Johnson Library, NSF International Meetings and Travel File. Taylor presented a paper to the South Vietnamese which differed only slightly from the instructions. See *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 343-345.

⁵⁸ Hop Tac (the words mean "cooperation") was a plan to pacify the seven provinces around Saigon, based on the spreading oil spot principle or concept which originated in the early 1960s during the administration of President Kennedy. Under the plan, security would expand outwardly in concentric circles from a secure center (Saigon), as areas were cleared, secured, and then pacified. Once the South Vietnamese Army cleared an area, paramilitary forces would secure and hold it while the process of pacification was being completed by civic action teams, and the Army would move further out in an effort to search for and destroy Communist forces. (This was the origin of the term "search and destroy.")

7. Broaden and intensify the civic action program using both military and civilian resources to produce tangible evidence of the desire of the government to help the hamlets and villages.

8. Carry out a sanitary clean-up of Saigon.

Taylor was also instructed to tell the South Vietnamese that, "While progress is being made toward these goals by a government of growing effectiveness, the USG is willing to strike harder at the infiltration routes in Laos and at sea [Phase I]." In addition, during this time U.S. and South Vietnamese forces should be prepared for "prompt reprisals for any unusually hostile action."

"... after the GVN has shown itself firmly in control," the instructions continued, the U.S. was "prepared to consider a program of direct military pressure on the DRV as Phase II," consisting of a "series of air attacks on the DRV progressively mounting in scope of intensity for the purpose of convincing the leaders of DRV that it is to their interest to cease to aid the Viet Cong and to respect the independence and security of South Vietnam, properly assured by appropriate international safeguards."

In a memorandum to Rusk, McNamara, and McCone on December 7, 1964, the President gave his formal approval to the new graduated pressure plan. He said that the "Position Paper on Southeast Asia," together with the instructions to Ambassador Taylor, represented his "present position." He added: "I consider it a matter of the highest importance that the substance of this position should not become public except as I specifically direct."⁵⁹

On December 7, Ambassador Taylor, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) and U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Ambassador, met with General Khanh and the new South Vietnamese civilian leaders, Premier Tran Van Huong and Deputy Premier Nguyen Luu Vien.⁶⁰ Taylor presented the U.S. program, but the Vietnamese said they did not understand what was meant by "campaign against the Viet Cong" and by the phrase "to speak for and to its people." They also noted that the U.S. plan did not deal with the question of the use of Cambodia as a sanctuary by the Communists.

The plan, proposed in July 1964 by Ambassador Lodge, was put into effect in September 1964 according to a design developed by American military personnel. It was not well-received by the South Vietnamese, however, and by the summer of 1965, after numerous setbacks and very limited success, it had been "defeated" according to one analyst: "Security in Long An province [adjacent to and south of Saigon] was worse than it had been in 1964 when the program started. Bao Trai, the capitol of Hau Nghia province [west of Saigon], was virtually isolated; no roads were usable, even by day. The province was so dominated by the Viet Cong that they staged a victory parade in Cu Chi district in August 1965." James W. Dunn, "Province Advisers in Vietnam, 1962-1965," ch. 1. in Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Schultz, Jr., (eds.), *Lessons from an Unconventional War* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982) pp. 1-23 at 17.

See also PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 521-530, and Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: Free Press, 1977), pp. 222-223.

⁵⁹ Johnson Library, NSF International Meetings and Travel File. (The position paper, dated Dec. 2, 1964, was excised in part before being released, but it is a verbatim copy of the Bundy draft memorandum of November 30, the full text of which is in PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 678.) There was no NSAM, apparently to help ensure the secrecy of the plan as well as to maintain greater Presidential flexibility.

⁶⁰ In October 1964, Khanh, who, since the problems of August-September 1964, had eased out his rivals—Khim went to the U.S. as Ambassador and Minh was sent on a goodwill tour abroad—had arranged for the appointment of a civilian government consisting of Premier Huong, Deputy Premier Vien and Chief of State Phan Khac Suu, and a body of notables—the High National Council—to serve as a legislature. However, Khanh, as commander of the armed forces and the putative leader of the Revolutionary Military Council, continued to hold the reins of power.

On December 9, the two groups met again, and Taylor gave the Vietnamese the text of a paper, "Actions Designed to Strengthen the Government of Vietnam," which contained the eight specific areas on which the U.S. wanted the South Vietnamese to concentrate. According to the *Pentagon Papers*, "The only decisions reached were for joint study and consultations. . . . This was the last time the USG tried to set GVN performance preconditions for U.S. force use and deployments. Its effect, if any, was the opposite of that intended."⁶¹

In the meeting on December 1 at which he approved the new plan, the President told Rusk and McNamara to inform selected Members of Congress of the decision. According to the notes of the meeting, they were to "give [Congress] good and bad; ask for suggestions."⁶²

Taylor also was asked by the President to "touch base with the Hill" before returning to Vietnam, and on December 3 he met in executive (closed) session with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁶³ He told the committee that officials of the executive branch generally agreed that the U.S. had to take action against North Vietnam at some stage, but that this should not be done when the South Vietnamese Government was as weak as it was at that time. Chairman J. William Fulbright (D/Ark.) said he was willing to work with the existing South Vietnamese Government, but that if it fell he would not support a U.S. attack on the North as a way of compensating for weakness in the South. Taylor replied that he would accept a "military dictatorship" if it were necessary to achieve the governmental stability which the U.S. desired as a precondition for attacking the North.

Fulbright and Frank Church (D/Idaho) expressed concern about major U.S. military involvement in the war. ". . . if you want to go to war," Fulbright said, "I don't approve of it. I don't give a damn what the provocation is. . . . I am not going to vote to send a hundred thousand men, or it would probably be 300,000 or 400,000. The French had 500,000." Taylor replied that the U.S. could attack the North from the air, "and let it go at that." Fulbright was skeptical: "Well, if it doesn't succeed—America never fails—once it engages in that they will just go all out."

In a memorandum to the President on December 9, 1964, Senate Majority Leader Mansfield also expressed concern about further U.S. involvement in the war, and urged the President to work toward a "peaceful unification" of all of Vietnam, North and South. "We remain on a course in Vietnam," he said, "which takes us further and further out on the sagging limb. . . ."⁶⁴

⁶¹ PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 345, from Saigon to State 1746, Dec. 7, 1964, and 1763 and 1764, Dec. 9, 1964.

⁶² Johnson Library, Meeting Notes File.

⁶³ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Together With Joint Sessions With the Senate Armed Services Committee* (Historical Series), 1964, vol. XVI (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988), pp. 364, 369.

⁶⁴ Johnson Library, NSF Name File, Mansfield. For further details on Mansfield's memorandum and the President's reply see pt. II of this study, pp. 371-379. For a discussion of congressional attitudes in early January 1965, see pp. 394-397.

Phase I Begins as the South Vietnamese Political Situation Becomes More Critical

On December 14, 1964, Phase I of the new U.S. graduated pressure plan began amid hopes in Saigon and Washington that the political situation was improving and that the South Vietnamese Government would be able to implement U.S. preconditions for stronger military action. A few days later, however, Khanh and the "Young Turk" military officers on the Military Revolutionary Council,⁶⁵ most of whom had supported Khanh during the political crisis in September 1964, demanded that the civilian legislature, the High National Council, members of which had been chosen by General Minh, dismiss General Minh as well as other leading officers who had been in the post-Diem junta. When they refused, Khanh and the Young Turks announced the abolition of the High National Council and arrested some of its members as well as other civilian leaders and some military officers, and placed Minh and four other generals in confinement. Premier Huong and Chief of State Phan Khac Suu were allowed to remain in their posts. The Military Revolutionary Council was replaced by an Armed Forces Council headed by Khanh.⁶⁶

The U.S. reacted sharply to these developments. On December 20, Ambassador Taylor and Deputy Ambassador Johnson, who had urged Premier Huong not to yield to Khanh and the Young Turks, met with four of the Young Turks—Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu (commanding the Army in IV Corps), Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky (commanding the Air Force), Rear Adm. Chung Tang Cang (chief of Naval Operations), and Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi (who commanded I Corps forces in the predominantly Buddhist area around Hue, and was very popular with the Buddhists)—and lectured them on the need for political stability as a precondition for stronger U.S. military action. Reminding the group that at a dinner at General Westmoreland's on December 8, at which the new U.S. plan was explained, he had told them that "we Americans were tired of coups," Taylor said, "Apparently I wasted my words. Maybe this is because something is wrong with my French because you evidently didn't understand. I made it clear that all the military plans which I know you would like to carry out are dependent on governmental stability. Now you have made a real mess. We cannot carry you forever if you do things like this."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The term "Young Turks" was used in reference to the younger generals on the Council who were allied with Khanh. The group included Gens. Nguyen Van Thieu, Nguyen Cao Ky, Nguyen Chanh Thi, Le Nguyen Khang, and Nguyen Huu Co, and Adm. Chung Tang Cang.

⁶⁶ The removal of Minh and other of the so-called "Dalat generals" of the post-Diem junta was part of a complicated scheme by the Young Turks to control Khanh, who in turn had apparently been seeking to gain support from the Dalat generals in an effort to counter the rising power of the Young Turks. For more details, see the extensive reporting of the *New York Times*, as well as Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Kahin, *Intervention*.

⁶⁷ Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Summary of Conversation, Sunday, December 20," Saigon to State AIRGRAM A-493, Dec. 24, 1964. In his memoir, *Swords and Plowshares*, (p. 330), Taylor says that he and U. Alexis Johnson agreed on the response which should be made to the Young Turks, and that he decided to treat the generals "with calculated asperity."

On Jan. 5, 1965, McGeorge Bundy sent the airgram to the President with a note saying, "I think you will want to read every word of this, and make up your own mind as to its implications." Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

The response of Khanh and the Young Turks, after a meeting the next day between Taylor and Khanh, in which Taylor told Khanh that he had lost confidence in him and that he should leave office,⁶⁸ was to defy Taylor and the Americans by demanding that Taylor leave Vietnam, to which the U.S. Embassy, after consulting with Washington, replied that this was tantamount to asking the U.S. to leave.

On December 24, 1964, the Communists set off explosives at a U.S. officers' billet in Saigon which killed two and injured 38 other Americans and 13 Vietnamese. President Johnson was urged by Taylor, Westmoreland, CINCPAC and the JCS to retaliate against North Vietnam, but this was rejected. As the *Pentagon Papers* states:⁶⁹

The immediate administration assessment was that under current political circumstances, neither the American public nor international opinion might believe that the VC had done it. Moreover, with clear evidence lacking, it was felt that a reprisal at this time might appear as though "we are trying to shoot our way out of an internal political crisis." Given the political disorder in Saigon, the administration believed "it would be hard for [the] American public to understand action to extend [the] war."

On December 30, President Johnson sent a personal message to Ambassador Taylor in which he said, referring to the "continuing political turmoil in Saigon," that the "general confusion in South Vietnam makes me feel strongly that we are not in a position which justifies a policy of immediate reprisal."⁷⁰ The President, who had made the same point in earlier communications with Taylor, added that he could not understand why women and children should remain in the "battle zone," and that his "readiness to authorize larger actions will be very much greater if we can remove the dependents and get ourselves into real fighting trim." He said, however, that he did not intend for that or other parts of his cable to be an order to Taylor.

The President also told Taylor that he was reluctant to approve reprisal when, as in this instance, U.S. security appeared to be inadequate.

The President added that he was "... worried, too, by our lack of progress in communicating sensitively and persuasively with the various groups in South Vietnam. I recognize the very great problems which we face in dealing with groups which are immature and often irresponsible. But I still do not feel that we are making the all-out effort of political persuasion which is called for." He said he wondered "whether we are making full use of the kind of Americans who have shown a knack for this kind of communication in the past ... men who are skillful with Vietnamese, even if

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 331.

⁶⁹ *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 262.

⁷⁰ Johnson Library, NSF NSC History, Deployment of Forces, CAP 6435 from the President to Taylor, Dec. 30, 1964.

they are not always the easiest men to handle in a country team."⁷¹

The President also emphasized again his feeling that the war had to be fought on the ground and could not be won through air power alone:

Every time I get a military recommendation it seems to me that it calls for large-scale bombing: I have never felt that this war will be won from the air, and it seems to me that what is much more needed and would be more effective is a larger and stronger use of Rangers and Special Forces and Marines, or other appropriate military strength on the ground and on the scene. I am ready to look with great favor on that kind of increased American effort, directed at the guerrillas and aimed to stiffen the aggressiveness of Vietnamese military units up and down the line. Any recommendation that you or General Westmoreland make in this sense will have immediate attention from me, although I know that it may involve the acceptance of larger American sacrifices. We have been building our strength to fight his kind of war ever since 1961, and I myself am ready to substantially increase the number of Americans in Vietnam if it is necessary to provide this kind of fighting force against the Viet Cong.

In conclusion, the President told Taylor, "If you can give me either progress or persuasive arguments on these matters [evacuation of dependents, better security, building better political relations, increased use of ground units], I would look with favor on the execution of immediate and automatic reprisal . . . in the event of further attacks."

On January 6, 1965, Taylor, with the concurrence of U. Alexis Johnson and Westmoreland, replied to the President's cable of December 30.⁷² ". . . we are presently on a losing track," Taylor said, "and must risk a change. . . . To take no positive action now is to accept defeat in the fairly near future." After describing the situation and discussing the basic historical factors which were "responsible" for the "turmoil" in South Vietnam, Taylor, alluding to the President's proposal for using Americans who were skilled in dealing with the Vietnamese, added: "Perhaps other Americans might marginally influence them [factors responsible for the turmoil] more effectively but generally speaking we Americans are not going to change them in any fundamental way in any measurable time. We can only recognize their existence and adjust our plans and expectations accordingly." There are, he said, "some things we clearly cannot do—change national characteristics, create leadership where it does not exist, raise large additional GVN forces or seal porous frontiers to infiltration . . . in the time available we cannot expect anything better than marginal government and mar-

⁷¹ McGeorge Bundy edited the cable (the edited version is in the same location as the cable), inserting the words "men who are skillful with Vietnamese" in place of the words "of the general type of [Edward G.] Lansdale and [Lucien] Conein" in the original draft. Lansdale and Conein were CIA agents (Lansdale was technically in the Air Force) who had worked extensively with the South Vietnamese since the early 1950s. In December 1964, Lansdale, who had retired as a major general from the Air Force in the fall of 1963, was a consultant to the White House Food for Peace program.

⁷² Same location, Saigon to Washington 2052 and 2055-2058 (a four-section message), Jan. 6, 1965. For a more complete discussion of the cable see pt. II of this study, pp. 387-389.

ginal pacification progress with continued decline of national morale—unless something new is added to make up for those things we cannot control.”

They recommended giving the Government of South Vietnam a “conditional commitment” that if it reached a “certain level of performance” the U.S. would then conduct reprisal attacks against North Vietnam. Such attacks, the cable said, would stimulate further improvements in the South Vietnamese Government and in the unification of the armed forces and thereby set the stage for Phase II actions.

The cable added that the U.S. “should look for an occasion” for reprisals “just as soon as we have satisfactorily compromised the current political situation in Saigon and set up a minimal government. . . .” Then, “At the proper time, we can set the stage for [Phase II] action by exposing to the [U.S.] public our case against infiltration, and by initiating aggressive DE SOTO patrols,” and when the U.S. decided to move into Phase II, “we can justify that decision on the basis of infiltration, of VC terrorism, of attacks on DE SOTO patrols or any combination of the three.”

Taylor said he agreed with the President that the war against the guerrillas in South Vietnam could not be won by air power, but he conceived of the use of airpower in Phase II as being a way of bringing pressure on the North Vietnamese who, as “practical men . . . cannot wish to see the fruits of ten years of labor destroyed by slowly escalating air attacks (which they cannot prevent) without trying to find some accommodations which will excise the threat.”

With respect to the use of U.S. ground forces, Taylor said he concurred with Westmoreland’s position, which was stated in a portion of the cable prepared by Westmoreland and his staff, as follows:

. . . after much soul searching we have reluctantly concluded that their [U.S. ground forces] military value would be more than offset by their political liability. The Vietnamese have the manpower and the basic skills to win this war. What they lack is motivation. The entire advisory effort has been devoted to giving them both skill and motivation. If that effort has not succeeded there is less reason to think that U.S. combat forces would have the desired effect. In fact, there is good reason to believe that they would have the opposite effect by causing some Vietnamese to let the U.S. carry the burden while others, probably the majority, would actively turn against us. Thus intervention with ground combat forces would at best buy time and would lead to ever increasing commitments until, like the French, we would be occupying an essentially hostile foreign country.

During early January 1965 there was increasing concern among U.S. policymakers about the growing military and political strength of the Communists. In a battle at Binh Gia between December 26 and January 2, well-armed and well-trained South Vietnamese Army units, supported by considerable American advice and assistance, were badly defeated.

On January 15, the CIA concluded that the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, which had been organized in 1960 in opposition to the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, and was controlled by the Communists, “. . . had extended its influence if

not its control, into nearly every corner of South Vietnam.”⁷³ The Front claimed to control three-quarters of the country and eight of the fourteen million people. “Outside of large urban centers such as Saigon and Hue,” the report said, “and those provincial strong-points manned by the South Vietnamese Army, the Viet Cong roam the countryside more or less at will. With the faltering of the GVN’s strategic hamlet program, many areas considered cleared of Viet Cong a year ago have been lost or are subjected to constant guerrilla pressure. . . . There are no indications that the government in Saigon will be able in the near future to counter effectively the steady increase in VC-controlled territory, and therefore the Front’s influence and control seem bound to grow.”

In response to these and related developments, the U.S. Army undertook a study of ways to improve military operations in South Vietnam. A directive on January 15 from the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations (DCSOPS) stated that in the study, which had been requested by the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Harold K. Johnson, “. . . emphasis is to be placed on military objectives, missions, policies, and operations. We want to know if all the things we are doing really contribute to attaining the military objective and what else we can do and should do.”⁷⁴ The directive added: “We realize that solution to the overall problem involves more than a military effort (i.e., political, psychological, sociological, economic), but no progress in the other fields is likely without progress in the military field—defeat of the Viet Cong.”

The directive also stated: “A quick solution to the South Vietnamese problem is extremely unlikely though desirable. Therefore, we must assume that the involvement in RVN [Republic of Vietnam] may last as long as 10 years. Our actions should recognize this possibility.”

The resulting 114-page study, “Analysis of the Military Effort in South Vietnam,” which was completed in March 1965, found that Communist forces were increasing in size, strength and effectiveness, that South Vietnamese forces lacked leadership and the will to fight, and that pacification was lagging except in the Hop Tac area around Saigon.⁷⁵

Overall, the study concluded, “there has been no significant improvement in the military situation. Because of continued political instability at national level and the condensation [*sic*] of pacifica-

⁷³ U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Central File, Special Report, “The Communist Liberation Front in South Vietnam—A Progress Report,” SC No. 00653/65C, Jan. 15, 1965. There is no indication as to which office of the CIA prepared the report.

⁷⁴ U.S. Department of the Army, Center of Military History (hereafter referred to as CMH), Memorandum from the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, “Analysis of the Military Effort in South Vietnam,” with attached outline, Jan. 15, 1965.

The outline included these objectives:

“a. *U.S. Objective.* The U.S. objective in South Vietnam is to re-establish an independent and secure South Vietnam with appropriate international safeguards, including the freedom to accept U.S. and other external assistance as required. Attainment of this objective involves activities in five fields—sociological, political, economic, psychological, and military. . . .

“b. *Military Objectives.* From the overall objective this military objective can be derived: To destroy the Viet Cong and/or his will to fight and to provide security for the country. This, then, becomes the primary mission of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). U.S. policy is that the Vietnamese should fight their own war with advice, assistance and support from us. Therefore, the U.S. military role in South Vietnam is to advise, assist and support the RVNAF in their fight against the Viet Cong.”

⁷⁵ A copy of the study, which is not dated, is in CMH. For a description of Hop Tac, see p. 21 above.

tion effort, the RVN [Republic of Vietnam—South Vietnam] gave ground to the VC [Viet Cong] pressures almost universally. With the exception of the priority 'Hop Tac' area where the GVN [Government of Vietnam] maintained the initiative, the *status quo* has not been maintained."

The study began with a description of the enemy situation. It estimated the number of Communist forces in the South at about 33,000 full-time regular forces—compared to 10,000 in 1960—and 60-80,000 part-time irregular forces. Infiltration of personnel from the North, it said, was higher in 1964 than in any other previous year with the possible exception of 1962, and almost twice that of 1963. For the first time, ethnic North Vietnamese were coming across the border.

Although the Communists were still fighting a guerrilla war, and would not attempt conventional warfare "unless they are dissatisfied with the results of their present activities, and they have little reason to feel dissatisfied as yet," they were more capable than previously of conducting conventional warfare. This was demonstrated at the battle of Binh Gia in early January 1965, when Communist forces remained in the village for several days and held parts of it against sustained attack by South Vietnamese forces.

The South Vietnamese Army, by contrast, while it could maintain the security of urban areas and lines of communication, "has been unable to overcome the VC efforts in subversion, terrorism and guerrilla warfare, nor has it provided adequate, country-wide security." "The principal weakness," the study continued, "seems to be in small unit tactics, scouting and patrolling, collection and processing of intelligence."

The pattern of military operations during 1964 has been one of reaction to VC activities rather than ARVN initiative. The RVNAF have not completely followed the principle of offensive action. In order to find, fix and fight the VC, ARVN must find the enemy and aggressively follow through. Since VC use the night for movement and relocation, ARVN should use more aggressive patrolling to force the VC to stay on the move and off balance. Constant movement of company and battalion size regular units at night could instill more initiative and aggressiveness in the ARVN clearing operations. Once the enemy has been located either through ARVN initiative, or as a result of VC attack, the pattern of ARVN operations has been characterized by slow reaction, piecemeal commitment, and seldom have [there been] sufficient forces at the critical point to bring about decisive and successful defeats of VC elements. When on rare occasions initiative was employed and aggressive follow-up continued, ARVN was able to defeat the VC decisively.

The study was critical of large sweep operations, which "produce negligible results," but it said that the concept of search and destroy operations using helicopter-borne infantry units as quick reaction forces had been a success.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ At that time (early 1965) the term "search and destroy" was used in connection with the design for the Hop Tac pacification program to describe the operations which would be carried out by South Vietnamese forces as they cleared areas previously controlled by the Communists. Only later was it used to refer to the large sweeps conducted by U.S. forces.

With respect to intelligence operations, the study stated that because of weaknesses in South Vietnam's intelligence and counterintelligence, "The Viet Cong regularly demonstrate detailed knowledge of both short and long term Government of Vietnam (GVN) operational plans, often in sufficient time to prepare relatively complex countermeasures. . . . Directives and plans are routinely compromised." "Improvements in GVN security procedures, particularly communications security must be made; otherwise there can be no hope of establishing a consistent pattern of successful operations against the Viet Cong."

Although there had been little progress in pacification, the study concluded that the concepts on which Hop Tac was based were sound and that better management was needed of the securing and pacifying of cleared areas. Rather than switching from military to civilian management after an area was cleared, it would be more effective to maintain military management and to resume civilian control once an area was "completely secure." Accordingly, the study proposed that the U.S. Military Command in South Vietnam should be made responsible for the direction "of all aspects of the clearing and securing phase of pacification." (This was carried out in 1967, when responsibility for pacification was removed from civilian control and given to MACV.)

Looking ahead to similar situations in other parts of the world, the report also recommended that a plan be developed by the staff of the Army "to establish and maintain an effective capability within the Army to advise and assist friendly foreign governments in counterinsurgency pacification operations. . . ."

The study also discussed "Special Operations"—covert activities conducted by the South Vietnamese and the U.S. against North Vietnam since the beginning of 1964. These were the 34-A operations, which included MAROPS (maritime operations—attacks on the North Vietnamese coast), behind the lines military teams which were airdropped in North Vietnam, and propaganda operations. In addition, special operations included YANKEE TEAM tactical air reconnaissance flights by the U.S. Air Force and Navy over Laos, and BARREL ROLL, which involved U.S. armed reconnaissance and airstrikes in Laos against Communist forces.

According to the study, "the material effectiveness of [34-A] operations has been marginal," but from a psychological standpoint all of the 34-A operations had been useful, "especially in signalling to the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam—North Vietnam] that they are not completely immune to military and political retaliatory actions."⁷⁷

The study noted that two of the activities which had been requested in the original plan in January 1964 had never been carried out—covert airstrikes by the South Vietnamese Air Force against military targets in the southern part of North Vietnam, and the organization and development of organized resistance

⁷⁷ The study said that MAROPS had been the most successful 34-A operation, and had caused the North Vietnamese to have to strengthen their coastal defenses and naval forces. Behind-the-lines teams, however, had suffered a 50 percent loss, and had conducted only three sabotage missions. Propaganda activities were considered to be useful by "causing concern and are probably planting the seeds of doubt and dissension which can be germinated over a longer period of time."

groups in North Vietnam, "under the mantle of 'Liberation Party'"—and it recommended that both activities be authorized.

Finally, the study concluded that in order to improve the counterinsurgency program, the U.S. needed to find better ways of motivating the Vietnamese:

If there is a basic weakness in the conduct of the U.S. counterinsurgency effort in SVN it stems primarily from failure to recognize the fundamental weaknesses and strengths of the Vietnamese people as measured by our standards and the peculiar workings of the oriental mind. The RVN military inherently have the same capabilities as the Viet Cong. Utilization of these capabilities is dependent upon motivation, training and leadership. The leadership potential is present; training is a matter of time, tools and the capability of U.S. training advisors; motivation is a matter of appreciation of the oriental mind and an understanding of the peculiar sense of values by which the RVN govern their efforts. It is the intangible element of motivation that seems to elude solution. It has puzzled Westerners for years and major effort has been expended searching for solutions. We must continue to pursue this problem and orient the training of U.S. advisors to cope with and to capitalize on those forces that motivate the RVN leadership at each echelon of the military and the governmental organization.⁷⁸

By the time this report was completed, however, it had been overtaken by events. The first U.S. combat forces had been deployed in Vietnam, and, as will be seen, General Westmoreland, having been told by the President that there was no limitation on funds, matériel or manpower, had requested deployment of additional U.S. forces.

January 1965: The President and His Advisers Ponder Phase II

When Taylor's January 6 cable was received, the President met that day with his advisers to discuss the situation. In advance of the meeting, William Bundy prepared a memorandum on January 6 for Rusk, which he said represented also the views of his deputy for Southeast Asia, Leonard Unger, as well as those of Michael Forrestal, head of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee, recommending that the U.S. take stronger action against North Vietnam.⁷⁹ "I think we must accept," the memorandum said, "that Saigon morale in all quarters is now very shaky indeed, and that this relates directly to a widespread feeling that the U.S. is not ready for stronger action and indeed is possibly looking for a way out." "The blunt fact," he added, "is that we have appeared to the

⁷⁸ On Feb. 1, 1965, Gen. William E. DePuy, who was Westmoreland's J-3 (Operations), sent Westmoreland a three-page, single-spaced memorandum on "Motivation" (a copy is in the file at CMH), in which he said, "The longer we observe the situation in South Vietnam the more we come to believe that motivation is the key to success or the cause of failure." Pointing out that the Communists placed great emphasis on indoctrinating their forces, he concluded, "... it is our conviction in J-3 that unless we devise a system whereby we can go into the minds of every member of the RVNAF and eventually through them and other public officials into the minds of all of the effective leadership of the country, and lead them into a conviction that the government can and must win for good and logical reasons, we will have no chance in the long run of seeing any return on our very extensive investment."

⁷⁹ U.S. Department of State, Lot File 85 D 240 (William Bundy Papers).

Vietnamese (and to wide circles in Asia and even in Europe) to be insisting on a more perfect government than can reasonably be expected, before we consider any additional action—and that we might even pull out our support unless such a government emerges.” By the same token, Bundy argued, the North Vietnamese were “extremely confident.” His prognosis was that “the situation in Vietnam is now likely to come apart more rapidly than we had anticipated in November.”

The alternative of stronger action, Bundy said, would present “grave difficulties”: “It commits the U.S. more deeply, at a time when the picture of South Vietnamese will is extremely weak. To the extent that it included actions against North Vietnam, it would be vigorously attacked by many nations and disapproved initially even by such nations as Japan and India, on present indications. Most basically, its stiffening effect on the Saigon political situation would not be at all sure to bring about a more effective government, nor would limited actions against the southern DRV [against infiltration routes] in fact sharply reduce infiltration or, in present circumstances, be at all likely to induce Hanoi to call it off.”

Stronger actions, however, would “. . . have some faint hope of really improving the Vietnamese situations, and, above all, would put us in a much stronger position to hold the next line of defense, namely Thailand.”

There were, William Bundy said, three actions that the U.S. could take in the near future: low-level armed reconnaissance of the North beginning immediately, and, on an “early occasion,” reprisal attacks. Concurrently, U.S. dependents would be evacuated. But these actions, Bundy said, would hasten the deterioration of the situation in Saigon unless they were taken in the context of stronger actions, and he said that “to many of us” the deployment of limited U.S. ground forces into the northern part of South Vietnam at the time when air attacks on the North were begun “still has great appeal.” “It would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi.” “On the disadvantage side,” he added, “such forces would be possible attrition targets for the Viet Cong.”⁸⁰

Also on January 6, prior to the meeting, NSC staff member Chester L. Cooper (formerly with the CIA), who had long experience in dealing with Vietnam, sent McGeorge Bundy a memorandum⁸¹ in which he argued that there was a risk of “greatly expanded hostilities” if the U.S. bombed the North, as well as a “considerable risk” that such bombing would not be effective in persuading the North Vietnamese to cease supporting the insurgency or to negotiate. Military victories in the South, he said, would be more persuasive and less risky. He recommended that rather than continuing to provide advice, U.S. military personnel should become more involved in the conduct of military operations in the South: “What is

⁸⁰ In a draft on Jan. 4, 1965, McNaughton, observing that the U.S. had two stakes in South Vietnam: “(a) Buffer real estate near Thailand and Malaysia, and (b) Our reputation,” and that the latter was more important than the former, said that he favored evacuation of dependents and reprisals against the North, but he was opposed to increasing the number of U.S. forces in Vietnam, which were “as likely to be counterproductive as productive.” For the text of his draft see *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 683-684.

⁸¹ Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, “Vietnam Today and Tomorrow.”