

The Untold Story of "OPERATION VULTURE"

By LLOYD SHEARER

Lieut. Gen. James Gavin, chief of plans of the Army in 1954 and President Kennedy's ambassador to France, is one of the most outspoken critics of U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Several weeks ago, Gavin told the student body at Yale University: "If we continue our present policies in Vietnam, we'll be there as long as five to ten more years . . . I was over in Vietnam two months ago. The people there want peace, peace, peace, and they want us out of their hair and off their backs . . . I think the domino theory is nonsense. . . There is no such mystery as the oriental philosophy of war. They always look upon military negotiations and armistices as part of the military effort . . ."

Gavin, who served under Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, former chief of staff and also an opponent of Johnson's war policy, told in a recent *Saturday Evening Post* article how in 1954 top Pentagon leaders — Adm. Arthur Radford, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Air Force chief Gen. Nathan Twining, and Adm. Robert Carney, Chief of Naval Operations—wanted to invade North Vietnam after France's defeat.

It was President Eisenhower, however, who vetoed the proposal, largely because Army chief of staff Ridgway, who had salvaged U.S. troops in the Korean War, objected strenuously to involving U.S. troops in another Asiatic land war.

What Gavin did not tell, however, is far more revealing than what he did. Here, for example, is some untold history of the top secret "Operation Vulture," which Gavin dared not mention.

In 1954, John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's powerful Secretary of State, was determined to have the U.S. intervene in Vietnam. He got the top Pentagon brass to agree with him that loss of Southeast Asia might lead to the loss of Southeast Asia, that "the United States might eventually be forced back to Hawaii."

One influential political leader in 1954, however, would not buy the Dulles policy of intervention. That man was Lyndon Johnson of Texas, then the

U.S. Senate minority leader.

What Dulles wanted specifically at the time was Congressional approval of a military plan, known by the code name "Vulture." It was a plan designed to pull the French chestnuts out of the Dien Bien Phu fire.

"Vulture" called for three wings of U.S. B-29 bombers—some 97 planes—to bomb the Communist enemy positions at Dien Bien Phu in support of the French. These bombers were to be protected and supplemented by further aircraft from two American carriers, the *Essex* and *Boxer*, if needed.

The leader

The man appointed to lead and command "Vulture" was Brig. Gen. Joseph "Smokey" Caldara of Fairmont, W. Va., then head of the U.S. Far Eastern Air Command, and now the respected head of the Flight Safety Foundation based in New York.

Caldara, one of the hottest pilots and most brilliant military men this country has produced, was ordered late in March 1954 by Lieut. Gen. Earle E. "Pat" Partridge, commander of the U.S. Far Eastern Air Force, to fly himself and his staff of 18 assistants from Haneda Air

Base in Tokyo to Saigon.

When Caldara's B-17 arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport, it was met by officials from the U.S. Legation and members of the French general staff. The American fliers were assigned rooms on the top floor of the Majestic Hotel. Caldara immediately surmised that the French security provisions were inadequate and quickly ordered four full Air Force colonels to pull guard duty on a 24-hour alert.

He then entered into a series of conferences with Gen. Henri Navarre, ranking general of the French high command, about a major saturation bombardment operation of enemy positions at Dien Bien Phu. Caldara is an earthy, straightforward man, honest and plain-talking but alert, intelligent, and perceptive. Navarre stupidly mistook him for a hayseed.

Caldara, however, insisted upon flying over Dien Bien Phu with his American crew before he committed the U.S. Far Eastern Air Force to the operation. He therefore had all the U.S. markings removed from his B-17 and took off for Dien Bien Phu. The French briefed him that Ho Chi Minh had 35,000 troops occupying the heights on three sides of

Dien Bien Phu and that they and their guns were dug in three meters underground.

After flying over Dien Bien Phu valley which was then being supplied by U.S. civilian pilots (who were being paid \$2000 a month to drop food supplies and paratroopers to the French), Caldara returned to Tan Son Nhut and gave the French an optimistic report.

With some short-range navigational radar (SHORAN) he said he could put his 97 B-29 bombers over the target in three minutes on three sides. His 500-pound bombs equipped with ten-second delay fuses, would make mincemeat of the Communist positions above and underground, because each of his planes would drop ten tons of bombs.

Caldara repeated the mission later in a French Dakota, again studying the terrain. "If I was going to lead my men to the target," he said later, "I wanted to know everything I possibly could."

The final version of "Vulture" eventually hammered out by General Partridge and the French called for U.S. B-29's from Okinawa and the Philippines to rendezvous over Vientiane in Laos, to proceed to Dien Bien Phu, bomb targets, and to exit over the Gulf of Tonkin. In case any U.S. plane was disabled, great care would be taken to ditch in the open sea and to hide the fact that the U.S. had come to the aid of the French with men as well as money and materiel.

Secret meeting

"Vulture" was presented on Saturday, April 3, 1954 in Washington, D.C., at a secret State Department meeting to a prominent bipartisan group of legislators: Sens. Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Russell, Earl Clements, Eugene Millikan, and William Knowland; and Reps. Joseph Martin, John W. McCormack, and J. Percy Priest.

At this meeting Lyndon Johnson asked Dulles if any other Allied nations planned to join the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Eloquent and vigorously, Johnson pointed out that the U.S. had paid for more than 90 percent of the Korean War, had taken more deaths and casualties than any other nation. He asked what would happen if the first U.S. air-strike over Dien Bien Phu failed, what other strikes would then be called for, and would American ground troops not then be eventually committed to fight a land war in Asia.

Dulles admitted that he had not consulted any other nation about intervening in Vietnam, whereupon Johnson and the seven other legislators turned him down cold. The U.S., they said, was not about to go it alone in Vietnam. "Operation Vulture" thus became a punctured pigeon.



U.S. Brig. Gen. Joseph "Smokey" Caldara, who was in charge of "Operation Vulture," and then Senate Minority Leader Lyndon Johnson (1954) who opposed it.