

'Cautious and Equivocal'

Now that a decision to bomb North Vietnam was drawing near, the study says, Mr. Johnson became "cautious and equivocal" in approaching it. Two analysts of this period, in fact, differ in their characterization of his decision at the two-and-a-half-hour White House meeting on Dec. 1, 1964, a month after the election, when the bombing plan was presented to him.

One analyst says that at this meeting the President "made a tentative decision" to bomb, ordering the preparatory Phase I put into effect and approving Phase II, the air war itself, "in principle."

The second analyst says that while the President approved the entire bombing plan "in general outline at least . . .

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it is also clear that he gave his approval to implement only the first phase of the concept."

The President tied the actual waging of air war to reforms by the Saigon Government, this analyst says, and left an impression by the end of the meeting that he was "considerably less than certain that future U. S. actions against North Vietnam [the air war] would be taken, or that they would be desirable."

No Following Memorandum

The study notes that "the precise nature of the President's decisions" at the meeting is not known because a national security action memorandum was not issued afterward.

"However," the study continues, "from handwritten notes of the meeting, from instructions issued to action agencies and from later reports of diplomatic and military actions taken, it is possible to reconstruct the approximate nature of the discussion and the decisions reached." The footnotes do not indicate who made the handwritten notes found in the Pentagon files, although the indication is that it was Mr. McNaughton or Mr. McNamara.

After a briefing by Ambassador Taylor on the situation in South Vietnam, the discussion turned to a draft statement, prepared by William Bundy, that the Ambassador was to deliver to the Saigon leaders. The statement explained the two-phase bombing plan and tied Phase II to a serious attempt by the Saigon leadership to achieve some political stability and get on with the war effort against the Vietcong.

In Saigon, General Khanh had nominally surrendered authority to a civilian cabinet headed by Premier Tran Van Huong. The general was intriguing against the Huong Cabinet, however, as the ostensible commander in chief of the armed forces and head of a Military Revolutionary Committee of South Vietnamese generals. Within this council, a group headed by Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, the chief of the air force, was intriguing both with and against General Khanh.

Against this background, the study says of the White House meeting:

"The President made it clear that he considered that pulling the South Vietnamese together was basic to anything else the United States might do. He asked the Ambassador specifically which groups he [Ambassador Taylor] might talk to and what more we might do to help bring unity among South Vietnam's leaders. He asked whether we could not say to them 'we just can't go on' unless they pulled together. To this, Taylor replied that we must temper our insistence somewhat . . ."

Which Ones to Brief

The meeting then moved into a discussion of which allied countries were to be briefed on the proposed air war. The President said he wanted "new, dramatic effective" forms of assistance from several, specifically mentioning Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Philippines. These briefings by special envoys were included in the draft position paper laying out the bombing plan as the important diplomatic element in Phase I.

"In each case," the study says, "the representative was to explain our concept and proposed actions and request additional contributions by way of forces in the event the second phase of U.S. actions were entered."

The plan made no provision for similar consultations with Congressional leaders and there is no evidence in the study that Mr. Johnson conducted any.

In approving the statement General Taylor was to make to the Saigon leaders, the President also gave his assent to ready the military signal that was formally to sound the beginning of the 30 days of Phase I—Operation Barrel Roll, air strikes by United States Air Force and Navy jets of Yankee Team against infiltration routes and facilities in the Laotian panhandle, which was to be the final step-up in the Laos air operations.

At the end of the meeting, the account continues, Ambassador Taylor "slipped out the White House rear entrance" to avoid the press and "only a brief, formal statement" was issued. The analyst, remarks that the White House press statement released immediately afterward "contained only two comments regarding any determinations that had been reached."

Instructions for Taylor

One said, "The President instructed Ambassador Taylor to consult urgently with the South Vietnamese Government as to measures that should be taken to improve the situation in all its aspects."

The other, the concluding paragraph, said the President had "reaffirmed the basic U.S. policy of providing all possible and useful assistance to the South Vietnamese people and Government in

their struggle to defeat the externally supported insurgency and aggression being conducted against them."

The final sentence in this paragraph, the analyst notes, was one "specifically linking this policy" with Congress's Tonkin Gulf resolution. The sentence read: "It was noted that this policy accords with the terms of the Congressional joint resolution of Aug. 10, 1964, which remains in full force and effect."

Then, on Dec. 3, emerging from a second meeting with Mr. Johnson, "presumably having received the final version of his instructions," the account goes on, Ambassador Taylor told reporters assembled at the White House "that he was going to hold 'across-the-board' discussions with the GVN."

"Asserting that U.S. policy for South Vietnam remained the same, he stated that his aim would be to improve the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. Although he hinted of changes 'in tactics and method,' he quite naturally did not disclose the kind of operations in which the United States was about to engage or any future actions to which immediate activity could lead."

The Administration now moved quickly. William Bundy left for Australia and New Zealand the next day, Dec. 4, to brief their governments on both phases of the bombing plan, the writer says.

Wilson Visits Washington

Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Britain was "thoroughly briefed on the forthcoming U.S. actions" during a state visit to Washington Dec. 7 to 9, the narrative continues, while other envoys briefed the Canadians and the Asian allies. The writer notes that while Britain, Australia and New Zealand were given "the full picture," the Canadians were "told slightly less" and the Philippines, South Korea and the Chinese Nationalist Government on Taiwan were "briefed on Phase I only." What the Thais and the Laotians were told is not made explicit.

The New Zealand Government "expressed grave doubts" that the bombing would break Hanoi's will, the writer says, and predicted that it might increase infiltration to South Vietnam.

In meetings in Saigon on Dec. 7 and 9 with General Khanh and Premier Huong, Ambassador Taylor exacted the desired promises in exchange for the bombing. At the second meeting, the Ambassador presented them with a draft press release describing the desired improvements, including strengthening of the army and the police, which the Saigon Government released in its own name, at the United States' request, on Dec. 11.

William H. Sullivan, newly appointed as Ambassador to Laos, obtained Premier Souvanna Phouma's agreement on Dec. 10 to the American air strikes at infiltration routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply network through the Laotian panhandle, and Operation Barrel Roll got under way on Dec. 14 with attacks by American jets on "targets of opportunity"—that is, unprogrammed targets sighted by the pilots.

At a meeting of the National Security Council on Dec. 12, when the final details for Barrel Roll were reviewed and approved, the study reports, it was "agreed that there would be no public operations statements about armed reconnaissance in Laos unless a plane were lost."

"In such an event, the principals stated, the Government should continue to insist that we were merely escorting reconnaissance flights as requested by the Laotian Government."

Level of Attacks Set

McGeorge Bundy was quoted in the memorandum of record as stating that the agreed plan "fulfilled precisely the President's wishes."

On Dec. 18 Secretary McNamara set the level of Barrel Roll attacks for the 30 days of Phase I—the analyst indicates that he did so at the President's wishes—at two missions of four aircraft apiece each week.

The Administration also stepped up the raids by T-28 fighter planes in Laos with a joint message on Dec. 8 from Secretaries McNamara and Rusk to Ambassador Sullivan. The cable instructed him to have the Laotians intensify bombing "in the corridor areas and close to the D.R.V. border."

The analyst reports that in the three months between the beginning of October and the end of December there were 77 sorties by the T-28's in the panhandle area—a sortie is a strike by a single plane—and that by early December the air raids had "already precipitated several complaints from the D.R.V." to the International Control Commission "alleging U.S.-sponsored air attacks on North Vietnamese territory."

Events in Saigon had meanwhile gone awry. Political turmoil broke out there again with Buddhist and student demonstrations against Premier Huong's Cabinet.

On Dec. 20, in defiance of Ambassador Taylor's wishes, General Khanh, in a temporary alliance with the so-called Young Turks—the young generals led by Marshal Ky—announced the dissolution of the High National Council, a body

that was supposed to be functioning as a temporary legislature to draw up a constitution for a permanent civilian government. They also made a large number of political arrests by night, seizing several members of the High National Council.

That day, Ambassador Taylor summoned the Young Turks to the embassy and, in the writer's words, read them "the riot act." They included Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, now President of South Vietnam.

According to the embassy's cable to Washington, the conversation began like this:

Ambassador Taylor: Do all of you understand English? (Vietnamese officers indicated they did...)

I told you all clearly at General Westmoreland's dinner we Americans were tired of coups. 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 government stability. Now you have made a real mess. We cannot carry you forever if you do things like this.

Marshal Ky and other Vietnamese generals denied that they had staged a coup and said they were trying to achieve unity by getting rid of divisive elements, the account goes on.

The Ambassador tried to persuade them to support the civilian regime of Premier Huong and apparently to restore the High National Council. The Vietnamese officers would not agree.

The embassy cable describes the end of the conversation:

"In taking a friendly leave, Ambassador Taylor said: 'You people have broken a lot of dishes and now we have to see how we can straighten out this mess.'" [See text, Taylor message, Dec. 12.]

By the end of the month, Ambassador Taylor, Deputy Ambassador Johnson and General Westmoreland had apparently despaired of trading a bombing campaign against the North for a stable Saigon Government that would prose-

cute the war in the South. On Dec. 31, the account continues, they sent a joint message to Washington saying, in effect, that the United States should go ahead with the air campaign against the North "under any conceivable alliance condition short of complete abandonment of South Vietnam."

A Firmer Base Sought

The account indicates, however, that the President was reluctant to proceed into Phase II without at least the appearance of a firmer base in Saigon since the turmoil there was making it more difficult for him to justify escalation to the American public.

The writer remarks that at the meeting of the senior National Security Council Members on Dec. 24, Secretary Rusk "raised an issue that was high among Administration concerns—namely that the American public was worried about the chaos in the GVN, and particularly with respect to its viability as an object of increased U. S. commitment."

On Christmas Eve, the Vietcong planted a bomb in the Brinks, an officers billet in Saigon, killing two Americans in the blast and wounding 58 others; the President declined to authorize reprisal air strikes against the North, despite vigorous recommendations from Ambassador Taylor, Admiral Sharp in Honolulu and the Joint Chiefs, who were now pressing hard for escalation.

"Highest levels today reached negative decision on proposal . . . for reprisal action," Mr. Rusk cabled the Ambassador on Dec. 29.

Five days earlier, Mr. Rusk had also instructed Ambassador Taylor to halt, until the turmoil in Saigon subsided, the planned, piecemeal release to the press of evidence of a major increase in infiltration from the North during 1964, the writer says. The Ambassador had first reported the increase to Washington in October, along with a report of the appearance of individual North Vietnamese Army regulars, and the Administration began leaking the information in November through background briefings.