

State of Emergency

The Taylor mission arrived in Saigon on Oct. 18 and was greeted by what the Pentagon study calls a "spectacular opening shot": President Diem's formal declaration of a state of emergency. Within the next week General Taylor met twice with the chief of state.

According to an embassy message to Washington on Oct. 20, President Diem told General Taylor at their first meeting that he wanted a bilateral defense treaty, American support for another expansion of the South Vietnamese Army and a list of combat support items very close to those suggested in June by Mr. Rostow in his handwritten note to Secretary McNamara.

"He asked specifically for tactical aviation, helicopter companies, coastal patrol forces and logistic support (ground transport)," the embassy report said. He did not, however, repeat the earlier request for actual American ground combat units.

By the second Diem-Taylor meeting, on Oct. 24, American and South Vietnamese officials had discussed the disastrous flooding in the Mekong River Delta, where the American military advisory mission, headed by Lieut. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr, thought American troops might be of some help.

General Taylor had incorporated this idea in a series of recommendations, which he put before President Diem at the second meeting. Item E, the study reports, was headed "Introduction of U.S. Combat Troops," and it proposed "a flood-relief task force, largely military in composition, to work with GVN over an extended period for rehabilitation of area. Such a force might contain engineer, medical, signal and transportation elements as well as combat troops for the protection of relief operations."

The general directed two messages to Washington after that meeting, both quoted in the Pentagon account. The first, sent through regular channels, reported that President Diem's reaction to all of General Taylor's recommendations—including the flood-relief task force—"was favorable."

Assurance to Diem Is Favored

In his second message, sent privately to President Kennedy and the President's most senior advisers, General Taylor was more specific. He proposed a force of 6,000 to 8,000 American soldiers not only to cope with the flooding but significantly, as the narrative points out, to assure "Diem of our readiness to join him in a military showdown with Vietcong or Vietminh." [See texts, Taylor's messages, Nov. 1

and 5, 1961.]

General Taylor said that he envisioned mostly logistics forces but that "some combat troops" would be necessary to defend the American engineer troops and their encampments. He warned that "any troops coming to VN may expect to take casualties."

The general underscored the propaganda advantage of relating the introduction of American ground troops to the need for flood relief as "offering considerable advantages in VN and abroad" and leaving President Kennedy his choice on future action. "As the task is a specific one," he explained, "we can extricate our troops when it is done if we so desire. Alternatively, we can phase them into other activities if we wish to remain longer."

He acknowledged, in conclusion: "This kind of task force will exercise little direct influence on the campaign against the VC. It will, however, give a much needed shot in the arm to national morale."

General Taylor's proposals engendered State Department opposition. His messages, evidently relayed to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who was in Japan for a conference, prompted Mr. Rusk to cable Washington, warning about the risks of making a military commitment without reciprocal political reforms by President Diem.

According to his Nov. 1 message, which is appended to the Pentagon study, Mr. Rusk said that if, as previously, the South Vietnamese leader was not willing to trust his military commanders more and to take steps to bring more non-Communist elements into influential roles, it was "difficult to see how handful of American troops can have decisive influence." While attaching the "greatest possible importance" to the security of Southeast Asia, Mr. Rusk expressed reluctance to see American prestige committed too deeply for the sake of "a losing horse."

Similar reservations were already reflected by reports from two middle-level State Department members of General Taylor's mission. Sterling J. Cottrell and William J. Jordan submitted separate dissents to General Taylor on their way home by way of Bangkok and the Philippines.

Mr. Cottrell, head of the interagency Vietnam task force in Washington, asserted in a memorandum dated Oct. 27 that "since U.S. combat troops of division size cannot be employed effectively, they should not be introduced at this stage" despite the "favorable psychological lift" it would give the Vietnamese.

"Since it is an open question whether the GVN can succeed even with U.S. assistance," he went on, "it would be a mistake for the U.S. to commit itself irrevocably to the defeat of the Communists in SVN." But if combined American and Vietnamese efforts failed

in the South, he recommended moving "to the 'Rostow plan' of applying graduated punitive measures on the D.K.V. with weapons of our choosing."

Mr. Jordan reported finding explosive pressures for political and administrative change in South Vietnam as well as "near paralysis" in parts of the Government because so many decisions had to await personal approval by President Diem. Many Government officials and military officers, he said, "have lost confidence in President Diem and his leadership." He urged that the United

States not identify itself "with a man of a regime."

Quite contrary pressures were being exerted on Washington, however, by the American mission in Saigon. On Oct. 31, the study says, the embassy reported to Washington the Vietnamese people's "virtually unanimous desire" for the introduction of American troops.

From Baguio, in the Philippines, where he had stopped to draft his formal report with Mr. Rostow and his other aides, General Taylor sent two more messages to President Kennedy on Nov. 1, urging a commitment of a "U.S. military task force" to Vietnam.

But, the messages show, he now listed the flood-relief mission as secondary to the objective of providing a "U.S. military presence capable of raising national morale and of showing to Southeast Asia the seriousness of the U.S. intent to resist a Communist takeover."

Writing in more sweeping language than he used in Saigon a week before, the general now advocated a "massive joint effort" with the South Vietnamese "to cope with both the Vietcong and the ravages of the flood." The presence of American ground units, he said, was "essential" to "reverse the present downward trend of events."

His second message discounted the risks of sliding into a major Asian land war accidentally and sought to assure President Kennedy that the American troops would not be aggressively hunting down the Vietcong guerrillas though they would be involved in some combat. He wrote:

"This force is not proposed to clear the jungles and forests of Vietcong guerrillas. That should be the primary task of the armed forces of Vietnam for which they should be specifically organized, trained and stiffened with ample U.S. advisers down to combat battalion levels.

"However, the U.S. troops may be called upon to engage in combat to protect themselves, their working parties and the area in which they live. As a general reserve, they might be thrown into action (with U.S. agreement) against large, formed guerrilla bands which have abandoned the forests for attacks on major targets."

The parenthetical matter was in General Taylor's original cablegram.

The message also repeated the theme, attributed by the analyst and by Mr. Cottrell to Mr. Rostow, that bombing of North Vietnam could be used as a diplomatic threat to hold Hanoi at bay.

Prior Kennedy Concurrence Hinted

The language of all of General Taylor's messages, the Pentagon study comments, suggests that the support forces—helicopter companies, the expanded advisory mission, tactical air support—“were essentially already agreed to by the President before Taylor left Washington.”

The general's interest, the study explains, was in getting a commitment of “ground forces (not necessarily all or even mainly infantrymen, but ground soldiers who would be out in the countryside where they could be shot at and shoot back).” His argument for ground troops, the study observes, was based more on “psychological than military reasons.”

The formal report by the Taylor mission, submitted on Nov. 3, incorporated the proposal for what the analyst calls a “basic commitment on the ground” and other measures, all under the over-all concept of a new American role in Vietnam: “limited partnership.” The drift of the report, which the Pentagon narrative says was probably written with Mr. Rostow, was reflected in the proposal that the American military advisory mission in Saigon not only should be “radically increased” but also should undertake more active direction of the war by becoming “something nearer [to]—but not quite—an operational headquarters in a theater of war.”

The main evaluation section, the study comments, “puts Saigon's weakness in the best light and avoids suggesting that perhaps the U.S. should consider limiting rather than increasing commitments to the Diem regime.”

The dissents of Mr. Cottrell and Mr. Jordan were submitted, along with a military annex, which said: “The performance of ARVN [the Army of South Vietnam] is disappointing and generally is characterized by a lack of aggressiveness and at most levels is devoid of a sense of urgency.”

The Taylor report, the Pentagon account notes, proposed solving this type of problem through administrative reforms in the army and the infusion of Americans. The writer comments that there was no serious demand for pressing President Diem to make the kind of reforms that Secretary Rusk felt necessary.

Moreover, the Pentagon study notes two important underlying assumptions for the report. The first was that South Vietnamese problems—whether the Army's lack of spirit or President Diem's bottlenecks—“could be cured if enough dedicated Americans become involved.” There was great implicit faith, the study goes on, that Americans could provide the South Vietnamese “with the élan and style needed to win.”

The second major assumption, the analyst notes, was that “if worse comes to worst, the U.S. could probably save its position in Vietnam by bombing the North.”

Both these assumptions, as the Pentagon narrative recounts in later sections, were essential ingredients of the advice given to President Johnson in late 1964 and 1965, as he made the decisions to move forcefully into the war.

As the Taylor recommendations were submitted to President Kennedy, he also received a special national intelligence estimate forecasting that American escalation would be matched by Hanoi. According to the Pentagon account, the Nov. 5 estimate considered four possibilities—expanding the American advisory mission, plus an American airlift

for Vietnamese troops; sending an 8,000-to-10,000-man flood-relief task force; sending a 25,000-to-40,000-man combat force, and warning Hanoi, in conjunction with any of those steps, that the United States “would launch air attacks against North Vietnam” unless Hanoi stopped supporting the Vietcong.

The gist of the intelligence estimate, the Pentagon account says, “was that the North Vietnamese would respond to an increased U.S. commitment with an offsetting increase in infiltrated support for the Vietcong.” The greater the American involvement, the intelligence estimate prophesied, the stronger the North Vietnamese reaction. The estimate also implied, the narrative goes on, that “threats to bomb would not cause Hanoi to stop its support for the Vietcong, and . . . actual attacks on the North would bring a strong response from Moscow and Peking. . . .”

Nonetheless, the Taylor recommendations received backing from Secretary McNamara, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In a memo on Nov. 8 to President Kennedy, reprinted in the study, Mr. McNamara summarized their position:

“We are inclined to recommend that we do commit the U.S. to the clear objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and that we support this commitment by the necessary military actions.

“If such a commitment is agreed upon, we support the recommendations of General Taylor as the first steps toward its fulfillment.”

“Mired in Inconclusive Struggle”

But the memorandum warned President Kennedy that the 8,000-man task force “probably will not tip the scales decisively,” meaning that “we would be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle.”

“In short,” the study comments, “the President was being told that the issue was not whether to send an 8,000-man task force, but whether or not to embark on a course that, without some extraordinary good luck, would lead to combat involvement in Southeast Asia on a very substantial scale.”

The Pentagon narrative says that while the Joint Chiefs' position was clear, Mr. McNamara's position “remains a little ambiguous,” especially in view of his qualified phrase “inclined to recommend” sending ground troops. The implication seems to be that Secretary McNamara was willing to go along with the Joint Chiefs to this extent to draw them out for President Kennedy on the full, long-term meaning of their recommendations.

Moreover, as the study records, three days later Mr. McNamara joined Mr. Rusk in a quite different recommendation and, the analyst says, “one obviously more to the President's liking (and, in the nature of such things, quite possibly drawn up to the President's specifications).” [See text, Rusk-McNamara report, Nov. 11, 1961.]

This memorandum, almost totally adopted by President Kennedy as policy, contained stronger rhetoric than the earlier McNamara note but milder recommendations. The memorandum, quoted nearly in full in the Pentagon account, began with a strong exposition of the domino theory:

“The loss of South Vietnam would make pointless any further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the Free World; we would have to face the near certainty that the remainder of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would move to a complete accommodation with Communism, if not formal incorporation within the Communist bloc.”

The language on the troop issue, omitting any mention of the flood-relief task force, seems carefully drafted:

“The commitment of United States forces to South Vietnam involves two different categories: (A) units of modest size required for the direct support of South Vietnamese military effort, such as communications, helicopter and other forms of airlift, reconnaissance aircraft, naval patrols, intelligence units, etc., and (B) larger organized units with actual or potential direct military missions. Category (A) should be introduced as speedily as possible. Category (B) units pose a more serious problem. . . .”

The italicized emphasis is in the original document.

The two Secretaries recommended that the United States “now take the decision to commit ourselves to the objective of preventing the fall of South Vietnam to Communism and that, in doing so, we recognize that the introduction of United States and other SEATO forces may be necessary to achieve this objective.” But for the present it said only that the Pentagon should prepare plans for ground combat forces.

Three lines of reasoning for opposing a commitment of ground combat troops emerge from this document.

The first and possibly the most significant, the Pentagon study suggests, is that such a move “prior to a Laotian settlement would run a considerable risk of stimulating a Communist breach of the cease-fire and a resumption of hostilities in Laos,” leaving the President the unattractive choice of “the use of combat forces in Laos or an abandonment of that country to full Communist control.” The second reason was the need “to involve forces from other nations” as well; otherwise it would be “difficult to explain to our own people why no effort had been made to invoke SEATO or why the United States undertook to carry this burden unilaterally.” The third was the dilemma underlying the troop proposals—that

"if there is a strong South Vietnamese effort, they may not be needed [but] if there is not such an effort, United States forces could not accomplish their mission in the midst of an apathetic or hostile population."

The Rusk-McNamara memorandum fully acknowledged that even sending

support troops and more advisers would mean openly exceeding military ceilings imposed by the 1954 Geneva accords. The memorandum proposed an exchange of letters with President Diem in which President Kennedy would assert "the necessity now of exceeding some provisions of the accords in view of the D.R.V. violations." It also called for the release of a white paper, "A Threat to Peace," reporting on infiltration from North Vietnam and on Vietcong terrorism.

Embracing the essence of Mr. Rusk's message from Japan, the joint memorandum added a demand for reform from President Diem before the United States build-up would be put in motion.

The President accepted all major recommendations, according to the study, except for the unqualified commitment to the goal of saving South Vietnam from Communism. His decisions were formally embodied on Nov. 22 in a national security action memorandum, No. 111, entitled "First Phase of Vietnam Program."

Concrete Evidence Demanded

But on Nov. 14 Washington sent a summary of the President's decisions—evidently made the day before—to Ambassador Nolting. The message demanded "concrete demonstration by Diem that he is now prepared to work in an orderly way [with] his subordinates and broaden the political base of his regime." For the first time it sought to inject the United States more deeply into managing the war by asserting: "We would expect to share in the decision-making process in the political, economic and military fields as they affect the security situation."

Possibly to assuage President Diem's expected disappointment, it noted that the decisions on combat support troops and many more advisers, "will sharply increase the commitment of our prestige to save SVN." It concluded by asserting that while the Pentagon was preparing contingency plans for ground combat forces, the "objective of our policy is to do all possible to accomplish [our] purpose without use of U.S. combat forces."

No Presidential paper in the Pentagon record clearly details Mr. Kennedy's thinking, but two documents shed light: the Nov. 14 message and some unsigned notes of a National Security Council meeting that, according to the Pentagon account, took place on Nov. 15.

The notes included these entries: "Pres expressed concern over 2-front war. Another bother him, no overt Chi-com aggression in SVN, unlike Korea. These Diem's own people; difficult operating area. If go beyond advisers need other nations with us . . . Pres receiving static from Congress; they against using US troops."

Kennedy Raised a Question

At another point, Mr. Kennedy reportedly asked why it was important to retain South Vietnam and Laos. The notes record the reply from Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: "We would lose Asia all the way—Singapore. Serious setback to U.S. and F.W. [free world]."

President Kennedy was also reportedly concerned about the lack of support from the British and worried about the proposed letter acknowledging that the United States would be breaking the Geneva accords. "Pres asked Rusk," the notes say, "why do we take onus, saying we are going to break Geneva accords (in letter to Diem). Why not remain silent? Don't say this ourselves. Directed State to reword letter." The parentheses were in the original notes.

The Nov. 14 message reflects similar reasoning. The implication is that one important consideration for President Kennedy was fear that sending ground combat forces to South Vietnam, in the language of the message, "might wreck chances for agreement" in Laos and lead to a breakdown of the cease-fire there.

A second drawback cited in the message was the risk of provoking confrontations with the Soviet Union elsewhere — the "two front" problem — especially in Berlin where the acute crisis had eased less than a month before.

The decision disappointed President Diem who, according to the Pentagon study, was seeking a firm U.S. commitment to him. The account reports that Ambassador Nolting cabled Washington on Nov. 18 to say that the South Vietnamese leader had immediately inquired about ground combat units. After hearing Mr. Nolting's response, the Ambassador said, President Diem "took our proposals rather better than I expected" Two days later the Ambassador said he was getting high-level reports that President Diem was upset and brooding.

Diem Would Still Hold the Reins

If this was a bargaining tactic to get the United States to back down on its demands for reform, the study says, it worked. On Dec. 7 Washington sent the embassy new instructions, the account goes on, softening demands for reforms and settling for "close partnership" and frequent consultation with the South Vietnamese Government rather than insisting, as before, on taking part in decision-making.

Whether intentionally or not, the Pentagon study contends, the over-all effect of these actions was to give the military side of the war higher priority than the political side.

"To continue to support Diem without reform," the study comments, "meant quite simply that he, not we, would determine the course of the counterinsurgent effort and that the steps he took to assure his continuance in power would continue to take priority over all else." The account says that this emphasis came to plague the Kennedy Administration when South Vietnamese disaffection with the Diem regime boiled over in 1963.