

A Sterner Objective

On May 11, two days after Vice President Johnson's departure for Saigon, President Kennedy made his decisions. As recorded in National Security Action Memorandum 52, a copy of which accompanies the Pentagon study, the American objective was stated more bluntly and more ambitiously than in typical public pronouncements. The memorandum said the American objective was "to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam," whereas six days earlier President Kennedy himself spoke at a news conference of a vaguer desire "to assist Vietnam to obtain its independence."

The memorandum also specified measures that were not disclosed to the public: Presidential approval for the deployment of 400 Special Forces troops, for Ambassador Nolting to start negotiations on "a new bilateral arrangement with Vietnam" and for the initiation of a covert-warfare campaign against North Vietnam.

The one step, in the Pentagon analyst's view, that involved the United States more than the President's public statements suggested was the decision to send Special Forces. "Obviously the President was sold on their going," the study comments, "and since the Vietnamese Special Forces were themselves supported by C.I.A. rather than the regular military-aid program, it was possible to handle these troops covertly."

Provisions for Covert Warfare

According to the documentary record, President Kennedy's specific orders on covert warfare called for these steps:

¶"Dispatch . . . agents to North Vietnam" for intelligence gathering.

¶"Infiltrate teams under light civilian cover to southeast Laos to locate and attack Vietnamese Communist bases and lines of communications."

¶"In North Vietnam, using the foundation established by intelligence operations, form networks of resistance, covert bases and teams for sabotage and light harassment."

¶"Conduct overflights for dropping of leaflets to harass the Communists and to maintain morale of North Vietnamese population, and increase gray [unidentified-source] broadcasts to North Vietnam for the same purposes."

¶Train "the South Vietnamese Army to conduct ranger raids and similar military actions in North Vietnam as might prove necessary or appropriate."

The documents also show that Mr. Kennedy approved plans "for the use in North Vietnam operations of civilian air crews of American and other nationality, as appropriate, in addition to Vietnamese." The plans, quoted in full in the final report of the Gilpatric task force, designate the South Vietnamese Army's First Observation Group, stationed at Nhatrang, as the main unit for carrying on unconventional warfare in Laos, South Vietnam and North Vietnam.

In July, 1961, General Lansdale submitted to General Taylor, the President's military adviser, a preliminary report on preparations for this clandestine

warfare. By that time, the report said, the First Observation Group had "some limited operations in North Vietnam and some shallow penetrations into Laos." [See text, Lansdale memo.]

The Lansdale report stated, however, that most of the unit's operations had been directed against the Vietcong in South Vietnam and that this was being changed to focus it entirely on North Vietnam and Laos—"denied areas," in official terminology.

"The plan is to relieve the group from these combat assignments [against the Vietcong] to ready its full strength for denied-areas missions," General Lansdale said. As of July 6, the unit was to be expanded to 805 men from 340. "Personnel are volunteers who have been carefully screened by security organizations," General Lansdale said. "Many are from North Vietnam. They have been trained for guerrilla operations at the group's training center at Nhatrang."

Additional Volunteers Were Trained

In addition, the Lansdale report said, 400 selected South Vietnamese soldiers, 60 montagnard tribesmen and 70 civilians were being formed into "additional volunteer groups, apart from the First Observation Group, for similar operations." The general listed 50 Americans—35 from the Defense Department and 15 from the C.I.A.—engaged in training these groups and preparing other South Vietnamese intelligence and psychological-warfare operations. According to the Pentagon study, these were to be augmented by some of the 400 Special Forces soldiers President Kennedy ordered to the field on May 11.

The study does not report on the actual operations of the units during the Kennedy years.

Bernard Fall, in his history "The Two Vietnams," published in 1963, described the organization of the First Observation Group into 15-man combat teams and 24-man support teams. "One such unit was captured near Ninhbinh (180 miles north of the 17th Parallel) in July, 1961, when its aircraft developed engine trouble," Mr. Fall reported.

In July the Hanoi radio, as monitored by the United States Government, carried several English-language broadcasts on the incident, saying that North Vietnam had shot down a plane encroaching on its airspace and describing a number of American-made items to try to authenticate the plane's origin. According to the broadcasts, the plane was marked in red letters "C-47," the oil tank "Douglas Aircraft" and the radio apparatus "Bendix Radio, Baltimore, U.S.A.," and some of the 10 men aboard carried "Colt" automatics. The generator was marked "Signal Corps U.S. Army," one broadcast said.

The North Vietnamese Government announced plans to try three survivors on charges of sabotage and espionage, saying that they confessed to having been trained by Americans who gave them a map and traced out their flight route over North Vietnam. Hanoi pro-

tested the incident formally to Britain and the Soviet Union, as co-chairmen of the 1954 Geneva conference on Vietnam, asserting that since May 13, 1961—two days after President Kennedy's orders were issued—the "U.S.-Dien regime" had "continuously carried out espionage and provocative acts against the North."

The North Vietnamese Foreign Minister described the C-47 incident as "an extremely impudent violation of the Geneva agreements." During July and August the North Vietnamese also broadcast descriptions of the build-up of the First Observation Group and the Amer-

ican organization and training of that unit, with details that corresponded almost exactly with the Lansdale report.

The North Vietnamese Government also formally protested several times to the International Control Commission that South Vietnamese units had conducted raids into the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams.

On Nov. 1 The New York Times carried a dispatch from Saigon quoting informants as reporting disaffection in North Vietnam and citing as evidence the sabotaging of an industrial plant at Vinh on Aug. 11 and other similar incidents.