

Notes From McNamara Memo On Course of War in 1966

Excerpts from notes accompanying the Pentagon study, from a memorandum for President Johnson from Secretary McNamara, "Military and Political Actions Recommended for South Vietnam," Dec. 7, 1965.

... We believe that, whether or not major new diplomatic initiatives are made, the US must send a substantial number of additional forces to VN if we are to avoid being defeated there. (30 Nov program; concurred in by JCS)

IV. Prognosis assuming the recommended deployments

Deployments of the kind we have recommended will not guarantee success. Our intelligence estimate is that the present Communist policy is to continue to prosecute the war vigorously in the South. They continue to believe that the war will be a long one, that time is their ally, and that their own staying power is superior to ours. They recognize that the US reinforcements of 1965 signify a determination to avoid defeat, and that more US troops can be expected. Even though the Communists will continue to suffer heavily from GVN and US ground and air action, we expect them, upon learning of any US intentions to augment its forces, to boost their own commitment and to test US capabilities and will to persevere at higher level of conflict and casualties (US KIA with the recommended deployments can be expected to reach 1000 a month).

If the US were willing to commit enough forces—perhaps 600,000 men or more—we could ultimately prevent the DRV/VC from sustaining the conflict at a significant level. When this point was reached, however, the question of Chinese intervention would become critical. (*We are generally agreed that the Chinese Communists will intervene with combat forces to prevent destruction of the Communist regime in the DRV. It is less clear whether they would intervene to prevent a DRV/VC defeat in the South.) The intelligence estimate is that the chances are a little better than even

that, at this stage, Hanoi and Peiping would choose to reduce the effort in the South and try to salvage their resources for another day; but there is an almost equal chance that they would enlarge the war and bring in large numbers of Chinese forces (they have made certain preparations which could point in this direction).

It follows, therefore, that the odds are about even that, even with the recommended deployments, we will be faced in early 1967 with a military standoff at a much higher level, with pacification still stalled, and with any prospect of military success marred by the chances of an active Chinese intervention.

(memo of 24 Jan 66: JCS believe that "the evaluation set forth in Par. 7 is on the pessimistic side in view of the constant and heavy military pressure which our forces in SEA will be capable of employing. While admittedly the following factors are to a degree imponderables, they believe that greater weight should be given to the following:

a. The cumulative effect of our air campaign against the DRV on morale and DRV capabilities to provide and move men and materiel from the DRV to SVN.

b. The effects of constant attack and harassment on the ground and from the air upon the growth of VC forces and on the morale and combat effectiveness of VC/PAVN forces.

c. The effect of destruction of VC base areas on the capabilities of VC/PAVN forces to sustain combat operations over an extended period of time.

d. The constancy of will of the Hanoi leaders to continue a struggle which they realize they cannot win in the face of progressively greater destruction of their country