

A Secret Seminar

During the summer of 1966, while Secretary McNamara was pondering the failure of the oil-storage strikes and considering General Westmoreland's latest troop request, a secret seminar of leading scientists under Government sponsorship was studying the over-all results of Operation Rolling Thunder.

Their conclusions, the historian relates, would have a "dramatic impact" on Mr. McNamara and further contribute to his disenchantment. [See text, bombing evaluation, Aug. 29, 1966.]

The idea for a summer seminar of scientists and academic specialists to study technical aspects of the war had been suggested in March by Dr. George B. Kistiakowsky and Dr. Carl Kaysen of Harvard and Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner and Dr. Jerrold R. Zacharias of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Dr. Kistiakowsky had been special assistant for science and technology under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Dr. Wiesner had held that post under President Kennedy. Dr. Kaysen had been a Kennedy aide for national security.

Secretary McNamara liked the idea, the study says, and sent Dr. Zacharias a letter on April 16 formally requesting that he and the others arrange the summer study on "technical possibilities in relation to our military operations in Vietnam."

The Secretary specifically instructed Mr. McNaughton, who was to oversee the project, that the scientists should look into the feasibility of "a fence across the infiltration trails, warning systems, reconnaissance (especially night) methods, night vision devices, defoliation techniques and area-denial weapons."

Some Scientific Advice

The idea of constructing an anti-infiltration barrier across the demilitarized zone had first been suggested by Prof. Roger Fisher of the Harvard Law School in a memorandum to Mr. McNaughton in January, 1966, the narrative says.

The scientists—47 men representing "the cream of the scholarly community in technical fields," the narrative says—met in Wellesley, Mass., during June, July and August under the auspices of the Jason Division of the Institute for Defense Analyses.

The Jason Division, named for the leader of the Argonauts in Greek mythology, was used to conduct "ad hoc high-level studies using primarily non-I.D.A. scholars," the Pentagon study says. The scientists were given briefings by high officials from the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the White House, the study recounts, and they were provided with secret materials.

Their conclusions and recommendations, which were given to the Secretary of Defense at the beginning of September, had "a powerful and perhaps decisive influence in McNamara's mind," the Pentagon record says.

These were the recommendations, it goes on, of "a group of America's most distinguished scientists, men who had helped the Government produce many of its most advanced technical weapons systems since the end of the Second World War, men who were not identified with the vocal academic criticism of the Administration's Vietnam policy."

Their report evaluating the results of the Rolling Thunder campaign began:

"As of July, 1966, the U.S. bombing

of North Vietnam had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South at the current level."

They then pointed out the reasons that they felt North Vietnam could not be hurt by bombing: It was primarily a subsistence agricultural country with little industry and a primitive but flexible transport system, and most of its weapons and supplies came from abroad.

These factors, the scientists said, made it "quite unlikely" that an expanded bombing campaign would "prevent Hanoi from infiltrating men into the South at the present or a higher rate."

In conclusion, the Pentagon study says, the scientists addressed the assumption behind the bombing program—that damage inflicted on a country reduces its will to continue fighting. The scientists criticized this assumption, the study says, by denying that it is possible to measure the relationship.

"It must be concluded," the scientists said, "that there is currently no adequate basis for predicting the levels of U.S. military effort that would be required to achieve the stated objectives—indeed, there is no firm basis for determining if there is any feasible level of effort that would achieve these objectives."

Alternative to Bombing

As an alternative to bombing North Vietnam, the 47 scientists suggested that an elaborate electronic barrier, using recently developed devices, be built across the demilitarized zone.

The barrier would consist of two parts, the Pentagon report discloses: an anti-troop system made up of small mines (called gravel mines) to damage the enemy's feet and legs, and an anti-vehicle system composed of acoustic sensors that would direct aircraft to the target.

Most of the mines and sensors would be dropped by planes, but the system would have to be checked by ground troops.

The whole system would cost about \$800-million a year, the scientists estimated, and would take a year to build.

Secretary McNamara "was apparently strongly and favorably impressed" by the scientists' ideas, the Pentagon study relates, and he immediately ordered Lieut. Gen. Alfred D. Starbird, an Army engineering expert, to begin research on the barrier.

On Oct. 10, 1966, the study reports, Secretary McNamara set out for Saigon to assess General Westmoreland's latest troop request. He had ordered General Starbird to precede him there to begin an investigation of conditions for the barrier.

Characterizing Mr. McNamara's attitudes toward the war, the Pentagon analyst says that the Secretary had gone from "hesitancy" in the winter of 1965 to "perplexity" in the spring of 1966 to "disenchantment" the following fall.

When he returned from his October trip to Saigon, the study relates, he would detail his feelings in two long memorandums to President Johnson and for the first time would recommend against filling a troop request from General Westmoreland.

Articles on the Pentagon study will continue tomorrow.