

Pentagon Papers: McNamara, in '66, Urged Bombing Cutback and Softer Peace Terms

By HEDRICK SMITH

Robert S. McNamara, while Secretary of Defense, sought to persuade President Lyndon B. Johnson in October, 1966, to cut back the bombing of North Vietnam to seek a political settlement of the war—17 months before Mr. Johnson made that move on March 31, 1968.

Mr. McNamara's effort is disclosed by the Pentagon's secret study of the war. It also says that in May, 1967, the Secretary went a step further and advocated that the Johnson Administration stop trying to guarantee a non-Communist Vietnam and be willing to accept a coalition government in Saigon that included elements of the Vietcong.

What the study terms his "radical" proposal for scaling down American objectives in the war called for Saigon to negotiate with elements of the guerrilla movement not only for a political compromise but also for a cease-fire.

While Mr. McNamara's disillusionment with the war has been reported previously, the depth of his dissent from established policy is fully documented for the first time in the Pentagon study, which he commissioned on June 17, 1967.

The study details how this turnabout by Mr. McNamara—originally a leading advocate of the bombing policy and, in 1965, a confident believer that Amer-

ican intervention would bring the Vietcong insurgency under control—opened a deep policy rift in the Johnson Administration.

The study does not specifically say, however, that his break with established policy led President Johnson to nominate him on Nov. 28, 1967, as president of the World Bank and to replace him as Secretary of Defense.

But Mr. McNamara has previously revealed that in both May and August of 1967 the possibility of his departure from the Administration came up in talks with President Johnson, and the Pentagon study depicts both periods as critical points in the internal maneuvering on military strategy. In May Mr. McNamara was pressing his proposals to scale down the war, and in August President Johnson decided to expand the

This is the seventh in a series of articles on the Pentagon's secret study of American participation in the Vietnam war. The study was obtained by The New York Times through the investigative reporting of Neil Sheehan. The series was researched and written over three months by Mr. Sheehan and other staff members. Four pages of documentary material begin on Page 9.

air war against the Secretary's advice.

The account of Mr. McNamara's dissent and the Administration's division on Vietnam policy forms another section of the presentation of the Pentagon papers by The New York Times.

The papers, prepared by 30 to 40 officials and analysts in 1967-68 as a study of nearly three decades of United States involvement in Indochina, consist of 3,000 pages of analysis and 4,000 pages of supporting documents, totaling some 2.5 million words.

Thus far The Times's presentation has covered the growth, under the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, of the American combat role on the ground and in the air through the fall of 1966.

The account of the Johnson Administration from late 1966 onward is that of a government wrestling with itself as the views of some senior policymakers changed under the pressures of protracted war.

Three identifiable camps are described: the McNamara group—the "disillusioned doves," as the analysts put it—trying to set limits on the war and then reduce it; the military faction, led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam, pressing for wider war; and President Johnson, as well as senior civilian

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officials at the White House and State Department, taking a middle position.

At each stage, the primary issues of debate were much the same: the size of American troop commitments; the effectiveness of the bombing of North Vietnam, which began on a sustained basis in March, 1965, and the proposed expansion of the air war and of the ground war in the South.

Beginning in late 1966, the study relates, President Johnson was being urged by the military leaders to step up the air war sharply and to consider allied invasions of Laos, Cambodia and even North Vietnam. Repeatedly the President was pressed to mobilize reserves to provide the manpower for a larger war.

The military leaders reacted to Secretary McNamara's proposals for a reduction of the air war with what the study calls "the stiffest kind of condemnation" and they "bombarded" him with rebuttals.

According to the study, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned on May 24, 1967, that halting the bombing north of the 20th Parallel would be "an aerial Dienbienphu"—a reference to the disastrous French military defeat in May, 1954, just before the negotiations that ended the French Indochina war.

The Joint Chiefs, the study relates, saw an "alarming pattern" in Mr. McNamara's over-all strategy—one, they declared, that would undermine the entire American war effort.

'The Time Has Come'

Their most vehement criticism was directed against the Secretary's memorandum to President Johnson on May 19, 1967. That paper gave a discouraging picture of the military situation and a pessimistic view of the American public's impatience with the war, and said:

"The time has come for us to eliminate the ambiguities from our minimum objectives—our commitments—in Vietnam. Specifically, two principles must be articulated, and policies and actions brought in line with them: (1) Our commitment is only to see that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their own future. (2) This commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself.

"It follows that no matter how much we might hope for some things, our commitment is not:

" . . . To ensure that a particular person or group remains in power, nor that the power runs to every corner of the land (though we prefer certain types and we hope their writ will run throughout South Vietnam),

"To guarantee that the self-chosen government is non-Communist (though we believe and strongly hope it will be), and

"To insist that the independent South Vietnam remain separate from North Vietnam (though in the short-run, we would prefer it that way)." The material in italics and in parentheses is in the McNamara memorandum.

Specifically, the Secretary urged that in September, 1967, after the South Vietnamese presidential elections, the United States "move" the Saigon Government "to seek a political settlement with the non-Communist members of the NLF [National Liberation Front, or Vietcong]—to explore a cease-fire and to reach an accommodation with the non-Communist South Vietnamese who are under the VC banner; to accept them as members of an opposition political party, and if necessary, to accept their individual participation in the national government—in sum, a settlement to transform the members of the

VC from military opponents to political opponents."

Mr. McNamara acknowledged that one obvious drawback would be "the alleged impact on the reputation of the United States and of its President," but argued that "the difficulties of this strategy are fewer and smaller than the difficulties of any other approach."

President Johnson, the study recounts, preferred the middle ground of piecemeal escalation—what the study calls "the slow squeeze"—to either the "sharp knock" advocated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the shift toward political and military accommodation favored by Mr. McNamara.

It is "not surprising," the Pentagon analysts remark, that the President did not adopt the McNamara approach in view of his need to keep "the military 'on board' in any new direction for the U.S. effort in Southeast Asia." This is evidently an allusion to reports at the time that some high-ranking officers were in the mood to threaten resignation if the McNamara policy was adopted.

Satisfying neither extreme, President Johnson "was in the uncomfortable position of being able to please neither his hawkish nor his dovish critics with his carefully modulated middle course," the study asserts.

During the prolonged internal debate, the Pentagon account discloses, such issues as stalemate in the ground war and civilian casualties of the air war were of much more concern to some policy makers than the Administration publicly acknowledged.

Press dispatches from Hanoi in late 1966 stimulated what the analysts call an "explosive debate" in public about civilian casualties. Privately, the analysts add, the Central Intelligence Agency produced a summary of the bombing in 1965 and 1966 that estimated that there had been nearly 29,000 civilian casualties in North Vietnam—a figure far higher than Hanoi itself had ever used. The study implies that the term "casualties" covered both dead and wounded.

The Pentagon study also discloses that early in 1967 the growing stalemate on the ground became a concern of high civilian officials—even, at times, of President Johnson himself.

On April 27, the study notes, the President met with General Westmoreland and General Wheeler, who urged him to grant General Westmoreland's request for 200,000 more troops—a request the two officers repeated nearly a year later—but Mr. Johnson was wary.

Their discussion was recorded in notes, found in Pentagon files and quoted in the study. [See text, April 27, 1967, Page 11.]

"When we add divisions, can't the enemy add divisions?" the President asked. "If so, where does it all end?"

When General Westmoreland conceded that the enemy was likely to match American reinforcements, President Johnson turned to the worry that Hanoi might ask Communist China for help.

"At what point," he asked, "does the enemy ask for volunteers?"

The only recorded reply from General Westmoreland was, "That is a good question."

The real ceiling on the American commitment, the analysts suggest several times, was imposed primarily by President Johnson's refusal to be pushed by the military leaders into asking Congress to mobilize reserve forces—both former servicemen on inactive status and organized units of these servicemen.

Mobilization, the analysts assert, became the "political sound barrier" that President Johnson would not break.