

Joint Chiefs' Recommendations On Military Courses of Action

Excerpts from memorandum, "Recommended Courses of Action—South-east Asia," from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Aug. 26, 1964.

3. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have considered Ambassador Taylor's statements of objectives and courses of action. In recognition of recent events in SVN, however, they consider that his proposed course of action B is more in accord with the current situation and consider that such an accelerated program of actions with respect to the DRV is essential to prevent a complete collapse of the US position in South-east Asia. Additionally, they do not agree that we should be slow to get deeply involved until we have a better feel for the quality of our ally. The United States is already deeply involved. The Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that only significantly stronger military pressures on the DRV are likely to provide the relief and psychological boost necessary for attainment of the requisite governmental stability and viability.

4. Recent US military actions in Laos and against the DRV have demonstrated our resolve more clearly than any other US actions in some time. These actions showed force and restraint. Failure to resume and maintain a program of pressure through military actions could be misinterpreted to mean we have had second thoughts about Pierce Arrow and the events leading thereto, and could signal a lack of resolve. Accordingly, while maintaining a posture of readiness in the Western Pacific, the Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the US program should have as concurrent objectives: (1) improvements in South Vietnam, including emphasis on the Pacification Program and the Hop Tac plan to clear Saigon and its surroundings; (2) interdiction of the relatively unmolested VC lines of communication (LOC) through Laos by operations in the Panhandle and of the LOC through Cambodia by strict control of the waterways leading therefrom; (3) denial of Viet Cong (VC) sanctuaries in the Cambodia-South Vietnam border area through the conduct of "hot pursuit" operations into Cambodia, as required; (4)

increased pressure on North Vietnam through military actions. As part of the program for increased pressures, the OPLAN 34A operations and the Desoto patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin should be resumed, the former on an intensified but still covert basis.

5. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe, however, that more direct and forceful actions than these will, in all probability, be required. In anticipation of a pattern of further successful VC and Pathet Lao (PL) actions in RVN and Laos, and in order to increase pressure on the DRV, the US program should also provide for prompt and calculated responses to such VC/PL actions in the form of air strikes and other operations against appropriate military targets in the DRV.

6. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recognize that defining what might constitute appropriate counteroperations in advance is a most difficult task. We should therefore maintain our prompt readiness to execute a range of selected responses, tailored to the developing circumstances and reflecting the principles in the Gulf of Tonkin actions, that such counteroperations will result in clear military disadvantage to the DRV. These responses, therefore, must be greater than the provocation in degree, and not necessarily limited to response in kind against similar targets. Air strikes in response might be purely VNAF; VNAF with US escort to provide protection from possible employment of MIG's; VNAF with US escort support in the offensive as well as the defensive role; or entirely US. The precise combination should be determined by the effect we wish to produce and the assets available. Targets for attack by air or other forces may be selected from appropriate plans including the Target Study for North Vietnam consisting of 94 targets, recently forwarded to you by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. . . .