

Top Aides' Proposal to Johnson On Military Steps in Late '64

Memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, William P. Bundy, for President Johnson, Sept. 8, 1964. The memorandum was headed "Courses of Action for South Vietnam."

This memorandum records the consensus reached in discussions between Ambassador Taylor and Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara and General Wheeler, for review and decision by the President.

THE SITUATION

1. Khanh will probably stay in control and may make some headway in the next two-three months in strengthening the Government (GVN). The best we can expect is that he and the GVN will be able to maintain order, keep the pacification program ticking over (but not progressing markedly) and give the appearance of a valid Government.
2. Khanh and the GVN leaders are temporarily too exhausted to be thinking much about moves against the North. However, they do need to be reassured that the US continues to mean business, and as Khanh goes along in his Government efforts, he will probably want more US effort visible, and some GVN role in external actions.
3. The GVN over the next 2-3 months will be too weak for us to take any major deliberate risks of escalation that would involve a major role for, or threat to, South Vietnam. However, escalation arising from and directed against U.S. action would tend to lift GVN morale at least temporarily.
4. The Communist side will probably avoid provocative action against the US, and it is uncertain how much they will step up VC activity. They do need to be shown that we and the GVN are not simply sitting back after the Gulf of Tonkin.

COURSES OF ACTION

We recommend in any event:

1. US naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin should be resumed immediately (about September 12). They should operate initially beyond the 12-mile limit and be clearly dissociated from 34A maritime operations. The patrols would comprise 2-3 destroyers and would have air cover from carriers; the destroyers would have their own ASW capability.
2. 34A operations by the GVN should be resumed immediately thereafter (next week). The maritime operations are by far the most important. North Vietnam is likely to publicize them, and at this point we should have the GVN ready to admit that they are taking place and to justify and legitimize them

on the basis of the facts on VC infiltration by sea. 34A air drop and leaflet operations should also be resumed but are secondary in importance. We should not consider air strikes under 34A for the present.

3. Limited GVN air and ground operations into the corridor areas of Laos should be undertaken in the near future, together with Lao air strikes as soon as we can get Souvanna's permission.

These operations will have only limited effect, however.

4. We should be prepared to respond on a tit-for-tat basis against the DRV in the event of any attack on US units or any special DRV/VC action against SVN. The response for an attack on US units should be along the lines of the Gulf of Tonkin attacks, against specific and related targets. The response to special action against SVN should likewise be aimed at specific and comparable targets.

The main further question is the extent to which we should add elements to the above actions that would tend deliberately to provoke a DRV reaction, and consequent retaliation by us. Example of actions to be considered would be running US naval patrols increasingly close to the North Vietnamese coast and/or associating them with 34A operations. We believe such deliberately provocative elements should not be added in the immediate future while the GVN is still struggling to its feet. By early October, however, we may recommend such actions depending on GVN progress and Communist reaction in the meantime, especially to US naval patrols.

The aim of the above actions, external to South Vietnam, would be to assist morale in SVN and show the Communists we still mean business, while at the same time seeking to keep the risks low and under our control at each stage.

Further actions within South Vietnam are not covered in this memorandum. We believe that there are a number of immediate-impact actions we can take, such as pay raises for the police and civil administrators and spot projects in the cities and selected rural areas. These actions would be within current policy and will be refined for decision during Ambassador Taylor's visit. We are also considering minor changes in the US air role within South Vietnam, but these would not involve decisions until November.