

Vietnam Archive: A Consensus to Bomb Developed Before '64 Election, Study Says

By NEIL SHEEHAN

The Johnson Administration reached a "general" consensus at a White House strategy meeting on Sept. 7, 1964, that air attacks against North Vietnam would probably have to be launched, a Pentagon study of the Vietnam war states. It was expected that "these operations would begin early in the new year."

"It is important to differentiate the consensus of the principals at this September meeting," the study says, "from the views which they had urged on the President in the preceding spring. In the spring the use of force had been clearly contingent on a major reversal—principally in Laos—and had been advanced with the apparent assumption that military actions hopefully would not be required. Now, however, their views were advanced with a sense that such actions were inevitable."

The administration consensus on bombing came at the height of the Presidential election contest between President Johnson and Senator Barry Goldwater, whose advocacy of full-scale air attacks on North Vietnam had become a major issue. That such a consensus had been reached as early as September is a major disclosure of the Pentagon study.

The consensus was reflected, the analysis says, in the final paragraph of a formal national security action memorandum issued by the President three days later, on Sept. 10. This paragraph spoke of "larger decisions" that might be "required at any time."

The last round of detailed planning of various political and military strategies for a bombing campaign began "in earnest," the study says, on Nov. 3, 1964, the day that Mr. Johnson was elected President in his own right.

Less than 100 days later, on Feb. 8, 1965, he ordered new reprisal strikes against the North. Then, on Feb. 13, the President gave the order for the sustained bombing of North Vietnam, code-named Rolling Thunder.

This is the second in a series of articles on a secret study, made in the Pentagon, of American participation in the Vietnam war. The study was obtained from other sources by The New York Times through the investigative reporting of Mr. Sheehan. The series was researched and written over three months by Mr. Sheehan and other staff members. Three pages of documentary material begin on Page 27.

This period of evolving decision to attack North Vietnam, openly and directly, is shown in the Pentagon papers to be the second major phase of President Johnson's defense of South Vietnam. The same period forms the second phase of the presentation of those papers by The New York Times.

The papers, prepared by a team of 30 to 40 authors in 1967-68 as an official study of how the United States went to war in Indochina, consist of 3,000 pages of analysis and 4,000 pages of supporting documents. The study covers nearly three decades of American policy on Southeast Asia. Yesterday The Times's first report on this study, and presentation of key documents, covered the period of clandestine warfare and planning before the Tonkin Gulf incidents in 1964.

In its glimpses into Lyndon B. Johnson's personal thoughts and motivations between the fateful September meeting and his decision to embark on an air war, the Pentagon study shows a President moving and being moved toward war, but reluctant and hesitant to act until the end.

But, the analyst explains, "from the September meeting forward, there was little basic disagreement among the prin-

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cipals [the term the study uses for the senior policy makers] on the need for military operations against the North. What prevented action for the time being was a set of tactical considerations."

The first tactical consideration, the analyst says, was that "the President was in the midst of an election campaign in which he was presenting himself as the candidate of reason and restraint as opposed to the quixotic Barry Goldwater," who was publicly advocating full-scale bombing of North Vietnam. The historian also mentions other "temporary reasons of tactics":

¶The "shakiness" of the Saigon Government.

¶A wish to hold the line militarily and diplomatically in Laos.

¶The "need to design whatever actions were taken so as to achieve maximum public and Congressional support..."

¶The "implicit belief that overt actions at this time might bring pressure for premature negotiations—that is negotiations before the D.R.V. [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] was hurting."

Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, the head of the Pentagon's Office of International Security Affairs, summed up these tactical considerations in the final paragraph of a Sept. 3 memorandum to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, in preparation for the crucial White House strategy session four days later:

"Special considerations during the next two months. The relevant audiences of U. S. actions are the Communists (who must feel strong pressures), the South Vietnamese (whose morale must be buoyed), our allies (who must trust us as 'underwriters'), and the U.S. public (which must support our risk-taking with U. S. lives and prestige). During the next two months, because of the lack of 'rebuttal time' before election to justify particular actions which may be distorted to the U. S. public, we must act with special care—signaling to the D.R.V. that initiatives are being taken, to the G.V.N. [Government of (South) Vietnam] that we are behaving energetically despite the restraints of our political season, and to the U. S. public that we are behaving with good purpose and restraint." The words in parentheses are Mr. McNaughton's.