

New Omens of Peril

In what the analyst calls the first flush of self-satisfaction, Ambassador Lodge cabled Washington on Nov. 4 predicting that the change of regime would shorten the war against the Vietcong because of the improved morale in the South Vietnamese Army.

But the Pentagon study recounts a number of immediate and disturbing omens. Vietcong activity jumped dramatically immediately after the coup. The fall of the Diem regime, as Mr. Lodge reported, also exposed the inflated South Vietnamese reports of success for the strategic-hamlet program.

Equally significant, when Mr. Lodge first met General Minh, the new chief of state, he reported to Washington that the general seemed "tired and somewhat frazzled" though "obviously a good, well-intentioned man."

"Will he be strong enough to get on top of things?" Mr. Lodge wondered.

It was a prophetic comment, for within three months one of the coup group, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, seized power for himself, starting a round of intramural power struggles that plagued Washington for the next two years drawing it ever deeper into the Vietnam war in an effort to prop up successive South Vietnamese regimes.

Just before President Kennedy's assassination, his top aides held a Vietnam strategy conference at Honolulu. Within four days of that meeting, President Johnson issued a new Vietnam policy paper to demonstrate that there would be no break from the Kennedy policies.

Particularly in the sphere of covert operations against North Vietnam, which became a prelude to the Tonkin Gulf clashes in 1964, the Pentagon narrative describes a smooth transition in the decision-making process. The Honolulu conference, set up under President Kennedy, ordered planning for a stepped-up

program of what the account calls "non-attributable hit-and-run" raids against North Vietnam. In his first Vietnam policy document, on Nov. 26, President Johnson gave his personal sanction to the planning for these operations.

In confident language, President Johnson set an objective in South Vietnam that was to stand unchallenged within the Administration for three and a half years: to assist "the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy." He reaffirmed the goal of concluding the war by the end of 1965. [See text, National Security Action Memorandum 273, Nov. 26.]

But a harbinger of events was a report to President Johnson from Secretary McNamara—"laden with gloom" as the analyst puts it—a month later.

After a trip to Vietnam, the Secretary of Defense reported on Dec. 21, 1963, that the new regime was "indecisive and drifting."

"Vietcong progress," Mr. McNamara said, in a major shift of his own thinking, "has been great during the period since the coup, with my best guess being that the situation has in fact been deteriorating in the countryside since July to a far greater extent than we realize because of our undue dependence on distorted Vietnamese reporting."

In conclusion, he felt compelled to say: "The situation is very disturbing. Current trends, unless reversed in the next two-three months, would lead to a neutralization at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state."

His assessment laid the groundwork for decisions in early 1964 to step up the covert war against North Vietnam and increase American aid to the South.

Articles on the Pentagon study will continue tomorrow.