

Questions for Kennedy

The Pentagon study shows President Kennedy facing three main questions on Vietnam during his term of office: whether to make an irrevocable commitment to prevent a Communist victory; whether to commit ground combat units to achieve his ends; whether to give top priority to the military battle against the Vietcong or to the political reforms necessary for winning popular support.

President Kennedy's response during 34 months in office, as the Pentagon account tells it, was to increase Ameri-

The writers of this series of articles are Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy and Fox Butterfield. The articles and documents were edited by Gerald Gold, Allan M. Siegal and Samuel Abt.

can advisers from the internationally accepted level of 685 to roughly 16,000 to put Americans into combat situations—resulting in a tenfold increase in American combat casualties in one year—and eventually to inject the United States into the internal South Vietnamese maneuvering that finally toppled the Diem regime.

The judgment of the Pentagon study is that while President Kennedy's actions stopped short of the fundamental decision to commit ground troops, nonetheless, "the limited-risk gamble undertaken by Eisenhower had been transformed into an unlimited commitment under Kennedy." Later, more cautiously, the study says that Mr. Kennedy's policies produced a "broad commitment" to Vietnam's defense, giving priority to the military aspects of the war over political reforms.

The study also observes that the per-

vasive assumption in the Kennedy Administration was that "the Diem regime's own evident weaknesses — from the 'famous problem of Diem as administrator' to the Army's lack of offensive spirit—could be cured if enough dedicated Americans, civilians and military, became involved in South Vietnam to show the South Vietnamese, at all levels, how to get on and win the war."

President Kennedy and his senior advisers are described in the study as considering defeat unthinkable and assuming that the mere introduction of Americans would provide the South Vietnamese with what the authors call "the élan and style needed to win."

The description of the debates in the Kennedy Administration presented in the study are revealing—particularly when the President decides against committing ground troops — because they emerge, in effect, as a rehearsal for the planning in the Johnson era that led to outright war in 1965. Many of the same officials advanced many of the same arguments, and the intelligence community offered some of the same ominous forewarnings.

President Kennedy was told that sending ground troops would be a "shot in the arm" that would "spark real transformation" of the South Vietnamese Army. The Joint Chiefs of Staff calculated that, at worst, no more than 205,000 American soldiers would be required to cope not only with the Vietcong but also with North Vietnam and Communist China if they should intervene. Both military and civilian advisers contended that American bombing of the North—even the mere threat of it—would hold Hanoi and the other Communist nations at bay.

In secretly urging the first commitment of American ground troops to Vietnam in November, 1961, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, then the President's personal military adviser, discounted the risks of a major land war. In a private message to the President from the Philippines, on his way home from Saigon on Nov. 1, he said:

"The risks of backing into a major Asian war by way of SVN are present but are not impressive. NVN is extremely vulnerable to conventional bombing, a weakness which should be exploited diplomatically in convincing Hanoi to lay off SVN.

"Both the D.R.V. [Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam] and the Chicoms would face severe logistical difficulties in trying to maintain strong forces in the field in SEA [Southeast Asia], difficulties which we share but by no means to the same degree. There is no case for fearing a mass onslaught of Communist manpower into SVN and its neighboring states, particularly if our airpower is allowed a free hand against logistical targets."

In General Taylor's recommendations for an initial commitment of 6,000 to 8,000 American ground troops, the ac-

count relates, he had a co-author, Walt W. Rostow, then the senior White House aide working on Southeast Asia.

On Nov. 5 Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara sent President Kennedy a memorandum stating that he and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were "inclined to recommend" General Taylor's proposal—but with the significant warning that much greater troop commitments were likely in the future. [See text, McNamara conclusions, Nov. 8, 1961.]

"The struggle may be prolonged and Hanoi and Peiping may intervene overtly," the McNamara memorandum told the President. It estimated that even so, "the maximum U.S. forces required on the ground in Southeast Asia will not exceed six divisions, or about 205,000 men."

Topic Dominated Discussions

The President eventually rejected this approach. But the Pentagon study comments that the ground-troop issue so dominated the discussions that Mr. Kennedy's ultimate decisions to approve the advisory build-up and the introduction of combat-support troops was made "without a careful examination" of precisely what it was expected to produce and how.

The study concludes that the Kennedy strategy was fatally flawed from the outset for political as much as for military reasons. It depended, the study notes, on successfully prodding President Diem to undertake the kind of political, economic and social reforms that would, in the slogan of that day, "win the hearts and minds of the people."

"The U.S. over-all plan to end the insurgency was on shaky ground on the GVN side," the study comments. "Diem needed the U.S. and the U.S. needed a reformed Diem."

It also says: "If he could not [reform], the U.S. plan to end the insurgency was foredoomed from its inception, for it depended on Vietnamese initiatives to solve a Vietnamese problem."

And in the end, the Pentagon account relates, the Kennedy Administration concluded that President Diem could not reform sufficiently and in 1963 abandoned him.

Abandoning President Diem was what Ambassador Eldridge Durbrow had suggested in September, 1960, [see text, Sept. 16] and again that December, shortly before Mr. Kennedy took office as President. Drawing on the Ambassador's reports, among others, a national intelligence estimate provided for Mr. Kennedy on March 28, 1961, gave a bleak appraisal of the situation in Vietnam:

"An extremely critical period for President Ngo Dinh Diem and the Republic of Vietnam lies immediately ahead. During the past six months the internal security situation has continued

to deteriorate and has now reached serious proportions . . .

"More than one-half of the entire rural region south and southwest of Saigon, as well as some areas to the north, are under considerable Communist control. Some of these areas are in effect denied to all government authority not immediately backed by substantial armed force. The Vietcong's strength encircles Saigon and has recently begun to move closer in on the city . . .

"The deterioration in the position of the Diem Government reached a new extreme in November when army paratroop officers joined forces with a number of civilian oppositionists in a narrowly defeated attempt to overthrow Diem. On the surface, Diem's position appears to have improved somewhat since then. . . .

"However, the facts which gave rise to the coup attempt have not been seriously dealt with and still exist. Discon-

tent with the Diem Government continues to be prevalent among intellectual circles and, to a lesser degree, among labor and business groups. There has been an increasing disposition within official circles and the Army to question Diem's ability to lead in this period. Many feel that he is unable to rally the people in the fight against the Communists because of his reliance on virtual one-man rule, his toleration of corruption extending even to his immediate entourage, and his refusal to relax a rigid system of public controls."

This assessment, the Pentagon study relates, echoed the themes and even some of the language of Ambassador Durbrow's cablegrams. One of these, on Sept. 24, 1960, suggested that if President Diem was unable to regain support through political and social reforms, "it may become necessary for U.S. Government to begin consideration alternative courses of action and leaders."