

A Challenge for the U.S.

However serious the problem in South Vietnam, the situation in Laos was far more critical. "The Western position was in the process of falling apart as Kennedy took office," the Pentagon account says.

And during the spring of 1961, when President Kennedy made his first series of Vietnam decisions, Laos—not Vietnam—was the dominant issue and largely determined how Vietnam should be handled, according to the Pentagon account.

The Eisenhower Administration had chosen to back right-wing elements in Laos; and by early 1961 they were reeling under Communist and neutralist attacks. President Kennedy chose to seek a political compromise and a military cease-fire rather than to continue to support the Laotian rightists.

Because of this shift in strategy in Laos, the Pentagon study says, the Kennedy Administration felt impelled to show strength in Vietnam to reassure America's allies in Asia.

In what the Administration saw as a global power competition with the Soviet Union, the account notes, Washington thought it dangerous to give ground too often. Summing up the Administration's reasoning, the author writes: "After the U.S. stepped back in Laos, it might be hard to persuade the Russians that we intended to stand firm anywhere if we then gave up on Vietnam."

Moreover, the Kennedy Administration sensed a particular challenge in the declaration by the Soviet Premier, Nikita S. Khrushchev, on Jan. 6, 1961, that Moscow intended to back "wars of national liberation" around the world. In response, counterinsurgency—as strategy against guerrilla war became known—grew to be a primary preoccupa-

tion of the Kennedy White House, as a steady flow of Presidential decision papers testifies.

"Vietnam was the only place in the world where the Administration faced a well-developed Communist effort to topple a pro-Western government with an externally aided pro-Communist insurgency," the Pentagon study comments. "It was a challenge that could hardly be ignored."

On April 12 Mr. Rostow, the senior White House specialist on Southeast Asia and a principal architect of counterinsurgency doctrine, put Vietnam directly before President Kennedy with a memorandum [see text] asserting that the time had come for "gearing up the whole Vietnam operation." He proposed a series of moves that the study calls "pretty close to an agenda" for the Kennedy Administration's first high-level review of Vietnam. Among other things Mr. Rostow proposed these measures:

¶ "The appointment of a full-time first-rate backstop man in Washington."

¶ "A possible visit to Vietnam in the near future by the Vice-President."

¶ "The raising of the MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group] ceiling, which involves some diplomacy, unless we can find an alternative way of introducing into the Vietnam operation a substantial number of Special Forces types."

¶ "Settling the question of extra funds for Diem."

¶ "The tactics of persuading Diem to move more rapidly to broaden the base of his Government, as well as to decrease its centralization and improve its efficiency."

Virtually all the Rostow proposals

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eventually became policy except his suggestion for a "first-rate backstop man." His candidate, the study notes, was Brig. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, a long-time Central Intelligence Agency operative who was close to President Diem and who in 1961 was in charge of "special operations" for the Pentagon. The State Department blocked his appointment, the study reports.

On April 20—the day after the collapse of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba—President Kennedy ordered a quick review of the Vietnam situation. As quoted by Secretary McNamara, the President's instructions were to "appraise . . . the Communist drive to dominate South Vietnam" and "recommend a series of actions (military, political and/or economic, overt and/or covert) which, in your opinion, will prevent Communist domination of that country."

Gilpatric Headed Task Force

The task force, headed by Roswell L. Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, turned in its report on April 27.

The report, quoted in the Pentagon study, recommended a 100-man increase in the American military advisory mission in Saigon, more American arms and aid for the Vietnamese regional forces known as the Civil Guard, the release of funds for a previously approved expansion of the South Vietnamese Army and the dropping of earlier conditions that President Diem undertake political and social reforms in return. Allied efforts, the report said, should be infused with a sense of urgency to impress friends and foes alike that "come what may, the U.S. intends to win this battle." The emphasis was in the original report.

Even before the report was submitted, it was overtaken by events: The Laotian crisis was at its peak. President Kennedy met with the National Security Council on April 26 to decide whether to send troops into Laos. Late that night the Joint Chiefs of Staff alerted the commander in chief of Pacific forces, Adm. Harry D. Felt, "to be prepared to undertake air strikes against North Vietnam, and possibly southern China," the account reports.

Overnight the Vietnam recommendations changed. "As insurance against a conventional invasion of South Vietnam" through the eastern, mountainous portions of Laos, the Gilpatric task force recommended quick expansion of the South Vietnamese Army by two divisions—40,000 men—plus the first major input of American troops, as training forces, according to the Pentagon study.

The April 28 "Laos annex," the narrative recounts, called for "a 1,600-man [American] training team for each of the two new [South Vietnamese] divisions, plus a 400-man Special Forces contingent to speed up counterinsurgency forces: a total of 3,600 men."

On April 29—described in the narrative as a day of "prolonged crisis meetings at the White House"—Admiral Felt

was alerted to prepare to move one American combat brigade of 5,000 men with air elements to northeastern Thailand and another to Danang, on the South Vietnamese coast, as a threat to intervene in Laos. "Decision to make these deployments not firm," the Joint Chiefs of Staff cabled Admiral Felt. The tactics were directly related to the Laos crisis.

Acting on Vietnam that day, the study reports, President Kennedy approved the modest 100-man increase in the American advisory mission and a few other steps suggested in the first Gilpatric task force's report.

"The only substantial significance that can be read into these April 29 decisions," the analyst writes, "is that they signaled a willingness to go beyond the 685-man limit of the U.S. military mission in Saigon." Publicity would have entailed "the first formal breach of the Geneva agreements," the study says, so the move was kept quiet.

By May 1 the acute fever of the Laos crisis had eased, the account goes on, and there was a "strong sense . . . that the U.S. would not go into Laos: that if the cease-fire failed, we would make a strong stand, instead, in Thailand and Vietnam."

Vietnam planning was directly affected. The State Department drafted the first of several revisions to tone down the Gilpatric task force's recommendations. When the task-force report finally went before the National Security Council on May 9, the study recounts, the State Department had largely prevailed. Shortly before that the White House announced that Vice President Johnson was leaving within days for a trip to Saigon and other Asian capitals.

Recommendation Was Modified Later

The final task-force report, quoted in the Pentagon account, recommended the deployment of 400 Special Forces soldiers and an immediate Pentagon study of a further build-up "in preparation for possible commitment of U.S. forces to Vietnam, which might result from an N.S.C. decision following discussions between Vice President Johnson and President Diem." The idea of sending 3,200 other soldiers right away was dropped.

In place of a Pentagon proposal made on May 1 for unilateral American intervention in Vietnam if that became necessary to "save the country from Communism," the final report by the Gilpatric task force proposed a new "bilateral arrangement with Vietnam."

"On the grounds that the Geneva accords have placed inhibitions upon Free World action while at the same time placing no restrictions upon the Communists," the report said, "Ambassador Nolting should be instructed to enter into preliminary discussions with Diem regarding the possibility of a defensive security alliance despite the inconsistency of such action with the Geneva accords Communist violations, therefore, justify the establishment of the security arrangements herein recommended."