

Open-Ended Strategy

When President Johnson decided in July, 1965, to accept General Westmoreland's request for 44 combat battalions and to endorse his search-and-destroy strategy, he "left the U.S. commitment to Vietnam open-ended," the study declares.

"Force levels for the search-and-destroy strategy had no empirical limits," it adds. "The amount of force required to defeat the enemy depended entirely on his response to the build-up and his willingness to continue the fight."

"The basic idea" underlying the search-and-destroy strategy, the study says, "was the desire to take the war to the enemy, denying him freedom of movement anywhere in the country . . . and deal him the heaviest possible blows." This concept replaced the static-defense and enclave strategies, which called for fewer American troops, and which had been tried briefly in the spring of 1965.

General Westmoreland intended his original allotment of 44 battalions to be only a stopgap measure, the account says. They would be used to blunt the enemy offensive that threatened to overwhelm the fragile Saigon Government, but more men would quickly be needed if the allies were to win.

To find out how much "additional force was required to seize the initiative from the enemy and to commence the win phase of the strategy," Secretary McNamara flew to Saigon on July 16, 1965, for a four-day visit. While he was there he received a cablegram notifying him that President Johnson had approved General Westmoreland's request for 44 battalions and the use of his search-and-destroy strategy.

According to the study, General Westmoreland then reported that he needed 24 additional American battalions, or 100,000 men, for the "win phase," which would begin in 1966.

Three-Phase Build-up

He also outlined, as quoted in the study, his over-all strategy, based on a three-phase build-up:

"Phase I—The commitment of U.S./F.W.M.A. [United States/Free World Military Assistance] forces necessary to halt the losing trend by the end of 1965.

"Phase II—The resumption of the offensive by U.S./F.W.M.A. forces during the first half of 1966 in high-priority areas necessary to destroy enemy forces, and reinstatement of rural-construction activities."

"Phase III—If the enemy persisted, a period of a year to a year and a half following Phase II would be required for the defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas.

"Withdrawal of U.S./F.W.M.A. forces would commence following Phase III as the GVN [Government of Vietnam] became able to establish and maintain internal order and to defend its borders."

According to the Pentagon study, General Westmoreland's plan shows that "with enough force to seize the initiative from the VC sometime in 1966, General Westmoreland expected to take the offensive and, with appropriate additional reinforcements, to have defeated the enemy by the end of 1967."

A Request for Wheeler

Secretary McNamara was seriously concerned, the Pentagon account says, about whether the United States could "win" in Vietnam. He was worried lest the United States "become involved more deeply in a war which could not be brought to a satisfactory conclusion."

Thus while he was preparing for his July 16 trip to Saigon, the Secretary asked Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for an assessment of "the assurance the U.S. can have of winning in South Vietnam if we do everything we can."

General Wheeler's answer, prepared by a study group of officers and civilians in the Defense Department, was: "Within the bounds of reasonable assumptions—there appears to be no reason we cannot win if such is our will—and if that will is manifested in strategy and tactical operations."

According to a memorandum to the study group from Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton, on the working definition of "win," it "means that we succeed in demonstrating to the VC that they cannot win."

This definition, the Pentagon analyst writes, "indicates the assumption upon which the conduct of the war was to rest—that the VC could be convinced in some meaningful sense that they were not going to win and that they would then rationally choose less violent methods of seeking their goals."

Approved by McNamara

Secretary McNamara got this assurance, the study goes on, and, armed with it, he recommended on his return from Saigon on July 20 that President Johnson meet General Westmoreland's request for 100,000 additional troops.

"The over-all evaluation," Secretary McNamara wrote the President, "is that the course of action recommended in this memorandum stands a good chance of achieving an acceptable outcome within a reasonable time in Vietnam."

"U.S. and South Vietnamese casualties will increase, just how much cannot be predicted with confidence," the Secretary added, "but the U.S. killed-in-action might be in the vicinity of 500 a month by the end of the year . . . United States public opinion will support the course of action because it is

a sensible and courageous military-political program designed and likely to bring about a success in Vietnam."

The Pentagon account declares: "Never again while he was Secretary of Defense would McNamara make so optimistic a statement about Vietnam—except in public."

Phase I Near Its Goal

By November, 1965, the situation in South Vietnam had undergone important changes, the study says.

The Phase I deployment of American troops, which was now nearing its 175,000-man goal, had apparently stopped deterioration in the military situation.

But at the same time, the narrative relates, the enemy had unexpectedly built up strength much faster than the American command had foreseen.

Where there were estimated to be 48,550 Communist combat troops in South Vietnam in July, 1965, American intelligence officials believed by that November that there were 63,550. And the number of North Vietnamese regiments had increased during these months from one to eight, according to the intelligence officials.

"The implications of the build-up were made abundantly clear by the bloody fighting in the Iadrang Valley in mid-November," the study says. In this first big battle of the Vietnam war, units of the United States First Cavalry Division fought numerically superior North Vietnamese forces for several weeks in the western part of the Central Highlands, along the Cambodian border. More than 1,200 of the enemy were reportedly killed in the fighting, which also left more than 200 Americans dead.

The Pentagon study says that the carefully calculated American strategy, with its plans for the number of American troops required to win, "did not take escalatory reactions into account."

While the study does not deal with this subject at length, the public record shows that the Johnson Administration had repeatedly said during early 1965 that North Vietnam was infiltrating large quantities of men and supplies into the South.

In February, for example, the State Department published a white paper entitled "Aggression From the North," asserting that North Vietnam was responsible for the war in South Vietnam and that Hanoi had infiltrated more than 37,000 men.

'Progressively More Flagrant'

The public record also shows that Secretary McNamara devoted a major part of a televised news conference on April 26, 1965, to a charge that North Vietnamese had stepped up their infiltration. "The intensification of infiltration," Mr. McNamara said, "has grown progressively more flagrant and more unconstrained."

Despite these frequent public statements about the build-up, in November, the Pentagon account says, General Westmoreland suddenly found it necessary to request a vast increase in troops for the Phase II part of his plan. The general said he would need 154,000 more men.

As the general explained his needs to Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, commander of American forces in the Pacific, who was his immediate superior:

"The VC/PAVN build-up rate is predicated to be double that of U.S. Phase II forces. Whereas we will add an average of 7 maneuver battalions per quarter the enemy will add 15. This development has already reduced the November battalion-equivalent ratio from an anticipated 3.2 to 1, to 2.8 to 1, and it will be further reduced to 2.5 to 1 by the end of the year."

In response to General Westmoreland's request for 154,000 men, Secretary McNamara detoured on his way from a Paris meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and flew to Saigon.

No Guarantee of Success

On his return to Washington on Nov. 30, Secretary McNamara wrote a memorandum to President Johnson in which he began to reveal doubts about the ground war. While recommending that the United States send a total of nearly 400,000 men to Vietnam by the end of 1966, the next year, he warned:

"We should be aware that deployments of the kind I have recommended will not guarantee success. U.S. killed-in-action can be expected to reach 1,000 a month, and the odds are even that we will be faced in early 1967 with a 'no decision' at an even higher level. My over-all evaluation, nevertheless, is that the best chance of achieving our stated objectives lies in...the deployments mentioned above." [See text, notes on McNamara memo, Nov. 30, 1965.]

While Secretary McNamara and President Johnson were considering troop increases up to nearly 400,000 men—the number of Americans in South Vietnam was then 184,000—news accounts were speculating that the troop ceiling might go as high as 200,000. This was the figure used, for example, in The New York Times's dispatch on Mr. McNamara's visit to Saigon on Nov. 28.

The Pentagon study does not say what decision President Johnson reached on Mr. McNamara's Nov. 30 recommendation. But the analyst does say that on Dec. 13, in another memorandum, Mr. McNamara outlined for the President an approved troop deployment of 367,000 men for 1966 and 395,000 men for June 1967.

Then on Dec. 16, the study reveals,

Secretary McNamara received another request from General Westmoreland, raising to 443,000 men the total he needed by the end of 1966. And on Jan. 28 the Secretary received a new request, this time increasing the total to 459,000 men.

Neither General Westmoreland's requests nor President Johnson's approvals were made public. At a news conference on Feb. 26, 1966, the President said, "We do not have on my desk at the moment any unfilled requests from General Westmoreland." There were 235,000 American soldiers in South Vietnam at the time.

The Pentagon narrative suggests two possible interpretations for the rapid ballooning of the number of troops required:

"It can be hypothesized, that from the outset of the American build-up, some military men felt that winning a meaningful victory in Vietnam would require something on the order of one million men.

"Knowing that this would be unacceptable politically, it may have seemed a better bargaining strategy to ask for increased deployments incrementally.

"An alternative explanation is that no

one really foresaw what the troop needs in Vietnam would be and that the ability of the D.R.V./VC to build up their effort was consistently underrated.

"This explanation seems, with some exceptions, to be reasonable. The documents from the period around July 1965 seem to indicate that [General Westmoreland] had not given much thought to what he was going to do in the year or years after 1965."

Citing a document of General Westmoreland's Military Assistance Command in Vietnam, the study goes on: "The words of the MACV history of 1965 indicate something of this. 'The President's July 28 announcement that the U.S. would commit additional massive military forces in SVN necessitated an overall plan clarifying the missions and deployment of the various components. [The general's] concept of operations was prepared to fulfill this need.'"

"If this is a true reflection of what happened," the analyst says, "it would indicate the MACV's plan of what to do was derived from what would be available rather than the requirement for manpower being derived from any, clearly thought out military plan."