

A Pessimistic Report

For Mr. McNamara and his influential aide John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, the first frontal challenge to the basic trend of policy came in October, 1966, and grew out of doubts that had been mounting for nearly a year.

As early as November, 1965—eight months after the American decision to intervene with ground forces—the Secretary of Defense warned President Johnson that the major new reinforcements he was approving could “not guarantee success.” And in January, 1966, Mr. McNaughton, the third-ranking official in the Pentagon, voiced fear that the United States had become caught in “an escalating military stalemate.”

In mid-October, Secretary McNamara returned disturbed from a trip to South Vietnam. He had been the intended target of a Vietcong assassination squad that was discovered only a few hours before his arrival in Saigon—a point to which he seemed to allude in his report to the President. “Full security exists nowhere,” he said, “not even behind the U.S. Marines’ lines and in Saigon [and] in the countryside, the enemy almost completely controls the night.” [See text, McNamara memo, Oct. 14, 1966.]

The Pentagon study notes that in this Oct. 14 memorandum, Mr. McNamara for the first time recommended cutting back sharply on military requests for reinforcements.

In September, 1966, Adm. U. S. Grant Sharp, commander in chief of forces in the Pacific, had pressed on behalf of General Westmoreland for an increase in the projected strength of American forces in South Vietnam from 445,000 to 570,000 by the end of 1967. Actual strength was 325,000 men, and still rising.

On Oct. 7, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged what the Pentagon study calls “full-blown” mobilization of 688,500 Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine reservists to help provide more troops for Vietnam and also to build up the armed forces around the world.

In his Oct. 14 memorandum, Mr. McNamara told President Johnson that he was “a little less pessimistic” than he had been a year earlier because the allied military campaign had “blunted the Communist military initiative” and prevented a total collapse in Saigon. But he went on to say that this had not

produced results in what he called “the ‘end products’—broken enemy morale and political achievements” by the South Vietnamese Government.

Discussing Saigon’s struggle to win the people’s allegiance, Mr. McNamara showed none of the confidence of high American officials in the early sixties that the mere introduction of Americans would revitalize the South Vietnamese civilian and military leadership.

“The discouraging truth,” he said, “is that, as was the case in 1961 and 1963 and 1965, we have not found the formula, the catalyst, for training and inspiring them into effective action.”

The ‘Meatgrinder’ Strategy

Summing up the crucial drive to extend Government control in the countryside, he said:

“Pacification has if anything gone backward. As compared with two, or four, years ago, enemy full-time regional forces and part-time guerrilla forces are larger; attacks, terrorism and sabotage have increased in scope and intensity; more railroads are closed and highways cut; the rice crop expected to come to market is smaller; we control little, if any, more of the population. . . . In essence, we find ourselves . . . no better, and if anything worse off.”

“Nor,” he said, turning to the air war, “has the Rolling Thunder program of bombing the North either significantly affected infiltration or cracked the morale of Hanoi.”

The essence of Mr. McNamara’s recommendations was that the United States should be “girding, openly, for a longer war” rather than pursuing what the Pentagon study terms General Westmoreland’s “meatgrinder” strategy of trying to kill enemy troops more rapidly than they could be replaced either by new recruits or by infiltration from North Vietnam.

In his memorandum, the Secretary put forward his program:

¶“Limit the increase in U.S. forces” in 1967 to a total of 470,000 men—25,000 more than planned, and 100,000 fewer than requested by the military.

¶“Install a barrier” to infiltration just south of the demilitarized zone astride the two Vietnams’ border and jutting across the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex of enemy supply lines in the mountainous panhandle of Laos. The electronic barrier would cost roughly \$1-billion.

¶“Stabilize the Rolling Thunder pro-

gram against the North" at the current monthly level of 12,000 sorties—individual flights by planes—because "to bomb the North sufficiently to make a radical impact upon Hanoi's political, economic and social structure, would require an effort which we could make but which would not be stomached either by our own people or by world opinion; and it would involve a serious risk of drawing us into open war with China."

¶"Pursue a vigorous pacification program" that would require "drastic reform" in the approach of South Vietnamese civilian, police and military officials to insure that they "will 'stay' in the [contested] area, . . . behave themselves decently and . . . show some respect for the people."

¶"Take steps to increase the credibility of our peace gestures in the minds of

the enemy" through both political and military moves.

Two Military Choices

Among these moves, he proposed that "we should consider" a decision to "stop bombing all of North Vietnam" or, alternatively, to "shift the weight-of-effort away from 'Zones 6A and 6B'—zones including Hanoi and Haiphong and areas north of those two cities to the Chinese border" and concentrate the air war instead "on the infiltration routes in Zones 1 and 2 (the southern end of North Vietnam, including the Mugia Pass), in Laos and in South Vietnam." The parenthetical material is Mr. McNamara's.

Politically, he suggested consideration of efforts to "try to split the VC off from Hanoi" and to "develop a realistic plan providing a role for the VC in negotiations, postwar life and government of the nation."