

How U.S. Planned The Viet Bombing

GARBLED

By Neil Sheehan
N.Y. Times Service

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The Johnson administration reached a "general consensus" at a White House strategy meeting on Sept. 7, 1964, that air attacks against North Vietnam would probably have to be launched, a Pentagon study of the Vietnam War states.

It was expected that "these operations would begin early in the new year."

The administration consensus on bombing came at the height of the presidential election contest between President Johnson and Senator Barry Goldwater, whose advocacy of full-scale air attacks on North Vietnam had become a major issue. That such a consensus had been reached as early as September is a major disclosure of the Pentagon study.

PLANNING

The last actual detailed planning of various political and military strategies for a bombing campaign began "in earnest," the study says, on Nov. 3, 1964, the day that Lyndon B. Johnson was right.

Less than 100 days later, on Feb. 8, 1965, he ordered new reprisal attacks against the north. Then, on February 13, the President gave the order for the sustained bombing of North Vietnam, code-named Rolling Thunder.

This period of evolving decision to attack North Vietnam, openly and directly, is shown in the Pentagon papers to be the second major phase of President Johnson's defense of South Vietnam.

The same period forms the second phase of this special report on those papers.

PAPERS

The papers, prepared by a team of 30 to 40 authors in 1967-68 as an official study of how the United States went to war in Indochina, consist of 3000 pages of analysis and 7000 pages of supporting documents.

The study covers nearly three decades of American policy toward Southeast Asia. The first report on this study, published yesterday covered the period of clandestine warfare and planning before the Tonkin Gulf incidents in 1964.

In its glimpses into Mr. Johnson's personal thoughts and motivations between the fateful September meeting and his decision to embark on an air war, the Pentagon history shows a President moving and being moved toward war, but reluctant and hesitant to act until the end.

But the Pentagon study says, "From the September meeting forward, there was

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little basic disagreement among the principals (The term the account uses for the senior policy makers) on the need for military operations against the north. What prevented action for the time being was a set of tactical considerations."

The first tactical consideration, the study says, was that "the President was in the midst of an election campaign in which he was presenting himself as the candidate of reason and restraint as opposed to the quixotic Barry Goldwater," who was publicly advocating full-scale bombing of North Vietnam. The account also mentions other "temporary reasons of tactics":

- The "shakiness" of the Saigon government.
- A wish to hold the line militarily and diplomatically in Laos.
- The "need to design whatever actions were taken so as to achieve maximum public and Congressional support . . ."
- The "implicit belief that overt actions at this time might bring pressure for premature negotiations — that is negotiations before the DRV (Democratic Republic of North Vietnam) was hurting."

During this period, the President was communicating a sense of restraint to the voters. On the night of August 29, in an address to a crowd a few miles from his ranch in Texas, he made a statement that he was to repeat in numerous election speeches.

"I have had advice to load our planes with bombs," the President said, "and to drop them on certain areas that I think would enlarge the war and escalate the war, and result in our committing a good many American boys to fighting a war that I think

ought to be fought by the boys of Asia to protect their own land."

POLICY

The Policy of the United States toward Vietnam, the president said later in his speech, was "to furnish advice, give counsel, express trained counselors, and help them with equipment to help themselves.

"We are doing that," he said. "We have lost less than 200 men in the last several years, but to each one of those 200 men — and we lost about that many in Texas in accidents on the Fourth of July — to each of those 200 men who have given their life to preserve freedom, it is a war and a big war and we recognize it.

"But we think it is better to lose 200 than to lose 200,000. For that reason we have tried very carefully to restrain ourselves and not to enlarge the war."

TAYLOR

Eleven days earlier, on August 18, Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor had cabled from Saigon that he agreed with an "assumption" now held in the administration in Washington that the Viet Cong guerrillas could not be defeated and the Saigon government preserved by a counterinsurgency war confined to South Vietnam itself.

"Something must be added in the coming months," the ambassador said in his message. What General Maxwell Taylor proposed to add was "a carefully orchestrated bombing attack on NVN (North Vietnam) directed primarily at infiltration and other military targets" with "Jan. 1, 1965, as a target D-day."

The bombing should be undertaken under either of two courses of action, the ambassador said. The first course would entail using the promise of the air attacks as an

inducement to persuade the regime of General Nguyen Khanh to achieve some political stability and get on seriously with the pacification program.

BOMBING

Under the second course, the U.S. would bomb the north, regardless of whatever progress Khanh made, to prevent "a collapse of national morale" in Saigon.

Taylor's eagle was designated a joint U.S. mission message, meaning that Deputy Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson and General William C. Westmoreland, chief of the United States Military Assistance Command, had concurred with the ambassador's views.

On August 26, three days before the President's speech at Stonewall, Tex., the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted a memorandum to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara agreeing with Taylor. They said that bombing under his second criterion, to stave off a breakdown in Saigon, was "more in accord with the current situation" in their view and added that an air war against the north was now "essential to prevent a complete collapse of the U.S. position in Southeast Asia."

In a September 3 memorandum to McNamara, Assistant Secretary John T. McNaughton outlined several means of provocation that could culminate in a sustained air war. In the meantime, they could be employed to conduct reprisal air attacks that would help hold the situation in South Vietnam together and, the account notes, permit postponing "probably until November or December any decision as to serious escalation."

But a majority of the officials at a September 7 White House strategy meeting disagreed. They decided for the present against adopting a

provocation strategy for reprisal air attacks, precisely because the Kyanh Regime was so weak and vulnerable and the morale-lifting benefits of such attacks might be offset by possible Communist retaliation, the account said.

The meeting was attended by the President, Secretary of State Dean Rush, McNamara, General Earle G. Wheeler, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Ambassador Taylor, who had flown in from Saigon, and John A. McCone, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"We believe such deliberately provocative elements should not be added in the immediate future while the GVN is still struggling to its feet," Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy wrote in a memorandum recording the consensus recommendations formally made to the President after the meeting.

PATROLS

er, we may recommend such actions depending on GVN progress and Communist reaction in the meantime, especially to U.S. Naval patrols." A resumption of the destroyer patrols was one outcome of the September 7 meeting.

The most important orders Mr. Johnson gave in a memorandum September 10 dealt with covert measures. The final paragraph in the President's memorandum also reflected the consensus, the account finds, of the September 7 meeting and other strategy discussions of the time — "the extent to which the new year was anticipated as the occasion for beginning overt military operations against North Vietnam."

The covert stepup in the air operation in Laos ordered by the President did not take place until mid-October, 1964. The Pentagon account says that one reason for the delay was the administration's need to "await the uncertain out-

come" of negotiations then taking place in Paris between the right-wing, neutralist and pro-Communist factions in Laos. The objective of the talks was to arrange a cease-fire that might lead to a new 14-nation Geneva conference to end the Laotian civil war.

"However, a Laotian cease-fire was not compatible with current perceptions of U.S. interest," the analysis says.

FEAR

The administration feared that during an ensuing Geneva conference in Laos, international pressures, particularly from the Communist countries, might force the discussions onto the subject of Vietnam. Negotiations in the present circumstances were considered certain to unravel the shaky anti-Communist regime in Saigon.

The administration also believed that even the convening of a conference on Laos might create an impression in Saigon that Washington was going to seek a negotiated withdrawal from South Vietnam and set off a political collapse there and the emergence of a neutralist coalition regime that would ask the United States to leave.

American mission representatives from Bangkok and Vientiane met in Saigon on September 11 under Ambassador Taylor's auspices, and decided that the South Vietnamese air force should not air action in Laos authorized by the President in his directive of September 10.

TARGETS

A list of 22 targets in the Laotian panhandle had been drawn up during the summer for the possibility of such raids, including one on a control point at the Mu Gia pass, nameless border.

South Vietnamese air attacks would offend Premier Souvanna Phouma by com-

plicating his political position, the meeting determined, so the attacks would be confined to clandestine raids by the T-28s in Laos and U.S. Navy and Air Force jets — code-named Yankee Team — operating over Laos.

Accord was also reached that South Vietnamese troops, possibly accompanied by American advisers, would make ground forays kilometers, or 12 miles.

"The mission representatives agreed that, once the (air and ground) operations began, they would not be acknowledged publicly," the account says. "In effect, then, they would supplement the other covert pressures being exerted against North Vietnam. Moreover, while the Lao government would of course know about the operations of their T-28s, Souvanna was not to be informed of the GVN-U.S. (ground) operations. The unacknowledged nature of these operations would thus be easier to maintain."

In October, however, the planned ground forays into Laos by the South Vietnamese. Taylor pointed out in a cable on October 9 that these would not be possible "in foreseeable future" in any case because the South Vietnamese army was so tied down fighting guerrillas in its own country.

On Nov. 24, 1964, a select committee of the National Security Council met to discuss the option papers on military action formally presented to the council three days earlier. This group comprised Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, McCone, General Earle C. Wheeler, McGeorge Bundy and undersecretary of State George W. Ball. William Bundy attended to keep a record and to represent the working group.

In the account of this meeting, Ball makes his first ap-

pearance in the Pentagon account as the Administration dissenter on Vietnam.

General Wheeler, reflecting the viewpoint of the Joint Chiefs, argued that a hard, fast bombing campaign actually entailed "less risk of a major conflict before achieving success," in the words of the account, than gradually intensifying air attacks.

UNDECIDED

The meeting on November 24 ended without a clear majority decision on which option should be recommended to the President. The principals resumed when Ambassador Taylor reached Washington to join the strategy talks on Nov. 27, 1964.

In a written briefing paper, he told the conferees:

"If, as the evidence shows, we are playing a losing game in South Vietnam . . . it is high time we change and find a better way."

The account says that the ambassador had revised his earlier view that Washington should bomb the north merely to prevent "a collapse of national morale" in Saigon. He still favored some form of bombing in an emergency, but now he wanted something solid from the Saigon leaders in exchange for a coherent program of increasing air war.

EFFECT

In the course of discussions on November 27, however, the ambassador acknowledged that while bombing "would definitely have a favorable effect" in South Vietnam, ". . . he was not sure this would be enough really to improve the situation," the account reports, again quoting from William Bundy's memorandum of record.

Taylor proposed that the administration adopt a two-phase program culminating in the bombing of inflation facilities south of the 19th parallel in North Vietnam.

The others agreed, and the proposal was redefined further at a meeting on November 28. William Bundy was assigned the task of drawing

up a formal policy paper outlining the proposal. The cabinet-level officials agreed to recommend it to the President at a White House meeting scheduled for December 1.

The Pentagon study notes a "gap" between the drastic

concessions expected from Hanoi and the relatively modest bombing campaign that was expected to break Hanoi's will.

PESSIMISM

Intelligence agencies "tended toward a pessimistic view" of the effect of bombing on Hanoi.

The intelligence panel composed of representatives from the three leading intelligence agencies—the CIA, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency—"did not concede very strong chances for breaking the will of Hanoi," the account says.

"We do not believe that such actions (bombings) would have a crucial effect on the daily lives of the overwhelming majority of the North Vietnam population. We do not believe that attacks on industrial would so greatly exacerbate current economic difficulties as to create unmanageable control problems. It is reasonable to infer that the DRV leaders have a psychological investment in the work of reconstruction they have accomplished over the last decade. Nevertheless, they would probably be willing to suffer some damage to the country in the course of a test of wills with the U.S. over the course of events in South Vietnam."

ANALYSIS

As in the case of earlier intelligence findings that contradicted policy intentions, the Pentagon analysis indicates no effort on the part of the President or his most trusted advisers to reshape their policy along the lines of this analysis.

One part of the intelligence panel's report that the administration did accept was a prediction that China would not react in any major way to a bombing campaign unless American or South Vietnamese troops invaded North Vietnam or northern Laos. The study indicates that this analysis eased administration fears on this point.

Events in Saigon had meanwhile gone awry. Political turmoil broke out there again with Buddhist and student demonstrations against the cabinet of Premier Tran Van Huong, who had taken over from Khanh.

On December 20, in defiance of Ambassador Taylor's wishes, Khanh, in a temporary alliance with the young generals led by Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky — announced the dissolution of the High National Council, a body that was supposed to be functioning as a temporary legislature. They also made a large number of political arrests by night, seizing several members of the High National Council.

THIEU

That day, Ambassador Taylor summoned the young generals to the embassy and in words of the Pentagon chronicle, read them "the riot act." They included General Nguyen Van Thieu, now president of South Vietnam.

The ambassador tried to persuade them to support the civilian regime of Premier Huong and apparently to restore the High National Council. The Vietnamese officers would not agree.

An embassy cable to Washington describes the end of the conversation:

"In taking a friendly leave,

Ambassador Taylor said: 'You people have broken a lot of dishes and now we have to see how we can straighten out this mess'."

By the end of the month, Ambassador Taylor, Deputy Ambassador Johnson and General Westmoreland had

apparently despaired of trading a bombing campaign against the North for a stable Saigon government that would prosecute the war in the South.

MESSAGE

On December 31, the account continues, they sent a joint message to Washington saying, in effect, that the United States should go ahead with the air war against the North "under any conceivable alliance condition short of complete abandonment of South Vietnam."

The account indicates, however, that the President was reluctant to proceed without at least the appearance of a firmer base in Saigon.

Action finally was taken after. The Viet Cong attacked the U.S. military advisers' compound at Pleiku in the central highlands and an Army helicopter base at Camp Holloway, four miles away. Nine Americans were killed and 76 wounded.

"The first flash from Saigon about the assault came on the ticker at the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon at 2:38 p.m. Saturday, February 6, Washington time," the Narrative says.

REACTION

"It triggered a swift, though long-contemplated presidential decision to give an 'appropriate and fitting response.' Within less than 14 hours, by 4 p.m. Sunday, Vietnam time, 49 U.S. Navy jets — A-4 Skyhawks and F-8

Crusaders from the Seventh Fleet carriers Coral Sea and HXANCOCK — had penetrated a heavy layer of monsoon clouds to deliver their bombs and rockets upon North Vietnamese barracks and staging areas at Dong Hoi, a guerrilla training garrison 40 miles north of the 17th parallel.

"Though conceived and executed as a limited one-shot tit-for-tat reprisal, the drastic U.S. action, long on the military planners' drawing boards under the operational code name Flaming Dart, precipitated a rapidly moving sequence of events that transformed the character of the Vietnam war and the U.S. role in it."

Then the guerrillas attacked an American barracks at Qui Nhon, on the central coast, and on February 11, the President launched a second and heavier reprisal raid, Flaming Dart II.

Two days later, on February 13, he decided to begin Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained air war against North Vietnam.

"As is readily apparent," the historian concludes, "there was no dearth of reasons for striking north. Indeed, one almost has the impression that there were more reasons than were required. But in the end, the decision to go ahead with the strikes seems to have resulted as much from the lack of alternative proposals as from any compelling logic in their favor."