

A Secret Study of The Vietnam War

Decisions Of Four Presidents

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A massive study of how the United States went to war in Indochina was conducted by the Pentagon three years ago.

The study demonstrates that four administrations progressively developed a sense of commitment to a non-Communist Vietnam, a readiness to fight the North to protect the South and an ultimate frustration with this effort — to a much greater extent than their public statements acknowledged at the time.

The 3000-page analysis, to which 4000 pages of official documents are appended, was written at the order of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and covers the American involvement in Southeast Asia from World War II to the spring of 1968 — two months after President Johnson set a limit on further military commitments and revealed his decision to retire.

Most of the secret study and many of the appended documents have been obtained by the New York Times.

PLANS

The documents show that the Johnson Administration planned major American military action against North Vietnam nearly five months before the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident. AUG 64

These plans were made at a time when the United States was already directing clandestine sabotage operations in the North.

Two months before the attack on two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin on Aug. 2 and 4, 1964, the Administration sent a Canadian diplomat, J. Blair Seaborn,

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on a secret mission to Hanoi where he is quoted as telling Premier Pham Van Dong that "in the event of escalation (of the war) the greatest devastation would result for the DRV (North Vietnam) itself."

It was the Tonkin incident — called totally unprovoked by the administration —

which led Congress on August 7 to pass a resolution declaring that the United States is "prepared, as the President directs, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force," to assist South Vietnam. It was on this resolution that President Johnson subsequently leaned heavily to widen the war.

A national security action memorandum of March 17, 1964, presumably the result of a presidential decision, set out both the administration's political aims and the basis for its military planning.

The memorandum said that "we seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam" but "do not require that it serve as a Western base or as a member of a

Western alliance. South Vietnam must be free, however, to accept outside assistance as required to maintain its security."

Unless the objective is achieved in South Vietnam, it said, "almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance" or accommodate to communism. The Philippines, it was

judged, "would become shaky" and "the threat to India on the west, Australia and New Zealand to the south, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the North would be greatly increased."

The policy decision, then, was to "prepare immediately to be in a position on 72 hours' notice to initiate the full range of Laotian and Cambodian 'border control actions' as well as "the 'retaliatory actions' against North Vietnam and to be in a position on 30 days' notice to initiate the program of 'graduated overt military pressure' against North Vietnam

As early as December 21, 1963, a memorandum from McNamara to President Johnson referred to "plans for covert action into North Vietnam" that "present a wide variety of sabotage and psychological operations" that should "provide maximum pressure with minimum risk."

This clandestine program became "Operation Plan 34-A," launched on February 1, 1964. The 34-A operations against the North during 1964 ranged from U-2 spy plane flights to parachuting sabotage and psychological warfare teams into the North, kidnappings of North Vietnamese citizens, sea-launched commando raids on rail and highway bridges and bombardment of coastal installations by PT boats.

These attacks were said to have been actually carried out by the South Vietnamese or "hired personnel."

Even before these covert operations began, however, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were reported recommending "increasingly bolder actions" including "aerial bombing of key North Vietnamese targets" and use of "United States forces as nec-

essary in direct actions against North Vietnam."

The Tonkin gulf incident changed the whole course of the war. Once Congress passed the Tonkin Resolution, both planning and action quickened. The United States immediately struck by air at North Vietnam in retaliation, and on August 10 Seaborn was sent back to see Premier Dong. Seaborn was told to say that if the North persisted in "its present course" it "can expect to continue to suffer the consequences."

Hanoi's response, according to the documents, was that "Pham Van Dong showed himself utterly un intimidated and calmly resolved to pursue the course upon which the DRV was embarked to what he confidently expected would be its successful conclusion."

The McNamara study, though far from a complete history, even at 2.5 million words, forms a great archive of government decision-making on Indochina over three decades. The study led its 30 to 40 authors and researchers to many broad conclusions and specific findings, including the following:

- That the Truman administration's decision to give military aid to France in its colonial war against the Communist-led Viet Minh "directly involved" the United States in Vietnam and "set" the course of American policy.

- That the Eisenhower administration, although ultimately to rescue a fledgling South Vietnam from a Communist takeover and attempt to undermine the new Communist regime of North Vietnam gave it a "direct role in the ultimate breakdown of the Geneva settlement" for Indochina in 1954.