

'Plan of Action' Attributed to Assistant Secretary McNaughton

Excerpts from memorandum, Sept. 3, 1964, "Plan of Action for South Vietnam," which the Pentagon study indicates was drawn up by Assistant Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton.

I. Analysis of the present situation.

The situation in South Vietnam is deteriorating. Even before the government sank into confusion last week, the course of the war in South Vietnam had been downward, with Viet Cong incidents increasing in number and intensity and military actions becoming larger and more successful, and with less and less territory meaningfully under the control of the government. Successful ambushes had demonstrated an unwillingness of the population even in what were thought to be pacified areas to run the risk of informing on the Viet Cong. War weariness was apparent. The crisis of the end of August—especially since the competing forces have left the government largely "faceless" and have damaged the government's ability to manage the pacification program—promises to lead to further and more rapid deterioration. . . . The objective of the United States is to reverse the present downward trend. Failing that, the alternative objective is to emerge from the situation with as good an image as possible in US, allied and enemy eyes.

2. Inside South Vietnam. We must in any event keep hard at work inside South Vietnam. This means, *inter alia*, immediate action:

(a) to press the presently visible leaders to get a real government in operation;

(b) to prevent extensive personnel changes down the line;

(c) to see that lines of authority for carrying out the pacification program are clear.

New initiatives might include action:

(d) to establish a US Naval base, perhaps at Danang;

(e) to embark on a major effort to pacify one province adjacent to Saigon.

A separate analysis is being made of a proposal:

(f) to enlarge significantly the US military role in the pacification program inside South Vietnam—e.g., large numbers of US special forces, divisions of regular combat troops, US air, etc., to "interlard" with or to take over functions of geographical areas from the South Vietnamese armed forces. . . .

3. Outside the borders of South Vietnam. There is a chance that the downward trend can be reversed—or a new situation created offering new opportunities, or at least a convincing demonstration made of the great costs and risks incurred by a country which com-

mits aggression against an ally of ours—if the following course of action is followed. The course of action is made up of actions outside the borders of South Vietnam designed to put increasing pressure on North Vietnam but designed also

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both to create as little risk as possible of the kind of military action which would be difficult to justify to the American public and to preserve where possible the option to have no US military action at all. . . .

Actions. The actions, in addition to present continuing "extra-territorial" actions (US U-2 recce of DRV, US jet recce of Laos, T-28 activity in Laos), would be by way of an orchestration of three classes of actions, all designed to meet these five desiderata—(1) from the US, GVN and hopefully allied points of view, they should be legitimate things to do under the circumstances, (2) they should cause apprehension, ideally increasing apprehension, in the DRV, (3) they should be likely at some point to provoke a military DRV response, (4) the provoked response should be likely to provide good grounds for us to escalate if we wished, and (5) the timing and crescendo should be under our control, with the scenario capable of being turned off at any time. . . .

4. Actions of opportunity. While the above course of action is being pursued, we should watch for other DRV actions which would justify [words illegible]. Among such DRV actions might be the following:

a. Downing of US recce or US rescue aircraft in Laos (likely by AA, unlikely by MIG).

b. MIG action in Laos or South Vietnam (unlikely).

c. Mining of Saigon Harbor (unlikely).

d. VC attacks on South Vietnamese POL storage, RR bridge, etc. (dramatic incident required).

e. VC attacks (e.g., by mortars) on,

or take-over of, air fields on which US aircraft are deployed (likely).

f. Some barbaric act of terrorism which inflames US and world opinion (unlikely). . . .

6. Chances to resolve the situation. Throughout the scenario, we should be alert to chances to resolve the situation:

a. To back the DRV down, so South Vietnam can be pacified.

b. To evolve a tolerable settlement:

I. Explicit settlement (e.g., via a bargaining-from-strength conference, etc.).

II. Tacit settlement (e.g., via piecemeal live-and-let-live Vietnamese "settlements," a de facto "writing off" of indefensible portions of SVN, etc.).

c. If worst comes and South Vietnam disintegrates or their behavior becomes abominable, to "disown" South Vietnam, hopefully leaving the image of "a patient who died despite the extraordinary efforts of a good doctor."

7. Special considerations during next two months. The relevant "audiences" of US actions are the Communists (who must feel strong pressures), the South Vietnamese (whose morale must be buoyed), our allies (who must trust us as "underwriters"), and the US public (which must support our risk-taking with US lives and prestige). During the next two months, because of the lack of "rebuttal time" before election to justify particular actions which may be distorted to the US public, we must act with special care—signalling to the DRV that initiatives are being taken, to the GVN that we are behaving energetically despite the restraints of our political season, and to the US public that we are behaving with good purpose and restraint.