

'Not to Enlarge the War'

The President was already communicating this sense of restraint to the voters. On the night of Aug. 29, in an address to a crowd at an outdoor barbecue a few miles from his ranch in Texas, when two tons of beef were served in a belated celebration of his 56th birthday, 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 help protect their own land."

The policy of the United States toward Vietnam, the President explained later in his speech, was "to furnish advice, give counsel, express good judgment, give them trained counselors, and help them with equipment to help themselves."

'It Is a War and a Big War'

"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 on 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."

Eleven days earlier, on Aug. 18, Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor had cabled from Saigon that he agreed with an "assumption" now held in the Administration in Washington that the Vietcong guerrillas—the VC, as they were usually termed—could not be defeated and the Saigon Government preserved by a counter-guerrilla war confined to South Vietnam itself.

"Something must be added in the coming months," the Ambassador said in his message. What General 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 Gen. Nguyen Khanh to achieve some political stability and get on seriously with the pacification program. Under the second course, the United States would bomb the North, regardless of whatever progress General Khanh made, to prevent "a collapse of national morale" in Saigon.

For the Ambassador cautioned that "it is far from clear at the present moment that the Khanh Government can last until Jan. 1, 1965." The Ambassador said that before bombing the North the United States would also have to send Army Hawk anti-aircraft missile units to the Saigon and Danang areas to protect the airfields there against retaliatory Communist air attacks—assumed possible from China or North Vietnam—and to land a force of American Marines at

Danang to protect the air base there against possible ground assaults.

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

On Aug. 26, three days before the President's speech at the barbecue in Stonewall, Tex., the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted a memorandum to Secretary McNamara agreeing with Ambassador 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."

The Joint Chiefs' memorandum was the first appearance, the account says, of a "provocation strategy" that was to be discussed at the Sept. 7 White House session—in the words of the narrative, "deliberate attempts to provoke the D. R. V. into taking actions which could then be answered by a systematic U.S. air campaign."

The memorandum itself is not this explicit, although it does seem to suggest attempting to repeat the Tonkin Gulf clashes as a pretext for escalation.

In a Sept. 3 memorandum to Secretary McNamara, however, Mr. McNaughton was specific. He outlined several means of provocation that could culminate in a sustained air war. In the meantime, they could be employed to conduct reprisal air strikes that would help hold the situation in South Vietnam together and, the analyst notes, permit postponing "probably until November or December any decision as to serious escalation."

Defines Serious Escalation

This serious escalation Mr. McNaughton defined as "a crescendo of GVN-U.S. military actions against the D.R.V.," such as mining harbors and gradually escalating air raids.

He described his provocation program to Mr. McNamara as "an orchestration of three classes of actions, all designed to meet these five desiderata—(1) From the U.S., 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 D.R.V., (3) they should be likely at some point to provoke a military D.R.V. 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." [See text, McNaughton plan, Sept. 3.]

The classes of actions were:

¶ South Vietnamese air strikes at enemy infiltration routes through south-eastern Laos that would "begin in Laos near the South Vietnamese border and slowly 'march' up the trails and eventually across the North Vietnamese border."

¶ A resumption of the covert coastal raids on North Vietnam under Operation Plan 34A, which President Johnson had temporarily suspended since the Tonkin Gulf incident. The South Vietnamese Government would announce

them publicly, declaring them "fully justified as necessary to assist in interdiction of infiltration by sea."

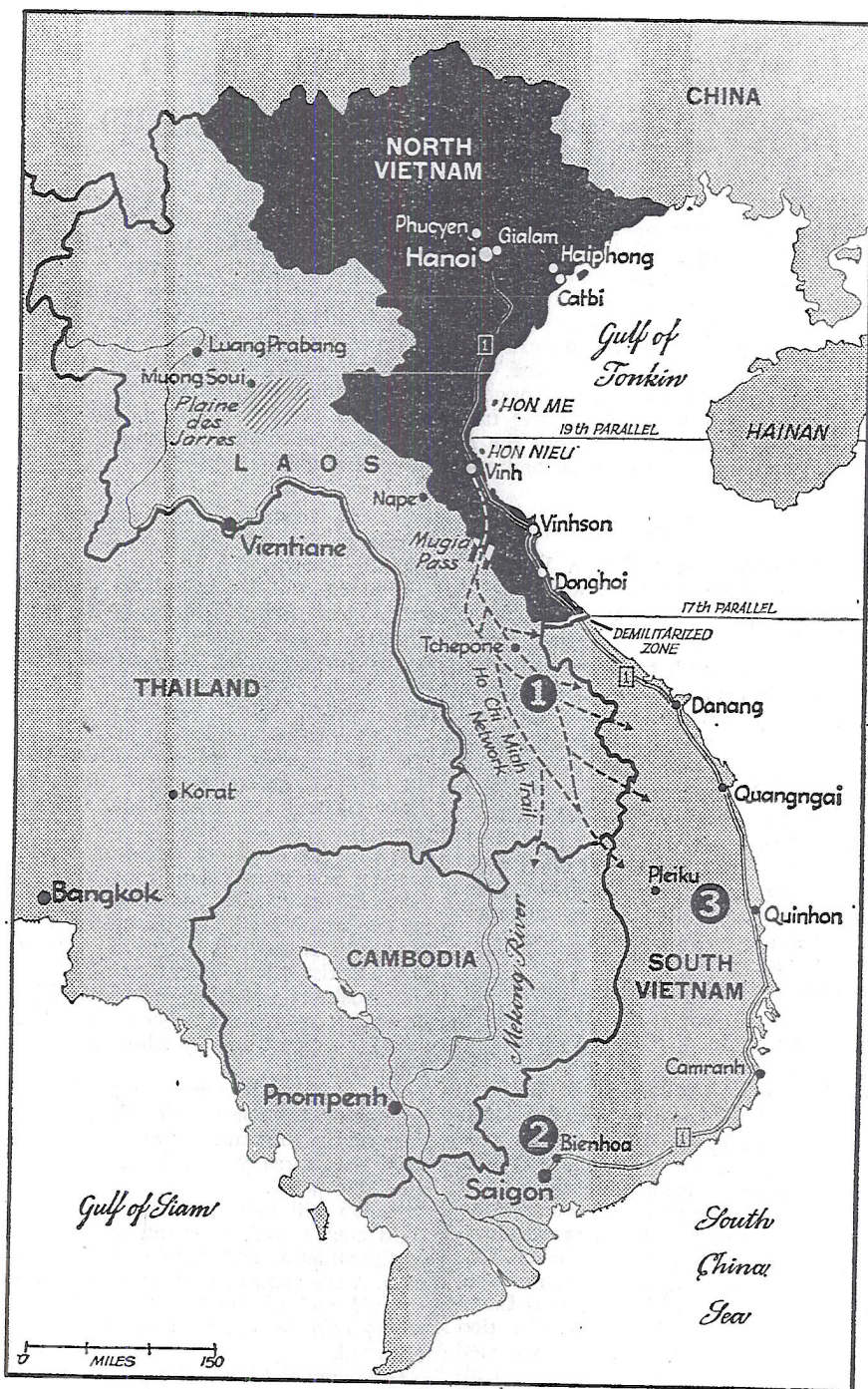
¶ A resumption of patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin by United States destroyers, code-named De Soto patrols, although these would still be physically "disassociated" from the 34A attacks. Mr. McNaughton noted that "the U.S. public is sympathetic to the reasonable insistence on the right of the U.S. Navy to ply international waters."

Majority in Disagreement

But a majority of the officials at the Sept. 7 White House strategy meeting disagreed. They decided for the present against adopting a provocation strategy for reprisal air attacks, precisely because the Khanh regime was so weak and vulnerable and the morale-lifting benefits of such strikes might be offset by possible Communist retaliation, the analyst says. The meeting was attended by the President; Secretary of State Dean Rusk; Secretary McNamara; Gen. 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 Central Intelligence.

"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.

"By early October, however, 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 Sept. 7 meeting.



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U.S. bombing of foe's Laotian trails (1) began in October, 1964. Enemy attack on Bienhoa (2) in December spurred study of U.S. options. Air war on North Vietnam followed guerrilla blows at Pleiku and Quinhon (3) in February, 1965.

The analyst says that a similar reason was given for the decision against beginning a sustained bombing campaign against the North, with or without a provocation strategy, in the near future. "The GVN over the next 2-3 months will be too weak for us to take any major deliberate risks of escalation that would involve a major role for, or threat to, South Vietnam," the Bundy memorandum states.

Ambassador Taylor had acknowledged in his cable of Aug. 18 that bombing the North to prevent a collapse in the South if the Khanh regime continued to

decline "increases the likelihood of U.S. involvement in ground action since Khanh will have almost no available ground forces which can be released from pacification employment to mobile resistance of D.R.V. attacks."

'A Base for Wider Action'

The Pentagon account concludes from the Sept. 7 strategy discussions that by now the Saigon regime was being regarded less and less as a government capable of defeating the Vietcong insurgency than "in terms of its suitability as a base for wider action."

Despite the pessimistic analyses of Ambassador Taylor and the Joint Chiefs for future escalation, some of those at the White House meeting hoped the Khanh regime could be somewhat stabilized. Citing handwritten notes of the meeting in the Pentagon files, the analyst quotes Mr. McNamara as saying that he understood "we are not acting more strongly because there is a clear hope of strengthening the GVN."

"But he went on," the account continues, "to urge that the way be kept open for stronger actions even if the GVN did not improve or in the event the war were widened by the Communists."

The handwritten notes of the meeting quote the President as asking, "Can we really strengthen the GVN?"

And in his memorandum of the consensus, William Bundy wrote: "Khanh will probably stay in control and may make some headway in the next 2-3 months in strengthening the Government (GVN). The best we can expect is that he and the GVN will be able to maintain order, keep the pacification program ticking over (but not progressing markedly), and give the appearance of a valid government."

On Sept. 10, therefore, the President ordered a number of interim measures in National Security Action Memorandum 314, issued over the signature of his special assistant, McGeorge Bundy. These were intended, in the words of William Bundy's memorandum of consensus, "to assist morale in SVN and show the Communists we still mean business, while at the same time seeking to keep the risks low and under our control at each stage."

A Reflection of Consensus

The most important orders Mr. Johnson gave dealt with covert measures. The final paragraph in the President's memorandum also reflected the consensus, the analyst finds, of the Sept. 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."

This final paragraph read: "These decisions are governed by a prevailing judgment that the first order of business at present is to take actions which will help to strengthen the fabric of the Government of South Vietnam; to the extent that the situation permits, such action should precede larger decisions. If such larger decisions are required at any time by a change in the situation, they will be taken." [See text, McGeorge Bundy memo, Sept. 10.]

The interim measures Mr. Johnson ordered included these:

① Resumption of the De Soto patrols by American destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf. They would "operate initially well beyond the 12-mile limit and be clearly disassociated from 34A maritime operations," but the destroyers "would have air cover from carriers."

2 Sabotage Actions

¶Reactivation of the 34A coastal raids, this time after completion of the first De Soto patrol. The directive added that "we should have the GVN ready to admit they are taking place and to justify and legitimize them on the basis of the facts of VC infiltration by sea." The account explains, "It was believed that this step would be useful in establishing a climate of opinion more receptive to expanded (air) operations against North Vietnam when they became necessary." The word in parentheses is the historian's.

¶An arrangement with the Laotian

Government of Premier Souvanna Phouma to permit "limited GVN air and ground operations into the corridor areas of [southeastern] Laos, together with Lao air strikes and possible use of U.S. armed aerial reconnaissance." Armed aerial reconnaissance is a military operation in which the pilot has authority to attack unprogramed targets, such as gun installations or trucks, at his own discretion.

¶The United States "should be prepared" to launch "tit for tat" reprisal air strikes like those during the Tonkin Gulf incident "as appropriate against the D.R.V. in the event of any attack on U.S. units or any special D.R.V.-VC action against SVN."

The President also ordered "economic and political actions" in South Vietnam, such as pay raises for Vietnamese civil servants out of American funds, to try to strengthen the Saigon regime.

The United States destroyers Morton and Edwards resumed the De Soto patrols in the Tonkin Gulf on Sept. 12, two days after Mr. Johnson's directive. They were attacked in a third Tonkin incident on the night of Sept. 18, and the President glossed over it.

However, he went ahead with his decision to resume the 34A coastal raids, still covertly, the account says. The order to reactivate them was issued by Mr. Johnson on Oct. 4, with the specification that they were to be conducted under tightened American controls.

Each operation on the monthly schedules now had to be "approved in advance" by Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance for Secretary McNamara, Llewellyn A. Thompson, acting Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, for Secretary Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy at the White House for the President.

During October, a subsequent report to William Bundy on covert activities said, the 34A coastal raids consisted of two shallow probes of North Vietnamese defenses, an attempt to capture a junk, and successful shellings of the radar station at Vinhson and the observation post at Muidao.

Two of the sabotage teams that had previously been parachuted into the North also "carried out successful actions during October," the report said. "One demolished a bridge, the other ambushed a North Vietnamese patrol. Both teams suffered casualties, the latter sufficient to cast doubt on the wisdom of the action."

The U-2 spy plane flights over North Vietnam and the parachuting of supplies and reinforcements to sabotage and psychological warfare teams in the North continued throughout this period and had not been affected by the President's suspension of the coastal raids after the original Tonkin Gulf incident.

The covert step-up in the air operations in Laos ordered by the President did not take place until mid-October. The Pentagon account says that one reason for the delay was the Administration's need to "await the uncertain outcome" 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 analyst writes.

The Administration feared that during an ensuing Geneva conference on 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.

The account notes that in his Aug. 11 high-level policy memorandum on Southeast Asia, William Bundy had "characterized U.S. strategy" toward the Paris talks with the statement that "we should wish to slow down any progress toward a conference and to hold Souvanna to the firmest possible position." Mr. Bundy had referred to a suggestion by Ambassador Leonard Unger that Prince Souvanna Phouma insist on three-faction administration of the Plaine des Jarres as "a useful delaying gambit."

"Significantly," the analyst says, "this proposal was advanced at Paris by Souvanna Phouma on 1 September—illustrating the fact that Souvanna was carefully advised by U.S. diplomats both prior to and during the Paris meetings. Other features of Souvanna's negotiating posture which apparently were encouraged as likely to have the effect of drawing out the discussions were insistence on Communist acceptance of (1) Souvanna's political status as Premier and (2) unhampered operations by the I.C.C. [International Control Commission]."

"Insistence on Souvanna's position is another point on which he should insist, and there would also be play in the hand on the question of free I.C.C. operations," Mr. Bundy wrote in his Aug. 11 memorandum.

Breakdown in Negotiations

"It will be recalled that the latter point was the issue on which progress toward a cease-fire became stalled," the analyst remarks. The negotiations broke down in Paris late in September.

American mission representatives from Bangkok and Vientiane met in Saigon on Sept. 11 under Ambassador Taylor's auspices, however, and decided that the South Vietnamese Air Force should not participate in the stepped-up air action in Laos authorized by the President in his directive of Sept. 10.

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 Mugia Pass, just across the North Vietnamese border.

South Vietnamese air strikes would offend Premier Souvanna Phouma by complicating his political position, the meeting determined, so the air attacks

would be confined to clandestine raids by the T-28's in Laos and the United States 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 also make ground forays into Laos up to a depth of 20 kilometers, or 12 miles.

"The mission representatives agreed that, once the [air and ground] operations began, they should not be acknowledged publicly," the analyst writes. "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-28's, 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."

Joint Departmental Message

On Oct. 6, a joint State and Defense Department message authorized Ambassador Unger in Laos to obtain Premier Souvanna Phouma's approval for the T-28 strikes "as soon as possible."

But as the analyst points out, the message showed that the President had decided to postpone the accompanying strikes by Yankee Team jets, the "U.S. armed aerial reconnaissance" mentioned in Mr. Johnson's National Security Action Memorandum 314.

Five of the targets in the Laotian panhandle, well-defended bridges, had been specifically marked for the American jets, and fire by the Yankee Team planes would also be required against anti-aircraft batteries defending the Mugia Pass. The message from Washington excluded these targets from the list of 22.

"You are further authorized to inform Lao that Yankee Team suppressive-fire strikes against certain difficult targets in panhandle, interspersing with further T-28 strikes, are part of the over-all concept and are to be anticipated later, but that such U. S. strikes are not repeat not authorized at this time," the cable said. [See text, cable on Laos Strikes, Sept. 10.]

Ambassadors Unger and Taylor both warned that the Laotian Government, without some participation by the American jets, would not persevere in attacking targets on the Communist infiltration routes. Accordingly, the day before the T-28 strikes began on Oct. 14 with Premier Souvanna Phouma's approval, Washington authorized the Yankee Team jets to fly combat air patrol over the T-28's to raise morale and protect them from any interference by North Vietnamese MIG's.

'Minor Extension' Only

Ambassador Taylor said in his cable that the combat air patrol missions could be achieved by "a relatively minor extension" of the current rules of engagement for American aircraft in Indochina.

The President also postponed for the present the planned ground forays into Laos by the South Vietnamese. Ambassador Taylor pointed out in a cable on Oct. 9 that these would not be possible "in foreseeable future" in any case because the South Vietnamese Army was so tied down fighting the guerrillas in its own country.

Several eight-man South Vietnamese reconnaissance teams were parachuted into Laos in an operation called Leaping Lena, but the Nov. 7 report to William Bundy on covert operations would note that "all of these teams were located by the enemy and only four survivors returned. . . ."

On Nov. 1, two days before the election, the Vietcong struck with a devastating mortar barrage on American planes and facilities at Bienhoa airfield near Saigon. The attack put the President under great internal pressure, the analyst says, to strike back openly, as he had said in his directive of Sept. 10 that he was prepared to do "in the event of any attack on U.S. units or any special D.R.V./VC action against SVN."

In the enemy's barrage, four Americans were killed, five B-57 bombers were destroyed and eight damaged. These were some of the B-57's that had earlier been sent from Japan to the Philippines at Mr. McNamara's suggestion as part of the preparations for possible bombing of the North. They had since been moved into South Vietnam, however, to try to shore up the Khanh Government's military position by bringing more air power to bear upon the Vietcong.

"As of the end of October (in anticipation of resumed De Soto patrols), elements of our Pacific forces were reported as 'poised and ready' to execute reprisals for any D.R.V. attacks on our naval vessels. Thus, there was a rather large expectancy among Administration officials that the United States would do something in retaliation," the analyst writes. The words in parentheses are his.

'Change of Ground Rules'

The Joint Chiefs told Mr. McNamara that the Bienhoa attack had been "a deliberate act of escalation and a change of the ground rules under which the VC had operated up to now." Asserting that "a prompt and strong response is clearly justified," they proposed, on the same day as the incident, "that the following specific actions be taken" (the words in parentheses are those of the Joint Chiefs; words in brackets have been inserted by The Times for clarification):

"a. Within 24-36 hours Pacific Command (PACOM) forces take initial U.S. military actions as follows:

"(1) Conduct air strikes in Laos against targets No. 3 (Tchepone barracks, northwest), No. 4 (Tchepone military area), No. 19 (Banthay military area), No. 8 (Nape highway bridge), and the Banken bridge on Route 7.

"(2) Conduct low-level air reconnaissance of infiltration routes and of targets in North Vietnam south of Latitude 19 degrees.

"b. Prior to air attacks on the D.R.V., land the Marine special landing forces at Danang and airlift Army or Marine units from Okinawa to the Saigon-Tan-sonnhut-Bienhoa area, to provide increased security for US personnel and installations.

"c. Use aircraft engaged in airlift (subparagraph b, above) to assist in evacuation of U.S. dependents from

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Saigon, to commence concurrently with the daylight air strikes against the D.R.V. (subparagraph d, below).

"d. Assemble and prepare necessary forces so that:

"(1) Within 60 to 72 hours, 30 E-52's from Guam conduct a night strike on D.R.V. target No. 6 (Phucyen airfield). [Phucyen, 13 miles from Hanoi, is the principal North Vietnamese air base].

"(2) Commencing at first light on the day following subparagraph (1) above, PACOM air and naval forces conduct air strikes against D.R.V. targets No. 6 (Phucyen airfield) (daylight follow-up on the above night strike), No. 3 (Hanoi Gialam airfield), No. 8 (Haiphong Catbi airfield), No. 48 (Haiphong POL), and No. 49 (Hanoi POL). [POL is a military abbreviation for petroleum, oil and lubricants.]

"(3) Concurrently with subparagraph (2) above the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) will strike DRV target No. 36 (Vitthulu barracks).

"(4) Combat air patrols (CAP), flak suppressive fire, strike photographic reconnaissance, and search and rescue operations (S.A.R.) are conducted as appropriate.

"(5) The above actions are followed by:

"(a) Armed reconnaissance on infiltration routes in Laos.

"(b) Air strikes against infiltration routes and targets in the D.R.V.

"(c) Progressive PACOM and SAC [Strategic Air Command] strikes against the targets listed in 94 Target Study.

"(e) Thai bases be used as necessary in connection with the foregoing, with authority to be obtained through appropriate channels. . . .

"Recognizing that security of this plan is of critical importance, they [the Joint Chiefs] consider that external agencies, such as the VNAF, should be apprised only of those parts of the plan necessary to insure proper and effective coordination. The same limited revelation of plans should govern discussions with the Thais in securing authority for unlimited use of Thai bases."

Caution From Saigon

From Saigon, Ambassador Taylor cabled for a more restrained response consisting of "retaliation bombing attacks on selected D.R.V. targets" using both American and South Vietnamese planes and for a "policy statement that we will act similarly in like cases in the future."

But the President felt otherwise for the moment. "Apparently, the decision was made to do nothing," the analyst says, adding that the documentary evidence does not provide an adequate explanation.

At a White House meeting the same day, the account continued, the President expressed concern that United States retaliatory strikes might bring counterretaliation by North Vietnam or China against American bases and civilian dependents in the South.

In briefing the press, Administration

officials, unidentified in the study, drew a contrast: "between this incident and the Tonkin Gulf attacks where our destroyers were 'on United States business.'"

"A second [White House] meeting to discuss possible U.S. actions was 'tentatively scheduled' for 2 November, but the available materials contain no evidence that it was held," the account continues. "President Johnson was scheduled to appear in Houston that afternoon, for his final pre-election address, and it may be that the second White House meeting was called off."

"One thing is certain," the writer concludes. "There were no retaliatory strikes authorized following the attack on the U.S. bomber base."

A Panel Under Bundy

But the President had not altogether declined to act on Nov. 1. He had appointed an interagency working group under William Bundy to draw up various political and military options for direct action against North Vietnam. This was the one "concrete result" of the Nov. 1 mortar raid on Bienhoa, the account reports.

The Bundy working group, as it would be unofficially called in the Government, held its first meeting at 9:30 A.M. on Nov. 3, the day that Mr. Johnson was elected to the Presidency in his own right by a huge landslide.

"Bienhoa may be repeated at any time," Mr. Bundy wrote in a memorandum to the group on Nov. 5. "This would tend to force our hand, but would also give us a good springboard for any decision for stronger action. The President is clearly thinking in terms of maximum use of a Gulf of Tonkin rationale, either for an action that would show toughness and hold the line till we can decide the big issue, or as a basis for starting a clear course of action under the broad options." [See text, McGeorge Bundy drafts, Nov. 5.]

Ostensibly, the Bundy group had a mandate to re-examine the entire American policy toward Vietnam and to recommend to the National Security Council a broad range of options. Its membership represented the entire foreign-policy-making machine of the Government—Mr. Bundy; Marshall Green; Michael V. Forrestal, head of the interagency Vietnam coordinating committee, and Robert Johnson of the State Department; Mr. McNaughton from the civilian hierarchy of the Pentagon; Vice Adm. Lloyd M. Mustin from the Joint Chiefs' staff and Harold Ford of the Central Intelligence Agency.

'Remarkable Little Latitude'

But, the account says, "there appears to have been, in fact, remarkably little latitude for reopening the basic question about U.S. involvement in the Vietnam struggle."

The basic national objective of "an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam," established by the President's National Security Action Memorandum 288 of the previous March, "did not seem open to question."