

Highlights of the Period

Between the Tonkin Gulf resolution of August, 1964, and the start of concentrated United States bombing of North Vietnam in 1965, the details of such an air war were being planned, discussed and debated in the Johnson Administration, according to the secret Pentagon chronicle.

Here, chronologically, are highlights of those months of decision-making.

AUGUST, 1964

Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor cables agreement with Administration "assumption" that "something must be added in the coming months" to forestall "a collapse of national morale" in Saigon. Suggests "carefully orchestrated bombing attack" on North.

Joint Chiefs of Staff concur, call air war "essential to prevent a complete collapse of the U.S. position in Southeast Asia." Propose what study calls "provocation strategy".

SEPTEMBER, 1964

John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, outlines provocation plan "to provide good grounds for us to escalate if we wished. . . ." Includes South Vietnamese air strikes on Laos infiltration routes; coastal raids on North; resumption U.S. destroyer patrols in Gulf of Tonkin.

White House strategy meeting. Analyst finds "general consensus" on necessity for early 1965 air strikes but says "tactical considerations" require delay. Cites President's "presenting himself as the candidate of reason and restraint," need for "maximum public and Congressional support," fear of "premature negotiations," Saigon weakness.

President orders low-risk interim measures, says William P. Bundy memo, "to assist morale . . . and show the Communists we still mean business. . . ." Coastal raids, destroyer patrols included.

OCTOBER, 1964

Air strikes on Laos infiltration routes start, following delay awaiting outcome Laotian cease-fire talks. U.S. feared new Geneva conference. Analyst says this "not compatible with current perceptions of U.S. interest."

NOVEMBER, 1964

Vietcong attack Bienhoa airfield. Joint Chiefs urge "prompt and strong response" including air strikes on North. Ambassador Taylor urges bombing "selected" targets.

President declines, directs interagency working group under Bundy to consider, recommend Vietnam options, policy.

Group's three recommended options all include bombing North. Analyst says group's deliberations showed "remarkably little latitude for reopening the basic questions about U.S. involvement."

Option A—reprisal air strikes, covert pressure intensified.

Option B—bomb North "at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption" till all U.S. demands met; U.S. to define negotiating position, chronicle says, "in a way which makes Communist acceptance unlikely" if U.S. pressed to negotiate "before a Communist agreement to comply."

Option C—graduated air war, possible deployment ground troops.

National Security Council select committee meets. George W. Ball, Under Secretary of State, indicates "doubt" about effectiveness bombing North, argues against domino theory, says Bundy memo. Mr. Ball's policy paper suggests diplomatic strategy leading to international Vietnam conference.

DECEMBER, 1964

President approves recommended plan—Option A for 30 days, then Option C. Stresses he feels "pulling the South Vietnamese together" basic to any other action.

Operation Barrel Roll—U.S. air strikes at infiltration routes Laotian panhandle—under way. National Security Council agrees to "no public statements" unless a plane is lost, then "to insist that we were merely escorting reconnaissance flights."

Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky and ex-Premier Nguyen Khanh attempt coup. Ambassador Taylor tells them U.S. is "tired of coups," warns that "all the military plans which I know you would like to carry out are dependent on government stability."

JANUARY, 1965

Two U.S. jets lost over Laos. Press reports on "Barrel Roll."

South Vietnam forces trounced at Binhia. Study says Saigon "final collapse" and Vietcong take-over seem "distinct possibility."

Mr. Bundy, in memo, says "shaky" Saigon morale due partly to "widespread feeling that the U.S. is not ready for stronger action" and is "insisting on perfectionism" in Saigon. Urges "stronger action" despite "grave difficulties."

Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNaughton favor "initiating air strikes"; agree U.S. aim "not to 'help friend' but to contain China," chronicle says.

FEBRUARY, 1965

Vietcong attack U.S. military advisers' compound at Pleiku. Study says this "triggered a swift, though long-contemplated Presidential decision to give an 'appropriate and fitting response'."

Forty-nine U.S. jets in first reprisal strike, raid Conghoi.

Second reprisal strike follows guerrilla attack on U.S. barracks.

Operation Rolling Thunder—sustained air war—ordered.