

The Options Hardened

The September discussions had established a consensus that bombing of the North "would be required at some proximate future date for a variety of reasons" and individual and institutional pressures all tended to harden the options toward this end as they were finally presented to the National Security Council and then the President.

The analyst gives a number of examples of this stiffening process from the successive draft papers developed by the group during its three weeks of deliberations.

"The extreme withdrawal option was rejected almost without surfacing for consideration" because of its conflict with the policy memorandums. "Fallback positions" outlined in an original working-group draft suffered a similar fate.

First Fallback Position

The first fallback position, the study says, "would have meant holding the line — placing an immediate, low ceiling on the number of U.S. personnel in SVN, and taking vigorous efforts to build on a stronger base elsewhere, possibly Thailand."

"The second alternative would have been to undertake some spectacular, highly visible supporting action like a limited-duration selective bombing campaign as a last effort to save the South; to have accompanied it with a propaganda campaign about the unwinnability of the war given the GVN's ineptness and, then, to have sought negotiations through compromise and neutralization when the bombing failed."

But because of "forceful objections" by Admiral Mustin, the Joint Chiefs representative, both of these possibilities were downgraded in the final paper presented to the National Security Council on Nov. 21. In effect they were "rejected before they were fully explored," the study says.

Thus all three options, labeled A, B and C, entailed some form of bombing, with "the distinctions between them" tending to blur as they evolved during the group's three weeks of deliberations, the analyst says. Mr. McNaughton and William Bundy collaborated closely on their formulation.

A similar convergence occurred on the question of negotiations.

The Minimum Position

Here the minimum United States position was defined as forcing Hanoi to halt the insurgency in the South and to agree to the establishment of a secure, non-Communist state there, a position the analyst defines as "acceptance or else." Moreover, talks of any kind with Hanoi were to be avoided until the effects of bombing had put the United States into a position to obtain this minimum goal in negotiations.

"The only option that provided for bargaining in the usual sense of the word was Option C," the study says. Here the United States would be willing to bargain away international supervisory machinery to verify Hanoi's agreement.

"The policy climate in Washington simply was not receptive to any suggestion that U.S. goals might have to be

compromised," the study comments.

These are the options in their final form as the study summarizes them:

OPTION A—Conduct U.S. reprisal air strikes on North Vietnam "not only against any recurrence of VC 'spectaculars' such as Bienhoa," intensify the coastal raids of Operation Plan 34A, resume the destroyer patrols in the gulf, step up the air strikes by T-28's against infiltration targets in Laos and seek reforms in South Vietnam.

OPTION B—What Mr. McNaughton called "a fast/full squeeze." Bomb the North "at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption," including early air raids on Phucyen Airfield near Hanoi and key bridges along the road and rail links with China until full American demands are met. "Should pressures for negotiations become too formidable to resist and discussion begin before a Communist agreement to comply," the analyst writes, "it was stressed that the United States should define its negotiating position 'in a way which makes Communist acceptance unlikely.' In this manner it would be 'very likely that the conference would break up rather rapidly,' thus enabling our military pressures to be resumed."

OPTION C—Mr. McNaughton's "slow squeeze"; the option he and William Bundy favored. Gradually increasing air strikes "against infiltration targets, first in Laos and then in the D.R.V., and then against other targets in North Vietnam" intended to "give the impression of a steady deliberate approach . . . designed to give the United States the option at any time to proceed or not, to escalate or not and to quicken the pace or not." This option also included the possibility of a "significant ground deployment to the northern part of South Vietnam" as an additional bargaining counter.

A Select Committee Meets

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

In the account of this meeting, Mr. Ball makes his first appearance in the Pentagon history as the Administration dissenter on Vietnam. William Bundy's memorandum of record says Mr. Ball "indicated doubt" that bombing the North in any fashion would improve the situation in South Vietnam and "argued against" a judgment that a Vietcong victory in South Vietnam would have a falling-domino effect on the rest of Asia.

While the working-group sessions had been in progress, the study discloses, Mr. Ball had been writing a quite different policy paper "suggesting a U.S. diplomatic strategy in the event of an imminent GVN collapse."

"In it, he advocated working through the U.K. [United Kingdom, or Britain] who would in turn seek cooperation from the U.S.S.R., in arranging an international conference (of smaller propor-

tions than those at Geneva) which would work out a compromise political settlement for South Vietnam," the analyst says. The words in parentheses are the analyst's.

Of those present at the November 24 meeting, the memorandum of record indicates, only Mr. Ball favored Option A. The study gives the impression this was conceived as a throwaway option by the Working Group. The group's analysis labeled it "an indefinite course of action" whose "sole advantages" were these:

"(a) Defeat would be clearly due to GVN failure, and we ourselves would be less implicated than if we tried Option B or Option C, and failed.

"(b) The most likely result would be a Vietnamese negotiated deal, under which an eventually unified Communist Vietnam would reassert its traditional hostility to Communist China and limit its own ambitions to Laos and Cambodia."

Secretary Rusk Disagrees

At the Nov. 24 meeting, however, Mr. Rusk said that while he favored bombing North Vietnam, he did not accept an analysis by Mr. McNaughton and William Bundy that if the bombing failed to save South Vietnam "we would obtain international credit merely for trying."

"In his view," the analyst writes, "the harder we tried and then failed, the worse our situation would be."

McGeorge Bundy demurred to some extent, the account goes on, but Mr. Ball "expressed strong agreement with the last Rusk point."

General Wheeler, reflecting the viewpoint of the Joint Chiefs, argued that the hard, fast bombing campaign of Option B actually entailed "less risk of a major conflict before achieving success," in words of the study, than the gradually rising air strikes of Option C.

The study adds that Mr. Bundy and Mr. McNaughton may have deliberately loaded the language of Option B to try to frighten the President out of adopting it lest it create severe international pressure for quick negotiations.

General Wheeler's argument presaged a running controversy between the Joint Chiefs and the civilian leadership after the bombing campaign began in the coming year.

The meeting on Nov. 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.

Taylor's Three Purposes

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." He proposed gradually increasing air strikes against the North for a threefold purpose:

"First, establish an adequate government in SVN; second, improve the conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign; finally persuade or force the D.R.V. to stop its aid to the Vietcong and to use its directive powers to make the Vietcong desist from their efforts to overthrow the Government of South Vietnam."

To improve anti-Communist prospects in the South, the Ambassador proposed using the lever of American air strikes

against the North to obtain promises from the Saigon leaders that they would achieve political stability, strengthen the army and the police, suppress dissident Buddhist and student factions, replace incompetent officials and get on with the war effort.

The analyst says that the Ambassador had thus 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 rising air war.

In the course of discussions on Nov. 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 analyst reports, again quoting from William Bundy's memorandum of record.

"Others, including McNamara, agreed with Taylor's evaluation, but the Secretary [Mr. McNamara] added that 'the strengthening effect of Option C could at least buy time, possibly measured in years.'"

Ambassador Taylor proposed that the Administration therefore adopt a two-phase program culminating in the bombing of infiltration facilities south of the 19th Parallel in North Vietnam, in effect Option A plus the first stages of Option C. Phase I would consist of 30 days of the Option A type of actions, such as

intensification of the coastal raids on the North, air strikes by American jets at infiltration routes and one or two reprisal raids against the North. Meanwhile, Ambassador Taylor would obtain the promises of improvement from the Saigon leadership.

At the end of the 30 days, with the promises in hand, the United States would then move into Phase II, the air war. The air raids were to last two to six months, during which Hanoi was apparently expected to yield.

The others agreed, and the proposal was redefined further at a meeting on Nov. 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 Dec. 1, right after Mr. Johnson's Thanksgiving holiday at his ranch.

On Nov. 28, the same day that his closest advisers made their decision to advise him to bomb North Vietnam, Mr. Johnson was asked at a news conference at the ranch:

"Mr. President, is expansion of the Vietnam war into Laos or North Vietnam a live possibility at this moment?"

'When You Crawl Out . . .'

"I don't want to give you any particular guide posts as to your conduct in the matter," Mr. Johnson told the newsmen about their articles. "But when you crawl out on a limb, you always have to find another one to crawl back on.

"I have just been sitting here in this serene atmosphere of the Pedernales for the last few days reading about the wars that you [speculating newsmen] have involved us in and the additional undertakings that I have made decisions on or that General Taylor has recommended or that Mr. McNamara plans or

Secretary Rusk envisages. I would say, generally speaking, that some people are speculating and taking positions that I think are somewhat premature."

"At the moment," he concluded, "General Taylor will report to us on developments. We will carefully consider these reports. . . I will meet with him in the early part of the week. I anticipate there will be no dramatic announcement to come out of these meetings except in the form of your speculation."

William Bundy's draft policy paper, written the next day, said the bombing campaign "would consist principally of progressively more serious air strikes, of a weight and tempo adjusted to the situation as it develops (possibly running from two to six months)." The words in parentheses are Mr. Bundy's.

The draft paper added: "Targets in the D.R.V. would start with infiltration targets south of the 19th Parallel and work up to targets north of that point. This could eventually lead to such measures as air strikes on all major military-related targets, aerial mining of D.R.V. ports, and a U.S. naval blockade of the D.R.V."

"Concurrently," it continued, "the U.S. would be alert to any sign of yielding by Hanoi, and would be prepared to explore negotiated solutions that attain U.S. objectives in an acceptable manner." [See text, working group's draft, Nov. 29.]

Apparently at Mr. McNamara's suggestion, the analyst says, a final sentence in this paragraph was deleted; it read, "The U.S. would seek to control any negotiations and would oppose any independent South Vietnamese efforts to negotiate." Also removed, possibly during a final meeting of the top officials on Nov. 30 to review the policy paper and "apparently on the advice of McGeorge Bundy," was a proposal that the President make a major speech indicating the new direction that Washington's policy was taking.

Likewise deleted was a provision to brief "available Congressional leaders . . . (no special leadership meeting will be convened for this purpose)" on new evidence being compiled on North Vietnamese infiltration into the South, as a public justification of the bombing.

A separate recommendation from the Joint Chiefs for a series of major raids—like those in their retaliation proposal for the Vietcong mortar strike at Bienhoa air base on Nov. 1—was deleted for unspecified reasons, the analyst says, "in effect, presenting a united front to the President."

The paper that was sent to the Presi-

dent made no mention of American ground troops to provide security for airfields in the South when the bombing began, as General Wheeler had reminded the conferees on Nov. 24 would be necessary.

The writer notes the "gap" between the drastic concessions expected from Hanoi and the relatively modest bombing campaign that was expected to break Hanoi's will. He puts forward "two by no means contradictory explanations of this gap." This is the first:

Calculated 'Doses of Force'

"There is some reason to believe that the principals thought that carefully calculated doses of force could bring about predictable and desirable responses from Hanoi. Underlying this optimistic view was a significant underestimate of the level of the D.R.V. commitment to victory in the South and an overestimate of the effectiveness of U.S. pressures in weakening that resolve."

A related factor, the account says, "which, no doubt, commended the proposal to the Administration was the relatively low cost—in political terms—of such action." The context here indicates that the Administration thought the public would find an air war less repugnant than a ground war.

The President seems to have shared the view of his chief advisers, the analyst writes, that "the threat implicit in minimum but increasing amounts of force ('slow squeeze') would . . . ultimately bring Hanoi to the table on terms favorable to the U.S."

"McGeorge Bundy, as the President's assistant for national security affairs, was in a position to convey President Johnson's mood to the group," the account goes on. It adds that notes taken at a White House meeting on Dec. 1 when the senior officials met with Mr. Johnson to present the bombing plan "tend to confirm that the President's mood was more closely akin to the measures recommended" than to other, harsher bombing plans.

"A second explanation of the gap between ends and means is a more simple one," the account comments. "In a phrase, we had run out of alternatives other than pressures."

A memorandum by Assistant Secretary McNaughton on Nov. 6, 1964, made the point succinctly: "Action against North Vietnam is to some extent a substitute for strengthening the Government in South Vietnam. That is, a less active VC (on orders from D.R.V.) can be matched by a less efficient GVN. We therefore should consider squeezing North Vietnam." The words in parentheses are Mr. McNaughton's. [See text.]