

As the Hour Approached

William Bundy communicated the feeling in a memorandum he wrote to Secretary Rusk on Jan. 6 for a meeting Mr. Rusk was to have with the President that afternoon. Mr. Bundy explained that the memorandum encompassed, besides his own thoughts, those of Michael V. Forrestal, head of the

interagency Vietnam coordinating committee, and Ambassador Unger, who had recently been transferred back to Washington from Vientiane.

"I think we must accept that Saigon morale in all quarters is now very shaky indeed," he said in part, "and that this relates directly to a wide-

spread feeling that the U.S. is not ready for stronger action and indeed is possibly looking for a way out. We may regard this feeling as irrational and contradicted by our repeated statements, but Bill Sullivan was very vivid in describing the existence of such feelings in October, and we must honestly concede that our actions and statements since the election have not done anything to offset it. The blunt fact is that we have appeared to the Vietnamese (and to wide circles in Asia and even in Europe) to be insisting on a more perfect government than can reasonably be expected, before we consider any additional action—and that we might even pull out our support unless such a government emerges.

"In key parts of the rest of Asia, notably Thailand, our present posture also appears weak. As such key parts of Asia see us, we looked strong in May and early June, weaker in later June and July, and then appeared to be taking a quite firm line in August with the Gulf of Tonkin. Since then we must have seemed to be gradually weakening — and, again, insisting on perfectionism in the Saigon Government before we moved.

"The sum total of the above seems to us to point—together with almost certainly stepped-up Vietcong actions in the current favorable weather — to a prognosis that the situation in Vietnam is now likely to come apart more rapidly than we had anticipated in November. We would still stick to the estimate that the most likely form of coming apart would be a government of key groups starting to negotiate covertly with the Liberation Front or Hanoi, perhaps not asking in the first instance that we get out, but with that necessarily following at a fairly early stage. In one sense this would be a 'Vietnam solution,' with some hope that it would produce a Communist Vietnam that would assert its own degree of independence from Peiping and that would produce a pause in Communist pressure in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, it would still be virtually certain than [sic] Laos would then become untenable and that Cambodia would accommodate in some way. Most seriously, there is grave question whether the Thai in these circumstances would retain any confidence at all in our con-

tinued support. In short, the outcome would be regarded in Asia, and particularly among our friends, as just as humiliating a defeat as any other form. As events have developed, the American public would probably not be too sharply critical, but the real question would be whether Thailand and other nations were weakened and taken over thereafter.

"The alternative of stronger action obviously has grave difficulties. It commits the U.S. more deeply, at a time when the picture of South Vietnamese will is extremely weak. To the extent that it included actions against North Vietnam, it would be vigorously attacked by many nations and disapproved initially even by such nations as Japan and India, on present indications. Most basically, its stiffening effect on the Saigon political situation would not be at all sure to bring about a more effective government, nor would limited actions against the southern D.R.V. in fact sharply reduce infiltration or, in present circumstances, be at all likely to induce Hanoi to call it off.

"Nonetheless, on balance we believe that such action would have some faint hope of really improving the Vietnamese situation, and, above all, would put us in a much stronger position to hold the next line of defense, namely Thailand. Accepting the present situation—or any negotiation on the basis of it—would be far weaker from this latter key standpoint. If we moved into stronger actions, we should have in mind that negotiations would be likely to emerge from some quarter in any event, and that under existing circumstances, even with the additional element of pressure, we could not expect to get an outcome that would really secure an independent South Vietnam. Yet even on an outcome that produced a progressive deterioration in South Vietnam and an eventual Communist take-over, we would still have appeared to Asians to have done a lot more about it.

"In specific terms, the kinds of action we might take in the near future would be:

"a. An early occasion for reprisal action against the D.R.V.

"b. Possibly beginning low-level reconnaissance of the D.R.V. at once.

"Concurrently with a or b, an early orderly withdrawal of our dependents [from Saigon, but only if] stronger action [is contemplated]. If we are to clear our decks in this way—and we are more and more inclined to think we should—it simply must be, for this reason alone, in the context of some stronger action. . . .

"Introduction of limited U.S. ground

forces into the northern area of South Vietnam still has great appeal to many of us, concurrently with the first air attacks into the D.R.V. It would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi. On the disadvantage side, such forces would be possible attrition targets for the Vietcong."

A Similar Memorandum

Mr. McNaughton, Mr. Bundy's counterpart at the Pentagon, had given Mr. McNamara a similar memorandum three days earlier.

"The impact of these views can be seen in the policy guidance emanating from Washington in mid and late January, 1965," the Pentagon's narrative says.

In a cablegram to Saigon on Jan. 11, the writer goes on, Secretary Rusk instructed Ambassador Taylor "to avoid actions that would further commit the United States to any particular form of political solution" to the turmoil there. If another military regime emerged from the squabbling "we might well have to swallow our pride and work with it," Mr. Rusk said.

Another memorandum to Mr. McNamara from Mr. McNaughton, on Jan. 27, along with Mr. McNamara's penciled comments on it, "adds perspective to this viewpoint," the historian says. Mr. McNaughton stated "and Mr. McNamara agreed" that the United States objective in South Vietnam was "not to 'help friend' but to contain China," and "both favored initiating strikes against North Vietnam."

Paraphrasing the memorandum and Mr. McNamara's comments, the writer says, "At first they believed these [air attacks] should take the form of reprisals; beyond that, the Administration would have to 'feel its way' into stronger, graduated pressures. McNaught-

ton doubted that such strikes would actually help the situation in South Vietnam, but thought they should be carried out anyway. McNamara believed they probably would help the situation, in addition to their broader impacts on the U. S. position in Southeast Asia."

"Clear indication that the Administration was contemplating some kind of increased military activity" had gone out to Saigon two days earlier in another cablegram from Mr. Rusk, the account goes on. "Ambassador Taylor was asked to comment on the 'departmental view' that U.S. dependents should be withdrawn to 'clear the decks' in Saigon and enable better concentration of U.S. efforts on behalf of South Vietnam."

The Signal for 'D-Day'

Ever since the original bombing scenario of May 23, 1964, the evacuation of American women and children had been the signal for "D-Day."

"The Rusk cable made specific reference to a current interest in reprisal actions," the analyst says.

The initial blow came in about two weeks. The Vietcong attacked the United States military advisers' compound at Pleiku in the Central Highlands and an Army helicopter base at Camp Holloway, four miles away. Nine Americans were killed and 76 wounded.

"The first flash from Saigon about the assault came on the ticker at the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon at 2:38 P.M. Saturday, Feb. 6, Washington time," the narrative says. "It triggered a swift, though long-contemplated Presidential decision to give an 'appropriate and fitting' response. Within less than 14 hours, by 4 P.M. Sunday, Vietnam time, 49 U.S. Navy jets—A-4 Skyhawks and F-8 Crusaders from the Seventh Fleet carriers U.S.S. Coral Sea and U.S.S. Hancock—had penetrated a heavy layer of monsoon clouds to deliver their bombs and rockets upon North Vietnamese barracks and staging areas at Donghoi, a guerrilla training garrison 40 miles north of the 17th Parallel.

"Though conceived and executed as a limited one-shot tit-for-tat reprisal, the drastic U.S. action, long on the military planners' drawing boards under the operational code name Flaming Dart precipitated a rapidly moving sequence of events that transformed the character of the Vietnam war and the U.S. role in it."

Then the guerrillas attacked an American barracks at Quinhon, on the central coast, and on Feb. 11, the President launched a second and heavier reprisal raid, Flaming Dart II.

Two days later, on Feb. 13, he decided to begin Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained air war against North Vietnam.

"As is readily apparent," the analyst concludes, "there was no dearth of reasons for striking North. Indeed, one almost has the impression that there were more reasons than were required. But in the end, the decision to go ahead with the strikes seems to have resulted as much from the lack of alternative proposals as from any compelling logic in their favor."

Tomorrow: The President orders
a ground-combat mission.