

McCone Memo to Top Officials On Forcefulness of Air War

Memorandum from John A. McCone, Director of Central Intelligence, to Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and Ambassador Taylor, April 2, 1965, as provided in the body of the Pentagon's study. Paragraphs in italics are the study's paraphrase or explanation.

McCone did not inherently disagree with the change in the U.S. ground-force role, but felt that it was inconsistent with the decision to continue the air strike program at the feeble level at which it was then being conducted. McCone developed his argument as follows:

I have been giving thought to the paper that we discussed in yesterday's meeting, which unfortunately I had little time to study, and also to the decision made to change the mission of our ground forces in South Vietnam from one of advice and static defense to one of active combat operations against the Viet Cong guerrillas.

I feel that the latter decision is correct only if our air strikes against the North are sufficiently heavy and damaging really to hurt the North Vietnamese. The paper we examined yesterday does not anticipate the type of air operation against the North necessary to force the NVN to reappraise their policy. On the contrary, it states, "We should continue roughly the present slowly ascending tempo of ROLLING THUNDER operations —," and later, in outlining the types of targets, states, "The target systems should continue to avoid the effective GCI range of MIG's," and these conditions indicate restraints which will not be persuasive to the NVN and would probably be read as evidence of a U.S. desire to temporize.

I have reported that the strikes to date have not caused a change in the North Vietnamese policy of directing

Viet Cong insurgency, infiltrating cadres and supplying material. If anything, the strikes to date have hardened their attitude.

I have now had a chance to examine the 12-week program referred to by General Wheeler and it is my personal opinion that this program is not sufficiently severe and [words illegible] the North Vietnamese to [words illegible] policy.

On the other hand, we must look with care to our position under a program of slowly ascending tempo of air strikes. With the passage of each day and each week, we can expect increasing pressure to stop the bombing. This will come from various elements of the American public, from the press, the United Nations and world opinion. Therefore time will run against us in this operation and I think the North Vietnamese are counting on this.

Therefore I think what we are doing is starting on a track which involves ground force operations, which, in all probability, will have limited effectiveness against guerrillas, although admittedly will restrain some VC advances. However, we can expect requirements for an ever-increasing commitment of U.S. personnel without materially improving the chances of victory. I support and agree with this decision but I must point out that in my judgment, forcing submission of the VC can only be brought about by a decision in Hanoi. Since the contemplated actions against the North are modest in scale, they will not impose unacceptable damage on it, nor will they threaten the DRV's vital interests. Hence, they will not present them with a situation with which they cannot live, though such actions will cause the DRV pain and inconvenience.

I believe our proposed track offers great danger of simply encouraging Chinese Communists and Soviet support of the DRV and VC cause, if for no other reason than the risk for both will be minimum. I envision that the reaction of the NVN and Chinese Communists will be to deliberately, carefully, and probably gradually, build up the Viet Cong capabilities by covert infiltration on North Vietnamese and, possibly, Chinese cadres and thus bring an ever-increasing pressure on our forces. In effect, we will find ourselves mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort that we cannot win, and from which we will have extreme difficulty in extracting ourselves.

Therefore it is my judgment that if

Terms in Texts

ARVN—Army of Republic of (South) Vietnam.
A.S.A.P.—As soon as possible.
B.L.T.—Battalion landing team.
CINCPAC—Commander in Chief, Pacific.
DEPTEL—Department telegram.
D.O.D.—Department of Defense.
DRV—Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam.
EMBTEL—Embassy telegram.
ISA—International Security Agency.
JCS—Joint Chiefs of Staff.
L.O.C.—Lines of communication.
MACV—Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.
NLF—National Liberation Front.
NLF SVN—National Front for Liberation of South Vietnam.
PAVN—People's Army of (North) Vietnam.
P.I.—Philippine Islands.
P.L.—Pathet Lao.
P.O.L.—Petroleum, oil, lubricants.
R.O.K.—Republic of (South) Korea.
RVNAF—Republic of (South) Vietnam Armed Forces.
SAM—Surface-to-air missile.
SEA—Southeast Asia.
SVN—South Vietnam.
U.S.G.—U.S. Government.
VM—Vietminh.

Continued on Following Page

Continued from Preceding Page

we are to change the mission of the ground forces, we must also change the ground rules of the strikes against North Vietnam. We must hit them harder, more frequently, and inflict greater damage. Instead of avoiding the MIG's, we must go in and take them out. A bridge here and there will not do

the job. We must strike their airfields, their petroleum resources, power stations and their military compounds. This, in my opinion, must be done promptly and with minimum restraint.

If we are unwilling to take it this kind of a decision now, we must not take the actions concerning the mission of our ground forces for the reasons I have mentioned [words illegible].