

SFChronicle

Johnson's Decision On Ground War

Associated Press

New York

President Johnson decided on April 1, 1965, that United States ground forces in South Vietnam would take the offensive despite some misgivings among his advisers, according to a Pentagon study reported in the New York Times yesterday.

A month of bombing of North Vietnam had convinced him that air power could not win the war and in a memorandum he ordered "a change of mission" that was to be kept secret, the Times said. He also wanted to "minimize any appearance of a sudden change in policy."

The next day, John A. McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, sent a note to Secretary of State Dean Rusk advocating a step-up of the air raids on North Vietnam.

DECISION

McCone wrote that the decision on U.S. ground forces taking the offensive "is correct only if our air strikes against the North Vietnamese are sufficiently heavy and damaging to hurt the North Vietnamese."

The study says Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor in Saigon opposed a plan by the Joint Chiefs in March to send two U.S. divisions and one South Korean division to South Vietnam. He protested the South Vietnamese might resent the presence of many foreign troops and said there was no military necessity for them.

However, Taylor was in accord with the plan for a limited

combat role for U.S. Marines in the north. He was opposed to any buildup before the Marine plan had been thoroughly tested. He also was astounded to learn that Marine reinforcements unsuitable for war against guerrillas, the Times said.

CABLE

In a cable to Rusk on April 17, 1965, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said he had left Washington with the understanding that Marine reinforcements were approved but "that decision on several proposals for bringing in more U.S. combat forces and their possible modes of employment was withheld."

Since returning to Saigon, Taylor continued, he had learned of the "Apparent decision to deploy the 173rd Airborne Brigade immediately."

The study said this decision "caught Taylor flat-footed."

The Times' report was the third in a series the newspaper

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per is publishing of a 7000-page study made in 1967-68 on how the United States went to war in Vietnam. The study was ordered by Robert S. McNamara, defense secretary in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

Mr. Johnson followed up with another decision in the middle of July to commit 44 battalions. The Pentagon study said this decision was "perceived as a threshold-entrance into an Asian land war," contrary to a policy since the Korean war of avoiding combat in Asia.

Before Mr. Johnson made this decision, he received a memorandum July 1 from George W. Ball, undersecretary of state, proposing negotiations.

"The alternative — no matter what we may wish it to be — is almost certainly a protracted war involving an open-ended commitment of U.S. forces, mounting U.S. casualties, no assurance of a satisfactory solution, and a serious danger of escalation at the end of the road," he wrote.

RESTRICTION

Ball proposed a restricted combat role in Vietnam of no more than 72,000 men and an approach to the North Vietnamese on negotiations. The United States would halt the bombing of the North, the South Vietnamese would begin no offensive operation, and the North Vietnamese "will stop terrorism and other aggressive action against the South."

"The choice at that time," says the study, "was not whether or not to negotiate, it was not whether or not to hold on for a while or let go — the choice was viewed as winning or losing South Vietnam."

By the end of 1965 U.S. forces in South Vietnam had risen from 27,000 on March 8 to 184,314. Their mission was no longer defense of installations but offensive "search and destroy" operations.

Air attacks on North Vietnam began on a sustained basis on March 2, 1965, in an effort to break the enemy's will and persuade Hanoi to stop the Viet Cong insurgency in the South.

"Once set in motion, however, the bombing effort seemed to stiffen rather than soften Hanoi's backbone." The study notes, "After a month of bombing with no response from the North Viet-

namese, optimism began to wane.

"The United States presented essentially with two options: (1) to withdraw unilaterally from Vietnam leaving the South Vietnamese to fend for themselves, or (2) to commit ground forces in pursuit of its objectives. A third option, that of drastically increasing the scope and scale of the bombing, was rejected because of the concomitant high risk of inviting Chinese intervention."

The decision to change the role of U.S. troops in Vietnam was made at an April 1-2 strategy session at the White House, the meeting to which Taylor changed the mission of 3500 Marines who had landed at Da Nang on March 8 to defend the Da Nang airfield. He also decided to send ashore two more Marine battalions and increase support forces in South Vietnam by 18,000 to 20,000 men.

The study says that after Mr. Johnson met with Taylor, and other officials on March 31, the President responded to press inquiries concerning dramatic new developments by saying: "I know of no far-reaching strategy that is being suggested or promulgated."

"But the President was being less than candid," it continued. ". . . This issue greatly overshadowed all other Vietnam questions than being reconsidered."

Reporting on some of the debate within the Johnson Administration, the study said Ball was critical of the request of General William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, on June 7, 1965, for 44 more battalions.

"In Ball's view there was absolutely no assurance that the U.S. could with the provision of more ground forces achieve its political objectives in Vietnam," the study says.

Another adviser, Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy, "Like many others found himself in between Westmoreland and Ball," the study reports.

Of McNamara's views, the study says: "It is difficult to be precise about the position of the secretary of defense during the buildup debate because there is so little of him in the files . . . From the records, the secretary comes out much more clearly for good management than he does for any particular strategy."