

Diem at the Fulcrum

President Kennedy's decision in May deferred—but did not settle—the issue of combat troops for South Vietnam. Throughout the summer and fall of 1961 the Administration's debate on that crucial matter was significantly affected by the attitude of President Diem, according to the Pentagon account. Initially, it relates, Vice President Johnson found the South Vietnamese leader reluctant; in midsummer he warmed to the idea somewhat; by fall he was appealing to the United States to become a co-belligerent.

The Vietnam troop decisions were also affected by the confrontation with the Soviet Union over Berlin. At his meeting in Vienna with Premier Khrushchev in June, President Kennedy managed to strike a general bargain to seek neutralization in Laos. But the Soviet leader applied pressure on the Berlin issue by threatening to sign a peace treaty with East Germany, making Western access to West Berlin extremely vulnerable. The tension on this issue mounted—and overshadowed developments in Southeast Asia—until, on Oct. 17, Premier Khrushchev dropped the idea of the peace treaty with East Germany.

Vice President Johnson, on his whirlwind mission through Asia to bolster the confidence of America's allies, met with President Diem on May 12. According to an embassy report of their meeting, when Mr. Johnson raised the possibility of sending American combat units to Vietnam or working out a bilateral defense treaty, he found Mr. Diem uninterested. The embassy report quoted President Diem as saying he wanted American combat troops only in the event of an open invasion.

In his private report to President Kennedy on May 23, the Vice President painted American alternatives in Asia in blacks and whites, giving Thailand and Vietnam pivotal significance. "We must decide whether to help these countries to the best of our ability," he declared, "or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San concept." [See text, Vice President's memo, May 23, 1961.]

Nonetheless, alluding to President Diem's response on the troop question, Mr. Johnson told Mr. Kennedy: "Asian leaders—at this time—do not want American troops involved in Southeast Asia other than on training missions. . . . This does not minimize or disregard the probability that open attack would bring calls for U.S. combat troops."

If this seemed to close the issue for President Kennedy, as the study indicates, it was not the last word from President Diem. Responding to a suggestion from Vice President Johnson, the South Vietnamese leader spelled out his military proposals in a letter to President Kennedy on June 9.

Big Expansion of Army Is Urged

The letter, quoted extensively in the Pentagon account, urged a major expansion of the South Vietnamese Army, from 170,000 to 270,000 men, accompanied by "considerable" United States build-up with "selected elements of the American armed forces." President Diem said that the increases were needed "to counter the ominous threat" of Communist domination—a threat that he documented by what the study calls "inflated infiltration figures."

The plea for "selected elements of the American armed forces," according to the Pentagon narrative, sounded "very much like" a request for the kind of forces that the Defense Department had proposed in April and that the American advisory mission in Saigon was urging in midsummer.

The real interest of the Joint Chiefs and other military officers, the account says, was "in getting U.S. combat units into Vietnam, with the training mission a possible device for getting this accepted by Diem" and by civilian leaders in Washington.

The White House, preoccupied by Berlin, sidestepped the issue by agreeing in August to finance a much more modest increase in the Vietnamese Army—30,000 men—and by postponing any build-up of American advisers, according to the study.

Moreover, the writer suggests that the White House was already developing other ideas about Southeast Asia. During the summer discussions, Mr. Rostow once again produced proposals that, in the study's words, were a "quite exact" prescription for President Kennedy's decisions in the fall. In what is described in the account as a handwritten note to Secretary McNamara on a piece of scratch paper, probably passed by hand during a meeting about June 5, Mr. Rostow said:

"Bob:

"We must think of the kind of forces and missions for Thailand now, Vietnam later.

"We need a guerrilla *deterrence* operation in Thailand's northeast.

"We shall need forces to support a counter guerrilla war in Vietnam:

"aircraft

"helicopters

"communications men

"special forces

"militia teachers

"etc.

"WWR"

The emphasis on deterrence was Mr. Rostow's.

In late fall President Diem jolted the Kennedy Administration into its most urgent consideration of the troop issue—and its most significant military decisions—with a sudden, secret request for

the bilateral defense treaty he previously spurned.

On Sept. 29 the study recounts, Mr. Diem had a gloomy meeting with American officials, and Ambassador Nolting sent Washington this cablegram:

"Diem asked for bilateral defense treaty. Large and unexplained request. Serious. Put forward as result of Diem's fear of outcome of Laos situation, SVN vulnerability to increased infiltration, feelings that SEATO action would be inhibited by U.K. and France in the case of SVN as in Laos. . . .

"Our reaction is that the request should be seriously and carefully treated to prevent feeling that U.S. is not serious in intention to support SVN. But see major issues including overriding Article 19, Geneva accords, possible ratification problems as well as effect on SEATO.

"Diem's request arises from feeling that U.S. policy on Laos will expose his flank [to] infiltration and lead to large-scale hostilities in SVN. So seeking a stronger commitment than he thinks he has now through SEATO."

Admiral Felt, the Pacific commander, who was also present at the Sept. 29 meeting, cabled a fuller report several days later saying that President Diem wanted not only a treaty but also an accelerated American "military build-up." Specifically, Admiral Felt said, the President pressed for a "large increase in advisers of all types" and American tactical air squadrons to help break up the larger Vietcong units that had recently been massing for attacks.

The Felt message explained that the stepped-up scale of combat in Vietnam was worrying President Diem as much as the threat of infiltration or attack from the Laotian side, if not more. It added: "Diem said VC now able to assemble large units, had extensive radio net, operating in one or more battalions with heavy arms capable of raiding principal cities in provinces. . . . Could enter a city, burn out stores, attack leaders, withdraw."

The Pentagon narrative explains that the Vietcong, now believed to be 17,000 strong, had nearly tripled the level of their attacks to 450 a month in September.

"Shattering Effect in Saigon"

"The most spectacular attack, which seems to have had a shattering effect in Saigon," the writer goes on, "was the seizure of Phuocthanh, a provincial capital only 55 miles from Saigon," where the Vietcong held the town most of the day and publicly beheaded the province chief, departing before the South Vietnamese Army arrived.

For Washington the situation had become more alarming than it was in the spring. Then Laos was the primary cause of Vietnam's jitters. "This time," the study comments, "the problem was not directly Laos, but strong indications of moderate deterioration of Diem's military position and very substantial deterioration of morale in Saigon."

Even before President Diem's request for a treaty, momentum for American intervention in Southeast Asia had been mounting.

By early October the Pentagon papers recount, several proposals had emerged: The Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated allied intervention to seize and hold major portions of Laos, mainly to protect the borders of South Vietnam and Thailand; the "Rostow proposal" urged sending a force of about 25,000 men from the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization into Vietnam to try to guard the border with Laos; and several other plans suggested putting American forces into the Vietnamese Central Highlands or the port of Danang, with or without a training mission.

In the bureaucratic maneuvering that led up to the important National Security Council meeting of Oct. 11, a significant new element was injected.

For the first time, the study notes, a proposal was put before President Kennedy urging that the United States accept "as our real and ultimate objective the defeat of the Vietcong." The analyst says this was suggested in a compromise paper drafted hastily by U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State. The paper said that "three divisions would be a guess" on the number of American troops needed but that a more precise estimate would be forthcoming from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

A 'Somewhat Confusing' Blend

The study describes this as a "somewhat confusing" blend of earlier proposals by Mr. Rostow and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put together on Oct. 10. "It was pretty clear," the account continues, "that the main idea was to get some American combat troops into Vietnam, with the nominal excuse for doing so quite secondary."

The Joint Chiefs provided a supplemental note estimating "that 40,000 U.S. forces will be needed to clean up the Vietcong threat" and that 128,000 additional soldiers would be sufficient to cope with possible North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist intervention. The note, which accompanies the historical study, cited the Berlin crisis as another strain on American military manpower and urged "a step-up in the present mobilization, possibly of major proportions."

A third paper, which the narrative terms notable for its candor, also advocated "early and hard-hitting" intervention in Vietnam. This paper, a note to Secretary McNamara from William P. Bundy, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense, said:

"It is really now or never if we

are to arrest the gains being made by the Vietcong. Walt Rostow made the point yesterday that the Vietcong are about to move, by every indication, from the small-unit basis to a moderate battalion-size basis. Intelligence also suggests that they may try to set up a 'provisional government' . . . in the very Kontum area into which the present initial plan would move SEATO forces. If the Vietcong movement 'blooms' in this way, it will almost certainly attract all the back-the-winner sentiment that understandably prevails in such cases and that beat the French in early 1954 and came within an ace of beating Diem in early 1955."

Mr. Bundy bluntly put the odds as he saw them:

"An early and hard-hitting operation has a good chance (70 per cent would be my guess) of arresting things and giving Diem a chance to do better and clean up . . . It all depends on Diem's effectiveness, which is very problematical. The 30 per cent chance is that we would wind up like the French in 1954; white men can't win this kind of fight.

"On a 70-30 basis, I would myself favor going in. But if we let, say, a month go by before we move, the odds will slide . . . down to 60-40, 50-50 and so on."

The italics are Mr. Bundy's.

A More Pessimistic Assessment

The intelligence community provided what the study calls a "conspicuously more pessimistic (and more realistic)" assessment than the formal recommendations of the Pentagon or Mr. Rostow. In spite of all the American worry about infiltration into South Vietnam through Laos, a special national intelligence estimate on Oct. 5 reported "that 80-90 per cent of the estimated 17,000 VC had been locally recruited, and that there was little evidence that the VC relied on external supplies," according to the Pentagon account.

The intelligence estimate also included a warning about the kind of enemy shrewdness and tenacity that became reality. The estimate, drafted while the Administration was thinking primarily of SEATO—rather than unilateral American—intervention, forecast:

"The Communists would expect worthwhile political and psychological rewards from successful harassment and guerrilla operations against SEATO forces. The D.R.V. would probably not relax its Vietcong campaign against the GVN [Government of (South) Vietnam] to any significant extent. Meanwhile, Communist strength in south Laos would probably be increased by forces from North Vietnam to guard against an effort to partition Laos. . . . The Soviet airlift would probably be increased with a heavier flow of military supply into south Laos. . . ."

Confronted with such conflicting advice, President Kennedy decided to send General Taylor to Saigon. According

to minutes of the National Security Council meeting on Oct. 11, quoted in the Pentagon account, the general was instructed to consider three strategies:

¶Bold intervention to "defeat the Vietcong," using up to three divisions of American troops.

¶Sending "fewer U.S. combat forces" to Vietnam, not to crush the insurgency but "for the purpose of establishing a U.S. 'presence' in Vietnam."

¶"Stepping up U.S. assistance and training of Vietnam units, furnishing of more U.S. equipment, particularly helicopters and other light aircraft, trucks and other ground transport"—short of using American combat forces.

Mission: 'An Economic Survey'

The minutes said President Kennedy was to announce the Taylor mission, at an afternoon news conference, "as an economic survey." But, the account says, the President did "not make the hardly credible claim that he was sending his personal military adviser to Vietnam to do an economic survey." After a vaguely worded announcement, the narrative relates, President Kennedy was "noncommittal when asked whether Taylor was going to consider the need for combat troops."

Even before General Taylor and his party could leave Washington, the Diem Government had sent new and urgent requests for American combat troops. Ambassador Nolting reported to Washington on Oct. 13 that Nguyen Dinh Thuan, the Vietnamese Acting Defense Minister, had requested: "U.S. combat units or units to be introduced into SVN as 'combat trainer units' . . . Wanted a symbolic U.S. strength near 17th [Parallel] to prevent attacks there, free own forces there. Similar purpose station U.S. units in several provincial seats in Central Highlands. . . . Thuan said first step quicker than [defense] treaty and time was of the essence. Thuan said token forces would satisfy SVN and would be better than treaty." [See text, request by South Vietnam, Oct. 13, 1961.]

The South Vietnamese Government's state of alarm was communicated by Mr. Nolting's additional report that Saigon was considering asking Nationalist China "to send one division of combat troops in the southwest." Ambassador Nolting said he had tried to discourage this approach.

The Pentagon study goes on to report that Administration officials effectively squelched press speculation about the troop question with carefully managed news leaks at this point.

It cites a dispatch on Oct. 14 in The New York Times reporting that military leaders, including General Taylor, were reluctant to send combat units to Vietnam and that this question was "near the bottom of the list" of things the general would consider.

From the way the dispatch was handled, the account says, it clearly "came from a source authorized to speak for the President, and probably from the

Continued on Following Page

Continued from Preceding Page up to the Taylor mission, most of this was simply untrue." But he concludes: President himself." He adds that "in "The Times story had the apparently the light of the recommendations quoted desired effect. Speculation about com- throughout this paper, and particularly bat troops almost disappeared from most of the staff papers . . . that led news stories."