

Pentagon Papers: Study Reports Kennedy Made 'Gamble' Into a 'Broad Commitment'

By HEDRICK SMITH

The Pentagon's study of the Vietnam war concludes that President John F. Kennedy transformed the "limited-risk gamble" of the Eisenhower Administration into a "broad commitment" to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam.

Although Mr. Kennedy resisted pressures for putting American ground-combat units into South Vietnam, the Pentagon analysts say, he took a series of actions that significantly expanded the American military and political involvement in Vietnam but nonetheless left President Lyndon B. Johnson with as bad a situation as Mr. Kennedy inherited.

"The dilemma of the U.S. involvement dating from the Kennedy era," the Pentagon study observes, was to use "only limited means to achieve excessive ends."

Moreover, according to the study, prepared in 1967-68 by Government analysts, the Kennedy tactics deepened the American involvement in Vietnam piecemeal, with each step minimizing public recognition that the American role was growing.

The expansion of that role, over three decades, is traced in the 3,000 pages of the Pentagon's study, which is ac-

companied by 4,000 pages of documents on the Vietnam era. Previous articles in The Times's presentation of this material have recounted President Johnson's movement to war in 1964 and 1965.

President Kennedy made his first fresh commitments to Vietnam secretly. The Pentagon study discloses that in the spring of 1961 the President ordered 400

The Times today resumes its series of articles on the Pentagon's secret study of the Vietnam war. The study was obtained through the investigative reporting of Neil Sheehan, and the articles were researched and written over three months by Mr. Sheehan and other staff members. The fourth and fifth articles, both by Hedrick Smith, are published today and form an account of decisions in the Kennedy Administration.

Three pages of documentary material covering the Kennedy policy begin on Page 3, and documents on the 1963 coup begin on Page 9. A summary of the three earlier articles, covering the Johnson Administration, appears on Page 15.

Special Forces troops and 100 other American military advisers sent to South Vietnam. No publicity was given to either move.

Small as the numbers seem in retrospect, the Pentagon study comments that even the first such expansion "signaled a willingness to go beyond the 685-man limit on the size of the U.S. [military] mission in Saigon, which, if it were done openly, would be the first formal breach of the Geneva agreement." Under the interpretation of that agreement in effect since 1956, the United States was limited to 685 military advisers in Vietnam. Washington, while it did not sign the accord, pledged not to undermine it.

On May 11, 1961, the day on which President Kennedy decided to send the Special Forces, he also ordered the start of a campaign of clandestine warfare against North Vietnam, to be conducted by South Vietnamese agents directed and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency and some American Special Forces troops. [See text, action memorandum, May 11, 1961, Page 3.]

The President's instructions, as quoted in the documents, were, "In North Vietnam . . . [to] form networks of resistance, covert bases and teams for

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sabotage and light harassment." The American military mission in Saigon was also instructed to prepare South Vietnamese Army units "to conduct ranger raids and similar military actions in North Vietnam as might prove necessary or appropriate."

The Pentagon study reports that the primary target of the clandestine campaign against North Vietnam, and Laos as well, was to be "lines of communication"—railroads, highways, bridges, train depots and trucks.

The study does not report how many agents were actually sent north, though documents accompanying it describe some of the build-up and training of the First Observation Group, the main South Vietnamese unit conducting the covert campaign.

Within weeks of President Kennedy's May 11 decision, moreover, the North Vietnamese Government made repeated protests to the International Control Commission that its airspace and territory were being violated by foreign aircraft and South Vietnamese ground raids thrusting into the demilitarized zone along the border between the two Vietnams.

In July, 1961, Hanoi announced publicly that it had captured and was putting on trial three South Vietnamese participants in undercover operations who had survived the crash of a plane that was shot down, Hanoi said, while preparing to drop them into North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, protesting formally to Britain and the Soviet Union—the co-chairmen of the 1954 Geneva conference on Vietnam—described in detail what they said the survivors had disclosed about their American training and equipment.

Mr. Kennedy's May 11 orders, the

study discloses, also called for infiltration of South Vietnamese forces into southeastern Laos to find and attack Communist bases and supply lines.

On Oct. 13, moreover, the President reportedly gave additional secret orders for allied forces to "initiate ground action, including the use of U.S. advisers if necessary," against Communist aerial resupply missions in the vicinity of Tchepone, in the southern Laotian panhandle.

The Pentagon study does not analyze these covert operations in detail, but it shows Mr. Kennedy's decisions as part of an unbroken sequence that built up to much more ambitious covert warfare against North Vietnam under President Johnson in 1964.

Combat-Support Efforts Begun

The analysts handling the Kennedy period put more stress, however, on the evolution of President Kennedy's decision in November, 1961, to expand greatly the American military advisory mission in Vietnam and, for the first time, to put American servicemen in combat-support roles that involved them increasingly in actual fighting.

In a cablegram to Washington on Nov. 18, cited in the study, Frederick E. Nolting Jr., the United States Ambassador in Saigon, described the significance attached to those moves.

He said he had explained to President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam that the new roles of American servicemen "could expose them to enemy action."

"In response to Diem's question," Mr. Nolting continued, [I] said that in my personal opinion these personnel would be authorized to defend themselves if attacked. I pointed out that this was one reason why the decisions were very grave from U.S. standpoint."