

# Memo From Joint Chiefs Urging A Greater Role in South Vietnam

*Excerpts from memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Jan. 13, 1962. On Jan. 27, 1962, Mr. McNamara sent the memorandum to President Kennedy with a covering letter that said in part: "The Joint Chiefs of Staff have asked that the attached memorandum . . . be brought to your attention. The memorandum requires no action by you at this time. I am not prepared to endorse the experience with our present program in South Vietnam."*

### 3. Military Considerations. . . .

a. Early Eventualities—Loss of the Southeast Asian Mainland would have an adverse impact on our military strategy and would markedly reduce our ability in limited war by denying us air, land and sea bases, by forcing greater intelligence effort with lesser results, by complicating military lines of communication and by the introduction of more formidable enemy forces in the area. Air access and access to 5300 miles of mainland coastline would be outflanked, the last significant United Kingdom military strength in Asia would be eliminated with the loss of Singapore and Malaya and US military influence in that area, short of war, would be difficult to exert.

b. Possible Eventualities—Of equal importance to the immediate losses are the eventualities which could follow the loss of the Southeast Asian mainland. All of the Indonesian archipelago could come under the domination and control of the USSR and would become a communist base posing a threat against Australia and New Zealand. The Sino-Soviet Bloc would have control of the eastern access to the Indian Ocean. The Philippines and Japan could be pressured to assume at best, a neutralist role, thus eliminating two of our major bases in the Western Pacific. Our lines of defense then would be pulled north to Korea, Okinawa and Taiwan resulting in the subsequent overtaking of our lines of communications in a limited war. India's ability to remain neutral would be jeopardized and, as the Bloc meets success, its concurrent stepped-up activities to move into and control Africa can be expected. . . .

. . . 13. Three salient factors are of the greatest importance if the eventual introduction of US forces is required.

a. Any war in the Southeast Asian Mainland will be a peninsula and island-type of campaign—a mode of warfare in which all elements of the Armed

Forces of the United States have gained a wealth of experience and in which we have excelled both in World War II and Korea.

b. Study of the problem clearly indicates that the Communists are limited in the forces they can sustain in war in that area because of natural logistic and transportation problems.

c. Our present world military posture is such that we now have effective forces capable of implementing existing contingency plans for Southeast Asia without affecting to an unacceptable degree our capability to conduct planned operations in Europe relating to Berlin or otherwise.

14. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend that in any consideration of further action which may be required because of possible unacceptable results obtained despite Diem's full cooperation and the effective employment of South Vietnam armed forces, you again consider the recommendation provided you by JCSM-320-61, dated 10 May 1961, that a decision be made to deploy suitable US forces to South Vietnam sufficient to accomplish the following:

a. Provide a visible deterrent to potential North Vietnam and/or Chinese Communist action;

b. Release Vietnamese forces from advanced and static defense positions to permit their future commitment to counterinsurgency actions;

c. Assist in training the Vietnamese forces;

d. Provide a nucleus for the support of any additional US or SEATO military operations in Southeast Asia; and

e. Indicate the firmness of our intent to all Asian nations.

We are of the opinion that failure to do so under such circumstances will merely extend the date when such action must be taken and will make our ultimate task proportionately more difficult.