

Johnson Decides to Use Ground Troops

President Johnson decided on April 1, 1965, to use American ground troops for offensive action in South Vietnam because the Administration quickly found that sustained bombing of North Vietnam—began on March 2—was not going to stave off collapse in South Vietnam.

The President's decision was described in the third installment, published June 15, of The Times series on the Defense Department history.

One of 16 documents published with that installment was National Security Action Memorandum 328, dated April 6, 1965. This reported that the President had "approved an 18-20,000 man increase in U. S. military support forces to fill out existing units and supply needed logistic personnel."

Further, he approved sending ashore two Marine battalions that Gen. William C. Westmore-

land, the commander in Vietnam, had asked for on March 17, adding to two Marine battalions with 3,500 men that had landed March 8 as defenders of Danang airfield.

A Change of Mission

Mr. Johnson also approved deployment of a Marine air squadron and "a change of mission for all Marine battalions . . . to permit their more active use. . . ." He approved "urgent" efforts to get South Korean, Australian and New Zealand troops.

And he desired that "premature publicity be avoided," and the actions "should minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy."

There was a comment in an April 2 memorandum by Mr. McCone of the Central Intelligence Agency that bombings "have not caused a change in the North Vietnamese policy of directing Vietcong insurgency, infiltrating cadres and supplying material" and "if anything, the strikes to date have hardened their attitude."

Mr. McCone warned of becoming "mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort that we cannot win."

The March 8 landings had brought the United States force in South Vietnam to 27,000 men. In mid-March, Gen. Harold K. Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, made two recommendations relating to a possible ground war.

One was to send a division of American troops to South Vietnam to hold coastal enclaves or to defend the Central Highlands, freeing Saigon Government forces for offensive action against the Vietcong.

The other was to establish a four-division force of American and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization troops to interdict infiltration by patrolling the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South Vietnam and the Laotian border region.

Before N.S.C. Meeting

In preparation for April 1-2 National Security Council meetings, Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton wrote in a memorandum:

"Can the situation inside SVN be bottomed out (a) without extreme measures against the D.R.V. and/or (b) without deployment of large numbers of U.S. (and other) combat troops inside SVN? The answer is perhaps, but probably no."

General Westmoreland, in a report completed March 26 for the same strategy meeting, contended that South Vietnamese troops could not hold the line against growing Vietcong strength long enough for the bombing to become effective.

General Westmoreland asked for the equivalent of two American divisions to arrive by June, to bring strength in Vietnam up to about 70,000.

He proposed to send an Army division to "defeat" the

Vietcong in the Central Highlands, and indicated that more troops might be required if bombing failed to achieve results.

On March 20, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had proposed sending two American divisions and one South Korean division for offensive combat operations.

The Joint Chiefs, the Pentagon study said, "had the qualified support" of Secretary McNamara.

A 'Mobile Role' Sought

On April 4, Ambassador Taylor proposed "the use of Marines in a mobile counter-insurgency role in the vicinity of Danang for the improved protection of that base and also in a strike role as a reserve in support of [South Vietnamese Army] operations anywhere within 50 miles of the base." This was described as an enclave strategy.

On April 20, Secretary McNamara met General Westmoreland and other officials in Honolulu. The Pentagon study said there were 33,500 American troops then in Vietnam.

The conferees agreed that United States ground forces should be increased from 4 to 13 maneuver battalions involving 82,000 men, with 4 battalions involving 7,250 men also to be sought from Australia and South Korea.

A series of major military victories by the Vietcong in May and June led General Westmoreland to ask on June 7 for still more help—for a total of 44 battalions.

The study said that on June 13, he proposed a "search-and-destroy strategy for U.S. and third-country forces," with the "primary focus" for South Vietnamese forces to be pacification.

Authority for Westmoreland

On June 26, the study reported, General Westmoreland was given authority to commit United States forces whenever he decided they were needed "to strengthen the relative position" of Government forces.

The first major ground action by United States forces took place June 27-30, with the 173d Airborne Brigade, an Australian battalion and South Vietnamese in "a search-and-destroy operation into Vietcong base areas."

On July 17, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance said in a cablegram that President Johnson had decided to go ahead with a plan to deploy 34 battalions. On July 30, the Joint Chiefs backed deployment of 44 battalions, involving 193,887 United States soldiers.

The search-and-destroy strategy, the study commented, "left the U. S. commitment to Vietnam open-ended." As to President Johnson and Secretary McNamara, it added, "there are manifold indications that they were prepared for a long war."