

'Consensus' on Bombing Reached Before the Election

Leaders of the Johnson Administration reached a "consensus" at a White House strategy meeting on Sept. 7, 1964, the Pentagon study of the war says, that sustained air attacks against North Vietnam would probably have to be launched, and indicated a start for early 1965.

In the second installment, The Times reported that the analysis had added that "what prevented action for the time being was a set of tactical considerations."

First among these, the analysis went on, was that "the President was in the midst of an election campaign in which he was presenting himself as the candidate of reason and restraint as opposed to the quixotic Barry Goldwater," who was publicly advocating full-scale bombing of North Vietnam.

Before that "consensus," there had been an Aug. 18 cablegram from Ambassador Maxwell Taylor—one of 16 texts published with the installation—declaring that "the present in-country pacification plan is not enough." The Ambassador urged "deliberate escalation of pressure against North Vietnam, using Jan. 1, 1965, as a target D-Day" to start bombing military facilities.

Marines for Danang

The bombing plan, Ambassador Taylor added, would entail sending Army Hawk anti-aircraft missile units to protect airfields at Saigon and Danang and a force of Marines to Danang.

On Aug. 26, a memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff termed, "accelerated" actions

against North Vietnam "essential to prevent a complete collapse of the U.S. position in Southeast Asia."

On Sept. 3, a memorandum by Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton said "the situation in South Vietnam is deteriorating." He proposed actions to cause "increasing apprehension" in North Vietnam and "likely at some point to provoke a military D.R.V. [North Vietnam] response" so that "the provoked response should be likely to provide good grounds for us to escalate if we wished."

The Sept. 7 "consensus" meeting was attended by President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs; Ambassador Taylor, and John A. McCone, Director of Central Intelligence.

A Sept. 8 memorandum by Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy described "the consensus reached in discussions... for review and decision by the President."

Patrols to Resume

It was followed by a Sept. 10 memorandum by McGeorge Bundy, adviser to the President on national security. This reported Mr. Johnson's approval of resumption of American naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin and resumption of South Vietnamese coastal raids against North Vietnam. The raids had been covert, but were to be admitted now.

The patrols resumed Sept. 12, and the raids in October. A covert step-up in air operations in Laos ordered by the President began Oct. 14.

On Nov. 1, a Vietcong mortar barrage struck American planes

and facilities at Bienhoa airfield. President Johnson, at a White House meeting, held off on reprisals and expressed concern over possible counter-retaliation by North Vietnam or Communist China against American bases and civilian dependents.

On Nov. 24, a select committee of the National Security Council heard General Wheeler, speaking for the Joint Chiefs, argue for a hard, fast bombing campaign—as entailing "less risk of a major conflict before achieving success" than the option of gradually rising air strikes, favored by Assistant Secretaries McNaughton and Bundy.

'A Losing Game'

On Nov. 27, Ambassador Taylor, in a briefing, urged gradually increasing air strikes—"we are playing a losing game in South Vietnam."

On Nov. 29, there was a "draft position paper" by an interagency working group on Vietnam: headed by William Bundy. It set out "first-phase actions" over 30 days to intensify South Vietnamese maritime, Laotian air and United States reconnaissance operations already under way.

Reprisal air strikes against North Vietnam by South Vietnamese forces, "supplemented as necessary by U. S. forces," were proposed to take place preferably within 24 hours of "any VC provocation."

The next phase would be "progressively more serious air strikes," as well as possible aerial mining of ports and a naval blockade.

The Pentagon study says President Johnson became "cautious and equivocal." In a White

House meeting on Dec. 1, he said he wanted "new, dramatic, effective" aid from allied countries.

Air Strikes Begin

Nevertheless, on Dec. 14, Operation Barrel Roll began the 30 days of Phase I—air strikes by United States Air Force and Navy jets against infiltration routes and facilities in the Laotian panhandle.

On Jan. 6, 1965, William Bundy, in a memorandum, suggested "an early occasion for reprisal action" against North Vietnam and "possibly beginning low-level reconnaissance" at once.

"Introduction of limited U. S. ground forces into the northern area of South Vietnam," Mr. Bundy added, "still has great appeal to many of us, concurrently with the first air attacks into the D.R.V."

The Pentagon study reported that a Jan. 27 memorandum by Mr. McNaughton, agreed to by Secretary McNamara, favored initiating air strikes against North Vietnam.

On Feb. 6, nine Americans were killed and 76 wounded in Vietcong attacks on a military advisers' compound and a helicopter base. The study said this "triggered a swift, though long-contemplated Presidential decision to give an 'appropriate and fitting' response."

Within 14 hours, 49 Navy jets raided Donghoi in North Vietnam. Next, the enemy attacked an American barracks; the President on Feb. 11 launched a heavier reprisal raid. On Feb. 13, he decided to begin Operation Rolling Thunder—the sustained air war against North Vietnam.