

Further McNaughton Memo On Factors in Bombing Decision

Excerpts from memorandum by Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton, "Some Paragraphs on Vietnam," third draft, Jan. 19, 1966, as provided in the body of the Pentagon study. Paragraphs in italics are the analysts' phrase or explanation.

McNaughton prepared a second memorandum complementing and partially modifying the one on bombing. It concerned the context for the decision. Opening with a paragraph which warned, "We . . . have in Vietnam the ingredients of an enormous miscalculation," it sketched the dark outlines of the Vietnamese scene:

. . . The ARVN is tired, passive and accommodation-prone . . . The PAVN/VC are effectively matching our deployments . . . The bombing of the North . . . may or may not be able effectively to interdict infiltration (partly because the PAVN/VC can simply refuse to do battle if supplies are short). . . Pacification is stalled despite efforts and

hopes. The GVN political infrastructure is moribund and weaker than the VC infrastructure among most of the rural population . . . South Vietnam is near the edge of serious inflation and economic chaos.

The situation might alter for the better, McNaughton conceded. "Attrition—save Chinese intervention—may push the DRV 'against the stops' by the end of 1966." Recent RAND motivation and morale studies showed VC spirit flagging and their grip on the peasantry growing looser. "The Ky government is coming along, not delivering its promised 'revolution' but making progress slowly and gaining experience and stature each week." Though McNaughton termed it "doubtful that a meaningful ceiling can be put on the infiltration," he said

"there is no doubt that the cost of infiltration can . . . be made very high and that the flow of supplies can be reduced substantially below what it would otherwise be." Possibly bombing, combined with other pressures, could bring the DRV to consider terms after "a period of months, not of days or even weeks."

The central point of McNaughton's memorandum, following from its opening warning, was that the United States, too, should consider coming to terms. He wrote:

C. The present U.S. objective in Vietnam is to avoid humiliation. The reasons why we went into Vietnam to the present depth are varied; but they are now largely academic. Why we have not withdrawn from Vietnam is, by all odds, one reason: (1) to preserve our reputation as a guarantor, and thus to preserve our effectiveness in the rest of the world. We have not hung on (2) to save a friend, or (3) to deny the Communists the added acres and heads (because the dominoes don't fall for that reason in this case), or even (4) to prove that "wars of national liberation" won't work (except as our reputation is involved). At each decision point we have gambled; at each point, to avoid the damage to our effectiveness of defaulting on our commitment, we have upped the ante. We have not defaulted, and the ante (and commitment) is now very high. It is important that we behave so as to protect our reputation. At the same time, since it is our reputation that is at stake, it is important that we not construe our obligation to be more than do the countries whose opinions of us are our reputation.

D. We are in an escalating military stalemate. There is an honest difference of judgment as to the success of the present military efforts in the South. There is no question that the US deployments thwarted the VC hope to achieve a quick victory in 1965. But there is a serious question whether we are now defeating the VC/PAVN main forces and whether planned US deployments will more than hold our position in the country. Population and area control has not changed significantly in the past year; and the best judgment is that, even with the Phase IIA deployments, we will probably be faced in early 1967 with a continued stalemate at a higher level of forces and casualties.

2. US commitment to SVN. Some will say that we have defaulted if we end up, at any point in the relevant future, with anything less than a Western-oriented, non-Communist, independent government, exercising effective sovereignty over all of South Vietnam. This is not so. As stated above, the US end is solely to preserve our reputation as a guarantor. It follows that the "softest" credible formulation of the US commitment is the following:

a. DRV does not take over South

Vietnam by force. This does not necessarily rule out:

b. A coalition government including Communists.

c. A free decision by the South to succumb to the VC or to the North.

d. A neutral (or even anti-US) government in SVN.

e. A live-and-let-live "reversion to 1959." Furthermore, we must recognize that even if we fail to in achieving this "soft" formulation, we could over time come out with minimum damage:

f. If the reason was GVN gross wrong-headedness or apathy.

g. If victorious North Vietnam "went Titoist."

h. If the Communist take-over was fuzzy and very slow.

Current decisions, McNaughton argued, should reflect awareness that the U.S. commitment could be fulfilled with something considerably short of victory. "It takes time to make hard decisions," he wrote, "It took us almost a year to take the decision to bomb North Vietnam; it took us weeks to decide on a pause; it could take us months (and could involve lopping some white as well as brown heads) to get us in position to go for a compromise. We should not expect the enemy's molasses to pour any faster than ours. And we should 'tip the pitchers' now if we want them to 'pour' a year from now."

But the strategy following from this analysis more or less corresponded over the short term to that recommended by the Saigon mission and the military commands: More effort for pacification, more push behind the Ky government, more battalions for MACV, and intensive interdiction bombing roughly as proposed by CINCPAC. The one change introduced in this memorandum, prepared only one day after the other, concerned North Vietnamese ports. Now McNaughton advised that the ports not be closed.

The argument which coupled McNaughton's political analysis with his strategic recommendations appeared at the end of the second memorandum:

The dilemma. We are in a dilemma. It is that the situation may be "polar." That is, it may be that while going for victory we have the strength for compromise, but if we go for compromise we have the strength only for defeat—this because a revealed lowering of sights from victory to compromise (a) will unhinge the GVN and (b) will give the DRV the "smell of blood." The situation therefore requires a thoroughly loyal and disciplined US team in Washington and Saigon and great care in what is said and done. It also requires a willingness to escalate the war if the enemy miscalculates, misinterpreting our willingness to compromise as implying we are on the run. The risk is that it may be that the "coin must come up heads or tails, not on edge."