

Doubts Start to Emerge

The ineffectiveness of Rolling Thunder and General Westmoreland's mounting demand for troops soon began to create doubts among the "Vietnam principals," the Pentagon study says. During the pause in the bombing, both Mr. McNaughton and Secretary McNamara wrote lengthy memorandums outlining the change in their feelings.

In a paper titled "Some Observations About Bombing North Vietnam," dated Jan. 18, 1966 and quoted in the narrative, Mr. McNaughton asked: "Can the program be expected to reduce (not just increase the cost of) D.R.V. aid to the South and hopefully put a ceiling on it?"

His own answer was no. "The program so far has not successfully interdicted infiltration of men and material into South Vietnam," he wrote. "Despite our armed reconnaissance efforts and strikes of railroads, roads, bridges, storage centers, training bases and other key links in their lines of communications, it is estimated that they are capable of generating in the North and infiltrating to the South 4,500 men a month and between 50 and 300 tons a day depending on the season."

This, he noted, was enough to support a major effort against the United States.

McNaughton Expands Draft

The next day Mr. McNaughton prepared another memorandum, expanding on his first draft, in which he warned: "We have in Vietnam the ingredients of an enormous miscalculation." [See text, McNaughton memo, Jan. 19, 1966.]

"The ARVN is tired, passive and accommodation-prone. . . ." he wrote. "The PAVN/VC are effectively matching our deployments. . . . The bombing of the North may or may not be able effectively to interdict infiltration. . . . Pacification is still stalled. . . . The GVN political infrastructure is moribund and weaker than the VC infrastructure. . . . South Vietnam is near the edge of serious infiltration and economic chaos.

"We are in an escalating military stalemate."

"The present U.S. objective in Vietnam is to avoid humiliation," he wrote. "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." The words in parentheses were in the memorandum.

Mr. McNaughton suggested that Washington ought to consider settling for something short of a military victory.

"Some will say that we have defaulted if we end up. . . . with anything less than a Western-oriented, non-Communist, independent government, exercising effective sovereignty over all of South Vietnam," he wrote. "This is not so. As stated above, the U.S. end is solely to preserve our reputation as a guarantor."

Some Acceptable Outcomes

He then outlined some outcomes that he felt the United States should be able to accept:

"Coalition government including Communists.

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

"A neutral (or even anti-U.S.) government in SVN.

"A live-and let-live 'reversion to 1959.'"

This presumably referred to the situation of low-level guerrilla warfare that prevailed in 1959, before either North Vietnam or the United States had committed major forces to the conflict.

Despite the pessimism of his analysis, the study adds, Mr. McNaughton went on to recommend "more effort for pacification, more push behind the Ky government, more battalions. . . and intensive interdiction bombing."

On Jan. 24, Secretary McNamara wrote a revised version of his Nov. 30, 1965, memorandum to President Johnson that, the study says, echoed much of his Assistant Secretary's pessimism.

While Mr. McNamara, too, recommended increasing the bombing strikes against North Vietnam, he could say only that "the increased program probably will not put a tight ceiling on the enemy's activities in South Vietnam."

'They Continue to Believe . . .'

And though he recommended raising the number of United States troops in Vietnam to more than 400,000 by the end of 1966, he told the President:

"Deployments of the kind we have recommended will not guarantee suc-

cess. Our intelligence estimate is that the present Communist policy is to continue to prosecute the war vigorously in the South. They continue to believe that the war will be a long one, that time is their ally and that their own staying power is superior to ours.

"It follows, therefore, that the odds are about even that, even with the recommended deployments, we will be faced in early 1967 with a military standoff at a much higher level, with pacification still stalled, and with any prospect of military success marred by the chances of an active Chinese intervention and with the requirement for the deployment of still more U.S. forces."

The doubts among officials of the Johnson Administration grew further with a political crisis in the cities of Hue and Danang during the spring of 1966, the narrative relates, and at the White House a major debate was conducted on America's goals in Southeast Asia.

The South Vietnamese political crisis was touched off March 12, 1966, when Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who was Premier, removed the powerful and semiautonomous commander of the I Corps, Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi. Buddhist monks and students quickly joined demonstrations supporting General Thi and attacking the Ky regime.

Fears of Neutralist Rule

The demonstrations stirred fears in Washington that Marshal Ky might be overthrown and replaced by a neutralist Buddhist government, the study recalls, and hurried meetings were called at the White House.

At the first of these meetings, on April 9, the study says, four policy papers were debated: George Carver, a senior C.I.A. analyst on Vietnam, argued for what was referred to as Option A—continuing as is; Leonard Unger, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and head of the Interdepartmental Vietnam coordinating committee, presented Option B—continuing but pressing for a compromise settlement; Assistant Secretary of Defense McNaughton argued Option B-P—continuing but with a pessimistic outlook; and George W. Ball, the Under Secretary of State, took Option C—disengagement.

Mr. Ball asserted, as he had the previous June in a memorandum for the President, that "We should concentrate our attention on cutting our losses." The United States, he said, should "halt the deployment of additional forces, reduce the level of air attacks on the North, and maintain ground activity at the minimum level required to prevent the substantial improvement of the Vietcong position."

"Let us face the fact that there are no really attractive options open to us," Secretary Ball concluded in his policy paper, as quoted in the Pentagon study.

Other papers, including one by Walt W. Rostow, who had just replaced McGeorge Bundy as Presidential adviser on national security, were prepared and debated on April 12, 14 and 16.

A Hint in His Notes

A hint of Mr. McNaughton's state of mind during this period, the Pentagon study says, can be gathered from notes he had taken of a conversation with an official just back from Saigon. Mr. McNaughton's notes read:

"Place (VN) in unholy mess.

"We control next to no territory.

"Fears economic collapse.

"Militarily will be same place year from now.

"Pacification won't get off ground for a year."

At the April 16 meeting, William P. Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, presented a draft entitled "Basic Choices in Vietnam." He apparently favored the option of continuing along present lines, the narrative recounts, but he also said:

"As we look a year or two ahead, with a military program that would require major further budget costs — with all their implications for taxes and domestic programs — and with steady or probably rising casualties, the war could well become an albatross around the Administration's neck at least equal to what Korea was for President Truman in 1952."

What new decisions these meetings produced is not clear from the record, the Pentagon study says. The meetings ended around April 20 with a lull in the South Vietnamese political crisis.