

McGeorge Bundy's Memorandum To Johnson in May on Bombing

Excerpts from memorandum for President Johnson from McGeorge Bundy, headed "Memorandum on Vietnam Policy," as provided in the body of the Pentagon study. According to the study, the document bore no date but a copy was marked in pencil "rec'd 5-4-67 12n." Paragraphs in italics are the study's paraphrase or explanation.

Since the Communist turndown of our latest offers in February, there has been an intensification of bombing in the North, and press reports suggest that there will be further pressure for more attacks on targets heretofore immune. There is also obvious pressure from the military for further reinforcements in the South, although General Westmoreland has been a model of discipline in his public pronouncements. One may guess, therefore, that the President will soon be confronted with requests for 100,000-200,000 more troops and for authority to close the harbor in Haiphong. Such recommendations are inevitable, in the framework of strictly military analysis. It is the thesis of this paper that in the main they should be rejected, and that as a matter of high national policy there should be a publicly stated ceiling to the level of American participation in Vietnam, as long as there is no further marked escalation on the enemy side.

There are two major reasons for this recommendation: the situation in Vietnam and the situation in the United States. As to Vietnam, it seems very doubtful that further intensifications of bombing in the North or major increases in U.S. troops in the South are really a good way of bringing the war to a satisfactory conclusion. As to the United States, it seems clear that uncertainty about the future size of the war is now having destructive effects on the national will.

Unlike the vocal critics of the Administrations, Mac Bundy was not opposed to the bombing per se, merely to any further extension of it since he felt such action would be counter-productive. Because his views carry such weight, his arguments against extending the bombing are reproduced below in full:

On the ineffectiveness of the bombing as a means to end the war, I think the evidence is plain—though I would defer to expert estimators. Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues simply are not going to change their policy on the basis of losses from the air in North Vietnam. No intelligence estimate that I have seen in the last two years has ever claimed that the bombing would have this effect. The President never claimed that it would. The notion that this was its purpose has been limited to one school of thought and has never been the official Government position, whatever critics may assert.

I am very far indeed from suggesting that it would make sense now to stop the bombing of the North altogether. The argument for that course seems to me wholly unpersuasive at the present. To stop the bombing today would be to give the Communists something for

nothing, and in a very short time all the doves in this country and around the world would be asking for some further unilateral concessions. (Doves and hawks are alike in their insatiable appetites; we can't really keep the hawks happy by small increases in effort — they come right back for more.)

The real justification for the bombing, from the start, has been double—its value for Southern morale at a moment of great danger, and its relation to Northern infiltration. The first reason has disappeared but the second remains entirely legitimate. Tactical bombing of communications and of troop concentrations—and of airfields as necessary—seems to me sensible and practical. It is strategic bombing that seems both unproductive and unwise. It is true, of course, that all careful bombing does some damage to the enemy. But the net effect of this damage upon the military capability of a primitive country is almost sure to be slight. (The lights have not stayed off in Haiphong, and even if they had, electric lights are in no sense essential to the Communist war effort.) And against this distinctly marginal impact we have to weigh the fact that strategic bombing does tend to divide the U.S., to distract us all from the real struggle in the South, and to accentuate the unease and distemper which surround the war in Vietnam, both at home and abroad. It is true that careful polls show majority support for the bombing, but I believe this support rests upon an erroneous belief in its effectiveness as a means to end the war. Moreover, I think those against extension of the bombing are more passionate on balance than those who favor it. Finally, there is certainly a point at which such bombing does increase the risk of conflict with China or the Soviet Union, and I am sure there is no majority for that. In particular, I think it clear that the case against going after Haiphong Harbor is so strong that a majority would back the Government in rejecting that course.

So I think that with careful explanation there would be more approval than disapproval of an announced policy restricting the bombing closely to activities that support the war in the South. General Westmoreland's speech to the Congress made this tie-in, but attacks on power plants really do not fit the picture very well. We are attacking them, I fear, mainly because we have "run out" of other targets. Is it a very good reason? Can anyone demonstrate that such targets have been rewarding? Remembering the claims made for attacks on [rest illegible].

In a similar fashion Bundy developed

his arguments against a major increase in U.S. troop strength in the South and urged the President not to take any new initiatives for the present. But the appeal of Bundy's analysis for the President must surely have been its finale in which Bundy, acutely aware of the President's political sensitivities, cast his arguments in the context of the forthcoming 1968 Presidential elections. Here is how he presented the case:

There is one further argument against major escalation in 1967 and 1968 which is worth stating separately, because on the surface it seems cynically political. It is that Hanoi is going to do everything it possibly can to keep its position intact until after our 1968 elections. Given their history, they are bound to hold out for a possible U.S. shift in 1969—that's what they did against the French, and they got most of what they wanted when Mendes took power. Having held on so long this time, and having nothing much left to lose—compared to the chance of victory—they are bound to keep on fighting. Since only atomic bombs could really knock them out (an invasion of North Vietnam would not do it in two years, and is of course ruled out on other grounds), they have it in their power to "prove" that military escalation does not bring peace—at least over the next two years. They will surely do just that. However much they may be hurting, they are not going to do us any favors before November 1968. (And since this was drafted, they have been publicly advised by Walter Lippmann to wait for the Republicans—as if they needed the advice and as if it was his place to give it!)

It follows that escalation will not bring visible victory over Hanoi before

the election. Therefore the election will have to be fought by the Administration on other grounds. I think those other grounds are clear and important, and that they will be obscured if our policy is thought to be one of increasing—and ineffective—military pressure.

If we assume that the war will still be going on in November 1968, and that Hanoi will not give us the pleasure of consenting to negotiations sometime before then what we must plan to offer as a defense of Administration policy is not victory over Hanoi, but growing success—and self reliance—in the South. This we can do, with luck, and on this side of the parallel, the Vietnamese authorities should be prepared to help us out (though of course the VC will do their damndest against us.) Large parts of Westy's speech (if not quite all of it) were wholly consistent with this line of argument. . . .

If we can avoid escalation—that does not seem to work, we can focus attention on the great and central achievement of these last two years: on the defeat we have prevented. The fact that South Vietnam has not been lost and is not going to be lost is a fact of truly massive importance in the history of Asia, the Pacific, and the U.S. An articulate minority of "Eastern intellectuals" (like Bill Fulbright) may not believe in what they call the domino theory, but most Americans (along with nearly all Asians) know better. Under this administration the United States has already saved the hope of freedom for hundreds of millions—in this sense, the largest part of the job is done. This critically important achievement is obscured by seeming to act as if we have to do much more lest we fail.