B. AT THE TURNING POINT

Chapter 17: The October Prelude

a. When I started to write this book, My first outline was to the effect that October was a month ~~of total quiet~~ in Administration thinking and planning. This impression was wrong, ~~in high degree,~~ perhaps because of the other absorbing events of the election climax, Khrushchev, Wilson, etc., perhaps because November was very much more intense in terms of planning activity. IN FACT, THERE WAS IN OCTOBER A VERY QUIET EXCHANGE OF ~~Yet October saw an important period of simmering in policy thinking, which so far as I know never reached the President, but~~ THOUGHTS, which served in important ways to winnow out ideas that entered into the major policy review of November.

Within South Vietnam, the month was mixed -- slightly encouraging on the political front, but with little comfort in the countryside trends. In the course of the month Taylor became convinced that the North Vietnamese were greatly increasing their rate of infiltration, and this factor henceforth assumed even greater importance. Then, just as November began -- and within three days of the American election -- came a devastating Communist attack on the American airbase at Bien Hoa, ten miles from Saigon, where the jet light bombers sent in August had been stationed. It was a test of the September policy of readiness to retaliate for just such incidents, but the timing made it out of the question for the President to take any such action. He declined to act, but the event crystallized feelings that were waiting only until the election was at least decided and out of the way. It was time for the United States to fish or cut bait. At the unanimous urging of his advisors, the President directed a full-scale review of policy, to analyze every aspect of the situation from scratch and to come up with possible options for action.

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Mixed News from Saigon

b. In Saigon, the utter mess of August and mid-September must have contributed to a general feeling that it was a last chance to work seriously on a political structure. ~~At any rate,~~ The schedule for developing a new Constitution and installing a government under it was kept almost to the day.

Exercising talents that may have been more political than administrative or military all along, Big Minh played the leading role in selecting a 17-man High National Council announced on September 26th. This Council was headed by a respected Southern political figure, Phan Khac Suu (pronounced "shoe"), who had spent years in Diem's prisons, ~~alas~~ to the great detriment of his health, until his triumphal release in the November 1963 coup. He was to be a prominent and right-minded, but somewhat erratic figure in the next six months. In this first stage, he guided the Council effectively, so that it completed the new Charter by October 20, and on October 24 voted to install Suu himself as the first Chief of State under it.

In this month of deliberation, Taylor and the Embassy worked to improve communication between the civilian Council and the top military men, and stressed that a solid new government must rest on close civil-military cooperation. Defining the role of the military, in fact, proved too hard for the Council, and the provisions in this area were vague, although ~~However,~~ the intent to make the government civilian was clear. Major power was given to a Prime Minister, and Suu as Chief of State chose for this post the respected and senior former Mayor of Saigon, Tran Van Huong (pronounced "Hoong"), who in turn picked a civilian cabinet. Unfortunately, many of the best ~~civilians~~ men could not be persuaded to enter the Cabinet, apparently because they did not wish to go down with the first boat launched. Obviously, the unresolved question of military power and the brooding riddle

of Tri Quang both hovered over the process of attempting to govern, like two swords of Damocles.

Still, there was briefly ground for hope. Once again the resilience of the South Vietnamese in political matters had been shown. For the first time since the overthrow of Diem, South Vietnam had a government with a claim to legitimacy. In the new structure, the legislative function was to be exercised by a National Assembly elected by the people on a broad basis; however, it was ~~clear~~ understood that security conditions for the time being made an election impossible, and the High National Council ~~simply~~ then converted itself into an interim Assembly, no doubt following precedent from the French Revolution, which almost all educated South Vienamese, for better or for worse, had studied in detail.

If this change and its manner were at least more hopeful than the preceding two months, the same was not true of the military and security situation. Taylor's cables in October reported a steady stream of incidents, including a growing number of large-unit attacks. At the same time, as he reported to Washington on October 16th, the North was apparently greatly stepping up the flow of men to the South. Since early in 1964, a steady increase had been noted, but this time the pace seemed to have quickened very markedly. The new arrivals seemed to be almost all native North Vietnamese, a sign that the original supply of native Southerners had been exhausted, but equally a sign that Hanoi was ready to go all out from the much larger, in guerrilla terms almost inexhaustible, pool of trained Northerners.

The mention of infiltration is a good point at which to examine how the American government, in Saigon and Washington, had come by the latter part of 1964 to view th4 nature of the conflict and the role of the

North. Why had the conflict gone so badly for a year and more? How important was Hanoi's leadership and support? How could the war be ended and peace along the lines of the 1954 settlement restored?

In looking at the reasons for the miserable year since the fall of Diem, none had difficulty in concluding that the major reason was the weakness of the South rather than the military or ideological strength of the Viet Cong and its Northern supporters. After the fall of Diem, dislocation and confusion had ~~perhaps inevitably~~ given the VC a golden chance. Then, instead of rallying or being able to mobilize the initial popular enthusiasm, successive governments in Saigon had frittered away every chance. Weakness in the South was the biggest cause of the trend to disaster.

But at the same time, two things were clear about the Viet Cong effort. First, despite all the advantages in their favor, the VC still could not attract significant political figures or elements in the South; there was no bandwagon effect, but rather a consistent rejection of the VC in all major political groups. Perhaps this was not wholly true of the groups that seemed to have "neutralist" ideas, tending in the direction of accepting a coalition with the Communists; yet over and over an apparent "neutralist" like Tri Quang himself would argue with invincible assurance that the Communists would never come to power through a coalition. In short, naivete seemed far more prevalent than any sympathy for the Communist cause, or for the methods of rule that the VC might bring. Insofar as one could judge the politically conscious groups in South Vietnam, there remained a non-Communist nationalist cause worth defending and giving a chance to. Divided and incompetent as military and political leaders might be, many among the Americans sympathized with the acute difficulty of learning to run a new nation under the conditions South Vietnam had

known for twenty years, and thought that in the circumstances the difficulties and failure were understandable. In this view, some among us -- myself most certainly included -- could not keep out of our minds how desperate and divided the Philippines had seemed before Magsaysay, and how low the Koreans had fallen before Park.

Second, the Viet Cong more than ever seemed controlled from Hanoi. They were without visible leaders, and a mass of evidence showed that orders flowed from Hanoi, through known communication links and long-established party ties heading up to the Lao Dong party in Hanoi. In 1964 this long-standing picture had been confirmed beyond all doubt simply by American diplomatic experience. When the Canadian, Seaborn, had talked twice to top men in Hanoi, there had not been a moment's doubt that Hanoi had full responsibility. On the contrary, there had been hardly a mention of the National Liberation Front or the VC. In the entire diplomatic web of the coming years, not until sometime in 1967 did any Hanoi representative disclaim Hanoi's being in charge or seek to shift the discourse to the NLF. In 1964, when he wished to help, U Thant too knew where to go -- to Ho Chi Minh.

Thus, on the question of Hanoi's degree of responsibility for the war in the South, the spectrum of views in the American government was narrow. In terms of international law or moral justification, American aid and force in support of South Vietnam seemed fully justified. Moreover, Hanoi was sufficiently at the center of the war to warrant a military effort of some scale against the related targets in the North. This latter issue, whether bombing was legally justified, had been raised in some of the early papers of March, but disappeared from view in all later discussion. This was not from mental inertia but simply because the events of the year seemed

to make the answer clear, at least in principle. For the scales of attack considered throughout 1964, at least, no one questioned that they fell within permissible limits, as Hanoi's role had revealed itself then and before.

The questions of wisdom, measure, and tactics were, of course, quite different. Whether South Vietnamese nationalism was a valid cause to defend was, ~~or course,~~ a different question from whether, in practice, Saigon leaders would be effective enough to play their crucial role in their own defense. Similarly, whether it was legally and morally sustainable to carry the war to the North was a different question from whether it was wise or useful to do so. But in both cases, as the time of decision approached, the former set of questions had been resolved throughout the American decision-making structure, and so far as one could tell in the great body of American opinion. (Citations.)

The point of this excursion is to describe a key part of the American state of mind in the period of decision, and to explain why that state of mind was rarely re-argued in the intense policy debate that came after the election. There was a nagging question at the border line between principle and practicality. In every mind that dwelt at all on the problem, it must have expressed itself in the lament: could people so feckless and unable to run their own affairs really be worth an American effort? I wonder if there was any thoughtful American who did not ask himself that question, usually silently, in this period and again many times in the years to come. ~~In later years, answers were to appear in the thought-avoiding jargon of the social sciences that Ho and Hanoi had pre-empted the nationalist feeling of Vietnam and that it was hopeless all along to look for capacity and will of the South.~~ (And perhaps even for that.) Carried to its logical conclusion, this line of thought would have given up without a fight in

France in 1940, in China's fight against Japan, and in a host of other causes where the outcome had seemed a loss for humanity. Perhaps it was important to the decision-making process that so many such cases had been part of the living experience of the President and his senior advisors. While despairing of Saigon's ineptitude, they were at the same time disinclined to think that weakness and incompetence invalidated the right to independence of man or nation. Over the years, many liberal Americans, who would have been horrified to be called believers that "might makes right," seemed to me to fall into the parallel and converse view that "weakness makes wrong." *[redacted]

Simmering in Washington.

c. Early in October, on Saturday the 3d, the President returned from his biggest campaign trip to meet with a disturbed group of senior advisors. All had received during the week a thoughtful and thoroughly pessimistic appraisal of ths Vietnamese situation, largely written within CIA but endorsed by all intelligence chiefs. The estimate saw the VC and Hanoi as aiming at a "neutralist" coalition goverment they could dominate, lying low for the time being, but believing that victory was near.

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* Such a line of thought is congenial to Chinese culture in particular. John K. Fairbank writes of the Maoist Revolution that one of its striking features "has been the continued fusion of morality and politics, such that a policy mistake is a moral crime, on the ancient Confucian assumption that conduct is character made manifest, that theory and practice should be one, and whoever acted with good intent but bad results was in the wrong." The United States and China, (Third Ed., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971,)pp. 356-7. One can reflect on the validity of this view, and also on whether Americans, more than other Western societies, have not tended over history to apply the same sort of equation of policy mistake to moral crime. Certainly there are many who have done so not only concerning Vietnam but in a host of other judgments of the way responsibility has been carried out in our society. The avowed concepts of moral responsibility and particularly of Anglo-Saxon law, of course, place much greater stress on intent. (Spell out that this is the source of our tendency to ascribe success to superior American virtues.)

Pacification in the countryside was completely at a halt, and the cities were beset by marauding private groups. In this bleak picture, the very slim hope that trends could be arrested came from the long resilience of the South Vietnamese people. Life did go on, and few if any seemed to want accommodation or Communist control. Of particular note was the detected growth of anti-American feelings, of a general sort among the militant Buddhists, specifically related among leaders to the belief that America had let South Vietnam down by failing to carry through with the firm stand on the Tonkin Gulf incidents. (SNIE 53-2-64, 10/1/64).

At this meeting, Secretary McNamara spoke of the general line of policy considered in early September, which would have led toward a systematic bombing campaign around the first of the year. He was not advocating this program but raising it as the only course now being seriously worked on by contingency planners. This led George Ball to express, in the privacy of the small gathering, his growing private conviction that the United States must find a way to disengage from Vietnam, that the stakes did not warrant the kind of strong military action that might already be the only way the situation could be brought even to a negotiating equilibrium.

It was the first such expression in council from Ball, or from any of the inner policy circle -- Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, McCone, and General Wheeler.* Doubtless the thought had occurred to almost all at one time or another, and more frequently since the political debacle of August. But this was Ball's initiative, and the honest statement of his views; his later christening, on occasion, as an appointed "devil's

* Refer to RFK-Kattenburg conversation at the end of August, 1963.

advocate" was, I think, designed to ease life for all concerned. None of those close to Ball doubted that he meant every word he wrote and said.

At the close of the meeting, Ball agreed, in the President's presence, to set down his thoughts in a full memorandum to be circulated solely to those present and to the most limited circle of trusted men in the State Department, meaning in the event Michael Forrestal, Thomas Hughes, the intelligence chief, Benjamin Read, the indispensable and wise coordinator for the Secretary, and myself. (B. Papers.) Thus, the President returned to the campaign trail knowing, on the one hand, that contingency plans continued to exist for stronger action, but on the other that at least one of his major advisors had developed the most basic doubts as to the wisdom of trying even to hold on ~~and that the whole inner circle believed this drastic view warranted a hard look.~~ The early September set toward stronger action -- never, to repeat, a "consensus" -- had by now vanished entirely. As the President now well knew, his advisors were as troubled and perplexed as he himself was.*

The Ball memorandum of October 5 was the fullest and most searching of the whole series he was to write in the next fifteen months. In _____ pages, it covered just about every possible aspect of the issue. The President and others read it with care, and Ball recalls that many months later the President could still recall specific passages. (Check).

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* Refer to Charles Roberts quote of LBJ that he made up his mind in October. Later denied by LBJ himself, the dating just does not fit. The hypothesis of a private LBJ decision could be plausibly made for many other months of 1964. October, however, was a low point both in evaluation and worry around him.)

Ball's first point was in line with his oral arguments of November 1961 — to which the then Vice President had probably not been exposed, although they remained vivid to a few of the policy circle like myself. It was, simply, that once the United States became involved on any major scale it was bound to find itself, willy-nilly, in the shoes of the French. Based on his close experience as a lawyer for the French government itself in the period of the First Indochina War, 1950-54 (check), Ball was convinced to the depths of his being that white men and Western military techniques simply could not win a guerrilla war against the kind of political/military force Ho had developed in North Vietnam and in the Viet Cong movement to the South. Ever since 1961, Ball had been profoundly unmoved by all the promoters of guerrilla war, at least as their views and theories related to Indochina. He had seen the problem, and in that setting at least, the most sophisticated techniques just did not work. ~~This~~ It was not to argue that the French had been brilliant, well-organized, or well-equipped, ~~but that~~ American superiority lay in the very types of equipment and organization least relevant to the real nature of this particular war and area. (Privately, neither Ball nor anyone else supposed that Americans understood South Vietnamese politics even as well as the French had done.) The conclusion was that in all probability American massive intervention -- by air at first, but as he saw it inevitably in significant degree on the ground as well (check) — simply could not bring about the kind of result that American policy sought, an independent South Vietnam (check). Even if the result could be achieved, the very best outcome would see the US tied down for years in a frustrating and constly struggle.

With this first point as his base, Ball went on to point out the damaging, potentially devastating, effect such a bogging down or defeat

would have for American capacity and standing in the truly crucial areas of American policy, the Soviet Union and Europe. Already it was clear that the European nations had little sympathy for what the US was doing in VN, and would not help in any military way. With de Gaulle doing his utmost to undermine American prestige in Europe, the situation would be made to order for the argument that America had ceased to care about NATO, could not be relied on in a pinch, etc., etc. The result would be a disastrous slowing down, and possibly a lasting defeat, for the concept of a strengthened Europe in partnership with the US, which Ball regarded as the essential aim of American foreign policy. We would be sharply reducing our chances of maintaining what we had in Europe, already under attack, and perhaps removing all chance of achieving something better.

And for what? Ball's third point was that SVN just did not matter critically to SEA as a whole, nor was SEA a top priority area for US policy. (Spell out.)

Finally, there was the risk of war with China. Although intelligence estimates judged that China would be unlikely to intervene in any large or overt way in response to a limited bombing program by American and South Vietnamese aircraft, no one could really be sure what the "flash point" was. Ball took it that all were agreed that war with China would be a disaster, and that no effort to hold South Vietnam was worth serious risk of such an outcome. Yet the risk was there, however carefully the campaign was conducted. Whatever our intent, there were bound to be errors, and there was no sure predicting how the Chinese would react.

These were Ball's four main theses leading to the conclusion that a stronger military role by the US would be a grave mistake. Whatever the rights and wrongs, or even the formal US commitment (did B. deprecate

this in his memo?) -- on which Ball accepted the prevailing views as to Hanoi's role, its essential aggression, etc. -- the practical consequences in the world argued overwhelmingly against the venture.

Recognizing his obligation to suggest an alternative course, Ball ~~and this especially admirably in my view then and now~~ made no ~~effort~~ claim ~~to pretend~~ that there was any easy way out. The French recipe of "neutralization" offered no hope, and would be seen all over Asia as a sellout, and not even from naivete as to its consequences, since American leaders had so often spelled them out in public.* Nor did any other avenue of negotiation offer hope even of a useful compromise, in effect stopping the war and delaying the Communist takeover of the South, in the face of present trends and with the Communist side confident of early victory.

Rather, Ball offered a day-to-day, ~~piece-by-piece~~ (step-by-step) recipe for American disengagement. It would proceed, not by negotiation, but by declining to raise the American contribution and letting events take their course in Saigon. This would be accompanied by actions and quiet information to make clear ~~what we in fact believed to be the truth, as he saw it, namely~~ that the South Vietnamese were no longer able to hold the fort at reasonable levels of American help, and that any increase in those levels would neither help nor be warranted in US worldwide priorities. In short, it was an honest solution, consistent with Ball's underlying arguments, at the same time -- as he readily conceded -- (admitted to be) harsh and unpalatable at first to many in America. But this was the price that had to be paid to extricate the country from an untenable position created in the first instance by the policies of the Fifties .

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* Quote from my Tokyo speech as most recent utterance.)

No summary quite does any memorandum justice, and least of all one by Ball, who wrote superbly. Some excerpts will give the flavor: (quotes if possible).

Apart from its impact on particular readers -- which doubtless varied from man to man -- the Ball memorandum was of great signficance in the policy process. With a frankness possible only in this small circle of roughly 6-8 readers, Ball had injected the alternative of letting Vietnam go, of gradual withdrawal. Thereafter, policy and option papers of wider circulation would refer more broadly to courses that seemed likely to fail, without advocating them; the inner circle knew that at least one of its members thought that the least bad course was just this, to acknowledge and accept failure in South Vietnam. The Ball memorandum was an unseen factor in all the November policy review, for this reason as well as for the force of its arguments. Its existence explains ~~, with other factors to be discussed later,~~ the absence from the November review of any policy option expressly labeled "withdrawal."

Returning to the thread of discussion in October, the Ball memorandum was circulated about October _____, roughly coinciding with the distribution of an intelligence estimate that addressed the North Vietnamese response to the full range of actions that had been considered in early September. I do not recall how this estimate came to be done at just this time, since the ideas it discussed were many of them either diluted or in abeyance for the time being. Presumably, the estimate had been requested in September, put over in the face of the trobules in Saigon, and remained unfinished business whose outright cnacellation might have caused some sort of leak -- whereas its completion was simply a rounding out of contingency planning.

At any rate, the estimate -- under terms of reference received from policy makers, as in all such cases -- took up the possibility of a systematic bombing program along the lines the JCS had proposed in early September. The judgment was a most gingerly and tentative one: after arguing back and forth for several paragraphs, the estimate concluded that it was more likely than not that such a program would cause Hanoi to (stiffen down) ~~soften up~~ in its effort in the South, play for time and political breaks, and pull out all the propaganda stops that the US was the aggressor. In the process, they would seek negotiations, but their position would be very tough and unyielding. While this course seemed a little more than a 50% chance, the estimate also conceded that a harsher response, by military step-up, was a substantial possibility. The State Department intelligence chief, Hughes, dissented, arguing that the vigorous response was the more likely. All agreed that if Hanoi took the vigorous response, Peking would be in full support and might mobilize forces and take other measures that increased the chances of conflict with the US -- even though Peking was judged not to want any major clash. (SNIE 10-3-64, check PP if released.)

Thus, the overall judgment was most uncertain. In my long service from 1951 through 1959 in CIA's Office of National Estimates, which wrote and coordinated the NIE's, I had been a strong advocate of such judgments of the consequences of a proposed line of policy or action. I must say that, in the spring and fall of 1964, and ~~indeed~~ repeatedly through the critical months of 1965, the best that the intelligence community could produce seemed not to be of enormous help to myself and other policy makers. I suspect others in the policy circle were like myself: we read the estimates to get a feel for what reasonable men might conclude, confronted

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with a necessarily general statement of proposed action. At no time did the NIE's have the weight of gospel, nor, it must be said, did the sophisticated Director of Central Intelligence, John McCone, make any such claim for them. He himself consistently took the line that Hanoi would not pull back in the face of anything but a truly systematic and determined bombing campaign, and perhaps not then if the South remained almost within their grasp. On the other hand, he and his staff were less fearful than many in State Department intelligence that China might intervene on a massive basis. All of us knew what the problems were, and each policy maker carried with him his own variable feel for Hanoi's toughness and China's intentions in a crunch. When policy makers and intelligence offices are both focussed with equal intensity on an issue over a long period of time, the advantage of intelligence offices is the detachment rather than any special expertise. It is a considerable potential advantage: I doubt, however, that it made much difference in the judgments of the two groups in the 1964-65 period, at least with respect to North Vietnamese and Chinese reactions to a series of cases and situations that, indeed, never fitted the kind of abstract summaries with which NIE's had to deal.

The SNIE of October 1964 was thus a second input into the quiet policy process of October. The third was a personal memorandum of my own, addressed to Messrs. Rusk, McNamara, Ball, and McGeorge Bundy, (and prepared after discussion with) McNaughton in Defense and Forrestal in State ~~had consulted with me on the nature and contents of the memorandum, and also received copies.~~ However, the memorandum differed from Ball's not only in the rank of its author but in the crucial respect that it was not distributed to the President or, so far as I know, ever known to him. Thus, it stands on a very different and

lower footing from Ball's effort, in relation to the policy process. Nor, in its tentative and exploratory nature, do I suppose it affected many minds in any special direction. What it does for history and the telling of the story is simply to give a fairly detailed map of one man's mind, and perhaps secondly to throw, in a lesser way, the kind of light the Ball memo does on the gaps and real meaning in the coming November policy review.

Entitled, "The Choices We Face in Southeast Asia," the 42-page typed paper was labeled in the cover note a "think-piece." The note went on:

> "I have not tried to meet all the points made in Mr. Ball's memorandum, tho I think you will find that virtually all come in one way or another. The choices we face are clearly in the Hobson class,* and I have not tried to arrive at any recommendation as to which is the least bad.
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> In keeping with the spirit of the exercise, I have trotted out all the apparent heresies I can think of, that would appear even faintly hopeful in one way or another. The only factor I have not tried to crank in is that of US public opinion, since I believe only the President can in the end judge this, and that I at least should not bring it in at this point in our thinking."

Then a brief introduction, reviewing elements in the overall situation since March, and concluding as follows:

> "In sum, our position has on the whole worsened considerably both with respect to the situation on the ground and with respect to the factors that would affect our being able to bring about a favorable outcome by any route. Thus, we must now take a really hard look at our stakes and at the courses of action open to us,

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* The reference is to the phrase "a Hobson's choice" or a choice between evils, damned if you do and damned if you don't. Ger dictionary or other definition, and historical story behind the phrase.

including the frank consideration of negotiating avenues that we have hitherto excluded, or considered only at the end of a program of pressures such that we could hope to have our way."

After this, there followed the part of the memorandum that most clearly went beyond any paper, save Ball's, prepared up to that time. Although long, I think it is worth quoting in full:

"I. A Hard Look at our Stakes in South Vietnam and Laos

In South Vietnam we are helping a government defend its independence. In Laos, we are working to preserve, in its essence, an international neutralized settlement wilfully flouted by the Communist side. Paradoxically, while American opinion weights the former well ahead of the latter, there are some quarters -- such as Britain and India -- where the latter is a more appealing cause both legally and practically. But our basic rationale is defensible in both cases.

Behind our policy have been three factors:

a. The general principle of helping countries that try to defend their own freedom against Communist subversion and attack.

b. The specific consequences of Communist control of South Vietnam and Laos for the security of, successively, Cambodia, Thailand (most seriously), Malaysia, and the Philippines -- and resulting increases in the threat to India and -- more in the realm of morale effects in the short term -- the threat to South Korea and perhaps the GRC, and the effect on Japanese attitudes through any development that appears to make Communist China and its allies a dominant force in Asia that must be lived with.

c. South Vietnam, and to a lesser extent, Laos, as test cases of Communist "wars of national liberation" worldwide.

The first and third of these are closely related. But the honest fact is that South Vietnam and Laos have not really been typical cases from the beginning, which accounts in part for our inability to enlist the kind of international support we had in Korea and for our having to carry the load so largely alone. Most of the world had written off both countries in 1954, and our ability to keep them going -- while an extraordinary and praiseworthy effort -- has never given them quite the standing of such long-established national entities as Greece, Turkey, and Iran, or the special ward-of-the-UN status that South Korea had in 1950.

Moreover, the recent course of events has already highlighted--and could be brought even more to highlight -- the atypical features that in sum have made South Vietnam and Laos so difficult. A bad colonial heritage of long standing, totally inadequate preparation for self-government by the colonial power, a colonialist war fought in half-baked fashion and lost, a nationalist movement taken over by Communism ruling in the other half of an ethnically and historically united country, the Communist side inheriting much the better military force and far more than its share of the talent -- these are the facts that dog us to this day. Other potentially beleaguered countries may not think we played our cards too well in South Vietnam, but in a general sense none are likely to feel that our failure to find the handle, even a loss of South Vietnam without our taking stronger action, really proves that we cannot be counted on in their individually different situations, or that they themselves cannot handle these situations with our help as needed. Their faith might be somewhat shaken -- and we must look separately at the local cases of Thailand and South Korea in particular -- but a strong case can be made that even the loss of South Vietnam and Laos to Communist control would not shake significant non-Communist nations in other areas, or encourage the Communist side to think it had really found the answer to continuing the cold war by neat little subversive operations to which we would have no counter.

The basic point, of course, is that we have never thought we could defend a government or a people that had ceased to care strongly about defending themselves, or that were unable to maintain the fundamentals of government. And the overwhelming world impression is that these are the lacking elements in South Vietnam, and that its loss will be due, if it comes, to their lack.

Thus, the general world consequences of the loss of South Vietnam and Laos probably could be made bearable. We should have to make clear what areas we do continue to value -- such as Iran, for example, and, in another sense, Latin America -- and perhaps be doubly sure not to appear to be letting such countries down. But we could probably ride it out.

However, the effects in Asia itself could be far more serious. Both in weighing the consequences of South Vietnam, and in weighing what actions we take and risks we run whether or not they save it, we must be especially concerned, in different senses, for the effects in (a) the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, and (b) Korea. The Philippines, the GRC, and Japan would be other areas of worry, but less acute at least initially.

Let us accept that the domino theory is much too pat. Control of South Vietnam and Laos by Hanoi would not mean that Communist China would automatically or soon have Thailand and Malaysia,

possibly Burma, as vassal states or worse. (If that control came about after a conflict in which Communist China had intervened in a major sense, the effects could be far worse, it should be noted.)

Nonetheless, Communist control of South Vietnam would almost immediately make Laos extremely hard to hold, and would surely have Sihanouk bending sharply to the Communist side, accepting Chicom military aid, etc.. These developments in turn would, as to mainland Southeast Asia:

a. Place great pressure on Thailand, a country which has done a great deal to strengthen its security measures and to consolidate its government and extend its national presence throughout its territory (as was not the case 10 or even 5 years ago) -- but which also has a long-standing historical tendency to seek out the side that looks like winning and make its "peace" with it. Even though the Thai leaders might understand the loss being due to failure to find a government, they would still have expected us to act strongly and would wonder just how high we would set the hurdles in Thailand before acting.

b. Embolden Sukarno to increase his pressure on Malaysia, which -- with the already serious Malay-Chinese-problem -- could mean great difficulty for the Tunku.

There is much we could do in Thailand, and the British in Malaysia, to reinforce the defense of these countries. But the initial shock wave would be great and even if this was surmounted the struggle would be uphill for a long time to come.

The second crucial consequence of the loss of South Vietnam and Laos could well be in South Korea. This may seem a strong judgment, for it is not likely that Communist China would launch an overt attack there. The point is that South Korea perhaps more than any single country depends overwhelmingly on the sure belief that the US will act against whatever difficulties to hold a non-Communist country. This faith would be shaken, and the underlying difficulties of political and economic progress, in the only situation in the world where the Communist side -- in North Korea -- has been making a better economic showing, and where US interest has appeared to be waning, would then come to the fore. The situation in South Korea just is not strong, and it could be compounded to a dangerous point by the kind of neutralist, unify-at-any-price sentiment that is now merely latent but could be easily aroused. Whatever we decide to do in South Vietnam, we must look to our Korean situation, including the level of our assistance programs and our force plans. South Vietnam has been our child by adoption; South Korea is integrally dependent on us and integrally symbolic of our resolve world-wide.

These are the key pressure points that would immediately become crucial. If either Thailand or South Korea were lost, or went badly sour in any way, then the rot would be in real danger of spreading all over Mainland Southeast Asia. Japan would

not only open diplomatic relations with Communist China (a threat in any case) but would start having real ties and thinking in terms of accommodation. The Philippines would start reinsuring with Sukarno, or just behaving stupidly in some way. The GRC would feel deserted and alone, with unpredictable consequences. In short, our whole Pacific security structure could progressively unravel in the space of a very few years.

To repeat, none of this -- beyond Laos and Cambodia -- is beyond the reach of rescuing action (which would cost us money and probably force deployments such as one or more ground divisions to Thailand), but the seriousness-times-likelihood sum total is formidably high. South Vietnam and Laos may not be "vital" as Berlin is, but out stakes there are great in terms of our Asian posture.

So much for the direct stakes. But we have other types of stakes in any situation in which we are thrust into the position of major Free World defending force. The most important of these is that our leadership should satisfy our allies in other areas that we are strong and at the same time wise. The lesser of these is our image in countries not directly associated with us.

Taking the lesser one first, we have seen over and over again -- in the Cuban missile crisis, in the Lebanon and Offshore Islands cases -- that even though the non-aligned and Afro-Asian nations may not like our basic position, they will accept and even admire and be grateful for actions that achieve the result we want in a strong and wise way. They will not support us in a UN clinch, if that ever becomes a factor, but they will take what we do and even privately like it. However, a US action that produces an inconclusive result, or that is long drawn-out, or both, could seriously weaken our influence in these areas -- not merely in an "image" sense but in senses that would drastically affect our ability to keep the peace and to keep the wavereers from veering clear over to Communist answers.

Far more basic is the question of our major allies, especially in Europe. Whether or not de Gaulle is trying to involve us more deeply in Asia, the fact is that Franch policy and its sympathizers, most important in Germany, would raise every possible doubt about our committing major forces to an Asian conflict, and would contend that we were no longer interested in, or at least capable of, playing our key role in European security. Our major allies in Europe accept the importance of Asia and our basic strategy of containing Communist China and its allies in principle, but in their present indrawn state, believing the Soviet threat reduced and preoccupied with prosperity, it all seems very far away and not worth all that much trouble. At the time of Korea, strong action in Asia fortified

our position in Europe, indeed helped to make it believable; today the picture may be the reverse! To most of Europe, fights in Asia have come to seem costly and in the end fruitless (from the Dutch and French experiences, and even some underlying feeling in Britain that Malaysia will not be worth it in the long run); not only would they not rally to our support, but their confidence in us for Europe would be adversely affected.

* * * *

The above analysis of our stakes is not a cheerful one. Clearly it will take great care and resourcefulness to find a policy that can preserve our key stakes in Asia without a scale of conflict that would both be terribly serious in itself and tend to hurt us as leaders of the Alliance in other areas."

To repeat, the judgments in this section were my own, and some even changed in my own mind. For example, I became convinced in November that the worry about Korea was somewhat overstated, but that the concern about Thailand and Southeast Asia might, if anything, be too mild. On the whole, however, the section states what might be called the predominantly Asian set of reasons for taking the defense of South Vietnam's independence seriously.

The next section defined "The Options Open to Us," ~~beyond~~/"present policy framework" ~~that~~ included "34-A operations, limited air and ground operations in Laos, and periodic destroyer patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin." ~~Beyond these~~ and of course "maximum assistance . . . within present guidelines," the possible policy ~~variations were defined~~ as follows:

"A. Carry on indefinitely with our present policy as defined above, rejecting both negotiation and any extensive or real risk-taking wider action.

B. If, but only if, a decent government comes into being in South Vietnam, increase our present very limited wider actions and make them into a systematic series of military pressures on North Vietnam, using air attack principally, but--as now envisaged-- deploying at least limited ground forces to both Thailand and South Vietnam for security and to be prepared to handle any Communist reaction. In the form in which we have envisaged it, this course of action would suppose that even if

some form of negotiation got under way we would continue our military action until Hanoi and Peiping came to our terms.

C. Carry on with our present assistance programs in South Vietnam, but softening our position in subtle ways so that we do not stand in the way of any negotiations that may develop between Saigon and the Liberation Front of Hanoi. Continue to oppose any wider forum, and refrain from any negotiating initiative ourselves (apart from making our position clear to Hanoi as best we can).

D. Carry on with our assistance programs in South Vietnam, but also take more affirmative action to get a negotiating track started--e.g., by letting a Laos conference convene, by encouraging some nation to raise the matter in the UN, by third-country contacts in Hanoi or Peiping.

E. Make a continued military threat as believable as possible, but initiating some significant degree of military pressure on North Vietnam, but then switch to a serious negotiating track in some forum.

The above options have been stated in terms of South Vietnam alone. In practice, each has implications for the accompanying course in Laos, and each has implications as to immediate reassuring and defending actions we might wish to take for Thailand. As a general rule, however, we would be operating under each option on the premise that Laos was the tail to the kite--unless the Communists will it otherwise -- in other words, that we would be trying to maintain and strengthen the status quo essentially -- but that Thailand's defense, present and future, remains a major objective to which we would devote every reasonable resource and degree of diplomatic and other support.

Note here the emphasis on Thailand as the most immediate nation affected by how the US handled itself in Vietnam. Implicit, of course, was the thought that SVN might be taken over no matter what was done, and that we should be looking to the next line of defense. This idea had started in my own thinking in early September; by this time it had become stronger, ~~and was to be a crucial element in my own views toward the start of bombing in the January-February period~~.

Analyzing these options, I quickly concluded that the first one could hold for only two months probably, six months at the outside.

Retaliation for another incident like the Gulf of Tonkin might have a helpful effect one more time, but beyond that the concept of specific retaliation would only stiffen Hanoi without lifting the South. In sum, carrying on unchanged would mean a likely "neutralist" outcome in Saigon. What this would mean was more fully developed under the third option (for all practical purposes the same as the first) as follows:

> "If we do not change course, the odds are heavy that influential elements in Saigon will in fact make contact with the Liberation Front -- directly or through avenues provided by the French (who have certainly been preparing them assiduously). We never have found out whether Minh and/or the Dalat generals were starting to play this game last January (as Khanh has asserted and has seemed genuinely to believe), but, whether it took place then or not, the channels could readily be opened. The objective would be to get a cease-fire by admitting elements of the Liberation Front -- doubtless starting with "non-Communist" front men -- to a coalition arrangement.
>
> This is "the Polish route," and we can see nothing to alter our continuing belief that it would lead in a period of months, just possibly extendable to a year or two, to a Saigon government dominated by Communists and then to a unified Communist Vietnam. Once the first big concession had been made, morale and anti-Communist feeling in Saigon would be eroded progressively. The Liberation Front would use the tactics classically employed by Communists in such situations -- starting from small portfolios to bid in time for key police and financial posts, and thus moving inexorably to total control. The Army would wilt on the vine, some units would probably go over, and so on.
>
> At the outset of such a process, the US might well not be asked to withdraw. Paradoxically, even the Communists might want the continued flow of economic aid to prevent outright chaos. But we would have a terrible dilemma whether to maintain our presence and assistance, and would be placed in a degrading position whether we stayed or gradually pulled out.
>
> These enormous disadvantages would appear to negate the course of action at the outset. But before we wash it out entirely, we should at least consider one compensating advantage. A "solution" reached in this way would be a <u>Vietnamese</u> solution without Chinese participation, and almost certainly Hanoi-would bend every effort to have it this way and to keep

it this way. Communist China would not have re-entered Southeast Asia in any concrete sense, and there is at least some hope that a Communist Vietnam, while retaining ambitions in Cambodia and Laos and perhaps achieving these, would be to some extent a buffer against further spread of Chinese influence.

The extent of any such hope, at any rate, needs careful weighing. At the very least, might we not have more time to organize strong defenses in Thailand -- or would this be outweighed by Bangkok believing we had already sold the pass and would not act strongly for them any more than we had for Saigon?

A second, the less important, "advantage" of such a course of action would be that we ourselves would not be directly associated with the negotiations. But this is pretty thin comfort, with all the world believing we had assumed almost full responsibility and could have acted had we chosen." *

Having thus given a gloomy prognosis for any variant of going on as we were, the paper came to an almost equally gloomy conclusion concerning the chances of success for the second option, the systematic air campaign against the north. As had already been noted, all the factors affecting its chances had moved adversely in the seven months since March of 1964. Hanoi was more dug in, the odds of Chinese intervention in some form were at least "in the range of high significance," the pressures for an early conference, before any balance for bargaining had been achieved, would probably be greater with the changes in the British and Soviet governments, and the ultimate need for US forces might become considerably greater than we had thought earlier. ** Lastly and most important of all, the Saigon

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* I include this passage partly to show that the idea of Vietnam as a buffer to China, later to be so much emphasized by Professor Hans Morgenthau and for a time by Sentor Fulbright, had occurred to some in the policy circle. In short order my own answers to the questions I had put were negative: by early 1965, as we shall see, the evidence was plain that Peking and Hanoi were collaborating happily in the attempt to win Thailand by pressure and subversion. (Refer to other discussion.)

** This last was more with an eye to Chinese action than in the expectation of large force needs for South Vietnam itself, which at this stage were not foreseen beyond a division or two! We shall come back to this major error in foresight.

political structure was much weaker than it had appeared to be earlier. All in all, the prognosis "is gloomy indeed. . . . at this moment the couse of action could not be recommended."

Next was the fourth option, calling for active US negotiating efforts. Here again the gloom was thick. There was no shortage of possible avenues for communication, or wider forums for actual negotiation. But to discuss these left a deeper question:

> "What, in practice, would we hope to get from either Hanoi or Peiping if all we were doing was to continue our present programs and policy? Neither would be really hurting; indeed, the sum total of our actions -- including above all our failure to take any stronger action -- would mean to them that our initiative was simply a quiet way of getting out and letting South Vietnam go down the drain. Time would not be on our side, the situation in South Vietnam would more likely be worsening than improving as we talked (whether or not the talks leaked) and all in all they would see themselves as having all the cards.
>
> Thus -- unless we were doing something to make the costs to them more serious actually or potentially -- this course of action would be a straight negotiation from weakness. This would be true whether or not the French or others got into the act with "neutralization" gambits. Our constantly stated opposition to wider negotiation per se appears on analysis still to be soundly based."

Hence, the fifth option played with the idea of trying to create a negotiating balance by military action, but then stopping such action once negotiations got under way -- in contrast to the second option, which proposed to continue even in the face of a big protest level in the world, at least until Hanoi made military concessions. This fifth option, as I drafted it, is closely similar to actual options considered in detail in the following month. In essence, it became the soft form of Option C, in the terms used in November. My October discussion of it is so general that it is not worth giving here. ~~Plainly, this was the direction in which my own thinking had moved in the course of preparing the paper.~~ As I

concluded: ". . if we reject Option B of systematic pressures on the North, [as I had at that time], this is the most hopeful course of action to salvage something in South Vietnam, and to gain time to shore up the next line of defense in Thailand -- but that is about all." IT WAS HARDLY A CHEERFUL CONCLUSION.

When this memorandum was being read by its limited audience, there were less than two weeks to go to the election. Although the JCS filed further formal recommendations during that period, all looking to a systematic and fairly tough bombing program, there were no meetings at any level. All the men at the top knew that Vietnam would be the first major foreign policy problem to go to the President after the election, and that the problem and the choices to deal with it were looking extremely dark.

Disaster at Bien Hoa

d. On the night of November 1st, Saigon time, the Communist side struck one of the most sophisticated and telling blows of the entire war. I say "the Communist side" rather than simply "the VC" because, although there was never proof of Hanoi's role, THE ORDER CAME FROM ~~all the evidence~~ pointed to a Politburo decision ~~aimed at~~ precisely this target and precisely this time.

The principal target was the squadron of B-57's that had been sent ~~in~~ in August. Of the total of _____, five were demolished, and another 15 badly damaged. Several other aircraft were also destroyed and damaged. Altogether the base was made a shambles in a short _____ minutes, in which the attackers ~~ran about placing explosive charges and shooting up parked planes, then disappeared without a single one being apprehended.~~ DROPPED WELL-AIMED MORTAR SHELLS FROM A MILE AWAY AND THEN DISAPPEARED WITHOUT TRACE

The outcome was ~~deeply~~ humiliating to the US, ~~for the sake of the planes,~~ and deeply damaging as well to South Vietnamese morale and to US-Vietnamese relations. For the security of the base had been left to the

South Vietnamese and had been a particular worry ever since August. Every kind of American pressures had been applied, and every kind of Vietnamese assurance given, that its protection was assured. Now, the abject failure left a stunned void.

The timing also was perfect. For the news hit Washington on the morning of Sunday, November 1st, two days before the election, and with the President back in Washington for a day between his traditional final appearance in New York City on Saturday night, and his last rally in his own Texas on the Monday. But the problem, of course, was not whether Washington was fully manned: the President and all his top advisors were on hand, and at once had full reports and Ambassador Taylor's cable involving the policy of readiness to retaliate of NSAM 314, and urging that every aspect of this attack called for a prompt response as at Tonkin Gulf. The problem was that, in these particular circumstances and above all in this particular campaign, it was out of the question for the President to order a retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam.

So far as I could tell -- having been called from bed at the first reports and remaining at work almost all that day -- no senior civilian thought the President could or should act. In the backgrounding of the press, by afternoon, the note was being struck that the aircraft had been in Vietnam, not, as yet, on any Vietnam missions -- a frail line of distinction at best -- and the press had quickly and quietly concluded that there would be no response.

Most to the point were the arguments of election timing frankly used in the second of two cables explaining the President's decision to Taylor in Saigon. First, retaliation at this time would be open to attack, within the US, as politically motivated -- thus diluting or distorting

its effect on Hanoi. Second and even more important, in the setting of that time any tit-for-tat action would in practice go far to commit the US to a systematic bombing program. This decision, weighed in all its pros and cons for so long, could not be taken in the closing days of a campaign, either in wisdom or perhaps even in the spirit of the Constitution. The cable concluded that the attack did mean we would have to consider wider actions even more acutely than before, but did not change the most basic need of all, for constitutional and effective government in Saigon.

On Monday morning, before leaving for Texas, the President held a special meeting with all of the JCS. It was designed to make clear the depth of his concern for the problem, and his resolve that it be addressed fully. The President made no commitments and announced no policy review plans on that day. Privately, that afternoon the word was conveyed to me and to John McNaughton that on Election Day we were to set under way a full review. We agreed to meet the following morning.

Chapter 16: November: The First Phase

a. The policy review that got under way on November 3d -- Election Day itself -- was by far the most comprehensive of any in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. It enlisted the specialist staffs of all five key foreign policy agencies, operating under a Working Group at Assistant Secretary level. The members of this Group reported to their Principals, at the National Security Council level.

Although in the first days there was thought that a decision might be taken as early as mid-November, the word from Texas by the 11th was that the President was extremely wary and wished every facet gone into. Thus, the pace slowed, and the drafting period went on, with extensive comment, from the 3d to the 21st. Then, on the 24th, the first phase came to a climax with a meeting of the Principals, without the President.

The result of this first phase was to sharpen and refine a great deal of thinking about objectives, US stakes, possible worst cases, and the twin cruxes of the problem -- South Vietnamese weakness and North Vietnamese pressure. Most important, the first phase wound up with two nearly unanimous conclusions among the President's top advisors -- first that the consequences of a Communist takeover in South Vietnam would be disastrous for the rest of Southeast Asia, and second that to go on within the existing policy framework was hopeless, or at best an expedient for a few months. More tentatively, a "hard and fast" bombing program was rejected, and the outlines of a gradual bombing program developed, with important changes in its negotiating elements. By the time Ambassador Taylor returned on November 27, these conclusions and lines of thought -- which must have been privately accepted by the President -- set the framework for the intense discussion of possible actions that followed and led to important Presidential decisions on December 1st and 3d.

The Policy Process

b. The Working Group that started work on November 3d was personally chosen by each Principal, to consist of men of the highest possible seniority consistent with their devoting full time to the work, and to reflect the full confidence and continuing guidance of their chiefs. Representing the State Department were myself as Chairman, Michael Forrestal, and Robert Johnson of the Policy Planning Council. The administrative man was Jonathan Moore from my office. The intelligence office of the Department, supervised by Allen Whiting and Thomas Hughes, also participated directly in the major intelligence sections of the drafting. At the top, Secretary Rusk, George Ball, and Averell Harriman were kept posted on the work. Harriman, then chiefly occupied with African matters, did not participate in any of the key meetings, but did receive the most important papers and talked with Forrestal and myself. Ball was intensely preoccupied during the month with the question of a European multilateral force, and both he and Rusk were necessarily ~~closely engaged~~ deeply involved in the critical decisions of mid-November for a relief operation to evacuate Americans and others from Stanleyville in the Congo -- an extremely controversial and worrisome ~~decision~~ operation, which dominated the headlines of the world for much of the month.

In the Defense Department, the principal civilian on the Working Group was John McNaughton, aided by Daniel Ellsberg as his personal assistant (since mid-August), and also by a first-class military and civilian staff that operated in close touch with the Joint Staff for specific military facts. McNaughton of course reported directly to Secretary McNamara, who took a close and continuing personal interest. Deputy Secretary Vance, on the other hand, was, as usual, the "all else" man for McNamara. Since in November of 1964

the "all else" included MLF, the Congo operation, and the final stages of the Defense budget to be submitted in January, Vance in fact played little part in this policy review, and did not attend any of the key meetings.

The representative of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was Vice Admiral Lloyd M. Mustin, senior operations officer, or J-3, for the Joint Staff. He had the services of his own substantial staff, and reported directly either to General Wheeler or to the Joint Chiefs as a group. Because of the Chiefs' custom -- long familiar to me from NSC days in the Eisenhower Administration -- of not wishing to speak authoritatively in the absence of a written paper endorsed by the Chiefs as a whole, Mustin was from the first in a somewhat difficult position in the Working Group. However, he quickly sized up the situation, and obtained the necessary working latitude from General Wheeler. He was an articulate, downright spokesman for the viewpoint of his superiors, ~~throughout the process.~~

The fourth working agency was CIA, with its senior China-Asia man, Harold Ford. He reported directly to John McCone, and drew on the full resources of the Agency, particularly the Office of National Estimates and the special group McCone had by then formed for day-by-day review of the Vietnam situation in all its aspects.

Finally, the White House was of course closely involved. McGeorge Bundy sat with Rusk and McNamara as an overall supervisory group, for scope, and participated fully in all the key meetings. His staff for Asian matters at this time consisted of Chester Cooper and James Thomson. Cooper still carried with him a large share of the responsibility he had had in CIA and in his divided CIA/White House duties of the first half of 1964. That is, he was regarded as a trouble-shooter on intelligence problems relating to Vietnam. Thomson, on the other hand, never immersed himself in the Vietnam

situation, but tended rather to keep a close eye on China and a watching eye on the rest of Asia. In November of 1964, both men received the papers, and Cooper participated fully in meetings of the Working Group. There, he did not seek to present any particular policy view, but rather to press for fullness and accuracy in the work.

All told, this was a full-scale mobilization of the relevant men in Washington. In contrast to the May/June and August/Septeember periods, when the papers had been seen by many but participated in by only a small circle, the papers in this review were available to a fairly wide professional circle, and the timing permitted extensive comment. After November, this was never true to the same extent, partly because of action urgencies, but partly because the President in particular became more and more concerned about the possibility of damaging leaks. It had always been his view that internal government deliberations must be private, to be frank and effective; he strongly shared the judgment that most observers of the Washington scene over the years -- most so-called "leaks" resulted either from stupidity or from a man wishing to carry his case to the public and, in effect, tilt the balance of decision in his own favor. For any such practice by subordinates, the President had absolutely no sympathy. Moreover, the President hated even to have it known that a particular problem was under intense scrutiny: over and over, speculation to this effect would cause him to issue public denials that any decision was imminent or any plan or recommendation before him -- and in private would make him slow down the process and defer the decision either way about the problem that had got itself into the newspapers.

In November of 1964, the press was -- as one looks it over from a distance of seven years -- remarkably restrained. Althought the gravity of the situation had been reported all through September and October, and

although the general goverment state of mind had been known since March, speculation during November was not acute.

There was a general feeling of "all passion spent" after the election -- perhaps similar to the feeling which, in the 1960 post-election period, obscured the emergence of the Laos crisis, and in 1968 was to produce a sharp drop in interest in the Paris talks. This seems to be one of the most marked down-points in the very striking cyclical character of American public sensitivity to foreign issues.

Nonetheless, the policy review was fully known. Right after the election, on November 5, Joseph Alsop summed up the situation in a column that bears quoting in full, since it shows how well the general situation and the government view were sensed by a well-informed reporter. He wrote:

> "After the long, loquacious nightmare of the election, the awakening is at hand. It is bound to be a rude awakening, however, even though it is nice to have the nightmare over. For some very ugly and difficult problems were put on the shelf for the duration of the campaign.
>
> At the head of the list is the unending, slowly deteriorating crisis in South Viet-Nam. Peace has been one of the campaign's most strongly stressed themes; yet we may be now heading into a decidedly unpeaceful period.
>
> In these last weeks there has been a marked, close-to-dramatic trend toward near unanimity on the central point. All the chief parties at interest--the State and Defense Departments, the intelligence analysts and the White House staff members--now agree that the U.S. cannot safely continue to deal with the Vietnamese crisis on the long established principle of 'more of the same medicine.'
>
> The level of United States aid has been repeatedly raised. Repeated attempts have been made to improve the efficiency of the United States team in charge of the problem. Some progress has been achieved by General Maxwell Taylor, most notably by the installation of a fairly acceptable civilian government which will nonetheless leave military authority strongly concentrated in the hands of General Khanh.

But here in Washington, and among the U.S. team in charge of in Saigon, no one of any consequence blinks at the fact that the anti-communist resistance in SVN is being slowly eroded at the base. The erosion was formerly discerned by a minority of policy makers and hopefully denied by the rest, but it is now generally admitted.

It is admitted too--and this is even more important-- that the erosion will not be halted in any of the easy ways, by further injections of U.S. money, men, and arms. Hence the stark choice looms between permitting the erosion to continue until the anti-communist resistance finally collapses, or taking extremely drastic measures to 'change the terms of the problem.'

'Changing the terms of the problem' is the new in-group phrase for changing the strange rules of a strange war --the rules which have permitted the Communist North Vietnamese to mount a long and murderous attack on South Viet-Nam without suffering any serious damage on their own territory to the north.

Last spring, the whole government gave serious consideration to the logical, if old-fashioned expedient of trying to halt the North Vietnamese aggression by making the North Vietnamese pay thru the nose for it. At that time, in quite large part because of the impending election, this hard decision was deferred. General Taylor and U. Alexis Johnson were then sent to Saigon to see what they could do.

General Taylor and his team at least prevented, or helped to prevent, the drastic and final deterioration that many expected to occur this fall. But one of the most important factors in the present situation is the reported conviction of General Taylor that no alternative now remains except to 'change the terms of the problem.'

Another important feature of the new situation is the posture of the intelligence analysts. Late last winter, the forecasters began to say that all might be lost in Viet-Nam, unless stern measures were promptly taken. In the late spring, however, greater stress began to be given to the grave possible consequences of stern measures against North Viet-Nam, such as Chinese Communist intervention on the spot or retaliation elsewhere.

Currently the line of the analysts--which is also the line of just about all of the policy makers--is that the risks of positive, decisive action are obvious and undeniable, but that these risks of action are also less grave than the risks of inaction. For it is more and more widely agreed that failure in South Viet-Nam will put the United States out of business as a Pacific power.

> The months of the campaign have been devoted to the elaboration of whole closets-full of contingency plans for action. Most of them are based on the principle of rolling, progressive retaliation against the North Vietnamese. Just before leaving for Texas, President Johnson ordered the contingency plans to be sorted out and costed out.
>
> This was no hasty, temporary response to the recent successful Communist attack on the U. S. B-57 bombers at Bien Hoa airfield. It was the beginning of a process of careful, painful choice which can be expected to take some time to produce a result. Nothing is likely to be more important in the time just ahead." *

(Other material from the press of the moment. Show quotes and general mood.)

Toward the end of the month, the problem of press ~~regulation~~ became considerably more acute. In another column, Alsop reported the substance of George Ball's basic position, while in Saigon General Taylor unintentionally triggered reports that he himself was taking a very hard position and even threatening to resign. The President's indignation at these events was vented unmistakeably during the last week of November, but did not affect the substance of the discussions so far as any of us could tell.

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* J. Alsop, Washington Post, November 4, 1964.

Workings of the First Phase

c. At the first two sessions of the Working Group, agreement was reached on a comprehensive outline: an intelligence assessment for Vietnam itself, a "hard look" at objectives and stakes, the setting forth of three broad courses of action, the full analysis of each of these, and a section on the immediate actions that were needed whatever choice was finally made. The Working Group left out any final recommendations, in part to avoid any premature taking of "agency positions" before the Principals had spoken. In the original outline, sections were also assigned on negotiations -- on which Robert Johnson did extensive work -- and on accompanying actions relating to Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. In the Working Group's report to the Principals, these last two were folded into the discussion of the three broad choices.

These choices were: an Option A that ~~simply~~ went on within existing policy (including the possibility of individual reprisal actions), an Option B that called for bombing the North with major attacks from the outset, and an Option C that called for a slow and gradual program of bombing the North, with the intent to keep maximum flexibility. All the Options, of course, dealt with the key element of negotiations, in ways that became central to the action debate. The presentation of each Option was designed to claim for it the maximum possible merit, while at the same time stating the disadvantages with honesty. In this spirit, Forrestal, McNaughton, and I did most of the original drafting for A, B, and C respectively -- but the latitude for comment made the "pros and cons" for each a composite product in the end. At heart, I think all three of us were personally "C men" from the start; McNaughton indeed made this evident to all with a first supporting paper on November 6 (PP, p. 365, Doc. 85), and my own private draft recommendation was

for Option C to begin in the new year. As senior civilians, and also the most clearly "political" members of a largely professional group, we nonetheless made an effort to see that all reasonable points were included and fairly stated.

Rusk, McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy checked the initial outlines, and on November 11th took to Texas the first drafts. ~~Since~~ The agenda for this one-day meeting with the President had many equally critical items, ~~it did not surprise me that~~ (and) no detailed guidance came back -- and I doubt if the President looked at the material. However, the Vietnam situation was discussed at some length, and it became clear that the President was distinctly wary of any quick decision, saw all the profound implications, and wanted every corner of the subject gone into. To jump ahead a little, he remained in Texas until the end of the month except for (two) short visits to Washington, and in Texas was focussed almost wholly on the usual budget matters and on pulling together the historic Great Society program that was to be the keystone of his elected Administration. All along he had believed that a great program of domestic reform can only be put through Congress "while the iron is hot" -- and in the first flush of a triumphant new Administration. In that November month, as he basked briefly in the election results and then worked and relaxed in the hill country he loved, his thoughts must have been torn. What was conveyed to his advisors, and surmised by others like myself who were only vaguely conscious of the full forces at work, was that he ~~xxx~~ would do what in the end seemed right, but that he wanted to walk every inch of the ground first, and not decide anything till he had to. (although this) It was a characteristic pre-decision attitude for him ~~but~~ that November the sense of challenge and potential cost must have been acute. Even a limited widening of the Vietnam war would cut right across the atmosphere and concentration

the President needed to get the Great Society approved and moving forward. The toughest choice of his Presidency was being foreshadowed unmistakeably in that beautiful Texas fall -- guns versus butter, lasting peace in Asia versus making America more humane, or trying to do both.

Meanwhile, in Washington the planners went ahead at full speed, with no mention at any time of domestic political factors. It may be worth saying right here that this remained the case straight through the months of decision, at my working level and in all meetings of working groups and of the Principals themselves. The impact of domestic politics is a key question concerning the ultimate decisions of both President Kennedy and President Johnson, and my own private "feel" for its significance will be found in Part II of this book. It figures very little in an account of events as seen from my position.

By the 17th, it had been decided (check) that Ambassador Taylor should return to Washington about Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, the 26th, and that he and the Principals should then meet prior to the President's full-scale return to Washington on the night of the 30th. In preparation, the Principals decided to meet themselves on the 24th. Accordingly, on the 17th the Working Group distributed a draft of over 100 double-spaced pages, which had been laboriously and critically edited and reviewed, line by line, within the Group, although no single member was bound to its wording. A 20-page draft summary was then done by me, and this, with the full text, some relevant cables from Ambassador Taylor, and a long list of key issues for discussion, filled the bulging notebooks of the Principals on the 24th. From that voluminous record and unusually careful and systematic discussion (of first session), there emerged endless points of detail on which students of the so-called decision-making process may wish to feast in years to come. As I saw it, the process

itself was as nearly neutral and complete as it can ever be. The real material for history lies in the substance of what was thought, and above all in the key points discussed below.

The Substance of Debate: Objectives and Stakes

d. All through the process, the immediate objectives of the United States were defined as the independence of South Vietnam and the restoration of the 1962 Accords for a neutralized Laos. The former was spelled out on occasion to mean the restoration of the essential provisions of the 1954 Accords (refer to earlier interpretation of these), and to require South Vietnam being free to receive external assistance. In these papers, the question of ultimate reunification was addressed only in working papers, in the sense that this issue should be resolved in time, by peaceful methods.

The factors that lay behind American policy were defined in the same terms as in my October memorandum, — from which in fact they were lifted: the general principle of helping countries defend their freedom, the specific consequences for Asia if Communist control of South Vietnam and Laos were brought about, and the importance of the two countries as test cases of Communist "wars of national liberation" worldwide. Frequently, through these and other papers, these wider stakes ~~and purposes~~ beyond Vietnam, ~~call them what you will~~, were embraced within a statement of "objectives," particularly in staff papers by McNaughton. I myself preferred, and generally adhered to, a formula that stuck first to what we were trying to achieve, or really to prevent, in Vietnam and went on to take up the wider factors as, in essence, measures of the importance of the achievement of these objectives, or of failure to do so. Thus, for clarity alone, I will use the phrase "measures of importance" to define this sector of the debate.

Still a third term must, alas, be introduced to cover a point argued throughout this first phase, the need for what were called "fallback objectives." McNaughton and I had both by this time come to stress what had, of course, been true all along — that there was a chance of failure in any event. The South

Vietnamese could collapse, cease to resist, and in some fashion make peace no matter what the US did. In such a case, no one seriously thought the US would carry on, although from time to time, in 1964 and later, the thought of doing so would be aired in a musing way by a few. To the decisive group at all times, it seemed as impossible to visualize in practice, ~~and perhaps in principle,~~ as trying to fight in France, against Germany, in the circumstances of the summer of 1940 after the French government had surrendered.* Hence, if we might fail in the task of preserving South Vietnam or Laos, we had to consider what we still wanted to achieve by the way we conducted ourselves. In the Working Group papers finally reviewed by the Principals, there were three of these "fallback objectives":

"1. To hold the situation together as long as possible, so that we have time to strengthen other areas of Asia.

2. To take forceful enough measures in the situation so that we emerge from it, even in the worst case, with our standing as the principal helper against Communist expansion as little impaired as possible.

3. To make clear to the world, and to nations in Asia particularly, that failure in South Vietnam, if it comes, was due to special local factors that do not apply to other nations we are committed

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* The discerning historian may note here that there have been cases, and honored ones, where an assisting power went on fighting on the territory of a nation whose official government had surrendered. Greece and Crete in 1941 was one such case -- others? Probably, if Rhee and the South Korean government had been captured or induced to surrender in early July of 1950, the United Nations and the US would have kept on with their military action. But no one would have argued that South Vietnam in 1964 or afterward, resembled these cases. This is, of course, part of the difference in degree that distinguished this part-civil, largely-political war from the standard case of aggression.

to defend -- that, in short, our will and ability to help those nations defend themselves is not impaired." (Vol. I, II, p. 3)

Of these, gaining time was always fully accepted as of great importance. The second -- what McNaughton and Forrestal in particular came to call the "good doctor" argument -- weighed heavily with McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and myself, as we shall see over and over in the next few months. In other language, it could have been described as "proving that the US honors its commitments" -- the firm nature of this particular commitment was accepted by all and because it was likewise agreed by all, as a fundamental premise of American policy all over the world, that the support of the United States and the credibility of American action were at this period of history the twin pillars of peace.

However, there was sharp disagreement as to the practical implications of the "good doctor" objective. In case of failure in Vietnam, would the US appear as a more reliable guarantor elsewhere for having tried? McNamara, McNaughton and I thought so, at least to the point where the effort in Vietnam appeared ~~firmly~~ plainly hopeless. Rusk and Ball thought that if we failed, wewould be worse off for having tried -- and in the end drew diametrically opposite conclusions. Rusk came to be convinced that if we did do more, we simply could not afford to fail; Ball never wavered that we should not try to do more, beyond the most temporary effort to get a balance.

I mention this important issue right at the start because, among other things, it helps to set the mood of the whole month and of those that followed it. Failure had been a distant streak of lightning through the summer and early fall; by late fall, its darkening shadow was in the council room every moment. In the deliberations of November, only Admiral Mustin objected to the inclusion of fallback objectives in the papers; it was the

honest position of a man of action, the forceful side of the Hamlet the policy group had become.

So much for objectives. On the "measures of importance," there were equally significant differences of relative emphasis and weight as between one factor and others.

As I had already written in October, I myself found the general principle of defending countries, and Vietnam as a test case of "wars of national liberation," to be essentially the same point in practice. In some cases, as in NATO or Korea, US commitments related to threats of a straight military nature; in other cases, US help, actual or potential, was keyed to a subversive type of threat. Both came down to the overall image of the US as wise, powerful and reliable. To want to preserve that image can be caricatured as simple Occidental "face" -- and I would not deny that it contained an element of that, of sheer pride. But Rusk and others who cared most about preserving the image had, I am sure, a much less nationalist and more idealist purpose; they believed, quite simply, what Rusk said over and over throughout his eight years as the American Secretary of State, that the world would run smack into the utter collapse of a third World War if like-minded nations did not work together to keep the peace, so demonstrably that others were deterred or defeated. In such an effort, the US role was central and indispensable. Hence, the US reputation was literally vital to human survival.

I think all of us accepted this in principle, although -- as I shall argue in the analysis to come in Part II -- this central premise of American policy in the 1960's did not mean at all that America was engaged equally in every problem. The United States was "the policeman of the world" only, by preference, alongside others, and certainly only where, in some combination, it had strategic interests, commitments, and a capacity to act.

All four points were thought to apply in South Vietnam, and the question was how the Vietnam case would affect the many cases around the world where the same points applied in significant degree.

The difference in the Vietnam policy debate, not merely in November but thereafter, came in the geographic application of the principle. Many of the policy group, myself included, did not believe that the outcome in Vietnam would necessarily affect the role of the United States in Europe or Latin America -- "commitment" areas both -- or even in the Middle East, where in the key case of Israel there was no formal commitment but a heavy degree of reliance on the US in a pinch. In a university phrase, we might have said that these tubs could stand on their own bottom, if the US subsequently showed such an intent. For the key NATO case, in particular, I at least was inclined to agree with George Ball's argument that while acting to the point of extremis in Vietnam might prove our reliability to Europe, we might at the same time end up subject to the damaging charge of caring more about Asia than about Europe. Either way, if you chose to look at it in personal terms, de Gaulle had the US on a cleft stick, and would probably make the most of the occasion.

There was a real difference of view here, and it was to color in an important way the presentation of the whole Vietnam policy to the American public in the years to come. To some LBJ speechwriters -- Richard Goodwin in a readily quotable example -- the "commitment" argument was utterly secondary and meaningless, so much so that he and others would deny even that the US had ever had formal/a commitment under SEATO, or at least had ever relied on it. (Citations.) To Secretary Rusk and on occasion to the President, at the other extreme, the "commitment" argument and its worldwide importance were central and paramount. Between the two schools was the view that I personally took with others: we never for a moment doubted that US prestige and

a US commitment were key parts of the American stake in the Vietnam conflict, but believed that the principal damage from failure was in relation to Asia and above all China, perhaps reaching as far to the West as India and even to the then-shaky situation in Iran, but not in any critical way beyond. For us, the "commitment" argument was above all intertwined with what seemed to us the greatest American stake -- the role of the United States in Asia and the underlying balance of peace there.

One must not dwell unduly on this point, nor was it a center of debate in November of 1964. Instead, the focus on debate was on the consequences in Asia itself, if South Vietnam were to be taken over. By nailing down how very grave a view the senior policy circle took on this point, the debate made unimportant, for decision purposes, the difference of emphasis between the "commitment" and "Asia" schools. If the weight of Vietnam for American policy had to be, in figurative terms, a measure of 8 (units of importance) to warrant tough action, then it mattered little whether the weight placed on the worldwide commitment point was 6 or 3 (out units,) if the weight on the Asia point came out at 5-6 for everyone (save Ball, whose total was of course less than the hypothetical 8 anyway). And this, in effect is what happened in the policy circle of late November, in what seemed to me -- as I wrote in the opening chapter of this book - the most critical single moment in all the policy debates of 1961 through 1965.

The issue was joined squarely, within the Working Group, by Admiral Mustin. The main text, drafted by me, followed closely the same line that I had stated in my October memorandum: while the domino theory was too pat, the fall of South Vietnam would mean the collapse of Laos and a high degree of accommodation by Sihanouk in Cambodia. Thailand would then be the key and focus, along with a Malaysia already threatened by Sukarno's

confrontation campaign. The shock wave might break over them in short order; in any event they would be under continuing pressure and would see in what had happened to Vietnam a demonstration that the US could not be counted on. Thus, a collapse of their will to stay independent was entirely possible. This in turn would virtually make SEA a sphere of communist influence or domination, and with this the case the effect on India and Japan could be serious. At each stage, there would be a chance to hold, but it would be very difficult to do so once the tide was running.

It was not a satisfactory judgment -- too many "ifs" and no clear ultimate guess on the odds of collapse all over the area. But it was the best I could do, and was generally accepted by the civilians in the group as being in the right tone of "dark grey" uncertainty.

Admiral Mustin, however, took the straight domino view, arguing that the collapse of SEA was as good as inevitable. Thailand would no longer have the slightest confidence in the US, all over the area the US would be seen as in total retreat, and the Communists would rapidly fill the vacuum.

So the views stood, as the paper came to the Principals for review on the 24th. Prior to that meeting, I went off by myself to try to produce a more specific and convincing discussion, leading to the "light grey" conclusion that the rest of Southeast Asia would somehow stand, if the US carried on strongly, even after a Communist takeover in South Vietnam. It was a private paper, designed only for the two Secretaries, and presented to them on the 23d in a brief private meeting (check). However, both at once rejected it as simply not persuasive, and I myself came to share that view. I would still not have accepted the conclusion of <u>inevitable</u> collapse, but the problems of carrying on did come to seem nearly insuperable.

Thus, at the meeting of the 24th, the consensus of the Principals, Ball alone dissenting, was that the likely outcome would be "in the direction of" the Mustin conclusion, and "somewhat more serious" than my original draft. Not perhaps "black," this "very dark grey" conclusion seemed to me an important and indeed climactic point in the discussions. What it meant was that the stakes, the total "measures of importance," were being set very high indeed -- by a group exposed at the same time to a full dose of difficulty and gloom. All through the Fifties and early Sixties, I had participated in NSC papers, working statements, and in a few cases public statements saying that Vietnam was in some sense the key to Southeast Asia. Now, in the particular historic circumstances of November 1964, which I tried to summarize in the last chapter on "East Asia on the Eve" -- this was a judgment that was not the blind repetition of past rhetoric, but a living and crucial judgment in the toughest of circumstances.

At the same time, the November review reaffirmed a central policy premise that runs through the whole account of American policy in Vietnam. If preserving the independence of South Vietnam had at the end of 1964 from all standpoints put together, a weight of 8, in American policy as a whole, a war between the United States and China had at all times a negative weight of 10, but for the courageous Admiral Mustin, I do not believe this factor would appear in any way in the papers in explicit form; in response to drafts that by implication treated the risk of war with China as paramount, his argument was that American power was so devastating that the Chinese must, in a pinch, back down and avoid a showdown. In other words, the argument that did rage over whether Option B or C involved greater risk of war with China -- to which we shall return in the next chapter -- assumed that any such war would be a national disaster.

The reader will see that this attitude was significantly different

from some that had been expressed in 1961 policy debates. Then military men, and on one occasion a senior liberal civilian, had at least thought out loud that perhaps war with China was inevitable and better faced then than later. So real had the possibility seemed that there had raged an intense discussion over whether nuclear weapons should be used against China, rather than trying to stem an avalanche of Chinese manpower into Southeast Asia by conventional military force.

In the intervening years, a similar debate on the nuclear threshold had been at the center of the NATO problem. Largely because of Secretary McNamara's personal convictions and force, the American position had shifted from an early reliance on nuclear weapons to a strategy that went to great lengths to use conventional forces even in central Germany, and to make a nuclear decision just as deliberate and controlled as possible.

The thinking behind this critical change in military policy had never been publicly extended to Asia.* Over and over, as we have seen in the account of Secretary Rusk's conversations of the spring of 1964, the assumption was that any war with China would involve at least grave decisions, with heavy cost either way, on the use of nuclear weapons. To be sure, the growth of American conventional capabilities had meant that American medium and heavy bombers were now equipped to operate with conventional bombs (which had not been the case in 1960), and far-sighted men in Washington could see that in a showdown with China the US now had an adequate deterrent threat -- potentially visible in Peking -- of external destruction without the use of nuclear weapons.

But all this was in the realm of theory and contingency planning. What mattered, for action purposes, was the conviction that if China ever

* On the contrary, Secretary McNamara and General Taylor had both thought hard about reducing American forces in Korea, in the face of strong and articulate argument that this could lower the threshold at which nuclear weapons would have to be used.

intervened massively in Vietnam or Southeast Asia, the resulting war would be a world disaster whether it stayed at the conventional level or not. If the US did confine itself to conventional forces, it would be Korea raised to the n^{th} power; as for nuclear weapons, thoughtful and totally anti-Communist Asian leaders had quietly warned Americans that at least in the context of the mid-1960's the Western power that used them first in Asia would incur a legacy of hatred that would warp the relation between East and West for generations to come.

Thus, major war with China was to be avoided. At all costs? Hardly, for it had to be honestly admitted that any action against North Vietnam involved a degree of risk above o%, of miscalculation or human error alone. But, for practical purposes, any action that involved significant risk of bringing on a war with China bore a heavy burden of proof. Similarly, the assumption concerning nuclear weapons -- expressly stated at one spontaneous and pregnant moment of a Principals' meeting -- was that in practice this would never be considered short of a case where large numbers of American forces faced imminent destruction in the most literal sense. Whatever had been accomplished in Korea in 1953 by the threat of nuclear weapons, no such threat was ever envisaged in the Vietnam policy deliberations at any stage. It is a major difference between American strategic thinking of the 1950's and that of the 1960's -- and, one might add, between President Johnson and "President Goldwater."

In short, the discussion of objectives and stakes in November of 1964 reached some central conclusions and reaffirmed others. Vietnam was worth a great deal, and failure there would be an extremely serious blow to American policy in the world and in Asia -- somewhat differently emphasized by different individuals. But preserving an independent South Vietnam,

however important, did not warrant taking serious risks of war with China. These were not easy guidelines within which to find a course of action. Were they a prescription for bricks without straw?

The View of the Problem in Vietnam

e. The intelligence contribution to the Working Group, for the most part, repeated judgments concerning South Vietnam that had been stated in early October. These had come in the intervening period to be pretty much accepted by the policy circle reading the cables from day to day.

From those cables, one could see the Huong government wrestling courageously with the twin threats of disruption from the Buddhists and students and of military non-cooperation. Both were all too visible: the cities remained disorderly, and there were some reports suggesting that military leaders were in league with the demonstrators, or at least wished to stay on good political terms with them. So, although Huong himself made a strong personal impression, and General Khanh seemed on the whole to be behaving himself, as well as making the right noises to Taylor about teamwork, the best that Taylor or intelligence draftsmen in Washington could see was that the government might hang on. There seemed little chance that in the next few months it would become even minimally effective in terms of real leadership in the pacification program -- and no small chance that it would collapse. The test of government in SVN had boiled down almost to whether there was enough to support a greater effort by the US to help the country dig out.

With this political evaluation went the more hopeful judgment that the South Vietnamese armed forces were, in military terms, in fairly good shape. Despite the evidence of continuing high rate of desertions, the military events since mid-September had contained no new setbacks, and the

judgment throughout November, and for some months thereafter for most of the policy circle, was that barring a political collapse the South Vietnamese armed forces would remain adequate to deal with the Viet Cong at past levels of help from Hanoi. Political weakness in the South was the vital problem; if it could be controlled or some improvement achieved, then the military situation would go along all right. The question was put to the Principals: were we "safe in assuming that SVN can only come apart for morale reasons, and not in a military sense as well?" The consensus answer was, in effect, that military defeat was not a serious danger.

This was, of course, a crucial judgment which was to be totally belied by events in the next six months. In part, the connection between politics and military performance was once again discounted as it had been in the fall of 1963. In part, the Viet Cong's local capacity was set too low. In part, however, the error was tied to another judgment, concerning the degree of intervention that North Vietnam was already exercising and would exercise in the coming months.

As of late November, 1964, there were warning signals on increased infiltration from the North. Following Taylor's cable of mid-October, MACV had done a new assessment, concluding that infiltration in every year since 1959 had probably been considerably greater than earlier estimates. For 1964, the study estimated a large increase over 1963, but the totals were still a shade below the top year of 1962. Apart from the changes in numbers, the 1964 flow appeared to consist heavily of native North Vietnamese. This was in contrast to earlier years when the flow had been native Southerners, almost all men who had gone north at the time of the 1954 Accords, and then been trained at the special schools developed by Hanoi specifically for the purpose of eventual action in the South.

The fact that the men might be native Northerners was not of legal or policy significance, for reasons already explained. (Refer to earlier chapter.) It might simply mean that Hanoi had run out of native Southerners. Or it might mean more -- that Hanoi was less concerned than in the past to conceal its involvement in the war, and from an inexhaustible reservoir of men was starting to pull out all the stops.

In the review of November, this last conclusion was mentioned, but not yet viewed as likely. On the contrary, the Washington intelligence agencies initially treated the MACV study with great reserve. Its base of data was admittedly thin -- principally the careful interrogation of about 200 prisoners. This process was conducted by South Vietnamese under American guidance that had much increased during the year as a result of Washington's continual pressing for better hard evidence. The South Vietnamese for a long time could not be brought to see how it mattered where a man had come from. To them, quite understandably, one Viet Cong was like another at this stage. (Later the number of Northerners, with their different accents, caused a distinct separation.) MACV now had twice as much evidence as in the spring, and moreover had introduced new categories of estimate, to cover the cases where only a single item of evidence established a group or unit; prior to this, the requirement of a second confirming item of proof, document or interrogation, had been rigidly adhered to. Doubtless, this kept all concerned to a high standard -- equally, many of us had long suspected, it tended to understate what was going on. Moreover, some of us thought that in periods when the military trends were adverse and prisoners few, as throughout 1964, there was an increased chance of underestimation. But these were thoughts in the back of policy-makers' minds. The Washington intelligence agencies remained very rigorous in their view of

evidence and estimate. Yet by the beginning of December 1964 they had moved a considerable distance, and the conclusion seemed solid and even conservative that, while the main elements of Communist strength in SVN were still indigenous (as had been emphasized since March), the North Vietnamese contribution was "substantial" and might now be "growing."

Could Hanoi call off the VC effort? The intelligence answer was that orders from Hanoi to reduce or end the insurrection would largely be obeyed. Moreover, if Hanoi in practice stopped its direction and support to the VC, the South Vietnamese could in time probably reduce the insurrection to manageable proportions. Thus, in theory, whatever ended/either North Vietnam's will or its capacity to continue would reduce the war to a local police problem (in which the US would not need to be significantly engaged). In practice, the drafts looked at the far more likely case -- what if military action merely destroyed many targets and reduced the elements of North Vietnamese support? The best guess was that this would give South Vietnam a breathing spell and a chance.

These were the basic intelligence judgments on Hanoi's role in the South. As we shall see, both intelligence men and policy-makers became fuzzy when they tried to assess what particular bombing programs would cause Hanoi to do, by way of cutting back and moving to negotiation in particular. But the connection between Hanoi and the war in the South was if anything believed to be more important in the fall of 1964 than at earlier periods. While the real key remained in the South, and especially now in the political/morale area, any action that reduced the North Vietnamese contribution could make an essential difference.

If one had to summarize this important judgment -- hammered out over months of debate and review of hypothetical programs, scenarios, and war games --

intelligence was saying by the fall of 1964 that military action against North Vietnam could help modestly to give the South Vietnamese army and government a fighting chance to reverse the steady downward trend. It was a light-orange light at most.

The Rejection of Option A: In Essence, a Decision Not to Withdraw

f. At the very beginning of the process, Option A had been framed to be essentially a continuation of existing policy. The only significant change was the idea of conducting reprisal actions not merely against another Gulf of Tonkin incident (that is, against US military forces not engaged in Vietnam), but against any VC spectacular attack in the South. Some small additional action in Laos was also included, but essentially the prescription was the same as the early September NSAM 314 -- which in any reasonable interpretation had not been followed in the decision not to retaliate for Bien Hoa.

Consistently with its definition, Option A excluded a US initiative for negotiations. As my paper of October had merely again demonstrated, no one in the policy circle could see any hope of fruitful negotiations in the existing balance of forces within South Vietnam. All felt that the US and South Vietnam would be in a hopeless position, even if the mere entry into negotiations did not bring about a collapse of any viable Saigon government.

Yet Option A did not exclude negotiations. If things continued to go badly, someone in Saigon -- in or out of government -- would probably start to deal with the NLF for a coalition, leading to a Vietnamese "deal" that would produce, on the Polish model, a Communist takeover and eventual merger with the North. Faced with this prospect, the US could stand aside or seek to cover its retreat by internationalizing the negotiations. For this, George Ball early in the month produced a script for a reconvened

Geneva Conference, with the US objective to be supervised domestic elections in which the NLF could freely participate. No paper tried to assess how likely the achievement of this objective, or its consequences, would be: I think the prevailing view would clearly have been that at most the conference would create a smokescreen of some sort to conceal in some degree the fact that North Vienam would henceforth control the South.

At any rate, the unanimous judgment of the Working Group was that -- ~~with~~ whatever negotiating tactic might be adopted -- Option A, ~~carried~~ as a result (Option carried out) ~~or~~ indefinitely, offered little hope of getting North Vietnam out of the South or establishing an independent South Vietnam. It was, in short, tantamount to US withdrawal, and to abandoning the effort to sustain South Vietnam.

The historian of the Pentagon Papers asserts that this Option was rejected simply because it was, on its face, inconsistent with the March 1964 NSAM stating US objectives in Vietnam, and without debate. This is far too simple and pat. No one in the policy circle felt bound by past statements of objectives -- although they were strenuously argued on occasion by Admiral Mustin as defining the Working Group's task or views. Past words were not a factor, nor was there a failure to examine what the abandonment of the enterprise would mean. On the contrary, the Working Group paper found two comparative advantages to a failure outcome: that the US would be less implicated than if it tried the stronger options, and failed, and that a Vietnamese-negotiated deal would lead (4) a unified Communist Vietnam, which in turn would reassert its traditional hostility to Communist China and confine its own ambitions to Laos and Cambodia. In such a case, the outcome in Thailand was hard to judge, but some sort of accommodation to China seemed likely.

It was not a harsh or tendentious picture of the consequences of sticking to existing policy, and rejecting the stronger Options B and C. In effect, the US could let South Vietnam go; the question was whether, with these two "advantages" taken into account, the consequences for Southeast Asia and for the American role in Asia would be bearable.

The bureaucratic record is straightforward -- on November 24th, Option A was dismissed by the Principals, and never further pursued as a long-term course. Elements from it were included in the short-range program to which we turn in the next chapter on the action debate. But the idea of letting go was rejected at the level of the President's senior advisors, without extensive ~~frontal~~ argument, but with a clear relation to the other two main judgments I have named as coming out of this first phase. In effect, if it was accepted that (a) the consequences of a Communist takeover would be extremely serious, and that (b) there was some hope that stronger action could improve the situation and avoid this result, it followed that (c) ~~rejecting stronger action and~~ letting events take their course -- what Option A amounted to -- was to be eliminated as a course of action.

In the osmosis of a top-level policy meeting, no one said this in so many words. In my record of the meeting of November 24th, what is specific is the summary of points (a) and (b), and the fact that the meeting simply skipped over all questions relating to Option A as a long-term course. Obviously, this was not a snap decision, or made on that day in this set of minds. It had been brewing for a year and more, and foreshadowed in the negative cast of the Working Group (DPC) itself. All the weight of years of thinking entered into the view that somehow the US must see this one through -- in the words I used in a summary afterward. So far as I can tell, the President never questioned the view thus reaffirmed, so that it became a decision

early the following week. This was not the crossing of the Rubicon, but it was a decision not to pull back from it.

One other point should be made about this vitally important decision. I have tried to demonstrate that the option of withdrawal was honestly presented, and as fairly argued as normal men can do. Yet any reader will see that in the balance of argument, totally inadequate weight was given to the potential costs of trying stronger action. In this critical month, these costs did not seem to include any possibility that large US ground forces would be needed, and the scope of bombing programs -- even the toughest considered -- seemed limited in both cost and damage. Although the best available military forecasts were used and the general sense was that things could get tough, the picture in everyone's mind was infinitely short of the later reality. The rejection of withdrawal, when the costs of carrying on seemed moderate, undoubtedly carried its own immense weight of inertia when the costs became visibly greater. This is what happens in many human enterprises. It is certainly what was foreshadowed in the November policy review of 1964.

Defining an Eventual Bombing Program and Its Relation to Negotiations

f. Finally, the first phase discussions -- through November 24th -- served in important ways to define what kind of bombing program against the North might eventually be employed. For practical purposes, the "hard and fast" Option B was discarded, and Option C, the gradual program, was adjusted and refined.

As the Working Group had seen it, Option B called for pressure actions against the North at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption, until the full American objectives were achieved. If international pressures and actions led to some form of negotiations, the U.S. would in any event both keep up its military actions and adhere inflexibly to its negotiating position in any conference or other forum.

One immediate need was to refine exactly what this meant in military terms, and in the Principals' meeting of the 24th it had been agreed that it must mean early air attacks on North Vietnam's principal air fields to neutralize North Vietnam's small jet air strength. The whole scale of South Vietnamese and American air effort envisaged in November 1964 was fairly samll -- the merest fraction of what was eventually deployed under later decisions and the relentless pressure of events. All told, the strike air power to be used even for Option B was, at this point, planned to be on the order of 150 aircraft, with a substantial South Vietnamese role using propeller-driven aircraft. The last, in particular, was out of the question if North Vietnam used its jet fighters, and even the US jet effort could be substantially harassed. Hence the military

logic of this point, as being crucial to the concept of Option B.

As airfield attacks were being accepted as integral to this approach, there was a more basic decision. It concerned the possibility that Option B might also include a ground invasion of the North, not designed to capture Hanoi but rather to establish a lodgment that would then force Hanoi to pull back and make peace in the South. Contingency plans for this purpose had been refined, and were discussed in general terms at the meeting of the 24th. The consensus was quick and emphatic. Such action, however effective it might potentially be, ran far too great a risk of bringing in the Chinese. Regardless of its actual limited purposes, it could not be expected that Hanoi or Peking would interpret it as anything but a mortal thrust. The record of that meeting is that the idea was put to one side, as a "detachable" part of Option B that might be reconsidered as things moved on. In fact, the rejection turned out to be lasting, quite apart from the demise of Option B itself.

With early airfield attacks and even without ground invasion, Option B seemed in November of 1964 too risky General Wheeler argued that it was the only course that had a strong chance of achieving the full U.S. objectives, and that the risks of war with China were not significant. On both counts, his colleagues among the Principals were skeptical or in disagreement. A really battered Hanoi might dig in all the harder, and as to the Chinese one simply could not say -- except that the rapid pace alone would make them decide under some emotional pressure and without time to

take in any messages of limited U.S. intent that reached them. Such were the arguments presented with special force by McNamara and supported by Rusk, who referred specifically to the Cuba missile crisis as showing how time to think permitted a solution. (DOD 42) Behind them, although I cannot recall it was ever mentioned specifically, was surely not only the Cuban experience of success by gradual methods, but the ghost of the Yalu debacle of 1950. If the Chinese came to think the U.S. was out to destroy North Vietnam, would not the situation be essentially similar to MacArthur's advance to the top of North Korea fourteen years before? Regardless of Hanoi's inhibitions against seeking Chinese aid, must it not then do so? And, in any case, how could one be sure?

This was surely the decisive factor,* and -- as on many other points -- the debate of November 1964 reflected a viewpoint that was to prove lasting. Like others, the conclusion was not a brand-new one, but rather formed slowly over a long time. This time it was out in the open, after a day in court.

In formal terms, the Joint Chiefs' continued advocacy of Option B meant that it survived into the discussions and papers that followed Ambassador Taylor's return on November 26th. In this respect, it was unlike Option A, which had no such institutional support. The reprieve, however, was short, and the outcome never in doubt. A terse summary of

* A desire to avoid early negotiations coming about under B had nothing to do with the rejection of B, contrary to the Pentagon Papers. (PP, P. 326.) On the contrary, Option B was all along tougher than any version of Option C concerning every aspect of negotiations.

the Joint Chiefs' view appeared in the November 29th draft Position Paper, designed for the President, but was deleted on November 30th from the version that actually went to the President that night.**

Was the President thus deprived by his Advisors of the chance to consider and judge the matter for himself? I doubt it very much. Although he had not participated in the formal meetings of the previous week, he must have known of this crucial consensus among his advisors. There is every evidence, then and later, that he shared completely its two central points: (1) no bombing program in the North should be such as to run significant risks of bringing in China, which in turn meant that it must not appear to threaten North Vietnam's existence; and (2) a hard and sharp program, as of 1964-65 at any rate, was above the acceptable level of risk.

Thus, it came to be completely accepted that the military elements of any bombing program would be gradual in character. As I have just noted, the planned weight of the whole effort -- while substantial -- was on a scale far below what was eventually done.

Apart from the pace and weight of bombing the North, there was one important military element in Option C which was proposed, discussed fairly fully, and in the end rejected. This was the immediate introduction of a substantial ground force combat unit, roughly of division size, into the northern part of South Vietnam.

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* See Pentagon Papers, p. 378.

The idea of making such a deployment came, I think, originally from Walt Rostow in the State Department Policy Planning Council. Viewing a strong demonstration of U.S. will as the crucial factor, Rostow argued in memoranda to Rusk and McNamara during November for large deployments to the Pacific, a semi-ultimatum to Hanoi, and then sending ground forces to SVN to show that the U.S. was prepared to meet whatever North Vietnam (or China) might do by way of sending ground forces into the South in response to the bombing of the North. Concededly, there did not seem to be a military need for such a force at this stage, nor was it argued that Hanoi was about to pour down its organized divisions. (As of early December, organized North Vietnamese military units had not yet been detected. The case was primarily one of psychological effect, to deter and face down the North and thus potentially to wind things up without ever having to do much more on the ground. (Refer to Hilsman, in March 1965 hearings.)

A second purpose, less strongly argued but with some appeal, was that it might serve as a vehicle to bring in the cooperative SEATO countries who might include Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Thailand, and the Philippines.*

In the Working Group, the proposal was taken seriously, and spelled out at some length, with its pros and cons, in the papers that went to the Principals on the 24th. There it met a mixed reception, as did the more strictly military proposal, backed by the Chiefs, to send security troops to the main airfields in SVN at Danang and Bien Hoa.

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* Thomson idea that it would serve as a bargianing lever?

In the end, through discussions that I do not have recorded, the idea died away. Although it kept coming up into December, it was for practical purposes shelved by December 19th. I believe the reason was that any deployment of ground forces on the scale of a division would seem to herald a true land war in Asia -- a prospect that seemed in fact remote at this point, and likely to have a very negative effect on the American public. Only demonstrated military need could support such a drastic step.

The main focus of debate concerning Option C turned, however, on its negotiating elements, which in turn related directly to the degree of firmness with which the whole course would be pursued. Here, the Joint Chiefs on November 23 had presented a paper criticizing the existing Option C sharply, and proposing an "Option C-prime" - still their second choice only after the clear-cut Option B - that was militarily gradual but tough on negotiations. Others came to share at least part of this view, so that the concept of Option C was significantly modified in a more unyielding direction.

To understand exactly what the change meant, and its limits, it is necessary to look first at the analysis of negotiating possibilities and positions that entered into the Working Group papers. This part of the work was done, in the first instance, by Robert Johnson of the Policy Planning Council. By my decision, his analysis was not kept and expanded as a separate section of the Report, but rather dispersed and abbreviated

into other sections of a more tactical nature. The result was unfortunate, certainly for historical reconstruction and quite possibly for clarity of thought at the time.

What Robert Johnson envisaged as the American negotiating position was, in the terms and climate of 1964, forthcoming and imaginative -- well ahead in key respects of almost anything that was appearing in American public comment at the time. (Citations.) He analyzed in detail the key provisions of the 1954 Accords -- which ones could be kept and which would require re-working -- and gave a realistic assessment of the problem of enforcing any cease-fire and of ascertaining and proving the withdrawal of elements introduced from North Vietnam. As areas of possible compromise, he singled out the nature and loopholes of supervisory arrangements for cease-fire and withdrawal, the question of free elections in South Vietnam including permission for the NLF to operate as a legitimate political party, and political consultations between North and South Vietnam. (Check Pre-P file.)

What neither he nor anyone else involved in the Working Group exercise envisaged was the kind of basic "compromise" that would accept either the North Vietnamese desire for coalition in the South or the French idea for neutralization of Indochina. Implicitly, both were categorically rejected as amounting, in effect, to giving up the independence of South Vietnam. This might come about by events, but not by active US negotiation.

Thus, the Working Group offered the Principals only thin gruel as the diet of negotiations, if and when they were entered into. There was a

little "give" in terms of accompanying supervision, but hardly any to be foreseen on the fundamental points of assuring Hanoi's effective withdrawal and arrangements under which the South could survive. Between terms that amounted, if not to Hanoi's surrender, at least to its giving up for a long time the effort to get control of the South, and terms from Hanoi that seemed to assure such control -- was there a middle ground? Not that anyone in the American policy circle could see in 1964.*

How then could the war end? The thin wedge of hope in the Working Group's presentation of Option C was that Hanoi might, either in negotiation or tacitly, agree to let up in the military effort in the South -- meaning a reduction or ending of support from the North and orders to the VC to go underground, as in 1954. This would not be a lasting settlement, but would give the South a respite in which to find itself.

Toward this modest goal, the original tactical outline of Option C called for "indicating from the outset a willingness to negotiate in an affirmative sense, accepting the possibility that we might not achieve our full objectives." Thus, some form of communication with Hanoi or Peking went right alongside the series of graduated military moves, first in Laos and then against North Vietnam itself. Most specifically, the analysis looked favorably on some sort of truncated Geneva Conference group drawing to this extent on Ball's scenario for "pull-out" negotiations. Thus, the Option C developed by the Working Group -- while it envisaged a

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* Refer to later text.

full range of ultimate military pressures against the North -- proposed to use these, not only more gradually then Option B, but much less implacably. This was carried to the point of being prepared to drop actions against the North altogether if a negotiating situation came about.

In the action debate of late November, this strategy came to be known within the policy circle as the "soft C." As McNaughton and I, its chief authors, admitted readily, its prospects for achieving a lastingly independent South Vietnam were not great. It fitted more with keeping U.S. involvement and risks down, and with the fallback objectives of buying time in Asia and showing Asians that the U.S. would go to some lengths to support a commitment despite local weakness.

Others besides the Joint Chiefs found this concept and strategy too little to settle for. My notes show McGeorge Bundy on the 24th speaking of a firmer way of conducting Option C, while Secretary Rusk thought that early American initiatives for a conference would have serious adverse effects on South Vietnamese morale. The Principals judged that a combination of military pressures and negotiating feelers could be conducted "under the klieg lights of a democracy" -- as my framed question put it -- but most of them, in the course of the debate, came to feel that a pattern of military pressure had to be truly established before there was any chance that Hanoi would be disposed to do anything meaningful in negotiations. Moreover, the set of the discussion was more inclined to the view that military actions against the North could not simply stop with the opening of negotiations.

Thus there emerged a harder concept of the gradual bombing program's negotiating aspects, even before Taylor's return. His own view was then strongly expressed -- that there should not be negotiations until North Vietnam was "hurting" -- and this, in my recollection, clinched the consensus. Taylor also thought the terms for stopping bombing should be very stiff.

Chapter 19: HALF A DECISION

a. With the return of Ambassador Taylor, there ensued between November 27 and November 30 a further series of meetings without the President. He then presided at decisive meetings on December 1-3. From broad assessments and alternatives, the debate at this stage shifted to action problems.

At Taylor's particular urging, the President decided to take the gamble of trying to bring about a real improvement in South Vietnamese political cohesion by, in effect, offering the "carrot" of stronger US military support if Saigon pulled itself together. With this decision went the first discussion of whether a bombing program could be justified as a last resort, even if the government did not become more cohesive.

Accordingly, the final decision was to proceed for a period of thirty days with a slightly stronger military program, while trying the effect of the "carrot" and also seeking to bring friendly countries to take more action. Then, tentatively, there would be a transition to the gradual and systematic program of military pressure against the North. It was a half-decision; the later phase was not firmly decided, and could in the end have been rejected. Yet the intervening steps were bound to force the issue one way or the other.

Ambassador Taylor's Position

b. All through the November review, Ambassador Taylor had been kept generally posted, and submitted a series of cables giving his broad views. On November (19th), Michael Forrestal was dispatched with a full set of the Working Group papers, so that Taylor had a thorough chance to review these and to get from Forrestal the "feel" of Washington thinking before his departure on November 25.

Thus, Taylor's memorandum of November 27 (reproduced in part in the Pentagon Papers, Document 87, pp. 370-373), was a complete statement of what he thought and what he considered had to be done.

Taylor's review of the situation reads today as perhaps the bluntest high-level appraisal in the whole story of American policy in Vietnam. It found a "mounting feeling of war-weariness and hopelessness," particularly in the urban areas of South Vietnam. Taylor noted that "there seems to be a national attribute which makes for factionalism and limits the development of a truly national spirit."

Yet, on the other side, the Viet Cong had shown "an amazing ability to maintain morale," and extraordinary recuperative powers in the face of heavy losses. Not attempting to weigh the underlying reasons for this Viet Cong toughness - (such as) ideology, belief in a nationalist cause, organization and indoctrination - Taylor focussed on the question of support from the North. His analysis concluded:

"Undoubtedly one cause for the growing strength of the Viet-Cong is the increased direction and support of their campaign by the government of North Viet-Nam. This direction and support take the form of endless radioed orders and instructions, and the continuous dispatch to South Viet-Nam of trained cadre and military equipment over infiltration routes by land and by water. While in the aggragate, this contribution to the guerrilla campaign over the years must represent a serious drain on the resources of the DRV, that government shows no sign of relaxing its support of the Viet-Cong. In fact, the evidence points to an increased contribution over the last year, a plausible development, since one would expect the DRV to press hard to exploit the obvious internal weaknesses in the south.

If, as the evidence shows, we are playing a losing game in South Viet-Nam, it is high time we change and find a better way. To change the situation, it is quite clear that we need to do three things: first, establish an adequate government in SVN; second, improve the conduct of the counter-insurgency campaign; and finally, persuade or force the DRV to stop its aid to the Viet-Cong and to use its directive powers to make the Viet-Cong desist from their efforts to overthrow the government of South Viet-Nam."*

Taylor then went at great length into ways to strengthen the Saigon Government and improve pacification. Since a strengthened government was fundamental to improvement on any front, particularly to pacification, he stressed the idea of informing Huong and Khanh of the stronger actions the US was considering, working out cooperative arrangements, and seeing if this did not improve their performance.** His conclusions added up to doing all that could be done for the best, while thinking of what to do if the worst occurred:

"It seems perfectly clear that we must work to the maximum to make something out of the present Huong

* Pentagon Papers, p. 372

** These passages are omitted from the Pentagon Papers.

government or any successor thereto. While doing so, we must be thinking constantly of what we would do if our efforts are unsuccessful and the government collapses. Concurrently, we should stay on the present in-country program, intensifying it as possible in proportion to the current capabilities of the government. To bolster the local morale and restrain the Viet-Cong during this period, we should step up the 34-A operations, engage in bombing attacks and armed recce in the Laotian corridor and undertake reprisal bombing as required. It will be important that United States forces take part in the Laotian operations in order to demonstrate to South Viet-Nam our willingness to share in the risks of attacking the North.

If this course of action is inadequate, and the government falls then we must start over again or try a new approach. At this moment, it is premature to say exactly what these new measures should be. In any case, we should be prepared for emergency military action against the North if only to shore up a collapsing situation. (ITALICS ADDED.)

If, on the other hand, as we hope, the government maintains and proves itself, then we should be prepared to embark on a methodical program of mounting air attacks in order to accomplish our pressure objectives vis-a-vis the DRV and at the same time do our best to improve in-country pacification program. We will leave negotiation initiatives to Hanoi. Throughout this period, our guard must be up in the Western Pacific, ready for any reaction by the DRV or of Red China."*

Finally, Taylor's last paragraph suggested three principles to which the US should adhere whatever the course of events:

"a. Do not enter into negotiations until the DRV is hurting.

b. Never let the DRV gain a victory in South Viet-Nam without having paid a disproportionate price.

c. Keep the GVN in the forefront of the campaign and the negotiations."**

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* Pentagon Papers, p. 373

** Omitted from the Pentagon Papers version

These three "principles" call for some comment. The first remained Taylor's firm position and became of course central to later decisions concerning bombing halts and negotiating initiatives. The idea of exacting a "disproportionate price" from North Vietnam, on the other hand, was not one that took root (WITH ITS IMPLICIT VIEW OF DEFEAT) in the policy process. Nor, unfortunately, did it prove to be possible to keep the South Vietnamese "in the forefront" in the key areas of the war.

The Taylor memorandum was not inconsistent in any significant respect with the laborious work of the Working Group. In effect, the two reinforced each other, with the Taylor paper being more personal and direct, and far more thorough on the immediate political need in Saigon. It went at once to the President in Texas, and perhaps more than any of the Washington papers set the basis for the President's decisions of December 1st and 3rd. As always, the President gave the views of the "man on the spot" great weight.

Framing an Immediate Course of Action

c. Taylor landed in Washington on Thanksgiving Day, the 26th, and his paper was distributed in the afternoon of what my calendar laconically notes as a "working day." Hardly calculated to excite a holiday spirit, it did at once pull together everyone's thoughts and set the state for getting on to action recommendations.

Late Friday morning, the Principals -- now calling themselves an Executive Committee, or "EXCOM," -- had a full meeting with Taylor. Present were Rusk, McNamara,

McCone, Wheeler, McGeorge Bundy, McNaughton, Forrestal, and myself.* After TAylor had led off with a summary of his paper, Rusk at once plunged the discussion into the topic which the Principals had only skirted until they had a first-hand report from the man in charge on the spot: what could be done to achieve Taylor's own first objective, getting the Saigon government to perform better?

Taylor thought he must have a strong message to take back, combining US resolve and readiness to act with a real "fight talk" and specific test measures to be carried out. The tone should be tough, but not threatening: to say that the US would "withdraw unless" the specific improvements were made would be "quite a gamble." But, with the right message Taylor did think some improvement could be achieved, slowly and over a substantial period. It was at most a glimmer of light.**

At this point, Taylor [NOTED] ~~digressed to report to the group~~ that General Westmoreland had sent a detailed report on the state of the South Vietnamese aremd forces. Believing there was hope for real improvement in the coming months, Westmore land's policy view was that the US should wait another six months before taking action against the North. This Taylor

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* Ball's departure on MLF business (?) must have been over the weekend, so that he did not come in at all in the following week. My notes indicate that he was present on the 28th, but on the 30th word came that I was to go with Rusk to the White House on 12/1, but not Harriman or Forrestal. This would indicate that Harriman was to some extent in the play, but that Ball was out of town. All were primed, and the opening discussion went to the heart of things.

BALL ON 11/17?

** Refer back to similar problem in 1961. Is there an answer?

emphatically did not accept, and agreed with the conclusion the Principals had already reached -- that existing policy, without more, would mean collapse in a much shorter period. Some attacks on the North, along the lines of the early stages of Option C, had to be started soon.

At this point, McNamara raised a gut question. He was doubtful that the military situation would improve, contrary to Taylor's hopes, and extremely pessimistic that the political side would. We could give it a try, but if things did not get better, would we nonetheless be justified in undertaking an Option C program? McNamara's own answer was that we would. Taylor indicated agreement, saying that even in this desperate case really strong American action should pull the South Vietnamese together for a while, though perhaps not enough to win through. McNamara said at least it would buy time, perhaps measured in years.

The exchange was an electric one. The idea of a last gasp effort -- the "pulmotor" treatment as Taylor now called it -- had now been judged conceivable. Drafted into the papers for the following week, it was removed before they went to the President, (PROBABLY AS) too hypothetical for present decision.* THIS ~~It~~ was the strongest mention to that point of the case that, more and more, presented itself in the following two months.

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* Pentagon Papers, p. 374, bottom line, shows the relevant clause in the November 29th draft paper by me. It lists among the contingencies that might lead to a systematic bombing program the following: "or if the GVN can only be kept going by stronger action." The italics in that paper show that the clause was deleted from the final version.

But this is jumping ahead of the story. At the meeting, the discussion then turned to Taylor's outline of a two-stage course of action. In the first stage, to last for a month or two, the US would expand its military actions somewhat and be prepared for vigorous reprisal actions. In the second, the US would move through a transitional stage to a systematic but gradual program of bombing and other military pressures. In effect, it would be Option A-plus for the time being, and then Option C. ~~The most vital~~ (A CENTRAL) point, however, was that as a part of the first phase the South Vietnamese government would be told of US readiness to move to the second -- as an inducement to them to pull together and lay the necessary foundation.

This was the concept Taylor spelled out. As the meeting broke up, I was ordered to do a full outline of the steps and problems that might be involved in carrying it out. The Principals met again on the 28th to review an outline and give more detailed guidance, I drafted with McNaughton and Forrestal on the 29th, there was an intense review meeting on Monday the 30th, and that evening the final paper went to the President to become the basis for his decisions on December 1 and 3.

This final phase of staff work and debate is impossible to nail down or describe with precision: almost certainly, many of the key changes made before the President formally saw the paper were in fact the result of his guidance, conveyed through Rusk, McNamara, or McGeorge Bundy. Take, however,

some of the highlights:*

1. American objectives were somewhat differently defined, putting first the removal of North Vietnam's support and direction from SVN, and "to the extent possible" Hanoi's cooperation in ending VC operations. Moreover, objectives beyond Vietnam were broadened to cover not only Laos but "the security of other non-Communist nations in Southeast Asia." It was, I think, the most realistic statement of the period, of a limited objective in SVN itself but also a crucial concern for SEA as a whole.**

2. In addition to a tough reprisal policy, the expanded actions of the first phase included added US air strikes in Laos, on an "armed reconnaissance" basis. This was the basis -- for practical purposes bombing of military targets at will -- that had ~~covered~~ (applied to) the "Yankee Team" flights conducted in the central area of Laos since May to assist Souvanna's forces. The new flights, however, were to be in the corridor areas, thus aimed more specifically at North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam.

3. The keystone of the first phase -- called a 30-day Action Program -- was the message to be conveyed in substance by Taylor to all the leaders and key groups in the GVN. This offered, in essence, the prospect of tougher US action if the GVN improved.

* The full text of my November 29th draft will be found in the Pentagon Papers, pp. 373-378, with changes worked out on November 30th. The text is in minor respects incomplete, but almost wholly accurate.

** Incidentally, the wording omitted the requirement that an independent SVN also be "non-Communist" (NSAM 288 of March.) Not much of a change perhaps, but it does reflect some dilution of ideological emphasis.

4. In the concept, the second phase was a graduated ptogram of military action against the North - Option C of November without the label.* For this, the paper read, the US "is prepared -- at a time to be determined".

5. The second phase was a firm or "hard" Option C program in its relation to negotiations: ". . . the U.S. would be alert to any sign of yielding by Hanoi and would be prepared to explore negotiated solutions that attain U.S. objectives in an acceptable manner."** (EARLY) No initiatives or "give" here.

6. For the first time, ~~the accompanying diplomacy called for~~ (THERE WAS TO BE) a major effort to inform and get support from key allies. In addition to Laos and Thailand, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and the Phillipines -- all the members of SEATO, in short, save France and Pakistan -- were to be told of US general intentions and asked to step up their contributions. It may seem extraordinary that this had never been done systematically in all the

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* As the Pentagon Papers show (p. _____), the JCS advocacy of Option B survived through the November 29th draft, but was deleted on November 30th and thus never formally presented to the President.

** Pentagon Papers, p. 375.

crises and semi-crises of 1964. The change was ~~one~~ ANOTHER measure of the degree to which the December 1964 decisions differed from those earlier periods.

7. Also, a new effort was cranked up to get more support for SVN from the so-called "third countries," that is, all interested and sympathetic countries whether or not allied or in any sense committed. This effort, not covered in the ~~policy issues of~~ (PAPERS OF) the Working Group, was always to the fore at times of actual decision from this point on. The President felt strongly about it, ~~and~~ all agreed that it was important to do as much as possible. (AND) There may also have been an element of pressure from some Senators on whose judgment the President especially relied.

8. A whole series of actions was initially envisaged to inform the public and Congress on key points. The main heading was the surfacing of the new and increased estimates and evidence of infiltration, through an early published paper. There was also proposed an early Presidential speech. However, by December 1st both ideas ~~and~~ HAD been put aside for the time being. In effect, the publicity for the new program boiled down to a White House statement on December 1st, and to quiet consultation with key Congressional leaders. * (FN - Any record available?)

9. At one point, the Principals had thought in terms of ~~keeping~~ (A FORMAL PLAN FOR REGULAR) meetings of their group, as an Executive Committee or EXCOM. This idea was, however, dropped on November 30th, I am sure on the President's wish. Perhaps he thought that any labels tended to attract attention and disturb privacy, perhaps he thought an EXCOM on constant watch built up too much of a crisis atmosphere, or perhaps he wished ~~top~~ (HIGH) -level meetings without his presence to be used sparingly and not to become a habit. All three points could have had some reason, especially the last. (Refer to Acheson Passage.) At any rate, the decision was to be a lasting one -- EXCOMS for any purpose never thereafter figured in the Johnson Administration. Even in the President's periods of absence from Washington, meetings of his senior advisors were rare -- although there were a few in this same December 1964 period.

With these changes -- some of real significance, others less so -- the Position Paper, as it was called, was fleshed out with a number of documents. Military projections were drawn up by McNaughton and approved by McNamara, to show air deployments, possible bombing targets and their order, and contingency action in worst cases. Discounting the delusive exactitude beloved of planners, these did represent the best thinking available, as well as an impressive array of facts on available forces. They were never approved, or seriously discussed, although it was anticipated that they would be looked at again in mid-December.

The key document for decision, however, was the message that Taylor might take to the leaders in Saigon. This was the focus of the hardest work, and of the President's major attention.

The President Decides

d. On the morning of Tuesday, December 1, the President himself met with the full group of senior advisors, except only for George Ball who had gone to Europe on MLF business. ~~(2)~~ On this occasion, the ~~newly-elected~~ Vice President, Elect Hubert Humphrey, was also present. The meeting devoted little time to the concept stated in the draft Position Paper. I believe the significance of this is simply that the President had already seen it and reviewed it privately with one of two others: through this Paper, embodying the whole process of the previous ~~two~~ weeks, he had already decided, for all practical purposes, on the basic course of action he would pursue. In effect, the Position Paper became a statement of general intent, while the President focussed on what Ambassador Taylor could tell him, and what he in turn should instruct Ambassador Taylor to do in Saigon.

My vivid recollection from the meeting is of the President going back and back over the political situation in Saigon, trying to feel his way into its strangeness, as he had done over the years for countless American local political problems. Whom do you talk to? What are the focal points with some influence? Were the Communists behind the trouble? (Answer: they were using it, but probably not directly involved.)

What could we do to get people to work together? And the ultimate ~~measure~~ (expression) of frustration: could we not say we just could not go on? Taylor, as before, thought that any threat of withdrawal would hurt rather than help, and that the most that could be said was that American aid was being promised only to the present Huong government, ~~-- which was agreed.~~

Then the President bore down hard on the specifics for South Vietnamese action that Taylor had proposed in the message. As so often, much of the discussion was on such small but, at the time, important points -- looking for the nail that would bring shoe, horse, and rider together.

Above all, the President laid it down flatly that he would never consider stronger action against the North unless he was sure that the U.S. had done everything it could to help in the South. In effect, the President as much as put it up to Ambassador Taylor -- "if you want this bombing program you have urged, you must get the Saigon political leaders into shape." It always frustrated the President especially -- master pleader that he himself had always been in groups potentially divided or at each other's throats -- to try to plead through other men, and on a political terrain he did not personally know. In this case, he left no doubt that Taylor should use every possible argument, in small groups or large, whatever would do the trick. The President tended, as here, to put a man on the spot, and to impart a personal element to instructions. Even when dealing with a totally experienced and distinguished man like

Taylor, the method may not be the best way to produce balanced performance.

The oral discussion of December 1st was reflected, sometimes almost verbatim, in long and careful instructions to Taylor, re-drafted after December 1st and approved by the President on December 3rd. In its final form, this document laid it down in blunt terms that bombing of the North would not end the war in itself, but could only be an important contributory factor. Thus, ~~such action being contributory and not central,~~ "we should not incur the risks which are inherent in such an expansion of hostilities until there is a government in Saigon capable of handling the serious problems involved in such an expansion and of exploiting the favorable effects which may be anticipated from an end of support and direction by North Vietnam."*

Note that there was no mention of the "last gasp" or "pulmotor" case to which Taylor and McNamara had referred in the discussion, without the President, on November 30th. So far as I know, this case was not discussed with him -- or if it was, it was summarily dismissed as too "iffy" and perhaps also too pessimistic. The President's instinct would always have been: "Don't think of worst cases. Get on with things, and then they won't happen." He had not approached the bridge that NcNamara and others of us were by now half-across.

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* My early December papers, "Instructions to the Field," p. 1, TS

Viewing the strengthening of the Saigon government as by far the most critical factor, the great bulk of the President's message, through Taylor, concerned arguments to be used, and a long list of specific actions which the South Vietnamese could take to firm things up. In these, there was something of a "fight talk" flavor, but also a considerable number of specific areas of weakness which Taylor judged were possible of improvement.

As the Saigon government worked toward greater effectiveness in these and other ways, the message said that the US was prepared to strike harder in Laos and, through the South Vietnamese covert operations, against ~~South~~ North Vietnam. In addition, the message proposed that both South Vietnam and the United States should be ready to execute prompt reprisals for any unusual hostile action. This was the first phase designed to warn North Vietnam. In itself, it differed only slightly -- principally through the added US strikes in Laos -- from the program that had been decided within the American government and then essentially aborted in September and October. The express statement of a reprisal policy to the Saigon government, was, however, new.

The really crucial part of the President's message was the statement that the US was "prepared to consider" a second phase of direct military pressure on Hanoi, to be carried out after the Saigon government had shown itself firmly in control. The second phase was described as "direct military pressure on North Vietnam," with specific reference to where

attacks in which US forces would participate in support of South Vietnamese air forces, under plans to be worked out at once. It was emphasized that the initiation of joint planning did not mean that the US was committed to any form of execution of the plans, and, further, that the duration of the first phase was left completely open, being defined only as the time required for the Saigon government to show itself in control and enlisting wider support. Thus, the 30-day period for the first phase, contained in the Position Paper presented to the President on December 1, was not carried over into the action message to the Saigon leaders, ~~not since the Position Paper itself was never formally approved -- had the President in any sense decided on such an interval prior to decision on the second phase.~~ ALTHOUGH THE POSITION PAPER WAS APPROVED BY THE PRESIDENT ON DECEMBER 7, NO ONE BELIEVED THE 30 DAYS WAS BINDING -- SINCE NO DECISION HAD BEEN MADE ON THE SECOND PHASE IN ANY CASE.

Nonetheless, the presentation to the South Vietnamese leadership of a US intent to start systematic bombing of the North was a major step. However carefully hedged and surrounded by exhortation, this was much further than the United States had ever gone in the direction of committing itself to taking part in actions against the North. It is thus as erroneous to say that the December decision amounted to nothing more than that of early September,* as it would be to contend that it amounted to any US committment to start bombing in the North or any internal Presidential decision to do so.

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* The author of this volume of the Pentagon Papers reaches this conclusion. (CITATION)

First Steps Under the Decisions

e. At the close of the meeting of December 1, a formal White House statement was issued. This was deliberately of a very general character, intended to convey a firm basic posture but little more. It said simply that the President had instructed Ambassador Taylor "to consult urgently with the South Vietnamese Government as to measures that should be taken to improve the situation in all its aspects." The concluding paragraph also "reaffirmed the basic US policy of providing all possible and useful assistance to the South Vietnamese people and government in their struggle to defeat the externally supported insurgency and aggression being directed against them." Finally, there was a cryptic sentence invoking the Tonkin Gulf Resolution (INTENDED TO) ~~and, by implication,~~ suggesting that ~~its~~ THE reprisal policy (OF THE RESOLUTION) was now in full force and that its broader authorizations were still very much in mind. This, at least, was what Hanoi was meant to read into it, and what (A FEW) discerning American newspapers saw (check) -- even though none of the specifics of the actual or contingent decisions had been made known.

- The mood of the release had been designed to be somber. A special touch was added inadvertently when members of the press, invited at the end of the meeting to take pictures, were able to overhear Secretary McNamara advising the President that Ambassador Taylor should not give a press interview:

"If these people talk to Max, they will think the situation has gone to hell." (Check).*

To complete the picture of what was said to the ~~public and the~~ Congress would require a record of the personal conversations between the President and Congressional leaders in the succeeding days and weeks. Plans for formal Congressional meetings or briefings had been considered, but were laid aside, so that the handling of the Congress fell directly on the President and his staff. This was a pattern that became characteristic from this point forward, so that neither as participant nor historian can I throw as much light as I would wish on a subject later to become so fiercely controversial.

So much for the ~~public~~ (INFORMATION) steps taken after the decisions of December 1-3. Their execution (OF THE REST OF THE PROGRAM) followed swiftly, so that all essential elements of the 30-day Action Program had been accomplished or set under way by December 15.

Of these, four were of greatest significance -- the message for South Vietnamese political leaders, the consultations with key interested governments, the initiation of the American bombing attacks against the infiltration trails in Laos, and a renewed Canadian visit to Hanoi.

Taylor's conversations in Saigon carried out to the full the President's basic instruction to "get the message across to everyone." He met first with President Suu, Prime Minister Huong, and General Khanh as commander of the armed forces, and then in separate groups with the senior civilians and top military men. It wss the only way to reach a political

* Add here date and specifics of 100,000 more men. Cooper, 250.

structure in which effective power was so widely shared or contended for. At the same time, the numbers and formality involved undoubtedly had two clear drawbacks: first the critical personal position of Prime Minister Huong can hardly have been strengthened by the bringing in of so many others and by what amounted to American lecturing that he should be supported. Although the words were designed to strengthen Huong's position, the process can hardly have had that effect.

Second, the ~~process~~ Effort put the United States even more totally in the limelight than before, and was undoubtedly somewhat wounding to South Vietnamese pride, both personal and national. As so often before and after this occasion, it seemed that the United States had all the disadvantages of taking charge, with none of the advantages or favorable effects of doing so.

However, all this was below the surface. Whether they felt they were being treated as schoolboys or not, or whether they felt that such treatment, even if true, was nonetheless deserved (as a few intimated) the South Vietnamese leaders reacted on the surface in a correct and forthcoming way. Both Huong and Khanh gave assurances along the lines that Taylor requested, and on December 11 Huong issued an SVN Government statement which, without referring to US urgings, announced a number of measures from the agreed list. Thus, the first steps in Saigon appeared to go unreasonably satisfactorily.

The consultations with key governments also proceeded rapidly. On December 4 and 5, I covered the President's thinking in all its significant aspects, including the possible "second phase," in careful conversations with the Ambassadors of Australia and New Zealand, Keith Waller and George Laking respectively. Both were extraordinarily acute and able men, who in the ensuing years earned the deep trust of their own governments and of everyone in Washington. In this case, the first when we had really spelled out a possible program of considered stronger action, the reports to down under must have been very full. The reply from Canberra expressed complete understanding, while that from Wellington was a most thoughtful paper pointing to the difficulties that might arise, mentioning the possibility of failure through a South Vietnamese collapse that no wider action could affect, but indicating general support in the difficult times ahead.

In the same category as the Australians and New Zealanders, the British were given the full picture at the top level of responsibility, through the visit of Prime Minister Wilson on December 7-9. He too was told of the first and contemplated second phases, and the matter was gone into in greater detail with members of his party (IN ADVANCE). In these (STAFF) ~~talks~~ conversations the question was pursued of a possible British role in the initiation of negotiations. The British, not surprisingly, made clear how important they believed their role as co-chairman of the Geneva Conferences of 1954 and

1962 could be. With the greatest frankness, we discussed the kinds of pressures that might arise if and when a program of bombing in the North was started, and at what point the British might seek to go into action with the Soviet Union, as the other co-chairman, in order to convene a conference or at any rate to arrange consultations among the major interested nations. These were important initial explorations of what was to become a crucial subject.

One other point about the British talks deserves mention. As with the Australians and New Zealanders, the possibility of some ground force introduction, on a multi-lateral basis, was, I believe, generally mentioned at this stage -- essentially with the Rostow concept of a division-sized "demonstration force" in mind. None of the nations was asked for specific contribution or commitments at this time, but the discussions did reveal significant differences of view. The Australians were quite forthcoming, the New Zealanders more reserved, and the British made it clear that their large deployment in Malaysia -- by this time _____ _____ thousand men --precluded any significant military contribution in any foreseeable circumstances to Vietnam.*

Generally speaking, however, Wilson's reaction was one of support. There did not appear to be any significant change in the British view of Asia, through the transition from Lord Home's government to that of Wilson.

(DRAFT)

* At one point, the Position Paper of November 30 had envisaged that in the President's talk with Prime Minister Wilson, he would not ask for any additional British contribution in view of the British role in Malaysia. (Pentagon Papers, p. 376) My own view, as draftsman, was that he should not do so as a matter of equity at that particular time when the "confrontation" situation

was at its height. However, in the final version of the Paper, the limitation was removed. I have every reason to believe that in this first meeting with Mr. Wilson, and on many other occasions thereafter, it was strongly urged that some British force contribution would be both appropriate and welcome. There is no truth whatever, I am sure, in the idea that the Johnson Administration agreed at any time with any British government for a kind of sharing of the military burden -- no American forces in Malaysia (never for a moment contemplated in any case) and no British forces in Vietnam. See Brandon, citation, for this claim. Many senior British officials at different times argued equity, and always political difficulties at home; none, so far as I know, ever claimed a protecting agreement.

The other key consultations were with the Asian nations directly concerned and interested. Thailand and Laos were told ~~through Ambassador Martin and Ambassador Sullivan on the spot~~ of both phases of the possible program, with accompanying messages of American firmness. Others in East Asia -- the Philippines, South Korea, and the Republic of China -- were told only of the first phase, but with accompanying language of sufficient strength to suggest that the US was actively considering going still further. Discussions were also set under way as to whether these three nations might be in a position to send various specialist forces in the near future, in categories similar to those the United States already had serving in South Vietnam. These discussions, to jump ahead for a moment, led to a Korean engineer battalion being sent to Viet-Nam for non-combat operations. The sending of this unit was agreed in _____, and it arrived in South Vietnam in March.*

More broadly, a number of other nations were approached in December for greater non-military contributions. ~~This topic was always to the fore in the President's mind at times of decision. In this December period,~~ (FROM THIS EFFORT) which included quiet work at the NATO Foreign Mnnisters' Meeting, little progress could be reported. This (CONFIRMED) ~~was part of~~ the general reading that, while the allies of the United States in Asia were deeply concerned, those in Europe and elsewhere were very much waiting to see what would happen.

Finally, there was the vitally important working out of the new actions in Laos. There, William H. Sullivan had been

* Westmoreland, p.223. Cooper, 269 says late February and implies a change of policy. Check

named as Ambassador in early November to take the place of Leonard Unger, who had done an extraordinary quiet job ever since the conclusion of the Laos Accords in July 1962. As already noted, Sullivan had worked as Averill Harriman's deputy right through the Laos negotiations and subsequently in the State Department, and since June 1964 had been with Taylor and Johnson in Saigon. His appointment brought to Vientiane a man thoroughly familiar with the situation, and also possessing that rare combination of political skill and executive toughness that is not found in combination in any walk oflife, perhaps especially the American Foreign SErivce.

Sullivan arrived in Vientiane on December 10th, and at once went over the full ground with an anxious Souvanna. The Prime Minister welcomed the proposal for American strikes in the corridor, where his own intelligence fully shared the Americnn view that infiltration had been substantially increased over the summer and fall. However, he again stipulated firmly, as he had done on previous occasions, that the United States should not announce its new actions. It will be recalled that in May, he had agreed to a joint announcement of the original reconnaissance flights in the then-threatened Plaine des Jarres area. This had led on to the North Vietnamese downing of American aircraft, and the responding American resort to firing when fired upon which shortly became "armed reconnaissance" involving firing at will. All this Souvanna

had in fact approved, but the publicity given to the sequence had scalded him badly. As he saw it; American admissions -- essential as they might be to American customs and beliefs -- simply meant that he was pilloried by the Soviets in particular (perhaps also by the Indians), while a silent Hanoi got away scot free for all its earlier and far graver violations of the 1962 accords. Why, he kept asking bluntly, should he put up with this?

The best Irish eloquence, repeated on two occasions, made no dent in this resolve, and in the end Washington accepted a policy of silence on the new raids -- knowing full well that sooner or later there was bound to be some incident or other publicity that would put the US in the position of appearing to conceal facts from its people. The dilemma was a constant one in Laos. IT HAD BEEN

foreshadowed in May and June of 1964, (AND) after December ~~even~~ BECAME (ACUTE) ~~tighter~~ as a result of Souvanna's greater rigidity on the subject. Then and later, the combination of patriotism, political sagacity, earthy toughness, and personal charm that Harriman had recognized in 1961 gave (SOUVANNA) ~~him~~ a special claim to Washington's consideration (--) on every aspect of the war in Laos, but especially the degree to which American actions should be made public. After all, it was his country.

~~In the case of~~ the new December operations, ~~they~~ were at the start far less important militarily than as a signal of new American action. Once begun on December 14th, the level was set at two raids a week, of four aircraft each. It was hardly a great forward step, and indeed was not even noted or attacked by Hanoi -- until in mid-January the inevitable crash led to fairly full publicity for all that the US was doing over Laos. (FN - check figures on Yankee team plus December flight volume by this time.)

Finally, there was the question of what, if anything, to say to Hanoi. The Canadian, Seaborn, had been scheduled to make one of his periodic trips, the first since August, toward the end of November, but postponed this at American request to December 7th, so that he could take any special message that might emerge from Taylor's visit to Washington.

As the nature of the President's decisions became clear, the problem was what to say about them. The August message had already been very forceful; anything that added to it would

have to be virtually an ultimatum. For this, the President was plainly not ready, now would it be believable after the failure to respond to the Bien Hoa attack and in the absence of a firm (AND VISIBLE) plan for early attacks on the North. If Hanoi had by now formed the impression that the US would not in a crunch act decisively, words alone would hardly undo such an impression.

In conversation with Alexis Johnson, Seaborn ~~who~~ must have sensed the dilemma the US was in, (He) made the simple suggestion that he take no new message, say only that he was sure his August message still stood and that Hanoi could judge the American mood for itself -- and then listen. After brief discussion in Washington, this idea was approved. ~~Thus,~~ It was no great surprise when Seaborn returned to Saigon on December __ and reported that his only contacts in Hanoi had been at a low level and without any substance. Obviously, Hanoi had waited to see if he had a message and, finding he did not, had felt that anything it might say, especially on its own initiative, would be construed as a sign of weakness. The episode ~~was~~ (SEEMED) additional evidence of the judgment now widely shared by foreigners and Americans, in and out of government: Hanoi was confident, tough, and unlikely to yield an inch so long as the balance of forces and trend of events were both in her favor.

Chapter 20: Collapse and Indecision

a. The month from December 15th, 1964, to January 15th, 1965, was a miserable period in both Saigon and Washington. Within ten days of Taylor's series of conferences, delivering the message of stronger action with more to come if Saigon pulled itself together, the exact opposite had happened. Top officers, with General Khanh himself, dissolved the civilian High National Council and assumed a commanding role, in the face of the most vehement advice and protests from Taylor himself. It was ~~not only~~ a humiliating episode for Americans, (AND) ~~but~~ another showing of the depths of the political crisis.

Militarily, also, events were bad. Striking on a wider scale than ever before, in battalion-scale efforts, the Viet Cong inflicted one serious defeat on government forces, at Binh Gia in the _____, and took over a crucial part of the major north-central province of Binh Dinh. Most dramatically, on December 24th, an American officers' quarters in the heart of Saigon was blown up. It was a clear case for retaliation under the early December policy decisions, but again President Johnson rejected recommendations to strike against the North -- this time because of the political chaos in Saigon.

Since all this was dramatically in the headlines, it was natural that Congressional and public sentiment in the United States began to come to life in late December, showing itself deeply discouraged and uncertain what the country should do.

Within the Administration, the result was a torment of indecision, with Taylor urging that the bombing program be started as a last-try shock treatment for the South Vietnamese, and others including myself arguing along similar lines. The President, however, rejected all these counsels, and gave no indication how he might decide. With Congress convening, hiw own Inauguration on January 20th, and his Great Society program fully worked out and ready to launch, a major foreign crisis -- let alone a war -- was the last thing he wanted.

In short, the frustration of this period was total. Obviously, as the American public was aware by the end of January, South Vietnam stood on the verge of collapse. Should the United States let this happen, or seek to act?

The Collapse of Authority in Saigon

b. Through November and early December, the main challenge to the government of Prime Minister Huong had come from the militant Buddhists, who had rioted several times, mostly in their northern strongholds of Hue and Danang, but also occasionally in Saigon itself. Although there was a suspicion that some leading generals were conniving with the Buddhists -- one, General Thi commanding the First Corps in Hue, had indicated such sympathy many times -- the military were in the main cooperating with the government, while Huong, himself a Buddhist with strong nationalist credentials, was stout under this pressure.

Behind the scenes, however, the question of raw power was an unresolved as ever, between civilians and military men, and

now among the top military leaders themselves. The military men now lacked any organization of their own, and were divided roughly between those still supporting General Khanh and a group of "young Turks" which had saved him in September but really thought him weak. Khanh had got rid of two potential rivals in November -- Big Minh to a ceremonial mission abroad, and Khiem to be Ambassador in Washington -- only to find that his authority within the military was still challenged, and in a more formidable way.

On the civilian side, the High National Council was unable to do much, but had set itself up as the interim legislative body, with powers yet untested to make laws and, as many members seemed to imply, to curb the military and install a truly civilian structure across the board.

The issue involving all three elements was triggered by the young generals, who on December ___ demanded that the High National Council adopt a law dismissing from the service a group of "old guard" senior generals, headed by Minh and Don. The group was no longer any kind of threat to anyone, being mostly on inactive status, and the charges urged against its members seemed spurious. The object was a brazen show of power, and when the High National Council refused the demand on December 19th, the young generals simply kidnapped a large number of them and took them to the mountains, simultaneously dissolving the HNC and setting up a new Armed Forces Council to speak for the military. The dissolution humiliated civilian control and

probably shook Khanh as well. As was suspected at the time and later confirmed by events, the new Armed Forces Council, was (ALSO) designed in part to provide a vehicle for dealing with Khanh in due course.* (FN. Shaplen, p. _____.)

As these maneuvers unfolded, Ambassador Taylor became directly involved. ~~Immediately on hearing of~~ THE GENERALS WHO HAD MADE the provocative demand to the HNC, ~~he invited a number of the generals to dinner and gave them a stern lecture~~ — KY, THIEU, AND THI AMONG OTHERS — HAD BEEN THE OBJECT OF SPECIAL EXHORTATION BY TAYLOR HIMSELF on the need for civilian control and (POLITICAL) unity, ~~exacting what he supposed to be a promise of no rash or precipitate action~~. Thus, the kidnapping ~~two days later was~~ a direct slap in his face. Was it a reaction to the message he had brought from Washington? Quite possibly, in the sense that Taylor had made emphatic that American support was going to the concept of civilian control and specifically to the Huong government; better, the generals may have thought, to nip this idea at once lest it take root.

The result, at any rate, was a nasty confrontation, first between Taylor and the group to whom he had talked in advance ~~(which included General Thieu and General Ky)~~, but quickly between Taylor and Khanh, who -- perhaps acting to win favor as a true nationalist and to undo his old reputation as the man backed by the U.S. -- went so far on December 24th as to threaten a request for Taylor's withdrawal as Ambassador.* (FN - B-check WP or NYT.)

Although some in Washington wondered privately whether Taylor had been too blunt and direct in putting his own pres-

tige and his country's on the line in such a squabble, the disposition was to accept his judgment that firm action had been the best course. In any event, there could be no ~~ques~~ doubt ~~tion~~ about backing him, both personally and on the principle of civilian control. On December 23, a State Department statement in Rusk's own name bluntly deplored the military action against the High National Council as "improper interference," and in Saigon the Embassy was authorized to make clear that American participation in non-routine military planning was suspended, and that delivery of military items might be withheld.* It was as far as it seemed possible to go, since Huong and the proper government were innocent bystanders whom the United States wished to support, not weaken or discredit.

In the last week of December, with the help of quiet talks at various levels, both South Vietnamese and American, the immediate crisis eased. Khanh half-apologized for his outburst, Taylor went about other business, and in early January Hunng met with Khanh and Chief of State Suu, reaching agreement on the release of the December 20th victims and on the principle of eventual civilian legislative responsibility. But the HNC remained dead, and it was clear that the Armed Forces Council was keeping what Khanh had called in December the power to "act as an intermediary" at any time -- a euphemism for taking over control. January 18th, in the face of renewed Buddhist protests on various issues, Huong revamped his cabinet

to bring in four of the young generals, including Ky and Thieu, On the face of things there was now unity between the civilians and military leaders, with only the Buddhists on the outs.* (FN - All this best in Shaplen, 292-300.)

In many ways, all this was a ridiculous charade, and it was sometimes hard to know how seriously the Vietnamese themselves took it. (Shaplen, 298.) ~~As noted,~~ The American view was that it was in part a struggle between two utterly disparate groups, civilian and military, neither of whom had ever come to know or trust the other either in the French period or, through Diem's ~~his~~ design, while ~~Diem~~ (he) ruled. To the civilians the generals were swaggering upstarts, while to the military men the civilians were pettifogging debaters incapable of decision. Differing and equally impractical education and training, the low position of the military profession in Chinese and Vietnamese culture, age differences, and above all the failure of either group to produce a commanding personality -- all these entered in, as they had throughout the whole post-1954 and especially the post-1963 political history of South Vietnam.

As Americans saw it, the second element was simply a struggle for personal power, in which Khanh and increasingly the other generals were simply aiming to get on top, at the expense of others they had come to hate.

Was there a third element, of real difference concerning policy, the war, or the Viet Cong? The three visible groups

contending for formal power -- the civilian leaders, Khanh, and the young generals -- did not seem to differ on these fundamental issues, then or later. All rejected what they asserted to be the neutralism of the old-guard generals; none, so far as any American could see, favored a deal with the Viet Cong. As for the fourth true power center in Vietnamese politics, the militant Buddhists, the enigmatic utterances of Tri Quang and Tam Chau offered then (or later) no sure basis for judgment; that did seem clear was that the militant Buddhists were content to bring down any authority not wholly to their liking, and did not wish to govern themselves.*

In short, the picture, and the danger, added up to straight demoralization and collapse of authority -- not to any underlying difference on the war nor, in significant degree, to the results of Viet Cong political activity.** When Washington policy analyses referred to the possibility that a government would come to power in Saigon that would give up the struggle and deal with the Viet Cong, there was no particular individual or group in mind. As the collapse of France in 1940 had produced a Laval, so collapse in South Vietnam would produce some figurehead or hidden man to do the dirty work.

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* Shaplen judgment that Buddhist view was a show.

** Shaplen, p. 281, notes that after the August political crisis, the Viet Cong stepped up their sending of political agents to the South, seeking especially to exploit the ties among families divided between North and South, or Communist and non-Communist. Such exploitation was almost certainly attempted. How much of a part it played can only be conjectured. Americans thought it not a key factor, but no one could be sure.

Whatever its form, such a political collapse of authority loomed more and more likely, in this turn-of-the-year period. It was, as always, the most fundamental fact.

Another Challenge Declined

c. As the political crisis took the center of the stage, the Viet Cong went about their military business with ever-growing success. In the last week of December, an attack by two Communist battalions (check) routed the South Vietnamese at Binh Gia, and in the latter part of December the VC established a commanding position in the province of Binh Dinh. This was the beginning of a really serious threat to the key coastal provinces in north central SVN; heavily populated and in parts infested by the VC ever since 1954, the provinces always had a special strategic importance. If they were under VC control, the routes between them and the highland area were an easy mark and the eventual result would be to cut South Vietnam in two. It was a nightmare that was to play an ever-growing part during 1965, particularly in June and July forecasts and decisions.

In general terms, moreover, every indicator was bad throughout these months. Desertions in the South Vietnamese forces were high, and the tell-tale ratio of weapons losses heavily in favor of the VC (check). Through November and December, the daily stories from Saigon and the reports of visiting newsmen spelled out a gloomy picture, and no official American tried to offset this. Although, as always in war, the

American command did not wish to be the direct source of reports of defeat, there was no disposition at this time to pretend the situation was either good or improving. (Check press more.) On the contrary, the feel of this period, militarily as much as politically, was that the VC were more numerous, better armed and organized, and more confident than at any previous time. By early November the estimates of increased infiltration during 1964 -- totalling 10,000 men -- were generally accepted and quietly released to the press. Hard-core VC strength was officially estimated at 30,000, but unofficially many Americans believed this was almost certainly well below the reality.* (FN. Later, in 1966, retrospective analyses of past periods indicated that as a general rule the hard-core VC strength had been under-estimated throughout the period 1961-65, but particularly in 1964 and 1965, years in which both infiltration and local recruiting picked up rapidly in the wave of VC victories and growing confidence that success was inevitable if not actually imminent. Although the later revised estimates were not, of course, part of the picture for decision purposes in late 1964 or early 1965, the general feeling that existing estimates were probably low was such a part. Those closest to the methods used in making the estimates were in general the most convinced that the error was on the low side. Identification of units had to be by several prisoners before it would be firmly accepted, and in 1964 the prisoners were few -- in itself another symptom of decay. The rule, I suppose from my own military experience

is that losing armies have poor intelligence.) By late December, as the author of this volume of the Pentagon Papers puts it: "All evidence pointed to a situation in which a final collapse of the GVN appeared probable and a victorious consolidation of VC power a distinct possibility." (Pentagon Papers, p. 340.)

The striking event of the period was, however, an attack of little military importance, but one that tested again the American readiness to retaliate against North Vietnam. This was the placing, by a VC squad, of small bombs, in a building called Brink's Hotel in downtown Saigon, which had been converted into quarters for American bachelor officers. The explosion on December 24th killed two Americans, and wounded 52 others and 13 South Vietnamese.

The attack ~~falls~~ (FELL) squarely within the ~~private~~ list of cases (FAR) which the U.S. would retaliate under the President's policy of December 1-3. Not nearly so dramatic or destructive as the attack on the Bien Hoa airbase, it (STILL) seemed another challenge to test American will and expose American weakness. For years, the VC had shown the capacity, possessed by even small disruptive groups in all countries, to create such incidents on a substantial scale in Saigon as elsewhere in SVN. Perhaps it had been surprising that American installations, impossible to guard properly in the heart of the city, had not previously been attacked. Now a decision to move to (SUCH) attacks ~~on American installations~~ seemed to be confirmed, and almost certainly to come from Hanoi in the total pattern. Certainly Hanoi Radio did nothing to dispel this impression, but on the contrary

broadcast an almost immediate and exultant account of the incident. (Check.)

Whether Hanoi had devised the precise timing seems more doubtful, since the planning must have taken days. But the fact was, of course, that the attack came not only on Christmas Eve (like Bien Hoa on Election eve) but just at the height of the squabble between Ambassador Taylor and the Vietnamese generals. It was again the most embarrassing possible moment, in every respect.

Nonetheless Taylor promptly recommended the application of the early December policy, in the form of a quick air strike at a North Vietnamese barracks area just above the 17th parallel. Such retaliation targets had been picked out and reconnoitered with care in the past three weeks, for just this type of contingency: this one seemed precisely apposite and also entirely military in character.

The President was in Texas when the cable arrived, and at once indicated that he would not decide (FOR SOME DAYS) ~~until after Christmas~~ in any event, and wanted direct evidence of Hanoi's involvement. In the meantime, there was quiet discussion in Washington in which I for one urged that we had to apply the retaliation policy if it was to have any meaning at all, especially as it had now been disclosed to the South Vietnamese and others. Rusk, to whom I talked, was noncommital, and no doubt he and McNamara were in direct touch with the President through the next few days.

The upshot, finally confirmed when Rusk journeyed to Texas on other matters on the 29th, was that the President rejected Taylor's recommendation. While several supporting reasons were advanced, including the lack of direct evidence (the attackers having escaped) to prove convincingly that Hanoi had ordered the attack, the real reason -- as all in the policy circle sensed it -- was that the United States would look ridiculous to take such action in the middle of a humiliating political crisis. All, including Hanoi, would conclude that the U.S. was simply lashing out as a smoke-screen to cover its underlying weakness. It was an impossible situation, doubtless observed in Hanoi with glee and as further confirmation that the American Administration would now accept almost anything, at least until the South Vietnamese got some sort of real government -- which seemed remote.

American Public Opinion Comes to Life

d. At this point, American public and Congressional opinion began, for the first time since the election, to make itself heard. On December 24th, Walter Lippmann, aging but still influential, commented on the squabble between Khanh and Taylor and on rumors that Khanh wanted to negotiate a neutral solution for his country, concluding that the situation was very difficult and that the U.S. must not be "hurried or harried into supposing that there is a simple way to deal with South Vietnam . . . It is a delusion, as well as unfair to ourselves, to set up a semantic trap by declaring that what

is not a victory is a defeat. There are many colors between black and white." The implication seemed to be that it would be no serious matter if the U.S accepted neutralization on the DeGaulle model -- which Lippmann had long supported -- or even pulled out altogether.

Senator Mansfield likewise thought that all possibilities should be explored, including DeGaulle's neutralization proposal, and Senator Church expressed himself in similar vein. (Cite.) Other editorial opinion, notably a Life (Ed.) ~~pic~~torial in the issue of January 8th, began to be expressed that the US simply could not put up with the political nonsense in Saigon, and should get out if it could not be corrected. (Check.) (May be in NYT.)

The broadest samplings of opinion in this period were an AP survey of the Senate, published on January 6th, and a Gallup Poll published in late January. The first showed that among 83 Senators responding, roughly 35 urged doing everything possible to strengthen the South Vietnamese government. On the harder side, 8 mentioned either carrying the war to the North or comitting U.S. troops, and on the softer side were 13 who favored either negotiations at once or, in 3 cases, withdrawal of US aid and advisors. Eight said they simply did not know what should be done, and others could not readily be classified in policy terms.* In the main, as the AP's own interpretation put it, the majority rejected both pulling out and taking

* New York Times, 1/6/65, check again.

stronger measures, and the consensus was in accord with Senator Mansfield, backing current policy on the ground that: "For the present, we have no other choice ..." ~~which in my judgment would fit the needs of the situation.~~ Mansfield also returned to the idea of exploring neutralization, with the idea of accepting it if it promised a "just and guaranteed solution," but if not, discarding it. Others favoring negotiation saw international control in VN as the goal.

In short, the Senate was ~~hardly~~ (NOT) putting pressure on the President in any particular direction. There is, indeed, some reason to believe that as he worked away in Texas over the holidays, at least one Senior Senator who enjoyed the President's total confidence and high respect had advised him bluntly that now was the time to find a way out.* (FN. This was Russell or Stennis, and I must find source.) (NYT.) ~~The insulting attacks on Taylor made have played a part in this reaction, but its roots probably lay deeper.~~

What, then, of the public as a whole? Here the Gallup Poll (PUBLISHED JANUARY) is revealing. By a margin of 4-to-1, the public felt that the war in South Vietnam was being lost; no doubt here that the trends of the past year had sunk in. An ~~substantial~~ (OVERWHELMING) majority (81%) felt that the US should seek negotiation and some form of settlement, with its nature unspecified. That the same people, or others amounting to a majority, did not envisage losing South Vietnam was suggested by a (4-3) majority ~~(of ——?)~~ voting that, if necessary, the US should be prepared

to commit its own troops (again in unspecified numbers) to hold South Vietnam. (FN. Check all these.)

I mention ~~all~~ these polls as indicative of the mood of the period. In terms of their bearing on the Administration's policy thinking, I do not recall that either poll, or the factor of public opinion -- short or long-term -- was invoked in any of the discussions that went from early November to early March. No doubt the polls were followed, particularly in the White House, but the dominant feeling throughout the Administration, so far as I could detect it, was that the President could carry the American public with him on whatever course he chose. For what polls may show, the Gallup reading of January 1965 -- on a periodic standard question -- was that 70% approved of the President's conduct of his office, while only 15% disapproved. So far as the President's adivsors were concerned, at any rate, this was a commanding position, and the question for Vietnam policy was not what was politically expedient, but what was the best or least bad course for the country to follow. (EXPAND.)

Torment within the Administration

e. As the year turned, the Administration did little to spell out its thinking. In ~~his~~ New Year's TV interviews delivered on January 3rd. Rusk tried to strike a steadying note, saying only that the US was not going to pull out, but also was not

actively considering stronger steps.* And in the President's State of the Union message, delivered to the outgoing Congress on January 4, 1965, the overwhelming emphasis was on domestic problems with only a brief reference to Vietnam in the following terms:

> "In Asia, Communism wears a more aggressive face. We see that in Viet Nam. Why are we there?
>
> We are there, first, because a friendly nation has asked us for help against the Communist aggression. Ten years ago our President pledged our help. Three Presidents have supported that pledge. We will not break it now.
>
> Second, our own security is tied to the peace of Asia. Twice in one generation we have had to fight against aggression in the Far East. To ignore aggression now would only increase the danger of a much larger war.
>
> Our goal is peace in Southeast Asia. That will come only when aggressors leave their neighbors in peace. What is at stake is the cause of freedom, and in that cause America will never be found wanting.
>
> But Communism is not the only source of trouble and unrest. There are older and deeper sources -- in the misery of nations and in man's irrepressible ambition for liberty and a better life.**

This was firm in tone, but said nothing about the immediate situation or future policy.

The inner fact was that the Administration was in a quandary. With the turn of the year, the 30 days tentatively set in the December Position Paper as the testing period for improvement in South Vietnamese politics was up. On that very day Taylor sent a cable giving his own strong view that notwithstanding Saigon's political weakness, indeed as

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* Check NYT or DSB

** from Congressional Quarterly — get from Public Papers

the only way to do something about it, the US should ~~now to~~ go ahead with the gradual bombing program against the North visualized as the second phase of the two-phase December 1 concept.

Taylor's argument was that the root of the South Vietnamese political problem might well lie in plain lack of confidence that the US would act. With the steady growth in Viet Cong power, the result was a feeling that South Vietnam was doomed and a general state of quiet panic, or sauve qui peut, in which men behaved foolishly and divisively -- as they had obviously been doing during December.

The argument seemed plausible to many in Washington, myself included. In October, Sullivan on a trip back had reported vividly on the letdown after the Tonkin retaliation had led to nothing further. All through November and December the same kind of quiet reports had piled up, usually from Americans who had some sort of friendships with South Vietnamese. As often in a crisis, political South Vietnamese blamed themselves privately but American lack of support openly. Doubtless many saw the US as able, with its unlimited power, to solve their problem at a stroke and get the Viet Cong off their backs by a few rapier bombing thrusts against the North. Thus exaggerating American power, and hearing American leaders say over and over again how important South Vietnam's independence was, in commitment and Asian power terms, they simply

could not understand why America hung back. At this point in the line of thought, they would fall prey to the darkest suspicions, of the sort to which South Vietnamese political life was extraordinarily prone even in middling times.

In effect, Taylor was now formally urging the pulmotor treatment of which he had spoken in the Washington meetings a month earlier. Having urged at the time that a future undertaking of stronger action be used to jack things up, what he was now saying was that the undertaking had not been enough -- the strongest drugs had not worked, and now the patient had to be operated on.

Overwhelmingly, it may be noted, the Ambassador's case for bombing rested on its effect on morale and political performance in the South. Although Taylor was more confident than most Washington civilians that the bombing would in fact put a serious crimp in Hanoi's military effort aimed at the South, he did not claim that either the concrete military impact or the effect on Hanoi's will could in any short period, of a few months perhaps, bring about a change that would either permit a settlement or lead to slow liquidation of the VC threat to terms locally manageable. On the contrary, Taylor always believed and argued that the bombing had to be sustained for some time, and so conducted as to convince Hanoi that it would move steadily to the vitals of North Vietnam, in order to convince the tough Hanoi leaders to call off their military effort in any fashion.

Such was the forceful recommendation that reached Washington just at the New Year. Its circulation was confined to the Principals and to the most limited additional circle, so that for the next critical month many at staff level were kept in the dark -- not unnatural or untypical in a phase of the utmost delicacy when any leak could hurt seriously.

On Tuesday, January 5th, the day after the President's State of the Union message, the Principals met for the first time as a group since December 19th. At the meeting, the JCS noted the expiration of the 30 days, and that no orders had yet gone out for the contemplated transition phase of markedly stronger actions leading up to actual bombing of the North. The meeting was inconclusive, designed only to prepare the way for a small meeting between the President and Messrs. Rusk, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy the following day.

In these two days, both McNaughton and I -- independently as I recall -- set down our thoughts at some length. My own memo was worked over with the departing Michael Forrestal and his successor as the full-time Vietnam man, Leonard Unger - just back from Laos, and now appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary.*

* With a larger Vietnam Working Group, this move back into the line organization made sense, although my relations with both Sullivan and Forrestal as Special Assistants had been intimate and easy.

It went to Rusk on January 6, with key sections as follows:

"I think we must accept that Saigon morale in all quarters in now very shaky indeed and that this is related directly to a widespread feeling that the U.S. is not ready for stronger action and indeed is possibly looking for a way out. We may regard this feeling as irrational and contradicted by our repeated statements, but Bill Sullivan was very vivid in describing the existence of such feelings in October, and we must honestly concede that our actions and statements since the election have not done anything to offset it. The blunt fact is that we have appeared to the Vietnamese (and to wide circles in Asia and even in Europe) to be insisting on a more perfect government than can reasonably be expected, before we consider any additional action-and that we might even pull out our support unless such a government emerges.

"In key parts of the rest of Asia, notably Thailand, our present posture also appears weak. As such key parts of Asia see us, we looked strong in May and early June, weaker in late June and July, and then appeared to be taking quite a firm line in August with the Gulf of Tonkin. Since then we must have seemed to be gradually weakening-and, again, insisting on perfectionism in the Saigon Government before we moved.

"The sum total of the above seems to us to point-together with almost certainly stepped-up Vietcong actions in the current favorable weather-to a prognosis that the situation in Vietnam is now likely to come apart more rapidly than we had anticipated in November. We would still stick to the estimate that the most likely form of coming apart would be a government of key groups starting to negotiate covertly with the Liberation Front or Hanoi, perhaps not asking in the first instance that we get out, but with that necessarily following at a fairly early stage. In one sense this would be a 'Vietnam solution,' with some hope that it would produce a Communist Vietnam that would assert its own degree of independence from Peiping and that would produce a pause in Communist pressure in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, it would still be virtually certain that (sic) Laos would then become untenable and that Cambodia would accommodate in some way. Most seriously, there is a grave question whether the Thai in these circumstances would retain any

confidence at all in our continued support. In short, the outcome would be regarded in Asia, and particularly among our friends, as just as humiliating a defeat as any other form. As events have developed, the American public would probably not be too sharply critical, but the real question would be whether Thailand and other nations were weakened and taken over thereafter.

"The alternative of stronger action obviously has grave difficulties. It commits the U.S. more deeply, at a time when the picture of South Vietnamese will is extremely weak. To the extent that it included actions against North Vietnam, it would be vigorously attacked by many nations and disapproved initially even by such nations as Japan and India, on present indications. Most basically, its stiffening effect on the Saigon political situation would not be at all sure to bring about a more effective government, nor would limited actions against the Southern D.R.V. in fact sharply reduce infiltration or, in present circumstances, be at all likely to induce Hanoi to call it off.

"Nonetheless, on balance we believe that such action would have some faint hope of really improving the Vietnamese situation, and, above all, would put us in a much stronger position to hold the next line of defense, namely Thailand. Accepting the present situation-or any negotiation on the basis of it-would be far weaker from this latter key standpoint. If we moved into stronger actions, we should have in mind that negotiations would be likely to emerge from some quarter in any event, and that under existing circumstances, even with the additional element of pressure, we could not expect to get an outcome that would really secure an independent South Vietnam. Yet even on an outcome that produced a progressive deterioration in South Vietnam and an eventual Communist take-over, we would still have appeared to Asians to have done a lot more about it.

"In specific terms, the kinds of action we might take in the near future would be:

"a. A nearly occasion for reprisal action against the D.R.V.

"b. Possibly beginning low-level reconnaissance of the D.R.V. at once.

"Concurrently with a or b, an early orderly withdrawal of our dependents (from Saigon, but only if) stronger action (is contemplated). If we are to clear our decks in this way-and we are more and more inclined to think we should-it simply must be, for this reason alone, in the context of some stronger action. . . .

"Introduction of limited U.S. ground forces into the northern area of South Vietnam still has great appeal to many of us, concurrently with the first air attacks into the D.R.V. It would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi. On the disadvantage side, such forces would be possible attrition targets for the Vietcong."

In essence, McNaughton and I were now both stressing that the most basic U.S. objective was to prevent Communist domination of all of Southeast Asia if this could possibly be done. If, as appeared quite possible, South Vietnam was too far gone to save, nonetheless a final additional American effort would greatly increase the chances of holding the line at Thailand, the fallback geographical bastion and, as it increasingly appeared, the psychological key to the rest of mainland Southeast Asia at least. By this time, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Thailand was being explicitly threatened fomm Peking, and to the south, Sukarno had taken long further steps to align himself and Indonesia with China.

The memorandum is also of interest in its consideration and rejection of the theory that a Titoist North Vietnam, largely independent of China, would be a bearable outcome. To me and others, notably Unger who had spent the past 6 years in Bangkok and Vientiane, the central judgment here was that Southeast Asians, whose psychology was in the end crucial, saw the Communist threat (IN EAST ASIA) as essentially a united one -- a

victory for North Vietnam meant that the wind blew from the East, in the cliche of the period, and it little mattered that a Communist North Vietnam meant to keep its territory inviolate from China, as Vietnamese had fought and bled to do throughout their history. More especially, a humiliating defeat for the U.S., without its lifting a finger, would make it nearly impossible to persuade the Thai, once they came under pressure, that their relatively solid political base made the defense of Thailand a different case.

In the policy process, I do not suppose that either my memo or McNaughton's had great weight. McNamara had already in early December made much the same argument, that a last-gasp effort would at least buy time, perhaps measured in years. (See page 19-__ above.) Rusk, however, was I think more skeptical of the argument, and more inclined as always to see Vietnam in the worldwide aspect of a U.S. commitment rather than predominantly in the Asian context. As of late December and early January, (The Secretary of State) ~~he~~ was particularly hard hit by the Saigon political troubles and by the humiliation to which an American Ambassador had been subjected. My impression was that a piece of him shared the sentiment of the Senator who had advised the President that people who behaved as the South Vietnamese had done simply did not measure up ~~to what the U.S. could validly require as a condition of keeping even a clear commitment.~~ On the other hand, his sense of the worldwide impact of a U.S. defeat, however valid the American excuse might be, remained acute.

At any rate, the President himself was clearly in no mood to make new decisions. He made this clear on January 6th and repeatedly over the next two weeks, expressing in earthy terms his opinion of the way the South Vietnamese were behaving. No new military instructions were given, and instead the President began to lay heavy stress on what to do about American dependents in Saigon. He feared that any bombing action at all against the North -- retaliatory or systematic -- would bring on a Hanoi/VC reprisal against Americans, on the model of the Brink's attack but possibly much more severe and directed against the many American wives and children who at this stage remained in Saigon.

It was not an unreasonable fear, although others of us thought any major harm unlikely. However, Taylor (and many of us in Washington) felt that to evacuate American dependents before the U.S. took any stronger action would be a disastrous morale signal to the South Vietnamese, and might indeed bring on disorders that would be just as dangerous as what the VC could do by themselves. (Check if this was argued.) Doubtless Taylor's mind went back to Berlin, where he had been the American Commandant in _____, and where, during the Soviet blockade of 1948-1949, General Lucius Clay had not only refused to evacuate dependents but ordered home any Americans, civilian or military, who did not wish to keep their dependents with them. It had been a decision typical of the tough Roman Proconsul that Clay was, and had certainly appeared wise and courageous in the successful handling of the blockade. The

Saigon case was not a complete parallel, but the same principle of not showing American signs of panic did seem to Taylor to apply.

The dependent issue, first raised in a PRESIDENTIAL cable ~~from Washington on January 6th,~~ (ON DECEMBER 31) ~~ran through~~ (PERMEATED) the cable traffic and occasional meetings throughout the month of January. By late in the month, the President was still adamant, but not ready to over-rule Taylor, In the many discussions the President was eloquent, even emotional, that American women and children should not be exposed to possible injury, that war was for men only. ~~This can be called a particularly Texan view, from one raised in a man's world. At any rate,~~ this view as his later policy on dependents was to show, ~~it~~ ran deep -- to the point of rejecting over and over again pleas from his Ambassadors, at later periods, for a more relaxed policy. The point is of interest, because his badgering of the dependent issue in January of 1965 could be interpreted, and indeed did strike some of us at the time, as a stalling tactic, in effect an impractical demand for preparatory action that he knew would tie up the situation until (UNTIL) he could sort it out, or a dramatic event gave him a new handle. In hindsight, I do not think this was the case; the President really meant it. Recognizing Taylor's argument, he still wanted events to unfold so that he had time to order the dependents out before he started anything serious.

There is, of course, the converse interpretation -- that the raising of the dependent issue showed that the President's mind was in effect made up in favor of stronger action.* Whatever the state of mind of his senior and junior advisors, ~~continue to believe that at this period — right up to Pleiku at least —~~ INDEED IN SPITE OF THE OBVIOUS IMPATIENCE OF MANY OF THEM, (GAVE NO SIGN THAT HE) the President ~~had not~~ made any decision even in his own mind. After all, even without any American stronger action, the Brink's episode had ~~already~~ shown that danger existed, and if the political situation reached the point of total collapse and abandoning the war, the position of American dependents, and Americans generally, would hardly have been a safe or easy one. In short, clearing the decks meant just that -- being ready for whatever might happen, and in the view of some, being more efficient without the worry over one's dependents. ——————————————————>

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* One of the Pentagon chroniclers reached this conclusion, pointing to a cable of January 25th which asked the Ambassador's view whether to evacuate and thus "clear the decks" for better concentration on efforts to help SVN. (Pentagon Papers, p. 343.) Although this cable did refer to the possibility that reprisal actions might become necessary at any time, this had been true since early December at least. Moreover, the cable was only a part of an exchange of many messages going back to ~~the 6th~~ EARLY ~~of~~ January, ~~and~~ THUS thus properly read in the wider context of thought for the whole period -- which was as I have described it. Of course, evacuation of dependents was on any checklist of steps to be included as soon as possible if the U.S. did move to stronger action, but after the Brink's episode it became an action to be considered seriously in its own right. Thus, the situation in January 1965 was quite different from the theoretical and long-forgotten scenarios of the spring of 1964, to which the Times writer refers on this same page to drive home his own interpretation (or innuendo) that the raising of the subject was "the signal for 'D-Day'".

At any rate, we shall see in the next chapter that as of late January the President's most trusted subordinates, the very men who has wrestled the dependent issue with him ever since EARLY January ~~8th~~ 6, were convinced he had not made up his mind -- and were deeply concerned at the lack of decision. In mid-January the President spent the great bulk of his time putting the finishing touches on his domestic program, reviewing one by one the series of messages that were to go to the Congress in late January and February. This was where his heart and mind were at this point - there and for two days in the happy outpouring that came to celebrate on January 20th the inauguration of the first elected President since _____ from below the Mason - Dixon line. It was a (LAST) glorious interlude in a steadily darkening picture of tough decisions to come.

Chapter 21: East Asia and the Great Powers in Early 1965

a. After the Soviet change of leadership in October, there was some easing in the heated attacks that had been passing for a year and a half between Moscow and Peking. Sino-Soviet relations became more correct, but with little indication -- as Washington or most observers saw it -- that the underlying causes of conflict and rivalry had been reduced.

Most important for Southeast Asia and Vietnam, it became apparent in the November-January period that the Soviet Union was taking a new interest in the area, and particularly in re-establishing some position of respect and influence in Hanoi. One drawing card, for both sides, was Hanoi's fear of American military action and resulting need for sophisticated air defense weapons that only the USSR could provide.

Meanwhile, China had every reason for satisfaction as it looked over the situation in East Asia. The Chinese domestic situation was once more showing economic progress, and to the outside eye the leadership appeared solid and in full control. Confidence oozed from Peking at every occasion, with a hint of threat toward Thailand and with clear satisfaction at the course of events in South Vietnam.

Indonesia was ~~equally~~ conspicuous in this period. The confrontation against Malaysia was pressed harder, although with no brilliant

success. Domestically, the "Sukarnoism" movement led by Adam Malik -- a subtle effort designed to offset ~~the~~ Communist influence of Sukarno by a counter-movement in his own name -- was abruptly dissolved in November, signalling the virtual end of moderate influence and the steadily growing ascendancy of the PKI and the left. Most dramatically of all, Sukarno on New Years' Day withdrew Indonesia from the UN, ostensibly in protest against Malaysia being elected to the Security Council, but plainly with the wider motive of dissociating Indonesia from international groupings in which US allies and even neutral nations played important roles. It was a big move tending to align Sukarno with Mao, and the strongest signal of how far he had moved in this direction.

All of this was watched by the rest of Southeast Asia, with the visible sense that major changes in the area might be imminent, and that China might emerge from these changes, especially if Vietnam were to collapse, in a much stronger position. In Washington, the atmosphere of steadily growing concern and fear in the area was both sensed and shared, becoming an additional factor in scales of decision already heavily weighted by East Asian considerations.

A New Feeling Out in Sino-Soviet Relations?

b. The year from November of 1964 to November of 1965 was a crucial one in relations between the Soviet Union and the Chinese Peoples Republic. During its course, the big question, for the outside world at least, was whether Khrushchev's departure would mean any healing of the rift that had developed since 1958 or 1959

and that, in hindsight, had its roots right back to 1945 if not earlier. As the year ended, there was an explosion of new invective, which started from the Chinese side in a famous Peking Review article of November (12), 1965, and included, on both sides, revelations of events that had taken place in the previous twelve months. The conclusion then became clear, to observers in late 1965 as to later scholars, that there probably never had been much chance of anything resembling a rapprochement. The New Soviet leadership had been just as zealous as Khrushchev in combatting Chinese influence within the Communist world, and at most warily exploring whether there existed some common ground with the Chinese on a few issues. The Chinese, for their part, had been ~~rough~~ throughout the year, ~~and~~ pursuing their objectives, often in conflict with the Soviets, with extra zeal. The rift was, if anything, deeper.

But this fairly clear view of what happened -- rather clearer and more rapidly achieved than for most other periods in the story of growing Sino-Soviet difference -- was not available at the start of 1965, or more than gradually over the course of the year. Mostly, the dealings between Moscow and Peking were private, only coming to the surface on rare occasions, expressing themselves rather through the indirect evidence of deeds than through the kind of direct accusations that had lit up the sky in 1963-64 and were to again after November 1965. Western observers were scrambling to

draw inferences from scraps of behavior. If they happened to be proved nearly right -- as was the case for the American official observers and the resulting Administration judgments -- it must nonetheless be taken into account that the evidence did not permit confidence. In the shaping of policy, allowances had to be made for what could conceivably have been serious error.

~~Thus specifically to the first three months of this critical years~~ From (To BEGIN THE NEW PERIOD), Chou-en-Lai showed up for the Soviet anniversary celebration on November 7th, 1964, and stayed on for a week of talks. Nothing was published about these talks, and their length plus ~~and~~ Tuí absence of a specific or especially glowing communique suggested that, while communication had been achieved, any wide agreement had not.

The other touchstone of those first weeks of the new regime of Brezhnev and Kosygin was its attitude toward the preliminary conference of world Communist parties which Khrushchev had scheduled for December of 1964. The capstone of Khrushchev's attempt to enlist almost all Communist parties in denunciation of Peking's "adventurism", ~~and possibly in~~ # ~~still further actions at a formal conference~~ the project had been divisive both in the Communist world and probably among the Moscow leadership. Perhaps it had been a key factor in Khrushchev's downfall, with the lively prospect that after the likely flow of ideological blood at the Conference, "the whole Communist movement would be a shambles."*

* Foy D. Kohler, Understanding the Russians, p. 387, advances this thesis plausibly. Kohler was American Ambassador in Moscow at this time, and as we shall see a shrewd observer.

In rejecting the Soviet Communist Party's invitation, the Chinese Communist Party had gently suggested that "the day you convene (this) schismatic meeting will be the day you step into your grave."*

Faced with this prospect, Brezhnev and Kosygin waffled. First they announced on _____ that the conference would be postponed from December, and then on _____ they announced that it had been re-scheduled for early March. The Chinese could hardly be cheered by this announcement, and observers concluded that the wholly changed tone of the propaganda on both sides was of limited and possibly temporary significance.**

Thus, by the beginning of 1965, the American Administration -- with most others -- saw little underlying change in the overall Sino-Soviet relationship. But there could be no certainty that the two might not draw together under pressure.

New Soviet Interest in Asia

c. At the same time, it was becoming apparent that the Soviet Union wanted to re-establish some degree of influence and presence in Southeast Asia, especially in North Vietnam. Whereas Khrushchev in his last year or more of power had been "prepared to leave Vietnam to the Chinese," perhaps counting on the Americans to contain China there, the new Soviet regime moved promptly to get back into the Vietnamese situation.

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* NYT, August 31, 1964. Davids, p. 118.

** Ulam, p. 696-7, says: "The tone of the Sino-Soviet dispute became more subdued, and professions of "unshakable unity" in the face of an imperialist attack began to be heard again. But essentially the impasse continued."

The lever for doing so was ready on hand. After the Tonkin Gulf incident, Le Duan, the secretary of the Lao Dong Party and one of Hanoi's top leaders under Ho, had visited Moscow, without apparent result. Almost certainly, however, he made clear in this visit how much Hanoi feared further American air attacks and how defenseless it was. Air defense was an area of military capacity in which the Soviet Union had developed sophisticated ground-to-air SA-2 missiles which were far more effective against jet aircraft than guns could ever be. Thus, the Soviets must have given thought to the problem, and been prepared to move promptly in this area, and perhaps others, when the opportunity presented itself.

This it did when (PRIME MINISTER) Pham Van Dong ~~came~~ WENT to Moscow for the anniversary in early November. The side talks were not extensive, but an effort was made on both sides to demonstrate cordiality. The possibility of an early deal for missiles and other military aid at once occurred to American observers, and seemed to be borne out when a working-level Soviet delegation, including military officers, was learned to have visited Hanoi in late December. (Check.)

With the discovery of this mission, American thinking on the Soviet attitude and possible role in Vietnam came into focus. On _____, Ambassador Kohler cabled a careful appraisal of the new Soviet position.

(space for its conclusion and tenor.)

Thus, as the tormented month of January moved on, Kohler in Moscow and Thompson in Washington -- the two senior men on whom Rusk and the President overwhelmingly relied for knowledge and "feel" of the Soviet Union -- had come clearly to one conclusion and tentatively to two others. The sure thing was that the Soviet Union would be helping North Vietnam considerably more, in both economic and military terms. This was partly for the sake of influence in Southeast Asia, and partly to show Soviet firmness in support of a threatened Socialist country. It was essential to remove any basis for a charge of weakness, as the Soviets moved to get the widest possible acceptance of their own foreign policy line of watchful coexistence as opposed to Chinese militancy.

Second, ~~and less surely,~~ the Soviets nonetheless did not want the war in Vietnam to expand. Any wider war meant a risk of direct Chinese involvement, and if China were drawn in with military forces in any way, the Soviets would face the harshest kind of crisis and choice, whether to invoke the 1950 Treaty with China and thus become directly involved themselves, or to stand aside and ~~destroy~~ LET BE DESTROYED all pretence of Communist solidarity. Short of direct Chinese involvement, both Kohler and Thompson by this time saw little chance that events in Vietnam would truly draw the Soviets and Chinese back together in any real sense; this much had already been read into the Soviet handling of the Communist conference, and the general mood in Moscow. They did not know what would happen if it came to a situation falling under the 1950 Treaty, but were fairly sure Moscow did not want to face this situation and find out for

itself. Moreover, they were by now persuaded that the new Soviet leaders still set ~~great~~ store by their relations to the US and wanted as little risk as possible even of seriously soured relations, much less of war. The top priority for the Soviet Union was the consolidating of its position with the Communist world, but US/Soviet relations were still important.

Thirdly, and really as an outcome of the first two elements in Soviet policy, the Soviets were on a cleft stick when it came to any question of peace in Indochina. Their ideal outcome would be a victory for Hanoi in the South, without further American intervention. To the Soviets this outcome must (now) have appeared quite possible, and ~~their scramble to~~ help (for) North Vietnam ~~would~~ positioned them to assume a new role if Hanoi emerged in control of a somewhat Titoist Vietnam wanting to protect itself from China with the help of others. At the same time, the Soviets with their long experience in the unpredictability of American behavior (most notably in Korea) must have recognized that there was no small chance that at some point in any conceivable Vietnam sequence, even if Hanoi stood on the verge of victory, the Americans might still act. Hence, their realistic preference -- particularly if the US did intervene further or the war looked like dragging on -- would be that the Vietnam crisis somehow be resolved, or at least gotten out of the way, by a Laos-type muddled settlement.

Yet, the Laos experience itself had demonstrated that Soviet influence went only a little way even in Hanoi's secondary target

areas. On issues involving South Vietnam itself, Soviet influence seemed likely to be limited for some time to come, although conceivably its advice would be well received, as time went on and Soviet aid grew in importance. The conclusion was that at some point the Soviet Union might be a useful force for peace in Vietnam, and that certainly every effort should be made to keep this chance alive. The action (CONCLUSION) ~~moral~~ fitted ~~would~~ with the ~~early~~ resolve of the Johnson Administration, ever since early 1964 and (WITH NO BREAK) ~~renewed~~ after Brezhnev and Kosygin took over, to continue the Kennedy line of seeking maximum possible cooperation and settlement of disputes with the USSR. (citations.)

Thus, the Soviet Union by January had once again assumed, as in 1961 and 1962, a central potential role in the Vietnam dispute and in American calculations concerning it. The Soviets had acquired at least a toehold in North Vietnam, and it was no great surprise when on January 31, 1965, it was announced that Kosygin himself would go to Hanoi, for (stated purpose). We shall see in the next chapter how this event came to play a crucial part in the whole story.

Chinese Confidence and Prestige at a Peak

d. During the last months of 1964 and January of 1965, there was no striking Chinese act or event. Yet the whole tenor of Chinese behavior, combined with what was happening in Southeast Asia, pointed to steadily growing Chinese confidence and prestige there. On hindsight, one can surmise that if the inner papers of

the Chinese government for this period were ever revealed, they might show a host of action plans for the coming year. Or perhaps it was a case not so much of formal planning but rather of seeing a number of opportunities to be taken as they presented themselves. Whichever it may have been, the situation in many areas of the world must have looked extraordinarily rosy to the Chinese. Let us take these areas in ascending order of importance, as they must have appeared to the Chinese themselves, and as they struck the American government at the time.

First, in Africa, the Chinese were riding high -- to the point where in January of 1965 there was instituted within the State Department a special monthly series of intelligence studies on just what the Chinese were doing in individual African countries. After the first high-level Chinese visit of December 1963, Chou en Lai had gone around again in June of 1964 (check dates and results). By January, the Chinese had strong positions in (describe countries.)

Second there was the Chinese effort to spread influence in the whole Third World. If the Chinese were somewhat put out at the prospect that the Soviet Union might organize most Communist parties against the militant Chinese line, they had their own counter ready to hand in an area of the world that was much more fluid and open to manipulation at the expense of the Soviets and others. The Afro-Asian conference, the first since Bandung in 1955, had now been scheduled for Algiers in June, and in the preliminary meetings the Chinese were gaining at every turn. (describe status in more detail.)

All this was moving slowly. What the Chinese had accomplished to this point in Africa and among the Afro-Asian nations seemed to demonstrate less a strictly ideological appeal of Communist doctrine than Chinese capacity to identify with frustrations and aspirations and, to this point, to play a fairly sophisticated game -- getting a lot of leverage for very modest outlays in aid. But the Chinese "forward policy" in Africa did seem another strong indication of Chinese will and ability to exploit weaknesses in Asia or Africa, wherever they might occur.

Third, sticking to an ascending order of importance, Chinese policy in South Asia had now taken on a strong power-play cast. After the initiation of substantial American military aid to India in 1963, and the even greater amounts of Soviet help (which the United States declined to try to match), it was perhaps natural that Pakistan should have become edgy. The new American and British military help was strictly directed to Indian forces aligned against the Chinese threat, with an American mission to check that this was adhered to: on the other hand, Soviet help was most conspicuous in the Indian Air Force, promising over time to give India a pronounced air superiority over Pakistan. In effect, whereas the American and British help to India might not have set Pakistan on edge, the Soviet additional role -- reflecting Indian desires both for aid as such and for help from both sides -- made it almost imperative both practically and psychologically for

Pakistan to seek a new big power friend. The US at this stage was continuing its long-standing military aid to Pakistan, but had rejected appeals to increase the level after the Indian program was initiated. In short, the situation between India and Pakistan had now become a cockpit of great power struggle, above all between China and the Soviet Union. (Check Barnds.)

This again had been a gradual process. In 1964, one could see the Pakistan press and politicians taking a steadily more friendly line toward the Chinese, and the pace of visits steadily quickened, along with the visible delivery of military equipment from China.* In (January - check) of 1965, the most dramatic move to date was announced -- a formal state visit by President Ayub of Pakistan to China, to take place at the end of February. Again, this was not a matter on which the American ~~government could be more than faintly concerned.~~ RELATION WAS ONE OF ALREADY with plans already under way for Ayub to be invited to the US later in the spring, and with the long-standing friendship between Ayub and President Johnson, Washington did not judge the Pakistani actions harshly, or as more than a practical set of moves to counter the Indian military build-up. But ~~on the Chinese side it~~ THE SEQUENCE DID APPEAR ~~was seen~~ as another instance of active Chinese foreign policy, ~~putting~~ (HAS BEING PUT) China's weight into the balance of power in South Asia, in part doubtless to protect China's territorial interest in Tibet from the possible eventual threat of an externally aided Indian military establishement, but also -- so it seemed -- to project Chinese influence, for its own sake,

* Zafuillah at Oxford in September 1964.

into an area where it had never historically been. Understandable perhaps -- and indeed more in the classic Chinese pattern of behavior than the efforts in Africa and the Afro-Asian world -- the emerging Chinese policy in South Asia was nonetheless another piece in the overall picture of China at surge.

But it was in the fourth area, Southeast Asia itself, that Chinese interest was almost certainly greatest, and its prospects most vividly brightening. In South Vietnam, the Chinese made no new moves in the period from November through January of 1965. Their propaganda continued to make clear their satisfaction at the course of events, and by the turn of the year Chinese comment had the tinge of victory for the Viet Cong being within sight. (Quotes.) Plainly, the Chinese were exultant at the prospect of what they called a (epithet) setback for the Americans.

With this satisfaction went signs that the Chinese themselves expected to take advantage of whatever might happen favorably in South Vietnam. On New Year's Day, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Ch'en Yi, went so far as to boast: "Thailand is next" -- a remark reported (how and where). That the boast was not idle was suggested by the beginning, in December, of powerful short-wave broadcasts beamed at Thailand from a station calling itself the voice of the Thai Independence Movement, and containing strong revolutionary propaganda calling on the Thai people to revolt and throw out their leaders. In January, the same station announced the formation

of a "Patriotic Front of Thailand." From the first, American direction-finding placed the station in China, leading to the ~~clear~~ conclusion that China was supporting the Movement and the Front. Although no North Vietnamese role in Thailand would yet be detected, it seemed a reasonable surmise that Peking was acting at least with the knowledge and support of Hanoi.*

In late 1964, Cambodia was reacting in a different way to its picture of the situation in Southeast Asia. If Sihanouk had concluded by late 1963 that Hanoi and the Viet Cong would probably win in South Vietnam, this belief must have hardened to certainty by the summer of 1964, ~~and it was at that time that~~ he began clearly to attempt to secure the future of his country by wooing Peking AND seeking its support as a counterpoise to Hanoi, in effect an insurance policy against a Hanoi victory. All through the spring and summer of diplomacy, Sihanouk may have hoped that the French would come into the picture, through the convening of a conference or the gaining of support for neutralization. This hope may have waned by fall; at any rate it was at that time in early October, that Sihanouk made the dramatic move or visiting Peking, and the less dramatic one of refusing to receive the credentials of a new American Ambassador. Randolph Kidder had been appointed with Sihanouk's agreement in July, arrived in Phnom Penh in August (check) -- and then cooled his heels for weeks. Finally, in early October, it was conveyed to him that the Prince's refusal to receive him was

* A.J. Dommen, "How Secure is Thailand" NR, 5/1/65.

a matter of considered policy. He was then withdrawn, and affairs left in the hands of an experienced charge, _____.

In November, things went rapidly from bad to worse, and on November (16) Sihanouk publicly threatened to break relations altogether. The US then felt out Cambodian willingness for quiet talks, got a favorable response, and set up a mission under a senior Foreign Service Officer, Philip Bonsal. The talks were held in New Delhi, where the Cambodian Ambassador was, Nong Kimny, who had formerly been in Washington and had many friends there including Bonsal. (Describe the talks and their negative outcome.) Although the US sought nothing in these talks except an honorable basis for maintaining its Embassy in Phnom Penh, the impasse was in the end unresolved. Plainly, Sihanouk had made his bet firm, that the United States would not be a factor in his future -- or at least that his most likely protector, China, would never forgive his trafficking with the United States, while if the US did hold on, it would not hold his difficult behavior against him.

All these were straws in the wind, from which many in Southeast Asia might have concluded that the wind was rising from the East. But the strongest set of events was in Indonesia, which between September and January moved rapidly on many fronts.

Most obviously, confrontation with Malaysia was steadily stepped up. This in itself tended to increase the power and local standing of the PKI, which had from the first been the strongest

Indonesian political group urging "konfrontasi." More to the point, however, the fall of 1964 saw the flowering and then the abrupt end of the most important move to moderate Sukarno's course.

(Describe the Murba party, Malik, the Sukarnoism movement, and the way it developed and then was lopped off.)

Finally, Sukarno made a truly dramatic move on New Year's Day itself. During 1964, in the quiet jockeying of United Nations politics, it had been worked out that Malaysia should occupy, for 1965, one of the non-permanent Security Council seats selected by the General Assembly and allocated by custom, through careful bargaining, on mixed grounds of geography, alignment in the cold war, and other factors. Since early fall, the predicted slate had been generally known in New York and throughout the world, without visible protest. Although Malaysia was a very new member, created only in 1963 in its full form embracing Singapore as well, its standing in New York was good, and it may have gained additional sympathy through its restrained handling of the Security Council proceeding of September.

At any rate, when the United Nations General Assembly finally met in December for a bob-tailed session postponed repeatedly because of a major wrangle over financing of peace-keeping operations (the so-called Article 19 dispute), the slate was duly elected, without audible protest from Indonesia, which had itself occupied a Security Council seat in (year or years).

However, Sukarno suddenly turned on January 1, and announced that Indonesia was forthwith leaving the United Nations entirely, for the stated reason that Malaysia was unfit for the Security Council. In view of the history on this point, it seemed at once clear that his motives went much further, and the language of his speech went so far as to suggest (what?) that he was moving Indonesia far over to the Chinese view, to the point of attacking the whole idea of the United Nations and seeking to set up a rival organization of these countries he had come to call "new emerging forces" (CONEFO'S), in opposition to the "old established forces" (ODDEFO'S). Bizarre as these acronyms may sound ~~today~~, they had at the time a following among many nations -- and were at any rate symbolic of the great degree to which Sukarno had by now come to share central points in the basic line that Peking was peddling to the nations of the Third World. All in all, Sukarno by late January had moved to a heavily pro-Peking position at home, and in the Third World, and was intensifying a confrontation struggle that could only weaken Malaysia if it did not destroy it.

These Indonesian events were vivid to the American government and set off during January 1965 an abortive flurry of high-level consideration of totally new moves. Ever since President Kennedy's death, ~~and indeed before,~~ Ambassador Howard Jones had urged that Sukarno could be influenced by personal attention and courtesy, in

particular by an invitation from President Johnson to pay another visit to the US as he had done twice in 1961.* Now the idea was revived by my staff, arguing that Sukarno had now gone so far that only such a dramatic action stood a chance of reaching him. At the same time, the proponents recognized that the British could be mortally, and rightly, offended if they were not carefully consulted. The result, in late January of 1965, was a cable, drafted by me and approved personally by Secretary Rusk, instructing Bruce in London to sound out the British government. So far as the record shows, there was never a formal reply, though Bruce himself used a full and colorful range of adjectives to convey his negative view; its essence was that the British would think we were out of our minds. Perhaps they did, briefly, but the matter died a natural death after February 7th. The episode stands, I suppose, simply as a measure of the grasping at straws to which the American government had been driven by this time. Indonesia's drift appeared, as Harriman had put it to the President the year before, (likely to deliver Indonesia effectively into the arms of the Chinese), but the US was without any local influence or wider power to affect the situation.

So, on any possible reading, the omens in early 1965 looked favorable to the Chinese. How Mao and his colleagues regarded them could safely be inferred from the series of welcoming statements, for the various Indonesian moves in particular. Perhaps the Chinese

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* Cites from Jones book.

mood was most vividly portrayed in an interview that Mao himself granted in January to Edgar Snow, the only American journalist who for years had been allowed entry to China and a favorite sounding board for Mao on many earlier and later occasions. The interview was quiet, confident, and relaxed. Mao seemed sincere in believing the US was doomed in Vietnam, spoke happily of China's efforts in Africa and on the Afro-Asia front, and was tepid on any real change in Sino-Soviet relations. All in all, Mao contemplated a restored domestic picture and seemed to see a growing tide of success and opportunity abroad.*

How All This Registered in Washington

e. It would be a mistake to conclude that all these events had by early 1965 created in Washington any sharp change in mood toward China, or a sense of rapidly approaching denouement in a struggle for great-power influence in East Asia between China and America. Events were seen one by one, and not pulled together into a much darker picture than had existed before.

Moreover, (IF) China looked generally more threatening and powerful in this "on the eve" period, it was also true that the Soviet Union's new interest in East Asia seemed ~~on the whole~~ faintly hopeful, at least for the middle and long term. Obviously, the very Chinese gains and prospects that concerned the US also concerned the Russians, and indeed in many areas could be seen to be aimed

* ~~National Review~~, 2/27/65.
New Republic)

as much at Soviet Communism as at Western "imperialism." In Washington there was the sense of new forces on the move, but for the short term there could be little change in the prognosis for Southeast Asia. The senior members of the Administration, who had concluded in November that Hanoi victory in South Vietnam would set off almost irretrievable consequences in Southeast Asia, must surely have felt, as I did, ever firmer in this view as events moved through December and January. No papers were written to record this hardening of opinion; it was, in my recollection, as palpable as the steadily growing doubt of American ability to help South Vietnam save itself. The stakes and the difficulties, as so often, grew alongside each other.

Chapter 22: Maneuvering and Teetering

a. With the Inauguration out of the way, the pressure in the Washington decision-making circle grew almost to bursting point. A strong memorandum from McNamara and McGeorge Bundy to the President, on January 25th, led to his decision to send Bundy to Vietnam for a hard look, as the clearly understood prelude to a decision one way or the other.

Simulataneously, the hope for a stable civilian-led government in Saigon evaporated with the overthrow of Prime Minister Huong and the return of General Khanh to effective power. In effect, Americans in both Saigon and Washington now took a philosophical view, expecting nothing more than the barest capacity to govern and heedless of the form that capacity might take.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes there was a spate of thought and some action on the possibility of negotiations. American thinking on a possible form of settlement was refined for use at any time, French explorations with both North Vietnam and China were reported to Washington, perhaps in the hope that they would influence the President to move to the kind of conference DeGaulle continued to urge with Hanoi's backing. At the same time, U Thant's proposal for direct talks between Hanoi and Washington came to the point where a long-sought American decision was conveyed by Secretary Rusk -- that the time was not ripe for such a channel.

Finally, on January 31st, it was announced that Premier Kosygin of Russia would visit Hanoi beginning February 6th. It seemed a kind of climax to weeks of maneuvering and soul-searching. Every posssible ball was in play, but the next move could not be foreseen.

Buddhists and Generals

b. We left the Saigon political story at the point where Huong had managed to paper over the dispute between the civilian High National Council and the generals' Armed Forces Council, and had on January 18th brought four top generals into the cabinet. For a moment, it looked as though Huong -- whose personal character and dogged resolve had by now become quite moving -- would be able to contrive a sort of coalition government, drawing on the Young Turk generals and isolating Khanh.

But it was not to be. The aggrieved parties were Khanh himself, and the militant Buddhists, who wanted no government they could not dictate to. These two quickly made common cause, in "one of those special opportunistic alliances that have proved so common in South Vietnam."* Frustrated by growing lack of response in Saigon, Tri Quang now shifted the emphasis to his stronghold area of Hue -- then as in May of 1963 the center both of Tri Quang's type of chauvinist Buddhist sentiment and of a special brand of central Vietnam local feeling. On January 23rd, 5000 Buddhists of

* Shaplen, I, pp. 299-300 in paperback.

student age sacked the American USIS library there, while smaller parallel demonstrations were staged in Saigon against the Embassy. The choice of Americans as the target was a reflection of the justified belief that the U.S. was supporting the hated Huong government; it was also a neat tactic to enlist Khanh after his own anti-American outbursts of December.

Once the Buddhists had created a situation in which the Huong government could be challenged as unable to keep order, Khanh took quick advantage. On the 27th, he persuaded his colleagues in the Armed Forces Council to announce formally that Huong was through and to appoint Khanh himself to "deal" with the situation.* Khanh promptly appointed a figurehead as Acting Prime Minister, while continuing to maneuver for the next two weeks. Since Tri Quang had brought Khanh down the previous August, it was obvious that the alliance was only for the negative purpose of getting rid of Huong, and that the Buddhists were simply hoarding their power to use again if they got the chance. As always, Tri Quang's true aims were masked by a screen of rhetoric, if indeed they were known in clear form even to himself.

The reaction in Washington was one of no great surprise, and of resignation and general helplessness to know where to turn. The mood was accurately reflected in a story by John Finney of the New York Times: "Now the Administration has concluded that it must accept Saigon's power struggle as inevitable in a nation still emerging

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* Shaplen, I, pp. 300-301.

from colonial control. Partly as a result of lessons learned in the December crisis, Washington was no longer trying to impose Western political solutions. The hope here was that at least a facade of a continuing civilian government could be maintained."* Whether or not Washington had overshot in backing Khanh's naked military rule of early 1964, and again in backing Huong and civilian control from November onward -- in both cases, of course, after the type of government had been installed by South Vietnamese action -- the disposition now was to take what was, and to hope for no more than the barest ability to govern. It was the end of the hopes for steady improvement that had lain behind the December decision of the President; now he would have to decide whether to embark on "Phase II" -- or any other form of stronger action -- on the spongiest sort of Saigon political base, just the setting that he and his advisors had hoped since May not to face when and if a decision on serious escalation became essential.

Pressures on the President

c. Even before the end of the Huong government, the President's senior advisors had come to feel strongly that that very decision had to be made -- in "pulmotor" form if need be. On January 25th, Secretary McNamara and McGeorge Bundy collaborated in a memorandum for the President, with the only other copy going to Rusk. Although unknown to me at the time, this paper summed up the feeling of all of us at that moment.

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* Shaplen, p. ____

The argument was simply that the country had come in Vietnam to a "fork in the Y." For fourteen months the President and all concerned had striven to make the previous policy work, trying every tactic and every resource that anyone could think of. In November, the end of this line had been in sight, but we had given it a last try, with the promise of stronger action as an inducement to Saigon. Now this had failed, and the political situation at least, possibly the military one as well, was near the point of irretrievability. Either the President must order a real military change and step-up, involving attacks on the North and in addition some reinforcements in the South, or he must start to retreat in some fashion, accepting that South Vietnam would be taken over by an essentially Communist regime controlled from Hanoi. The arguments had been gone through as thoroughly as his advisors were capable of doing. Now McNamara and Bundy were inclined to favor acting rather than getting out -- but the worst outcome would be to let events decide without conscious American decision.

Undoubtedly this was not the only advice the President was getting in ~~these crucial days~~. Confined briefly by a cold after the Inauguration, he almost certainly used ~~these days~~ to do what he always did in time of crisis -- sounding out men he trusted, by phone, getting their reaction broad or precise, looking especially for the man who would not react as ~~he had~~ expected. By this time, the "action" tendency of both McNamara and Bundy must have been clear to him; their arguments had their own weight, not the added

force of conversion or change of heart. Almost certainly, he would have looked especially at this period to Rusk, who had been throughout more reserved, and who had during December and January been particularly upset by the political shenanigans in Saigon. He must also have consulted his private advisors, men like Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas (then still in private law practice), and the Senators who were his old friends.

But most of all, as throughout the period since November, the President had to put this most pressing decision of foreign policy alongside what he hoped to accomplish in the domestic scene. Those who had written the domestic scenario were at his elbow constantly, reviewing the programs and ringing messages that were to go to the Hill in sequence all through late January and February.* These alone could have been work enough for the strongest of Presidents. Now he was called on to handle them, and decide at the same time on an issue of war.

Faced with such pressures, the President argued the matter out in the luncheon group on January 27th, and decided, typically, that he had to have a first-hand picture of the situation. Since all agreed that Ambassador Taylor could not come back without overwhelming speculation at home and risk of being absent during some new turn in the continuing crisis in Vietnam, the President turned to an idea that Taylor himself had suggested at the turn of the year -- sending Bundy himself to Saigon. Taylor quickly agreed and the trip was mounted to arrive on the morning of the last day of the Viet-

* List these, with dates.

namese TET holidays, Thursday., February 4th, work and talk for three days in Saigon itself, and round out the visit with a fourth day of field trips on Sunday, the 7th, before returning that night.

To accompany him, Bundy chose a top staff team including John McNaughton from Defense, Leonard Unger from my office, and Chester Cooper, now of the White House staff. The keynote was local knowledge, and the trip was particularly focussed on politics, with all the team to see as many groups as possible on their own -- Buddhists, students, and politicians outside government, as well as the inevitable Khanh.

Likewise on the 27th, the President cabled Taylor that dependents simply had to be removed before there could be further decisions. After arguing the matter in three exchanges with Washington going back to January 6th, Taylor had by this time talked to Huong and Vien and found them worried about the psychological effect. However, he had also accepted an idea, introduced from Washington, that this effect could be counterbalanced by a simultaneous announcement of American force increases amounting to 2-3000 men -- these being elements that had accumulated from various field recommendations and were thought justified in any event. Hence, by the 29th, Taylor finally indicated his complete acceptance of the dependent withdrawal, saying that he would work out timing and method during the Bundy trip. Over and over, he hinted, and more, that this action must be quickly followed by going ahead on the Phase II program;

every time, the answer came back that the President had made no decisions and was not committing himself to any. But Taylor, and all the inner circle aware of the traffic, could see that the dependent withdrawal would be a major addition to the pressures on the President to decide one way or the other.

In these exchanges, Taylor also sought authority to oppose Khanh's return to power, if necessary by saying the US would cease to assist -- the ultimate threat. This was quickly rejected by Washington, nailing down the new approach of taking what might come.

Finally, the action problems at the end of January included a strongly backed proposal for a new DESOTO patrol, to get needed intelligence on North Vietnam's strengthened air defense radar system. Taylor himself had urged against this in November; now he was wholeheartedly in favor. The plan called for the destroyers to stay at long distances from the North Vietnamese coast, and for a total standdown of maritime covert operations during the patrol and for substantial times before and after. It was approved to begin on February 3rd, but then postponed, on the 29th, till February 7th, so as not fo fall in the TET period. There may also have been some thought of avoiding conflict with the Bundy visit, it was clearly realized that the patrol might lead to North Vietnamese attack and another American decision on reprisal. Over the previous three months civilian thinking had moved strongly against starting a reprisal program for another incident confined to American forces

and outside South Vietnamese territory. Some military commands may have hoped the patrol could be the trigger; the civilians, from the President down, did not want their hands forced, so that I believe the intelligence reason was the valid and true one, outweighing risks reduced to a minimum by the strict ground rules. Even to seek this kind of intelligence was, of course, in tune with the possibility of early bombing of the North, but it was a contingency action, not intended as a committing one.

Negotiation: Thought, Word, and Deed

d. As this series of actions went forward at the Presidential level, the State Department and its Secretary were concerned with negotiating possibilities. Three unrelated developments came at this tense time: renewed and considerably more careful planning and exchanges between Washington and the Embassy in Saigon, first readings from the French on talks they had initiated with North Vietnamese and Chinese representatives in Paris, and an immortal Rusk decision in response to U Thant's longstanding proposal for direct talks between North Vietnam and the United States.

By mid-January, it was apparent both to Alexis Johnson in Saigon and to my associates in the Department that, whichever way the President might decide, there had to be a much better picture of negotiations -- choice of forum, objectives, and initial issues and opening positions. All these points had been covered in the

November papers, on the basis of Robert Johnson's extensive background research and analysis, but the Principals had agreed with my own conclusion that the work was not satisfactory. In the day-to-day pressures since, the project had been put off.

On January 22nd, Alexis Johnson sent a long cable from Saigon, drawing I am sure on his personal experiences as a senior member of the American delegation at Geneva in 1954, watching the confused process by which the Accords had reen reached.* Its conclusion was that a totally new agreement to replace the 1954 Agreements was not necessary, although there would have to be replacement understandings on such issues as all-Vietnam elections.

The last seemed a hurdle that lay well down the course, and as it turned out Hanoi never manifested real interest either in all-Vietnam elections or any early reunification of Vietnam. In the fog of early 1965 we had only the faintest inkling of what Hanoi's position would be, as we shall see in a moment.

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* The murkiness of those negotiations was, all along, one of the most frustrating elements in attempting either to see what the Agreements really meant or to assess their usefulness for the future. Despite full secondary accounts from many quarters, such important parts as Article 7 on elections are still fraught with ambiguity. I recall that within my first months of coming to the Department in early 1964, I asked for the TOP SECRET history. It was an honorable effort, but almost wholly unhelpful. The root problems were, first, the haste of the final negotiations, and second, the fact that many provisions were, as I am more confident in hindsight, drawn with deliberate ambiguity or (the election provision particularly) with few of the negotiators really believing that they would be carried out. Of the Americans involved, Alexis Johnson and Chester Cooper retained fairly clear and objective recollections, which, however, led them to opposite conclusions. Johnson thought many elements could be made central to a future settlement, while Cooper believed, as his book shows, that the agreements were worthless for any future purpose. (Cooper, p. ____)

Much more immediate, in the lengthy analysis and supporting file I worked on in that last week with Robert Johnson and others, was the question of how rapidly negotiations might be opened, and where. I find in my notes one pregnant sentence -- that since November the mood both internationally and within the U.S itself had "moved quite markedly in the direction of seeking a negotiated outcome." Thus, this staffwork looked hard at the prospects of any useful action in the UN Security Council, concluding that a resolution condemning North Vietnam would surely be vetoed by the Soviet Union, perhaps even by France, and that any proposal to establish a United Nations presence to handle infiltration would, in the terse phrase of the Department's UN experts "not even get off the ground."* Any recourse to the UN would lead almost certainly to the standard UN remedy, a call for a cease-fire and for the parties to negotiate, and would have to be viewed in that light. Public negotiation would then have to be in some sort of conference format; again, the 1954 Geneva grouping seemed unsatisfactory because of the presence of a now hostile France and the absence of many nations that had acquired major interests in the shape of an Indochina settlement.

There emerged no clear picture or plan of how to proceed. However, the analysis of substantive issues was, in hindsight, quite prescient, pointing to the key issues as withdrawal of North Viet-

* The Council in August of 1964 would probably have adopted the three-nation plan for an observer force along the borders of Cambodia, which, as noted in Chapter ___ had been Sihanouk's own idea which he later repudiated and thus killed. However, an observer force in the areas of infiltration from North to South Vietnam would have thrust the UN directly between the major participants.

namese and American forces, cease-fire within South Vietnam and cessation of US actions then in progress against the North, and above all the internal situation in South Vietnam -- whether and to what extent the Liberation Front could be admitted to a legal political role, and the question of free elections "or some other method of determining the popular will." All the difficulties that were to intrude for years to come were seen in outline at this time -- which was perhaps no great feat.

This staffwork had one direct bearing on the public American position, which from then on referred, at least in prepared statements, to restoring the "essentials" of the 1954 Accords. Bit by bit, other parts of the thinking found their way into public statements also, over a period of time. It is not true to say that the Administration never did its homework (Cite Cooper), but it is true that this work was not pressed hard enough to produce imaginative and realistic ideas for new public statements in the months to come. The greatest difficulty of all, however, was that at this stage there simply was no South Vietnamese government with whom one could begin to discuss the issues. All of us felt, as Taylor had written in November (p. ____ above) that the US should not be to the fore in stating peace positions. It was a position that the Administration was to cling to for too long, and at some cost to the credibility of its efforts for peace. Whether there was, in fact, a chance that more and clearer American public positions could have brought about serious negotiations is a key question for the reader to bear in mind as he pursues the account of the months to come.

In all this planning, it was assumed that the United States would have proceeded to the point of military action against North Vietnam. As in November, it seemed to all concerned that negotiation, in the absence of a firmer US posture established in some fashion, could only mean a settlement that accepted effective Hanoi control of South Vietnam. To "muddle through and negotiate," as one staff member urged, was his euphemism for letting go and pulling out, and I am sure understood by him in this sense.* Similarly, within the fairly wide circle of those concerned with the shape of a settlement, there were none who argued, even as the harsh nature of the impending choice became clearer, that French "neutralization" would hold or be workable. There seemed no middle ground either in tactics or position.

Nor was this view shaken by reports received in late January, from the French themselves, of their private exploratory conversations with Hanoi and Peking representatives. The Seaborn contacts had elicited not even a useful statement of the North Vietnamese position, and although many countries had contact with Hanoi, none had obtained any reading other than the firm reiteration of propaganda lines. Hence, the French reports were examined with special care in Washington.

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* This was the proposal given to me at this time by James Thomson, then on the White House Staff, without detailed discussion or explanation. A franker statement along the same lines came from the China expert in my office, Lindsey Grant, in his analysis of February 5th. Pentagon Papers, p. _____)

The conversations had been held with the North Vietnamese representative in Paris, Mai Van Bo, at French initiative, and with the Chinese Charge at Chinese initiative in December and mid-January. The Chinese part had produced almost nothing save an overall impression of hardness, but the Mai Van Bo talks had elicited a strong indication that Hanoi might accept an independent and neutral South Vietnam -- which was of course the French preoccupation. However, on the crucial question whether Hanoi would then desist from political and military subversion of the South, Mai Van Bo had become evasive.

It was a clearer indication than anything before, that Hanoi was not thinking of early formal reunification of Vietnam, but was probably prepared to accept a nominally separate South, which it would presumably then, in turn, control through the Liberation Front and the core People's Revolutionary Party. This would be a two-stage process of take-over, with the second stage of outright reunification possibly postponed for some time. Since the practical result would be just as certain, the new reading seemed in Washington to suggest no "give" in Hanoi.

Yet the readings did show a discernible difference in tone between Hanoi and Peking. This fitted with evidence that Hanoi's propaganda line by this time had dropped all hostility to the Soviet Union.*

* For example, the Hong Kong Consulate General at just this time called attention to a January 19 Communique of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi, taking a pragmatic and non-revolutionary line in marked contrast to that of Peking. Similarly, earlier in the month, it had come to light that back in November, a strongly anti-Soviet article had been withdrawn at the last moment from the top Hanoi journal, Noc Tap, in favor of a bland substitute article.

The conclusion could only be that Hanoi was back to the fence-straddling position it had held until August of 1963 on the Sino-Soviet squabble -- with the likely corollary that Hanoi was more independent than ever.

Finally, the readings left no doubt that Hanoi considered itself in charge. Although French correspondents had by this time begun to suggest that the Liberation Front was somewhat out from under Hanoi, possibly even affected by strong separate ties with Peking, the conversations contained no trace of this.* All along, the Quai d'Orsay - the professionals as opposed to the amateurs -- saw the North Vietnamese Politburo as the controlling force with power to decide the war.

The French readings were thus fragmentary but useful, tending to confirm the basic assumptions held in Washington. It seemed apparent that the French were continuing to explore what might be done, and that this quiet activity explained the French silence of recent months. In these exchanges, the French asked nothing of the American government, and in turn was thanked for its efforts.

* The suggestion of Peking influence on the Viet Cong had originally been made in November by Georges Chaffard, a French expert writing for L'Express. It has not taken seriously by most commentators; for example, in the New Republic of January 16, 1965, Bernard Fall -- a onetime Frenchman occasionally inclined to this type of speculation -- deprecated almost completely the idea of significant Chinese influence directly on the Liberation Front or the Viet Cong. This was in an article arguing mainly that the U.S. did have the capacity, through threats or limited military action, to exert leverage on Hanoi, which was the key. This was in accord with the view within the American government.

This was the private side of French activity. Publicly, De-Gaulle once again urged an immediate reconvened Geneva Conference. As before, Hanoi indicated its approval of this forum -- to which the American government had repeatedly stated its opposition in the absence of any sign that Hanoi was prepared to desist from its effort in the South. It seemed a stereotyped move on all sides, signalling publicly that the United States did not see at this point a basis for negotiation. (check.)

The same position lay at the root of the important decision taken by Secretary Rusk, in these same last ten days of January, on the longstanding U Thant proposal for bilateral talks with Hanoi on a totally private and secret basis. Through Ambassador Adlai Stevenson in New York, Rusk sent word that the time was not appropriate and that the US would not take up the offer for the time being. It appears that Stevenson conveyed the message as amounting to outright rejection, and that it was in this form that U Thant relayed it to Hanoi in the first days of February.

In terms of its true place in history, this episode may not be of any real significance. Hanoi can hardly have been surprised at the American response, which fitted with the public and private American position at the time. Nor, as I shall argue in a moment, is there any reason to suppose Hanoi had any concessions to make or any expectation other than that the US might choose this way of

working out a camouflaged surrender. Yet the episode later became a real cause celebre, first through U Thant's partial disclosure in February, 1965, and then through the posthumous publication in November, 1965, of Stevenson's casual and off-the-record account to a friend, and respected TV commentator and writer, Eric Sevareid, just before his death in July.

Was a chance for peace lost? Was it badly misplayed? What really happened, and above all why?

The chronology of the episode may forever be unclear. At the time, Stevenson kept the matter to himself to the point of not committing a word to paper or informing his closest associates, Francis Plimpton and Charles Yost; even Stevenson's retrospective accounts were fragmentary and not self-consistent. Rusk likewise kept no written record, while the third major participant, U Thant himself, has given oral accounts to some dozen responsible Americans at various times, but with wide discrepancies on dates. Perhaps a historian will eventually do better than those of us who tried in late 1965 to piece the exact facts together, but I doubt it.

The central outline, however, is that after his call on the President and Rusk on August 6, 1964 (mentioned in Chapter ___ above) U Thant felt encouraged to pursue the idea of arranging direct and secret bilateral talks. The American reports and recollections of this occasion do not support the idea of American encouragement, but

it was of course a delicate question of impression in which misunderstanding was easy.

U Thant says that he then approached Hanoi through a Soviet senior officer in the UN Secretariat, _____ Suslow, who contacted Hanoi and received an affirmative reply, allegedly from Ho himself, in September. This was then conveyed to Stevenson, who gave no reply but did apparently discuss the matter quietly with Rusk on one or more occasions, these steps coming probably in September and October but perhaps not completely till late November, when the files first show a cryptic reference by Rusk. To U Thant, Stevenson apparently conveyed the impression that the matter was too tricky to handle till after the election -- as indeed it might have been for that reason alone.

Then, in late November or December or alternatively in early January, U Thant pressed Stevenson, who responded at Rusk's suggestion by asking where such talks could be held with true privacy, which was a major American concern. U Thant then got in touch with General New Win, who gave permission for the use of Rangoon, where both parties had resident representatives of some stature. This was reported to Rusk, again either in December or mid-January, but more likely the latter. Within ten days Rusk had conveyed what he regarded as an interim American reply, that this was not the time.*

* The evidence points to mid-January for three reasons. First, in the various dictated accounts of Stevenson, and oral recollections of U Thant, January outnumbers December by some margin. Secondly, U Thant was away from New York for much of December because of illness. Third, my own vague recollection, from the fact that, in Rusk's momentary absence, Stevenson related the message that Rangoon was arranged through me. This was my only personal knowledge of the matter, which somehow seemed very theoretical and remote, at most a contingency possibility in case a direct channel were ever needed.

To complete the episode, after U Thant had half-surfaced the matter in a somewhat accusatory tone in mid-February of 1965, Rusk then conveyed to him the flat American response that a formal bilateral channel was out of the question in the circumstances that by then prevailed.*

So much for the "what" of the matter. It is foggy in exact dates and missing such key points as the form in which the proposal and American attitude were presented to Ho.** The "why" on the other hand, is not too difficult to unearth. It is, alas, obscured by the later attempt to reconcile the episode with American claims of readiness at all times to pursue any avenue. The United States was not thus ready in the fall of 1964 or early 1965, and it was a great mistake, later, to claim that it had been.***

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* This response is the one cited by the UN spokesman, on March 10, as the official American reply. We shall see in the next chapter what the context was by this time.

** In one of his later accounts, U Thant is reported to have said that he told Hanoi that he was fully aware of their objectives, but nonetheless thought a settlement could be arranged. Such a formula could easily have conveyed to Hanoi that the Americans were eager for the talks, or ready to give up on the key Hanoi objective of control of South Vietnam, or both. Certainly U Thant's accounts have never had the precision of usual diplomatic practice for intermediaries, perhaps partly because he was not prodded either by the somewhat impressionistic Stevenson or by polite American questioners in retrospect. It seems likely that U Thant himself operated on a highly personal basis, as he has so often done on other occasions, and even with some aversion to precision. If the parties came together at all, leave the precision to them. It is a method that has had its advocates and perhaps, in history, its successes. I doubt if it is well suited to wary and sophisticated adversaries.

*** The point has some similarity to what later use of the Tonkin Resolution did to the history of its origin. See Chapter 14.

On the contrary, Rusk in the period of the U Thant matter weighed a host of negative arguments and found them at least temporarily decisive for not pursuing the avenue. First and most basic, the proposal was purely procedural, calling for the holding of exploratory talks with no indication that the positions of the parties had changed in any way. At most, it appeared as an opportunity to take soundings.*

Second, and especially in the absence of any contrary indication in this channel, all the signs at the time pointed to Hanoi being totally tough and obdurate. That Hanoi was publicly willing to go to a conference had been clear since July (check.) Yet in the very same period the private readings from the Seaborn mission had been negative to the point of harshness, and in December Seaborn had not even been able to talk to any significant North Vietnamese. So willingness to talk seemed to prove little on substance, while every other indication -- Seaborn but above all the course of the war itself -- suggested that Hanoi had every expectation of winning without excessive cost of time. If Hanoi was firm in June, which had been the clearest Seaborn reading, why was there the slightest reason to suppose that it would be any less firm in December or January?

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* This was the phrase used by Eric Sevareid himself in a TV broadcast of November 16, 1965, after his revelations. Neither Stevenson to Sevareid, nor Sevareid himself, ever claimed more, though Stevenson's tone to Sevareid was one of great regret that even this opportunity was missed. Those who knew Stevenson better than I (who voted for him twice for President and admired his style and broad positions greatly) tell me that it was common for Stevenson to "blow off steam" ~~to some extent~~ in this way. Rusk never got the impression at the time that Stevenson disagreed with his handling of the matter, although U Thant did get such an impression. Nothing in the American government record, contemporaneous or retrospective, suggests that Stevenson

It was a central conclusion, doubtless strengthened for Rusk by his own experience in negotiations with Communist countries. Three cases stood out in Rusk's memory, as he later said in public and used to say at greater length in private sessions. These were the lifting of the Berlin Blockade in 1949, the start of the Korean Armistice negotiations in June of 1951, and the Cuba missile crisis in October, 1962. In all three, the United States made its broad position clear and left the door open to negotiations. In all three, the other side -- the Russians -- had taken a recognizable secret initiative indicating a readiness to compromise on one or more key points. And in all three the result had been the ending of a Communist-initiated pressure or military action.

The shape of Rusk's thinking on negotiation was undoubtedly a key factor in the American handling of the subject all through the years from 1965 through his departure in January 1969. As we shall see in a much later section of the book, there is ample room for argument whether his historical parallels really fitted the Vietnamese case at several later stages when Hanoi might conceivably have responded to some adroit move. But, on the situation as it stood in early 1965, it seems to me that common sense made his conclusion -- that there was no chance whatever of Hanoi being conciliatory or compromising -- not only defensible but incontestable.

Thus, the case stood as one where the US was being asked to join in talks that had essentially no prospect of producing progress,

that at most would serve as a continuing channel of communication. Why not, however, pick up at least this, for later use?

Here there were two additional reasons. One, simple and obvious, was that if the channel had future meaning, it could almost certainly be opened up at a later time. Moreover, it could then be weighed against, or put into parallel with, a host of other possibilities of forum. But, finally, there seemed an overwhelming practical reason not to become embroiled at this time for no discernible gain toward peace. This was the effect on Saigon, where political morale was at rock bottom and fearful above all that the US might pull out. If talks were held, it would be entirely possible for Hanoi to leak their existence, through manifold agents, to South Vietnamese leaders or others. The result, in an overcharged atmosphere already rent with suspicion, could be devastating, even fatal.

This last was an argument actually cited by Rusk in his January "not for now" response. In passing it on to U Thant, Stevenson then and later may have had little sympathy with it, as he indicated to many -- although without contesting the basic decision at the time. It fitted, like the other arguments, with the central American position of standing firm in the hope that an independent South Vietnam could be preserved. Readiness for negotiations, without regard to their prospects or effect on the situation, was not a part of American policy in January of 1965 or at any earlier period.

Such, were the reasons why Rusk acted as he did. All are reflected in the later reconstruction and in his public explanation of November 1965* (citation.) To sophisticated observers, the American position must have appeared as the normal one for any nation engaged in war, perhaps the more natural when trends are adverse and a smaller nation directly affected. For the losing side to resist, and the winning side to welcome (or seem to welcome) negotiations, has been the experience of nations in 99% of the wars of history. By April of 1965, the roles of the contending sides had been reversed (long before the prospects for the war seemed to be), and the American government made an effort to relate its April position back to the previous period. This effort was to confuse a perfectly understandable episode and interim decision by Rusk, so obvious to him that it appears he never consulted either his subordinates or his colleagues in the senior advisory circle, or done more than inform the President orally, with the implication that the matter was of no great importance.

One must jump a little ahead of the story to make one final point about the U Thant episode, as it came to be called. Almost certainly insignificant as regards the relation between Washington and Hanoi, it did much to sour relations between U Thant himself and the American government. This was not because of anything the Secretary General had done during the active period of the proposal, but rather because he chose, in mid-February, to give a partial account

to the press, implying that the American people should have been told of this and other central aspects of the struggle. This breach of his own injunctions of secrecy was in itself shocking. Moreover, in the resulting recriminations, it seemed clear on the American side that the Secretary General, as some had suspected before, took a fundamentally hostile attitude toward the American position in Vietnam. In effect, he believed that Ho Chi Minh's nationalism was utterly paramount over his Communist ideology, that North Vietnam was essentially in the right and entitled to win, and that -- at least as of 1964 and early 1965 -- Hanoi's victory was in fact inevitable. To these views on the nature of the Vietnam struggle were joined a deep conviction that Southeast Asian nations should have followed the utterly neutral postwar course taken by his own Burma, and that China would have then left them alone. Somewhat paradoxically, he also professed great fear of China, and above all - in early 1965 - of a Sino-Soviet reconciliation.

The point was not whether these views were right or wrong; any sophisticated person knew that they were tenable and held by many in responsible positions. Rather, the point was that in U Thant this line of belief was so strong, and so emotionally charged, that it affected his conduct of his office. Try as he might to remain truly neutral and abcve the battle, it never seemed to Washington, after the heated exchanges of February 1965, that he was really capable of doing so. While Stevenson, and later Arthur Goldberg, dealt as fully and frankly with U Thant as it was possible to do, the fact is

that he was never trusted in Washington on anything, judgment or proposal, having to do with Vietnam. It was a sad additional factor to add to difficulties that probably would have made the United Nations useless in the short-term in any event, as we shall see at a later point.

Reaction to the Kosygin Announcement

e. Much of what was happening in late January was behind the scenes, and not visible to the public. The announcement of the McGeorge Bundy visit on January 28th gave the knowing press a fairly strong signal that events were moving to a climax, and certainly the chancellories of the world were aware that there had to be a break in some direction before long. Publicly, however, neither the President nor any of his senior advisors commented in the last weeks of January or the beginning of February, and the only word from the Administration was a speech by me, delivered on January 23rd at a long-standing engagement, undertaken at Senator Symington's request in Washington, Missouri. Dwelling mostly on the history of the conflict, the stakes in Asia, and the reasons for South Vietnam's political difficulty, the speech concluded as follows:

> "As to our basic policy, the alternatives to our present course might be, on the one hand, to withdraw or to negotiate on some basis such as what is called "neutralization," or, on the other hand, for the Vietnamese and ourselves to enlarge the war, bringing pressure to persuade Hanoi, by force, that the game they are playing is not worth it.
>
> It is also suggested that the United Nations might be of help. There may emerge possibilities for a UN role, but it is not clear that the UN, which has been unable to carry through commitments such as the Congo, would be able to act effectively to deal with this far more difficult situation in its present form. And this has been the public judgment of the UN Secretary General, Mr. U Thant.

As to the basic alternatives, so long as South Vietnam is ready to carry on the fight, withdrawal is unthinkable. A negotiation that produced a return to the essentials of the 1954 Accords and thus an inndpendent and secure South Vietnam would of course be an answer, indeed the answer. But negotiation would hardly be promising that admitted Communism to South Vietnam, that did not get Hanoi out, or that exposed South Vietnam and perhaps other countries of the area to renewed Communist aggression at will, with only nebulous or remote guarantees.

As for enlarging our own actions, we cannot speak surely about the future -- for the aggressors themselves share the responsibility for such eventualities. We have shown in the Gulf of Tonkin that we can act, and North Vietnam knows it, and knows its own weaknesses. But we seek no wider war, and we must not suppose that there are quick or easy answers in this direction.

The root of the problem, to repeat, is in South Vietnam.

The speech attracted little notice, which I thought at the time meant that it corresponded closely to the ambivalent picture, of uncertainty alongside the chance of a major break, which the press and all serious observers had by then formed.

On January 31, the press had something much more substantial to speculate on. It was announced from Moscow that Premier Kosygin himself would travel to Hanoi, via Peking (was this in it?), to arrive about February 6th and to stay for an unannounced period of talks. The accompanying party included representatives of the Soviet Communist Party, Defense, civil air, and foreign economic ministries, an all-purpose delegation lending itself to wide interpretation.

Obviously, it was a major move by Moscow to get back into the Vietnam picture. The high-level Washington conclusion focussed above all on the virtual certainty that Kosygin would commit the Soviet Union to major additional military and economic assistance. Military equip-

ment would be promised at least for guerrilla warfare and probably for air defense as well although the latter, if done in any reasonably short time, would involve a commitment of Soviet personnel to operating roles and thus a Soviet exposure the Soviets would accept only for the greater gain of renewed influence in Hanoi. While thus taking an affirmative line, the Soviets, it was thought, would caution Hanoi against any overt military moves likely to bring on American reprisals. The tenor was that the Soviets probably thought Hanoi was on a winning course anyway and did not need to take risks. In sum, it was a trip to get back hard into the Vietnam area, and essentially in anticipation of victory.

To this view, some staff members added the view that Kosygin might be going to say or do something about a negotiated settlement. The argument advanced by two of the China experts in my office, Lindsey Grant and William Watts, was that Moscow and Hanoi might both see advantages in an early settlement, provided the Liberation Front got a strong position in the Saigon political structure through a coalition government. If this could be done, Moscow would get credit for a settlement that would in the end amount to victory, and both Moscow and Hanoi would have thwarted Chinese influence.*

At high levels, (which in any case did not see the Grant-Watts memorandum) it seemed unlikely that Soviet influence was yet at the point where such a positive and sophisticated line could be proposed -- reminiscent as it must have been of the compromise of 1954 and Hanoi's

* Check Pentagon Papers citation for this, and spell out. Make clear US standpoint.

dashed hopes at that time that the second half of the loaf would get to them. On the other hand, the possibility that the Soviets might help toward peace at a later point was very much present. Moreover, whether the possibility was great or small, it was plainly in the American interest both to keep it alive and to do nothing that could affect American relations with the Brezhnev-Kosygin regime.

Hence, the Kosygin announcement led to one quick decision by the President, to postpone the DESOTO patrol indefinitely. Even with maximum precautions, some had thought it unwarranted. Now the scales were tipped decisively.

So the first week of February moved on, in an atmosphere of growing speculation in and out of the American government. In Saigon, the press followed the McGeorge Bundy party as its members saw political leaders and groups through the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, February 4-6. By the night of February 6th, Saigon time, the group had pretty well made up its mind that it would carry back to Washington a recommendation for stronger action in the immediate future, coupled with a plan to carry out the withdrawal of dependents on which the President had already decided.* But as the evening of that day approached, in Washington, subdued tension was mixed with complete uncertainty what the next move would be and where it would come from.

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* Cooper, p. _____.

Chapter 22B: The Pleiku Attack and the Shaping of a New Course

a. In the early morning of February 7th, Saigon time, a Viet Cong attack on an American military installation at Pleiku, in the highlands of Vietnam, ~~combined with a wave of other attacks elsewhere in the country, operated as~~ (PLT) the match to the smoldering situation. On the unanimous advice of all his advisors in the Executive Branch, the President decided on an immediate air attack on the southern part of NVN, carried out that day and the 8th. The decision was taken after weighing fully the presence of Premier Kosygin, on the basis that time was of the essence.

Directly thereafter, the McGeorge Bundy party returned to Washington, bringing a report recommending a policy of continuing reprisals amounting to a steady campaign against North Vietnam. By Monday, the 8th, the President had made the decision in principle that he would move to some form of "Phase II" of the December half-decision.

The following ten days saw not only a second VC major attack and American reprisal on February 11th, but important debate within the Administration on how the question of negotiations should be approached under the new course of action, and also how the new course should be presented to the American public and the world. These questions were not resolved till the 17th and 18th, by the act of a Presidential public statement and by the framing of a rounded private description of the new course, for the Saigon government and America's associates.

However, the initiation of continuous bombing of the North was then delayed for another ten days, by renewed Saigon political ructions and then by weather. As public diplomatic initiatives were being made at the UN and by third countries, the real diplomatic move was behind the scenes -- an attempt by Britain to enlist the Soviet Union in a quiet mediation effort.

Finally, on February 24th, the President gave the order to proceed, believing that even if quiet negotiations got under way it was essential to keep up military pressure against Hanoi in order to have any balance. On February 28th, the new course was signalled by the release of a White Paper detailing the evidence of "Aggression from the North." It was the visible crossing of the Rubicon.

All in all, it was a thoroughly confused three weeks. Soviet behavior, in particular, remains obscure to this day, and no doubt the policy of the United States seemed murky to Moscow, to other key countries, and to the American people themselves. In embarking on the new course, the United States was about as elegant as a man getting into a cold bath, and for similar reasons.

Pleiku and the Immediate Reprisal

b. During January, the pace of military action in the South -- always dictated by the VC -- had been only moderate, and some had found encouragement in the performance of government forces, which according to their own reports had exacted high losses from the VC in relation to their own casualties. (McGB report). Almost certainly, however, the VC had been lying low till after the Tet holiday, which ran from

January ___ through February 4th. Traditionally a period when Vietnamese returned to their homes for celebration, this was naturally a time when the VC tended to regroup to strike hard ~~while the government was still~~ in the holiday aftermath.*

In the early morning of the 7th, the new offensive manifested itself dramatically, in a series of attacks throughout Vietnam. The biggest and most devastating, politically and militarily, was ~~a mortar barrage~~ against an American military compound in Pleiku, housing men who maintained aircraft and helicopters, and flew the latter, for the highland area of which Pleiku was the capital and corps headquarters. Using mortars from a considerable distance, the VC killed 8 Americans, and wounded more then 100 others, without taking any losses in return.** Similar South Vietnamese losses were inflicted at several other locations. The pattern throughout was that of the November 1 mortar attack on Bien Hoa.

Taylor, accompanied by Bundy, went at once to Westmoreland's military headquarters in Saigon, and the first reports led to the prompt convening of the President's advisors in the Cabinet Room in Washington. Between the two, cables and occasional direct phone calls passed for nearly three hours. Whether the recommendation for immediate reprisal action came from Saigon or not is immaterial; it was in the air that it must be done. In the end, the President did insist on confirmation that Taylor, Bundy, Westmoreland, and Johnson all concurred in such a recommendation, but by then the die was cast.

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* Or of course, as in 1968, to strike while the holiday was on.

** The ~~World War II~~ cartoonist and correspondent, Bill Mauldin, happened to be in the Pleiku compound the night of the attack. His vivid account is in the New Republic, February 20, 1965, pp.8-9.

In Washington, the group included McNamara, Wheeler, and Vance from the Pentagon, and Ball, Thompson, and myself from the State Department -- Rusk being ill and in Florida. So far as I can recall, the major topic of discussion was Kosygin's presence in Hanoi. With his usual quiet restraint, Thompson pointed out that a reprisal at once would put the Russians, and Kosygin personally, very much on the spot, and perhaps impair the chance of their acting in a useful way for some time. When, it was then asked, was he likely to leave? The answer was that no terminal date had been set, and that in any case he and his hosts could decide to prolong the visit, if they thought it was keeping the United States from acting. Even without the lively possibility of further (MAJOR) incidents, ~~in what seemed a totally concerted military pattern,~~ the resulting delay seemed impossible. Thompson himself agreed that if reprisal was indicated, the Kosygin presence should not delay it, although immediate steps should be taken to inform the Russians of our regret that it had been necessary to act at just this time, pointing out that the triggering act had been that of the VC, and we believed at Hanoi's orders.* (Refer to Kosygin's later personal sense of offense.)

On this point, there was no direct evidence. The inference from the total pattern, however, seemed clear. Accepting the basic evidence of Hanoi's command and control, one did not conclude that every isolated VC act was ordered from the North. But these actions were far too widespread and systematic to be isolated, and too neatly timed, as well, not to be the work of the central planning organization, which

meant Hanoi.

Beyond that, one could only speculate -- for example, whether Ho had meant to mouse-trap Kosygin into all-out support (~~this~~ (AS) soon became my own view). For purposes of immediate action it was enough that Hanoi was almost certainly responsible, and that the actions amounted on their face to a major challenge to American will and resolve. As Taylor had been pointing out for more than two months, the leaders in Saigon had not understood our failure to act for the Bien Hoa and Brink's attacks. A third case could be the last straw. All present, including George Ball, thought that the case was decisive at least for this immediate action.

So the decision itself was taken almost at once. The rest of the evening went into action orders and a careful statement, referring to the series of attacks, not just to Pleiku or American casualties, and bringing the South Vietnamese into the basis for action as well as into the action itself. During these same hours, Taylor readily obtained Khanh's approval; almost certainly Khanh would have requested the strikes.

But first there was a dramatic second meeting in Washington. Having worked out with his advisors the plan of action, the President had then asked (SPEAKER McCORMACK AND) Senator Mansfield ~~with others?~~ to come in. Once as close as men of totally dissimilar temperaments can be, (PRESIDENT AND THE SENATOR) the ~~two~~ had drifted to arm's length over a year of new positions and responsibilities, and with recurrent expressions of doubt on Vietnam from ~~the Senator~~ (MANSFIELD), whose close association and experience, as we have seen, ran back to

the original choice of Diem in 1954. Now the Senator sat across the Cabinet table from the President while the latter laid out what had happened and clearly implied wht he was about to order. What, the President finally asked, did the Senator think he should do?

"I think you should negotiate, Mr. President," came the dry and plain answer.

The President did not try to draw the Majority Leader out, as he might have done in a setting of more privacy and less tension. Instead, his reply was terse and quite biting. As I recall, he asked how there could be any hope in that if our men were dying and we were sitting with our hands behind our backs? But it was not a rational attempt to persuade. Hours and hours of private lalk lay behind the difference now nakedly revealed. My impression was that the Senator would have given anything to be alone with the President; finding that he had to speak (IN FRONT OF OTHERS,) he did so, with typical courage and frankness. But never again did he take this kind of blunt position in a (OPEN) meeting, doubtless because the President and he both worked to keep their basic exchanges private. My suspicion is that the President simply could not imagine that even Mansfield would disagree on this occasion. Whatever differences there were on policy, if American "boys" were dying, you had to hit back. It was a gut reaction.

Yet this strong human impulse of the President's would not have prevailed without the whole build-up of event and thought over the past year. He had gone one way at Tonkin, another at the time of the Bien Hoa and Brink's attacks. Now he had returned to the Tonkin response, acting within the framework of the first clause of the Tonkin Resolution (quote), but in a new context.

So the difference between the President and Mansfield was a profound difference of policy, and the decision the President was making was understood by all to be more than a decision to hit back for one night's attacks in a guerrilla war where incidents were legion. However, the first Saturday night, and through the series of explanations to friendly governments that filled my Sunday, the emphasis was strictly on this one episode. No continuing decision on new actions was communicated to anyone, for in the formal sense none had been made as yet.

The Bundy Report and the Bigger Decision

c. After the decisive exchanges of Saturday evening, which was early Sunday morning in Saigon, McGeorge Bundy and a small group carried out a truncated visit to the countryside by visiting Pleiku itself. There they say the damage and the casualties briefly, before returning to Saigon and taking off for home.*

On the long flight, he and his party rounded out the report which had been outlined the previous day before the attacks. It began by summarizing largely familiar views of the trend and the stakes.

"The situation in Vietnam is deteriorating, and without new U.S. action defeat appears inevitable -- probably not in a matter of weeks or perhaps even months, but within the next year or so. There is still time to turn it around, but not much.

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* For some reason, a few contemporary accounts have said that McGeorge Bundy's joining in the reprisal recommendation followed his emotional reaction to the sight of American men dead and wounded. The chronology alone negates this, and so far as I know Bundy's reaction to bloodshed

in war has always been the normal mix of humanity and the stoicism that comes from having seen war at first hand, in his case in World War II combat.

"The stakes in Vietnam are extremely high. The American investment is very large, and American responsibility is a fact of life which is palpable in the atmosphere of Asia, and even elsewhere. The international prestige of the United States, and a substantial part of our influence, are directly at risk in Vietnam. There is no way of unloading the burden on the Vietnamese themselves, and there is no way of negotiating ourselves out of Vietnam which offers any serious promise at present. It is possible that at some future time a neutral non-Communist force may emerge, perhaps under Buddhist leadership, but no such force currently exists, and any negotiated U.S. withdrawal today would mean surrender on the installment plan."

The reference to Buddhist leadership was considerably more hopeful than the Embassy view had been, and this was reinforced in the body of the report, with the urging that somehow the Buddhists be brought to a participating role in government.

Most of all, however, the report focussed on that most intangible of all factors, Vietnamese morale. It found the Vietnamese people "war-weary" but also "remarkably tough and resilient . . . they do not find the prospect of Communist domination attractive. Their readiness to quit is much lower than the discouraging events of recent months might lead one to expect. It is probable that most Vietnamese think Am withdrawal is more likely than an early switch to neutralism or su by major elements within Vietnam. Nevertheless the social and po fabric is stretched thin, and extremely unpleasant surprises are ingly possible -- both political and military."

Hence, while the report had changes to suggest an American handling of the political situation, and of the pacification program, the key question was what the United States could do about morale. Here, there was -

> "one grave weakness . . . which is within our own power to fix -- and that is a widespread belief that we do not have the will and force and patience and determination to take the necessary action and stay the course."

Or, as McNaughton put it in a side cable to McNamara just before boarding the plane, the South Vietnamese believed the U.S. was "on the verge of bugging out."*

This judgment was the over-riding reason for the key recommendation of the report, for a "policy of graduated and continuing reprisal," keyed initially to specific acts but in time simply to the broad pattern of Hanoi-directed and supported terror and death in the South. This new step was not a panacea, but only "the most promising course available." On the basic prospects, the report concluded:

> "At its very best the struggle in Vietnam will be long. It seems to us important that this fundamental fact be made clear and our understanding of it made clear to our own people and to the people of Vietnam. Too often in the past we have conveyed the impression that we expect an early solution when those who live with this war

* One may ask how three days of talk could nail down judgments of this sort -- or how any man or group, in government, Congress, or the news media, go about forming the opinions that form the bulk of our operating information all over the world. The answer can never be wholly satis-

factory, but in this case the supporting evidence was simply that a great many people had been contacted in conditions of some privacy, and all had said the same thing. Whether a mood is spontaneous or self-generated is at a certain stage almost irrelevant, and particularly in Saigon politics. This being the mood, it would be the basis of whatever happened.

know that no early solution is possible. It is our own belief that the people of the United States have the necessary will to accept and to execute a policy that rests upon the reality that there is no short cut to success in South Vietnam."

An annex to the report made clear that, in terms of past planning what was now proposed fell short, initially, of the full Phase II envisaged in December. With improvement of morale and performance in the South the primary object, the scale of attack on the North would be more limited and slow-paced than the implacable type of gradual program aired (~~though never approved~~) then.

The proposal was not thought likely to affect Hanoi in the short run, only to change the balance and trend of the contest enough to get the South moving and gradually getting on top of the VC-Hanoi combination. Even for this limited purpose its chances were only "between 25% and 75%" of success, but -- another by-now-familiar argument -- "even if it fails, the policy will be worth it" by showing the US had done all it reasonably could, and tending to deter other guerrilla "adventures."

Finally, the detailed proposal -- envisaged a lower level of action and thus also less recrimination and controversy then had hitherto been thought likely -- took the "reserved" position on negotiations.* Talks and discussion, yes, but not formal negotiation except on the basis of a standdown of VC violence.

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* I need to build a base for such thumbnail descriptions, in the November chapter.

Such was the report received and digested on Monday, the 8th, as the first reactions to the reprisal were being assessed. In general, the American press and public had been strongly approving, while the reactions abroad had followed a fairly predictable pattern. (check evidence.) But the most serious comment, such as a New York Times editorial, said in effect: all very well for once, but where do we go from here? (citation.)

On that Monday, the President took one further step. Drawing the keynote from the Bundy report, -- the need to encourage the South Vietnamese by a firm continuing stand -- he authorized Taylor to tell Saigon leaders that the US was indeed moving to what would in effect be Phase II. His basic decision was now made, but the form and detail of the new course of action remained to be worked out.

For this purpose, the President in effect allocated the next week. The time was needed in any event to complete the evacuation of American dependents. This had been ordered at once on the 7th, to be carried out on an emergency basis. However, on the 8th the President accepted Taylor's appeal to handle it in a more orderly manner over 7-10 days.

Key Issues in a New Course

d. Thus, the work of fleshing out the new program went ahead at full speed, with a long exchange with Taylor. However, planning was interrupted almost at once. On the 10th, as Kosygin was just leaving Hanoi, the Viet Cong carried out another successful attack, on an American enlisted men's barracks at Qui Nhon, on the coast, with greater

casualties than at Pleiku. Again the decision was to react at once, and on the 11th American and South Vietnamese aircraft carried out attacks, including targets well to the north of the 17th parallel. This time the White House statement took account of a line of thought that had already developed strongly in the State Department: whether or not the new US course was related to what Hanoi was doing in the South, as the McGeorge Bundy report had urged, each individual action should not be presented as a "reprisal." The concept of the legitimacy of "reprisals" for specific acts had always been controversial in international law, and in the specific case of British military actions in Yemen in the previous April, the US had abstained on a Security Council vote of condemnation instead of supporting the British position, simply because the action involved, however justified otherwise, had been couched in "reprisal" terms.*

This point, together with the desire to imply strongly that American actions were now on a continuing basis, led to the use of the word "response" and to the action being related to the sweep of North Vietnamese actions in the preceding days. These changes, slight as they might appear, had the intended effect in many quarters. With the act of repetition, it was now widely assumed that the US was embarked on a new track.

But of course ~~to~~ (THE) Qui Nhon "response" did nothing to clarify just what the new program would be. On its development, George Ball now

* This sensitivity grew up principally in cases of reprisal for acts of individuals. However, it had come to extend more widely.

assumed a major role. With Rusk's illness still keeping him in Florida, until February 15, Ball not only took the lead but did much of the drafting of a full discussion and (ANALYSIS) drawing on supporting material and thoughts from McNamara and McNaughton, McGeorge Bundy, and, in the State Department, Thompson, myself, and the intelligence people.

It may be wondered how Ball, the advocate of cutting our losses in October and November, could have supported the Pleiku reprisal and an ongoing policy of hitting the north. The answer may lie, in small part, in the difficult position in which the timing of the Pleiku attack placed him, coming as it did when Rusk was away. Knowing his chief's views to be firmer than his, though still uncertain, Ball may have felt he had to represent what he believed Rusk would do -- which in those first days was undoubtedly conveyed in general terms from his convalescent base in Florida.

More basically, however, Ball believed at this time that it might be possible, through carefully limited and controlled attacks on the North, to improve the American-South Vietnamese bargaining position to the point where an acceptable political solution would become possible. Ball thought in terms of a hard try at righting the negotiating balance, not more, and certainly no commitment to hold on whatever it took. In this light the Pleiku reprisal fitted -- if a script could now be devised to limit the course of action to this purpose.

Thus, Ball's paper, submitted to the President on the 13th (12th?) on behalf of himself, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Thompson, made the

central point that an early political, or negotiating move was essential. It was the "forward" view as distinguished from the "reserved" view of the early November papers on "Option C", or the "stand tough" position urged at different times and reflected substantially in the final November papers and the Position Paper of December 7th.

The principal arguments were twofold: that pressures by important foreign nations would lead to some move being made anyway, over which the US would then have no control, but most especially that in the military circumstances that had developed by this time, a sustained air offensive in the North ran really serious risks of bringing on Chinese intervention. All along, intelligence had seen this as a possibility, once attacks moved above the 19th parallel; indeed, an estimate done on February 11th was, if anything, more restrained on its likelihood than the previous intelligence assessment, in November. Now, the factor which had come to the fore was the actual move to North Vietnamese bases of the 53 interceptors North Vietnam had acquired in (August-check.) Already in November it had been concluded that these would probably ~~come in and~~ have to be dealt with in the event of a really tough bombing program. Now ~~it was put to~~ McNamara (JUDGED) that any significant bombing north of the 19th parallel would likely soon entail losses that would compel attack on the air bases. If this was done, the policy-making group and Ball in particular took a somewhat more alarmist view than the intelligence community generally. Ball spelled out all the ~~steps~~ THINGS that could happen, including the terrible choice the Soviets would face and the possible devastating effect on US-Soviet re-

lations, the chance (discounted by intelligence) that the Soviets might make some threatening move in Berlin or elsewhere, and altogether a black potential picture indeed.

While contributing to the negotiating part of Ball's paper, I did not myself share the full sweep of this alarm. Rather, Ball's judgment drew on the views of State Department intelligence, particularly Allen S. Whiting, the man in charge of East Asia. All through these first six months of 1965, Whiting pressed on all concerned, including his daily briefings of me, a generally alarmist view of Chinese actions and comment. For this he had a special standing, having done a scholarly and much admired book on the steps by which China had come into the Korean War, and how the Chinese had signalled their intent in ways that might have been detected.* So the "Whiting watch" on indicators of Chinese action became a daily institution for me and others, keeping before us the current evidence and what it might mean. It was an important and influential input, somewhat balanced as time went on by the more measured views of Edward Rice, the top China-watcher in Hong Kong, and of Marshall Green, my principal deputy Assistant Secretary, who had served in Hong Kong and, although lacking the language and mainland experience, had an admirable "feel" for Chinese behavior.**

Undoubtedly, Ball's pessimistic prognosis sank in, and the President gave many evidences, then and later, that he did not want to get near a war with China and that he considered the risks significant. (Cite Lady Bird and others). So, despite differences of degree that

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* Allen S. Whiting, "China Crosses the Yalu," (N.Y., Macmillan, 1960).

** Refer to Marshall's role in 1958, if not in an earlier chapter.

narrowed as time went on, did the entire policy circle. It was enough to cause the bombing program, for this reason primarily, to be put on a very limited and gradual basis from the outset -- much more limited than the blueprint submitted in early December. A special aim was to avoid reaching the point at which the main North Vietnamese air base, Phuc Yen, near Hanoi, had to be hit.

However, the recommendation for a "forward" negotiation course ran into heavier weather. Ball's proposals were in the alternative. One possibility was for an early joint US/South Vietnam statement of position (based on the revised February staff work of Robert Johnson and myself) and then a resort to the UN Security Council, looking to preliminary talks in the grouping of "5-plus-2" which U Thant was by then urging in many quarters -- that is, the two Vietnams plus the US, USSR, China, France, and Britain. A dimmer alternative (my suggestion) was to push at this point for an early Laos conference, a forum we had always envisaged at the right time.

However, as the discussion and new information quickly developed, both of these specific alternatives had serious defects. U Thant himself flatly opposed resort to the Security Council, predicting that the Soviet Union would veto even an appeal for a cease-fire aimed at both sides, and that it would only be a harsh and fruitless debate; this judgment came to be accepted in the Administration, and thus this course was never tried then or later. Moreover, a joint American-South Vietnamese statement simply could not be done without weeks of preparation: the months of (POLITICAL) chaos had precluded what Alexis Johnson in Saigon

had long urged, a serious consultation on the subject, and now the Saigon picture was again totally uncertain, with a new government under a civilian, Dr. _____ Quat, only installed on February 15th, and then far too shaky to tackle difficult peace positions.

Finally, the Laos conference idea seemed much too indirect and evasive, while the "5-plus-2" grouping in effect set 3 (South Vietnam, the US, and a supporting but reserved UK) against 3 (North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union), with the critical seventh member, France, not neutral but in fact heavily committed to a solution that tacitly accepted North Vietnamese control of the South and Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia. A less tough and wary negotiator than the President might have seen in this one the possibility of loaded dice.

So the specifics of an early negotiating initiative were elusive, and this was one major point against a public American step at an early stage. A second, perhaps equal in weight, was the argument most strongly urged by Taylor in Saigon (and perhaps by McCone in Washington) that the new bombing program should establish itself before the US moved at all on the negotiations front.

Hence, there was a progressive change of position. On February 13th, the Ball view was adopted in a Presidential cable, to the extent of saying, as part of the program to be presented to Saigon, that the US would not envisage early formal negotiations, but would look to some form of informal talks, perhaps arranged through the UN. By the 18th, this had been changed to provide that the US would not initially take any public initiative or display any eagerness for either talks or negotiations. In essence, the "stand tough" public position had won out.

However, between the 13th and the 18th, one other crucial development had taken place, which doubtless played a key role in the position taken on the 18th. In effect, a track that combined private discussions and formal public statements, (BUT) without the problems of an American initiative, seemed to open up.

It was the British who acted. Apprised since early December that the US might move to a continuous bombing program, the British had thought hard all along of the chance that in this event they would have a critical ~~potential~~ role as Co-Chairman of the 1954 Geneva Conference. This thankless task had seemed in August to be almost at the end of its usefulness, with the Soviets then whipsawed and threatening to throw up their parallel role and function. (Chapter ____ above.) However, (BRITISH) Foreign Office representatives in December had told me they would give new thought to this, and I had encouraged them with Rusk's full approval and knowledge. Now, with the Soviet Union back in the picture, and with the British analysis closely parallel to our own -- that the Soviets might be interested at least in cooling moves -- the time seemed ripe. Although not formally told, so far as I know, of the continuous character of the President's future plans for action against the North, Lord Harlech was far too shrewd not to have seen in the week after February 7th that this was becoming, for all practical purposes, the program of which they had been told in December. Incidentally, Wilson had strongly supported the first American attacks of the 7th and 11th, and had been backed in some degree by most political

quarters except for his own Labour Party left wing.* This had the predictable effect of cementing Anglo-American relations, and at this stage these were extraordinarily close and trusting.

Thus, on Wednesday, February 17th, Lord Harlech brought an important and urgent report to Secretary Rusk, who had returned to work on the 15th. Its gist was that on the 16th the British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, had discussed with Deputy Foreign Minister Lapin the response that the Co-Chairmen might make to a North Vietnamese complaint sent to them about the American bombing. This complaint had ssemed a pro-forma Hanoi action, as in August; however, by this time it had been noted in Washington that Moscow's attacks on the American bombings had been restrained and much in contrast with Peking's vehemence. Now, pressed adroitly by Trevelyan about the August Soviet position of not wanting to activate the Co-Chairmanship, Lapin had shown a striking change of heart, to the point of dismissing any legal technicalities that might impair taking some action "to help the victims of US aggression." Trevelyan noted that the abrupt change might be connected with Kosygin's trip to Hanoi, from which he had returned, via Peking and Pyongyang, the previous day.

The American surmise was that either Hanoi, or Moscow, or both, wanted a negotiating anchor to windward. ~~something more substantial than previous public endorsements of a conference -- which Hanoi had not repeated, incidentally, since February 7th. (check.)~~ To Rusk, Ball and myself -- as I believe at once to the President -- the Co-Chairmen seemed to present the perfect opportunity, not for rushing

* REFER TO NEW STATESMAN.

toward peace in a public fashion, but for quiet diplomatic efforts to settle the preliminary issues -- visualized on the American side as cease-fire and mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and American forces, with the bombing stopping in this connection -- and then in the end to convene a formal conference of some appropriate grouping. As a participant in the 1954 Conference, South Vietnam would be directly involved, with every chance to coordinate the American and South Vietnamese positions and without the risks of bilateral and secret talks between Washington and Hanoi.

Whether the avenue opened up to this extent or not, the first step could be for the Co-Chairmen to ask each of the 1954 participants for a statement of its views toward a peace settlement. This relatively non-committal step could then lead on as far as the possibility of agreement permitted -- and all without the high visibility of a conference, or the pressures that formal negotiations would create for the US to stop its visible bombing while North Vietnam went on with its invisible infiltration.

This first step was discussed back and forth with the British, who had the same idea. The upshot was that on the 20th it was formally put to the Soviets by Trevelyan, who expected from the Lapin talk that a fairly rapid response might be forthcoming.*

All through these three weeks, the Soviet attitude seemed the potential key. Llewellyn Thompson in Washington, and Foy Kohler in Moscow, bent every effort to figure which way the Soviets might move.

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* The British message was published in August 1965. "Recent Exchanges, etc.", CMND. 2756, H.M. Stationery Office, London (hereafter called the "British White Paper").

So far as they could tell, the initial reaction had been some surprise and dismay -- a feeling I myself sensed in an encounter with Ambassador Dobrynin that first week. Whether or not there was division within the Soviet leadership, the pressure to work out a position on Vietnam came at an extremely awkward time. In preparation for the long-awaited preparatory Communist Party meeting beginning March 1st, the Soviets were fighting off the opposition of the Chinese and their allied Communist parties, and the sharp criticism of the Italian Communist party and other caught in the middle. Moscow's hands were full and its ~~flanks~~ FLANKS exposed.

Hence, after the February 11th bombing, and particularly after the Harlech ~~disclosure~~ REPORT on the 17th, both Thompson and Kohler kept urging a "go-slow" pace, that would not through further bombings put Moscow more on the spot till it had had time to think. As it happened, weather and Saigon politics did produce a lull at this time, with no further bombing till March 2nd. The Soviet leaders can have been in no doubt that the United States intended to continue bombing North Vietnam, but their deliberations and actions during these crucial ten days were not affected by any specific new American action.

So the last week in February passed with both Washington and London on tenterhooks, awaiting what both hoped would be a favorable Soviet reply. On the 23rd, the Soviet Ambassador in Paris, Vinogradov, called on President DeGaulle, with an undisclosed message concerning Vietnam to which, it was soon learned, DeGaulle had not chose to reply at once. It seemed possible that the Soviets were laying their lines to play a

central role. However, as this crucial week ended without a Soviet reply, the possibility that Hanoi, or Peking, or both had objected seemed to become greater. By the end of February, the British/Soviet gambit seemed a weakening hope.

So long as the British/Soviet gambit was in the air, however, it still contributed to American decisions to rebuff or postpone other possible avenues. Thus, a cool reply was given to U Thant on his idea of discussions on the "5-plus-2" basis, and a categorical rejection on the idea of bilateral secret talks with Hanoi. Unfortunately, American dealings with U Thant during this period were darkened by the Secretary General's public recriminations over the bilateral idea, as well as by his reference to the objectives of creating "conditions that would enable the United States to withdraw gracefully from that part of the world." Whether or not these words were welcome to most Southeast Asians, they infuriated Secretary Rusk and the President and seemed flagrant proof of lack of impartiality. By the 27th, when Stevenson formally conveyed American reactions on (BOTH OF) U Thant's ideas, the level of mutual confidence was low. Moreover, there was by this time a general sense, in the UN corridors as well as in the State Department and White House, that for the time being the UN as such could play no useful role. By the end of the month, it was accepted that it would be no more than a debating forum at this stage.

In reviewing this complex period, mention must also be made of the position of the French. Foreign Minister Couve de Murville visited Washington on February 19 and 20, and saw both the President and

Rusk at some length. He brought with him renewed emphasis on the French official thesis that Peking, not Hanoi, was the key, and a new argument, that the Chinese were preoccupied with internal matters and would not move in Southeast Asia. These points, of course, fitted neatly into the DeGaulle plan for neutralization, although some of us could not fail to note that the view of Chinese policy seemed exactly the opposite of what Couve had told Rusk the previous April in Manila, that the Chinese were vastly menacing and indeed irresistible. (check chapter.) The rationalization seemed not too difiicult, however; either way, France would let China have a free hand in Southeast Asia. As usual, Couve presented his views with calm detachment, as if he did not expect to move any American minds. His report of recent talks with the Chinese Ambassador in Paris gave no ground for hope, although he tried to imply there was some. The French remedy, ~~accepting~~ an immediate Geneva conference and neutralization, was as clear as ever, and as unappealing to the Americans.* In addition, the French seemed to be in a degree of rivalry with the British, to show who could affect a world crisis. In Washington's mind, there was never any doubt. The British were trusted completely, the French hardly at all.**

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* By this time, the rooters for neutralization in the US, (Senators) Mansfield and Church primarily, were hedging their advocacy by phrases about favoring it if it assured the independence of South Vietnam. However, the NYT continued to urge this course, without being clear now it thought SVN would emerge.

** In saying this, I should make an exception for the working level men at the Quai d'Orsay. Their competence and judgment were admired by all of us in Washington, and in this period, while echoing Couve's emphasis on China, many of them suggested that Hanoi was at least equally important. The explorations of December and January appeared to have been a working level idea, and were seriously received and studied in in Washington. As we shall see in later chapters, this channel continued to be useful in the later months.

Finally, to complete the picture, there were a few suggestions from other countries. Of these the Indian proposal of February 8th for a "suspension of all provocative action" by both sides seemed, on inquiry, even-handed, in keeping with the initial Indian reaction to the bombing, which while publicly somewhat critical of the US had shown considerable sympathy in more private comment picked up by Ambassador Bowles.* However, again the existence of the British effort forstalled for the time being any American response. In sum, the President and Secretary Rusk had decided on a waiting game, tough in public, ready for some exploratory avenue to open up in private, hopeful most of all -- though not optimistic -- that the Soviet Union might start to play a useful role.

Presenting the New Course to the Public

e. Meanwhile, as the negotiating approach was being debated, the President had made his personal decision on what was perhaps the most difficult of all the questions about his new course, how it should be presented to the American public.

On this he had given no hint in the first week after February 7th, and it was not seriously addressed in the Ball or other papers of the period. Immediately after he had approved a defined program on the 13th, attention shifted to public presentation, with McGeorge Bundy, Ball, and I each drafting material for use in a Presidential statement

* The Indian proposal is in the British White Paper, p. 17

to be made when the withdrawal of dependents had been completed. All of us assumed that the new course -- as we viewed it, a change in policy -- would have to be fully presented, as only the President could do. With Rusk's return there was also work on the alternative of a short Presidential statement, and a longer Rusk statement by way of background and exposition of the American position on the terms of settlement and possible steps in negotiation.

The President, however, decided otherwise. I do not know why or how, and can only surmise that this was his sense of how the country could best be led. As always, he must have consulted quietly with his circle of political advisors. At any rate, he rejected the various long drafts that had been prepared and on February 17th simply added a few paragraphs at the end of a speech in unrelated setting. His remarks put what had happened and was planned in the lowest possible key, as follows:

22B-26

10/7/71

Quote from PP -

could find everything <u>but</u> HBJ message to public on Feb. 17th

The President's decision for a low-key description of the program at once affected the form in which it was completed and presented to the key friendly countries. The fairly detailed outline the President had tentatively approved on the 13th was replaced on the 18th by a more general description that drew heavily on what the President had said publicly the previous day. As already noted, the new summary of the program also took a more reserved position toward any kind of talks.

Plainly, the President was trying to give himself all the leeway he could. He man also have been marginally influenced by desire not to put the Soviets, or Chinese, to a test of will and firmness, as -- it may have been argued -- a tough statement of purpose might do. Most especially, he did not wish to have pressures, at home or abroad, mount for early negotiations before a pattern of military action had given some semblance of negotiating balance. And there was the intangible element, always unassessable to me, of his domestic program. For some or all of these reasons, the President refused at this time to spell out the new course, and left it to reveal itself through individual action. Presumably he followed the same course with Congressional leaders.

More Saigon Trouble

f. Framing the new program, handling the first negotiating possibilities, and deciding on the form of public presentation would have made this a hectic three weeks in any event. To top the whole, politics in Saigon once more took a violent turn, in a series of maneuvers that ran from the 19th to the 25th and ended by finishing off the

stormy petrel of the previous year, GEneral Khanh.

After the fall of the Huong government on January 27th, the generals kept effective power through their Armed Forces Council. However, they wanted a respected civilian Prime Minister acceptable to the Buddhists, and in the ensuing negotiations successive candidates refused to act as military stooges. With this bargaining, the final selection of Dr. Pham Huy Quat represented a swing back again toward civilian rule, or at least toward a balanced structure. Dr. Quat was a Northerner, a respected physician graduated from Hanoi University, with clearcut nationalist and anti-communist credentials. Way back in 1954 or 1955, as a young man, he had already (BEEN) a prominent political figure in Saigon, mentioned as a possible successor to Diem. In the troubled years from 1959 to 1963, he had opposed Diem quietly but firmly as one of the so-called Caravelle group (check), and ~~in 1964~~ he had served as Foreign Minister under Khanh in the spring and summer (OF 1964). A slight, gentle-seeming figure of a man, he gave the impression of possible steel beneath. His choice seemed a sign of hope, and on February 16th, he took over just as Taylor was consulting the South Vietnamese on the program refined in Washington and provisionally approved the 13th.

Almost at once, however, there was a new disruption, aimed not at Quat but at Khanh. It was an internal military action, triggered by Colonel -- Thao, an ex-VietMinh who had been involved in plots galore over the years and who had only recently been in Washington with the

exiled Ambassador Khiem. Now bitterly anti-Khanh for selling out to the Buddhists, Thao led a small force that took over many key points in Saigon on the morning of the 19th. He was persuaded that night to call it off, on the promise that Khanh would be ousted -- which was done within the Armed Forces Council on the 20th. Finally, on the 25th, Khanh went into exile, and leadership on the military side passed to a group that included Deputy Prime Minister Thieu, General Ky of the Air Force, and General Thi (now of I Corps?). The apolitical _____ ("Little") Minh came in as Commander in Chief, and for the time being there was no outstanding political general -- which Taylor thought all to the good.

Nonetheless, the new troubles were a major handicap in getting the new program against the North under way. Not only did they make the cause of defending South Vietnam appear more doubtful, but the timing operated to delay the serious start of continued bombing and to confuse both Hanoi and the public on what the President was doing. Intended to get under way on the 19th, the program of Rolling Thunder bombing, planned at the rate of 1-2 raids a week, with 2-3 targets each, was held up for several days till Khanh left, and then still further by weather. The intended effect on Hanoi was thus weakened, and the whole concept of steady and unrelenting pressure compromised from the start.

Rounding Out the Military Program

g. On the 24th, weighing all factors, the President finally gave the order for the Rolling Thunder program. Almost anticlimactic by now to the military services after the host of alerts since February 7th,

the order finally led, after further delays, to the first programmed attack on the North, carried out with South Vietnamese participation on March 2nd against a variety of targets.

Bombing the North and all that went with it had been almost the total focus in Washington, and of public opinion in America and the world. However, in this same period two fateful steps were taken, expanding the American military role in other directions. Neither had been seriously considered in the long and repeated policy debates of 1964, and as late as January General Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor had not envisaged either as part of any early program. Yet now they were introduced in response to felt necessity, not inadvertently but equally without full thought to their wider implications.

The first was the use of American air power within South Vietnam. True, all along the so-called Farmgate operation had involved American pilots flying with Vietnamese trainees, with the Americans in practice doing the job. But the number of planes had been small, and their character even more limited, for the A1H was a World War II propeller aircraft with little bomb capacity. Thus, the bomb tonnages dropped by Americans and South Vietnamese together had remained low, and there had been little tendency or temptation to do much except in actual combat situations.

Combat emergency, February 1965, was again the ~~stated~~ mission of the first flights under wholly American operation. The case arose in Binh Dinh province, which since December had become heavily beleaguered, with its capital directly threatened. On the 19th, such a threat im-

pelled the American Command to look to the B-57's that had been introduced in September, crippled in the Bien Hoa attack of early November and then replaced and refitted. Now they stood idle, not as well suited as more modern fighter-bombers for the attacks against the North now that Hanoi had its own fighters. Like nature, military commands abhor a vacuum, and I do not think one can exclude this factor from the decision of the 19th, accepted without debate in Washington. But there was a deeper reason: if it was now legitimate to hit the North, but the main struggle was still in the South, what possible logic could there be in withholding full American air power from the South? As often thereafter, those who wished to go hard both North and South were joined by those who wanted to hit the North only moderately but were driven by their own logic (and perhaps by a need to compensate) to accept putting every possible resource into the South.

In this case, the Washington decision-makers were fairly easy in their minds. Over the previous three years, no doctrine concerning the conduct of this guerrilla war had seemed more thoroughly imbedded than that which prescribed the undiscriminating use of air power. What neither Washington nor the honorable men in the field could reckon, or at least did reckon, was how much the availability of resources, in itself, can corrupt doctrine and belief. It was not to do this for months; so far as one could judge, air power continued to be applied where it was really needed and useful, in straight combat situations almost entirely. Still, what was decided in February was a major step, not then thought through or later controlled.

Much more thought was given to the second step, which was the sending of a contingent of 3500 Marines to provide security in the area of the Danang air base, the first American ground forces sent as a unit for possible combat use. This had been raised briefly as far back as the previous September, and aired as a future possibility in Taylor's cables of early January. But both Taylor and Westmoreland had then believed such forces were not needed, and that their arrival could have many bad political and psychological effects on Vietnamese performance.

On February 22, Taylor cabled Washington on the whole question of ground forces. His conclusion was flatly negative, with only a possible future exception for a security force at Danang, which had now become the principal base for air attacks on the North and was also in an area habitually and increasingly threatened by the VC. As before, Taylor was eloquent on the drawbacks of Americans taking on this degree of responsibility, and particularly on Americans engaging in operations that might involve civilian casualties, with all that this could mean for VC propaganda and the basic US position.

Yet on the 25th, Westmoreland came in with a firm recommendation for the Marines, to land at Danang as rapidly as possible, and quoted Taylor as being prepared to approve it from a political standpoint. The JCS must have acted rapidly on the recommendation, for on the 26th, with no work by any staffs outside the Pentagon, the matter was presented to the President at the luncheon meeting, and approved by him.

Since the Marines in question had all along been the first force slated to go to South Vietnam under the long-standing contingency plans, they were in readiness in the Philippines (check) and were put ashore on March 8th, with a simultaneous announcement in Washington and Saigon the same day.

In the meantime, Taylor had first expressed surprise, and then reluctant acquiescence. He still felt, and was for a third time eloquent on the subject, that this was a dangerous path to tread. But he conceded that Danang was in danger and inadequately guarded, and ~~even~~ joined with Westmoreland in shooting down a brief project to substitute airborne Army troops for the Marines.

Thus the shape of the total new military program was rounded out in ways that had not been foreseen in the planning from November on. Three new avenues of American military effort had been opened up, and while all three were meant to be limited, the control valves were sure to be fully tested for each.

Public Statements and Communications to Peking and Hanoi

h. To coincide with the beginning of the serious continuing program, Rusk on February 25th made the fullest statement of the period, on American negotiating objectives and posture. In effect, he laid down the principle that had guided the American rejection of the U Thant proposal for direct talks, and that had guided most nations in conflict situations. After describing the many forms of contact among interested parties that had gone on for years, Rusk concluded:

> "Now since the Geneva Conference of 1962, the United States has been in active and continuous consultation with other governments about the danger created by aggression in Southeast Asia... We have had direct discussions with almost every signatory of the agreements of 1954 and 1962.... What is still missing is any indication that Hanoi is prepared to stop doing what it is doing and what it knows it is doing against its neighbors. The absence of this crucial element affects the current discussion of "negotiation." Political channels have been and are open, and a considerable number of governments are actively interested in keeping them open to explore the possibilities of a peaceful solution. But a negotiation aimed at the acceptance or the confirmation of aggression is not possible. And a negotiation which simply ends in bitterness and hostility merely adds to the danger."*

Elaborating in response to a question, Rusk laid bare both his own experience in negotiation and the depth of his personal views on the issues.

> "But let me come back again with great emphasis -- because I do think that it is central to this question of negotiation. And that is that the missing piece -- the missing piece is any indication that Hanoi is prepared to stop doing what it is doing against its neighbors.
>
> Now, in many of these postwar negotiations in the last 20 years, as you know, the negotiations have been frequently and most often preceded by some indication that these negotiations might have some chance of success. Now, that is the missing piece here -- that is the missing piece.
>
> The object is the safety and security of these smaller countries of Southeast Asia. In that issue all of the smaller countries of the world have a vital stake. It is at the heart of the very structure of international life, of the international state system. And it is the missing element, the unreadiness of Hanoi to stop doing what it is doing -- that is the problem in this thing called negotiation."**

It was the essence of the Secretary's philosophy and approach, and I am sure at this stage reflected the President's views. In effect, both had put aside the idea of a "forward" American public initiative, as had

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* VI.B, pp.6-7

** ~~B&D~~ Ibid.

been urged by Ball and others in the first week after Pleiku. As Rusk now put it, the United States appeared to be insisting on some strong indication from Hanoi that it would stop its effort against the South, before there could be any negotiation. This was actually less tough as an opening public position than both Peking and Hanoi had now been -- both having issued statements that called for a complete American withdrawal from South Vietnam before any conference or other form of negotiations. ((Check) But, in the double standard by which the world had for years judged the behavior of the US and the Communist powers, many nations and peoples in the world were sure to regard the American position as intransigent.

Meanwhile, the day before Rusk spoke, there had been direct communication with Peking, through a regularly scheduled meeting at Warsaw between the American Ambassador, John M. Cabot, and the Chinese representative, Wang _____. In the framing of the American message, the main effort went into language that would be as crystal clear as words could make it, that the United States not only did not threaten China, but did not have as its objective the destruction of displacement of the Communist government in Hanoi. The carefully worked draft, approved by Rusk and the President, wove a straightforward statement on these key points into a generally firm message that the US did intend to follow through to the end to defeat the North Vietnamese attempt to take over the South. It was not a negotiating message, or in any way an appeal to the Chinese to take a step toward negotiation -- which seemed out of the

question in any event on every reading, the French included. Rather, the message was aimed to prevent misunderstanding, to reduce to a minimum the chance that Peking would enter the war in a mistaken belief as to American objectives. Perhaps the Chinese would not believe what was said at this stage, but perhaps also a seed would be planted that could grow to conviction if American actions fitted the proclaimed statement of intent.

This left, finally, the question of whether to communicate with Hanoi through the Canadian channel. Seaborn himself was about to make a regular trip, but was not clear that any senior person would receive him after the negative December experience. However, it was finally decided that the channel should be used at least to make clear the nature of US beliefs and aims, and to negate any chance that Peking might convey the Warsaw message to Hanoi in distorted form. Hence Seaborn was asked to repeat the Warsaw statement, identifying it as such, and to see if any comment was forthcoming. Again, it was not a negotiating move, but only an attempt to clarify and avoid misunderstanding. The response, predictably, was negative, but Seaborn did get some feeling of Hanoi's mood, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The White Paper Disaster

h. The final step in February was the public presentation of the evidence of North Vietnamese involvement in the South, along with the completion of a legal brief, drawing on the evidence to justify the bombing of the North under international law. The evidence was compiled

and published in a White Paper of February 27th, while the legal brief was published on _____.

The tortured history of this project has been given in previous chapters. In November and December, it had been at the ready, only to be put off or relegated to background disclosures to reporters in Saigon. Understandably, those directly responsible had grown stale, while those at the top had perhaps read too much into the insignificant press treatment of what had been released, interpreting the lack of reaction as evidence that at least the informed press and its readers were pretty well convinced of North Vietnam's deep involvement.*

With these reactions, both groups had failed to come face to face with a crucial problem. The most decisive and convincing evidence of Hanoi's role lay in the analysis of radio communications between North and South; yet, as I have explained at length in the treatment of the Tonkin Gulf incidents (chapter 14), this whole category of intelligence information was protected by the most rigid security requirements. By statute, it could only be released on the authority of the Director of Central Intelligence, and even a Presidential direction was technically illegal. Quite naturally, John McCone was negative on disclosure on grounds that it could impair the methods used, which were producing current information of much tactical importance. Moreover, the sheer difficulty of the issue caused the top circle to shy away from it. It was argued that the evidence required complex professional explanation to sink in fully, and thus was not suited to a simple public paper in

* Here refer to the immense difference between the informed press and public, and the public as a whole. A note on this might fit at the end of 1964.

any case. Finally, the issue was let go by default, and the framers of the White Paper had to operate without a critical input.

This meant that the new evidence consisted mostly of the statements of prisoners from the North, concerning men and units coming down. Although much multiplied during 1964 by re-interrogation of men taken earlier, this evidence lacked ~~many~~ fresh prisoners to testify on the most crucial point -- the rise of infiltration during 1964 and the flood tide that was believed to exist at the beginning of 1965. A losing South Vietnamese Army simply did not get many prisoners, and the lag between a change and full information on it was one of months. Yet, as the press noted in questioning Rusk on February 25th, it was the root of the case to show that Hanoi's role had now become so critical as to warrant the bombing.

Even weaker was the evidence on military supplies. Although the VC had for several months been using new and more modern weapons, mostly Soviet designs manufactured by the Chinese and then given to the North Vietnamese and sent South, very few of these had been captured, and in any case ~~how could one~~ (IT WAS HARD) to prove origin convincingly? Any attempt to do so was bound to run into the fact, embarrassing to explain, that most VC arms all along had been of American types supplied during the 1950-54 period, or more recently, and (THEN) captured from government forces. The case on weapons was (THUS) inherently weak, although it was considerably strengthened on February 17th, as the White Paper was being drafted, by the South Vietnamese capture of an arms-bearing ship landed on the coast, with some 4000 arms bearing Hanoi shipping labels. But this one swallow hardly made a summer.

Thus, the really strong part of the case -- Hanoi's direction and control -- had to be presented with crucial evidence suppressed, the evidence of the infiltration of men was the undramatic word of a host of Vietnamese corporals with unpronounceable names, and the evidence on supply was numerically weak to the point of ridicule. Americans who had followed the situation in detail, including the most critical correspondents, had never doubted Hanoi's crucial role, and must have found the new material only a useful supplement.* However, to those who had thought little about Vietnam until this point and who reacted sharply against their government bombing a small Asian nation, it fell far short of the blockbuster that would have been needed to convince them their government was justified. A third group, comprising the vast bulk of the American public, probably paid little attention, but equally was not fortified in its tendency to support the government on an issue of war.

Thus, the White Paper was a serious failure. Much better use could have been made of the evidence that was available, (WHILE) and non-government testimony -- for example, from the eloquent Bernard Fall (citations) -- could have been most helpful in reaching the newly aroused intellectuals. Perhaps most of all, the case suffered from the difficulty of demonstrating the ugly mathematics of this kind of guerrilla war. Just as the British all through the Malayan emergency had been open to ridicule that such a massive effort should be needed against a force never estimated to exceed _____, so it was now extremely hard to persuade people, in America and around the world, (THAT) ~~why~~ 40,000

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men from the North could be the critical element in putting in jeopardy a South Vietnamese government that had (650,000) men equipped apparently with the best that the vast United States had to offer. Those who had ever lived with this or other guerrilla wars knew the answer; to the common man, it was a hard case to make.

Conclusion

i. And so, at last, by the end of February, the Administration was across the Rubicon, committed to attacking the North, using American air power in the South, and sending American ground forces at least for essential missions the South Vietnamese could not perform. It was a major new level of American action, bound to engage the United States more deeply in the outcome.

Yet, as this account must have shown, the process all the way through from early November had been a tortured and uneven one. Particularly in the three weeks after Pleiku, all sorts of difficulties and uncertainties continued to present themselves. A few at the top of the Administration thought that the immediate objective was to right the balance and permit negotiations, and that beyond that effort, nothing had been decided. Others viewed the decision as much more final and irrevocable, a righted balance and negotiation if that could be achieved, but in any event sticking to the job unless the South Vietnamese themselves made it impossible. The President himself did not commit himself either way in this period; he left the impression with his senior policy circle that he would see it through, but his refusal to admit that there had been any change in policy cast a shadow on his

associates as it did on the public presentation of the situation. If all wars, at least all American ones, begin in confusion, the major escalation of February 1965 began in the added shadow of unclear purposes and limits of effort. There was a sense of disaster avoided or postponed, and there was the lift of action. But on the whole it was a period when no move seemed right, and the outcome remained wholly murky.

Chapter 23: Competing Pressures and the Baltimore Speech

a. March of 1965 started with the petering out of the private British attempt to enlist the Soviet Union in a mediation effort. There was dramatic evidence of renewed Sino-Soviet friction but no sign that Hanoi was being influenced by American pressure or the Communist power picture.

As the systematic American bombing got under way, new public peace initiatives contributed to a growing clamor for the U.S. to make some visible move toward peace. Within the Administration, pressures from this direction were balanced against contrary arguments to strike harder and not make a negotiating move until the trends in South Vietnam had been affected. Although the political and military picture there was quiet during the month, the downward trend had not been reversed, and on the 30th, the VC showed their strength by a bloody bombing of the American Embassy itself.

The competing pressures came to a head in early April. The President responded, first, by ordering many additional measures in South Vietnam, including the authority to use American ground forces in local combat missions. But in addition the President took two dramatic new steps in a Baltimore speech of April 7th, first by offering "unconditional discussions" on peace and second by pledging American help for a vast undertaking to develop the resources and economies of ~~mainland~~ Southeast Asia, including North Vietnam once peace was restored. It

was a great effort to enlist the American people and to define an overall policy for Southeast Asia.

Confusion on the Communist Side

b. For the first ten days of March, the Kremlin had its hands full, with a Communist Party conference that got nowhere in rallying support for the Soviet position against the Chinese one, and with a resounding incident to reaffirm and dramatize the sharp frictions between Peking and Moscow. As all the world could see, the Conference concluding with an empty set of releases and communiques, and on March 4th Soviet police brutally repressed a crowd of Asian Communist students demonstrating outside the American Embassy.

The latter episode had obviously been contrived from Peking to put the Soviet Union on the spot in the worst possible way, just as the conference was concluding. If the Soviets had let the students go on unchecked, the result must have been serious damage to the Embassy.* However, since the Soviets themselves had contrived fairly menacing demonstrations on February 9th, damage to American property seemed to be less the issue than the flouting of Soviet authority itself. Thus, the police moved hard, wounding many Chinese students and arresting more, and then declining to let the Chinese authorities see them. Quite naturally, the result was a torrid set of messages back and forth to Peking, the first exchange of invective since the change of Soviet leaders in October.

* As it was (describe damage).

To Washington, the implications of the affair were not surprising. It confirmed the already prevailing view that the two Communist giants were unlikely to come together, but it was not ~~to be~~ taken to mean that the Kremlin's rivalry with China, and desire to thwart the Chinese in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, meant any useful Soviet action concerning Vietnam.*

On the contrary, by early March, Ambassador Kohler in Moscow had concluded that the USSR was set in a "hard" posture. The Soviet leaders, he argued, thought that the US position in Vietnam was fundamentally weak, and that the US was mostly isolated from its major allies with even its own public opinion sharply divided. Soviet help to Hanoi would be defensive in purpose, but could extend to the "means of counterattack" if the US appeared to threaten the existence of North Vietnam as a socialist state. As for any move toward peace, the Soviets would be of no help unless they were convinced there was real danger of major American escalation likely to bring on a direct confrontation with the USSR. Then and only then, might the Soviets urge Hanoi to accept the half-loaf of a coalition government in Saigon, arguing (as in 1954) that this would only be a temporary way-station to complete control.**

It was a perceptive and influential analysis. Among other things, it pointed to a paradox: the Soviets could be induced to move only by

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* At exactly this time, from March 10 to March 31, the Zablocki subcommittee of the House of Foreign Affiars Committee held hearings on the Sino-Soviet conflict. The resulting printed record (House Document No. 237, 89th Congress, 1st session) is a fascinating compilation of top scholar and expert views.

** The full text of Kohler's message is at DOD Study, Book 4, Volume IV, C.3, pp. 62-3.

creating "an increasingly dangerous situation," yet any actions perceived as seriously threatening the DRV were still judged likely to bring a flash-point of Chinese intervention at some point impossible to see in advance. Was there a "just right" point between the two? It seemed to many of us that it was not wise to try to find out, and that this meant -- with other factors perhaps already decisive -- that the degree of threat to the North would have to remain limited, with everything hinging on the South, as had been said so often.

For the time being, this bleak forecast fitted perfectly with Soviet behavior. Contrary to the hopes that had flickered briefly on the strength of the Lapin-Trevelyan conversation of February 16 (p. ___ above), the Soviets delayed any reply to the British proposal for seeking the views of the Geneva Conference participants, until finally on March 15th, they countered with what amounted to a proposal for a totally one-sided denunciation of the U.S. When Gromyko then visited London for talks with the British, ~~Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart,~~ his public statements that any discussions of peace must be directly with Hanoi made clear what Soviet diplomats then confirmed - the USSR was out of the play even as a carrier of messages.

Let us digress here for a little historical speculation. Had the Soviets ever wanted to move, or had their position been "hard" all along? Accepting that Kohler's analysis was correct by March 2, when it was written, one can still draw on later evidence, largely supplied by the Chinese the following November, for the hypothesis that in late February the Soviets were indeed maneuvering to play a role in early peace negotiations.*

In brief, the Chinese said in November, as part of their chorus of denunciations, Kosygin in his second February stop over in Peking had told them that it was necessary to "help the Americans find a way out." At the same time, he had promised that the Soviet Union would not "bargain with others" on the subject. Then, contrary to this pledge, said the Chinese, the Soviet Union on February 16th proposed to Peking and Hanoi the convening of a new international conference on Indochina without prior conditions. Hanoi, the account ran, immediately opposed this, while the Chinese did not immediately reply. Yet, in the face of Hanoi's declared opposition, the Soviets went ahead to discuss it with the French through the Vingradov presentation to DeGaulle on the 23rd, and to indicate agreement with the French remedy of neutralization. The Chinese account does not say what happened then, nor mention the publicized fact that Moscow pulled back by March 15th. But it follows clearly, from the rest of the account, that Moscow must have yielded to Hanoi's opposition, which Peking probably did its best to promote.

This later evidence seems to me to fit into a pattern both coherent in itself and consistent with the American interpretation at the time. The coincidence of the Lapin-Trevelyan talk on the 16th and the alleged Soviet conference proposal the same day is particularly striking: Kosygin and his party must have judged that Hanoi was ready for a conference -- which had been the Hanoi position from August 1964 to early February 1965 -- and argued that the joint action of the co-Chairmen was the best way to get this done. At the same time, the Soviets would have a special

position in the arrangements, which they could use to block antagonistic Chinese ideas. Without directly "bargaining with others," the Soviet Union would move the situation toward some form of discussions, which in themselves would inhibit American action, and which might in time ratify whatever the VC and Hanoi had achieved on the ground, as to which Moscow must have been hopeful. It seems a plausible reconstruction, very similar to the Lindsey Grant memorandum of February 5th, quoted in Chapter ___.

The trouble must have been, as the Chinese account says, that Hanoi would not agree. By the time the British invitation to the Soviets was finally rejected, on March 15th, many events had supervened which might conceivably have affected the result -- including the then-rekindled Sino-Soviet public polemic and the beginning (or) systematic American bombing of the North, from March 2nd onward. But the Chinese account supports the interpretation which the American government had surmised roughly by the end of February: Moscow was willing to see some negotiating avenue opened up, but Hanoi on reflection was not.

It may well be that Hanoi at first was uncertain. Right after the Pleiku reprisal, ~~bombing of the North,~~ Hanoi had written to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference to denounce the American actions and demand that the U.S. get out of Vietnam; however, neither then nor in the joint Kosygin communique of February 10 did the North Vietnamese speak of con-

vening a conference.* Yet this had been their apparent position prior to February 7th, explicit on Laos and Cambodia and implicit in regard to DeGaulle's repeated proposals for a Vietnam conference, or one covering all of Indochina. Hence, American intelligence had consistently judged that one of Hanoi's first responses to any American bombing would be to exert maximum pressure for early formal negotiations. (Check whether this was always or as a part of the "seek a respite" hypothesis.)

Why did Hanoi change its tune? The simple answer may be that the American intelligence judgment was wrong, and that in the face of new American military actions that might tip the scales against Hanoi, Ho and his colleagues reversed their position, behaving no longer like the clearly winning party to a conflict, but rather like one for the moment threatened with adversity.

Another reason may well have been the Chinese position, which from the start of the new phase was wholly negative on negotiations -- perhaps in large part because of the felt necessity to show the Americans that China was tough and would fight if necessary.

A third possible reason, not really recognized at the time, may have been that Hanoi was under pressure from the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. To the Southerners who formed the main titular leadership

* The communique declared that the Soviet Union, as Co-Chairman, would "do its best to ensure international support for the 1954 Geneve Agreements on Indochina." It went on: "The two sides unanimously declared that the only correct way to settle the South Vietnam problem is: the USA must correctly implement the Geneva Agreements, end at once the aggressive war, withdraw all its troops, military personnel and weapons from South Vietnam, stop all interference in South Vietnam's affairs and let the South Vietnamese people settle by themselves their internal affairs. British White Paper, p. 18.

of the Front, the mere idea of negotiations must have brought back visions of the 1954 promise and betrayal, more bitter for them even than for the North Vietnamese leaders themselves and indeed, as the southerners must have seen it, essentially a betrayal by Hanoi itself under pressure from Peking and Moscow.

Little had been heard from the Front for a long time, and as I have noted, Hanoi did all the talking during 1964 both publicly and privately. In March 1965, however, the Front became more prominent, particularly through the holding in Phnom Penh of an "Indo Chinese Peoples' Conference." Scheduled in _____, this conference brought together the leaders of the "liberation" movements throughout Indochina -- the NLF in South Vietnam, the Pathet Lao in Laos, and the _____ in Cambodia -- and may have been originally intended to lay plans for further action as the situation in South Vietnam collapsed. Certainly, it was meant to dramatize the existence of these groups and put them in a stronger position to go after power in their respective countries, under Hanoi's overall direction.

~~After February 7th, the nature of~~ IN ANY EVENT, the conference ~~must have changed. It~~ became a sounding board for militant expressions, including a strong NLF statement opposing a conference on Vietnam, and insisting rather that the US get out "and leave the South Vietnamese people to settle their own affairs."* This was followed on March 22 by a long statement from the NLF Central Committee. Subsequently to be built up and referred

*. British White Paper, p. 24.

to over and over as the Front's peace position, the "five points" were in fact largely exhortation to drive out the Americans, as the key to achieving "an independent, democratic, peaceful and neutral South Vietnam, with a view to national reunification."* The last phrase, suggesting the reunification could wait, seemed to fit with Hanoi's line by this time. Otherwise, the statement seemed to show only that the Front was dead set against negotiation in any form.

Thus, the picture by the end of March, on Communist attitudes toward negotiation, had become reasonably clear. Peking and the Liberation Front were vehemently opposed, Hanoi likewise firm against, and Moscow not hopeful for the present. This was not what American intelligence had foreseen. It meant a firm and unyielding Hanoi position -- from which it was unlikely to be budged short of several months.**

Negotiating Initiatives and Public Clamor

c. By early March, the positions of the major parties were categorically opposed even on the conditions for the opening of negotiations -- each insisting in effect that the other must first cease its major forms of action and withdraw from South Vietnam. Behind both positions lay deeply felt views concerning the very nature and origin of the conflict. Hanoi's demand for American withdrawal, at this stage implied as a precondition for any conference, rested on the apparent claim that the Geneva Agreements of 1954 had given the North a free hand in the South; in support

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* British White Paper, p. 33.

** Cite my news of 2/18 as foreseeing this.

of this view, Hanoi itself did not stress the question of Article 7 and the elections slated for 1956, but the point was hammered by every Communist medium and quickly became central in debate in America and elsewhere.* At the same time, Hanoi continued to deny that in fact it had men in the South, a denial it was later to continue in the Paris negotiations after 1968; hence, American demands that infiltration cease were impossible to discuss on their face, since Hanoi was not prepared to admit there was infiltration. Thus, although each side invoked the Geneva Agreements of 1954, it was with totally different interpretations.

Sophisticated observers throughout the world must have understood the depth of this difference, as well as the extraordinary difficulty of achieving compromise on the gut substantive issue of the Communists' place in the government of South Vietnam. If ever a military conflict was hard to negotiate -- as events were to confirm abundantly in the years to come -- this was it, and certainly both sides knew it.

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* The degree to which this point would appeal to intellectual circles had not been foreseen within the American government, which was slow to make its counter-case. Contemporary sentiment in 1956 had so completely accepted what was done -- as statements by men as diverse as John Kennedy and Professor Hans Morgenthau showed -- that the issue had not been considered nearly so effectively as it could have been, either by the Administration or by its many scholar supporters.

Yet to nations not directly involved, and to the peoples of key nations, including a wide segment of the American people themselves, it seemed vitally important that a visible effort be made. And, as in many other situations, with the Communist powers impervious to outside appeal, the sentiment for peace was bound to focus on the United States.

This had been amply foreseen within the American government, but all the same the pressures of March, 1965 hit with a force that simply had not been taken in. One of my questions in November had been whether a policy of gradual military pressure, with feelers on neogtiation, could be carried out "in the klieg lights of a democracy." Now the heat of those lights was felt acutely, ~~and was hotter than had been foreseen~~.

As has been noted, the Communist side made little direct contribution to the clamor for peace moves, though its attacks on the basic American position of course played a part. Nor did any specific peace move made in February have any great appeal in itself. The hopelessness that had caused the U.S. (and U Thant himself) to reject resort to the UN Security Council was sensed in most circles, and U Thant's proposal for a 7-nation consultation was too complex to become a rallying point.

An early Indian proposal of February 8th likewise had small impact. Of all the various initiatives, the most appealing public one came in mid-March, from a group of non-aligned nations meeting in Belgrade at the invitation of President Tito of Yugoslavia. On March 3, Tito had written to President Johnson urging immediate negotiations without either side imposing conditions. (DOD papers, IV.C.3, p. 83, in Book 4. Get primary sources.) The President had replied on March 12 along the lines

of Rusk's February 25th position, saying in effect that there must be some sign of Hanoi ceasing its aggression. Tito then brought together an impressive group of 15 heads of state or government, representing nations that could truly call themselves "non-aligned." Tito, Nassar of the UAR, and Shastri of India were leading spirits, while such China-oriented countries as Pakistan and Indonesia were absent. The Belgrade Declaration, eventually signed by a total of 17 leaders, was a moving and at the same time even-handed document. It spoke of "foreign intervention in various forms" without specifying, said that negotiations were the only way out, and concluded with "an urgent appeal to the parties concerned to start such negotiations, as soon as possible, without posing any precondition ....*

Coming from nations whose good will and attitudes toward the U.S. mattered in practical policy terms, this Declaration was bound to be taken seriously within the Administration, even though it did not attract great attention in America. Moreover, it was another in the many indications of concern among nations who counted. By this time, while not nearly so "isolated" as the Russians argued, the U.S. position was beset by substantial international pressures. Almost alone among America's major allies, British leaders defended the American position in detail, while the Germans and some others in NATO were in more formal and general support. However, the French were actively hostile, and all through Western Europe critical voices were raised, covering a much wider spectrum

* Text in British White Paper, p. 25.

than the extreme left of Jean Paul Sartre, who ____ on March ___ dramatically declined to go through with a trip to the U.S. on the ground that American opinion was supporting the inhuman bombing. (Cite.)

In East Asia itself, the reaction to the bombing had been mixed. Apart from the outright hostility of Indonesia, there was no country vehemently opposed; Japan was officially sympathetic, but with strong public criticism, while it was the other way round in some Southeast Asian countries, with semi-critical public comment contrasting with private expressions of understanding and support. In early March, Averell Harriman and I met with the American Ambassadors throughout East Asia, at Baguio in the Phillipines, and found general agreement that, in addition to the strong support of the directly threatened countries of Thailand and Laos, and of the SEATO memebers, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, there was an almost universal feeling in East Asia, even from countries normally critical of the U.S., that the combination of Chinese and North Vietnamese threats was grave and that only the power of the U.S. could resist this. Although the South Vietnamese government and people were little known in Asia, the situation was seen as one of "aggression," so that the American bombing was seen as justified and in the circumstances not immoderate. In particular, the East Asian nations, at least, did not take the American bombing of North Vietnam in a racial sense, although some of this element seemed to be present in India and

Africa.*

In sum, the international pressures outside of East Asia were predominantly in the direction of urging an American move toward peace. Even within East Asia, Japanese concerns were evident, as had been foreshadowed when Prime Minister Sato had visited Washington in January. On the other hand, the rest of East Asian opinion (bar China and Indonesia, of course) was more concerned with American firmness than with early negotiations. All in all, the balance in the nebulous factor sometimes called "world opinion" was about what might have been expected.

However, the really crucial factor that made itself felt during March and early April was not international, but rather the force of domestic opinion within the United States itself. There, the most conspicuous protest came from the campuses, where students and faculty members, younger men for the most part, had come to express themselves with new vigor on domestic racial issues and academic grievances, and now turned the force of their new sense of power against the war, inventing in that month the

* This last topic was thrashed out at a special Baguio session. Carl Rowan, the distinguished black writer who headed the U.S. Information Agency from _____ through _____ was present and took the lead in urging that the racial aspect was already marked and bound to grow. His view was almost unanimously contested by those present, in a searching discussion that drew on the inmost experience of men most of whom had lived for years with the problem of a predominantly White nation's role among Asians. Perhaps their judgment was wrong, although it did not seem so then or later. Rowan himself, having returned to private newspaper work, toured Asia in _____ and wrote a moving series of articles concluding that the racial element had not become acute in the various reactions to American policy in Vietnam. Citations.

"teach-in," a non-stop discussion meeting usually combining expression and demonstration.* More to the point, for a President who owed his overwhelming election in part to wholehearted liberal support and certainly now needed that support to put over the Great Society program in a potentially hostile Congress, the vocal centers of liberalism -- press, media, articulate individuals -- were now aroused in questioning the Administration's whole policy, but above all its tough stance on negotiations. (Cite best evidence.)

So the pressure built up, not with any clear idea of what negotiations could accomplish or any real picture of its difficulties, but in the simple sense that if the United States was to engage in bombing a small and helpless Asian nation which did not directly threaten it, the least it could do was to demonstrate beyond a doubt that it was doing all that could possibly be expected to keep the door open to a peaceful solution.

Opposite Pressures to Hit Firmly and Do More

d. The paradox was that the bombing program that was arousing this controversy was, from a military man's viewpoint, halting and modest. A single strike on March 2 was followed by another one-day operation on March 15. Only beginning on March 19 was authority given for a week's activity at a time, and all attacks through June were confined to the area south of the 20th parallel.** Moreover, the weather at this season

* Cite the Scranton Report on how the student movement became a big-time thing in late 1964 and was just ready to take fire by the spring of 1965.
** A full chronology and description of the Rolling Thunder program of bombing from February through June, 1965, will be found in the DOD Papers, Book 4, Vol. IV.C.3, pp. xxiv-xxvi.

was bad, and repeated postponements further undermined the effect intended by the planners and supported strongly by Ambassador Taylor, that the program should work up slowly to present the leaders in Hanoi with a picture of increasing and inescapable damage to come if they did not move toward peace.

Hence, the JCS and Admiral Sharp in particular, but also Taylor in early March, pressed for harder hitting and greater frequency. Similarly, Taylor kept stressing that publicized peace moves, even by other nations, diluted the effect of the bombing on Hanoi. When Seaborn returned from his Hanoi visit in early March (having delivered the American message) he reported a strong impression that Hanoi was not at all convinced that the United States was doing more than a modest effort to right the balance. Taylor seized hard on this evidence -- which indeed was persuasive to anyone watching the whole picuure and Hanoi's public reactions -- to urge a more regular and increasing pace, and in general this was done by the end of the month, but still at relatively low weights of attack and in limited geographic areas. Neither Taylor nor any other civilian questioned the over-riding need to keep the bombing well out of reach of the North Vietnamese MIG interceptors, which Ball and his colleagues had singled out as likely to start a train of power that might run to Peking. While Taylor wanted regularity and slow increase, he did not envisage that the attacks even over a period of months would reach into the actual areas of Hanoi or Haiphong; these, as he often put it,

would remain, in effect, hostages against any drastic military response by Hanoi or attacks on cities in the South.

Under these limitations, it was plain to the President and all his advisors that the bombing of the North could not possibly move Hanoi for a long time, and had to be paced alongside efforts to get a turnaround in the South. As Taylor had noted in November, a devastated North and a thriving insurgency in the South was the worst possible situation. Hence, the pressures to do more came to focus much more intensively on the South. Perhaps the bombing of the North tended to drag upward the level and breadth of American military action in the South; more likely, the needs would have made themselves felt by this time anyway, so that if Pleiku had come a month or two later, the American choice of actions would have included sending large ground forces. It is an interesting speculation; what is certain is that once the North was being hit, the commander in South Vietnam was given progressively greater leeway, with the accompanying sense that whatever might now be proposed would get a very sympathetic hearing.

The mood of the period is well caught in Mrs. Johnson's record of what the President said to her concerning Vietnam on March 9th: "I can't get out. I can't finish it with what I have got. So what the Hell do I do?"* Through the first two weeks of March, the President was engrossed in a major civil rights crisis at home. In Selma, Alabama, determined American blacks marched to assert their right to vote, and the President

*. Lady Bird Johnson, A White House Diary (N.Y., Holt, Rinehart, and Winston 1970), p. 248.

responded by pressing a far-reaching new Civil Rights Act and by a ~~tele-~~ TELEVISED ~~vision~~ speech TO CONGRESS that by common consent was one of the high points of his Presidency. But even as he thus put his back and mind to affairs within the United States, he pressed in every way to find more things that could be done, and ways things could be done better, in Vietnam.

Carl Rowan of USIA went out to overhaul both the political warfare aspect and the adequacy of American information policies; and General Harold Johnson, Chief of Staff of the Army, went out to go over the military situation. In particular, the question of major ground forces for combat missions now came to the fore. Although the weekly reporting through March and April gave a picture of fairly level military trends, the summary reports of General Westmoreland painted a more disturbing, and probably more accurate, picture. Relative optimists in November, Westmoreland and his staff were becoming persuaded by late February that the South Vietnamese could not muster the forces needed to cope with the steadily rising strength of the VC. Even though the political situation had eased and the government forces still seemed in reasonable shape, there simply were not going to be enough of them if the VC continued to grow as they were doing. This sudden surge of concern could not be explained by the military intelligence estimates, which showed only modest increases, but the suspicion was growing that intelligence was very slow to reflect the actual picture, and that the VC were successfully recruiting in the South, and perhaps being reinforced from the North, much more rapidly than the thinly based intelligence picture could keep account of.

Thus, General Johnson's report concluded that about three additional divisions, from outside nations, were required to meet the manpower need, even if every possible reinforcement was raised within SVN. On March 20, the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the President the first formal recommendation for combat ground units, urging a total of three divisions, of which two would be American and the third, if it could be obtained, South Korean. The purpose of these three divisions (totalling 27 battalions) would be to reverse the adverse tide and assume the offensive. The implication was that such a force would be enough to do this without further reinforcement, although the paper did not limit itself to this extent.

In any case, the recommendation for large ground forces met with skepticism, from virtually all the civilian elements in Washington. The overall feeling is fairly well summarized in a draft memorandum that John McNaughton prepared on March 24, and perhaps circulated to McNamara though not to others. McNaughton thought deployment of combat forces was blocked by the "French-defeat and Korea syndromes," by the queasy attitude of the Vietnamese Prime Minister Quat, and by the thought that "troops could be net negatives and be besieged."* These had been Taylor's

* This McNaughton memorandum is extensively quoted in the DOD Papers, Book 4, Vol. IV.C.3, pp. 85-89. It contains a statement of American objectives defining these in percentage terms as "70% -- To avoid a humiliating US defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor). 20% -- To keep SVN (South Vietnam) (and then adjacent) territory from Chinese hands. 10% -- To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life." This statement, highlighted in the NY Times version of the Pentagon Papers, has been attacked by many as indicating a callous disregard for the Vietnamese, I believe, from all my long discussions with McNaughton, that it was quite otherwise. He was as concerned as any man could be for the

Vietnamese, but also believed that the wider stakes in the world and in Asia were of even greater importance in assessing whether the US should make the terribly serious effort now required. For further discussion of this point, see _____.

arguments all along, and he himself cabled that he would go no further than to round out the Marine force at Danang and give it somewhat greater freedom to operate outside its limited operating area. By this time, there was a clear difference between the Ambassador and the Commanding General in Vietnam, for at the end of March Westmoreland sent in his appraisal that two additional US divisions were required, one of which would operate in the threatened highland area of Pleiku and Kontum.

Compromise Military Decisions

e. Thus, by the time Taylor arrived in Washington on March 29th for five days of talks, including a session with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the debate within the Administration inner circle was sharply joined. That the President would decide on a large number of further actions was a foregone conclusion, for he now had before him Taylor's own action program under 41 headings, Rowan's report on information and political warfare changes, a report by John McCone on covert actions (by this time an insignificant heading), and General Johnson's earlier report with 21 headings for action. All of us, in preparing for this series of meetings, had the feeling that this was Western rational planning gone wild, that whatever plans one might draw up in neat form depended overwhelmingly for their execution on a South Vietnamese government and military structure that was still in very shaky condition. I suppose there may have been an important break point here: once the United States had started to assume a large share of the responsibility,

the tendency to do things American-style was beginning to take hold, and with it the subconscious feeling, at least in Washington, that one had actually done something by approving a plan to do it. Taylor and the men in the field, I am sure, did nothing to support any such view, for their picture of the situation, while guardedly hopeful, saw only a long slow process of recovery at best.

The major issues were how hard to hit in the bombing program, and what additional ground forces to send. On both, the outcome was in effect a compromise, more than "no change," less than what the military men wanted. In effect, the President went with the consensus of his civilian advisors, by deciding:

First, to continue the measured pace of the bombing program, stressing lines of communication in the near future, but avoiding the detection-and-intercept range of the North Vietnamese jet fighters -- which in practice meant staying some distance away from Hanoi and Haiphong.

Second, to send for the time being only two additional Marine battalions and associated aircraft, rounding out the full four battalion Marine force at DaNang.

Third, to authorize this Marine force to take on a more active role, not specifically defined in the decision but generally understood to fit what Taylor had recommended, active patrols to a 50-mile radius from their base area, and availability for emergency use as U.S. Commanders might determine on Vietnamese request.

Fourth, to send an additional 18-20,000 support and logistic forces.

Fifth, to explore urgently with the Korean, Australian, and New Zealand governments their sending combat forces, in parallel with the American deployment of the four Marine battalions.

All of these decisions were taken on April 1, and embodied in a National Security Action Memorandum 328, of April 6.* Publication of the basic materials in 1971 has led to intense controversy as to these decisions. Were they, in effect, a decision to commit ground forces to combat on an open-ended basis, with unlimited missions and in whatever numbers might thereafter be required? And was there deliberate concealment and misrepresentation, especially through language in the memorandum that enjoined maximum secrecy and expressed the President's desire "that these movements and changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy"?

The two questions go together, and as so often the contemporary answer on the first question differs considerably from the interpretation that reasonable men might put on the April 1 action seen in hindsight. This was the first formal decision that American forces might engage in active combat as units, the new Marine deployments rounded out the first division-sized American unit, of a size which in itself was almost bound to lead to more than local security duty, and the logistic forces fitted

* The full text of this NSAM will be found in the Defense Department Papers, Book 4, Vol. IV.C.5, 00. 124-6.)

deliberately into long-drawn plans to send additional American divisions. In the light of what went on in the next four months, it is not unreasonable to see in the April 1 decisions a deliberate setting out on a new and unlimited course, while concealing or withholding the full picture of future steps that were foreordained and for all practical purposes decided.

Yet, in the minds of almost all of us concerned with that April 1 decision, this was not so. Taylor, whose plan it primarily was, saw the four-battalion Marine force as a very limited local experiment; even its enlarged authority meant only that it could do the offensive things any military commander would wish to do to secure his position, and by "emergency" he meant just that -- a very rare case where all else failed and disaster could not otherwise be prevented. (At this point in the war, the outright disasters to South Vietnamese forces could have been counted on the fingers of one hand.) As Taylor saw it, the experiment would be carried out for a period of two months, stiffening the situation enough to allow the South Vietnamese to get on with their programs -- to which he and his staff had devoted the bulk of their effort and planning for the Washington visit. Most especially, Taylor continued to pound the table to the President, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs, and everyone he saw in Washington, that large-scale American combat units were not the answer. In this light, his consent to the new logistic forces was as a precautionary measure, against the chance of unforeseen sharp deterioration or of an all-out North Vietnamese or even Chinese intervention, to

be on the safe side.

Taylor's view, to be sure, may not have been universally shared in the inner circle. My impression was that the Joint Chiefs felt it was sure to come to more, and probably a great deal more, and it may be that McNamara from the bitter experience of past mis-judgments tended to agree. But as the matter went to the President, it was on the more limited basis that Taylor outlined, and I am sure that this was all the President meant to decide.

But to say this hardly gets around the question of concealment. Any decision for American combat missions, it may be argued, should have been at the very least disclosed to the Congress and seriously discussed with its leaders. Even if the carrying out of the authority was well off in the future -- two months were to elapse before it was invoked -- the Congress and perhaps the public as well, had a right to know and to be consulted. It is a big issue, and will need full discussion at a later point in this book. Suffice it, for the present, that the decision was in essence part of the President's earlier February posture, that he was not changing the basic American policy. As such, it was not debated in early April, and we shall see how the question of disclosure was handled in the next four critical months. As one looks back on it, the whole period from February through July falls into a consistent pattern of minimizing the significance of each separate move and letting the total speak for itself. This was surely the aim in early April, and the sense of the memorandum as it was understood by those who acted under it.

The Baltimore Speech

f. If the style of the military decisions was somewhat Johnsonian, that of the next major event, the President's Baltimore Speech of April 7, was ~~quite~~ QUITE essentially so. It was abruptly decided, sweepingly laid out, and finally executed ~~in key elements~~ with his own almost unique force and stamp.

The essence of the problem was, of course, the steadily building pressure for the United States to make some move toward peace. Moreover, for two months, the President had simply kept on repeating that there was no major change in policy; now, if he was to make a policy speech, it had to contain something more than a summary, and to stand on new and original points. How a Presidential speech comes to be is one of the most obscure of all the processes of American government, and I can shed no light on how Lyndon Johnson came to make this one. In fact, on April 3, I had left town for a week's rest, with no forewarning that a speech was even being considered. The recollection of others is that the speech became a strong idea on Sunday night. April 4th, and a firm commitment only on April 6th, when Johns Hopkins (UNIVERSITY IN BALTIMORE) was told LBJ would take Mac's place. I can however, describe some of the events and deliberations that by April 3rd had brought into view the two central ideas of the speech -- the offer of massive regional economic aid to Southeast Asia, including North Vietnam, and the declaration of American willingness to engage in "unconditional discussions."

The idea of massive economic aid to Southeast Asia -- an Asian "Marshall Plan" as the more exuberant were wont to call it at times -- had a long history. My first recollection of it dates from about 1958, when an imaginative Foreign Service Officer, Charles Baldwin, drew up full-scale plans, then resigned from the Service when they were rejected by the Eisenhower Administration as too ambitious.* The idea of a massive U.S.-triggered aid program was not thereafter raised within the American government, so far as I know or can determine, although I do recall that in the spring of 1964 it was being urged on members of Congress by at least one old New Dealer, Benjamin V. Cohen, as an alternative to what even then appeared likely to be military escalation in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, such grandiose ideas apart, there had been since _____ a quiet effort under way in Southeast Asia under the auspices of the UN's Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE). A network of small groups of experts and officials had grown up in Bangkok, ~~which was quietly~~ pulling together material from which pilot projects could be launched. One such had some into being on an impressive scale, at least in terms of organization; this was the Mekong Valley Project, which had enlisted expert engineers on river development and which had two Americans, General _____ Wheeler (retired from the Army Corps of Engineers and thereafter a central figure in the abortive American project to help build the Aswan Dam in Egypt) and, in New York, _____ Goldschmidt, nicknamed

*. Baldwin returned to serve as President Kennedy's Ambassador to Malaya and Malaysia from 1961 to early 1964.

"Tex" after the state he shared with President Johnson. All this had been embryonically in being when the then Vice-President had visited Bangkok in 1961, and he had talked with many of the groups and become quite excited about the long-term prospects.

In the first 15 months of his Presidency, however, neither the President nor his Administration moved to help this effort. With political stability IN Southeast Asia desperately uncertain, it seemed hopeless to launch a major new effort, or even to try to push forward rapidly what was already under way. As I recall arguing with Ben Cohen in the spring of 1964, unless one first held off the threat from North Vietnam and China in the North, and from Indonesia in the South, there would be no independent nations to assist. Moreover, viewed as a substitute for a firm American stance in defense of South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, the launching of a big economic aid effort seemed not only ineffective but likely to be taken as a sign that America had thrown in the towel. Thirdly, there was at this stage nothing coherent, bar the fragmentary ECAFE groups, to work with.

Such arguments had prevailed within the government to the point where, in 1964 and early 1965, the United States had rather conspicuously dragged its feet on the creation of an Asian Development Bank. This project, again essentially originated within the UN and ECAFE, had been the subject of a few preliminary conferences, in the last of which, held in (Australia) in _____, the American representatives had been ~~at a low~~

~~level and~~ cool toward setting up the Bank on any substantial basis. Failing an American lead of the sort that had brought about every major international institution since 1943, the idea of the Bank seemed unlikely to get off the ground.

All this I, to my discredit, had been only generally aware of in the strenuous months of my baptismal year in the State Department. However, after the Pleiku decision, my economic colleagues started to press me much harder, especially Robert Barnett, my economic Deputy.* Now that the United States had shown it was standing firm in SVN, they argued, the confidence needed, in both Asian recipients and outside participants, might now be present for a serious effort in Southeast Asia. The idea took hold in my Far Eastern Bureau, and elsewhere in the Department, to the point where it was reflected in general language in some of Secretary Rusk's February statements, as at least an eventual American hope.

In March, Barnett's repeated memoranda to me led me, in turn, to press on McGeorge Bundy in the White House the idea of the President saying something positive on the subject, in a speech or press conference. While others had similar ideas, including Chester Bowles from India, I believe it was the material Barnett had supplied, through me, that led the President on March 25th to say (BM - find approximate text).

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* Barnett was and is one of the most broad-spirited and humane men in the American Foreign Service, or any other. Raised in China, he was a younger member of the group of "China hands" whose liberal views were so emphatically rejected in the 1950's. At that time he was shunted into a series of European economic assignments, which in the end gave him a priceless insight into European attitudes and capacities as they related to economic assistance in Asia. He returned from "exile" under Averell Harriman, and served with steadily growing distinction and responsibility as Deputy Assistant Secretary in charge of economic matters, from ____ until his retirement in _____ 1970.

It was a classic case of public words leading rapidly on to policy. The idea landed on the press and public like water on parched ground -- a measure, no doubt, of the frustration Americans instinctively felt that their country seemed to be doing nothing in Southeast Asia except bombing. There was instant critical acclaim, the President ~~reacted~~ RESPONDED, ~~sharply~~, and the word came back rapidly to develop fully and at once the actions needed to give substance to his words.

Thus, by April 3rd, it was clear that American policy toward the development of Southeast Asia was about to change and become more active. But the idea of turning this budding change into a dramatic new initiative related in part to Vietnam was that of the President himself, or of advisors other than my Bureau. It was a brilliant move, nourished I believe by quiet talks directly between the President and Tex Goldschmidt, rooted above all in the President's own fervent belief, based on experience in the hill country of Texas, that nature could be transformed and poverty and all that went with it reduced. I do not believe he seriously thought that North Vietnam would be diverted from its military enterprise by the offer, nor was he so advised in preparing the Baltimore speech. I am positive that his belief in regional development for its own sake ran very deep indeed; once kindled and presented as practicable, the idea fitted his deepest convictions. If it also moved the men in Hanoi, so much the better, but he meant to do it anyway.

The appointment of Eugene Black to lead the effort was also the President's personal idea. To move quietly on a number of fronts, starting

with a more positive position toward the Asian Development Bank, was the gist of what the President was urged from the State Department in this two-week period. But he saw at once that to give the change lasting emphasis, and also to do the job without frittering things away in bureaucratic delays, he needed a man in charge. He aimed high and got his first choice, by typically Johnsonian personal persuasion.

So, when the President spoke at Baltimore on the night of April 7th, he not only gave a moving and personal plea on the negativeness and futility of war, but went on to pledge that the United States would contribute up to a billion dollars to the support of economic development and cooperation programs in Southeast Asia, to be initiated by the nations of Asia themselves. Specific mention was made of the Mekong Valley Project and of the intent that North Vietnam too should participate in the program in conditions of peace. Not mentioned in the speech, but quickly developed in the aftermath, was a switch to firm and forceful American support for the Asian Development Bank. We shall see in the later chapters how Mr. Black went about his task and with what results, giving substance to what was in original intent, and then in execution, an important addition to American policy in Asia. If the President was not making economic aid his sole or predominant approach, as Ben Cohen would have urged, he was at least giving some balance to the overall American effort in Southeast Asia.

The second of the major new ideas in the Baltimore Speech, the offer of "unconditional discussions," came out of a more tangled and

immediate history. Unlike the economic aid proposal, the new negotiating posture came almost wholly from outside pressures. By late March, key foreign opinion had reached fever pitch. In bellwether Britain, Wilson and his Foreign Minister, Michael Stewart, were increasingly beleaguered by the left wing of their own Labour Party, and criticism abroad had been greatly accentuated by the revelation, in late March, that South Vietnamese forces had on a few occasions used American-supplied tear gas. The resulting outcry was ~~somewhat~~ clumsily handled in Washington through sheer lack of foresight and excessive confidence in the fact that the same types of tear gas had been used by police forces the world over on innumerable occasions in the previous decade. Nonetheless, the practice smacked of chemical warfare, forbidden under the Geneva Convention of ____, and although the US had not signed this convention there was a general feeling that it should be above reproach.* Essentially, the outcry probably reflected a more general revulsion against the use of superior technology by an advanced nation against a backward enemy, a pattern of which the bombing itself was of course the foremost example.**

Thus, by the time of the Taylor visit, the President was already ~~beleaguered~~ especially pressed. At just this time Prime Minister Pearson of Canada added his voice to the proposal that the United States stop the bombing at least temporarily to see if negotiations could get under way. This had become in February the standard Soviet position, and had been urged by many

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* At almost the same time, it had been announced that napalm, liquid fire, was authorized for use in the bombing of North Vietnam. The authority was in fact seldom used, but the effect on opinion abroad was again serious

** See later discussion at _____.

leaders in Communist and neutral nations during March. To have it put forward by America's closest friend and neighbor was something else, and the impact was ~~something else; and the impact was~~ the greater because Pearson spoke on American soil. He had given notice of his remarks only at the very last minute, too late for remonstration, and went directly from the speech in Philadelphia to a weekend private meeting with the President.

As we shall see in the next chapter, the speech was to have a lasting effect on President Johnson's whole feeling toward foreign visitors, and to lead him to take actions toward India and Pakistan that may have had great effects. More to the immediate point, the President reacted in a sulfurous fashion, fully communicated to Pearson at Camp David (two days) later. In the just-concluded talks with Taylor, the consensus had been that any suspension of the bombing would be useless for at least a month or two. Now the President was more than ever dug in, reacting as he almost always did for both foreign comment and domestic speculation (or presumed leaks), that he was damned if he would do what was suggested (or reported). But at the same time, if he was to reject a bombing suspension, he must have felt he had to come up with some winning idea to take the heat off.

Hence, the President suddenly focussed hard on the pending diplomatic business of that week, which was the question of an American reply to the appeal of the 17 non-aligned nations. This declaration had been adopted on March 15th, but was only presented as a formal communication on April 1,

when Rusk received four of the Ambassadors. Information from the Belgrade Conference was that the balanced tone of the appeal was a compromise among the hostile viewpoints of some such as Tito himself, the middle and not unsympathetic position of such as Shastri of India, and the outright support of American policy by at least one man, Bourguiba of Tunisia. In any event, those signing the appeal were a roster of prominent first-generation leaders of new or newly emergent nations in Asia and Africa. Both their message and they themselves had to be taken seriously.

Accordingly, we in the State Department drafted a proposed reply that did not explicitly change Rusk's "missing piece" formulation, but made it very much gentler than the insistence on prior surrender it had come by this time to seem to many. The reply said, in effect, that the U.S. was prepared at any time for negotiations without any precondition, but that it did not believe such negotiations could be useful unless North Vietnam was prepared to address the issue of its actions against the South and of a return to the essential provisions of the Geneva Agreement. In effect, the U.S. would take a forthcoming position to this extent -- not, frankly, because the draftsmen believed that early negotiations were either possible or desireable, but because this was a better statement of the underlying U.S. view, ~~and because it was thought overwhelmingly likely that Hanoi would reject the appeal out of hand~~. ~~Thus,~~ the U.S. would look comparatively more friendly to negotiations --

as indeed it was, on an objective examination of the positions of the two parties to this stage.

Just who took the next step, to the formula of "unconditional discussions," I do not know. Bill Moyers and Richard Goodwin in the White House were by this time strong advocates of a new move, while George Ball had written in February of an initiative for exploratory talks, without getting into a formal negotiation till both sides had seen whether some progress was really possible. Thus, all parties must have come together on a formula confined to "discussions," and, for Saigon's sake, confined also to governments -- by implication excluding the National Liberation Front at least from direct contact with the United States. It was in fact the only practical way that any progress could be made toward a peaceful settlement; with the wide difference between the two sides, only by preliminary contact of some sort could it be seen whether more formal negotiations offered hope. The formula thus combined realism with rhetorical appeal.

In his memoirs, President Johnson describes the launching of the "unconditional discussions" formula as a major decision, ranking with Tonkin Gulf, the decision to bomb the North after Pleiku, and the decision to send large-scale ground combat forces. At the time, to many in the United States and abroad, the formula must have seemed to have such great importance, and there can be no doubt that it helped greatly to stem the attacks on the Administration that were rising rapidly at the time. Then, and for many months to come, the American position toward peace

negotiations seemed to most, though far from all, reasonable and considerably more forthcoming than that of North Vietnam.

Yet, three things must be said about the "unconditional discussions" formula. The first is that in the particular environment of this war, it came almost two months late. If the President had adopted the position urged by Ball and others in mid-February, he would have indicated a readiness to pursue exploratory discussions from the outset. The issue of ~~"preconditions"~~ "PRECONDITIONS" would have been faced before it arose or became acute through the simple taking of a position that could have been stated in three sentences: "We are prepared for exploratory discussions at any time, direct or indirect, in any setting or grouping that appears reasonably fitted for honest exchange of views. If such exploratory discussions indicate the possibility of a reasonable peace settlement (defined), then we can proceed to ~~that point.~~ FORMAL NEGOTIATIONS." A large part of the need for the April 7th speech was simply that the United States had got itself into a false position, of apparently refusing to talk unless the other side indicated it was prepared to stop its action, in effect to surrender. The Berlin precedent of 1948 and the Korea precedent of 1951 could be applied when the United States was clearly the aggrieved party in the general international view. In 1965, in Vietnam, the United States had to go further and suggest its own willingness to talk.

Second, or perhaps as part of the same point, an earlier taking of this position would have avoided the red herring of American dealing with

the NLF. While no serious government or person (such as U Thant) doubted in early 1965 that Hanoi and Hanoi alone was the key, by April -- and even more in the later months -- the position of the NLF had been built up to the point where it was argued that the U.S. willingness for talks was meaningless unless the Front was included formally. No doubt it would always have been urged that the US should do something more of some sort, and perhaps if it had not been the NLF it would have been some other proposal. The fact is, however, that between February and April, the NLF was brought to the fore for the first time, almost certainly as part of an overall plan in which Hanoi participated. Thus, by April, it was an issue whereas in February it had not been.*

Third, there was a problem arising not from the formula so much as from the President's subsequent claim that this had, in effect, been the American position all along. (citations). There was some limited basis for such a claim. Through the Seaborn contacts with Hanoi, and since February through American encouragement of the British approach to the Soviet Union, the United States had sought to develop the mutual expression of views between Washington and Hanoi. However, in the all-too-conspicuous case of the U Thant proposal for talks in Rangoon, the United States through Secretary Rusk had refused to participate blindly in bi-

* In making these two points, I am not being critical of any individual. On the contrary, a large part of the failure lay in the planning area for which I was responsible. Had I foreseen in November, and especially in early February, what the actual climate of opinion would be like, a clearly defined statement and posture might have carried the day.

lateral talks at a time when there seemed no chance of a useful result. The fact was that, since February 7th, the position of the parties had been reversed: Hanoi from supporting ideas for a Geneva Conference had moved to outright opposition to anything of the sort, and Washington had now moved, through the Baltimore speech, to a willingness it would not have displayed before ~~February~~ APRIL for anything beyond a cautious exchange through trusted third parties. The reversal could, I think, have been made wholly understandable; the mistake was to pretend that it had not been that -- which was perhaps part of the President's strong urge to claim that all the elements in his policy were simply logical extensions, not changes.

Thus, appealing as it was for the time being, the "unconditional discussions" formula in the Baltimore speech really only made up for lost ground, and with an interpretation that was to cause trouble for the future. The negotiating parts of the Baltimore speech did indeed serve to spell out, from the President himself, key elements in the basic American position. The overall tone of the speech was eloquent, masterly, and essentially true to the pacifist/populist character of Lyndon Johnson. So was the part of the speech dealing with aid to Southeast Asia, truly a change in American policy that boded much for the future. Only the "unconditional discussions" formula, necessary and useful as it was for setting the record straight by oversimplification, rings a little hollow for any lasting importance in history. It led to no real new move toward

peace, and as we shall see in the next chapter even its effect in meeting pressures and criticism proved to be limited. Perhaps there is a lesson here -- that democratic countries feel a great compulsion to over-simplify and dramatize their views toward peace and its pursuit; the result is not often helpful in the serious work that is needed to that end.

Chapter 24: Negotiation: Word and Deed, Public and Private

a. The period from early April to late June of 1965 contains two themes in counterpoint. Internationally and to a large extent within the U.S., the center of the stage went to various negotiating moves and to the growing controversy over American policy. The negotiating arena swarmed publicly with new initiatives, and privately with intensive work seeking to lay out a practicable course to peace. Through the exchange of public statements and some private signals as well, the main issues that divided the two sides were reaffirmed and clarified -- the gap becoming only more apparent in the process.

This negotiating arena is the subject of this chapter. Never in history, certainly if one takes the whole sweep from February through July, have the nations of the world worked harder to head off or control a conflict. They failed -- and by late June could be seen to have failed -- essentially because the situation in the theatre of conflict was becoming steadily more favorable to one side, North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The trend on the ground, discussed fully in the following chapter along with American military actions, was the real determinant in this period. Nonetheless, the story of the negotiating moves is an important one both in its own right and for what it foreshadowed for future efforts at peace as the military trends changed.

Briefly, it has four parts:

-- Hanoi's basic statement of position, the celebrated "four points," and --new American thinking on a Southern political solution,

-- the strange story of the Cambodian Conference proposal.

-- the first bombing pause, for five days in May, with its signals and sequels.

-- the development and announcement of a South Vietnamese position.

Hanoi's Four Points

b. For a week after the President's speech, the response from Hanoi and Peking was confined to propaganda blasts, directed equally against the speech and against the formal American acceptance of the 17-nation proposal, which had been delivered on April 8th, with a fuller statement of the American position on a settlement. (Citation, and highlights.)

Then, on April (14th ?), the Vietnamese News Agency reported that on April 8th, Prime Minister Phan Van Dong had made a formal statement of the North Vietnamese position. Its full text was:

> It is the unswerving policy of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to strictly respect the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietna, and to correctly implement their basic provisions as embodied in the following points:
>
> 1. Recognition of the basic national rights of the Vietnamese people: peace, independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. According to the Geneva Agreements, the U.S. government must withdraw from South Vietnam all U.S. troops, military personnel and weapons of all kinds, dismantle all U.S. military bases there, cancel its "military alliance" with South Vietnam. It must end its policy of intervention and aggression in South Vietnam. According to the Geneva Agreements, the U.S. government must stop its acts of war against North Vietnam, completely cease all encroachments on the territory and sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
>
> 2. Pending the peaceful reunification of Vietna, while Vietnam is still temporarily divided into two zones the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam must be strictly respected: the two zones must refrain from joining any military alliance with foreign countries, there must be no foreign military bases, troops and military personnel in their respective territory.
>
> 3. The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves, in accordance with the programme of the South Vietnam National Front for Liberation, without any foreign interference.
>
> 4. The peaceful reunification of Vietnam is to be settled by the Vietnamese people in both zones, without any foreign interference.
>
> This stand unquestionably enjoys the approval and support of all peace- and justice-loving Governments and peoples in the world.
>
> The Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam is of the view that the above-expounded stand is the basis for the soundest political settlement of the Vietnam problem. If this basis is recognized, favourable conditions will be

> created for the peaceful settlement of the Vietnam problem and it will be possible to consider the reconvening of an international conference along the pattern of the 1954 Geneva Conference on Vietnam.
>
> The Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam declares that any approach contrary to the above stand is inappropriate; any approach tending to secure a U.N. intervention in the Vietnam situation is also inappropriate because such approaches are basically at variance with the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam.* (ITALICS ADDED.)

At once there was speculation whether the statement was a reply to President Johnson's speech of April 7. If in fact it had been delivered on the 8th, this was of course out of the question, for there would only have been a few hours between -- but why the delayed announcement, and a text that in tone conflicted with much that Hanoi said between the 7th and 14th? The answer is probably that the date of delivery was rigged, but the point is of small consequence. Essentially the same formulation had been used in a little-noticed Pham Van Dong interview with Japanese journalists on March __, and Hanoi obviously decided that the time was ripe for a solid statement on which it could base both its case and its resistance to early negotiations, as well as its continued total rejection of the United Nations.

The statement was well drawn for these purposes. Purporting to be a simple interpretation of the Geneva Agreements of 1954, much of its content was consistent with this claim, the conspicuous omissions being Article (16), forbidding interference by one "zone" with the other, and Article 7, the provision for free elections. It was plain enough why Article (16) was omitted, but the omission of Article 7 suggested that Hanoi had little confidence in its chances under free choice -- or that it was now adopting a new position under which reunification was indefinitely put off.

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* Recent Exchanges Concerning Attempts to Promote a Negotiated Settlement of the Conflict in Viet-Nam, Viet-Nam No. 3 (1965), Her Majesty's Stationery Office, p. 51.

To the extent it followed or harmlessly modified Geneva terms, the statement raised no problem from the American standpoint. As American statements had already made clear, the U.S. wanted no bases or alliances into the future (whether or not South Vietnam's status under SEATO was an "alliance"), American military action would end with a settlement if not before, and reunification was for the Vietnamese to determine. Disregarding the rhetorical wrappings, there was nothing in the first, second, or fourth points which the U.S. could not accept in principle, subject only to working out the details, and adding such points as a reaffirmed Article 16. Almost at once, I explained this to friendly diplomats and newsmen on several occasions; it was obvious enough not to require a high-level determination.

The third point was something else again. Obviously, it was spurious to claim that the Geneva Accords of 1954 gave any warrant for this formula, since the National Liberation Front had not then been in existence. More substantially, the program of the Front, now put forward as decisive called for the formation of a coalition of all "peace-loving forces," (?) then the holding of an election, <u>in that order</u>. Formulated in 1960, its language reeked of the kind of takeover from within that had taken place in Poland in 1946 (?) and in North Vietnam itself in the same period. (BM. See if there is a good statement at the time explaining all this.)

Hence, when Pham Van Dong insisted that the four-point stand be "recognized" as the basis of settlement, before there could be any re-

convened conference, it seemed clear that he was taking the familiar Communist position in negotiation after negotiation since the war. This was not a "basis for discussion" with central points then open for argument; if one accepted Hanoi's "basis," its central points were then agreed

beyond discussion. Of course, one could then break off, but it would be an absurd and futile exercise, with misunderstanding and recrimination in the world and severe damage to South Vietnamese confidence.

Governments abroad readily grasped this point, and there was no urging that the U.S. should accept the North Vietnamese preconditions as they stood. For the time being, the American position was much more appealing, although it soon began to be eroded by arguments that the Front should be a party even to "discussions," and above all by the undiminished clamor for a bombing pause. In fact, Hanoi had not communicated in any way at this time that its readiness for negotiations hinged on a suspension or cessation of the bombing. However, it was widely assumed that the Soviet insistence on such action reflected an underlying Hanoi position, which it was too proud to state lest it seem to be hurting or even yielding to pressure.

The effect of the four points, nonetheless, was to focus American thinking on the question of political control in South Vietnam. Obviously, this was Hanoi's central objective, and equally clearly the coalition device in the NLF program was intended to provide a sure thing. As Bernard Fall and many others soaked in post-1945 Vietnamese history lost no time in recalling, Ho had felt cheated in the sequel to his 1946 negotiations with the French (with much reason), and again in the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva negotiations (with less reason, as seen from the West at least). Now he and the leaders of the NLF must be united in the conviction that there should be no loose ends; the "coalition" approach, with outsiders removed, was their answer. It was not a great surprise that this should be so, but now it was out in the open.

Yet, if this was Hanoi's clear and possibly implacable objective, it did not follow that there was no room for useful exploration -- if only to open a route that

—Hanoi might take when it felt itself thwarted and able to continue only at great and fruitless cost. George Ball, as often, was the first to seize the issue, pointing out with his usual eloquence on April 21 that it was verbally a simple task to "de-fuse" the third point: if Hanoi would agree to the principle of settling the internal affairs by free choice of the South Vietnamese people, with the NLF implicitly free to participate in the process but without refering to their program, the parties could come to grips and be a long way toward a solution. At least, he urged, this should be explored as soon as possible. In fact, the North Vietnamese communique with Kosygin in February had called ~~(only)~~ for the Americans to withdraw and "let the South Vietnamese people settle by themselves their internal affairs" -- with no reference to the Front.* Thus, as recently as that, Hanoi had not seemed wedded either to a reference to the Front or to the "sure thing" approach. Perhaps they would agree to some method of free choice, if not now, at least when the tide of battle had clearly turned.

The Ball proposal to smoke out Hanoi on a revised version of the third point was not adopted by Rusk or the President for the time being, on the ground that admitting the members of the NLF to a political process in the South was something on which the South Vietnamese government must be fully aboard. With the first consultations with Prime Minister Quat only just getting under way, it seemed essential to wait a little while.

In the meantime, Ball was directed by the President to see if some better or more sweeping plan could be worked out for a final settlement and action toward it. At once, Ball enlisted a two-man team of Dean Acheson, former Secretary of State, and Lloyd Cutler, a prominent Washington lawyer of wide-ranging experience and talents.

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* British White Paper, p. 18

Working over a period of two weeks, Acheson and Cutler produced a report of much originality and imagination. Its essence was that verbal negotiations were unlikely to produce an answer to the central problem of political control in the South. Thus, the only course was one of action and reciprocal action, in which the lead would be taken by the government in the South -- {then seen from Taylor's reporting to be in -- a fairly good military situation, with the North set back by the bombing and American reinforcements in the South}. Starting with a two-week bombing pause, the Saigon government should offer complete amnesty to the Viet Cong and then the holding of local elections; these, when completed in a sufficient number of districts, would provide the core for a new Constituent Assembly, which in turn would provide for a new central government. The Viet Cong would be free to participate in the local elections, and if elected in the later forming of a central government. American forces would withdraw as the process unfolded and security was restored. If, however, the local election process was resisted, the war would necessarily go on in local areas, while if the North continued to send down forces the bombing of the North would be resumed.

Presented on May 7th, the Acheson-Cutler report suggested that if the military trends held up, the process might get under way by the end of May, when South Vietnam was already scheduled to hold local elections. To start at the local level had, as the authors pointed out, a strong sentimental appeal to the South Vietnamese people; democracy in the village had deep roots, as it did not at all at the national level. Granted that the plan allowed the Viet Cong to keep control where they now had it, this was estimated to be no more than 30%-40% of the rural areas, or 15-20% of total population as it was then distributed. There was a risk that the Viet Cong and NLF

would emerge in control at the end of the process, but as things looked in early May to Acheson and Cutler, this risk was less than that of the military moves that would be needed to deal with the combined forces of the NLF and North Vietnam.

It was probably the most judicious compromise solution that could have been devised. Circulated to the Saigon Embassy for comment, its difficulties and flaws were pointed out with fervor in late May, and the plan never got back into the main stream of policy thereafter, at least until late 1966. Its basic problems were twofold: first, it required a much more sophisticated and appealing Saigon government than was in existence at any time after late May of 1965 (probably even the Quat government at its strongest point would not have been up to it); second, the assumed favorable military trends of late April proved by late May to be an illusion, with the situation verging on disaster from that point on. Hence it was never practicable to revive the Plan. Over and over in the coming years, however, peace proposals reverted to the ideas highlighted (though not in all cases invented) in the Plan -- local elections, free participation of the Viet Cong in the political process, and working for progress through reciprocal actions rather than through verbal forumlae. At any time from mid-1965 onward, had Hanoi or the National Liberation Front been prepared to talk realistically about a compromise political solution in the South, thsee ideas would certainly have come into play. Writing in 1971, I am still inclined to think that these points will be crucial to the kind of "Vietnamese solution" that must in time emerge. Or perhaps the issue of political control has all along been "all-or-nothing" to both sides, for history does not offer many examples of civil wars settled by democratic processes or by a stable division of power between the contending groups.

While the Acheson-Cutler plan went into abeyance by June, Ball's idea of probing Hanoi on the third point had at least a minor whirl. By careful design, the American interpretation ~~of the references to~~ of the NLF program AND ITS DECISIVENESS ~~third-point~~ was conveyed to a number of countries thought to be in contact with Hanoi, with a request that these countries seek to find out (a) if this understanding of the third point was correct, and (b) if Hanoi was adamant that the four points must be accepted as a precondition to any negotiation. This kind of third-country nibbling would, it was thought, at least turn up any real error of understanding. When there came no reply of any sort in a month or so, it seemed reasonably safe to conclude that at least we were correct in interpreting the third point to MEAN ~~acceptance of~~ an NLF-chosen coalition. Its acceptance as a precondition to negotiations also seemed required, though less surely.

The ~~Stage~~ STRANGE Affair of the Cambodia Conference

c. No ~~key~~ figure in the Second Indochina War played a more significant role than Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia -- using "significant" in the most literal sense as showing which way the wind is blowing. In touch with Hanoi, Peking, and Paris as closely as he knew how to be, and on occasion the object of attention from Moscow and Washington, Sihanouk was the weathervane of the war. We have seen how in late 1963 he wrote off the United States and started to re-insure with China, always guarding against (while trying not to alienate) the feared North Vietnamese and their "liberation" forces. In 1964, he tried to get a conference and then flirted briefly with a United Nations presence on his borders, only to be thwarted on both, in the latter case pulling back himself under fairly obvious pressure from Hanoi and probably from Peking as well. Then, by late 1964, he had moved to the point of a near-embrace of Peking.

Yet, over and over, his balancing instincts would impel him to some gesture toward the other potential great forces in the area. Toward the US, by postponing a final diplomatic break and even talking briefly in New Delhi at the end of 1964. And then, as Soviet Russia re-emerged on the Southeast Asian scene and once again showed interest in its Co-Chairman role, Sihanouk moved to put a Soviet underpinning under his frail neutrality and independence.

He did this, in late March of 1965, by directly proposing to the USSR that it should join with the British Co-Chairman to reconvene the 1954 Geneva Conference participants to deal with Cambodian problems. Specifically, the conferees should deal with the repeated violations of his territory (naming the occasional military postes or errors of the South Vietnamese and American forces) and with the threats to his neutrality (meaning, unstated, the North Vietnamese and their cohorts) -- and produce new international guarantees for his country.

If Sihanouk's motives in launching the idea were evident, those of the Soviet Union in picking up the ball (on April 3) and running with it were more subtle and interesting. With Hanoi shooting down Soviet efforts to act in the framework of the 1954 Conference on Vietnam, we in Washington had concluded by late March that the USSR was out of the play. Now it came back, perhaps hoping that the initiative being Sihanouk's would neutralize Hanoi and Peking, and that any conference once convened, however limited its basis, would serve as a safety valve (or forum for denunciation) in case America kept increasing its military effort. That the Soviet Union was on tricky ground and subject to conflicting pressures was never more evident than in ~~late~~ April, as the Cambodian matter was up in the air. On every public front, Soviet

propaganda and Soviet representatives sought to create the impression of rigid Soviet obduracy. Even the Cambodian matter was pursued almost furtively -- yet the fact that it was pursued at all seemed to show that somebody in the Kremlin wanted to cool things. Perhaps, also, there was a French angle, for in these two months the Russians were engaged in a fairly frantic courtship of the French for European reasons, while the French tended to influence and be influenced by Sihanouk, and not to want to see him fall wholly into Peking's orbit.

All in all, Sihanouk's initiative precipitated a tricky battle for influence, in which hands were played and misplayed on all sides. Unfortunately, one of the misplayed hands was that of the British. To appease his restive left wing by showing how hard Britain was working for peace, Prime Minister Wilson in early April sent Patrick Gordon Walker to Asia. In itself, the trip might have done some modest good, if only by demonstrating that Hanoi and Peking were too dug-in even to receive him. However, on the Cambodia matter, then just at a boil, Gordon Walker went out of his way to say how useful the Cambodia conference could be in permitting corridor discussions of Vietnam. This needed no pointing out, but was exactly the line best calculated both to belittle Sihanouk and to make life most difficult for the Soviet Union in its relations with Hanoi.

Meanwhile, the American hand had been none too well played. Both Thailand and South Vietnam understandably disliked the prospect of a slanging match with the Prince, and it took nearly two weeks to bring them around -- and to sort out clearly that, in the new American posture created by the President's Baltimore speech, it was only consistent, and probably wise as well, to pursue this and every other reasonable gambit just as far as possible. Finally, on April 24th and 26th, both the United

States and South Vietnam announced their acceptance of the conference, with the President designating as his neogtiator Averell Harriman, who had just stepped down as Under Secretary for Political Affairs and become Ambassador at Large.

Perhaps British and American handling made a difference and gave the opponenets of negotiation more time and pretext to act -- or perhaps they needed none. At any rate, at the end of April Sihanouk started to backtrack, much as he had done in 1964 and perhaps for similar reasons. A border violation by ~~South Vietnamese~~ AMERICAN aircraft on April 28 did not help, and during the first week in May the Prince suddenly insisted that the National Liberation Front should represent South Vietnam and that neither the Saigon government nor the United States should be invited. Finally, on May 15, he announced that the Co-Chairmen should convene a conference as soon as the participants could agree among themselves who should represent South Vietnam. It was a devide designed to bury the project, and thereafter no British prodding could move a Soviet muscle. Rebuked in March, the Soviets had now been given a second lesson in their lack of influence. Clearly, Hanoi had put on the pressure in the end, yet since Hanoi itself had been ready to go along as of _____, one could surmise that Peking again had been at work, in effect telling Sihanouk that the conference was a bad idea and unacceptable to China.

Was the episode of ~~real~~ ANY importance in the whole negotiating story? No one can say whether a Cambodian conference would have amounted to anything, but it was for a time the only realistic negotiating forum in sight -- and the existence of such a forum might have made a real difference over time. Above all, the course of events revealed the relative strength of the great power magnets at work on the most sensitive and vulnerable of neutral Southeast Asians. In a pinch, China would have its way, not perhaps through direct pressure, but through Prince Sihanouk's reading that China would be the power that could save or sink him in the future.

Indeed, the Prince now went one step further. Acting on the excuse of past border violations and after a doubtless-instigated violent demonstration against the American Embassy, Sihanouk on May __ formally broke diplomatic relations with the United States. Even to the end, however, he wanted to have his cake and eat it, suggesting somewhat plaintively that the U.S. should stay on a consular basis, a transparently useless and demeaning idea Rusk promptly rejected. The net result was that Cambodia had slid one step further toward total accomodation with China and North Vietnam.

The May Bombing Pause

d. The President's Baltimore speech proved in a few days to have almost no effect on one set of pressures on him, the urging that he stop the bombing. On the contrary, the very next day many of the 17-non-aligned

nations were vigorously complaining that the favorable American reply had not been accompanied by an immediate suspension. On April __, Senator Fulbright added his powerful voice to the chorus.

To the President, the continuing pressure seemed to prove again how harsh a double standard many nations of the world applied to the United States when it was in conflict with other and especially Communist nations. (See LBJ book for this quote.) The outcry simply redoubled his resolve not bo be drawn into a suspension at least until a solid pattern of bombing had been established, and even then not in response to this kind of shrill appeal. As many pointed out to him, if Ho & Co. got the idea that the American position could be swayed easily by voices from abroad, they would hang on all the more rigidly and the chance of a move toward peace would be that much less. A bombing pause could have its place at a time when there was some chance of a response, but to try it before that time was to throw away a card, and the resumption would conceivably make things worse than they had been -- with new pressures on the President to hit harder than he had any intention of doing. It must never be forgotten, in this and later periods up to 1968, that the President, his advisors, and almost every experienced Washington observer thought that the most serious pressures of American opinion must come in time from the hard-line right wing. To make a "soft" move and get nothing for it -- especially if it could be argued that American military forces paid a price for the move -- was, it was deeply believed,

likely to open the way to the kind of wide outcry for extreme measures that had characterized the MacArthur crisis in 1950-51, during the Korean War. This basic miscalculation of the American mood, as it must appear in hindisght, played a very distinct part at least in the President's attitude toward a bombing halt of any type. Over and over, as I vividly recall, he or others would mention it in council, while I myself stated the fear of later backlash as a major argument to diplomats and reporters alike -- at least against a premature or hopeless pause.

The Pearson intervention of April 2 thus would have fallen on stony ground in any case. However, the fact that the Canadian Prime Minister chose to speak in the President's own back yard, so to speak -- a doubtful move at any time, for any head of government on any subject in any foreign country -- had at this particular time a more general consequence whose effects were not, alas, confined to the field of feelings or protocol. This was the President's decision, about April 7, that he would postpone the scheduled visits of President Ayub of Pakistan and Prime Minister Shastri of India. The decision rested in part on the fear that the two visits would highlight to an already critical Congress the difficult position the United States was in, supplying arms to both countries when their relations were tense.* My impression, however, was that the President's reason was simpler and more visceral. Ayub, though an old personal friend, had by then been (QUOTED AS) ~~highly~~ critical of American bombing of the North,

* In ~~late~~ April, in fact, there erupted a small conflict in the desolate Rann of Kutch area, in which Pakistani forces used American arms in some degree and in violation of the basic military assistance agreement.

calling it "aggression" (CHECK) in the course of a Peking visit the previous month; Shastri had been balanced in his own statements but much comment in New Delhi had not, In any case, the President simply would not accept the possibility that major visitors might not only disagree privately with American policy in Vietnam, but express themselves publicly, as Pearson had done.

It was one of the few cases when the President in the end over-rode the objections of Rusk and Ball, both of whom had serious misgivings about the postponement, as more obviously did the American Ambassadors in the two countries. The decision seemed to me, and to many others, a regrettable case of making Vietnam seem more all-embracing and pervasive than it needed to be, as well as a missed chance to get at the roots of criticism. Moreover, it may, in hindsight, have contributed to loss of American influence in South Asia in the critical months that followed. My own conviction remains that the United States should be able to stand quite a lot of criticism for the sake of direct contact at the top with basically friendly nations, as it does naturally in its relations with those less friendly. In this instance, the nature of the President's policy was made even more glaring by the announcement that he was putting off all visits and personal plans for travel, but making an exception for President Park of Korea, who was of course totally in support of American policy in Vietnam and quietly considering the further dispatch of Korean forces. The progress of Korea under Park deserved the visit anyway, without its being put in such a rigid policy ~~mantle~~ MOULD.

As the decision to postpone the Ayub and Shastri visits was winding through its painful execution, to be announced on April __, the calls for a bombing suspension grew anyway. On April 17, both the President and Rusk explained at press conferences that the Administration rejected the idea at least for the time being, in the face of what seemed overwhelming indications that Hanoi would have no interest in serious discussions except on its own terms.

Actually, the idea of a bombing pause in the next month or so was very much alive among the President's senior advisors, and quite probably in his own mind. It was deferred at this point by the crisis in the Dominican Republic, which began on April 24th, led to an American decision on April 29 to send ground forces amounting shortly to more than 20,000 men, and raged at fever pitch through the whole of May. Justified first by the need to protect Americans in the Caribbean country, the intervention became massive for the basic purpose of preventing a Communist takeover, a "second Cuba." However, the evidence of Communist power was largely circumstantial, and of external involvement very slight, so that both the action and its rationale came under heavy fire in the very quarters both at home and abroad, that were already skeptical or hostile to the Vietnam actions. The compounded criticism on the issue of the moment, which had become the bombing, with the ~~clear~~ prospect that the fever would become even greater in the last two weeks of May, when many demonstrations and debates were scheduled.

I believe this clamor contributed to the decision of May 11th to have a bombing pause of a few days. Certainly, it made the planning of the pause hastier than would have been desirable. All hands were taut with strain, those involved in the Dominican Crisis from it, those not involved (like myself) from the strain of handling Vietnam without the usual high-level guidance. It has often been said that the American government finds it difficult to handle two crises at once, and in this case it was true. For the Dominican crisis involved not only the toughest kind of action decisions and engaging of allied cooperation, but the job of explaining the decisions to the Congress and the public at home and abroad.

Under these pressures, the pause was not as well executed as it might have been, especially in the drafting of the initial message to North Vietnam. The main THRUST was sound, urging that Hanoi take some action to reduce its own military efforts, and saying that this type of reciprocal reduction could become a pattern for the future. But the accompanying rhetoric was diffuse and a shade abrupt in tone, as was quickly pointed out by Ambassador Kohler in Moscow.*

To Kohler fell the unenviable job of seeking to establish, for the first time since the Laos Conference of 1961-62, direct communication between the United States and North Vietnam. The result was an off-told

* Text in British White Paper, p. 81. (Other sources?)

tale of fiasco, with Hanoi's Embassy returning the message allegedly unopened, the Russians declining to deliver it on behalf of America, and then a follow-up second delivery and ostensible rejection in Hanoi by the British. Although the Russians since February had told Americans not to use them as intermediaries, their refusal to help even in this case was dramatic proof of the low estate to which they had been reduced and the skepticism with which Hanoi regarded the Russian attitude toward easing the Vietnam conflict.

All these faults and difficulties being noted, nonetheless the Hanoi response to the basic action seemed clear enough at the time -- as it does in retrospect. On the 15th, when Foreign Minister Gromyko met with Rusk in Vienna on European matters (what?), Gromyko referred sharply to the American message as an "ultimatum" and dismissed the project out of hand. ~~It seemed a clear heading that~~ the Russians, fearful of being called messengers of hope, were quite ready to be messengers of toughness. Rusk's report, taken together with Hanoi's behavior toward the messages and with a wave of major attacks in South Vietnam from May 11th on, seemed to the President conclusive, and he directed resumption of the bombing on May 18th, Vietnam time. The pause had lasted five and a half days.

However, within a few hours (AFTER) ~~of~~ the resumption there took place a MURKY ~~strange~~ episode on which the French government was to dwell heavily in the coming months. On the morning of the 18th (IN PARIS,) ~~a few hours after the~~

(THE RESUMPTION,) ~~resumption but~~ apparently in ignorance of it, the North Vietnamese representative, ~~in Paris,~~ Mai Van Bo, called on his urgent initiative on the French Foreign Office. His message was an interpretation of the four points of Pham Van Dong, emphasizing that the four substantive points were to be read in conjunction with the language about their being the "basis" for the "soundest" political settlement. When the French representative asked whether this meant that such actions as American troop withdrawal, the dismantling of American bases, and the ending of American "alliances" were thus to be viewed as the end results of negotiation rather than prior conditions, the answer was affirmative.

It was a Delphic message, delivered without any reference to the bombing halt or any request that it be passed to the United States. Such was the apparent sensitivity of the North Vietnamese toward any suggestion of making concessions or even seeking to communicate under pressure. The French must have had to seek the authority of General DeGaulle himself before reporting to Washington what had happened. They finally did so fully and formally on the 20th, although a brave staff member had given our Embassy a slightly abridged version on the 19th.

Studied in Washington, the message was clear enough on one point: negotiations could begin without the United States having first pulled out its forces, read South Vietnam out of SEATO, etc. But this was a straw man: only Peking, since February, had really taken the position that physical withdrawal must actually precede neogtiations. Hanoi had

been ambivalent, most of its statements making no such extreme demand, and those of us who read everything ~~from~~ (SAID BY) Hanoi had no doubt that this was not their real position. Mai Van Bo had now cleared up the point, but this was ~~little change~~ A SMALL GAIN AT BEST.

The real question was not whether Hanoi insisted on the prior execution of elements from the four points -- an absurd position for many of the listed actions, and unrealistic for all, since in effect it would hav disposed of the matter for negotiation before the negotiation was held. Rather, the issue was as it had been since April 8th: Did Hanoi insist that the four points had to be accepted in principle before there could be negotiations? On this point, the Mai Van Bo message seemed to the French an answer in the negative; to us, reading and re-reading the full text of the interview, the point seemed left as open as it had been on April 8th, so that one returned to the apparent meaning of the original text -- the four points did have to be "recognized" in advance.

It was not to be the ~~first~~ ONLY time that North Vietnam spoke in riddles. Over and over in the years to come, public exchanges between Hanoi and Washington, and later the private Paris negotiations of 1968, hinged on carefully chosen and nuanced phrases and words -- "could," "would," "unconditional," and in this case "recognized," "basis" and ("SOUNDEST" OR "best possible." While all international negotiation hinges in some measure on such subtleties of language -- and in rare cases on the deliberate use of words known to mean different things to the two parties -- I often thought that the

North Vietnamese had raised the art of ambiguity almost to its highest level. When they wished to be clear, as Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance found at Paris in 1968, they could be entirely so -- but they often did not, ~~AND~~ ONLY ON A VERY FEW OCCASIONS (THERE MAY) HAVE BEEN (TRUE) LANGUAGE PROBLEMS.

In any event, the Mai Van Bo message warranted a follow-up. Unfortunately, the Administration was as reluctant as ever to engage the French as intermediaries; although the French professionals were trusted, it was obvious that they operated under the tightest sort of policy control exercised from DeGaulle through Couve de Murville. Given the underlying belief of these two that the American cause was hopeless, one could not suppose that French mediation would be even-handed.

Hence, the follow-up was carried out in a different channel, through Seaborn's next visit to Hanoi in early June. Well briefed on the French report, he was asked to find out whether acceptance of the four points in principle was required, or merely their recognition as the North Vietnamese view of a "best possible settlement." It was Seaborn's last visit of his eventful one-year tour of duty, and he was able to see enough senior officials to give a good report. So far as he could tell, the responses that took the hard line greatly ~~outnumbered~~ WEIGHED those that even hinted as a softer interpretation. (CHECK)

Hence, by mid-June the most one could conclude was that Hanoi was leaving the door just a crack open so that it might accept negotiations at some point without full satisfaction on the principle of the four points.

It was a natural loophole to leave, but there was no indication that it would be used at any early date. For by this time, as we shall see in the next chapter, the military situation had moved to the point of near-triumph from Hanoi's standpoint. All thought of early negotiation had to be shelved, unless as a device for extricating the United States.

Thus, the May pause led nowhere, although it did leave important lessons for the future -- chiefly to say (IN FORMAL MESSAGES) as little as possible. It had been a serious effort, not thought at all likely to have results at this stage, but designed to prepare the way for the future when trends were different. This, in large measure, it accomplished.

Rounding Out the South Vietnamese and American positions

e. By mid-June, the phase of useful third country effort had about run its course. Any chance of action by the Soviet Union was totally dead, and another even-handed neutral effort, launched in late April by President Radhakrishnan of India, had petered out in the face of Hanoi's refusal even to discuss its central provisions, a stopping of the American bombing coupled with the installation of an Afro-Asian police force to prevent interference in either direction.* The Radhakrishnan proposal was consistent with the American position at this stage, that any lasting end to the bombing must be paired against a cessation of infiltration from the North.**

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* Citations

** At earlier stages in Administration planning, Maxwell Taylor in particular had envisaged more stringent requirements, such as the verified ending of radio communications between the North and the Viet Cong headquarters in the South, or and end to Viet Cong activity itself. By June, however, the position had moderated to require the cessation of infiltration only. In later years, this position was to be successively moderated to the point reached in the San Antonio formula of 1967 and in the Paris agreement of late October, 1968. We shall see in Ch.__ how the issue was handled in

A similar pairing figured heavily in the last major third-party initiative of this hectic period, the British Commonwealth Mission launched on June 17th. This was a tour de force by Prime Minister Wilson, bringing together a wide group of nations whose views on Vietnam covered the whole spectrum from Menzies to Nyerere, from Australian support to all-out Tanzanian opposition. The resulting four-nation delegation aimed to visit the crucial capitals and see if a basis could be established for the convening of a conference. Its agreed Memorandum of Guidance, approved by the Conference on June 25th, is worth noting as a reflection of the consensus of 21 nations. Its list of the elements of peace was as follows:

"

(i) a suspension of all United States air attacks on North Vietnam;

(ii) a North Vietnamese undertaking to prevent the movement of any military forces or assistance or material to South Vietnam;

(iii) a total cease-fire on all sides to enable a conference to be convened to seek a peaceful settlement;

(iv) the objectives of such a conference might be to:

(a) end the war in Vietnam;
(b) secure the withdrawal of all foreign military presence from Vietnam and the neutralisation of the area;
(c) establish, for a period, an international police force, under the auspices of the Geneva Agreement, to safeguard peace in Vietnam;
(d) establish principles for the eventual unification of the country through free and internationally supervised elections.

I would share Mr. Wilson's verdict, in his memoirs, that this was a remarkable document. Unfortunately, the initiative never really got off the ground. It was denounced fervently by both Hanoi and Peking on the 19th, two days after the initial message had been delivered, and the four-nation

delegation in the end was able to visit only Washington and Saigon -- not Hanoi, Moscow, or Peking.*

By coincidence, the period of the Commonwealth Conference was also the time when the voice of the South Vietnamese government was heard for the first time on its conditions for peace. The delay had been caused only in part by the successive government crises from November through February, and by the lack of any senior man, competent on the 1954 Geneva Conference, until the appointment of Tran Van Do as Foreign Minister in late February. Do had represented his embryonic country at Geneva and lived through the whole tortured history of the Agreements; in the end he had not been prepared to subscribe to them, and France as the colonial country had assumed obligations on behalf of South Vietnam.

This was a central obstacle in the effort to get a clear and forthcoming statement from the Saigon government about its peace terms. "Geneva" was a dirty word, symbolic of a two-stage French sellout. True, the second stage, control from Hanoi, had been thwarted through the rallying of the South under Diem and his rejection of what he regarded as a stacked election to which his country had never been bound save by the colonial power.** Even after the Diem years, the anniversary of the 1954 Agreements

* A full account of this initiative with the text of the Memorandum, is in Wilson Memoirs, pp. 108-123. Texts of the various messages, including the reactions of Hanoi and Peking, are in the British White Paper, pp. 88-107.

** Cf. The Rhodesia case, where world opinion had condemned the idea of a colonial power allowing independence without democratic processes being in effect. Is it any different if independence is granted subject to the obligation to participate in an election, in a wider geographic area, with a hostile and numerically greater population in the other half of that area? Cf. also the German case, where any suggestion of all-German elections to decide on reunification has been rejected out of hand by successive Russian and East German governments.

was celebrated in Saigon as a passionate day of mourning, symbolically for the division of the country, more substantively for the shame to which South Vietnam had been subjected at Geneva. Even though the ICC was dealt with fully (at least after 1958), the South Vietnamese attitude toward Geneva remained hostile. Every politically conscious person wanted a new agreement, which their country would sign in its own right.

Hence, American references to the "essentials of the Geneva Agreement", while they were understood by sophisticated men in Saigon, cut across general popular feeling. The Saigon government had to feel its way to a new formulation, and the process took time. Prime Minister Quat and Dr. Do were first approached by Alexis Johnson in March; only in late April did serious consultations begin, and only on June 22 -- after a new political crisis to be described in the next chapter -- did Tran Van Do complete a statement, get approval from the new military leaders, and launch it. Its essence was simple, and cast like Hanoi's position in four points:

"
-- An end to aggression and subversion.
-- Freedom for South Vietnam to choose and shape for itself its own destiny "in conformity with democratic principles and without any foreign interference from whatever sources."
-- As soon as aggression has ceased, the ending of the military measures now necessary by the Government of South Vietnam and the nations that have come to its aid to defend South Vietnam; and the removal of foreign military forces from South Vietnam.
-- And effective guarantees for the independence and freedom of the people of South Vietnam."*

* 1965 Documents, CFR, p. 174.

In essence, the statement confirmed that South Vietnam would ask American and other forces to leave when the North stopped its military action. It broke new ground in the reference to "democratic principles" as the basis for the future political structure of South Vietnam: (IT WAS) a bold promise never achieved in the past by this, or most other new Asian countries, and ~~which~~ was to prove difficult in the years ahead. In June 1965, it was, I am sure, an honest gesture on Dr. Do's part, reflecting his personal views and at least the aspirations of others. At the same time, it stopped short of ensuring the Viet Cong a chance to participate in the political process. Do and others in Saigon, perhaps particularly at this desperate time, understandably regarded the whole public clamor about peace and negotiations as pretty far from reality. They did not care about getting out on limbs to get credit in the world; to them, Hanoi's invasion and control of the NLF were the palpable realities. Peace meant first an end to these, and of this they saw no sign..

There is a larger problem here, of course, of the relation between a small and beleaguered nation and a great power giving it indispensable support. The same relation had obtained in Korea in 1953, and in the end there had been a flat-footed disagreement on war aims and a parting of the ways as peace drew near. In the Vietnam situation, the difference between American and Vietnamese views was never great in principle, but the difference in detail and emphasis could have become substantial if put to the test. Over and over, in the coming years, especially after 1968, the inevitable differences were important behind-the-scenes factors.

Unfortunately, as the almost total lack of public notice of Dr. Do's June 1965 statement readily shows, the question of peace in Vietnam had already by this time become "Americanized." The position of Saigon should have been more widely appealing in the world; had it come from a government of the stature that Syngman Rhee's had possessed in Korea as of 1950-51, it would perhaps have had a greater impact. But the delay in launching a South Vietnamese position, the weakness and apparent unrepresentative character of the Saigon government, and perhaps most of all the apparent disproportion between American military power and that of both South and North Vietnam -- all these combined to focus the peace issue on Washington. Inevitably, the public emphasis moved in this period almost wholly to the opening of negotiations as an objective in itself. The difficulty of the ultimate issues concerning a settlement was largely obscured.

The series of initiatives from February through June was in all probability doomed from the start -- hopeless in the absence of at least a rough military equilibrium on the ground. Yet their history still has many elements of interest and importance. It signaled the Soviet half-interest in peace, balanced against the compulsion on the USSR to give substantial military and economic aid to North Vietnam, but still in sharp contrast to Peking's total rigidity. Hanoi had emerged, as the American Administration had foreseen, as very much in charge of its own destiny, subject at most to tactical influence from the two Communist giants, impervious to any other foreign voices. The National Liberation Front had

entered the picture in a troublesome way that had not been foreseen, but which did not seem to affect Hanoi's basic control.

In terms of the substance of a peace settlement, the months had shown that early reunification was not a serious issue. Rusk on June 23rd had specifically endorsed a free decision by the peoples of North and South Vietnam, the same position that the Commonwealth Memorandum of Guidance had taken. Hanoi conspicuously was not pressing this issue, but rather accepting that reunification would come only in the future, by some method it declined to specify. Gone, or forgotten, was the argument that the 1954 Agreements had created a united Vietnam, only temporarily divided by a demarcation line, which Hanoi was entitled to breach when the 1956 elections were omitted. Instead, Hanoi had dug itself into the position of denying that its forces were in the South, and of pretending that the NLF was the whole show. The inconsistency and concealment of this position, had they been practiced on the American side, would have caused "world opinion" to pillory the American government. Practiced by Hanoi, they went almost unnoticed.

Beneath the surface, the ultimate issue could be seen to be political control of the South, with no compromise in sight. Then and thereafter, as the points in the Commonwealth Memorandum show as readily as any single document, a settlement could have been visualized on every other point of consequence.

This was the inner reading at the end of the period. Outwardly, foreign and domestic pressures on the American Administration tended to die down by the end of June. The result of the bombing pause was convincing to the American people, and the basic posture of readiness for any form of discussions, laid out in the Baltimore speech, had been amply proven in the many initiatives to which the U.S. had responded affirmatively while Hanoi had not. The sense that this was a deeply felt conflict, in which peace would not be easy to achieve, had generally sunk in by the end of June. By this time the negotiating picture was becoming secondary, even in the world news media, to the military crisis that had developed in South Vietnam. To that we now turn.