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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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September 14, 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Meeting on South Vietnam, 9 September, 1964,
11:00 a.m., Cabinet Room

Present were: The President, Secretary Rusk (after the first half-hour), Secretary McNamara, Mr. McCone, General Wheeler, Ambassador Taylor, William Bundy, John McNaughton, Robert Manning, and McGeorge Bundy

The meeting began with the President's review of a memorandum, "Courses of Action for South Vietnam," dated September 8, 1964 (attached). Initial attention was concentrated on the four specific recommendations in this paper. The Secretary of Defense reported that these recommendations, with minor adjustments, had the approval of the Joint Chiefs, but he reported also that there was an important division among the Chiefs, in that the Chief of Staff of the Air Force and the Commandant of the Marine Corps believed that it was now necessary in addition to execute extensive U. S. air strikes against North Vietnam. General Wheeler explained that these two officers now felt that the situation would continue to deteriorate unless such drastic action was taken now. He said that he and the other two colleagues were persuaded by the argument of Ambassador Taylor -- the man on the spot -- that it was important not to overstrain the currently weakened GVN by drastic action in the immediate future. General Taylor repeated that this was indeed his view, but he emphasized that he also believed that in the long run the current in-country program would not be sufficient. He had held this view for many months, but it had been reinforced by recent events in the field.

The President pressed General Taylor as to the reasons for his current unreadiness to recommend larger action. Under this questioning General Taylor made it clear that he and General Westmoreland were in agreement on this question of timing. The President indicated that he had gained the impression in an earlier talk with Ambassador Taylor that the Government now might in fact be somewhat strengthened by recent events, in that General Khanh had eliminated some people who were good riddance. Ambassador Taylor agreed that this was a real possibility, at the more optimistic end of the spectrum, and that perhaps also General Khanh would now have more true support in the country as a whole. But he could not be sure of this, and on balance

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he thought the government was in a more uncertain condition than before.

The President asked whether the U. S. had given any encouragement to General Khanh in his August 16 effort to concentrate power in his own hands, and the Ambassador replied in the negative. We had tried to encourage Khanh to include a bill of rights and to lay a careful groundwork for any actions he might take. He had accepted the first point, but had not had time to carry out the second before his plans were overtaken by protest.

The President asked Director McCone for his opinion and the Director replied that in the judgment of his Agency the four recommended actions were appropriate, and that a sustained air attack at present would be dangerous because of the weakness of the GVN. Such an attack might also trigger major increases in Chinese Communist participation. The Agency remained very gravely concerned by the internal situation in South Vietnam, which the Director estimated a shade more pessimistically than Ambassador Taylor.

The President asked the Ambassador whether we could stop internal feuding. The Ambassador replied that it was very difficult with a group of men who turned off their hearing aids in the face of appeals to the public weal. These people simply did not have the sense of responsibility for the public interest to which we were accustomed, and regularly estimated matters in terms of their own personal gains and losses. The President then asked the Secretary of State for his judgment. Mr. Rusk said that a major decision to go North could be taken at any time -- "at 5-minutes' notice." He did not recommend such decision now. He thought we should take the four recommended actions and play for the breaks. The split in the Communist bloc was deepening and would probably be sharpened by the forthcoming December meeting. As that split grew more severe, there might be real inhibitions upon adventures by Peking and Hanoi in Southeast Asia.

The President asked what could be done to strengthen the Government in South Vietnam. Ambassador Taylor replied that this was very difficult, but that one thing he would try to do would be to discourage Khanh from excluding all military men. I said that this was the common judgment of all of us, and that the Government needed what talent it could get, whether military or civilian.

The President said that in his judgment the proper answer to those advocating immediate and extensive action against the North was that we should not do this until our side could defend itself in the streets of Saigon.

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We obviously wanted to strengthen the GVN. We believed it could be strengthened. But what specifically were we going to do in this direction?

Ambassador Taylor replied that we needed to move on in meshing our team with the GVN. This had been well started before the unrest of August. The problem was not in planning but in execution, and in the quality of the individuals in the GVN. Nevertheless we should continue to seek better individuals and continue to strengthen our cooperative effort with them.

The President accepted this as a first purpose and then asked whether we needed additional equipment as well. Ambassador Taylor said that while the additional U. S. advisers would be helpful, there was currently no equipment need beyond that which was being supplied.

Secretary McNamara emphasized the importance of politico-economic action in the urban areas, along the lines of the recent Rand report, to lower the level of student and Buddhist pressure and increase the political base of support for the GVN. Mr. McCone endorsed this judgment. He further expressed his opinion that Hanoi and Peking now believed that they were doing very well and that they were not having second thoughts about their basic policy (an implied disagreement with the Secretary of State). The Agency was also disturbed by the prospect that internal movement toward negotiations might be increasing, and that there was some sign also of anti-American feeling in South Vietnam. It could happen that the President would find that the purposes originally set forth in Eisenhower's 1954 letter were no longer supported by the people of Vietnam themselves.

Secretary Rusk asked Ambassador Taylor if it could be said that the key leaders had looked at the dangers of recent weeks and might be sobered toward responsibility. Ambassador Taylor said there were some such factors at work. The recent events had proven that for the present, at least, General Khanh is indispensable, and on paper, at least, he now had a broader backing than before.

The President asked what would happen if our proposed efforts did not strengthen the government and if instead it got weaker and weaker. Ambassador Taylor replied that as long as the armed forces are solid, the real power is secure. It was vital to be sure of the armed forces. And he believed that these forces would be reliable as long as they had confidence that we were with them.

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The President asked who might come in if Khanh went out. He said that he hoped that it would not be "Mac's friend Mr. Oanh of Harvard," and was pleased to hear that this assumption was right. Ambassador Taylor indicated that it might be such a man as Quat, or General Khiem, or perhaps Vu Van Mau. But he emphasized that this was a very uncertain game of prediction.

Ambassador Taylor further recommended that we should make every effort to execute the sound Hop-Tac plan. This plan for clearance around Saigon would make ministers work, but work was good for the ministers.

The President asked whether the situation was better or worse than when Ambassador Taylor went out. Ambassador Taylor said he thought it was somewhat worse, but made it clear in response to a further question that this weakening was political, not military. Ambassador Taylor also emphasized his belief that sooner or later we would indeed have to act more forcefully against the North. He simply did not think now was the best time.

The President asked if anyone doubted whether it was worth all this effort. Ambassador Taylor replied that we could not afford to let Hanoi win, in terms of our overall position in the area and in the world. General Wheeler supported him most forcefully, reporting the unanimous view of the Joint Chiefs that if we should lose in South Vietnam, we would lose Southeast Asia. Country after country on the periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area. Mr. McCone expressed his concurrence and so did the Secretary of State, with considerable force.

The President indicated that the reason for waiting, then, must be simply that with a weak and wobbly situation it would be unwise to attack until we could stabilize our base. Secretary McNamara added that the price of waiting was low, and the promise of gain substantial. Ambassador Taylor pointed out that General Khanh himself wants two months simply to organize his own government. The Secretary of State asked what the situation was in the countryside. Ambassador Taylor replied it was not too bad. He had constantly asked Khanh if he was keeping things quiet in the provinces and had regularly been assured of Khanh's concern on just this point.

The President asked Ambassador Taylor to compare Khanh and Diem in the people's affections. The Ambassador replied the people did not care for either one.

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The Secretary of State asked if television could be used to give Khanh more contact with the people. Ambassador Taylor said the matter needed further study.

Secretary McNamara asked if it were clear that money was no object, and returned to the importance of carrying out the kind of program recommended in the Rand report. Ambassador Taylor replied that recommendations from Saigon were likely to be more conservative than the Rand report. Mr. Killen felt that our program had been too much a U. S. program, and too little a matter of real intent and planning by GVN officials. Mr. Killen felt that to make a government you had to make it do its own work.

Secretary Rusk said he very much hoped money would not be regarded as the ceiling, and felt that it would be worth any amount to win. He adduced the example of the costs of the anti-Communist struggle in Greece, which worked out at \$50,000 a guerrilla. Secretary McNamara repeated that the Rand report said we had been penny-pinching and that we should make sure that our people in the field understood that these were not normal circumstances and that normal attitudes would not be helpful. Ambassador Taylor replied that the country team would ask for any money it needed. The President emphasized his own continuing conviction that it was necessary not to spare the horses. He pointed out that this had been his constant view and that he wondered what the Rand report was talking about. Secretary McNamara and I said in reply that the report was talking of the attitudes of second- and third-level officials in the field, and not about the efforts of people in Washington to get everybody to do whatever would be helpful.

The President reemphasized his own position and asked Ambassador Taylor directly if he felt pinched. The Ambassador replied "no."

The President said that what disheartened him was that we had our best team out there for 60 days and had lost ground. Ambassador Taylor replied that the President might have a wrong impression. The Ambassador believed that in the field we were indeed doing better -- that General Westmoreland, if present, would report real strengthening of the pacification effort, that tactics and performance were improving -- that at least in half the provinces the over-all program was going well. The Ambassador believed that progress was being made at the grass roots, and that our current problem was political.

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The President asked Mr. McCone why things were quiet on the enemy side after the Gulf of Tonkin. Mr. McCone replied that the enemy was waiting and watching and probably felt that the current political unrest was working in his interest.

The President asked if anyone present had a different view from the basic recommendation of the attached paper. No differing view was expressed. Secretary McNamara said that we could try other things later on. Secretary Rusk concurred. General Wheeler said that of course a clear-cut incident might require appropriate action at any time, and there was general agreement with this thought.

The President then turned to what would be said, and Mr. Manning made brief suggestions emphasizing our concern for security and stability in South Vietnam, as well as for the pacification effort. The President discussed briefly the plan for a meeting with the Leadership, saying that we should take every occasion we could to bring them in normally in these matters. Mr. Bundy pointed out the problem of Congressional delegations going to South Vietnam, and the President and Ambassador Taylor agreed that it would be useful for Ambassador Taylor to point out that one reason for his regular return to this country was to avoid the advantage given to enemies of the GVN government by U. S. types coming out all the time. We would emphasize to the Leadership our hope that Congress would let the government get stabilized, and that at this delicate moment when the government is fragile we should have only one spokesman on the scene -- the Ambassador.

The President then approved the four courses in the attached memorandum, reemphasized that money was no object, and asked General Wheeler to explain to his colleagues in the JCS that we would be ready to do more, when we had a base. The President did not wish to enter the patient in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round. We should get him ready to face 3 or 4 rounds at least.

There was a brief discussion of a draft letter to General Khanh, and the President directed that a revision be prepared for his consideration.

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON

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September 8, 1964

COURSES OF ACTION FOR SOUTH VIETNAM

This memorandum records the consensus reached in discussions between Ambassador Taylor and Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, and General Wheeler, for review and decision by the President.

The Situation

1. Khanh will probably stay in control and may make some headway in the next 2 - 3 months in strengthening the government (GVN). The best we can expect is that he and the GVN will be able to maintain order, keep the pacification program ticking over (but not progressing markedly), and give the appearance of a valid government.

2. Khanh and the GVN leaders are temporarily too exhausted to be thinking much about moves against the North. However, they do need to be reassured that the US continues to mean business, and as Khanh goes along in his government efforts, he will probably want more US effort visible, and some GVN role in external actions.

3. The GVN over the next 2 - 3 months will be too weak for us to take any major deliberate risks of escalation that would involve a major role for, or threat to, South Vietnam. However, escalation

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arising from and directed against US action would tend to lift GVN morale at least temporarily.

4. The Communist side will probably avoid provocative action against the US, and it is uncertain how much they will step up VC activity. They do need to be shown that we and the GVN are not simply sitting back after the Gulf of Tonkin.

Courses of Action

We recommend in any event:

1. US naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin should be resumed immediately (about September 12). They should operate initially beyond the 12-mile limit and be clearly dissociated from 34A maritime operations. The patrols would comprise 2 - 3 destroyers and would have air cover from carriers; the destroyers would have their own ASW capability.

2. 34A operations by the GVN should be resumed immediately thereafter (next week). The maritime operations are by far the most important. North Vietnam is likely to publicize them, and at this point we should have the GVN ready to admit that they are taking place and to justify and legitimize them on the basis of the facts on VC infiltration by sea. 34A air drop and leaflet operations should also be resumed but are secondary in importance. We

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should not consider air strikes under 34A for the present.

3. Limited GVN air and ground operations into the corridor areas of Laos should be undertaken in the near future, together with Lao air strikes as soon as we can get Souvanna's permission. These operations will have only limited effect, however.

4. We should be prepared to respond on a tit-for-tat basis against the DRV in the event of any attack on US units or any special DRV/VC action against SVN. The response for an attack on US units should be along the lines of the Gulf of Tonkin attacks, against specific and related targets. The response to special action against SVN should likewise be aimed at specific and comparable targets.

The main further question is the extent to which we should add elements to the above actions that would tend deliberately to provoke a DRV reaction, and consequent retaliation by us. Examples of actions to be considered would be running US naval patrols increasingly close to the North Vietnamese coast and/or associating them with 34A operations. We believe such deliberately provocative elements should not be added in the immediate future while the GVN is still struggling to its feet. By early October, however, we may recommend such actions depending on GVN progress and Communist reaction in the meantime, especially to US naval patrols.

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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

CM-124-64
9 September 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

SUBJECT: Courses of Action for South Vietnam

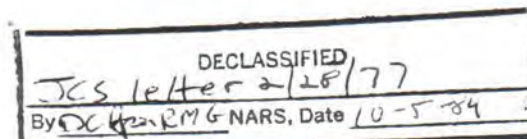
1. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have considered the draft paper prepared by Assistant Secretary William Bundy, subject as above, and have expressed the views set forth in subsequent paragraphs.

2. De Soto patrols - These patrols should be resumed shortly after the return (two to three days) of Ambassador Taylor to Saigon. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the first De Soto patrol should complete its operation and clear the Gulf of Tonkin before MAROPS are resumed. Rules of engagement, attached hereto, should be consonant with those earlier established to deal with hostile acts by DRV military forces.

3. MAROPS - Marine operations should be resumed as set forth above.

a. The Chief of Staff Army, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Chief of Staff Air Force, and the Commandant Marine Corps consider that MAROPS should not be made overt (legitimized) until these operations and De Soto patrol operations become so intertwined that they can be associated, or until the US is prepared openly to support MAROPS militarily.

b. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff does not agree with a above. He considers that failure to legitimize MAROPS until the circumstances postulated above are realized could cause us to limit the scope and thereby the effectiveness of MAROPS and could inhibit the United States as to the nature and extent of our response to hostile attack on US forces on or over the high seas. In making this judgment, the Chairman considers that the fact the GVN is conducting maritime operations in the Gulf of Tonkin must not inhibit the mounting of De Soto patrols in those waters.



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4. Air and ground operations in Laos - The JCS consider that the proposed actions should be somewhat expanded as follows: GVN air and ground operations should be undertaken in the near future against the VC LOC in the Laotian corridor to include attacks against staging bases and infiltration routes. US armed aerial reconnaissance flights should be used to supplement the foregoing actions. We should attempt to gain Thai participation in ground action in this area.

5. Response to attack - The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the term "tit for tat" could be interpreted to limit too narrowly our response to an attack on US units or any specific DRV/VC action against SVN. This action should be rephrased to state, "We should be prepared to respond as appropriate against the DRV in the event of any attack on US units or any specific DRV/VC action against SVN."

6. The Joint Chiefs of Staff agree that the present in-country pacification plan, including the foregoing actions, is not enough in itself to maintain national morale or to offer reasonable hope of eventual success. Military action by GVN and US forces against the DRV will be required.

7. The Chief of Staff Air Force and Commandant of the Marine Corps believe that time is against us and military action against the DRV should be taken now. They concur that the American public should support any action taken by the United States Government against the DRV. They consider that, linked to the next significant incident, we should commence a retaliatory GVN and US air strike program against the DRV in accordance with the 94 target plan. In this regard, they consider that a battalion-size VC attack on South Vietnam should be construed as "significant".

8. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chief of Staff, Army, and Chief of Naval Operations consider that, based upon Ambassador Taylor's recommendations, we should not purposely embark upon a program to create an incident immediately but that, as indicated above, we must respond appropriately against the DRV in the event of an attack on US units.

Attachment:
Rules of Engagement,
De Soto Patrol

EARLE G. WHEELER
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

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THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

Rules of Engagement, De Soto Patrol

The following rules of engagement are recommended for De Soto patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin:

a. In the event of hostile attack, the patrol ships and aircraft are directed to fire upon the hostile attacker with the objective of insuring destruction. Ships are authorized to pursue the enemy to the recognized three mile territorial limit. Aircraft are authorized hot pursuit inside territorial waters (3 miles) against surface vessels and into hostile airspace (includes DRV, Hainan Island and Mainland China) against attacking aircraft when necessary to achieve destruction of identified attacking forces.

b. Ships and aircraft will confine their actions to the attacking ships and/or aircraft.

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By DCH NARS, Date 10-6-81

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