

UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY

DECISIONMAKING IN OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER

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Introduction

The assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963, left a leadership void in Saigon that was never filled. Heads of state went through Saigon like a revolving door, yet none of them were able to successfully lead and govern the people of South Vietnam.

On the other side of the globe, President of the United States John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. While the U.S. had a line of succession, President Johnson was relatively new to the Vietnam situation. Even though Johnson was new, he still had Kennedy's cabinet and advisers to aid his decisions. Despite this, by early 1964 two new leaders, Nguyen Khanh and Lyndon Johnson sought a solution to the decades long struggle in Vietnam.

President Johnson inherited a three-front war in Vietnam. One front was North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong (VC) insurgency in South Vietnam, and Johnson had to stop this support in order to defeat the VC. The insurgency itself constituted another front that had to be defeated in order to maintain a free and independent South Vietnam. The third overarching front was the creation of a stable and legitimate government in Saigon capable of governing the people of South Vietnam. The question for his administration was on which of these aspects to focus. Before Johnson could make that decision, he first had to decide if the U.S. should continue to aid Saigon; therefore, he had three options: leave Vietnam, continue in an advisory role, or escalate U.S. involvement.

The political and military situations in Vietnam deteriorated to such a point through 1964-1965 that by February 1965 there were no good choices left from which

President Johnson could choose. Johnson desired for there to be a stable South Vietnamese government before he committed U.S. forces to its defense; however, no such government emerged. The administration was unwilling to risk U.S. prestige, resources, and lives unless they were confident South Vietnam could succeed without U.S. support. Because of the instability in South Vietnam as well as the perceived risk of communist aggression, President Johnson decided that escalatory military actions would be limited and gradual. Therefore, President Johnson made the least bad decision he could in February 1965 by initiating Operation ROLLING THUNDER and committing the United States to the Vietnam War.

Pre-Tonkin Gulf

In early 1964, the United States was engaged in an advisory role in South Vietnam. The restrictions of such a role frustrated the Joint Chiefs of Staff because they took away the initiative and put the South Vietnamese and U.S. advisers in a strategic defensive posture. The Joint Chiefs wanted to go on the offensive and gain the initiative in the situation, which meant striking North Vietnam. This would allow the U.S. and the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) to go on the offensive, thereby restricting North Vietnam's ability to re-supply the Viet Cong (VC). Without curtailing this external support, it would be nearly impossible to defeat the Viet Cong since their supply was limited only by North Vietnam's ability to send it. Therefore, the Chiefs believed it was necessary to end North Vietnamese support in order to defeat the Viet Cong and stabilize South Vietnam.¹

¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 3, Gravel ed. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), 497. Between July 1963 and March 1964 China sent 75 mm recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns, 90 mm rocket launchers and mortars. North

At the time, the U.S. was engaged in covert operations against North Vietnam such as coastal bombardment, harassment operations and South Vietnamese commando raids under the program OPLAN 34A; however, these operations were weak and accomplished little.² In particular, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis LeMay, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Wallace Greene, favored strong, immediate actions against North Vietnam in the form of a bombing campaign. Their advocacy of such a program constituted a course of action in Vietnam based solely on military aims. They believed if the U.S. intended to stay and save South Vietnam, such actions were inevitable and should be implemented immediately.

Because they favored swift action, the Chiefs developed a plan, which involved striking North Vietnamese airfields, petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL) facilities, bridges and military installations, as well as interdiction operations which could be implemented on a gradual or rapid pace.³ This view dominated the Chiefs' planning

Vietnam also purchased chemicals and munitions needed to produce explosives about 50,000 pounds of which was intercepted on its way into South Vietnam. In addition to materials, North Vietnam provided training for 25,000 VC cadres and 60-80,000 irregular guerillas. These men and munitions made their way to South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh trail and began their part of the war effort. Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), March 2, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/28_69.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 66. Memorandum Prepared in the Department of Defense, March 2, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 67.

² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, http://www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/reading_room/615.pdf, 8-20. Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, March 16, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section II (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/70_107.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 84. Initially the President approved expanded intelligence collection operations, psychological operations including leaflet drops, propaganda, harassment, and deception operations. President Johnson also approved sabotage operations aimed at 18 targets all of which were plausibly deniable by the United States. These operations were designed to let Hanoi know that South Vietnam would not allow the subversion of their government to go unpunished while not committing to escalatory actions. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 8-20.

³ The plan was to be part of a coordinated military and political strategy in order cause the cessation of Hanoi's support of the VC; however, they did acknowledge that even without North Vietnamese support

throughout the entire planning process. They felt strongly about the need to take stronger measures and advocated such actions.

Civilian advisers however, felt they were listening to a broken record stuck on advocating escalation against North Vietnam. To them, actions against North Vietnam were ancillary to the counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in South Vietnam, because the Viet Cong could “continue for an indeterminate amount of time” even without North Vietnamese support.⁴ This meant that the South Vietnamese had to win their own fight in South Vietnam. This included two objectives. The first task was for South Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Khanh to solidify his regime and establish a viable government in Saigon. According to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, this was their greatest weakness at the time; however, the Khanh regime was in its early stages and showed some promise. At this time, Khanh was energetic, able, and responsive to U.S. advice, so it seemed Khanh could succeed if given the necessary support.⁵ Nevertheless, without a strong government the “rug could be pulled out from under” the U.S. mission at any time, which was a major reason the U.S. was reluctant to commit major forces until there was a solid base. The second course of action was establishing an effective counterinsurgency program.⁶

McNamara submitted his report and recommendations regarding the situation in Vietnam on March 16, 1964. In light of the deteriorating military and political situations,

the VC could continue for an indeterminate amount of time. Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), March 2, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section I, Document 66. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 9-8.

⁴ Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), March 2, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section I, Document 66.

⁵ Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, March 16, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section II, Document 84.

⁶ *The Pentagon Papers*, 502, 504.

he saw three courses of action. The U.S. could negotiate and neutralize the Saigon government.⁷ This would likely resolve the domestic issues in the south, but would resign South Vietnam to a communist take over. Another possibility was taking actions against North Vietnam in the form of tit-for-tat reprisals or graduated overt pressures in the form of air strikes; however, he explicitly recommended against these courses of action because of the risk of Chinese and Soviet intervention and the weakness of the Khanh regime. McNamara's final course of action, which he favored, consisted of actions designed to bolster the government in South Vietnam. Not only would the U.S. pledge support for Khanh's administration, but it would also further strengthen the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the VNAF. By infusing money and support while bolstering the South Vietnamese military, McNamara believed the Khanh regime could show marked improvement in 4-6 months.⁸

The next day, on March 17, 1964, the National Security Council met to discuss the report and develop a course of action. The council favored McNamara's plan, and President Johnson believed it was the only realistic course, given the choice of adding forces, withdrawing, or neutralizing.

In the earliest days of his Presidency, President Johnson made it clear that he would "win in Vietnam," a position he held throughout his Presidency.⁹ Therefore, out of the three options, only escalation enabled him to win. It was too early in the game to add forces, because the President wanted the South Vietnamese to fight and win their own

⁷ Neutralizing the government meant incorporating groups such as the Buddhists and National Liberation Front into the government which would give them a way to present their platforms in a manner that did not result in mass demonstrations, rioting, and guerilla warfare.

⁸ Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, March 16, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section II, Document 84.

⁹ Robert McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, *In Retrospect* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 147.

war. He believed creating a neutralized government or withdrawing from South Vietnam would constitute losses in the region because both, he believed, would inevitably result in a communist regime.¹⁰ This is why the President decided to bolster South Vietnam and hope for the best. Later that day this wait-and-see approach became policy in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288, which directed the respective agencies to implement McNamara's plan.¹¹

The President implemented McNamara's plan because he believed it was critical for there to be a stable and secure government in Saigon before the U.S. committed to strong overt measures against North Vietnam. Realistically, this wait-and-see approach was all the U.S. could do to aid the South Vietnamese government, because improvement required the South Vietnamese themselves to step-up and run an efficient government.

The CIA agreed with McNamara that establishing a strong government was only part of the grand strategy required for victory in Vietnam. The South Vietnamese needed to defeat the insurgency, which would be made easier by a stable government. Part of defeating the insurgency, however, was severing North Vietnamese support in the form of men and material.¹² The conflict within the Johnson administration throughout 1964 was over which of these areas demanded immediate attention and action. At this stage,

¹⁰ A neutralized government would incorporate groups such as the Buddhists and the National Liberation Front who previously tried to bring down the government, and had communist leanings. It was believed, as these groups gained power in the government, communist views would dominate the government creating a *de facto* communist regime. In the case of withdraw, it was believed the Viet Cong would win and North Vietnam would take over South Vietnam.

¹¹ Summary Record of the 524th Meeting of the National Security Council, March 17, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section II, Document 86. National Security Action Memorandum 288, March 17, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section II, Document 87.

¹² Central Intelligence Agency, *Special National Intelligence Estimate 50-2-64*, <http://www.foia.cia.gov/>, 5.

Johnson and his advisers chose to focus on stabilizing the government, because they considered it the fundamental dynamic.

The only other option open to the President was to escalate militarily either by striking North Vietnam or by introducing U.S. ground forces to conduct major combat operations against the insurgency. The President chose not to implement these options because he could not justify them to the American people or the international community. Even though President Johnson was one of the most powerful men on Earth, he could not simply bomb whomever he wanted on a whim, because he was constrained by the inevitable outcries and objections of the American people and the world for such indefensible acts.

The Joint Chiefs were adamant about taking action against North Vietnam immediately, because they felt this was the best way to reverse the negative trend in Vietnam. They believed such actions would bolster the Saigon government and aid in the counterinsurgency operations. They also believed North Vietnam was vulnerable due to its simple lines of communication and lack of modern anti-air defenses. Therefore, they believed that militarily it was the best time to strike North Vietnam.¹³

The primary problem with this course of action, as McNamara noted in his report, was justifying the action and mitigating a greater communist response. The Johnson administration could do neither at this point. The U.S. had no clear evidence North

¹³ North Vietnam had overcommitted their resources towards heavy industry thus an agrarian nation suffered from a food shortage, and were reliant on food imports. This shortage precluded them from engaging in sustained operations without foreign aid. Their railroad system radiated from Hanoi, and did not have alternate or tertiary rail lines for any one route. They had many key bridges, and few ships for inland and coastal transport. What makes these facts important is that North Vietnam imported all of its POL, iron, steel, railroad rolling stock, vehicles and most heavy machinery. They also had to import their military hardware, looking to China for small arms and the Soviet Union for heavier equipment. These vulnerabilities as well as their lack of modern air defense radars made this the most opportune moment to strike North Vietnam. Central Intelligence Agency, *Special National Intelligence Estimate 14.3-64*, <http://www.foia.cia.gov> , 2, 4, 6, 7, 10.

Vietnamese forces were in South Vietnam, and North Vietnam had not openly invaded South Vietnam. North Vietnam had also not launched deliberate attacks on U.S. interests such as the Saigon embassy, and military bases and military barracks. It was politically impossible for President Johnson to justify attacking North Vietnam at this point. It was because of these political constraints, and the desire to bolster South Vietnam, that the President endorsed McNamara's plan rather than the military actions advocated by the Chiefs.

Although McNamara's plan starkly contrasted with the views of the Chiefs, these differing opinions were simply differing views on which aspect of the Vietnam puzzle the U.S. would tackle first. The civilians wanted to resolve the political problem in South Vietnam before they took military measures. The Joint Chiefs advocated striking North Vietnam in an effort to stabilize the South Vietnamese government. The military's objective was, as it should be, to win the military situation; however, the situation in Vietnam was still too politically unstable to initiate a military solution to the problem. President Johnson recognized the need for military action, but he was unwilling to approve such actions until a firm base of governmental support existed in South Vietnam. The complexity of the situation necessitated a mixture of politics and military action for which only Johnson's civilian advisors planned.

To those who felt immediate strong actions were necessary and those who today feel the U.S. should have taken action earlier, McNamara's plan may seem like a stalling tactic to delay inevitable actions against North Vietnam. This plan was anything but procrastination. President Johnson and his advisors wanted to take every possible course of action to avoid major U.S. intervention, because commitment meant the loss of

American lives and the risk of a wider war with China. Intervention during the summer of 1964 meant committing forces before the administration exhausted all options to strengthen Saigon. The administration did not feel that it had exhausted all of its political avenues to strengthen Saigon, so it implemented these options prior to U.S. commitment.¹⁴ The plan afforded South Vietnam the opportunity to stand and deliver as per the pre-requisites of the Johnson administration for the use of force. McNamara's plan accomplished little because South Vietnam failed to capitalize on the opportunity. While the South Vietnamese were unable to improve their government, it was essential they be given this opportunity before the U.S. committed to action that could have been avoided.

Serious thoughts of withdrawal were missing from this debate. The reason the U.S. never gave serious consideration to leaving the region was senior policy makers believed South Vietnam was critical to the U.S. position in the global fight against communism. However, the CIA believed Southeast Asia was not critical to U.S. power; furthermore, they challenged the likelihood that Southeast Asia would fall, believing the situation was too complicated to determine whether the "Domino Theory" would in fact occur. The administration understood the CIA's position, but the unpredictability of such

¹⁴ In a letter to Secretary of State Rusk, George Ball said: "Both Alex and I find it personally difficult to advocate a course of action that could result in the loss of many American lives, the further disruption of western society and grave dangers of escalation-at a time where we feel unprepared to do all that we know to be possible to reverse the downward trend in SV....I cannot in other words, reconcile myself to the fateful step of action against the North until we are satisfied in our hearts that we have taken every possible step to achieve full effectiveness in our own efforts in the South." Letter From the Under Secretary of State (Ball) to the Secretary of State, May 31, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section VI (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/181_225.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 185.

events caused the administration to plan according to the worst-case scenario which was the “Domino Theory” coming to fruition.¹⁵

Perhaps the greatest reason, though, was that the U.S. was already involved in Vietnam. Withdrawing from the region meant relegating South Vietnam to communist control and admitting defeat. The U.S. faced the decision to leave Vietnam or stay and try to save South Vietnam. Because the administration was unwilling to admit defeat and cut its losses in the absence of a clear solution, President Johnson continued on the road toward deeper involvement in Vietnam.

The main political advantage of this wait-and-see policy was it allowed President Johnson to focus on the 1964 Presidential election and other domestic issues, instead of becoming embroiled in Vietnam. Earlier in the year, he needed support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made its way through Congress during the late spring of 1964.¹⁶ After the bill, he turned his sights on the election. With the hawkish Senator Barry Goldwater advocating escalation in Vietnam, President Johnson stressed his refusal to send American boys to fight a war he asserted the South Vietnamese should fight themselves. Throughout this entire process, he favored the implementation of his Great Society programs and stressed domestic improvements as evidenced in his State of the

¹⁵The CIA believed the loss of South Vietnam would probably not trigger the loss of Cambodia, Thailand and other surrounding countries. It also believed that U.S. strength resided in the islands spanning from the Philippines to Japan, which would not be affected by the fall of South Vietnam; therefore, Southeast Asia was not critical to US strength in the western Pacific. Memorandum From the Board of National Estimates to the Director of Central Intelligence (McCone), June 9, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section VI, Document 209.

¹⁶ When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was on the Senate calendar, the administration drafted Congressional resolutions for Vietnam, but chose to wait on proposing them until this landmark piece of legislation became law. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 10-16.

Union Address on January 8, 1964.¹⁷ Johnson chose McNamara's course of action because it provided an opportunity to bolster Saigon while enabling Johnson to put Vietnam planning on hold through the election and maintain a non-escalation stance. This is not to say that he postponed action *because of* the election. He delayed because of the instability in South Vietnam. The plan he implemented, though, *enabled* him to focus on the campaign and maintain a more moderate stance on Vietnam involvement while South Vietnam tried to improve itself.¹⁸

Gulf of Tonkin to Bien Hoa

On August 2, 1964, three North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the destroyer U.S.S. *Maddox* while on patrol 30 miles off the North Vietnamese coast.¹⁹ U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor made it clear to the State Department that reprisals were essential to maintain credibility in the region; failure to do so would prove the U.S. was a "paper tiger."²⁰ Despite this, the Johnson administration refused to

¹⁷ "This budget, and this year's legislative program, are designed to help each and every American citizen fulfill his basic hopes--his hopes for a fair chance to make good; his hopes for fair play from the law; his hopes for a full-time job on full-time pay; his hopes for a decent home for his family in a decent community; his hopes for a good school for his children with good teachers; and his hopes for security when faced with sickness or unemployment or old age." Lyndon Baines Johnson, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union," State of the Union Address, Washington, DC, January 8, 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640108.asp>.

¹⁸ "[Johnson] never indicated to me or to the Joint Chiefs that he wanted us to hold back in Vietnam because of the election. In fact, there was still no consensus among his advisers about what to do." Robert McNamara with Brian VanDeMark, 145.

¹⁹ *Maddox* as well as aircraft from the U.S.S. *Ticonderoga* returned fire leaving one dead in the water while the other two ran for home. Memorandum From the Duty Officer in the White House Situation Room to the President, August 2, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section VIII (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/255_308.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 257.

²⁰ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, August 3, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section VIII, Document 262.

retaliate. The administration questioned the true nature of the attacks believing they may have been erroneous, or the Vietnamese were responding to the DESOTO patrols.

However, the administration's position changed after the alleged second attack of August 4, 1964 when the destroyers *Maddox* and *C. Turner Joy* were reportedly attacked 65 miles off the North Vietnamese coast.²¹ It was clear these attacks were not mistakes but deliberate acts of aggression. The President agreed sharp limited actions were required in order to make it clear the U.S. was determined to stay in Vietnam, and ordered U.S. air strikes against North Vietnamese patrol boat bases.²² After ordering the strikes, President Johnson informed Khanh these were limited actions, which indicated this was as far as the U.S. intended to go at this point.²³

Ambassador Taylor recognized this was a critical time for Khanh to gain stability and viability.²⁴ He believed the U.S. should be slow to get deeply involved "until we have a better feel of the quality of our ally" since most actions open at the time carried with them considerable risks.²⁵ The greatest perceived risk was greater Chinese and Soviet military support for the North Vietnamese, so Taylor and others believed a limited and gradual use of force would mitigate such a risk.

²¹ Editorial Note, *Ibid.*, Document 276. The August 2 attack was undisputed; however, controversy surrounds the second attack. During the afternoon of August 4 the *Maddox* cast doubt as to whether an attack actually occurred. McNamara, Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance, and the Joint Chiefs discussed the matter and concluded there was an attack. *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* The President wished to send the message that "we are not going to take it lying down, but we are not going to destroy their cities. We hope we can prepare them for the course we will follow." Rusk added that they were "trying to get across two points: (1) leave your neighbors alone and (2) If you don't, we will have to get busy." Notes of the Leadership Meeting, White House, August 4, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 280.

²³ Message From President Johnson to Prime Minister Khanh, August 4, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 283.

²⁴ By this time Maxwell Taylor succeeded Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador to South Vietnam. General Wheeler was then promoted to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Harold Johnson was his replacement as Chief of Staff of the Army.

²⁵ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, August 18, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section IX (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/309_338.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 319.

Taylor recommended two options on August 18, 1964. The first was a slowly evolving program designed to bolster Saigon, and targeted January 1, 1965, as the date to escalate against North Vietnam. The second option was an accelerated and stronger version of the first which could be implemented should the situation in Saigon require immediate actions.²⁶

Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) commander, General William Westmoreland's pessimistic outlook caused the Joint Chiefs to disagree with Taylor and once again advocated immediate actions to cause "the destruction of the DRV will and capabilities as necessary to compel the DRV to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos."²⁷

The elation from American strikes quickly died when on August 21 students in Saigon led mass protest demonstrations. Because of these demonstrations, threats by the Buddhists, and rumors of a coup, Khanh agreed to revise the constitution and relax social restrictions.²⁸ A September 8 CIA estimate concluded the situation in South Vietnam was

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Additionally, they do not agree that we should be slow to get deeply involved until we have a better feel for the quality of our ally. The United States is already deeply involved. The Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that only significantly stronger military pressures on the DRV are likely to provide the relief and psychological boost necessary for attainment of the requisite governmental stability and viability... Failure to resume and maintain a program of pressure through military actions could be misinterpreted to mean we have had second thoughts about Pierce Arrow and the events leading thereto, and could signal a lack of resolve." Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 12-10, 12-11.

²⁸ *The Pentagon Papers*, 84-86. "Source believes Tri Quang [is] sincere in his belief that [an] apparatus exists within government inimical to Buddhist interest-this group led by Generals Khiem and Thieu and comprised of ex-Can Lao members, Catholics, and certain key Dai Viets...if Khanh does not opt for Buddhists, Tri Quang intends [to] launch [a] campaign of passive resistance. Tri Quang would not resort to demonstrations or to violence but would call on Buddhist faithful not to cooperate with government." Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, August 22, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section IX, Document 321. The students in Saigon demonstrated against the August 16 constitution and because of the rights curtailed in Khanh's declaration of a state of emergency. Such infringements included press censorship and strict curfews. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, August 24, 1964, Ibid., Document 322. "The MRC met on 26 and 27 August. Khanh brought in the three generals he had accused of participating in the pro-French neutralist plot, as a ploy to forestall a power bid by Minh. But the Council refused to seat them and

not hopeless. Khanh was still the best chance to build a sustainable government, but his success was contingent on others within the government and the military to either support him or excuse themselves from their position.²⁹

This was the primary and continuing problem in Saigon. Other South Vietnamese actors continually destabilized the government in order to promote their own agenda. Whether the agitator was Buddhist, Catholic, a military official, a college student, or another political leader, all of their actions resulted in the same destabilization of South Vietnam. This caused the situation to be unpredictable, and prevented the Johnson administration from committing to defend such a government.

The events of late August 1964 created a great deal of political exhaustion in Saigon. In the eyes of Taylor, the void in leadership made it all but impossible to mount a successful pacification program that at the very best might have a slim chance of making progress.³⁰ These events delayed any thoughts of striking North Vietnam for at least two to three months.³¹

they were returned to their protective custody at Dalat. While these maneuvers were going on street demonstrations continued. Within the MRC Khiem failed in an attempt to name himself Chief of State and Minh Prime Minister. Next Khanh was named Prime Minister, but refused to accept either Khiem or Minh as President. Finally when he refused to be installed alone, the triumvirate of Khanh, Minh and Khiem was chosen." *The Pentagon Papers*, 86.

²⁹ Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 53-64, September 8, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section X (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/339_345.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 341.

³⁰ Taylor felt "only the emergence of an exceptional leader could improve the situation and no George Washington [was] in sight." Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, September 2, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section IX, Document 336. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, September 6, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section X, Document 339.

³¹ "At best, the emerging governmental structure might be capable of maintaining a holding operation against the Viet Cong. This level of effort *could*, with *good luck* and *strenuous American efforts*, be expanded to produce certain *limited* pacification successes... But the willingness and ability of such a government to exert itself or to attempt to execute an all-out National Pacification Plan would be marginal." (emphases added) Ibid.

At a September 9, 1964, White House meeting, Ambassador Taylor presented his view that the issues plaguing South Vietnam were political rather than military, so they needed quality people in government. Because of this, he believed it was not the appropriate time to escalate since such actions could result in the further destabilization of Saigon should the VC retaliate. Despite any signs for future improvement, all of the members at the meeting believed it was critical to win in Vietnam. The President decided against escalation, but he approved tit-for-tat reprisals as well as further actions to improve the “fabric of the Government of South Vietnam.”³²

Several reasons prevented Johnson from escalating immediately. Not only was the election climate heating up, but also it appeared as though escalation would not solve the problems in South Vietnam. 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,” instead the U.S. “should get him ready to face 3 or 4 rounds at least.”³³ The problem was South Vietnam’s lack of leadership, which bombing North Vietnam could not directly solve. Granted, action against North Vietnam could jump start Saigon into becoming an efficient government, but the risk was too great that the government would crumble in the interim. Therefore, the risks and drawbacks of escalation outweighed the benefits.

On the morning of September 12, a group of rogue generals initiated a coup to topple Khanh, but the coup failed due to a lack of support.³⁴ The coup showed Khanh’s lack of support from the military. Instead of focusing on defeating the enemy, these

³² Memorandum of a Meeting, White House, September 9, 1964, Ibid., Documents 343. National Security Action Memorandum No. 314, September 10, 1964, Ibid., Document 345.

³³ Memorandum of a Meeting, White House, September 9, 1964, Ibid., Document 343.

³⁴ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, September 13, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XI (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/346_392.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 348.

generals felt it was more important to turn against their own government and play into the hands of their enemies. This further destabilized the government, especially in the eyes of the VC, who no doubt watched the events unfold with great interest and glee.

Even with these troubles, the administration gave little thought to negotiating their way out of Vietnam because they believed losing Vietnam would threaten their position as the chief protector against communist aggression in the Cold War. Undersecretary of State George Ball argued in an October 5 memo that South Vietnam was destined to fail, so the best course of action would be for the U.S. to negotiate a way out. At the very least, Ball argued that it was paramount for those who advocated the use of force to prove their case conclusively because of the costs and consequences of such a course of action.³⁵

The prospect of withdrawal was even less prevalent in October because of the domestic political consequences. If President Johnson left Vietnam, he would be seen as weak on communism and on foreign policy. In regards to escalation and withdrawal, President Johnson did not want to attract attention to a change in Vietnam policy. He wanted to give the appearance of remaining strong against communism and forcing the South Vietnamese to fight for themselves. He succeeded in this goal; however, in doing nothing, the situation in Vietnam worsened, which meant the U.S. would be faced with taking action in an even worse situation.

³⁵ George W. Ball, "Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1972, 36-49. The memo was only distributed to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy at the time which was one reason the memo did not receive much attention. However, LBJ became aware of the memo in January, and when he did he seriously deliberated on these issues which caused LBJ to question his committal to action. George W. Ball, Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Oral History Collection*, LBJ Library, July 8, 1971, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/oralhistory.hom/Ball-G/Ball-g1.pdf>. (accessed January 14, 2009), page 11.

The new national charter of October 16 resulted in several major changes in the South Vietnamese government. On October 28 Khanh resigned as Prime Minister in order to hand the reigns of government over to the civilians. Pham Khac Suu became the new Chief of State, and Tran Van Huong became the new Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. Khanh and many other military officers accepted these changes in the government with little enthusiasm, but said they would go along with the changes.³⁶

The complete incompetence of the Saigon government tied the hands of the United States. With each passing day, it was clearer the U.S. needed to take strong actions against North Vietnam in order to aid the counterinsurgency effort, but they were unwilling to commit to such actions until the government in the south was stable and rightly so. The U.S. could not stand and fight on behalf of South Vietnam if the rug could be pulled out from under them at any given moment. There was no point in risking American lives and spending the money to escalate in defense of a country that could fail on its own even without North Vietnamese pressure. In 1964 alone, there were seven different governments in Saigon, three of which occurred between August 16 and September 3, yet there were no indications these changes resulted in anything favorable.³⁷ The situation was very confusing and anything but clear, so decision makers in Washington felt it unwise to escalate at this time for those very reasons.

³⁶ Message From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor) to the President, October 28, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XI, Documents 389. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, October 31, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 390. On October 16, debate over the new national charter being developed by the High National Council deepened the growing confrontation between Khanh the “Young Turks” on one side and Minh and the HNC on the other. The conflict stemmed from the role of the military in the government. The charter essentially left Khanh powerless so he proposed the military constituting a fourth branch of government, and amounted to a power struggle between Minh and Khanh both of whom tried to get the other out of a powerful position in government. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, October 16, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 380.

³⁷ Leslie H. Gelb with Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1970), 98.

Bien Hoa

On November 1, 1964, the Viet Cong launched a mortar attack against the U.S. airfield at Bien Hoa. The enemy launched 60 mortar rounds in 39-minutes; four Americans were killed, 72 were wounded, and five B-57 bombers were destroyed with severe damage to thirteen others.³⁸

This was exactly the sort of action requiring a response in kind according to NSAM 314. Taylor deemed the attack “a deliberate act of escalation and a change of the ground rules under which they have operated up to now,” and immediately recommended a response on Phuc Yen airfield near Hanoi.³⁹

The Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Forces (CINCPAC), Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, USN also recommended retaliation. He believed that “failure to establish the fact now that attacks such as that on Bien Hoa will result in prompt and heavy retaliatory action can only result in a serious blow to our prestige and serve to invite further attacks at places and times of their choosing.”⁴⁰ The Joint Chiefs formulated their own plan, believing immediate reprisals should begin a program of systematic air strikes on North Vietnam thus their response was the strongest application of force presented.

³⁸Out of the force of 36 B-57 aircraft in South Vietnam, half had been put out of commission by this attack which significantly decreased FARMGATE capabilities which severely inhibited the VNAF’s ability to take part in any air actions. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 13-10.

³⁹ Phuc Yen was the location of North Vietnam’s entire Mig force the destruction of which would severely inhibit North Vietnam’s defense posture and their ability to retaliate. “It should be met promptly by an appropriate act of reprisal against a DRV target, preferably an airfield. Since both US and GVN have been victims of this attack and since ultimate objective should be to convince Hanoi to cease aid to VC (and not merely to lay off US), the retaliatory action should be made by a combined US/VNAF effort. Immediate objective would be to reduce probability of similar attacks on other crowded US facilities such as Da Nang and Tan Son Nhut and to offset the depressive effect of this action on the new government.” Ibid., 13-10, 13-11.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13-10, 13-11, 13-12.

The plans called for substantial B-52 strikes on Phuc Yen, followed by air strikes against targets in Hanoi and Haiphong.⁴¹

The problem with this plan though was how it fit into the President's overall view of the situation. The Chiefs' plan was obviously too strong for a single reprisal action, so if the President only intended on responding in kind, such a plan was useless. The plan was only significant if the President intended on initiating a sustained campaign, which he was not. In the end though, the President decided to take no action despite the recommendations of Ambassador Taylor, the Joint Chiefs, and CINCPAC.⁴²

Coming only days before the Presidential election and on the tail of severe political turmoil in Saigon, this was without a doubt a test of U.S. resolve by the Viet Cong. The U.S. claimed it was committed to the region, so the VC decided to test that commitment. The Johnson administration, obsessed with the messages every action sent to Hanoi, failed to see the message a failure to respond would send. That message was that it was acceptable to attack U.S. personnel without fear of reprisal.

Why did President Johnson refuse to act? The administration believed strikes on North Vietnam would bring increased VC activity, which Saigon could not handle. However, the primary reason, as told in an "eyes-only" telegram to Taylor, was it was too

⁴¹ Within 60-72 hours 30 B-52s from Guam would strike Phuc Yen airfield at night. At first light the next morning "carrier and land-based aircraft [would] conduct a follow-up strike against Phuc Yen and strikes against POL storage at Hanoi and Haiphong and against the Gia Lam and Cat Bi airfields at those two cities." In addition, VNAF forces would strike the Vit Thu barracks. While having the effect and appearance of reprisals these strikes would actually be the opening gambit in a sustained air campaign. Ibid., 13-14, 13-15.

⁴² Washington responded to Taylor saying, "There is no doubt here that this event adds considerably to cumulative factors pointing toward much harder policy in near future. At same time, we would find it hard to portray attack as major act of escalation in itself, since it differs only in degree and extent of damage from such previous incidents as CARD sinking and recurrent attacks on US personnel and equipment playing military roles. We have also been reluctant to give any appearance of reacting only when US personnel affected." Ibid., 13-16.

close to the Presidential election.⁴³ The President would not have time to defend adequately his decision to conduct strikes before voters went to the polls on November 3. He also risked criticism from the Republican Party for taking action that fundamentally violated his campaign promises.

The President campaigned on minimal involvement in Vietnam, so he would conceivably break that plank days before the election. The freshest thing on the minds of U.S. voters would have been Johnson ordering air strikes against North Vietnam. Such a response might also have exposed Johnson to criticism regarding U.S. involvement in the region, since the Viet Cong attacked U.S. advisory forces on the ground at Bien Hoa. The Viet Cong however, were unsympathetic to the President's predicament.

The irony of the situation was that in the months of policy debate one of the consistent themes was demonstrating the level of U.S. resolve; however, the lack of response to the Bien Hoa attack dispelled any sense of U.S. resolve. In the eyes of Hanoi, the U.S. would not strike when South Vietnam was deteriorating, and they would not even strike in retaliation to a devastating attack on their own forces.

The Bombing Debate

On November 3, the President formed the National Security Council Working Group on Vietnam. Chaired by William Bundy, the job of the group was to study the situation in Vietnam, develop a comprehensive analysis of the situation, and offer courses of action.⁴⁴ Despite this consolidated effort, the group failed to develop any new

⁴³ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, November 1, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XI, Document 397.

⁴⁴The rest of the group consisted of representatives from various departments and their staffs. Harold Ford, senior Asia/China advisor at the CIA, represented the Agency. John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of

approaches to the problem. They merely recycled existing information and bolstered their pre-determined conclusion that a gradually escalating program was the appropriate course of action.

By November, the limited and gradual escalation family of strategies gained a great deal of traction within the Johnson administration, yet the Chiefs continued proposing actions based on destruction, Johnson and his civilian advisers rejected these in favor of a lighter course of action that was better suited for negotiations.

Secretary of Defense McNamara was one of President Johnson's closest advisors and Johnson trusted him, so much so that McNamara frequently advised on matters other than defense. Johnson even asked McNamara to be his running mate during the 1964 election.⁴⁵ McNamara a staunch believer in civilian oversight of the military, believed military strategy must be a derivative of foreign policy.⁴⁶ The military strategy for Vietnam thus needed to minimize the risks of greater communist aggression, present the best chances for a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam, and use the least amount of force. Above all, the amount of force had to be justifiable to the American people and the world. For these reasons, Secretary McNamara and most other civilian advisers advocated a gradual application of force.

Defense for International Security Affairs, represented the Department of Defense, and McGeorge Bundy represented the White House. Editorial Note, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XII (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/393_440.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 403.

⁴⁵ McNamara with VanDeMark, 123.

⁴⁶ Robert McNamara, Interview by Walt W. Rostow, *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library Oral History Collection*, LBJ Library, January 8, 1975, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/oralhistory.hom/McNamaraR/McNamara1.PDF>, (accessed January 14, 2009), page 10.

Another reason such a strategy was attractive was the decline of the Saigon regime. U.S. foreign policy dictated strengthening the government before applying force, so a gradually escalating program would allow the U.S. to test the waters so to speak to gauge Saigon's and Hanoi's reaction to increased operations. If Saigon failed to improve with low-scale overt actions against North Vietnam, the administration still held the option to continue escalation or not.

The Chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council on Vietnam, Walt Rostow, submitted a plan for gradual escalation. He believed too much consideration was being given to damage levels rather than the signal sent to Hanoi. In stark contrast to the Joint Chiefs, Rostow believed the goal should not be inflicting damage, but rather using deadly serious communications and deadly serious military preparations sufficient to "raise the question in Hanoi as to whether the war in [the] South [was] worth pursuing."⁴⁷ Implementing such a plan required initial strikes to be "as limited and unsanguinary as possible," to achieve results.⁴⁸ By using limited airpower and deploying U.S. ground forces to South Vietnam, Rostow believed North Vietnam would capitulate from the threat of what was yet to come rather than actual destruction.

Rostow's plan was not the one adopted by the Working Group, but the majority of Johnson's advisers favored such limited courses. Ambassador Taylor had advocated such plans in an August 18 recommendation.⁴⁹ Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton also advocated a program "designed to put increasing pressure on North

⁴⁷ Memorandum From the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council (Rostow) to the Secretary of State, September 19, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XI, Document 357.

⁴⁸ Memorandum From the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council (Rostow) to the Secretary of Defense (McNamara), U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XII, November 16, 1964, Document 412.

⁴⁹ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, August 18, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section IX, Document 319.

Vietnam but designed also both to create as little risk as possible for the kind of military action which would be difficult to justify to the American public and to preserve where possible the option to have no U.S. military action at all.”⁵⁰ The concept of gradual escalation was not new, and this forum allowed advisers to present their vision of limited action, and in so doing, showed that the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs, in their opinion, did not meet U.S. objectives.

Taylor, McNaughton, McNamara and others did not believe limited measures would cause North Vietnam to end its support and alone save Saigon, yet they favored them because such a course of action offered the greatest amount of flexibility and the least amount of risk. The greatest concern of decision makers was greater escalation and involvement by the Soviet Union and China, the threat of which limited measures mitigated to the greatest extent possible.

As McNaughton pointed out, limited actions would allow the U.S. to leave with a minimal loss of prestige. This was McNaughton’s “good doctor theory.” Should the U.S. fail in Vietnam, U.S. actions must make it clear that failure was based on circumstances unique to South Vietnam and did not represent an overall weakness against communism. In so doing, the U.S. had to emerge as a “good doctor” with a dying patient.⁵¹

The working group settled on three potential courses of action. Option A was simply to continue present policies. Option B was a fast/full squeeze without

⁵⁰ *The Pentagon Papers*, 557.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 583. Limited actions would allow the U.S. to leave without having to commit a large amount of force, thus be able to save the most face. On the other hand, full measures would commit too much prestige to the questionable situation. This would put a greater spotlight on U.S. inability to change the situation rather than on South Vietnamese incompetence.

negotiations. Option C, which was preferred by most, was a slow progressive squeeze that allowed for negotiations throughout the campaign.⁵²

Option A provided for the continuation of current policies to establish a strong government in Saigon which they believed could take 2-4 months. This course of action would not affect the scale of infiltration or Hanoi's will; however, they believed it could prevent more Viet Cong spectaculars, thus keeping the conflict manageable for the South Vietnamese. It also provided South Vietnam with some valuable time for improvement, but in any event, the U.S. would have to move on to option B or C in order to achieve their goals. The most likely outcome of this action would be a negotiated settlement that would lead to a communist takeover.⁵³

Option B was the strongest of the three options and utilized the maximum amount of force in the shortest amount of time. In such a campaign, the U.S. would be completely inflexible on negotiations and wait for Hanoi to yield, which they were unlikely to do in the early phases. Instead of yielding or retaliating, Hanoi would probably try to turn world opinion against the U.S.⁵⁴

Under Option B, the U.S. believed Hanoi might decide the pain was greater than the gain and decide to restore the 1954 Geneva accords; however, at worst, South Vietnam could fall.⁵⁵ In spite of this, the report stated Option B stood a greater chance of achieving U.S. goals and would be more decisive than A or C. However, with this chance of success came a considerably higher risk of escalation into a major conflict.

⁵² Ibid., 600

⁵³ Paper Prepared by the National Security Council Working Group, November 21, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XII, Document 418.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The Geneva agreements ended French rule over Vietnam and split the country into North and South based. Neither side was supposed to engage in operations to re-unify the country. Reunification would depend on a nationwide referendum.

Furthermore, since the U.S. would apply the bulk of its power, failure with this option would be more embarrassing than in A or C.⁵⁶

Option C was the middle-of-the-road option offering the most flexibility in the use of force. This plan would begin slowly with strikes against infiltration routes in Laos and gently escalate according to Washington's desires and the situation in Saigon. Based on the status of the Khanh regime, the U.S. could initiate strikes into North Vietnam against targets south of the 19th parallel. As part of the plan, the U.S. would immediately establish communications with Hanoi and inform them that the U.S. was not trying to colonize North Vietnam or cause its downfall; rather, the U.S. demanded that Hanoi cease its support of the insurgency.⁵⁷

The risks of Option B were its greatest drawback and the reason the Chiefs' constant proposals for strong force were denied. Even though the available intelligence estimates believed the Soviet Union and the Chinese would not respond to heavy air strikes against North Vietnam, the President, who was accountable for the decision, and his planners were unwilling to risk a wider war. Because this perceived greater risk went against U.S. aims in the region, the President and his advisors did not endorse strong actions.

Option B also did not lend itself to failure. If North Vietnam refused to capitulate, which previous Pentagon war games considered a distinct possibility, the U.S. was left with few options. They could either continue bombing North Vietnam with few results or admit an embarrassing defeat and stop bombing. The latter was the greatest danger because it would completely nullify the utility of airpower and U.S. military strength. The

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, 600.

former would lead to perpetual ineffective bombing, wasted lives, and a growing public outcry for peace.

At the heart of this issue was the fact that ultimate success was in the hands of North Vietnam and their decision to end their support of the Viet Cong. This was especially true since Pentagon war games were inconclusive as to whether bombing North Vietnam would cause them to end their support of the Viet Cong.⁵⁸ Which plan would accomplish this, if any, was pure speculation since planners could not foresee what Hanoi's decision would be. What was more important to planners was which strategy they could justify and would fulfill the objectives of U.S. foreign policy, and ultimately was the least dangerous.

It is important to remember that the end goal was a stable government in Saigon, so it was ultimately irrelevant which campaign the planners chose because it was the action that was important, not the *level* of action. Strictly in terms of morale, it did not matter what level of force the U.S. used. It only mattered that they undertook continued actions to bolster South Vietnam.

What did matter though, and where the two plans differed, were their potential tangible results. Because a graduated campaign by its nature struck fewer targets at a lower tempo, it could not impede supplies to the extent a campaign with more available targets at a higher operational tempo could. Therefore, Option B stood the greatest chance of limiting the flow of supplies to the VC. This must not be confused with its ability to convince Hanoi to end its support. It was unclear which would influence Hanoi

⁵⁸ These war games were the SIGMA I-64 and SIGMA II-64 exercises. While in both SIGMA I and II bombing North Vietnam failed to achieve its objectives, these results were debatable because of the nature of the exercise. It was impossible for American personnel to simulate a value judgment made by Ho Chi Minh. It was also difficult to simulate the immediate and long term affects of such air strikes.

the most, and in the absence of such a verdict, McNamara in particular endorsed the least dangerous of the plans.⁵⁹

General Westmoreland, skeptical as he was about the viability of the government, recommended implementing Option A for a period of six months. Admiral Sharp favored Option C, believing the systematic and gradually increasing program of pressures would provide time to gauge the communist response to the strikes before the U.S. made a major commitment to heavy strikes. Taylor was the most influential in this debate and agreed with Westmoreland. He recommended implementing Option A initially while incorporating the beginning actions of Option C, gradually moving towards the latter based on improvement in the Saigon government. The Joint Chiefs stood alone in their advocacy for Option B.⁶⁰

Option C utilized the limited force approach that had gained serious momentum over the previous months. A milder application of force would be easier to justify to the world and the American people, and presented the lowest risk of escalation. Most importantly, given the uncertain political climate in South Vietnam, it put the U.S. in the best position should the strategy fail.

Another part of Option C attractive to Johnson's civilian advisors was the level of control Washington would exert over military action. The plan was a veritable arthroscopic surgery of military actions requiring such actions to be minimally evasive while trying to gain the most positive response from Hanoi. Washington would hold the reins of the operation enabling them to control the operational tempo, target selection, and escalation in an effort to minimize the risks of escalation. This would also prevent the

⁵⁹ Robert McNamara, Interview, page 28.

⁶⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part I*, 14-14, 14-22.

military from prematurely escalating or striking targets that would create a risk of enemy escalation. The Johnson administration would be responsible for the consequences of bombing, so it wanted to control every aspect of it to the best of their ability.

A Time for Decision

The opening days of December 1964 appeared to be the major days of decision on Vietnam. On December 1, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, USA, personally briefed the President on the course of action advocated by the Joint Chiefs. The Chiefs, once again, recommended strong, positive, and early action against North Vietnam in order to strike the enemy when they were vulnerable and the U.S. had the advantage.⁶¹ The Joint Chiefs believed U.S. escalation of force was inevitable; therefore, they believed it was best to initiate actions as early as possible or accept defeat in South Vietnam.⁶²

On December 2, the President saw the views of the NSC Working Group whose position concurred with Taylor's recommendation of continuing with Option A and then moving into Option C. They recommended stepping up current operations and striking targets in Laos for 30 days. After the 30-day mark, they would deploy U.S. aircraft and

⁶¹ Ibid., 14-31, 14-32, 14-33. "If we must fight a war in Southeast Asia, let us do so under conditions favorable to us from the outset and with maximum volition resting with the United States." Ibid., 14-33. "The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend initiation of sharp military pressures against the DRV, starting with an attack in force on the DRV, subsequent to brief operations in Laos and US low-level reconnaissance north of the boundary to divert DRV attention prior to the attack in force. This program would be designed to destroy in the first three days Phuc Yen airfield near Hanoi, other airfields, and major POL facilities, clearly to establish the fact that the US intends to use military force, if necessary, to the full limits of what military force can contribute to achieve US objectives in Southeast Asia, and to afford the GVN respite by curtailing DRV assistance to and direction of the Viet Cong. The Follow-on military program-involving armed reconnaissance of infiltration routes in Laos, air strikes on infiltration targets in the DRV, and the progressive strikes throughout North Vietnam could be suspended short of full destruction of the DRV if our objectives were earlier achieved. The military program would be conducted rather swiftly, but the tempo could be adjusted as needed to contribute to achieving our objectives." Ibid., 14-31.

⁶² Ibid., 14-32.

conduct low-level reconnaissance of infiltration targets in North Vietnam. Should Saigon improve significantly during this period, they would initiate a gradually increasing bombing campaign against North Vietnam that would run from 2-6 months and gradually strike targets moving north from the 19th parallel.⁶³

President Johnson relayed his decision to Ambassador Taylor on December 3. He believed there must be a stable government in Saigon in order to conduct an effective campaign against the Viet Cong insurgency; therefore, there was no point in conducting risky operations against North Vietnam until South Vietnam could take care of itself. At the very least Saigon had to maintain law and order as well as the capability to speak to and, more importantly, for the people. He approved the plan of the Working Group's paper of December 2, and indicated actions would be taken against North Vietnam once Saigon showed it could run its own country.⁶⁴

Overall, President Johnson's decision was the best and most responsible decision he could have made, given the uncertain situation in South Vietnam. While it would feel good to strike North Vietnam and *militarily* it would be best to strike North Vietnam, the political volatility in Saigon made such a decision was unwise. As the Commander-in-Chief, the President decided he could not responsibly commit U.S. forces and escalate on behalf of a government whose leadership could change completely on a moment's notice.

Although the U.S. would not initiate the Phase II operations against North Vietnam in the immediate future, the question was resolved on how the U.S. would bomb North Vietnam. The only question that remained was when.

⁶³ Paper Prepared by the Executive Committee, December 2, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XII, Document 433.

⁶⁴ Instructions From the President to the Ambassador to Vietnam (Taylor), December 3, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 435.

December: Conflict in the Government of South Vietnam

On December 20, 1964, General Khanh, in an effort to halt the deterioration in Saigon, dissolved the High National Council and arrested several of its members. Prime Minister Huong told Khanh that the civilian government could not function with the military acting as a state within a state.⁶⁵

Khanh's actions ran counter to Ambassador Taylor's guidance; furthermore, they did not even inform Taylor they were taking such actions. When Taylor confronted Khanh, Khanh erupted proclaiming that "Vietnam was not a vassal of the United States," furthermore Khanh told Taylor he, "should keep to his place as Ambassador and, as Ambassador, it was really not appropriate for him to be dealing in this way with the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces on a political matter."⁶⁶

On December 22, Khanh publicly stated over Radio Vietnam that they would not "carry out the policy of any foreign country," and they were "better to live poor but proud as free citizens of an independent country rather than in ease and shame as slaves of the foreigners and Communists."⁶⁷ It was one thing for Khanh to initiate a change in power in Saigon, but it was infinitely worse to stir anti-American sentiment in the way he did.

⁶⁵ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, December 20, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XIII (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_i/441_479.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 451. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, November 20, 1964, Ibid., Document 452. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, December 20, 1964, Ibid., Document 453.

⁶⁶ Memorandum of a Conversation Between the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor) and the Commander in Chief of the Vietnamese Armed Forces (Khanh), December 21, 1964, Ibid., Document 454.

⁶⁷ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, December 22, 1964, Ibid., Document 458.

General Khanh and the military failed to understand the military's role in an effective government. Even in the October debates over the new charter, Khanh wanted the military to be a fourth branch of government, and now he put that plan into action. The South Vietnamese military therefore was not subordinate to the civilians in charge of the government.

What made the situation worse was the blatant disregard of the South Vietnamese military leaders towards the wishes of Ambassador Taylor. Taylor nearly found himself determined *persona non grata*. The true power in Saigon, the military, quickly turned against the U.S., and the actual government was merely a puppet of the military. After the coup there existed a “three-cornered conflict, most of it unfortunately public: the Huong government versus the generals, the generals versus the American Ambassador, and the Buddhists versus the government and the Ambassador.”⁶⁸ In light of Saigon's latest power struggle, the VC decided once again to capitalize on this chaos and test U.S. resolve.

The Brinks Hotel Bombing

On December 24, 1964, the U.S. Officer's quarters at the Brinks Hotel in Saigon fell victim to a terrorist attack, killing two officers and wounding 64. While there was no clear proof it was a VC attack, there was little doubt to anyone in South Vietnam that the VC was responsible for the bombing. Ambassador Taylor believed this was a clear case

⁶⁸ Gelb and Betts, 99.

for reprisals, especially since action would send a desperately needed message of commitment to Hanoi.⁶⁹

Washington, however, did not agree with the utility of reprisals given the disunity in Saigon. Rusk believed North Vietnam would feel that “we are trying to shoot our way out of an internal political crisis.”⁷⁰ Rusk continued saying the U.S. could not defend the decision to expand the war due to Saigon’s disunity.

A U.S. response to this attack would send the message that no matter what the climate in South Vietnam, the U.S. would not stand idle while its personnel became the victims of terrorist strikes. Failure to strike would send the opposite message: that when Saigon was in turmoil, U.S. servicemen and interests were open targets and the U.S. was afraid to act. Therefore, this attack, like Bien Hoa, was yet another test to gauge U.S. actions in light of the situation in Saigon.

Despite National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy’s argument for reprisals, the President decided against reprisal actions.⁷¹ President Johnson was not convinced this was a Viet Cong attack, so he was not prepared to take actions against North Vietnam in the absence of clear and convincing evidence. In addition, the President hesitated to take action against North Vietnam given the political turmoil in Saigon, and did not want “to

⁶⁹ The message Taylor wanted to send was that “despite our present tribulation there is still bite in the tiger they call paper, and U.S. stock in this part of [the] world will take [a] sharp rise. Some of our local squabbles will probably disappear in enthusiasm which action would generate.” Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, December 25, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XIII, Document 468.

⁷⁰ Rusk believed that, “Hanoi would hardly read into it any strong or continuing signal in view of overall confusion in Saigon, and Hanoi might well share what would certainly be strong reaction in U.S. opinion and internationally that we are trying to shoot our way out of an internal political crisis.” Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, December 25, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 469.

⁷¹ Paper Prepared by the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (McGeorge Bundy), December 28, 1964, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. I section XIII, Document 474. Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, December 29, 1964, *Ibid.*, Document 475.

be drawn into a large-scale military action against North Vietnam simply because our own people [were] careless or imprudent.”⁷²

This was the second time the U.S. blinked when directly challenged by the Viet Cong. The VC deliberately chose inopportune times to strike U.S. targets and to test U.S. resolve; therefore, failing to respond sent a negative message to Hanoi. An administration obsessed with the message that every action, no matter how significant, would send, failed to see the message it sent through lack of action. The Johnson administration only encouraged further attacks on U.S. servicemen in failing to respond.

The year 1964 ended in a state of disarray. Saigon was in shambles and the U.S. proved once again its lack of commitment to South Vietnam, at least in Hanoi’s eyes. U.S. planning made it clear the importance of sending a message of commitment to Hanoi, but their actions did not support this platform. After failing several tests by the Viet Cong, the U.S. seemed to bolster the notion, that it was a paper tiger, making it extremely difficult to regain its credibility as South Vietnam’s big brother.

January 1965

Even though January 1, 1965, had been the target date for escalation according to previous plans and the 30-day window of improvement was closing, the President was still unwilling to escalate due to the unsure situation in South Vietnam.

At this point, Taylor recognized the need for the U.S. to roll the dice and hope for a favorable break, but realized those same gambles could have negative outcomes. To roll the dice, Taylor believed a program designed to produce the maximum level of stresses

⁷² Telegram From the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor), December 30, 1964, Ibid., Document 477.

on the minds of the North Vietnamese leadership, as opposed to maximum destruction, could produce a necessary change in the situation. Above all, Taylor stressed--in a fit of desperation--the need for reprisal actions regardless of the circumstances in South Vietnam in order to demonstrate U.S. commitment to South Vietnam and the protection of U.S. personnel. At this point, Taylor believed it was necessary to implement the limited bombing program, and recommended so on January 6, 1965.⁷³ Later on January 6, after a great deal of “soul searching” Ambassador Taylor sent a second message to Washington repealing his recommendation and advocated remaining in an advisory role because the political liability of a limited program outweighed their military benefit.⁷⁴

Taylor’s second message made it clear that he was uneasy about increasing U.S. involvement because of South Vietnamese incompetence. Because this position constituted a change in Taylor’s belief, it had a great effect on the President since it was obvious Taylor put a great deal of thought into the situation. In the end, he could not advocate escalation at this time.

Taylor was not the only person to advocate against escalation at that time. Also on January 6, George Ball met with the President and pressed for a diplomatic solution. Like Taylor, he believed the risks of escalation were too great, so the U.S. should pursue a negotiated route. He believed there were no “good” options on the table, and despite the obvious prestige hit the U.S. would take in a negotiation, he believed it to be the least bad option.⁷⁵

⁷³ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, January 6, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/10_18.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 10.

⁷⁴ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, January 6, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 13.

⁷⁵ Personal Notes of a Meeting with President Johnson, January 6, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 17.

President Johnson needed to make a tough decision. It was clear current efforts in South Vietnam were not getting the job done. Escalation against North Vietnam at this time was dangerous because of the great instability in South Vietnam. Pulling out of Vietnam would have grave political consequences and be a significant loss in the larger Cold War. Unfortunately for the thousands of Americans that would fight and die in Vietnam, President Johnson wrote off a withdrawal, so he was left deciding whether to maintain the status quo or escalate.

However, as the 30-day bolstering window closed and the administration considered escalation, General Khanh further complicated the state of affairs in Saigon. On the evening of January 26, General Khanh removed Huong and returned to power.⁷⁶

Khanh's latest coup put the U.S. in a precarious position. Not only had the previous month's events put Khanh's loyalty in question, but also Khanh still did not have the support of the military. After this coup, the situation was arguably worse, because instead of having just a weak leader in Huong, Saigon now had a weak ruler who had lost the trust of the U.S. mission.

Khanh further compromised his status in the eyes of the U.S. when he aligned himself with the Buddhists. This appeared to be the first step in neutralizing the Saigon government. According to General Cao, there was a good chance that during this process Khanh would ask the U.S. to leave Vietnam. Such actions could end the insurgency, but at the same time, South Vietnam, it was believed, would shift to communism. In addition

⁷⁶ The generals still did not support Khanh, so there was a split of allegiances amongst the military leadership. The largest group was against another coup to remove Khanh. Another group considered initiating a pre-emptive coup against Khanh before he could act. Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (McGeorge Bundy) to President Johnson, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/31_45.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 39. Memorandum From the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Denney) to Secretary of State Rusk, *Ibid.*, Document 40.

to these developments in Saigon, an intelligence report believed South Vietnam was in the midst of a social and political revolution.⁷⁷

After the coup, John McNaughton provided his views on the situation, concluding that even though Khanh's actions provided the U.S. with an opportunity to leave South Vietnam, the U.S. should not jump on this opportunity. He believed that even though history was against this coup resulting in a positive outcome, it could work. McNaughton seemed to believe striking North Vietnam was the most appropriate course of action.⁷⁸

McNamara disagreed. He believed such strikes probably would not help the situation, and even if they would help, there was no U.S. public support for a slow squeeze. Furthermore, he believed they should not launch strikes until there was some substantial positive change in Saigon.⁷⁹

Despite the impossibility of the situation, President Johnson decided to remain in Vietnam, because he was still unwilling to let South Vietnam fall to communism. He was unwilling to deal with the political backlash of being defeated in Vietnam, and even more unwilling to face what the administration thought would be a major defeat in the Cold War.

In addition to the political reasons for staying, was the issue of the U.S. investment in the region. The U.S. had spent the past decade advising and investing in South Vietnam, and the President was unwilling to let all of that go to waste. Thousands of men were in South Vietnam and several hundred men had died in this advisory

⁷⁷ Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, January 27, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I, Document 41. Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, February 3, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 58. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, February 3, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 59. Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 53-65, February 4, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 69.

⁷⁸ *The Pentagon Papers*, 686-687.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

expedition. The President wanted to see this investment through to a successful completion, which is why he was unwilling to write it off as a bad one and move on.

Pleiku and U.S. Escalation

Once again, in the aftermath of a coup, the Viet Cong tested the United States. On the morning of February 7, 1965, Viet Cong forces launched a mortar attack at the U.S. advisory compound at the Pleiku airfield killing eight Americans, wounding 108, and damaging or destroying 20 U.S. aircraft. 45 minutes after the attack, the VC carried out another attack against a POL storage site at Chap Chai airfield killing five South Vietnamese and destroying the POL stockpile. In addition to these strikes, Viet Cong forces attacked several villages northeast of Nha Trang; however, they did not inflict any casualties.⁸⁰ The consequences of U.S. inaction finally came to fruition in the form of stronger and more coordinated Viet Cong attacks. U.S. inaction caused the Viet Cong to not only continue their attacks, but also caused them to escalate the scale of their attacks.

General Westmoreland, CINCPAC, Taylor, and McGeorge Bundy, who was in South Vietnam at the time of the attacks, all recommended immediate reprisals for these atrocities. Bundy went even further and proposed the U.S. take further action. He recognized U.S. prestige was at risk, and perhaps most importantly, that a negotiated withdrawal was essentially surrender “on the installment plan.”⁸¹

The National Security Council met immediately to decide on a response to the Pleiku attacks. They decided the targets should be four barracks. U.S. forces would strike

⁸⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part II*, http://www.dod.gov/pubs/foi/reading_room/545-2.pdf (accessed March 5, 2009) 8-20, 17-17.

⁸¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1960-1968 Part II*, 18-2.

the Dong Hoi barracks, Vit Thu Lu barracks and Chap Le barracks, and the VNAF would hit the Vo Con barracks. In response to the situation, President Johnson said, “We have kept our gun over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now, and what was the result? They are killing our men while they sleep in the night. I can’t ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand tied behind their backs.”⁸² Believing also that “cowardice has gotten us into more wars than response has,” President Johnson approved air reprisals against North Vietnam.⁸³

The attacks, however, were less than impressive, because poor weather prevented three of the four targets from being bombed. After deliberation on whether to hit the remaining targets, President Johnson ultimately decided to settle for striking only one of the four barracks.⁸⁴

The issue plaguing the administration was how to transition from reprisals to sustained actions, so Ambassador Taylor developed a solution. Instead of retaliating for a single major VC attack, the U.S. would respond to a series of smaller events. Eventually, the need to justify each strike would disappear, allowing them to continue with Phase II operations.⁸⁵

⁸² Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, (New York, NY: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 125.

⁸³ Memorandum For the Record, February 6, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/71_80.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 77.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 80. Memorandum for the Record, February 7, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/81_86.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 81.

⁸⁵ “Not much of a government is required for the GVN to play its role. The present government, for example, ineffectual as it is, is enough to participate in such a program of graduated reprisals. It is not good enough to carry out the pacification program, but that is another question...The reprisal program thus gives something like a Phase II, but provides a much better international and internal-US posture. It also reduces pressure for negotiations.” U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/71_80.html, Document 79.

While Saigon was anything but stable, the time had come for the United States to take action or allow Saigon to fall, because there was little hope that continuing the same actions would improve Khanh's regime. Planners realized the struggle would be long and arduous, but they still believed South Vietnam was worth the effort.⁸⁶

At the February 8 meeting of the National Security Council, it appeared as though the NSC decided it would take limited actions against North Vietnam, but were unsure as to the scale of the operation. In an effort to use the least amount of force in the early stages, the NSC decided to limit targets to those south of the 19th parallel and out of the range of the North Vietnamese MiGs at Phuc Yen. Robert McNamara believed they could decide later whether to attack the MiGs; however, George Ball made it clear that the North Vietnamese would likely strengthen their defense posture the longer they pushed the decision. In the end, McNamara's position won the day, because it used the least amount of force.⁸⁷

On February 10, the Viet Cong detonated a bomb at a hotel in Qui Nhon used for billeting U.S. enlisted personnel. 23 Americans were killed in the bombing and 20 were

⁸⁶ "The Communists have been gaining and the anti-Communist forces have been losing. As a result there is now great uncertainty among Vietnamese as well as Americans as to whether Communist victory can be prevented. There is nervousness about the determination of the U.S. Government. There is recrimination and fear among Vietnamese political leaders. There is an appearance of wariness among some military leaders. There is a worrisome lassitude among the Vietnamese generally. There is a distressing absence of positive commitment to any serious social or political purpose...For immediate purposes—and especially for the initiation of reprisal policy, we believe that the government need be no stronger than it is today with General Khanh as the focus of raw power while a weak caretaker government goes through the motions. Such a government can execute military decisions and it can give formal political support to joint US/GVN policy. That is about all it can do." Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, February 7, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section I (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/81_86.html, Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (McGeorge Bundy) to President Johnson, February 7, 1965, Document 84.

⁸⁷ Memorandum For the Record, February 8, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 88

wounded. McNamara, Taylor, the Joint Chiefs, and the Department of Defense all recommend immediate strikes, so President Johnson decided to strike two targets.⁸⁸

The next step was forming a sustained plan, which took the form of an eight-week program developed by the Joint Chiefs, in accordance with the NSC decision on February 8. The target area was along Route 7 south of the 19th parallel and would be justified as retaliatory strikes at first, but as time went on there would be less of a need to classify them as such.⁸⁹

Taylor believed the main objective of such air strikes was the will of the Hanoi leadership followed by South Vietnamese morale. The physical damage to North Vietnam was seen as the lowest objective. Taylor believed the recommended level of destruction would not have a bearing on the ability to sustain the Viet Cong but will provide a means to gauge Hanoi's discomfort.⁹⁰

President Johnson had made every attempt possible to bolster South Vietnam before striking North Vietnam, but the attempts were in vain. The President could let Saigon fall without taking action and allow communism to win without putting up a fight, or Johnson could roll the dice and take actions against North Vietnam in the hope of bolstering the South. Leaving was not an option because the administration was unwilling to allow South Vietnam to fall to communism. Taking into account all points of view and the undeniably desperate situation in South Vietnam, President Johnson made the least

⁸⁸ Editorial Note, *Ibid.*, Document 95. Memorandum of Meeting of Principals, February 10, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 97. Summary Record of the 548th Meeting of the National Security Council, February 10, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 98.

⁸⁹ Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, February 11, 1965, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1964*, vol. II section II (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_ii/109_120.html (accessed February 1, 2009) Document 109.

⁹⁰ Telegram Form the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, February 12, 1965, *Ibid.*, Document 112.

bad decision he could and approved the beginning of regular air attacks against North Vietnam on February 13, 1965.

Conclusions

The absence of a stable government and numerous coups during 1964-1965 raises the question: why did the U.S. insist on remaining by Saigon's side? One answer lies in the best possibility for a U.S. exit. The least painful way of leaving Vietnam was under Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton's "good doctor" theory. However, in order to initiate this, the U.S. had to use some level of overt force against North Vietnam. In other words, the U.S. had to bloody North Vietnam's nose before it could exit Vietnam. It was as if America's exit strategy in Vietnam had become a paradox. In order to withdraw, it first had to escalate against North Vietnam, but in order to escalate, Saigon had to improve. If Saigon improved, there was no need for the U.S. to withdraw; in fact, a marked improvement would, according to plans, lead to greater U.S. involvement.

From their viewpoint, decision-makers had one option left to try to save South Vietnam. That option involved escalating against North Vietnam, because any other decision meant defeat. Their great mistake, then, was overestimating the ability of military power to affect the political stability of a country that was tired of war. If the South Vietnamese were unwilling to take the steps needed to solidify their government and win the war, there was nothing the U.S. could do to save South Vietnam.

To save South Vietnam, the Johnson Administration implemented the plan that best fit its objectives in the region. They did not want this limited war to escalate into a

nuclear World War III. They wanted to maintain the greatest amount of flexibility in order to react to developments in North and South Vietnam. They wanted the ability to control the operation to the greatest ability. Above all, they did not want South Vietnam to fall to communism. The only course that fit these objectives was a strategy of gradually escalating force developed by Johnson's civilian advisers.

Given U.S. objectives, constraints, and the unpredictability of Saigon, it was reasonable for President Johnson to delay action as he did. What was inexcusable was his failure to respond to Viet Cong attacks. Johnson and his advisers failed to grasp, or at the very least ignored, the signal of weakness they sent to Hanoi. The evidence is in the continued series of escalating Viet Cong attacks initiated with Bien Hoa and followed by the Brinks Hotel bombing and the Pleiku attacks.⁹¹

Some critics, such as H.R. McMaster in *Dereliction of Duty*, assert that the Johnson administration failed to take action against North Vietnam in 1964 because of the election and later in order to maintain Congressional support for the Great Society. These domestic concerns certainly played a key role in the decision-making process, but they were not the primary reasons for delayed action. The administration did not need to use domestic politics as an excuse for delayed intervention, because the situation in South Vietnam provided an adequate reason to delay action. Taking away the Great Society and the 1964 election would not change the fact that Saigon was unstable, and the President could not justify action. Therefore, the primary reason was the state of affairs in South Vietnam.

⁹¹ The Gulf of Tonkin attacks were not apart of this trend, because the attacks were conducted by North Vietnamese vessels, not the Viet Cong.

President Johnson waited until February 1965 to act because he and his advisers hoped to aid a strong Saigon government rather than one in shambles. They were unwilling to risk U.S. prestige, resources, and most importantly, lives unless they were confident South Vietnam could stand on its own two feet.

A great deal of Vietnam literature tries to create villains out of members of the Johnson administration. However, a balanced look at the information available to members of the administration and the situation in Vietnam shows that even the “best and the brightest”⁹² could not bring the impossibly difficult situation in South Vietnam to a desirable end.

The true villain of Vietnam was the incompetence of South Vietnamese leaders. This was their war to win or lose, and the U.S. was willing to help them in their struggle. Instead of pulling themselves together and working under the wing of the strongest big brother a country could ask for, Saigon disintegrated due to squabbling and ineffective leaders. Their constant quarreling prevented the U.S. from acting in 1964. Instead, the U.S. acted in 1965 as a last resort, and waded deeper “into the quagmire.”⁹³

Lessons

One lesson from Vietnam is that leaders should carefully weigh the negative consequences of situations where there seems to be no good solution. In the case of Vietnam, the Johnson administration was forced to weigh the drawbacks of escalation and continuation, but wrote off pulling out because it thought the domestic and international ramifications too great. In hindsight, the consequences of leaving Vietnam

⁹² David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, (New York, NY: Random House, 1972).

⁹³ Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995).

in 1964 would have been significantly less than later in the war, and probably would have been less damaging than the war itself became. Yes, the U.S. would have suffered diplomatically if it left South Vietnam and allowed it to fall to communism, but given South Vietnam's chronic instability, President Johnson could have justified U.S. withdrawal.

The most important lesson of Vietnam is realizing there are some things the U.S. cannot change. No matter how hard the U.S. tried or what it urged the South Vietnamese to do, it could not force them to create an effective government. Sometimes, the only solution is for people to help themselves. It is a tough reality for the most powerful country in the world to reach, but to avoid future Vietnams, it is critical that American leaders wake-up and embrace the limitations of power. Until leaders grasp this concept, the U.S. will be the giant that refuses to wake.

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