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Chapter 17

THE US COMMITMENT GROWS

As 1965 began, it appeared that the US policy of furnishing only military equipment and counsel to nations threatened by the communists had failed in Vietnam as it had failed in Korea. The United States now faced squarely the choice of either entering more directly and at increased risk and cost into the war in Vietnam or, by inaction, of allowing the communists to prevail. In view of the growing support being furnished the insurgents by NVN, and the critical governmental weakness and waning military fortunes of the RVN, the necessity for a decision while choice was still possible grew more urgent each day. In the first months of the new year, the President, moved as much by events as by the various arguments of his several advisors, ordered stronger, more direct military, economic and political actions in Vietnam. Like the year 1962, in which President Kennedy had greatly increased US support of the RVN, 1965 was to mark a definite turning in the national policy toward Vietnam.

Signs of an Enemy Victory

At no time had the VC seemed so close to a decisive military victory over the RVN as in early 1965. The weakened and dispirited forces of the RVN were no match for the insurgents. In major battles, in patrol skirmishes, and in ambushes throughout the country the ARVN and its paramilitary cousins, the RF and the PF, consistently suffered costly and discouraging defeat at the hands of their highly motivated, more skillful enemy.

The VC made good use of their superiority, taking the initiative nearly everywhere in the RVN and closing LOCs almost at will. No longer were they restricting themselves to hit-and-run tactics. And there was good reason to believe that they might be shifting to a strategy of committing larger units against the ARVN in pitched battles. In early January, for example, in a fierce and protracted encounter around Binh Gia, forty miles southeast of Saigon, the VC inflicted heavy losses on the ARVN. US military intelligence

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experts believed that this battle might mark a turning point toward a more intense phase of the war.¹

As to VC strength, US intelligence authorities believed that the communists were now employing about 30,000 regular VC troops and from 60 to 80 thousand part-time guerrillas in RVN--an increase of from 8 to 10,000 regulars during 1964. This rise was considered remarkable in view of the high number of casualties, estimated at 21,000, that the VC had sustained. US experts judged that only a well-established, efficient military-political organization could sustain such losses and still be able to function with greater effectiveness than ever. The fact that the VC had professional command, logistics, communications, and personnel systems to support their specialized military tactics seemed to confirm that the VC were being directed from Hanoi. Captured documents, interrogation reports, and other sources of information showed that the broad guidance on policy, strategy, and doctrine flowed from the top governmental levels in Hanoi. The organization for insurgency which had, the United States believed, been planned in Hanoi was well suited both militarily and politically to its task.

Regular VC forces (main force units that had been identified in the RVN) comprised 5 regiments, 47 battalions, and 135 companies. Early in 1965, strong concentrations of these units were located in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces in the northern I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ). Regular VC units were thinly scattered throughout the central area in the II CTZ but again were heavily distributed in the III and IV CTZs north and south of Saigon. The irregular local guerrillas were most dense in this same southern area of the RVN.²

As of 1 January, COMUSMACV had no definite proof that any organized units of the NVA had entered the RVN, although such entry was suspected. It was believed, however, that nearly half of those infiltrated during 1964 were native to NVN. COMUSMACV estimated that 37,449 persons had entered from NVN to join VC units during the period 1959 to the end of 1964. He could confirm, on the basis of POW interrogations,

1. (TS-NOFORN-GP 1) COMUSMACV Command History 1965, p. 109.

2. (S-NOFORN) Special DIA IB 1 Feb 65; (S-NOFORN) DIA IB, 14 Jan 65, p. S-3.

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only 19,678 of these infiltrators, however. One report indicated that approximately 7,500 had infiltrated during 1964.3

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As a yardstick of their success at the beginning of 1965, the VC controlled almost one quarter of the rural population and more than half of the countryside of the RVN. Throughout virtually all the nation, the VC were intensifying their tactics of terror against the people. Citizens who favored the GVN were terrified into silence and compliance or eliminated, while those who were uncommitted cooperated with the VC out of sheer fright. The security situation in the larger urban areas was less serious, but there were definite signs that the VC had moved into such cities as Saigon and Da Nang and could, when they chose, create a much more serious security problem in those thickly populated areas.

Strategically, it appeared at the beginning of 1965 that the VC meant to cut off the northern portion of the RVN by driving from the mountains to the sea in the northern part of the II CTZ, sending their main force units from their base camps in Laos and Cambodia across the central highlands to the populous coastal provinces on the South China Sea.

The Republic of Vietnam

The plight of the RVN was discouraging from nearly every view. Pacification, on which a succession of GVN and US officials had pinned high hopes, had come to a virtual standstill by 1965. Unable to respond effectively to the VC initiatives, the RVNAF had been forced into an increasingly defensive role. And it was clearly evident that without a great deal more outside assistance the RVNAF and, consequently, the RVN was going down to defeat.

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Statistically at least, the RVN surpassed the VC in armed strength. In January 1965, the RVN had 245,000 men in its regular forces, 99,000 in the RF, 165,000 in the PF, and 31,500 National Police. The regular forces included a 220,000 ARVN and a 7,000-man marine corps generally employed as a reserve force. It also had an 8,000-man navy (VNN) and 11,000-man air force (VNAF). Neither of these latter forces was considered particularly effective by US military authorities. Because the enemy could strike at places and times of his own choosing under conditions completely favorable to him

3. (S-NOFORN) DIA IB, 25 Feb 65, p. S-3.

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and because the forces of the RVN had to be spread throughout the country, the numerical superiority of these forces gave them no real advantage. Adding to the problem was the extreme difficulty of shifting troops and supplies from one area of the RVN to another, particularly with the enemy controlling many of the main LOCs. As the tempo of VC attacks rose, the ARVN was being struck hard in widely separated district capitals, their garrisons of regular forces and regional militia being defeated in rapid succession. In the rural areas, ARVN columns and the PF were being destroyed in numerous ambushes. VC night assaults visited havoc on scattered hamlets and outposts.⁴

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US statistical reports forecast the scope of the impending military defeat. In the first month of the new year, the RVNAF suffered 3,313 killed and wounded. While casualty figures might be dismissed as an indication of a brave defense by outnumbered forces, a more ominous picture emerged when these figures were read in conjunction with desertion and weapon losses figures. COMUSMACV reported that in January, 7,000 men had deserted the RVNAF, about the same monthly rate as prevailed in 1964. In the following months this figure would soar to over 11,000 per month. In the first two months of 1965, weapons losses averaged approximately 2,000 units per month.⁵

Political Turmoil Continues

This somber story of military failure was occurring against a background of growing political chaos in the RVN. Sapped by uprisings and coups since late 1963, the GVN had, by 1965, become a jumble of mutually antagonistic factions, religious, political, and military--all maneuvering for control. Government ministries and provincial leaders operated with little direction or support from the central government, and this near-paralysis in government seriously crippled the war effort. Lacking confidence in the ability of the GVN to govern or to prosecute the war, important elements of the population, especially within the large and influential Buddhist community, had become increasingly permeated with antiwar, antigovernment, and anti-US sentiment.

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4. (S-NOFORN-GP 1) DIA, SIS-267-65, Jul 65.

5. Ibid.

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The immediate problem, the growing rift between the new Huong government and the Generals, seemed capable of solution. Ambassador Taylor, renewing the efforts he had begun in December to bring about a reconciliation between civilian and military leaders, urged the principals in both factions to negotiate. He succeeded to the extent that on 5 January the Generals and the GVN agreed that Chief of State Suu and Prime Minister Huong would make a public statement that the military had returned full power to the civil government and that the government intended to hold early elections for a national assembly. Simultaneously, the Generals, headed by Khanh, would announce their support for the Huong government and its election plan and would release the persons arrested on 20 December. In addition to these provisions, the communique, finally issued jointly on 9 January, vested all legislative power temporarily in the Chief of State.⁶

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Ambassador Taylor doubted that the agreement would last long. Washington, too, had doubts about the effectiveness of the agreement and instructed Taylor to avoid to the extent possible any action that would commit the United States to either the civilian government or to Khanh. For his part, Taylor worked for the integration of the military into the government. This, he hoped, would give them a sense of participation, but not actual control, of the administration. At the same time he tried to make clear the US position regarding the need for political stability so that the various power groups which might be planning "adventures" would know in advance that the United States would not support them.⁷

As the result of behind-the-scenes negotiations, Prime Minister Huong and the Generals reached a solution on the participation of the military in the government which appeared to meet US specifications. On 18 January, Huong reshuffled his cabinet, appointing four generals to the formerly all-civilian body: Nguyen Van Thieu, Commander of IV Corps, became Second Deputy Prime Minister; Tran Van Minh (Little Minh), Chief of Staff of the RVNAF, became Armed Forces Minister of Youth, Sports, and Civil Defense, another new post; and Linh Quang Vien, Director of the Military

6. (S) Msgs, Saigon 2079, 2080, 2099 to State, 060532Z, 071155Z and 091050Z Jan 65, JCS IN 73113, 74666, and 76658.

7. (S) Msgs, Saigon 2133 and 2166 to State, 121150Z and 160823Z Jan 65, JCS IN 78849 and 83669.

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Security Service, was appointed Minister of Information and Psychological Warfare. Huong also dismissed two ministers who were objectionable to the Buddhists.⁸

Bringing the military into the government gave some promise of a more stable GVN, capable of prosecuting the war more effectively. Unfortunately, the settlement between the civilian government and the military did not eliminate the longstanding Buddhist unrest. The Buddhist leadership had remained quiet during the political crisis, but their objectives remained unchanged. They deeply resented Huong's decree of 8 December 1964 creating a General Buddhist Association and wanted him replaced. Tri Quang and the other leaders also attacked Huong for showing weakness vis-a-vis the generals.⁹

On 19 January, Buddhist leaders announced an anti-Huong campaign. They told US Embassy officers that there was no longer any possibility of reaching agreement with Huong on outstanding differences, as he had neither goodwill toward the Buddhists nor power of his own to carry out any agreement. They announced a hunger strike, to death if necessary, by five institute bonzes to secure the overthrow of Huong. Ambassador Taylor noted that this marked a full resumption of the Buddhist confrontation with the government and closed the door to any negotiated settlement between the Huong government and the Buddhists.¹⁰

True to their pledge, the priests launched their hunger strike and Buddhist-inspired students led a demonstration against the government in Saigon. Similar demonstrations continued in the following days and spread to the other major cities, with the bonzes threatening self-immolations to achieve their demands. As the disturbances spread, they became increasingly anti-American, with demonstrators calling for an end to US interference in RVN internal affairs and the

8. NY Times, 19 Jan 65, p. 1. (C) Msgs, Saigon 2176 and 2182 to State, 180459Z and 181111Z Jan 65, JCS IN 84668 and 85801. (S) Msg, Saigon 2201 to State, 200647Z Jan 65, JCS IN 87097.

9. (C) Msgs, Saigon 2016 and 2047 to State, 020825Z and 051230Z Jan 65, JCS IN 71059 and 73126.

10. (C) Msg, Saigon 2200 to State, 200905Z Jan 65, JCS IN 87113.

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expulsion of Ambassador Taylor. The anti-American reaction reached a climax on 23 January when a mob sacked and burned the USIS library in Hue.¹¹

In the midst of this turmoil, the Buddhist leaders reached an agreement with General Khanh: in return for a guarantee of religious freedom, the Buddhists pledged to support a military government for two years and to avoid political activity. US Deputy Ambassador Johnson quickly pointed out to Khanh that the Buddhists had twice in the last six months attempted to veto a Vietnamese government, and he questioned the ability of any new government, even with such an agreement as Khanh had mentioned, to resist successfully Buddhist pressure. Johnson also tried to make "entirely clear" to Khanh that the United States had "less than no enthusiasm" for such a change in government.¹²

Despite this warning, General Khanh and the AFC ousted the Huong government on 27 January. Khanh announced that he would immediately convene a twenty-member military-civilian council, representing religious, political, and military groupings, which would choose a new chief of state and advise the government on important decisions. The Chief of State, with the approval of the new council, would then select a prime minister to form a government. This government would have the responsibility of convening a national assembly. Khanh added that the provisional charter of 20 October 1964 continued in effect, except for those provisions conflicting with "the spirit of this decision." The AFC would remain the "supreme body" until the new council was formed and a government selected, when it would revert to its position as executive body of the military. In the interim, until the new government was formed, the AFC named Nguyen Oanh, Huong's Second Deputy, Acting Prime Minister.¹³

State The successful coup once more left the United States with the bleak prospect of supporting a military dictatorship under General Khanh. Putting the best face on the situation, the State Department instructed Ambassador Taylor to deal

11. (C) Msgs, Saigon 2214, 2219, 2257, and 2262 to State, 201425Z, 210610Z, 231125Z, and 231313Z Jan 65, JCS IN 87235, 87936, 90785, and 90770.

12. (S) Msg, Saigon 2282 to State, 251121Z Jan 65, JCS IN 91762.

13. (U) Msg, Saigon 2307 to State, 270349Z Jan 65, JCS IN 93956. (C) Msg, Saigon 2308 to State, 270403Z Jan 65, JCS IN 93767.

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with the new government, not raising the question of recognition lest it might create problems for other countries having relations with the GVN. Taylor was to treat with Khanh in a manner that would neither increase Khanh's prestige nor consolidate his power, but would leave the United States in a position to continue an effective relationship with him should his regime prove viable. At the same time the United States would maintain a flexible position with regard to potential opposition to Khanh among other military leaders and useful contacts with the Buddhists, pending clarification of Khanh's intentions and prospects.¹⁴

For his part, Ambassador Taylor was still convinced that a stable government in Saigon was impossible so long as Khanh remained on the scene. He reported to the State Department that Khanh's ability to stay in power would depend largely on the support of both the Buddhist leaders and the Generals, and Taylor doubted that Khanh could keep both these groups in line. He believed Khanh incapable of maintaining even that minimum level of stability necessary to allow the United States to continue the war at the present level. He urged that the United States take every possible step to prevent Khanh's becoming Chief of State. Taylor had already informed General Ky, who was known to be concerned over the possibility of a Khanh-led GVN, that the United States was not backing Khanh. With Washington's approval, the Ambassador subsequently informed several other of the influential Generals that the United States did not support Khanh. The United States thus was in the position of contributing to the downfall of the "de facto" leader of the GVN, without having a candidate to replace him.¹⁵

14. (C-GP 3) Msg, State 1542 to Saigon, 27 Jan 65, JCS IN 94576. (S-GP 3) Msg, State 1562 to Saigon, 29 Jan 65, JCS IN 97870.

15. (S) Msgs, Saigon 2382 and 2389 to State, 030535Z and 031107Z Feb 65, JCS IN 11361 and 11594. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2391 to State, 031405Z Feb 65, JCS IN 11766. (TS-GP 3) Msg, State 1601 to Saigon, 4 Feb 65, JCS IN 12612; (S) Msg, Saigon 2400 to State, 041145Z Feb 65, JCS IN 13335.

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The United States Military Position in the RVN

The deteriorating military position of the RVN and unabating political turmoil in the nation affected US military planning and actions in Vietnam and caused considerable concern to US military, as well as political, leaders in early 1965. US involvement in the defense of the RVN had steadily increased since 1959 until, by the beginning of 1965, with over 23,000 uniformed Americans in RVN, the United States had become an active belligerent in virtually everything but name. The US Army had about 15,000 men in RVN, about one-third acting in advisory roles or in staff support positions directly under COMUSMACV, the rest providing combat support and combat service support to the RVNAF and US advisors. The US Air Force was employing over 6,000 personnel in RVN to train and develop the VNAF, while a 650-man US Marine unit operated a medium helicopter squadron in support of RVNAF operations in IV CTZ. The US Navy had approximately 1,500 men in the Vietnam area, all employed in administrative and logistic support roles. Despite this impressive commitment of US armed forces and the continued infusion of US supplies and equipment for the RVNAF, the crisis steadily worsened.¹⁶

Concern over the lack of a sound government and the adverse effect of this on the military situation caused General Wheeler to suggest to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV that they press military and civilian leaders in Saigon to submerge their difficulties in their own national interest. General Westmoreland, with the concurrence of Ambassador Taylor, on 6 January issued guidelines to MACV advisors to be used in discussions of the political situation with the RVN counterparts. He stressed that the primary US concern was for "stable government in place, able to speak for all its components," adding that the absence of such a government was blocking the US-GVN ability to move ahead more vigorously with the war. He urged the rapid restoration of conditions favorable to the pursuit of the war.¹⁷

16. (S) Recapitulation of US Strength Increases in South Vietnam, 1 Mar 64; (S-GP 4) DJSM-187-65 to CJCS, 16 Feb 65; OCJCS File 091 Feb 65.

17. (S) Msg, Saigon 2053 to State, 6 Jan 65, JCS IN 73522.

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The Dependent Problem

Because the RVN in earlier years had been considered a relatively safe area for Americans, some of the US military and civilian personnel, especially those assigned to the Saigon area, had been allowed to bring their dependents to the RVN. By 1965 there were more than 1,500 dependents in the country. With the increasing political troubles and the upsurge in VC activities in the RVN, the presence of dependents became a source of great worry to the President, who feared for their safety should a full-scale revolution erupt as a result of the political crises or should the VC direct a terror campaign against them. The chances of this latter eventuality appeared on the rise of 1965. In the past year, attacks against American personnel had increased sharply, with 61 major attacks resulting in death to 19 Americans and injury to 253.¹⁸

Withdrawal of these dependents from the RVN had been seriously considered several times in the past. Ambassador Taylor had opposed such action mainly on the ground that it would adversely affect the people and the government leaders of the RVN. By 1965, however, other factors had begun to appear. The presence of dependents, for example, had an inhibiting effect on the freedom of US military action in Vietnam. General Wheeler was convinced, for example, that the continued presence of US dependents had been a major factor in causing the President to hold back in ordering further reprisals against NVN.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted all US dependents evacuated from the RVN prior to or concurrent with the initiation of overt US military action against NVN. In the light of the Brink Hotel bombing and the growing boldness of the VC, they recommended to Secretary McNamara on 4 January the withdrawal of all US dependents from RVN as soon as it was possible to do so in orderly fashion. The

18. (C) MACV Catalogue of Incidents, CINCPAC SDO item number 001, 29 Dec 64, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam, Nov-Dec 64.

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Secretary forwarded the JCS views for consideration at the "highest levels of government."¹⁹

At an interdepartmental meeting on 15 January, Defense and State officials discussed the possible reduction of dependents in the RVN and requested participants to provide further information on this subject. The Joint Staff concluded that the advantages of withdrawal in terms of military freedom of action far outweighed the disadvantages, and that anything less than complete withdrawal of all US dependents would not result in the required military freedom of action.²⁰

The dependent question was still under review when the deteriorating political situation in late January heightened the threat to security of Americans in the RVN. On 26 January, CINCPAC informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the present instability in Saigon, the tenuous security arrangements, and the general vulnerability of US personnel to attack by "dissident elements" made it prudent to withdraw US dependents from the RVN. Admitting the serious political implications of such action, Admiral Sharp stated that because of the worsening situation, evacuation was no longer primarily a political problem but must be decided on the basis of "the actual and growing danger to American lives." On the next day, however, COMUSMACV reported that developments in Saigon had reduced the danger to Americans, and he recommended against evacuation because of its profound, and perhaps disastrous, impact on the RVN.²¹

General Wheeler supported CINCPAC. While agreeing with COMUSMACV that withdrawal at this time would have a great

19. (S) Msg, JCS 5485 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 31 Dec 64, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam, Nov-Dec 64; (S) CM-277-64 to SecDef, 26 Nov 64, Encl to JCS 2343/496, JMF 9155.3 (26 Nov 64); (S) CM-359-64 to SecDef, 4 Jan 65; (S-GP 4) Memo, OSD to Secy, JCS, 19 Jan 65, Encl to 1st N/H of JCS 2343/512; (TS) Note, sgd Bottomley, 4 Jan 65; JMF 9155.3 (4 Jan 65).

20. (TS) J3M-69-65 to D/JS, 18 Jan 65; DJSM-65-65 to ASD(ISA), 18 Jan 65; JMF 9155.3 (4 Jan 65).

21. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS 270155Z Jan 65, JCS IN 93713. (TS-GP 3) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 271715Z Jan 65, JCS IN 93924.

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impact in the RVN and the rest of Southeast Asia, he was not persuaded that the impact would necessarily be disastrous. General Wheeler believed that Khanh and other "adventurers" in Saigon were using US dependents as hostages to pressure for their ends. The withdrawal of dependents would free US hands by removing these hostages, by shocking "Khanh and company" into the realization that there were limits to US patience, and by clearing the decks for possible future action.²²

The establishment of the caretaker government on 28 January returned a measure of stability to the RVN and the United States again deferred the question of dependent evacuation.

Proposals for Additional Military Measures in Vietnam

The 30-day period originally scheduled for the completion of Phase One of the Presidential program elapsed in mid-January. While the military portions of the program were well under way by that time, the political side had not fared so well. The program that had seemed so sound in Washington did not follow the prescribed schedule in RVN. To expect an effective GVN to develop in only 30 days proved wishful thinking. The political situation in Saigon by mid-January was no better, and perhaps worse than it had been in early December. The growing anti-American tone of the Buddhist agitation alarmed both COMUSMACV and CINCPAC. On 25 January, CINCPAC positioned an Amphibious Ready Group within a 24-hour reaction time of Da Nang. The next day, at COMUSMACV's request and because of the threat to the US Consulate at Hue and US property in Saigon, he repositioned two Task Groups (TG 76.5 and 76.7) within a six-hour reaction time of Saigon.²³

As the governmental turmoil in Saigon continued through January and February, Phase One of the program was extended into a second month. US military leaders, however, became increasingly impatient to get on with the military actions they had proposed, and recommendations and preparations for

22. (S) Msg, CJCS to CINCPAC, 271547Z Jan 65, OGCJS File 091 Vietnam, Jan 65.

23. (TS-GP 1) NMCC OPSUM 20-65, 26 Jan 65, p. 4, and 21-65, 27 Jan 65, p. 5.

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these operations became of major concern during this period. One of these recommendations was for the use of US jet aircraft in a strike role in the RVN. At the height of the Buddhist unrest, US intelligence experts reported the possibility of VC attacks on district and provincial towns and on critical US installations, especially during the coming Tet period. General Westmoreland himself was convinced that the VC would try to win a spectacular victory during the festival season to coincide with this period of "extreme political uncertainty," and he warned that the widespread civil demonstrations and disorders had so committed RVN forces as to impair their ability to handle any emergency situation without sacrificing the security of metropolitan areas. He noted that the discipline and efficiency of the VNAF in particular had diminished because of General Ky's preoccupation with politics. He asked for authority to use US jets in RVN subject to the following conditions: concurrence of the US Ambassador prior to exercising such authority; the decision to use the US jets would be made by COMUSMACV personally, or by his Deputy, provided that: 1) he considered the situation such that the VC could gain a major victory or that numbers of American lives would otherwise be lost; 2) strikes by US jet aircraft would be controlled by US ground or airborne observers who were in touch with the situation on the ground and the location of friendly troops; 3) reliable intelligence indicated a major VC concentration beyond the capacity of the VNAF or USAF commando units to strike effectively (US jet aircraft might also be employed to take advantage of the opportunity to launch spoiling attacks); and 4) appropriate clearance would be effected in advance with the RVNAF. The Embassy concurred with COMUSMACV's request, and, with White House and State Department agreement, the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 27 January authorized the restricted use of US jet aircraft in combat operations in RVN for the first time.²⁴

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Although the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended the resumption of patrols by US destroyers along the coast of NVN in October 1964, higher authority had deferred a decision. At that time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had wanted to establish and maintain a legitimate US presence in international waters, to resume intelligence collections, and to continue to exert pressure on NVN. As one of the military

²⁴. (TS-GP 2) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 260532Z Jan 65, JCS IN 92948. (TS-GP 2) Msg, JCS 4213 to CINCPAC, 27 Jan 65.

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programs under Phase I, DESOTO patrols assumed a new significance. On 28 January the Joint Chiefs of Staff alerted CINCPAC to prepare for a resumption of DESOTO patrols on or about 3 February, the first since their suspension in mid-September. They ordered that the patrols should not be provocative, remaining 30 nm off both the NVN mainland and Hainan Island and south of 20 degrees north latitude. They did, however, authorize patrol ships and supporting aircraft to return fire if attacked, permitting patrol ships to pursue the enemy to the recognized three-mile territorial limit and aircraft hot pursuit inside territorial waters against surface vessels and into hostile air space (including NVN, Hainan Island, and mainland China) against aircraft when necessary to achieve destruction of identified attack forces.²⁵

In planning for resumption of DESOTO patrols the Joint Chiefs of Staff considered the possibility of NVN attacks on the destroyers and consequent US reprisals. They ordered CINCPAC to preposition retaliatory forces prior to commencement of the patrol and directed him to proceed with reprisal planning against five targets in the southern part of NVN. The five targets were all from the JCS Outline Plan of 14 November 1964 for air operations against NVN. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also directed CINCPAC to prepare a further strike increment for the VNAF against an additional NVN target.

In the next few days the JCS revised their reprisal planning guidance to provide greater flexibility in reprisal options and to include targets considered "more suitable in terms of Washington objectives." They asked CINCPAC to develop reprisal plans based on three attack options. In ascending order these options increased the scale of the attack, although all three options were against low-value military targets, primarily barracks areas, in southern NVN.²⁶

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were not the only ones anticipating NVN attacks on DESOTO patrols. Ambassador Taylor even hoped that the planned patrol would bring about the opportunity for US reprisals. On 31 January he told Washington that an NVN attack on a DESOTO patrol followed by

25. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4244 to CINCPAC, 28 Jan 65.

26. (TS-GP 1) Msgs, JCS 4297 and 4484 to CINCPAC, 29 Jan and 3 Feb 65.

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Immediate, strong, and effective US retaliation would offer "a priceless advantage to our cause here."²⁷ | Stal

The DESOTO patrol planned for 3 February was never conducted. It was postponed first because of Tet (2-6 February), and later, to prevent it from coinciding with the visit of Premier Kosygin to Hanoi.²⁸] T-F

In support of another of the Phase I actions, the Joint Chiefs of Staff late in January asked the Secretary of Defense to approve additional OPLAN 34A Maritime operations. Such covert operations had continued throughout January based on the first four increments of Package One actions furnished to COMUSMACV on 15 December 1964. On 5 January 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had authorized VNAF air support for 34A Maritime operations south of the 18th Parallel and on 21 January the Joint Chiefs of Staff had codified and consolidated approval procedures to give COMUSMACV the maximum possible flexibility for planning and advance approval within the limitations set by higher authority.

By the end of the month, COMUSMACV had completed three of the four increments. On 30 January, the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested the Secretary of Defense to approve an additional four increments under Package One. COMUSMACV had prepared these additional increments at JCS direction, using the original Package One planning guidance of early December 1964. The Joint Chiefs of Staff pointed out to the Secretary of Defense that all the actions recommended were of types previously approved for execution with the addition of one new action providing for PTF harassment of coastal villages by firing illumination and leaflet 81mm mortar shells over the villages, but so designed that no physical harm would be done to the inhabitants or houses. The Deputy Secretary of Defense approved the four new increments, and after coordination with the White House and the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff notified CINCPAC and COMUSMACV of this approval. OPLAN 34A Maritime operations were based on these increments until

27. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2359 to State, 31 Jan 65, JCS IN 98620.

28. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4422 to CINCPAC, 2 Feb 65; (S-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4612 to CINCPAC, 4 Feb 65.

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mid-June 1965, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted additional increments to the Secretary of Defense.²⁹

Reprisals

Throughout this period, the Joint Chiefs of Staff continued to be concerned with the general question of reprisals. On 29 January, in a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, they pointed out that the VC had carried out 61 attacks against US military and civilian personnel in RVN during 1964, and reviewed their previous proposals for retaliation against NVN. They repeated their argument that US failure to respond to major VC/NVN attacks against US personnel could be misconstrued and result in further attacks against Americans. Noting Ambassador Taylor's support for reprisals, the Joint Chiefs of Staff once again recommended a positive, timely, and appropriate response to the next significant provocation in order to signal Hanoi that further provocations would bring prompt and destructive US retaliation. They urged the execution of such a reprisal against selected NVN targets within 24 hours of the incident, using the VNAF to the extent feasible. They also provided Mr. McNamara with a resume of reprisal actions of varying intensity for which plans were available for rapid execution. Again, the Secretary of Defense noted the Joint Chiefs of Staff views and passed them on to the State Department and the White House.³⁰

Because of the increased high level interest in operations against NVN, on 1 February the Chief of Staff, Army, in a memorandum to the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that any direct military pressure against NVN carried an inherent risk of overt Chinese Communist intervention. He urged the Joint Chiefs of Staff not to ignore this risk, and recommended a program of additional military actions to prepare the United States for the eventuality of direct CHICOM intervention in

29. (TS-GP 1) Msgs, JCS 3486 and 3995 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 5 and 21 Jan 65. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-72-65 to SecDef, 30 Jan 65 (derived from JCS 2343/516); (TS-GP 1) Msg, JCS 4707 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 052211Z Feb 65; JMF 9155.3 (15 Jan 65).

30. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-70-65 to SecDef, 29 Jan 65 (derived from JCS 2343/514); (TS) Memo, DepSecDef to CJCS, Encl to 1st N/H of JCS 2343/514, 8 Feb 65; JMF 9155.3 (22 Jan 65).

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Vietnam. This program provided for increasing readiness measures that would eventually culminate in major deployments to support military pressures against NVN.³¹

The Pleiku Attack - A Turning Point

Before the JCS had sufficient time to consider the program proposed by the Chief of Staff, Army, the VC took an action that was to have a profound effect on US national policy toward Vietnam and which led eventually to a significant widening and strengthening of the US commitment in Vietnam. In the early morning hours of 7 February (Saigon time), the VC fired a devastating mortar barrage at the US advisor's compound and airfield at Pleiku, killing eight US military personnel, wounding 108 others, and damaging or destroying 20 US aircraft. The Pleiku attack was followed 45 minutes later by a VC barrage against a POL storage area at Chap Chai airfield near Tuy Hoa in which five South Vietnamese died and POL stocks were destroyed. The VC carried out a third attack at this same time against a series of villages 15 miles northeast of Nha Trang, but no further casualties were inflicted.³²

The US response was swift and unequivocal. From the field COMUSMACV, CINCPAC, Ambassador Taylor, and McGeorge Bundy, who was in Saigon at the time, all called for reprisals against NVN. In Washington, where it was the late afternoon of 6 February, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Deputy Secretary of Defense briefed the President on the attacks. A National Security Council meeting followed, and a plan for retaliatory action was drafted. This plan called for US/RVNAF reprisal strikes against military targets in the southern part of NVN, accompanied by the air deployment of a HAWK LAAM battalion to RVN, and the removal of US dependents from RVN. After consulting with Ambassador Taylor in Saigon, who concurred but requested modification of the reprisal targets, the President approved the plan. The targets finally approved were the four recommended by Ambassador Taylor. These targets were all NVN military barracks

31. (TS-GP 3) CSAM 36-65, 1 Feb 65, Encl to JCS 2343/520, 5 Feb 65, JMF 9155.3 (1 Feb 65).

32. (TS-GP 3) Telecon, MACV to NMCC, 070805Z Feb 65, JCS IN 17098. (TS-GP 1) NMCC OPSUM 31-65, 8 Feb 65, p. 5. Statement by SecDef, 7 Feb 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LII (22 Feb 65), pp. 239-240.

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(Dong Hoi, Vit Thu Lu, Chap Le, and Vu Con) in areas supplying men and arms for attacks in RVN. US forces would strike the first three targets, while VNAF and FARM GATE aircraft would hit Vu Con. All targets were on the JCS list of reprisal attack options, forwarded to CINCPAC on 3 February.³³

When informed of the planned reprisals, the GVN was enthusiastic. Acting Prime Minister Oanh "readily" concurred and General Khanh, when contacted by General Westmoreland, also approved. Taylor told Oanh that "this reprisal action was a significant new step which we should take enthusiastically and with a visible clearing of the boards for possible future action." Taylor informed Oanh that the United States meant to prepare for such future action by bringing in HAWK missiles to Da Nang and possibly evacuating US dependents. He urged the GVN to think of ways to exploit these reprisals and to demonstrate that "a new and encouraging element" had been added to the war.³⁴

On 7 February the JCS ordered CINCPAC to execute the reprisal strikes, using "optimum conventional ordnance," excluding napalm, on Dong Hoi, Vit Thu Lu and Chap Le Barracks, with the VNAF and FARM GATE aircraft hitting Vu Con Barracks. They also alerted CINCPAC and COMUSMACV to expect an announcement within the next 12 hours of the decision to withdraw all US dependents from South Vietnam. The evacuation was to be "expedited but orderly" with CINCPAC designating safe havens and providing the necessary airlift. At the same time, the State Department notified US Ambassadors in key world capitals of the pending reprisals. The Department instructed the Ambassadors (except those in Moscow and Paris) to inform their host governments of the action being taken.³⁵

33. (TS) NMCC EA Chronological Log, 6 Feb 65, OCJCS File, Pleiku Incident. Statement by SecDef, 7 Feb 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LII (22 Feb 65), pp. 239-240. (TS-GP 1) Msg, JCS 4484 to CINCPAC, 030019Z Feb 64.

34. (S) Msg, Saigon 2417 to State, 070430Z Feb 65, JCS IN 16924.

35. (TS-GP 1) Msg, JCS 4766 to CINCPAC, 070220Z Feb 65. (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 4756 and 4758 to CINCPAC, 070246Z and 070428Z Feb 65. (S-GP 1) Msg, State Circular 1438, 6 Feb 65 (11:41 PM EST) JCS IN 17080.

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CINCPAC acted at once to carry out the reprisals, placing all PACOM forces in Vietnam, Thailand, and the South China Sea area on DEFCON 2 and the remaining PACOM forces west of 160°E longitude on DEFCON 3. He directed CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT, and COMUSMACV to execute the strikes. Weather conditions on 7 February forced the cancellation of three of the four strikes, including the VNAF/FARM GATE strike on Vu Con Barracks, but 49 aircraft from the USS HANCOCK and USS CORAL SEA hit the remaining target, Dong Hoi Barracks, losing one US plane in the attack.³⁶

Ambassador Taylor recommended to Washington that authority be given "at once" to reschedule the three cancelled missions on the morning of 8 February (Saigon time). But because high State Department and Defense officials wished to avoid the appearance of a continuing series of attacks, further air strikes by US forces were not approved. The rescheduling of the VNAF strike on the Vu Con Barracks, with suitable weather alternate targets, was authorized and executed on 8 February. One VNAF plane was lost.³⁷

To be ready for possible NVN retaliation, the President approved, and the JCS directed, the immediate air movement of the Headquarters plus one battery of the Marine LAAM battalion from Okinawa to Da Nang. (The first LAAM battery became operational at Da Nang on 8 February.) The Joint Chiefs of Staff directed CINCPAC to alert the remainder of the LAAM battalion for movement to Vietnam and alerted the 173d Airborne Brigade for transfer by air from Okinawa to RVN. They also instructed CINCPAC to position one Amphibious Group with the Marine SLF off Cap St. Jacques and CINCSTRIKE to alert 10 tactical fighter squadrons for movement to WESTPAC. CINCPAC had recommended alerting only three squadrons, but the President had directed that 10 be alerted.³⁸

36. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS 070750Z Feb 65, JCS IN 17259. (S-GP 4) Msg, CINCPAC to CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT, and COMUSMACV, 070300Z Feb 65, JCS IN 16845. (TS-GP 1) NMCC OPSUM 31-65, 8 Feb 65, pp. 1, 7.

37. (S) Msg, Saigon 2419 to State, 070636Z Feb 65, JCS IN 17047. (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 4764 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 071459Z Feb 65; JCS 4775 to CINCS, 081000Z Feb 65.

38. (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 4760 to CINCPAC and CINCSTRIKE, 070455Z Feb 65; JCS 4762 to CINCPAC, 071341Z Feb 65. (TS-GP 3) CINCPAC Command History, 1965, vol II, p. 451. (S) Note to Control Div, "US Reprisals Against Viet Cong Attacks in South Vietnam," 7 Feb 65, OCJCS File, Pleiku Incident. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4766 to CINCPAC, 071707Z Feb 65.

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In Saigon, Acting Prime Minister Oanh and Ambassador Taylor jointly announced the reprisal action. The brief announcement stated that military action had been taken against installations in NVN which had been directing and supporting aggression in RVN.³⁹

Following the Saigon statement, the White House announced the VC attacks and justified the subsequent reprisal action. The statement emphasized that the US/GVN action was in response to provocations ordered and directed by Hanoi and was justified because of the markedly increased and continuing NVN infiltration of the south. The White House stressed that the joint response had been "carefully limited" to military areas that were supplying men and arms for attacks in the RVN. The statement added that the United States, as it had frequently said, sought "no wider war." Whether or not this course could be maintained lay with Hanoi, the key to the situation being the cessation of infiltration from NVN and a "clear indication" of Hanoi's intention to cease aggression against its neighbors.⁴⁰

Addressing the nation, the President announced his decision to withdraw US dependents from RVN and warned that expanded US action in Vietnam might continue. He stated that it had become clear that Hanoi had undertaken a more aggressive course of action against both RVN and American installations and that the United States had no choice "but to clear the decks and make absolutely clear our determination to back South Vietnam in its fight to maintain its independence." The President also announced the deployment of the HAWK air defense battalion to RVN and stated that other reinforcements "in units and individuals" might follow.⁴¹

39. (S) Msg, Saigon 2426 to State, 071015Z Feb 65, JCS IN 17183.

40. White House Statement, 7 Feb 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LII (22 Feb 65), pp. 238-239.

41. The first US dependents departed Saigon on 8 Feb and by 19 Feb all medically-able US dependents (1,593) had left South Vietnam. Statement by the Pres, 7 Feb 65, Dept of State Bulletin, LII (22 Feb 65), p. 239. (TS-GP 1) NMCC OPSUMs 32-65, 9 Feb 65, p. 4 and 41-65, 19 Feb 65, p. 5.

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Radio Hanoi claimed that the "unjustified" attack had been "victoriously rebuffed," alleging to have downed the "aggressor" US aircraft. Both Moscow and Peking condemned the US "provocation" and pledged support and assistance to Hanoi, but both statements were cautions, neither raising the specter of a broad conflict or portraying the US action as a threat to world peace.

Unfortunately from a political standpoint, Soviet Premier Kosygin was in Hanoi at the time of the reprisal strikes. The Soviet Ambassador to the United States, in private discussion with Department of State officials, assailed the bombing, saying he believed it was actually related to Kosygin's visit to Hanoi. He was assured that this was not the case and that the United States, when it first learned of Kosygin's plans to visit Hanoi had taken certain steps, including the calling off of the DESOTO patrols. Hanoi had forced the bombing of its territory by the outrage at Pleiku.⁴²

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For months the Joint Chiefs of Staff had urged higher authorities to retaliate against VC/NVN provocations against US personnel to indicate to Hanoi that such attacks would bring prompt and destructive US reply. The Pleiku reprisal was, apparently, not a sufficient deterrent; just two days later, on 10 February, VC bombs destroyed a US enlisted man's billet (the Viet Cuong Hotel) in the coastal city of Qui Nhon, killing 23 soldiers of the 140th Aviation Maintenance Battalion and wounding 22 others.⁴³ Again, CINCPAC recommended to the Joint Chiefs of Staff strong retaliation by both US and VNAF planes. Ambassador Johnson, after reviewing the situation with General Westmoreland, agreed that this "serious VC atrocity" justified prompt air reprisal. Taylor reported to Washington that both the MACV and VNAF planners were at work on specific recommendations on targets for reprisal. Ambassador Taylor had already alerted Acting Premier Oanh of the possible reprisal and General Westmoreland was alerting General Khanh.⁴⁴

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42. (C) Msg, Saigon 2435 to State, 080825 Z Feb 65, JCS IN 17792. (C-GP 1) USIA Special Memo, 10 Feb 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Feb 65. NY Times, 9 Feb 65, p. 1; 10 Feb 65, p. 1. (S) Memo of Conversation, Dobrynin and Thompson, 15 Feb 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam, Feb 65.

43. (TS-GP 1) NMCC OPSUMS 34-65, 11 Feb 65, p. 1 and 40-65, 18 Feb 65, p. 1.

44. (TS-GP 2) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 101540Z Feb 65, JCS IN 21384. (S) Msg, Saigon 2491 to State, 10 Feb 65, JCS IN 21442.

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Within hours of the attack, the President met with the NSC, including Admiral McDonald, Acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to consider actions to be taken in retaliation. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended seven targets in NVN as reprisal targets. The Secretary of Defense proposed to the President that three of these targets, the Thanh Hoa Bridge and two barracks areas, be bombed. Because of objections that the bridge was too far north--it was just below the 20th parallel--the President directed that only two targets, the Chanh Hoa barracks and the Vu Con barracks, would be hit.

Acting on the President's decision, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered CINCPAC to execute reprisal strikes against NVN during daylight hours of 11 February, designating Chanh Hoa barracks as the primary US target and Vu Con barracks as the primary VNAF target.⁴⁵

Accordingly, on 11 February 1965, the United States launched the largest reprisal air strike to date against NVN. More than 100 planes from the USS HANCOCK, USS RANGER, and USS CORAL SEA struck Chanh Hoa barracks, while 28 VNAF planes, supported by 22 US aircraft, hit their weather alternate target, Chap Le barracks. Both attacks were successful, although the US lost three planes in the Chanh Hoa strike.⁴⁶

Upon the completion of the strikes, the White House announced that US air elements had joined the VNAF in attacks against military facilities in NVN used for the training and infiltration of VC personnel into South Vietnam. The Washington statement justified the strikes as reprisal not only for the Qui Nhon incident, but also as a response to additional direct provocations by the Hanoi regime, citing the increased number of VC ambushes and attacks against RVN and US personnel since 8 February. The White House stated that the US Government had been in consultation with the GVN and that, while both governments wished to avoid spreading the conflict, they felt compelled to take action. Following the White House announcement, Ambassador Taylor and Acting

⁴⁵. NY Times, 11 Feb 65, p. 1 (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 4962 and 4973 to CINCPAC, 10 Feb 65.

⁴⁶. (TS-GP 1) Msg, JCS 5010 to NSA et al., 11 Feb 65. (TS-GP 1) NMCC OPSUM 35-65, 12 Feb 65, p. 3.

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Premier Oanh released a joint statement in Saigon giving the details of the reprisal and echoing the Washington justification.⁴⁷

In the reprisal strikes on 7, 8, and 11 February against Dong Hoi, Chap Le and Chanh Hoa a total of 267 sorties had been directed against a total of 491 buildings. Only 47 buildings had been destroyed and 22 damaged, and operations at the target areas were relatively unimpaired. Secretary McNamara informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that, in spite of the limited effectiveness of the strikes, he was quite satisfied with the results. "Our primary objective, of course," he said, "was to communicate our political resolve. This I believe we did." He then showed that he really was not satisfied at all, pointing out that "future communications of resolve" would carry a "hollow ring" unless the US planes did more damage than in this case. He expressed concern and doubt over the adequacy of the military planning and/or the execution of future missions, observing that "Surely we cannot continue for months accomplishing no more with 267 sorties than we did on these . . . missions."⁴⁸

Secretary McNamara was not alone in feeling that the reprisal planning and techniques for strikes against NVN could stand some improvement. General Westmoreland felt the same way, although for different reasons. On the day following the Qui Nhon reprisals, COMUSMACV sent a lengthy message to Admiral Sharp criticizing the procedures which had been used and describing just how much confusion and lost motion had taken place in Saigon on 10 and 11 February getting ready for these reprisals. Particularly he complained about lack of information on what was going on, and about the seemingly unnecessary changes in direction which took place in the two-day period. He charged that his 2d Air Division had worked all night for no purpose and that units were "whiplashed" and confused by orders and counter orders.⁴⁹

⁴⁷. White House Statement, Dept of State Bulletin, LII (1 Mar 65), p. 290; Joint US-South Vietnamese Statement, ibid., p. 291.

⁴⁸. (S) Memo, SecDef for CJCS, 17 Feb 65, OCJCS Files 091 Vietnam, Feb 65.

⁴⁹. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV 130356Z, Feb 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam, Mar 65.

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Admiral Sharp responded by reminding General Westmoreland of the several specific directives that had been issued, assigning responsibilities and establishing relationships, and forwarding target information. CINCPAC also stated that the system was in his opinion capable of doing the job very well.

With particular regard to the 11 February reprisals, Admiral Sharp listed for COMUSMACV those activities that had preceded the strike in which he had been personally involved. Upon being notified by the CINCPAC duty officer of the attack upon Qui Nhon, Admiral Sharp had immediately called Saigon and had directed CINCPACFLT to return the carrier HANCOCK to Point Yankee and to start loading his aircraft for reprisal strikes. He had directed CINCPACAF to alert his forces in SE Asia and at Clark Air Force Base. He had called General Wheeler in Washington and then called Admiral Mustin, J-3, to recommend the Option 3 attacks provided by the existing operational order.⁵⁰

He reminded Westmoreland that, under the terms of the operations orders in effect on 10 and 11 February, CINCPACAF had been directed to plan for USAF strikes against NVN, and that specific orders, still current on 10 and 11 February, had directed COMUSMACV to continue planning for the VNAF to strike its assigned target. Both of these standing orders had been provided by the existing operations order, paralleled by numerous phone conversations with the various commands involved. "You and the component commanders were given information just as fast as we received it," Sharp told Westmoreland. "This flow of information, combined with the clear directives that I have outlined above, should have resulted in a minimum of confusion." While Sharp agreed it was unfortunate that COMUSMACV's officers worked all night to no purpose and in confusion, he noted that the Navy's carrier forces, operating under similar instructions and orders, were not confused and had carried out their preparations and strikes smoothly and with a minimum of fuss in accordance with the basic operations order.⁵¹

COMUSMACV was informed by CINCPAC that in future similar situations it was his intention to continue to exercise operational command through CINCPACFLT for carrier forces, CINCPACAF for USAF forces and through COMUSMACV for the VNAF. He was

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

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convinced that this system would work as smoothly as any for a complicated joint, combined operation of this nature. "In this operation Commander, 2d Air Division works for you in planning the VNAF strikes and for CINCPACAF in planning the USAF strikes. This two-hatted arrangement will work perfectly well if we all will recognize it as a fact of life and help him in this difficult assignment."52

The US response to the Pleiku and Qui Nhon attacks was more than mere reprisal; it marked a turning point in the war. Within a four-day period, the United States had carried out two air attacks against NVN, ordered the withdrawal of all US dependents from RVN, deployed a HAWK battalion to Da Nang, moved additional aircraft to WESTPAC, and warned that reinforcements in units and individuals might soon follow. In announcing his decision to take these steps, President Johnson stated that the United States had no choice but to "clear the decks," making absolutely clear its continued determination to back the South Vietnamese fight for the maintenance of its independence. Ambassador Taylor called the reprisals a "significant forward step" in demonstrating US determination, and a "good foundation" for embarking on a graduated reprisal program to bring increased pressure on NVN to cease its intervention in the South.53

52. Ibid.

53. (TS) Msg, Saigon 2455 to State, 9 Feb 65, JCS IN 19338. (TS-GP 1) Msg, State 1693 to Saigon, 11 Feb 65, JCS IN 06067.

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