

November 25, 1964

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: United States Policy Options in Vietnam

Introduction:

It is clear that the policy of the United States in Vietnam will be carefully reviewed within the next few weeks. The decisions made will have a significant, perhaps a determining, effect on the history of our times, for they may well determine the course and the effect of US foreign policy in much of the world. This memorandum seeks to outline briefly the general courses of possible action open to the United States, to indicate the probable consequences of each, and to recommend one which is clearly consonant with US foreign and domestic policies and avowed purposes.

Broadly stated, four general courses of action, singly or in combination, are open to the United States in seeking a solution to the long stalemate in Vietnam:

1. Punitive/Interdictory bombardment of installations and activities in North Vietnam and Laos.
2. Ground force intervention and commitment of US (and perhaps SEATO) troops in selected areas.
3. Negotiation for a ceasefire, followed by US withdrawal from a position of dominance and responsibility in Vietnam.
4. Positive, politically-oriented action for the development of a free, stable, democratic, Vietnam and South East Asia.

Before proceeding to a discussion of these options, certain bases of understanding, certain "facts of life" must be established and agreed upon. The more important of these are:

1. The United States is irrevocably committed, in the eyes of most of the world, to assisting South Vietnam to achieve freedom and assured independence in the face of threatened Communist conquest.

2. U. S. domestic political considerations, as well as the national interest, require that there be a "new look" in the Vietnamese situation.

3. The Vietnamese armed forces, even with massive U. S. support, have so far been unable to prevent the spread of Viet Cong influence, but have proven themselves able to defeat the Viet Cong in formal combat. They have not gained, generally, the support of the people, nor have they demonstrated an adequate anti-guerrilla capability.

4. Vietnamese leaders have not succeeded in establishing a stable, effective national government, and there seems little hope that they can do so without more effective assistance. Government administration and effectiveness generally is, and has been, deplorable.

5. Many, perhaps most, of the Vietnamese civilian and military leaders have been engaged in the fight to establish a strong, free, Vietnam for ten or more years. Despite their inability so far to use their larger numbers and greater resources to defeat the Viet Cong, despite their understandable concern with political and other matters which appear to some Americans to be of secondary importance, the anti-Communist forces show little willingness to give up the fight and accept defeat. Unless this leadership is helped to function more effectively, continuing reverses may soon drain away much of its effectiveness and determination.

6. A socio-economic-political development program with security aspects (the Strategic Hamlet program) succeeded for a time in 1962-63 in stemming the spread of Communist influence, and even reversing it. This success has been substantially undermined by political, administrative, and military weaknesses.

7. Although the Viet Cong have achieved the status of a soundly-rooted domestic insurgency they remain a minority in comparison to either the convinced anti-Communists or the substantially apolitical rural majority.

8. The Viet Cong employ combat to further a political-psychological purpose; they seek to achieve victory by the destruction of their opponents will to resist rather than by the destruction of

their armed forces. The concentration of Viet Cong forces into conventional units which could then be conventionally attacked and destroyed, hoped for by American strategists two years ago did not, and seems unlikely to, materialize.

9. The supplies and men infiltrated to the Viet Cong are helpful but not essential to them -- their principal value is psychological; their secondary value is in saving training or preparation time. As in many other instances, the recent bombardment of Bien Hoa airfield seems to have been accomplished with American weapons, procured in-country.

Discussion of the Options:

1. Punitive/Interdictory bombardment of installations and activities in North Vietnam and Laos:

At first glance this course offers many attractions. It would employ our vaunted technical and material superiority against a corresponding weakness of the enemy; it would allow us full initiative in choice, time, and place of attack; and it would vent our righteous indignation against the aggressor without experiencing ourselves the discomforts and casualties of ground warfare, and with little fear of retaliation in kind. Some argue that this course would isolate the South Vietnamese battlefield, while others assert that North Vietnam, thus intimidated, would call off the war in South Vietnam (and even Laos?). It is further pointed out that great target selectivity is possible; that militarily significant installations can be destroyed with minimal casualties to non-combatants. In short, the proponents of this course of action insist that some form of military intervention is essential, even to the achievement of a negotiated solution; that the US must demonstrate its strength and determination; and that selective bombardment is the cheapest, most aseptic, and most dramatic way to meet these requirements.

Some of the risks and disadvantages of the bombardment approach are immediately apparent. These include the strong incentive and excellent pretext which it would offer for the Communist powers to patch up their differences and reunite in a common front against a common foe; the international and domestic static from neutral and friendly powers which overt offensive action would inevitably generate; the certain increased toll in American lives; and the possibility of escalation to nuclear war.

The less apparent disadvantages of this course are even more significant. To Vietnamese, especially in the north, attacks on industrial and communications installations which the northern government says belong to the people, and which were certainly created by their labor, would give far greater weight to the Communist contention that the Americans are the enemies of the Vietnamese people. More, they would furnish invaluable grist to the Chinese Communist propaganda mills. The inevitable casualties, vastly exaggerated by their government, would go far to furnish the final proof needed to unite the presently apathetic people of the north behind that government, and might well make possible a Korea-style attack which could only be stemmed by the introduction of major U.S. troop units.

The greatest disadvantage of this course is that it could not achieve victory for the proclaimed US purposes; could not establish a free, stable, South Vietnam. The French found bombardment could not stop the build-up of Viet Minh semi-conventional forces far more dependent on supplies than any Viet Cong forces which exist in South Vietnam today. Even in Korea we found bombardment unable to stop Chinese and North Korean supply columns in relatively open terrain. And since the Viet Cong are not dependent upon supply routes from the North for the majority of their personnel, supplies or equipment, interdiction of those routes or of the sources, even if feasible, is not likely to seriously weaken Viet Cong capabilities in the South. At best, we might achieve a conference agreement on a meaningless "neutrality" ---- but that we could have today. To gain more would necessitate the commitment of major US ground forces to an enterprise which could lead only to a conventional war -- or the same old conference table.

It is argued that even if interdiction is unsuccessful, punitive bombardment of installations in the North can be used as a deterrent, to force the North Vietnamese to call off the war in the South, at least temporarily, thus buying time for the formation of a strong Government in the South. This might be true if such a bombardment were capable of inducing the collapse of the North Vietnamese regime. The contrary, a strengthening of popular support for the regime, seems more likely because the North Vietnamese are not dependent economically or politically on these installations but upon the Communist Party, their Army, and ultimately the population.

In the South, a punitive bombardment of the North will certainly raise hopes for an easy victory, but will, at the same time, lay the ground work for a strong proneutralist reaction should the Viet Cong not suspend the war. The recent Gulf of Tonking incident created just illusions in the South which were subsequently shattered, leaving South Vietnamese morale even lower. A vastly enlarged operation of a similar nature, with a similar lack of results in terms of lessening VC pressure on the South, when combined with the inevitable VC charges about Americans killing fellow Vietnamese, is very likely to create just the right atmosphere for a "neutralist" coup.

Finally, the adoption of this course would be a confession that the United States, dedicated to freedom and the rule of right rather than might, finds itself incapable of defeating a vastly inferior enemy who appeals to ideals and fights only to achieve a political goal, by any means except the use of naked force.

2. Ground force intervention and the commitment of US (and, perhaps, SEATO) forces:

There are three ways in which this course of action, perhaps the least palatable to most Americans, could be implemented. In order of their apparent attractiveness; in inverse order of the likelihood of their success or adoption, they are:

a. Commitment of a limited number -- perhaps a corps -- of regular US and SEATO troops in an effort to establish a cordon sanitaire across Vietnam and Laos, cutting off North Vietnam and Communist-dominated Laos, from the south of both countries. Some troops might also be committed to action in heavily Viet Cong infested areas south of the cordon.

The greatest advantage of this course would be that it would demonstrate the willingness of Americans and their allies to fight and die rather than let aggression triumph. It would -- for a time, at least -- prove our commitment to the struggle for freedom. So long as we refrained from aggressive action against North Vietnam (and were not obviously losing) it would strengthen our position with the free and the neutralist nations. Proponents of this course believe that it would win time to achieve resolution of internal political, social, economic, and military problems in the south of Laos and in South Vietnam, or at least provide the basis for their effective neutralization.

The disadvantages of this course are almost as apparent as they are manifold. The often-repeated thesis that a ratio of 20 to 1 is necessary to defeat guerrillas is not unrealistic when it is applied to conventional forces, largely alien, operating against guerrillas who are on terrain, and in an environment, familiar to them. The idea that such conventional forces could substantially reduce infiltration into the present combat areas is preposterous to anyone who knows the problems involved. The cost in lives and material of this approach, especially when balanced against the limited successes possible to achieve, would soon force attacks on the north, and increase the scope of the effort required; or make necessary an ignominious armistice. Meanwhile, the control and coordination problems would force American assumption of command of all forces in the area; and the picture of American imperialism, so long drawn by Communist propagandists, would crystallize in the minds of Vietnamese, and the myth of a "liberation struggle" would begin to take on reality.

As a principal course of action this approach is unthinkable. It could only mean a dribbling away of our military strength and a rapid erosion of our moral posture, leading to disgraceful defeat; or the initiation of a war certain to be far more costly than Korea.

b. Limited intervention by an unofficial international volunteer force (ground Flying Tigers) with US logistic support:

This is not a feasible principal approach, but as a secondary course of action to provide the dramatic impact needed for political reasons, and to gain more time for other programs in South Vietnam and Laos, it offers many advantages.

As a truly volunteer force, drawn primarily from Americans, Filipinos, and Thais, it could demonstrate support to the Vietnamese while generating popular support and strengthening commitment at home. Composed of volunteers largely familiar with jungle operations, drawing on the wealth of antiguerrilla experience available from Filipinos and Americans who have served with them, and adapting their tactics to this kind of war which they know, even a few battalions properly employed could provide a major diversion, possibly substantially reduce Viet Cong capabilities, and give a new sense of confidence and strength to those

who must make the major effort -- the Vietnamese in South Vietnam.

The only significant possible danger in the adoption of this course would be the possibility that it might bring in similar international volunteers on the other side, leading to gradual escalation to a full-scale Korea-type conflict. This seems remote, in view of the Vietnamese distaste for Chinese troops, but the possibility must be carefully weighed. More troublesome, unless there is strong topside backing from the beginning, may be the well-known and understandable reluctance of conventional military establishments to give adequate support to irregular efforts such as this must be if it is to succeed.

c. Attack North Vietnam by surprise:

A carefully planned and coordinated surprise attack on the north, executed largely by US airborne troops dropping simultaneously on Hanoi and other key targets, acting on behalf of the provisional government of a free, United Vietnam, accompanied by bombardment of selected military targets, and a carefully planned psychological operation stressing the liberation theme, could well prove the easiest and the cheapest, as well as the quickest way to reduce the problems of South East Asia to manageable proportions.

The advantages of such a course are many; the greatest perhaps being the dramatic demonstration of US determination to support freedom, and make good its commitments at any cost. The demands on American intelligence, understanding, and determination would be greater than for any other politically possible course possible means of action; so too would be the rewards.

The disadvantages and risks are also major. Such an effort might bring about full-scale Chinese intervention. It would commit STRAC for 90-120 days -- and probably require the commitment for a year or more of forces larger than we now have in Vietnam and Laos. Congressional approval would probably be necessary, and might destroy the secrecy essential to success.

3. Negotiation for a ceasefire and US withdrawal:

In the eyes of much of the world, as well as in those of the Vietnamese, and of many Americans, this would be seen as surrender, a clear-cut admission that we cannot cope with the Communists in politically-oriented "liberation" warfare, and lack the courage or the will to honor our obligations if to do so means danger or discomfort.

The only advantage to be derived from this course of action would be that it would cut our present losses -- would postpone until another day, when it would be even more difficult and dangerous, a decision to act boldly and effectively in the defense of freedom. The disadvantages could scarcely be better summarized than they were by General Lansdale in his talk at Yale on 23 November: "we will have demonstrated..... (that) the United States is powerless to help a victimized people against a modern tyranny... The lesson would be: If you want a country, grab it through subversive insurgency; one can ... get away with it -- even when Uncle Sam says no... (or, as a Filipino columnist wrote)... "It would reduce America in the estimation of mankind to a dismal third rate power ... make every individual American distrusted everywhere on earth'..."

4. Positive, politically-oriented action for the development of a free, stable, democratic South Vietnam and South East Asia:

Some of the advantages of this course of action are obvious, the only real risk is that we may not be able to employ sufficient intelligence, determination, and understanding to make it succeed. A failure, which could only come about because of our own ineptitude, vacillation, or delay in taking the right actions with the right people in the right way, would place us at the same conference table to which the other courses would lead --- but with our military might untested. We risk only psychological defeat --- the possibility of a true military defeat by the forces presently deployed in Vietnam is at least years in the future.

A positive, politically-oriented program would express and be consonant with American political, economic and social beliefs, and seek to implement them in that beleaguered part of the world as the only foundation for a just and lasting peace. Its adoption

should be dramatically heralded by, in effect, a proclamation by the President of the United States of faith in the freedom and progress not only of South Vietnam, but of all South East Asia. It should contain specific pledges of plans for long-range economic development, as well as of support for intensive democratic development to insure stable, popular, effective self-government to all the countries that desire them. A special committee of the American Friends of Vietnam will soon present a paper outlining a suitable overall development plan for the area, based on existing surveys and data, as well as concepts for democratic development. The immediate tactical rural development programs appropriate to the situation in Vietnam today are largely described in the attached "Notes on Strategic Hamlets", while a plan for the all-important task of building a political base for government in Vietnam is described in the attached paper with that title. The details presented in these papers will unquestionably require changes as the situation develops; the essential principles are unchanging, whether they refer to Vietnam or to the United States.

Conclusion:

The argument most used against the politically-oriented approach is that it is too late, that the political situation has deteriorated so badly in South Vietnam that drastic action now is essential, if total collapse is to be avoided. The falsity of this is readily apparent if one compares factually the situation in South Vietnam today with that of the post-Geneva Vietnam of 1954. Measured in terms of areas under government control, of population supporting the central government, or of the effectiveness of central government control of military forces and civilian administrators, the Vietnamese government today is much stronger and more united than its predecessor of 1954 which controlled nothing beyond the gates of the Presidential palace. In a period of a few months after Geneva, many Vietnamese Army units lost as many as 80% of their personnel through desertion, a far cry from the Vietnamese Army rate today. And in 1954, in contrast to the present, few Vietnamese had any faith that an independent South Vietnam could last out the year or had any will to struggle to maintain that independence.

The major difficulty with this approach is that few really understand it and even fewer have had any personal experience with it. Since its essential ingredients are intangibles, the determination and will of patriots, the excitation and constructive use of human

emotions and abilities, it can no more be set forth in Pentagon style briefing charts supported by statistics than could the bases for the success of our own Revolution. True some of the techniques, some of the doctrine developed from the success of this approach in the Philippines in 1950-53 and in Vietnam in 1954-56 have already supposedly been tried in contemporary Vietnam. Too often the effort has been piecemeal, or a superficial application of words and empty forms, labelled as the approach itself. The essential concept, the imaginative construction of a political base for counter-insurgency has become obscured by words, by the poorly guided efforts of people who lack both understanding of the concept and experience in its application; or has been lost in the clogged channels of a vast and insensitive bureaucracy. (In the Philippines, not more than 5 Americans were really concerned with the formulation or implementation of the policies which won that counter-insurgency). Instead of understanding the war in Vietnam as a revolution and adapting our organization, plans and techniques to this revolution, we have tried to fit the revolution into our own conventional bureaucratic and military framework. In fact, and perhaps this is the most effective argument against it, one resigned to accepting business-as-usual could well say that the successful implementation of this approach requires such a radical change in US methods, personnel, and organization in Vietnam that it is not practical. This may be true, but it need not be, for frontal assaults on orthodox practices are not required.

The essential requirement is that there be a small "catalyst" team of men experienced in counter-insurgency, headed by a man who has full Presidential authority and backing to implement the approach within broad policy lines. Fuller explanations of this concept, and of the actions to be taken in its implementation, are contained in the attached papers "Concept for Victory in Vietnam" and "A Catalyst Team for Vietnam". For the President of the United States to decide to put his blue chips on a small group of people of lesser rank, with the necessary pertinent and successful experience (in this instance, in counter-insurgency) and back them to the hilt, is not uncommon, historically. It is such a departure from what has become the standard US approach to its problems overseas that it may be too much to hope for. The resulting changes would constitute almost a quiet revolution in themselves but they are certainly less hazardous and ultimately less painful than the alternatives.

It is eminently sound management practice to send in a team of tough, experienced, proven winners with full authority when a major enterprise has bogged down in "accepted practices" or encountered problems new to those in charge. Most often they are given command; but they need have no more than authority to give advice which can be over-ridden only by the commander-in-chief they represent. This is, in fact, generally consonant with military advisory concepts. Sound management practices do not permit critical decisions to be made by men inexperienced with the special factors involved, no matter how illustrious their performance in other fields.

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