

east Asia in the next year if we are going to do the job and meet what I think are very clear national needs.

Faced with this dilemma, the President, according to Forrestal, "More or less beginning then . . . began to take an interest in Vietnam. He began to get worried about it. It was a reaction of extreme nervousness—this thing is getting out of hand, and what am I going to do about it?"²

Forrestal was asked what Kennedy did after receiving the Forrestal-Hilsman report in January 1963:³

The thing that bothered him most about the report was that we were fighting a war, or helping Diem fight a war, with massive military means in a situation which was essentially a civil war—an elephant trying to kill a fly sort of thing. We were killing lots of other people at the same time we were trying to kill Viet Cong. So, the first thing he did was to try to get control of the kind of military operations that we were assisting the Vietnamese in undertaking, search-and-destroy, and great waves of battalions and regiments running all over the countryside pillaging and burning, doing all the things that soldiers do, which we thought had tended to make the political situation in Vietnam very much worse than it was, or should be. So his first reaction was to try—and he more or less succeeded—to cut back on the heavy military activity of the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]—the use of napalm, the use of herbicides, the use of too many mines. And that was very difficult to do because our Army supported all those activities, and thought they were necessary and militarily justified.

In late January, Kennedy also received a report from the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Earle C. Wheeler, on a trip he and others on a JCS team had just completed to Vietnam. Wheeler and his group were favorably impressed with the progress being made, but they, too, noted the increased strength of the Communists. The report concluded that unless there was increased pressure from the Communists, the present program could succeed in controlling the insurgency. ". . . we are winning slowly on the present thrust," the report said, and there is "no compelling reason to change."⁴ "At the same time," the report added, "it is not realistic to ignore the fact that we have not given Ho Chi Minh any evidence that we are prepared to call him to account for helping to keep the insurgency in South Vietnam alive, and that we should do something to make the North Vietnamese bleed." Rather than direct U.S. attacks on North Vietnam, or the "minor intelligence and sabotage forays which lie within the competence of the Central Intelligence Agency," the group recommended that South Vietnamese military units, trained by U.S. military advisers, should engage in a "powerful military endeavor" of "sabotage, destruction, propaganda, and subversive missions against North Vietnam."

The report was also critical of the coverage of the war by the American press, and recommended a series of "sponsored visits to

Vietnam by mature and responsible news correspondents and executives."

On February 1, President Kennedy met with Wheeler, McNamara, Taylor, and CIA Director John A. McCone to discuss the report. According to a memorandum from Forrestal to the President on February 4, "The meeting with General Wheeler on Friday was a complete waste of your time, for which I apologize. It was intended to provide you an opportunity to initiate action on some of the problems in South Vietnam described in the Eyes Only Annex to Hilman's and my report. The rosy euphoria generated by General Wheeler's report made this device unworkable."⁵

Forrestal suggested that Harriman and he begin a "quiet campaign" to get action on this series of steps:

1. to get General Harkins a direct line of communication to the JCS, or, alternatively and less desirably, to persuade CINCPAC to delegate more responsibility to Saigon;
2. to look for a replacement for Fritz Nolting when his 2-year term is up in April;
3. to encourage our civilian and military people in Saigon to put across more forcefully to the GVN U.S. views on fighting the war and on foreign policy;
4. to develop gradually a more independent posture for the U.S. in South Vietnam and very carefully to dissociate ourselves from those policies and practices of the GVN of which we disapprove with good reason;
5. to stimulate Defense to examine more carefully whether our Special Forces camps and the strategic hamlets are getting effective close air support when they are attacked;
6. to make a rapid and vigorous effort to improve press relations in Saigon, even at some cost to our relationships with the Diem Government;
7. [sanitized]
8. to get the field to consider whether we are supporting too many paramilitary organizations and overlooking some of the specific needs, such as a police force for movement control.

It should also be noted in passing that General Wheeler's optimism in early 1963 was apparently shared by most Members of Congress. In two executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 1963 in which Secretary of State Rusk testified on the general state of the world, Vietnam and Southeast Asia were scarcely mentioned.

Growing Doubts about Diem

Even though Kennedy may have begun to worry more about the conduct of the war, the problem, as Hilsman and Forrestal had reported, was not the kind of war being waged; the problem was Diem. This feeling was widely shared among top White House and State Department officials, especially Forrestal, Hilsman, Harriman and Under Secretary Ball (in March 1963 Hilsman became Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East and Harriman became Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs) as well as by some

² CRS Interview with Michael Forrestal, Oct. 16, 1978.

³*Ibid.*

⁴The report ("Report of Visit by Joint Chiefs of Staff Team to South Vietnam, January 1963") was declassified in 1984, and is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

⁵Same location.

elements of the CIA, including many in the CIA Station in Saigon. On the other side were McNamara and the military, including Maxwell Taylor (then Chairman of the JCS) and General Harkins, Chief of the MAAG in Vietnam, General Lansdale, Ambassador Nolting, John McCone and the CIA Station chief in Saigon, John H. Richardson, as well as William Colby, (who had preceded Richardson as station chief, and was then chief of the CIA's Far East Division in the Directorate of Plans (which conducts the CIA's covert operations). They tended to believe that the U.S. could and should work with Diem, and that the principal emphasis should be on prosecuting the war against the Communists.

A similar view was held by Robert K. G. Thompson, the British adviser to Diem, whose counterinsurgency expertise, as was mentioned earlier, was widely respected by the Americans. In March 1963, Thompson visited CINCPAC while on a brief trip to the United States, and gave the officers of the Pacific Command a very glowing report on Diem and on the progress being made in Vietnam. According to the CINCPAC report to Washington, Thompson said, "One year ago we were neither winning nor losing in RVN. Now we definitely are winning."⁶ He said the strategic hamlet program was going "much better in the last six months than he had ever expected." Moreover, the Government of South Vietnam was "stronger and more widely supported." A "coup attempt is remote," he added, but he was concerned about maintaining momentum and continuity, and said that "government throughout RVN would come to complete stop if Diem was eliminated."

The "greatest danger in RVN now," Thompson said, "is trying to do too much too rapidly. . . ."

Thompson suggested that at the end of the year, "if things go right," the U.S. should withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel from Vietnam. He recommended that the U.S. ". . . make big production out of this and publicize widely. This would show (1) RVN is winning; (2) take steam out of anti-Diemists; and (3) dramatically illustrate honesty of U.S. intentions." Whether or not this idea originated with Thompson, it was the plan subsequently carried out, at least on paper, by the Kennedy administration.

During April-June 1963, a series of events occurred in Vietnam that strengthened the Harriman-Hilsman-Forrestal position that Diem was "the problem," and led directly to the coup against Diem the following November.

Before examining these events it is important to note the broader framework within which U.S. policy was being made. From the beginning of Diem's rule in 1954, many U.S. policymakers had assumed that, under certain circumstances, the United States had not only the right but the responsibility to bring about a change of government in Vietnam. This assumption also prevailed with respect to relations with the government of some other countries in the world where U.S. interests were found to require such action, and in keeping with this philosophy the United States arranged and supported coups in 1954 in both Iran and Guatemala in which the putative leaders of those governments were replaced by leaders

of U.S. choosing. (There were other similar but less successful efforts, including one in Cambodia and another in Indonesia.) One such plan, code-named Operation MONGOOSE, in which, after creating unrest in Cuba, the U.S. would seek to have the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, removed from power directly or indirectly by one method or another, was underway, in fact, during the coup against Diem.⁷

Moreover, such action on the part of the U.S. Government had gained favor outside the government, primarily among those who supported U.S. intervention in the political affairs of other countries. These included persons of various political persuasions, but on the whole the support for such intervention appears to have come principally from individuals who tended to prefer political rather than military means, and who were strongly reformist in their political thinking. One of these was John Kenneth Galbraith, a professor at Harvard University then serving as U.S. Ambassador to India, who had advised Kennedy that if the Vietnamese failed to perform adequately under the new limited partnership, "the only solution would be to drop Diem." Another was Hans Morgenthau, a noted University of Chicago political scientist with access and influence in Washington, (who, it will be recalled, had been among those in the middle 1950s who had praised Diem's accomplishments in a speech at a meeting of the American Friends of Vietnam, while warning Diem himself that he should liberalize his attitude toward political opposition), who had decided that Diem was a liability. Morgenthau took the position that the U.S. was becoming overly involved in supporting regimes in countries like Vietnam "whose political weakness compels us in the end to commit ourselves militarily beyond what our national interest would require."⁸ If the U.S. persisted in supporting Diem, he said, ". . . we are likely to be drawn ever more deeply into a Korean-type war, fought under political and military conditions much more unfavorable than those that prevailed in Korea and in the world a decade ago. Such a war cannot be won quickly, if it can be won at all, and may well last, like its Greek and Malayan counterparts, 5 or 10 years, perhaps only to end again in a stalemate, as did the Korean war." Such a war, Morgenthau warned, ". . . would certainly have a profound impact upon the political health of the Nation. McCarthyism and the change in the political complexion of the Nation which the elections of 1952 brought about resulted directly from the frustrations of the Korean War. The

⁶In the case of Vietnam, according to one account, "As early as 1957 some American government officials were talking about getting rid of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam." Thomas Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets: Richard Helms and the CIA* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 126.

Powers also states (p. 127): "Later in the 1960s, a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Robert Murphy [a retired senior Foreign Service officer], asked why the CIA didn't kill Ho Chi Minh, since he was giving us so much trouble. . . . CIA officers responded with . . . what good would it do? Ho's successor might be even worse. How were you going to kill Ho Chi Minh secretly? You might be able to fool the *New York Times*, Robert Murphy was told, but how were you going to deceive the Vietnamese? They'd know what happened, they'd know who did it, and they'd probably be in a position and mood to retaliate. There is a tacit truce between nations on such matters: once you start killing them, they start killing you. The CIA simply does not have the assets to kill secretly a well-guarded figure like Ho Chi Minh in a security-conscious state like North Vietnam."

⁷Hans J. Morgenthau, "Vietnam - Another Korea?" *Commentary*, 33 (May 1962), pp. 369-374.

American people are bound to be at least as deeply affected by the frustrations of a Vietnamese War."

The alternative, Morgenthau said, was "the subordination of our military commitments to, and thus their limitation by, our political objectives in South Vietnam. These objectives must be defined as the restoration of a viable political order, which constitutes the only effective defense against Communist subversion." According to Morgenthau,

It is obvious that such a political order can be established only through American intervention. It would be infantile to argue against such a policy on the ground that it is intervention; for if we had not intervened consistently since 1954 in the affairs of South Vietnam, Mr. Diem would not be its President today and South Vietnam itself would not exist. The choices before us are not between intervention and nonintervention, but between an intervention which serves our political interests and thereby limits our military commitments, and an intervention which supports to the bitter end the powers that be, even if their policies, by being counterproductive, jeopardize the interests of the United States.

The U.S., Morgenthau said, should "find a general" to replace Diem, and to establish a viable political order. "The idea that there is no alternative to Diem," he said, "is in the nature of a self-fulfilling prophecy. There appears to be no alternative to Diem only because we have placed all our bets on him."

Shortly after Morgenthau's views were published, a prominent American journalist, Theodore White, who had just returned from a trip to Asia, sent a personal letter to Kennedy in which he made a similar recommendation. Praising the negotiated settlement for Laos, White said:⁹

But this South Vietnam thing is a real bastard to solve—either we have to let the younger military officers knock off Diem in a coup and take our chances on a military regime (as in Pakistan or South Korea); or else we have to give it up. To commit troops there is unwise—for the problem is political and doctrinal (in the long-range intellectual sense); until a government in South Viet-Nam comes about that inspires its people to die against Communism, as Communism inspires men to die against others, our troops can do no good.

Many of Diem's former supporters had also become disillusioned, and were actively promoting a change of leadership in South Vietnam. These included a large part of the membership of the American Friends of Vietnam, as well as most of those formerly associated with the Michigan State University project.

Joseph Buttinger, one of the organizers and principal leaders of the American Friends of Vietnam, had become disillusioned with Diem, and, beginning in 1960, worked for his removal. By 1962, he was, in his own words, a "determined opponent" of Diem.¹⁰ In co-

operation with an exiled former official of Diem's government, he wrote a proclamation for clandestine distribution in South Vietnam which called on the people to help overthrow Diem. In June 1963, Buttinger convened a conference of American and Vietnamese social scientists to discuss the situation, and afterwards, at their behest, he prepared a memorandum, distributed in Washington, on the reasons why, in order for the war to be won, Diem had to be replaced. After the Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States resigned in protest in August 1963, Buttinger worked with him to convince the American public of the case against Diem.

One of the Michigan State group, Frank Child, as was noted earlier, said that the situation in Vietnam was critical; that new leadership was required; and that "A military coup—or an assassin's bullet—are the only means by which this leadership will ever be exercised."¹¹

Wesley Fishel, who had been one of his close friends and advisers in the 1950s, was deeply discouraged about Diem's failure to "mobilize the hearts and loyalties of the people."

In Congress itself, where support for Diem had been a very important element in the U.S. commitment to Diem, Mansfield was very disillusioned by 1963. Morse put the Morgenthau article (quoted above) in the *Congressional Record*. Church, who was to play a supporting role in September 1963 in the power play mounted against Diem by the Kennedy administration, had returned from his trip to Vietnam feeling that the war was being lost because of the lack of Vietnamese public support for the government.

Fulbright, although silent on the subject, had indicated on several occasions in executive sessions of the Foreign Relations Committee that he was not opposed to U.S. efforts to bring about a change of leadership in Vietnam. Prior to the coup against Diem he had also received, probably in the spring of 1963, a memorandum from John Newhouse of the Foreign Relations Committee staff quoting from a letter from Stanley Karnow, a veteran Far East reporter, in which Karnow stated that the U.S. had its hands tied behind its back as long as Diem was in power. Karnow said, however, that the U.S. should not take the lead in overthrowing Diem; that the Vietnamese themselves would do so.¹²

Thus, by the spring of 1963, Diem's political support in Washington and among influentials in the U.S. had declined drastically, especially among Kennedy's own supporters. This, together with the lack of progress being made on the military front in Vietnam, provided the ingredients for the decision to "drop Diem," which was made during the period between May and August 1963, following numerous discussions of the matter during the spring and early summer in meetings of the Special Group (CI).¹³

Beginning in May 1963, and continuing during the summer, the case for withdrawing support from Diem was further strengthened as a result of the "Buddhist crisis," in which, following Buddhist demonstrations against the Diem government, including self-immo-

⁹Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam General, 1962.

¹⁰Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: The Unforgettable Tragedy* (New York: Horizon Press, 1977), p. 50. Buttinger adds: "Two facts, however, prevented me from experiencing great satisfaction over the fall of Diem. I did not believe that his replacement by a military government offered much chance for the adoption of the policy of radical reforms I knew was called for; and I was deeply disturbed by the politically unnecessary and despicable murder of Diem and his brother Nhu."

¹¹See p. 76.

¹²University of Arkansas, Fulbright Papers, series 48, undated memorandum from Newhouse to Fulbright.

¹³Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*, p. 168.

lation by several monks, the government responded with what may have been or appeared to be excessive force.¹⁴ These events, which were widely televised in the United States, created a sense of public revulsion, and policymakers in Washington became concerned that this reaction would have the effect of reducing American public support for the role of the U.S. in Vietnam.

The U.S. Decides to Act

On June 11, the first self-immolation of a Buddhist monk (*bonze*) occurred, and the U.S. warned Diem that unless the situation improved, the U.S. would have to dissociate itself from his treatment of the Buddhists.

There was also a sharp reaction from the American public to the burning of the Buddhist monk. Influential newspapers and leaders criticized the Diem government,¹⁵ and a group of prominent New York clergymen, calling themselves the Ministers Vietnam Committee, organized a protest against U.S. policy, citing the following points:

1. Our country's military aid to those who denied him [the Buddhist monk] religious freedom.
2. The immoral spraying of parts of South Vietnam with crop-destroying chemicals and the herding of many of its people into concentration camps called "strategic hamlets."
3. The loss of American lives and billions of dollars to bolster a regime universally regarded as unjust, undemocratic, and unstable.
4. The fiction that this is "fighting for freedom."

The group, led by Dr. Donald Szanho Harrington, pastor of the Community Church of New York, a large unitarian universalist congregation, as well as vice chairman (later chairman) of the Liberal Party in the State of New York, placed an ad in the *New York Times* urging public support for the protest, and on August 15, 1963, sent President Kennedy a letter and a petition signed by 15,000 clergymen from around the country endorsing the four-point protest statement.¹⁶

This was one of the earliest protests against U.S. policy in Vietnam, and it attracted considerable support. According to Dr. Harrington, there were about 18,000 replies to the advertisement, and enough money was raised to cover the cost of both the first advertisement and another in the *New York Times* on September 15 in which the protest statement was repeated.¹⁷

Soon after the issuance of the protest, Dr. Harrington, Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas, and Robert Jones, the executive sec-

¹⁴The Buddhist uprisings are discussed in a number of the books dealing with Vietnam. See especially Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*; Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*; Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

¹⁵See, for example, the *New York Times*, June 17, 1963, which said that if Diem ". . . cannot genuinely represent a majority then he is not the man to be President."

¹⁶Twelve of the country's foremost clergymen signed the protest, including Henry Emerson Fosdick, Reinhold Niebuhr, James A. Pike, and Ralph W. Sockman.

¹⁷Letter to CRS, Aug. 21, 1984. The money for the first advertisement had been advanced by a New York businessman, Daniel J. Bernstein, who, before his death in 1970, was one of the principal financial supporters of antiwar activities, primarily those of religious and business groups. Other antiwar activities of an informational or educational nature were supported by the Daniel J. Bernstein Foundation, known as the DJB Foundation.

retary of the Unitarian Universalist Washington office, organized the first picketing of the White House on the Vietnam question. In addition, Harrington's Liberal Party became the first political group to oppose the war.

Prior to the burning of the monk, the U.S. mission in Saigon had prepared a contingency plan for dealing with Diem in the event that the situation became more critical, and on May 23, 1963, Nolting submitted the plan to Washington for approval. On June 14, the State Department replied in a cable from Hilsman drafted by Chalmers Wood of the Vietnam Task Force, and cleared by Harriman, suggesting that in implementing this plan the U.S. mission consider Diem's Vice President, Nguyen Ngoc Tho as a replacement for Diem; that ". . . while there is no change in US policy of supporting Diem, we want Tho to know that in event situation arises due to internal political circumstances (in which US would play . . . no part) where Diem definitively unable act as President and only in this situation we would want to back Tho as constitutional successor. . . ." The cable added, "we would assume he would need military support," but it did not explain what was meant by "military support."¹⁸

"In view precarious situation," the cable continued, "it would seem worthwhile to run risk delivering such message now assuming Tho would not likely consider it in his interest to inform anyone else. We would have to tell Tho that if word leaked we would flatly deny." If the mission thought it advisable, the cable said, it might be preferable to tell Diem himself about the plan for succession.

As will be seen, it was indeed Nguyen Ngoc Tho, under the general authority of the military junta, who succeeded Diem as the civilian leader of Vietnam after the coup.

The cable also contained a second suggested action, which was deleted when the document was declassified in 1982. Judging by a reply from Saigon on June 16, this deleted recommendation had to do with the importance of maintaining contact with opposition leaders in the Diem government, especially those who might be involved in a coup.¹⁹ In its comment on this suggestion the U.S. mission said: ". . . There are no bars whatsoever on contacts and we are receiving just now a surfeit of coup talk and antiregime comment. It is to be expected in such circumstances that one is never in contact with the people (if any) who really mean business, but we have all the lines out that we know how to put out and have had for some days. However, everyone is as usual under strict instructions . . . not to encourage coup talk and to meet any that arises with firm statement of US support for GVN."

As for Washington's suggestion about telling Tho or Diem about the plan for supporting Tho in the event Diem were no longer able to continue as President, the mission replied that the situation was more stable as a result of an agreement just concluded between the government and the Buddhists, and that it would not be wise to take such action at that time. "Our best move at this juncture . . .

¹⁸Kennedy Library, NSF Country file, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 1219, June 14, 1963, same location.

¹⁹Saigon to Washington 1195, June 16, 1963, same location.

is to press Diem directly and indirectly to accept Buddhist crisis as blessing in disguise and to use agreement reached as a stepping stone to concessions to other groups (before they demand them). The whole operation would be keyed to building up popular support for regime prior to August parliamentary elections and importantly also to making sure that paper undertakings to Buddhists are carried out in full measure."

The U.S. mission was dubious about the chances for such a plan, however, as the cable admitted. "This scheme will doubtless be regarded as naive by anyone who knows this country (and it is certainly the longest of shots)." But the mission thought it should be given a "fair try." If Diem was "in a mood to freeze up, rather than move forward," the cable added, then "his days are numbered," and at that point the suggested approach should be made to Vice President Tho.

By July 1, 1963, the situation had not improved, and policymakers in Washington were once again concerned about a potential "crisis." At a meeting that morning, Ball, Harriman, Hilsman and Forrestal decided that they should notify McGeorge Bundy, who was with the President on a trip to Rome, of their appraisal of the situation. "We all believe," the ensuing White House cable stated, "one more burning Bonze will cause domestic U.S. reaction which will require strong public statement despite danger that this might precipitate coup in Saigon. Demarche to Diem insisting on removal of Nhu and wife to post outside SVN before such statement becomes necessary under consideration."²⁰

Upon returning to Washington, Kennedy met with these advisers on the fourth of July.²¹ They reported that the U.S. had put "extremely heavy pressure" on Diem, who had agreed to make a speech saying he would meet with Buddhist leaders. He was told that if he did not make the speech, and if the demonstrations resumed, the U.S. would be forced to take a public stand against his policy toward the Buddhists.

Hilsman told Kennedy, "Our estimate was that no matter what Diem did there will be coup attempts over the next four months." He said that there was general agreement, however, that "the chances of chaos in the wake of a coup are considerably less than they were a year ago." Hilsman added that Nolting thought a civil war would ensue if Diem were killed in a coup, but he said he disagreed with Nolting, feeling that in such an event a civil war was possible but not likely.

Forrestal reported Gen. Victor H. Krulak's (JCS Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency) view that even if there were chaos in Saigon, the Vietnamese Armed Forces would continue military actions against the Communists.

The group discussed the possibility of "getting rid of the Nhus," but the "combined judgment" was that this was not possible.

On that same day, Lucien Conein, the veteran CIA agent in Saigon, was contacted by General Tran Van Don, Acting Chief of Staff of Vietnamese Armed Forces, about the possibility of a military coup against Diem. Conein reported, and Washington was so

informed, that General Don, his brother-in-law, General Le Van Kim, General Tran Thieh Khiem (Army Chief of Staff), and General Duong Van "Big" Minh, who had been a strong ally of Diem in 1954-55, had agreed on the necessity for a coup.²² A week later, a CIA cable from Saigon said that if a coup occurred, the new government "might be initially less effective against the Viet Cong but, given continued support from the U.S., could provide reasonably effective leadership for the government and the war effort."²³

The next day (July 5) Ball met with Ambassador Nolting, who was in Washington for a few days, and during the conversation he asked Nolting what would happen if there were a "change of government" in Vietnam. Nolting said, ". . . if a revolution occurred in Vietnam which grew out of the Buddhist situation, the country would be split between feuding factions and the Americans would have to withdraw, and the country might be lost to the Communists." As to the question of how much pressure the United States could bring to bear, Nolting said that Diem's government would fall if the U.S. were to repudiate it on the Buddhist question.²⁴

On July 9, Nolting testified on Vietnam in an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.²⁵ He said that the war was going well despite the Buddhist disturbances, and he defended the Diem government against charges of ruthlessness. Committee members seemed concerned about the situation, but only Senator Symington took a position on what should be done. He repeated earlier statements he had made publicly that the U.S. should either use greater military force to bring the conflict to an end (he preferred action directly against the north), or American forces should be withdrawn.²⁶

On July 10, a Special National Intelligence Estimate on "The Situation in South Vietnam"²⁷ concluded that Diem and Nhu would resist further U.S. pressure, and that their inaction on the Buddhist "crisis" could then lead to a "better than even" chance of a coup or assassination.

On August 5, another *bonze* was burned, followed by another on August 16, as tension increased in Saigon.

On August 12, however, just before leaving Vietnam, Nolting talked to Diem, and reported to Washington that Diem had assured him that he would be conciliatory toward the Buddhists in order to satisfy world public opinion, even though he considered them sub-

²⁰Conein's "After-Action Report," Nov. 1, 1963, cited by *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, An Interim Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, November 20, 1975, (S. Rept. 94-465), 94th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print Off., 1975), p. 218 (hereafter cited as Senate Report on Assassination Plots).

Don was the principal contact with the CIA. Minh was the leader of the group, and became the head of the military government which replaced Diem. Gen. Ton That Dinh, the III Corps commander in Saigon, joined the group in October and participated in the coup. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, II Corps commander in Pleiku was also involved, and later overthrew the Minh government in January 1965.

²¹Quoted by *U.S. News and World Report*, Oct. 10, 1983, "Untold Story of the Road to War in Vietnam," p. VN5. This special report was prepared by the magazine after three years of extensive research and interviewing.

²²PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 728-729.

²³U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, July 9, 1963.

²⁴For Symington's position see his remarks during an appearance on "Meet the Press" on Apr. 28, 1963, reprinted in *CR*, vol. 109, pp. 17149 ff.

²⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 729-733.

²⁰Same location.

²¹PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 727-728.

versive. He also told Nolting that he would remove his brother's controversial wife, Madame Nhu (who, among other things, had been very outspoken in her defense of government actions against the Buddhists), from the country.

On August 21, while Nolting, Hilsman, and Henry Cabot Lodge, the new U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, were meeting in Honolulu prior to Lodge's arrival in Saigon the following day, word came that Buddhist pagodas had been attacked in several cities. Originally it was thought that the attacks were carried out by Vietnamese Army units, but it soon became clear that they were conducted by police and Special Forces loyal to Nhu.

At this point, the U.S. Government began to put into effect the plan it had been developing for several months. First, Harriman and Forrestal drafted a statement denouncing and dissociating the U.S. from Diem's policies toward the Buddhists. Second, the U.S. began discussing with dissident Vietnamese army officers and others the possibility of a coup. On August 23, Conein, who had been contacted in July by General Tran Van Don, as was noted above, met again with Don, who discussed alternatives to Diem but refused to reveal the generals' plans.²⁸

Also on August 23, Rufus Phillips, a CIA agent who had been one of Lansdale's associates in the middle 1950s, and had returned to Vietnam in 1962 as Assistant Director of Rural Development, was contacted by Nguyen Dinh Thuan, one of Diem's most intimate associates. In the cable to Washington reporting their conversation, Phillips said that Thuan recommended that the U.S. try to split the Nhus off from Diem. "Under no circumstances, Thuan said, should the U.S. acquiesce in what the Nhus had done. This would be disastrous." The U.S., Thuan added, "must not be afraid of leaving the door open to the Communists, by withdrawing support from the government as long as it contained the Nhus." The U.S. had to be "firm." If it was, Thuan said, "the army would respond."²⁹

The August 24 Cable

Washington reacted in a cable from Hilsman to Lodge on August 24, 1963, the key part of which was as follows:³⁰

US Government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands. Diem must be given chance to rid himself of Nhu and his coterie and replace them with best military and political personalities available.

If, in spite of all of your efforts, Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved.

We now believe immediate action must be taken to prevent Nhu from consolidating his position further. Therefore, unless you in consultation with Harkins perceive overriding objections you are authorized to proceed along following lines:

²⁸Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files, The memorandum, sanitized with source deleted, dated 23 Oct. 1963, is entitled: "first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963."

²⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 324, Aug. 24, 1963.

³⁰For the cable, Washington to Saigon 243, Aug. 24, 1963, see Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

(1) First, we must press on appropriate levels of GVN following lines:

(a) USG cannot accept actions against Buddhists taken by Nhu and his collaborators under cover martial law.

(b) Prompt dramatic actions redress situation must be taken. . . .

(2) We must at same time also tell key military leaders that US would find it impossible to continue support GVN militarily and economically unless above steps are taken immediately which we recognize requires removal of Nhus from the scene. We wish give Diem reasonable opportunity to remove Nhus, but if he remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell appropriate military commanders we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown central government mechanism.

The cable added that the mission should "urgently examine all possible alternative leadership and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem's replacement if this should become necessary."

This cable, which marked the beginning of active U.S. support for the coup against Diem, was drafted by Hilsman, with direct roles played also by Forrestal, Harriman and Ball. (It has usually been referred to as the "green light" cable, but there is said by one key official to have been a second "green light" cable on October 27 giving final approval for the coup.) It was cleared in Washington by various deputies—Ball for the State Department, Gilpatric for the Defense Department, Krulak for the JCS, and Richard Helms for the CIA, in the absence from Washington on that Saturday of all of the principals involved, as well as the President himself. A copy of the cable was teletyped to Kennedy in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, and he cleared it after a phone conversation with Ball in which he told Ball that if Rusk (who was contacted by phone) and Gilpatric, as well as Ball himself, approved it, then it was all right with him.³¹ According to Hilsman, the President "went over the cable word by word."³²

The President had known that a proposal for such action was imminent. On August 24, prior to the drafting of the cable itself later that day, Forrestal sent Kennedy a memo for his "Week-end Reading File," as follows:³³

I attach the latest cables on the situation in Saigon. It is now quite certain that Brother Nhu is the mastermind behind the whole operation against the Buddhists and is calling the shots. This is now agreed by virtually everyone here.

Agreement is also developing that the United States cannot tolerate a result of the present difficulties in Saigon which leaves Brother Nhu in a dominating position. There is disagreement on whether Diem has any political viability left,

³¹Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, p. 91.

³²CRS Interview with Roger Hilsman, Sept. 23, 1980.

³³Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

and on whether he could even be brought to acquiesce in the removal of his brother.

Averell and Roger now agree that we must move before the situation in Saigon freezes. I am pressing them to get John McCone's endorsement of one of several courses of action which can be presented to you at the earliest opportunity.

Rusk was in New York on August 24, but according to Hilsman³⁴ he, too, was teletyped a draft, and both he and Kennedy, Hilsman says, "participated in the revisions" through "several telephone conversations." Hilsman also takes the position that Rusk added an important sentence (the final sentence in part [2] of the cable) promising direct assistance to the leaders of the coup, the "implication being," says Hilsman, "that if the generals revolted, and it wasn't immediately successful, we would attempt to supply the generals through Hue."³⁵ Rusk, for his part, denies that he added the sentence, and says that the cable was cleared by him by telephone, "but in the most guarded terms . . . I didn't have a text in front of me. It was cleared with me on the phone in rather general terms because we were on an open telephone line."³⁶ Ball agrees with Rusk's version, saying that after he talked to Kennedy he called Rusk and "paraphrased it to him, because I thought we had an open line." He said that Rusk replied that if the President approved, if Ball agreed, and if Defense agreed, then he would concur.³⁷ Hilsman contends that the telephone call occurred after Rusk had seen and revised the cable.³⁸

Gilpatrick, acting for McNamara, was telephoned at his farm near Washington by Forrestal, who told him of the contents of the cable, but stated that because it had already been approved by the President it did not need his concurrence. Gilpatrick acquiesced, but then called Taylor, and the two agreed that both in substance and procedure the cable was unsatisfactory.³⁹ Meanwhile, according to Hilsman,⁴⁰ Taylor's concurrence had been given to Forrestal by General Krulak, then on the staff of the Joint Chiefs (of which Taylor was Chairman), after Krulak talked to Taylor by telephone at a restaurant. (Hilsman adds, however, that Krulak gave Taylor's clearance an hour and a half before actually receiving it from Taylor.) Taylor, on the other hand, says that he first heard of the cable when called at his residence by Gilpatrick, and that he then called the Pentagon for a copy which was delivered later by Krulak.⁴¹

McCone was also out of town, but his deputy, Richard Helms, agreed emphatically, saying that it was time to take the proposed action.⁴²

³⁴ *To Move A Nation*, p. 488.

³⁵ *Many Reasons Why*, pp. 90-91, 93.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁸ David Wise, *The Politics of Lying* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 1, fn. 20.

³⁹ Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 292.

⁴⁰ *To Move A Nation*, p. 488.

⁴¹ *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 292.

⁴² *To Move A Nation*, p. 488. As Colby notes, however, Helms' action was not a clearance as such, in view of the fact that the cable concerned a policy matter rather than intelligence *per se*. See *Honorable Men*, p. 210.

Apparently, no Member of Congress was contacted or informed about the decision to support a coup against Diem, as represented by the cable.

By Monday, August 26, severe doubts about the cable were being expressed by McNamara, McCone and Taylor. The President himself, Schlesinger said, ". . . felt rather angrily that he had been pressed too hard and fast. He discussed the situation with Robert Kennedy, who talked in turn with McNamara and Maxwell Taylor. The Attorney General reported back with great concern that nobody knew what was going to happen in Vietnam and that our policy had not been fully discussed, as every other major decision since the Bay of Pigs had been discussed."⁴³

According to Schlesinger, President Kennedy ". . . thought the August 24 cable impulsive and precipitate. 'He always said it was a major mistake on his part,' Robert Kennedy recalled the next year. '. . . The result is we started down a road that we never really recovered from.'" Schlesinger added that the President became, according to Robert Kennedy, "'very unhappy' with Harriman—so much so that Robert noting that Harriman 'put on about ten years during that period . . . because he was so discouraged,' asked his brother 'if he couldn't rehabilitate him by just being nice to him . . . because he's a very valuable figure.'"⁴⁴

Lodge replied the next day (Sunday, August 25) to Hilsman's August 24 cable. He generally agreed with the position taken in the cable, but questioned whether the U.S. should approach Diem directly with an ultimatum. This, he said, might strengthen Diem's defiance. Moreover, Diem was the one who should make amends. After receiving Lodge's cable, the State Department, after checking with others, agreed to postpone the question of talking directly to Diem.⁴⁵

On Monday, August 26, Kennedy met with his top NSC advisers. According to Hilsman (the only available account of the meeting at this writing), he wanted to know ". . . how everyone stood. It was not too late to back off." The group discussed the "growing disaffection in Vietnam among the non-Communist elements of society whose support was essential if the war against the Viet Cong was to be pursued successfully." "What Rusk, Ball, Harriman, Forrestal, and I feared," Hilsman said, "was not only that there would be worldwide political repercussions if the situation continued as it was but that the heart would go out of the war effort. . . . McNamara, Taylor, and Krulak . . . wanted to try to find a way to get Diem to return to his old position and his old policies. . . . But they also agreed that in the circumstances we had to tell the generals that, although we would prefer to see Diem remain—without Nhu—if the Vietnamese decided otherwise, an interim, anti-Communist military government could expect that American support would continue."

"The consensus of the group," Hilsman said, "was that even though the present course of action was dangerous, doing nothing was even more dangerous, and the President went around the table

⁴³ *A Thousand Days*, p. 991.

⁴⁴ *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 713.

⁴⁵ *To Move A Nation*, p. 488.

one by one to make sure. The Secretary of State summed it up by saying that if we acquiesced in what had happened and the present situation in Vietnam continued, we would be on an inevitable road to disaster. The decision would then be whether to get out and let the country go to the Communists or move United States combat forces into Vietnam and take over." The question of whether to approach Diem directly remained unanswered.⁴⁶

Later that day (August 26), CIA Headquarters in Washington told the U.S. Mission to instruct Conein, and Alphonso G. Spera, also of the CIA, to discuss the coup with the generals, based on the August 24 cable, using the following points:⁴⁷

- (1) Solidification of further elaboration of action aspects of present thinking and planning. What should be done?
- (2) We in agreement Nhus must go.
- (3) Question of retaining Diem or not up to them [generals].
- (4) Bonzes and other arrestees must be released immediately and five-point agreement of 16 June be fully carried out.
- (5) We will provide direct support during any interim period of breakdown of central government mechanism.
- (6) We cannot be of any help during initial action of assuming power of the state. Entirely their own action, win or lose. Don't expect to be bailed out.
- (7) If Nhus do not go, and if Buddhists' situation is not redressed as indicated, we would find it impossible continue military and economic support.
- (8) It is hoped bloodshed can be avoided or reduced to absolute minimum.
- (9) It is hoped that during process and after, developments conducted in such manner as to retain and increase the necessary relations between Vietnamese and Americans which will allow for progress of country and successful prosecution of the war.

That same day (August 26), Conein and Spera discussed these points with Generals Tran Thien Khiem, Army Chief of Staff, and Nguyen Khanh, II Corps commander in Pleiku, two of the members of the group considering a coup. Khiem said that the generals agreed with the nine points. Khanh said he was not yet ready to move, and that he was waiting for indications that Nhu was preparing an accommodation with North Vietnam.⁴⁸

On August 27, Khiem was again contacted, and told Conein that a committee of generals, headed by General Duong Van "Big" Minh, had discussed the question of a coup, and had agreed that one would occur within a week's time.⁴⁹

The NSC advisers, along with Nolting, met again with the President the next day (August 27).⁵⁰ (In advance of the meeting, Ken-

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 490-491.

⁴⁷ Director of Central Intelligence to Lodge, Aug. 26, 1963, cited in Senate Report on Assassination Plots, p. 239.

⁴⁸ [first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963, cited above.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File. Present besides the President were: the Attorney General, Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Ball, Gilpatrick, Taylor, Hilsman, Nolting, Krulak, Helms, Colby, Edward R. Murrow (USIA Director), McGeorge Bundy, Forrestal, and General Marshall S. Carter, Deputy Director of the CIA.

nedy was told by Forrestal that a committee of South Vietnamese generals had been formed "for the purpose of bringing about a military coup within a week.")⁵¹ Colby reported that the situation in Saigon was quiet, and the "unrest was not apparent in the countryside." He said that two generals had been interviewed by the CIA. "One general said the situation for a coup was favorable and forecast that one would take place within a week. The second general gave what was described as a jumpy answer."

The President then asked a series of questions. Among other things, he wanted to know about the effect of the civil disturbances on the war itself. Krulak replied that the effect was "slight."

In response to the President's question about why the peasants were not more disturbed about the attacks on the Buddhists, Nolting said the Buddhists were not an organized religious force, and that what happened in Saigon was of little concern to the rural population.

The President asked why Diem had not kept his promises. Nolting replied that Diem had kept his promises. "He said that there was no promise made to us which he [Diem] had not tried to keep. . . . Diem should be given an 'E' for effort. Diem is not a liar and is a man of integrity."

The President said that Hilsman had told him that Diem was not "forthright." Hilsman said he had gotten this impression from Nolting.

The President asked Nolting whether the situation between August 12, when Diem had promised conciliation, and August 21, when the pagodas were attacked, had caused Diem to change his mind, or whether Diem had lied to Nolting. Nolting replied that he thought Diem and Nhu had decided to "end the unrest once and for all and together they had moved from conciliation to the use of force."

Kennedy asked Nolting about the prospect for a coup. Nolting replied that there was not sufficient military support for a coup to be successful, but there might be if the U.S. told the Vietnamese that they had to get rid of Diem and Nhu. According to the official summary of the meeting, "Ambassador Nolting recalled that the circle had nearly been completed in a three-year period. Ambassador Durbrow had told Diem three years ago that Nhu must go. Diem refused to accept the suggestion and Durbrow was removed from Vietnam. (The President recognized the irony of this situation by smiling.)" Nolting added, ". . . we should not fight the internal political situation in Vietnam too hard. He urged that we keep our eye on fighting the Viet Cong." He said, however, "Diem must be forced to limit the authority of Nhu and get Madame Nhu out of the country. Diem would not respond if he were pushed, but he could be convinced by Ambassador Lodge that the situation must improve if we were to continue assisting Vietnam."

As the meeting ended, Rusk said that it was important to make clear to the U.S. mission that Washington was not changing the "existing directive," i.e., the August 24 cable authorizing U.S. support for a coup.

⁵¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Memorandum for the President," Aug. 27, 1963.

After the meeting, a cable was sent to Lodge and Harkins asking for their views on what the next move of the U.S. should be. They replied in a cable from Lodge on August 29, concurred in, with one exception, by Harkins, saying, "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back; the overthrow of the Diem government."⁵² The cable continued:

We must press on for many reasons. Some of these are:

(a) Explosiveness of the present situation which may well lead to riots and violence if issue of discontent of regime is not met. Out of this could come a pro-Communist or at best a neutralist set of politicians.

(b) The fact that war cannot be won with the present regime.

(c) Our own reputation for steadfastness and our unwillingness to stultify ourselves.

(d) If proposed action is suspended, I believe a body blow will be dealt to respect for us by Vietnamese Generals. Also, all those who expect U.S. to straighten out this situation will feel let down. Our help to the regime in past years inescapably gives a responsibility which we cannot avoid.

Lodge added, "I realize that this course involves a very substantial risk of losing Vietnam. It also involves some additional risk to American lives. I would never propose it if I felt there was a reasonable chance of holding Vietnam with Diem."

Harkins, Lodge said, thought that Lodge should ask Diem to "get rid of the Nhus before starting the Generals' action." Lodge disagreed: ". . . I believe that such a step has no chance of getting the desired result and would have the very serious effect of being regarded by the Generals as a sign of American indecision and delay. I believe this is a risk which we should not run. The Generals distrust us too much already. Another point is that Diem would certainly ask for time to consider such a far-reaching request. This would give the ball to Nhu."

A cable on August 28 from CIA Station Chief Richardson to McCone, supported Lodge's position:⁵³ "Situation here has reached point of no return. . . . If the Ngo family wins now, they and Vietnam will stagger on to final defeat at the hands of their own people and the VC. Should a generals' revolt occur and be put down, GVN will sharply reduce American presence in SVN. Even if they did not do so, it seems clear that American public opinion and Congress, as well as world opinion, would force withdrawal or reduction of American support for VN under the Ngo administration. . . . It is obviously preferable that the generals conduct this effort without apparent American assistance. . . . Nevertheless, we all understand that the effort must succeed and that whatever needs to be done on our part must be done."

On that same day (August 28), Conein met with Generals Minh and Khiem. Minh asked for a "token" of U.S. determination to sup-

⁵²The sanitized text of the cable, Saigon to Washington 375, Aug. 29, 1963, is in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 738-739, and a copy of the cable is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

⁵³*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 736.

port a coup in the form of a cutoff of economic aid "in order to force Nhu's hand." Conein said he did not reply specifically to this request.⁵⁴ In the weeks ahead, however, as will be seen, the U.S. decided to cut off aid to Nhu's Special Forces, thus giving the generals the token they wanted as the sign of American support for the coup.

The next day (August 29), the State Department received a cable from a Foreign Service officer, Paul Kattenburg, who had served in Vietnam during the 1950s, and at that time was director of the Vietnam Task Force under Hilsman. Kattenburg had been sent to Vietnam for a report on the situation, especially Diem's psychological state, and he cabled from Saigon that after talking with Diem, "while there is no doubt he is in full possession of his faculties, impression of growing neurosis cannot be escaped."⁵⁵

Also on that same day, incidentally, the Public Affairs Bureau (Public Opinion Studies staff) of the State Department circulated within the government its latest "American Opinion Summary," based on the accounts of the news media and statements by Members of Congress, which concluded that there was general concern in Congress and the media about the effect of continuing to support Diem. "The Diem government's 'image,' insofar as a large number of those who commented are concerned," the Summary stated, "is 'beyond repair.'" Senator Morse was quoted as saying that "the sooner the U.S. ceases its support of the Diem government the better off we shall be."⁵⁶

The White House also received a memorandum of a private conversation on the evening of August 27 between Lansdale and the former South Vietnamese ambassador to the U.S., Tran Van Chuong (who had resigned on August 22 in protest against the Diem government), and his wife, who were the parents of Madame Nhu. Both of them told Lansdale that, as he stated in his memo:⁵⁷

The U.S. must act firmly and quickly to replace both Diem and Nhu with a new government. The Vietnamese people are aroused far more than ever before, and it is too late even to save Diem as a figure-head. The people, seeing VN special forces and police with U.S. weapons and equipment, knowing that Diem can only stay in power with U.S. support, will turn against the U.S. unless there is a change in the whole top of government.

Madame Chuong, Lansdale reported, said: "You must go to Saigon fast and tell Diem and the Nhus to leave the country now. The people hate them and they shouldn't stay for the people to kill them. They will surely be killed if they stay, and nobody at the Palace now is telling them how the people really feel. They are cut off from reality. Why do they need power after nine years of it, if the family is killed. The US told Syngman Rhee to leave. Why not Diem and Nhu?"

On the morning of August 28, there was a rather contentious NSC meeting. Ball said that the battle with the Communists would

⁵⁴"[first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963."

⁵⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 371, Aug. 29, 1963.

⁵⁶Same location.

⁵⁷Same location.

be lost if the U.S. continued to support Diem. Nolting responded that failure to support Diem would be contrary to our commitments. Ball replied that it was Diem who had broken commitments. At this point Harriman expressed very strong disagreement with Nolting, which, as Gilpatrick recalls, was worse than any tongue-lashing he had ever witnessed in the presence of the President, and that, "I don't think it would have been tolerated by the President from anybody else." According to Robert Kennedy, the division among the President's advisers was so deep that "The government split in two. . . . It was the only time really, in three years, the government was broken in two in a very disturbing war [sic—probably should be "way"]]." ⁶⁸ Although the summary of this meeting is still classified, Schlesinger, who had access to a copy of the summary in the Robert Kennedy papers, says that Harriman, Ball, Hilsman, and Forrestal (quoting from the summary) "said that the U.S. must decide now to go through to a successful overthrow." Taylor, McNamara, McCone, Lyndon Johnson strongly opposed a coup.⁶⁹

That afternoon, in an effort to close ranks, Kennedy met with Rusk, McNamara and Taylor before meeting again with the larger group. (At the latter meeting, two of the contenders, Ball and Hilsman were not included. Rusk who had not been at the morning meeting, represented the Department of State.) Prior to the first of the two afternoon meetings, McGeorge Bundy sent Kennedy a memo suggesting who should attend. At the top of his list were Rusk, McNamara and Taylor. He then listed the Vice President, the Attorney General, (McGeorge) Bundy, Douglas Dillon and Harriman, with a question mark beside each one of this second group. Beside Harriman's name he wrote by hand, "Mike [Forrestal] thinks not." Beside the Attorney General there was the typed notation "(He and I have had a talk and he knows what is at stake and is at your disposal if you want him, and will go cruising if you do not)." ⁷⁰

At this smaller meeting, agreement apparently was reached on putting aside personal differences and reaching a common position. There is no information available as to what was discussed at the meeting that followed, but when the larger group met again the next day (August 29), Kennedy polled those present and it was agreed by all that the decision announced in the August 24 cable should stand. Accordingly, a cable was sent to Saigon stating that "Highest level meeting today . . . reaffirmed basic course." The cable authorized Harkins to inform the generals of this decision. "He should stress that the USG supports the movement to eliminate the Nhus from the government, but that before arriving at specific understandings with the Generals, General Harkins must know who are involved, resources available to them and overall plan for coup. The USG will support a coup which has good chance of succeeding but plans no direct involvement of U.S. armed forces. Harkins should state that he is prepared to establish liaison with

⁶⁸Both quotes are from Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 714.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 718.

⁷⁰Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security 1963.

the coup planners and to review plans, but will not engage directly in joint coup planning."

The cable also authorized Lodge to suspend U.S. aid to the Diem government if and when he decided this was necessary.

With respect to what the cable called the "last approach to Diem," Lodge was told that Rusk was sending him a separate cable on that subject.⁶¹

In his separate cable to Lodge, Rusk suggested further discussion of the possibility of separating Diem and the Nhus. Rusk said that, based in part on Paul Kattenburg's cable, he doubted whether Diem could be persuaded to take such an action. "Unless such a talk included a real sanction such as threatened withdrawal of our support, it is unlikely that it would be taken completely seriously by a man who may feel that we are inescapably committed to an anti-Communist Vietnam. But if a sanction were used in such a conversation, there would be a high risk that this would be taken by Diem as a sign that action against him and the Nhus was imminent and he might as a minimum move against the Generals or even take some quite fantastic action such as calling on North Vietnam for assistance in expelling the Americans."

To prevent this from happening, Rusk suggested that this sanction "... might properly await the time when others were ready to move immediately to constitute a new government," thus leaving it to the generals to make one last effort to separate Diem and the Nhus. "In any event, were the Generals to take this action it would tend to protect succeeding Vietnam administrations from the charge of being wholly American puppets subjected to whatever anti-American sentiment is inherent in so complex a situation."⁶²

Lodge replied the next day (August 30) that he did not think the U.S. could remove the Nhus by working through Diem.⁶³ "In fact Diem will oppose it. He wishes he had more Nhus, not less. The best chance of doing it is by the Generals taking over the government lock, stock and barrel. After this has been done, it can then be decided whether to put Diem back in again or go on without him. I am rather inclined to put him back, but I would not favor putting heavy pressure on the Generals if they don't want him."

Lodge added:

It is possible, as you suggested [several words deleted] for the Generals when, as and if their operation gets rolling to demand the removal of the Nhus before bringing their operation to fruition. But I am afraid they will get talked out of their operation which will then disintegrate, still leaving the Nhus in office.

If the Generals' operation does get rolling, I would not want to stop it until they were in full control. They could then get rid of the Nhus and decide whether they wanted to keep Diem.

⁶¹A copy of the cable, Washington to Saigon 272, Aug. 29, 1963, is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

⁶²PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 737-738. A copy of the cable, Washington to Saigon 279, Aug. 29, 1963, is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

⁶³PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 739-740. A copy of the cable, Saigon to Washington 383, Aug. 30, 1963, is in the Johnson Library, Declassified and Sanitized Documents from Unprocessed Files.

It is better for them and for us for them to throw out the Nhuds than for us to get involved in it.

I am sure that the best way to handle this matter is by a truly Vietnamese movement even if it puts me rather in the position of pushing a piece of spaghetti.

Lodge's cable had been preceded by discussions with Vietnamese leaders about the situation, and on the same day (August 30), he sent reports to Washington on two of these. One was with the Interim Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Truong Cong Cuu, and the other was with a prominent person whose name has been deleted from the cable reporting the conversation.⁶⁴ Cuu tried to reassure Lodge that measures were being taken by the Diem government to improve relations with the U.S., but he told Lodge "Please cease the efforts of your CIA to make us a nation of 'boys'"; and he asked him to stop the recruitment of spies "that we may be allowed to develop in our own way in dignity," adding "... the French tried to manipulate the Vietnamese people in this way and that is the reason why he had never been able to work with them."

Lodge reported that his other contact, a person who supported the U.S. program in Vietnam, advised against trying to remove the Nhuds. The situation was improving, the informant said, and Diem, an excellent leader, needed Nhu. The war, he added, could be won by the Diem administration. As the conversation ended, he advised Lodge "First, try to calm American opinion and, second, no coups."

In addition to cabling Lodge and Harkins on August 29 to report agreement that the coup should be carried out as first ordered on August 24, President Kennedy personally sent Lodge that day the following top secret, "Eyes Only" cable marked "No Other Distribution Whatever".⁶⁵

I have approved all the messages you are receiving from others today, and I emphasize that everything in these messages has my full support.

We will do all that we can to help you conclude this operation successfully. Nevertheless, there is one point on my own constitutional responsibilities as President and Commander in Chief which I wish to state to you in this entirely private message, which is not being circulated here beyond the Secretary of State.

Until the very moment of the go signal for the opposition by the Generals, I must reserve a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions. While fully aware of your assessment of the consequences of such a reversal, I know from experience that failure is more destructive than an appearance of indecision. I would, of course, accept full responsibility for any such change as I must bear also the full responsibility for this operation and its consequences. It is for this reason that I count on you for a continuing assessment of the prospects of success and most particularly desire your candid warning if the current course begins to go sour. When we go,

⁶⁴Both cables, Saigon to Washington 380 and 384, Aug. 30, 1963 are in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

⁶⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, CAP 68465. This cable was declassified in 1980.

we must go to win, but it will be better to change our minds than fail. And if our national interest should require a change of mind, we must not be afraid of it.

On August 30, Lodge replied to Kennedy in a cable marked "President only, pass White House directly, no other distribution whatever".⁶⁶

1. I fully understand that you have the right and responsibility to change course at any time. Of course I will always respect that right.

2. To be successful, this operation must be essentially a Vietnamese affair with a momentum of its own. Should this happen you may not be able to control it, i.e., the "go signal" may be given by the Generals.

The Generals Hesitate, and the U.S. Regroups

Kennedy's personal cable to Lodge coincided with an apparent reluctance by the Vietnamese generals to proceed with the coup, and U.S. officials in both Washington and Saigon decided that the time was not yet ripe.

After a meeting of the NSC at the State Department on August 30, at which Secretary of State Rusk presided in the absence of the President, Rusk sent the following cable to Lodge:⁶⁷

Generals so far appear have no plan and little momentum. Further, bits and pieces of information here suggest that Diem and Nhu are moving to normalize situation and head off possibilities of being upset. Prospects of changing government by strong and concerted Vietnamese elements seem very thin on basis of any hard information we have. This raises possibility that Nhu will try to ease internal and international pressures and perhaps bring about quiet liquidation of potential opposition. Possibility therefore increasingly is that if there is to be a change, it can only be brought about by American rather than Vietnamese effort. Obviously, an abortive effort inspired by or attributed to the United States will be disastrous. Central question therefore comes to be how much reality there is in attitude expressed by generals with whom contacts have been made and their capabilities and determinations with respect to what has been said thus far. The distinction between what is desirable and what is possible is one which we may have to face in the next few days. This telegram changes none of your instructions but expresses our uneasiness at the absence of bone and muscle as seen from here.

On August 31, the U.S. mission cabled Washington that planning for the coup had stopped because of doubts among the generals that they had enough forces under their control to undertake a successful coup, as well as about the commitment of the U.S. to support the coup. At that point, as the *Pentagon Papers* states,

⁶⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. This cable was declassified in 1983 as a result of a mandatory review request by CRS. A number of other cables between Washington and Saigon during the period Aug. 28-30, 1963, remain classified.

⁶⁷Washington to Saigon 284, Aug. 30, 1963, same location.

"... the U.S. found itself ... without a policy and with most of its bridges burned."⁶⁸

That same day, Lodge replied to Rusk's cable of August 30.⁶⁹ He noted that by then Washington had received Harkins' cable reporting that planning for the coup had stopped. "At some undeterminate date in the future," Lodge said, if "some other group with the necessary strength and lust for office comes forward, we can contemplate another effort."

Lodge said he thought Washington was "right" to instruct him to support a coup, "... not only because of the state of opinion in America and Free World but because the government of Viet-Nam have acted both as liars and criminals. But now the only attempt to change the government which would succeed would be one which the U.S. could mount itself and, of course, that is out of the question."

He suggested that the U.S. try to arrange for a go-between other than himself (he thought the coup planning and other factors had lessened his effectiveness to play such a role) to negotiate with Diem the departure from the country of Madame Nhu, as well as stripping Nhu of all functions except administration of the strategic hamlets. Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, another of Diem's brothers, should also leave the country. The position of Prime Minister would be created to be filled by Thuan. Conciliatory steps would be taken toward the Buddhists and the students.

Lodge also asked whether, to strengthen his hand, it would be possible for the U.S. House of Representatives or the House Foreign Affairs Committee to "cut out appropriations for foreign aid for Viet-Nam? Giving me chance to get GVN to agree to our points on the ground that this would facilitate restoration of the item."

On August 31, there was another meeting of the NSC group at the State Department with Rusk presiding.⁷⁰ It was, or could have been, a significant meeting, because it was the first important high-level meeting of this kind during the Kennedy administration at which doubts were expressed about continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The meeting began with comments from Rusk as to why a coup had been considered by the U.S. in the first place. He listed three factors, the first two of which were the internal and external effects of Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife on the situation in Vietnam, and the third was the pressure of U.S. public (and congressional) opinion. He said the time had come to take steps to improve the situation in Vietnam as well as to strengthen U.S. public support of Vietnam policy, but that it was unrealistic to begin by assuming that Nhu would have to be removed. McNamara said he agreed with Rusk, and urged that normal communications between the U.S. mission and Diem be resumed immediately. Hilsman then reviewed the reasons for supporting a coup.

At that point there occurred an exchange of some historical significance involving, on the one hand, Paul Kattenburg, and, on the other, Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, Nolting and Vice President John-

son. It was, among other things, a sobering experience for anyone who might have had any thoughts about questioning the U.S. commitment. Kattenburg, who had just returned from Vietnam, commented that Lodge thought the United States would be thrown out of Vietnam in 6 months if the U.S. tried to continue working with the Diem regime. Kattenburg said he had known Diem for 10 years, and did not think that Diem would ever take the steps necessary to correct the situation. This, he said, would mean a steady deterioration in the situation, and he suggested that it would be better for the U.S. to withdraw honorably. Taylor questioned Kattenburg about what he meant by being forced out in 6 months, and Nolting disagreed with Kattenburg, but it was the response of Rusk, McNamara and Johnson that ended the argument. Rusk said that Kattenburg's comments were "largely speculative; that it would be far better for us to start on the firm basis of two things—that we will not pull out of Vietnam until the war is won, and that we will not run a coup." McNamara agreed. Rusk added that he thought there was "good proof that we have been winning the war." Vice President Johnson agreed also, adding that he had "great reservations with respect to a coup, particularly so because he had never seen a genuine alternative to Diem." He said that "from both a practical and political viewpoint, it would be a disaster to pull out; that we should stop playing cops and robbers and get back to talking straight to the GVN, and that we should once again go about winning the war."

Kattenburg later commented on this experience:⁷¹

... I listened for about an hour or an hour and a half to this conversation before I was asked to say anything at the meeting and they looked to me absolutely hopeless, the whole group of them. There was not a single person there that knew what he was talking about. It simply looked, to me, that way. They were all great men. It was appalling to watch. I didn't have the feeling that any of them—Bobby Kennedy, Taylor, even down to my good old friend and buddy, Roger Hilsman—really knew. ... They didn't know Vietnam. They didn't know the past. They had forgotten the history. They simply didn't understand the identification of nationalism and Communism, and the more this meeting went on, the more I sat there and I thought, "God, we're walking into a major disaster," and that's when I made what essentially was a very imprudent and also presumptuous remark, in a way. And the reaction to it was sort of what I had invited. They all just disregarded it or said it was not backed by anything.

After the meeting, the State Department sent Lodge two cables, one from Hilsman and the other from Rusk, both of which were read and approved by Kennedy.⁷² In the cable from Hilsman, Lodge was told that policymakers in Washington agreed with his proposal for a "direct effort" in Vietnam. "U.S. cannot abandon Viet-Nam and while it will support Vietnamese effort to change government that has good prospects success U.S. should not and

⁶⁸PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 240. The cable was based on a meeting on Aug. 31 between Harkins and Khiem.

⁶⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 391, Aug. 31, 1968.

Parts of this cable have been sanitized.

⁷⁰PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 741-743.

⁷¹CRS Interview with Paul Kattenburg, Feb. 16, 1979.

⁷²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 294 (Hilsman) and 295 (Rusk), Aug. 31, 1962.

would not mount and operate one. . . . In the meantime, our primary objective remains winning war and we concur your suggestion that we should now reopen communications with Diem." The cable continued:

As to general posture, it seems desirable to maintain both publicly and in our private talks with GVN the leverage of U.S. discontent with repression which has eroded war effort within Viet-Nam as well as support of Congress, U.S. public, and world. Impression should be, both privately and publicly, that U.S. engaged in candid and critical discussion to improve government not overthrow it. Decision on changing government is Vietnamese affair.

In your talk with Diem, our thought is you should first stress common interest in defeating Viet Cong. Then in frank but tough line point out that daily juxtaposition of continuing American casualties and massive U.S. aid with repressive measures contrary deepest American convictions will make it difficult for Executive and Congress to continue support. Common problem for U.S. and GVN in general and you and Diem in particular is to work out set of GVN policies and actions that will make possible continued U.S. support. But time is rather short. President Kennedy may well be obliged at next press conference to express U.S. disapproval of repressive measures. Should we find it impossible to reach an agreement with GVN on a program to undo the damage caused by recent GVN actions, then suspension of aid might soon be forced upon us.

Hilsman's cable concluded by stating that the President was going to comment on the situation in Vietnam in a televised interview on September 2. "While in this interview he will be as restrained as possible, if asked it will be impossible to avoid some expression of concern. This expression, however, will be mild in comparison to what may have to be said soon unless there is major improvement."

Rusk's August 31 cable to Lodge was as follows:

It seems to me that we must keep our eye fixed on the main purpose of our presence in South Viet-Nam and everyone on the U.S. side needs to review the bidding on this elementary purpose: why we are there, why are we asking our fellows to be killed and what is getting in the way of accomplishing our purpose. The actions of the GVN and the Nhus have eroded this purpose—inside Viet-Nam and internationally and they have also eroded our capacity to provide political leadership in the U.S. necessary to support the effort in Viet-Nam. To raise these questions is not merely an emotional reaction to two individuals. They involve the fundamental requirement of political leadership in Viet-Nam which is necessary to coalesce the Vietnamese people in a war effort which we can support. Diem must realize that his obligation of political leadership runs to the solidarity of his people which may require conciliatory actions which are distasteful to him personally. He must make a systematic effort to improve his international position, and a demonstration to the American people that we are not asking

Americans to be killed to support Madame Nhu's desire to barbecue bonzes.

On September 2, 1963, President Kennedy was interviewed on CBS television by Walter Cronkite. When asked a prearranged question about Vietnam by Cronkite, Kennedy gave this pre-planned response:⁷³

I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the Government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it.

Kennedy was asked by Cronkite whether "this government has time to regain the support of the people," and he replied that it did; that "with changes in policy and perhaps with personnel I think it can." He added that he did not agree with those who advocated U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. "That would be a great mistake," he said. "We . . . have to participate—we may not like it—in the defense of Asia."

Copies of Kennedy's comments during the Cronkite interview were then cabled by the State Department to Saigon and to all other relevant U.S. diplomatic missions with the notation, "They represent the U.S. Government's attitude toward the situation and should be followed as the official U.S. public position."⁷⁴

On September 6, the *New York Times* said in an editorial on Kennedy's interview: "The lessons of the present crisis are plain. One is that the anti-Communist war in South Vietnam . . . is not only, as President Kennedy declared, 'their war' but our war—a war from which we cannot retreat and which we dare not lose."

A week later, in an interview with Chet Huntley on NBC television, Kennedy repeated that the U.S. should not withdraw from Vietnam. He was also asked by Huntley whether he believed in the "domino theory." He replied: "I believe it. I believe it. I think that the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms so high just beyond the frontier, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists. So I believe it."⁷⁵

According to William Bundy, Kennedy's opposition to withdrawal " . . . reflected exactly what the internal record shows was being said by his senior advisers in council. Short of the most dire extremes, the U.S. simply should not think of withdrawing."⁷⁶

In early September 1963, as the U.S. Government began regrouping prior to new efforts to force Diem's hand, Lodge, who was deliberately avoiding a meeting with Diem, met for the second time with Nhu (the first meeting had been on August 27). Accompanying Lodge were the Italian Ambassador and the Papal Delegate to Vietnam. At this meeting, Nhu said that he was planning to resign and to retire to the Vietnamese countryside (Dalat), and that Madame Nhu would leave Vietnam for an extended trip. The

⁷³ *Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1963, p. 652.

⁷⁴ Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 306, Sept. 2, 1963.

⁷⁵ *Public Papers of the Presidents*, John F. Kennedy, 1963, p. 659.

⁷⁶ Bundy MS., ch. 10, p. 9.

Papal Delegate agreed to arrange for Archbishop Thuc to leave the country. Nhu also said that conciliatory steps would be taken toward the Buddhists, and that, as the U.S. had advocated, a Prime Minister would be appointed.⁷⁷ During the remainder of that week, the Italian Ambassador and the Papal Delegate urged Nhu to carry out these promises. One of the reasons they cited was the need to avoid a suspension of U.S. aid for Vietnam which was then being considered in the U.S. Senate. (On September 6, Nhu said again that he would resign, but that he would not leave the country. On September 7, the Papal Delegate "got Thuc out of the country," and on September 9, Madame Nhu left for Europe.⁷⁸ Nhu still had not resigned, however.)

On September 3, Kennedy met with his NSC advisers to consider new instructions for Lodge when he met again with Diem. The group discussed Lodge's meeting with Nhu on September 2 and agreed that it would be helpful if Nhu were to resign and leave Saigon, if only for Dalat. The President said he did not want to discourage Madame Nhu's trip, but that he did not want her to come to the United States, and particularly did not want her to make a speech in Washington. CIA Director McCone replied that "He believed we could handle the press in such a way that the trip would not increase Madame Nhu's prestige."⁷⁹

Several hours after the meeting, a cable was sent to Lodge stating that Nhu's promises were hopeful, but that Lodge should meet with Diem as soon as possible.⁸⁰ "Bargain with Nhu," the cable said, "would only confirm his ascendancy." Even if Nhu were in Dalat, "he could still be power behind throne."

Washington's "guidance" for Lodge in the September 3 cable was about the same as in the August 31 cables from Hilsman and Rusk:

We will continue to assert publicly and privately U.S. discontent with repression which has eroded effort toward common goal of winning war until there are concrete results in GVN policies and posture. U.S. not trying to overthrow government, but engaged in candid and critical talks to improve it. Purpose of general posture is to give you leverage with GVN; avoid false public impression U.S. tried something and now backing off; and avoid seeming to acquiesce in repression, which would put U.S. on wrong side fence with majority of people inside Viet-Nam and the world.

In a memorandum reporting on a luncheon meeting he had that day (September 3) with journalists Peter Lisagor (*Chicago Daily News*), Hugh Sidey (*Time*), and Marguerite Higgins (*New York Herald Tribune*), Hilsman said in part:⁸¹

I have been saying for several months that the U.S. would not attempt to "play God"; and the U.S. could not scurry about plotting and pulling strings on puppets in a country like Viet-Nam. The U.S. could not play God for three reasons: (1) it would undermine our efforts to build viable political systems

⁷⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 242.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Memorandum of Conversation with the President," Sept. 3, 1963, portions sanitized.

⁸⁰Washington to Saigon 317, Sept. 3, 1963, same location.

⁸¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

throughout Asia; (2) it would open a new Vietnamese Government to a charge of being a U.S. puppet and set back the war effort; and (3) the CIA did not have the skill, the eptness or the perceptiveness into Asian societies to bring it off.

All this I have been saying for months. It remains true. What has happened here is that Nhu beat up the Pagodas without the Army knowing about it. It was an attempt to tar the Army with this brush and the U.S.. The purpose was to lead the U.S. around by the nose to demonstrate to all of Viet-Nam that we were controllable. Faced with this action and these motives, the U.S. had to show Diem-Nhu and the Vietnamese people that the U.S. could not be made a puppet. It is true that we don't have the leverage that some think we do in calling the tune in a country we are helping, but we are not and cannot be their complete puppets. The motive behind the statement that the Army was not to blame was not an "invitation to rebellion" in exactly that sense. It did and was intended to put all concerned on notice that it was winning the war that we were concerned with and that, if the Vietnamese chose to change their government, we were not committed to Diem, the personality. It seemed to me that this was not "an invitation to rebellion."

(At the end of the last sentence, after "rebellion," Hilsman had added "if this is treason make the most of it," but he or someone else penciled out these additional words.)

At about this time, General Lansdale, even though involved in other assignments, met with Harriman to discuss the situation in Vietnam. This is his description of that conversation:⁸²

. . . In the late summer of '63 I had breakfast one day with Harriman. He was asking me some questions about brother Nhu and Diem, and he told me he was very surprised at my viewpoints on things, I guess they sounded unusual to him. I urged him to create a place for Nhu up at Harvard. I remember he had John Kenneth Galbraith, a Harvard economist and Ambassador to India at the time, having breakfast with us at Harriman's house. I was saying that Galbraith and Harriman should get together and put up a group at Harvard and invite Nhu over from Vietnam to be a member there. I said, "Kick him upstairs. Tell him he's an intellectual. Listen to him and give him a job there. He'd come, and Diem would let him go. And once he's away, then Diem will be a very different person and be on his own and you won't have to worry so much about him." Galbraith sort of snorted negatively. And I said, "No, Nhu is a real smart guy. He's obnoxious like most of you intellectuals—he sort of gets on my nerves a little bit." Galbraith was so negative about it that I couldn't help teasing him. But it would have been one way out for Diem and Nhu.

Harriman liked the idea. He said, "I like the way you think and I like ideas like this." I said, "Well, Diem gave his father a sort of a death-bed promise that he would take care of his youngest brother, Nhu. And we Americans have come in and

⁸²CRS Interview with Edward G. Lansdale, Nov. 19, 1982.

bluntly told him to get rid of Nhu. Well, his father's wishes mean more to him. He's a family man. Instead of that, if we had gone in and said, 'We have a real good job for Nhu and want you to help us convince him to go,' he'd do it. You know, he'd think it was good for his brother which it would be." And I said, "And Nhu is a real intellectual. He really is. He'd a deep political student. I don't agree with him on a lot of things but that doesn't say that he doesn't have a lot on the ball, because he does." But we didn't do it. . . .

Lansdale said that he could "feel that something was happening," and he went to see Roger Hilsman in the State Department. "Roger kept talking about his forthcoming trip to Australia, and I said, 'No, Harriman wants me to talk about Vietnam to you. You must be about to do something. Tell me what it is, so I'll know, and maybe I can help you, come up with some ideas for you.' And he'd keep going back to Australia. He wouldn't talk about Vietnam at all." Lansdale also saw McNamara:

I went in and saw McNamara and he must have hinted at forthcoming changes in Saigon. I remember saying, "Don't forget there's a constitution there. Keep it alive. . . . don't go monkeying around trying to overcome the will of the people to make some new idea work. . . . And don't forget there's a constitutional vice president there," and so on.

Using Congress to Reinforce the Threat

In his cable of August 30, as was noted earlier, Lodge (a former Member of the U.S. Senate until he was defeated by John F. Kennedy) had suggested the possibility of having the House or the House Foreign Affairs Committee pass an amendment to reduce or suspend U.S. aid to Vietnam unless and until Diem agreed to the changes being suggested by the United States. On September 6, he suggested it again: "I am obviously looking for leverage for my talk with Diem," he said in a cable to Harriman.⁸³ "The following is clear to me: even though Vietnamese public mind would not differentiate, a congressional cut would, in GVN mind, clearly avoid much of the odium which would attach a suspension of U.S. aid by the executive branch. If our congressional system does, in fact, give us an advantage in handling the extremely explosive issue of aid suspension, we should certainly not overlook it."

Just before he sent this cable, Lodge received Hilsman's cable of September 5, in which Hilsman reported on an executive session of the Far East Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where he had testified on the situation in Vietnam.⁸⁴ Hilsman told Lodge that the meeting ". . . revealed far-reaching doubts regarding not only Diem-Nhu leadership but also advisability of continued U.S. participation in Viet-Nam war."

Following the subcommittee meeting, the chairman of the subcommittee, Senator Frank Lausche, made a brief speech in the Senate, apparently drafted by or with the advice of the State Department, in which he said that he concurred with Kennedy's

⁸³Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security, 1963, Saigon to Washington 423, Sept. 6, 1963.

⁸⁴Washington to Saigon 335, Sept. 5, 1963, same location.

statement on September 2 about the need for a change of policy and possibly of personnel by the South Vietnamese, as well as Kennedy's opposition to the attacks on the Buddhists, which he called "a grave mistake of policy" on Diem's part.⁸⁵

Later that day, Senator Frank Church, also a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said that he was considering offering a resolution to suspend U.S. aid to Vietnam unless the Diem government instituted reforms. Senator Frank Carlson (R/Kans.), another member of the Foreign Relations Committee, said he would support such a move. This information was immediately cabled to Lodge by the State Department, and after a meeting of the NSC a cable was sent to Lodge directing him in talking to Diem, (which the cable urged him to do as a part of U.S. strategy), to "elaborate difficulties with U.S. public opinion and Congress using Hilsman meeting with Far East Subcommittee and statements of Lausche and Church. . . ."⁸⁶

Lodge met with Diem on September 9, and afterwards he reported that "the greatest impact was probably made by the discussion of the grave reaction which Diem is courting in the U.S. Congress."⁸⁷

When Church told Hilsman that he was thinking of introducing the resolution, Hilsman urged him not to offer specific language "without first checking with the Executive Branch on both wording and timing. . . ." Church agreed. The administration, which may have been responsible for initiating the resolution, pursuant to Lodge's suggestion, began encouraging Church, and working closely with him to maximize the impact of the proposal on the situation in Vietnam. McGeorge Bundy is said to have called Church on behalf of the President to tell him to 'Keep it up'; that they thought that was kind of helpful pressure.⁸⁸

At a meeting of the NSC on September 10, the President raised the subject of a congressional resolution condemning Diem's actions.⁸⁹ Hilsman replied that "the problem was not to start Congress but to stop it." He discussed Church's interest in offering such a resolution, and said he thought Church would be amenable to suggestions from the administration on timing and wording. The President said ". . . we should decide whether we thought a revolution was advantageous. If we decided it was, we should then get the full support of Senators Mansfield and Dirksen. The worst possible situation would be to have a resolution put up and then defeated."

Following the NSC meeting, Hilsman went directly to Capitol Hill to talk to Church. He cautioned Church that it would not do to have a weak or contrary vote on the resolution. It had to be "near

⁸⁵CR, vol. 109, p. 16397.

⁸⁶Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Washington to Saigon 341, Sept. 6, 1963, Vietnam; NSF Presidential Meetings File, Washington to Saigon 348, Sept. 6, 1963.

⁸⁷Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security, 1963, Unsigned report by General Krulak on "Vietnam, 6-10 September 1963."

⁸⁸CRS Interview with Church's former assistant, Bryce Nelson, Dec. 12, 1978. Bundy says he does not remember this phone call, but that it may have occurred. CRS Interview with McGeorge Bundy, Jan. 8, 1979.

⁸⁹Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Memorandum of a Conference with the President," Sept. 10, 1963.

unanimous." Church replied that the proposed resolution had a "good prospect of getting real support."

Hilsman said he would work with Church on the language of the proposal. (At that time, Church's resolution provided for discontinuing aid to the government of South Vietnam because of its religious persecution which "offends the conscience of the American people. . . .")

In a meeting on September 11, the NSC agreed to support the Church resolution as one of a series of moves to bring new pressures to bear on Diem. The President said he thought it would be helpful, "but only if we could control the ensuing situation." There were these further comments:

Mr. [McGeorge] Bundy said we could support the introduction of the resolution and then suggest that it not be acted upon in a hurry. Secretary Rusk and Senator Mansfield shared the view that the resolution should be introduced, but that hearings on it be delayed.

The President expressed his concern that an effort would be made to attach the resolution to the aid bill. He wanted us to work with the Congressional Committees so that we would not end up with a resolution requiring that we reduce aid. The objective was a resolution merely condemning current actions of the Diem government. We must not get into a situation in which the resolution could be defeated. We should try to avoid having it tied to the aid program.

Following the NSC meeting, Church was given the go-ahead by Hilsman, and the next day, September 12, 1963, he introduced the resolution, as follows:⁹⁰

Resolved, That it is the sense of the Senate that unless the Government of South Vietnam abandons policies of repression against its own people and makes a determined and effective effort to regain their support, military and economic assistance to that Government should not be continued.

Cosponsoring the resolution were its principal cosponsor, Republican Senator Carlson, and 21 additional Senators (others joined subsequently), all but two of whom were Democrats, mostly liberals. Included among the cosponsors were some of the stalwarts among those who, in addition to Church, subsequently opposed the war: Morse, Ernest Gruening (D/Alaska), Gaylord Nelson (D/Wis.), Pell, Joseph S. Clark (D/Pa.), George S. McGovern (D/S. Dak.) and Stephen M. Young (D/Ohio).

Church's resolution had been drafted by the State Department, and, as stated in a note from a member of Hilsman's staff informing him that it been offered, "Church offered his resolution using exactly the same language as we had. No change."⁹¹

Following the introduction of the Church resolution, the State Department again cited congressional pressure as one of the arguments to be made to Diem. In the September 16 draft of instructions for Lodge, which was part of an overall action plan, he was to

⁹⁰S. Res. 88-196. For Church's statement see *CR*, vol. 109, see p. 16824.

⁹¹Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers, Note to RH from Ginny, Sept. 12, 1963, reporting phone call from State's congressional liaison office. In the same file there are several other State Department drafts of the resolution.

tell Diem that "The Executive Branch considers any effort to contest moves in Congress to restrict or terminate U.S. aid programs in Vietnam bound to be ineffective under present circumstances."⁹²

In the general plan of action prepared by State and sent to the President, Rusk, McNamara and McCone on September 16, Hilsman included this statement of "Congressional Action":⁹³

A resolution expressing the "sense of the Senate" that aid to South Vietnam be terminated unless that regime reverses its policies of repression might be useful ammunition for Ambassador Lodge, if it were passed by a substantial margin. With tacit Administration approval, the Church-Carlson resolution has good prospects for passage. In terms of general strategy on the foreign aid bill, such a resolution should be delayed until Senate passage of the aid bill. Although a case can be made for earlier approval of this resolution, what is contemplated here is not a crash program of sudden aid termination but rather a carefully phased plan which might well benefit from Senate action at a later date.

The Debate Continues

Meanwhile, policymakers in the executive branch continued debating the next phase in the ongoing effort to bring about the desired changes in Vietnam. The NSC met again on September 6.⁹⁴ During the first part of the meeting, before the arrival of the President, there was a very pointed discussion among his advisers. Rusk said, "if the situation continues to deteriorate in Vietnam, if our relations with Diem continue to deteriorate, and if U.S. domestic opinion becomes strongly anti-Diem, we will be faced with no alternative short of a massive U.S. military effort." He said that Lodge should be directed to tell Diem that the United Nations was on the verge of passing a resolution condemning the repression of the Buddhists, and that the U.S. would not be able to prevent passage of that resolution. Moreover, unless Diem acted promptly there would be a "drastic effect in the U.S. involving both reduction in economic and military assistance and strong pressure to withdraw U.S. political support of Vietnam."

Robert Kennedy asked whether the war could be won if Diem and Nhu remained in power. Rusk replied that it could not be won unless changes were made. RFK wondered whether Diem would change, and said that the U.S. should get "tough." "Ambassador Lodge has to do more than say our President is unhappy. We will have to tell Diem that he must do the things we demand or we will have to cut down our effort as forced by the U.S. public." Rusk responded that pressure should be applied in ". . . two or three bites. It is very serious to threaten to pull out of Vietnam. If the Viet Cong takes over in Vietnam we are in real trouble." He recommended that the first step should be a discussion between Lodge and Diem, following which the U.S. would then be in a better posi-

⁹²Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Hilsman to Rusk and McNamara, "A Plan to Achieve U.S. Objectives in South Vietnam," Sept. 16, 1963.

⁹³*Ibid.*, pt. C, phase I, p. 11.

⁹⁴"Memorandum of Conference with the President," Sept. 6, 1963, cited above.

tion to know what to do, and could, if desirable, issue an "ultimatum."

McGeorge Bundy commented, ". . . this was not the moment of decision. When we say we can't win with Diem we are talking of a longer time period." He, too, thought they needed more information, particularly from Thuan.

Taylor observed that only three weeks earlier the U.S. believed that the war could be won with Diem, and he wondered whether recent events had changed that judgment. There apparently was no direct response to his query.

RFK asked again what the U.S. should do if it were concluded that the war could not be won with Diem. McNamara replied that this question could not be answered in Washington because of the lack of first-hand information on the state of affairs in Vietnam. Rusk agreed, and said that a reassessment was required. Taylor suggested that General Krulak should go to Vietnam to assess the "grass roots military view," and McNamara and Rusk agreed.

There was further discussion of the instructions to Lodge. Nolting argued that it would be a mistake to put too much pressure on Diem. "He asked that we not talk to Diem about sanctions, but describe to him flatly the situation as we saw it."

Rusk concluded this part of the meeting by calling the situation "stage one." He added, "There may be no stage two if we decide to pull out. If we pull out, we might tell Diem that we wish him well. Diem may be able to win the war without us, but this is unlikely."⁹⁶

At this point the President joined the group and the meeting continued. McGeorge Bundy asked about the "essential minimum of our demands." Rusk replied, "if the Nhus stay on their present course we will continue to lose ground." The President remarked, "we should ask Diem to prohibit Madame Nhu from talking."⁹⁷ Nolting said that, on balance, he thought Ngo Dinh Nhu himself would "have to go." This, he added, "would mean a loss in Vietnam but a gain with U.S. public opinion." McGeorge Bundy said that if Madame Nhu would leave, "we could live with Nhu remaining in Saigon," but he again suggested getting Thuan's opinion. (Thuan had said two weeks earlier that the war could be won only if Nhu left.)

It was agreed that a team representing the two dominant points of view, Krulak from the DOD/JCS and Joseph A. Mendenhall, Director of the Far East Planning Office under Hilsman, should make a quick trip to Vietnam to survey the situation. McNamara ordered Krulak to leave in 90 minutes. Hilsman reported later that he personally had to have the departure of the plane delayed until Mendenhall could reach the airport.⁹⁷

After the September 6 NSC meeting, a cable was sent to Lodge reporting on the meeting.⁹⁸

It is clear that as a minimum we face a major problem with world, with U.S. Congress and with American public which

⁹⁶Following this, Rusk's next sentence has been deleted.

⁹⁷An additional comment by the President at this point has been deleted.

⁹⁷To Move A Nation, p. 501.

⁹⁸Washington to Saigon 348, Sept. 6, 1963, cited above.

will require GVN to take actions to restore its image so that we may continue to support it. These actions included [here there are one or two words sanitized] and removal from country of Madam Nhu, releasing of bonzes, students, etc., along lines we have discussed.

What is not clear is whether these measures will suffice to restore sufficient confidence in the Diem Government within Viet-Nam to permit them to win the war.

Sense of meeting was that if the answer to this second question is that additional measures, such as departure of Nhu, are essential, and if we cannot obtain these additional measures after negotiating with Diem, then U.S. faced with question whether to apply sanctions with all their risks rather than let situation get steadily worse.

Lodge was urged to meet with Diem as soon as possible in order to explain the U.S. position, and to get his reaction to that position.

Krulak and Mendenhall were gone for four days, September 6-10. "It was a remarkable assignment" wrote John Mecklin,⁹⁹ the chief U.S. public affairs officer in Saigon, who accompanied Krulak and Mendenhall on the return trip, "to travel twenty-four thousand miles and assess a situation as complex as Vietnam and return in just four days. It was a symptom of the state the U.S. Government was in." "The *non sequitur* tone of the whole trip," he added, "was capped by the fact that the general and the FSO not only appeared to dislike each other, but also disagreed on what should be done about Vietnam. On the whole flight they spoke to each other only when it was unavoidable."

On September 10, Krulak and Mendenhall presented their findings to the President and his advisers.¹⁰⁰ This was the meeting made famous by the President's quip after hearing the reports from the two men: "Were you two gentlemen in the same country?"¹⁰¹

Mendenhall ". . . emphasized the breakdown of civilian government in Saigon, accompanied by civilian fear and hate of the Nhus. . . . He foresaw the possibility of a religious war or a large-scale movement to the Viet Cong."¹⁰²

Krulak, on the other hand, said that Mendenhall's report reflected the "metropolitan view," and that out in the countryside the situation was entirely different. Saigon's political problems, he said, had not interfered with military operations against the Communists. "He believed strongly that we can stagger through to win the war with Nhu remaining in control."¹⁰³

The President asked why the judgments of the two men should be so different. Hilsman responded that "it was the difference between a military and a political view."

⁹⁹Mission in Torment, pp. 206-207.

¹⁰⁰Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, Memorandum of Conference with the President, Sept. 10, 1963.

¹⁰¹Mission in Torment, p. 208.

¹⁰²The only written report made by Mendenhall was a cable, which is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Saigon to Washington 453, Sept. 9, 1963.

¹⁰³For Krulak's complete report see "Visit to Vietnam," cited above. His general conclusions are also in PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 243-244.

Nolting, however, who presumably also represented the political view, disagreed with Mendenhall's conclusions, and said that he thought "the present government will bear the weight of our program."

Rufus Phillips, who also came back with Krulak and Mendenhall, however, said that there was a "crisis confidence in Vietnam." (His comments immediately following this statement have been deleted.)¹⁰⁴ Phillips added that the U.S. had an obligation to adopt measures that would bring about a change of government in Vietnam. He recommended that Lansdale be sent to Vietnam. Lodge, he said, agreed.

Kennedy asked Phillips what the U.S. should do. Phillips replied that the U.S. should use the aid program to apply gradual and graduated pressure on Diem and Nhu. As one aspect of this, the U.S. should suspend aid to the special forces under the command of Colonel Le Quang Tung, who was under the control of Nhu. He believed that through this and other actions the U.S. could split Nhu from Diem, adding, "If we acquiesced in the actions which Nhu had taken against us, the result would be further loss of support from others in Vietnam."

Phillips also gave a pessimistic report on the military situation, with which Krulak disagreed, arguing that this was not the view of General Harkins. At this point the "Crocodile" (Washington's nickname for Harriman), according to Halberstam's detailed account of the meeting, ". . . went after Krulak: Harriman said he was not surprised that Krulak was taking Harkins' side—indeed he would be upset if he did not. Harriman said that he had known Krulak for several years and had always known him to be wrong, and was sorry to say it, but he considered Krulak a damn fool."¹⁰⁵

The President then called on John Mecklin to state his views. Mecklin said that he agreed with Phillips and Mendenhall that the situation was critical and that strong action was required. He said that the policy of graduated pressure proposed by Phillips was not adequate, however. The Diem government was finished, and "The time had come for the U.S. to apply direct pressure to bring about a change of government, however distasteful." Mecklin said that this could be done without the U.S. appearing to play a direct role. Actions such as the withholding of certain types of aid would have the result of bestirring the generals to act on their own. This might create such chaos, however, that U.S. forces would have to be used to protect American lives.¹⁰⁶

Mecklin also warned that the coup could provide an opening for the Communists, and therefore that the U.S. should resolve to use U.S. forces if necessary in order to prevent that from happening.

¹⁰⁴From the official summary of the meeting, paraphrased in Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 504. Hilsman obviously had the benefit of the unexpurgated classified version of the summary when he wrote his book.

¹⁰⁵Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*, p. 279.

Halberstam adds that the Army major who had written a report on Long An province that Phillips had used to illustrate his position "was reprimanded, given a bad efficiency report and immediately transferred out of Long An to the least attractive post available, which happened to be a National Guard slot. The stakes were getting higher and the game was getting tougher." *Ibid.*, pp. 279-280.

¹⁰⁶These comments by Mecklin are from his book, *Mission in Torment*, p. 210. They have been deleted from the sanitized summary of the Sept. 10 meeting.

In a memorandum on September 10 to Edward R. Murrow, the noted radio and TV commentator who was then the director of the United States Information Agency, Mecklin (an employee of USIA) recommended using U.S. combat forces, if necessary, "both to promote unseating of the regime and against the VC, as well as a willingness to accept an engagement comparable to Korea if the Communists choose to escalate."¹⁰⁷ Expanding on these points, he said:

In the writer's judgment, conditions in Viet-Nam have deteriorated so badly that the U.S. would be drawing to a three-card straight to gamble its interests there on anything short of an ultimate willingness to use U.S. combat troops. . . .

If we are not willing to resort to U.S. forces, it is wholly possible that efforts to unseat the Ngo Dinh would produce results that would be worse, from the U.S. viewpoint, than a negotiated "neutral" settlement. . . .

On the other hand, a decision now to use U.S. forces if necessary would give the whole U.S. effort psychological lift, producing confidence that we need not be frustrated indefinitely, giving us a sure hand that has been lacking in the past. . . . Such a new sureness in our actions, with the clear implication that the U.S. "means business," would quickly get through to the Vietnamese and to third countries and thus conceivably itself remove the need to resort to force.

Perhaps it should also be noted that the present situation in Viet-Nam is confronting the U.S. with what was certainly an inevitable showdown on the thesis that Western industrial power somehow must always be frustrated by Communist guerrilla tactics applied against a weak, underdeveloped government that refused foreign advice and reforms of the very ills that the Communist live on. There are incipient insurrections of this sort all over the underdeveloped world and the outcome in Viet-Nam will have critical bearing on U.S. capability to prevent and/or suppress them.

In the writer's opinion, furthermore, there is a very real possibility that if and as Viet-Nam is conclusively being lost to the Communists, the U.S. will be forced to use force in any case as a last resort . . . just as we did so unexpectedly in Korea. It would be vastly wise—and more effective—to make this unpalatable decision now.

In this memorandum, and in his comments at the meeting with the President, Mecklin concluded that if diplomatic pressure failed to dislodge Diem and Nhu from power, and if selective suspension of aid also failed, that the U.S. should then begin covertly planning a coup. At that point, all aid should be suspended. If this, too, failed to produce the necessary changes, the coup should be carried out. "If this also failed, or only partly succeeded, there should be plentiful excuses to bring in U.S. forces, e.g. to restore order, protect American citizens, etc. Such forces should be prepared for attack by local GVN troops, but it is more likely that they would simply act as power in being, making it possible for the U.S. to have its way by seriously presenting the Ngo Dinh with an ultimatum."

¹⁰⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "A Policy for Vietnam."

matum. . . . And once U.S. forces had been introduced into Vietnam, it would be relatively simple—on the invitation of the new regime—to keep them on hand to help, if needed, in final destruction of the Viet Cong."

Subsequently, Phillips, in a memorandum that Forrestal sent along to McGeorge Bundy with the comment, ". . . Phillips' judgments of Vietnamese reactions are as good as any we have," took issue with Mecklin's suggestion for using U.S. troops. "Certainly," Phillips said, "no one should rule out the possibility of the ultimate use of U.S. troops and they should be ready to protect dependents if the going gets rough before Nhu topples but the entire policy should not be hinged on this contingency. The use of U.S. troops to fight the war against the VC would, in any case, be a mistake. The Vietnamese are willing to fight and can fight. If we help give them a government worth fighting for, this single action will be worth more than any number of U.S. troops."¹⁰⁸

As the September 10 NSC meeting continued, Rusk observed that in May and June the U.S. had estimated that the war could be won with Diem. He suggested that events in July and August should be analyzed "to decide whether the situation can be returned to that which existed last May." Harriman's rejoinder was that as far back as May there had been warning signs that Diem was through. McCone said that intelligence reports as recently as the middle of July did not bear out Harriman's point, adding, "The current view of the intelligence community is not as ominous as that expressed by the civilian reporters today. The Vietnamese military officers will work with Nhu. Any aid cutoff would seriously affect the war effort."

At this point the President adjourned the meeting, asking that by the next meeting the following day (September 11) a paper be prepared on ways of cutting U.S. funds.

At 5:45 p.m. that same day (September 10), the NSC principals met at the State Department without the President to continue the morning's discussion.¹⁰⁹ McCone questioned whether there was an alternative to a government headed by Diem. Hilsman then described a ". . . two-prong pressure program on Diem with the aim of forcing him to change his present policies." According to the official summary of the meeting, "He acknowledged that if we started down this path we would have to be prepared to contemplate the use of U.S. forces on the ground in Vietnam." General Taylor commented that he was in favor of continuing to work with Diem, and the summary states that Taylor "revealed a reluctance to contemplate the use of U.S. troops in combat in Vietnam. . . ."

As the meeting concluded, McGeorge Bundy asked Hilsman to prepare two papers for the President, one on U.S. objectives, and the other on "a program of pressures against Diem with the aim of forcing him to meet our demands."

The NSC group met again the next day (September 11) at 6 p.m. without the President¹¹⁰ and at 7 p.m. with the President. Earlier

¹⁰⁸Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Comments on the Necessity for an Advance Decision to Introduce U.S. Forces in Viet-Nam," with transmittal memo of Sept. 17, 1963.

¹⁰⁹Kennedy Library, "Meeting at the State Department," Sept. 10, 1963, NSF Presidential Meetings File. Some comments have been deleted.

¹¹⁰Records of this meeting are still classified.

that day a long cable had been received from Lodge, "Eyes Only for the Secretary of State," summarizing the situation in Vietnam.¹¹¹ It was a strong message, obviously intended to support the Harriman-Hilsman position, and to counteract the arguments of Krulak, McNamara and Taylor. Lodge said, ". . . the ship of state here is slowly sinking. . . . if there are effective sanctions which we can apply, we should apply them in order to force a drastic change in government. The only sanction which I can see is the suspension of aid and therefore I recommend that the best brains in the government study precise details of suspending aid so as to do ourselves the most good and the least harm."

Lodge directly questioned the reliability of Krulak's report, saying among other things:

I do not doubt the military judgment that the war in the countryside is going well now. But, as one who has had long connection with the military, I do doubt the value of the answers which are given by young officers to direct questions by generals—or, for that matter, by ambassadors. The urge to give an optimistic and favorable answer is quite unsurmountable—and understandable. I, therefore, doubt the statement often made that the military are not affected by developments in Saigon and the cities generally.

In addition to recommending that a study be made of ways to apply effective sanctions to the Diem government, Lodge said that the U.S. should be making "renewed efforts . . . to activate by whatever positive inducements we can offer the man who would take over the government—Big Minh [General Duong Van Minh, the leader of the coup group] or whoever we might suggest. We do not want to substitute a Castro for a Batista."

At the 7:00 p.m. meeting with the President on September 11, Hilsman summarized the proposed pressure plan. McGeorge Bundy observed that the difference between Hilsman's proposal and Lodge's was that Lodge wanted to suspend all aid. According to the official notes of the meeting, McGeorge Bundy added, "It turns out that it is not easy to cut U.S. aid without stopping the war effort."¹¹² Gilpatrick agreed. Rusk said that Hilsman's proposal ". . . did not involve really important actions, but would have an important psychological effect. He recommended that Ambassador Lodge be told to tell Diem to start acting like the President of Vietnam and get on with the war." Rusk, McNamara, McCone, and Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon all agreed that the U.S. should proceed cautiously, and should continue trying to work with Diem.

President Kennedy asked "whether deterioration has set in and whether the situation is serious." McCone replied that it was not serious, but might become serious within three months. McNamara agreed that it was not serious, and said that "we could not estimate whether the situation would become serious in three months."

¹¹¹Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, Saigon to Washington 478, Sept. 11, 1963.

¹¹²"Memorandum of Conference with the President," Sept. 11, 1963, same location.

Kennedy also read to the group from a news report of Madame Nhu's latest statement, in which she again criticized the United States. He thought there should be a reply, and added, "How could we continue to have her making anti-American comments at the same time she is one of the leaders of a government we are supporting?"

As the meeting ended, Kennedy asked Hilsman for a detailed plan of action on the proposed sanctions. He also wanted a draft of new instructions for Lodge, "including in that instruction a request that he attempt to hush up the [U.S.] press in Saigon." Meanwhile, the President said, all further decisions on aid to Vietnam should be held up temporarily.

The following day (September 12), the NSC group met again (without the President) apparently for the primary purpose of agreeing on new instructions for Lodge.¹¹³ Based on the documentation available, it would appear that the group agreed with Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, McCone and Nolting to make one last attempt to work with Diem, and approved the draft instruction to Lodge which had been personally drafted by Rusk for consideration at the meeting.¹¹⁴ In that draft Rusk tried to put the situation in perspective, and to suggest that, given the alternatives, it was important to make another effort to get Diem to act on the problems facing his administration.

The draft cable began by recognizing Lodge's difficult assignment, but added that this was not the first time the U.S. had faced such a situation "in a country whose leadership stubbornly resists measures which we consider necessary to achieve desired results."

Rusk went on to reiterate that "Our central objective remains a secure and independent South Viet-Nam even though, at some future date, it may be possible to consider a free, independent and non-communist unified country. This central objective was what brought us into South Viet-Nam and its achievement is the condition for our leaving. No one would be happier than we to leave under that circumstance." The "outer limits" of our policy, he added, "within which we must therefore operate unless the situation forces us to break through those limits," are ". . . that we do not get out and turn South Viet-Nam over to the Viet-Cong. . . . [and] that we do not use large-scale force to occupy the country and run it ourselves."

Rusk said that the "key question" was what had happened to change the favorable developments of the first six months of 1963. The problem, he added, appeared to be the loss of political confidence, which he attributed primarily to "the two Nhus."

The next step should be "to concentrate on Diem himself to make him see that everything he has been working for for the past ten years is threatened with collapse and failure and that bold and far-sighted action on his part is required. . . ." What "pressures"

¹¹³It is impossible at this time to be certain of this, however, because the records of that meeting are still classified, and in the file at the Kennedy Library there is this notation concerning a one-page summary of the meeting: "Withdrawn because of high sensitivity and high national security classification and placed in special NLK (National Library Kennedy) security safe." This suggests that the discussion may have gone beyond the question of new instructions into the realm of more drastic U.S. action against Nhu, and against Diem if he did not cooperate.

¹¹⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File.

should be applied in getting Diem to act, the draft cable stated, would have to be determined by Lodge. "I am inclined," Rusk added, "to think that in the next immediate stage we should not threaten what we will not or cannot deliver and that we are not yet ready to cut off assistance which affects the war effort or which would inflict serious damage to the people as contrasted with the regime."

The draft cable concluded with this statement: "It may be that it will be impossible to succeed along this line but the alternatives are so far-reaching that the present effort seems to me to be worth the tedious and frustrating hours which will undoubtedly be required to get through to him and to get him to carry out his own full responsibility."

Development of a General Plan of Action to Enforce U.S. Demands

As the debate over U.S. policy continued, McCone dispatched a special CIA officer to make an independent evaluation of the situation, who reported in mid-September that "we had hastily expended our capability to overthrow the regime, that an aid suspension would not guarantee a constructive result, and that to prevent further political fragmentation we should adopt a "business as usual policy to buy time."¹¹⁵

Diem was also making some moves toward easing the tension in Saigon. On September 14, the government announced that martial law, imposed in August, would end, and that elections for the General Assembly, which had been originally scheduled for August but were postponed, would be rescheduled in September.

Meanwhile at the State Department, Hilsman and his associates were preparing the plan requested by the President at the September 11 meeting. On September 16 this was sent to the President and members of the NSC, and on September 17 the NSC met to consider it.¹¹⁶

This State Department plan, which became the basic action document for U.S. policy prior to the coup on November 1, had two parts or "tracks"—the "Reconciliation Track," and the "Pressures and Persuasion Track." They were not mutually exclusive. According to the cover memo from Hilsman to Rusk and McNamara, the latter track (Pressures and Persuasion Track) was "a phased program designed to persuade the GVN to take certain actions to ensure popular support necessary to win the war, including the removal of Nhu from his position of influence," whereas the former (Reconciliation Track) "proceeds from the assumption that the removal of Nhu is not feasible and attempts to develop a plan aimed at rehabilitating the GVN, even though Nhu continues in power."

Following the cover memo, there was this introductory statement to the two plans:

The overall objective in South Vietnam is to win the war against the Viet Cong. It is our judgment that the recent repressive actions of the GVN have created disaffection which will inevitably affect the war effort, unless that government

¹¹⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 246.

¹¹⁶There are copies of the State Department plan, which was opened in a sanitized form in 1981, in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

undertakes changes in both its policies and personnel that are effective and credible.

Withdrawal by the U.S. would be immediately disastrous to the war effort. On the other hand, acquiescence by the U.S. to recent GVN actions would be equally disastrous, although less immediately so. Our policy is therefore to discriminate; in the words of the President, "what helps to win the war we support. What interferes with the war effort we oppose."

Our problem is to implement this policy of persuasion coupled with pressure in such a way as to avoid triggering either civil violence or a radical move by the government of South Vietnam to make a deal with the DRV and remove the U.S. presence.

Following this introductory statement there was a 14-page statement on the Reconciliation Track, and a three-page "Checklist of Actions for GVN to Ensure Popular Support," which contained specific steps to be taken in conjunction with the Reconciliation Track. These steps included most of the reforms that the Kennedy administration had been urging Diem to adopt since the spring of 1961. The paper also suggested that U.S. efforts at reconciliation with Diem should be led by someone like Lansdale.

It was the second track, "Pressures and Persuasion," however, that was most fully articulated, because Hilsman and his associates considered that track to be more effective. Included was a paper on each of four phases of this track, together with six separate annexes.¹¹⁷ The first of these papers was on the concept of the second track "pressure plan":

The general concept is to use phased, multiple pressures to persuade Diem and Nhu (1) that the GVN should reverse its recent policies of repression effectively and credibly; (2) that the GVN should be broadened; and (3) that the Nhu's influence in the GVN should be sharply and visibly reduced.

Phase 1 concentrates on suasion by a continuation of Lodge's conversations with Diem on the problem of U.S.-GVN relations in all its ramifications.

Phase 2, 3, and 4 add increasingly pressures to the continued conversations.

We recognize the possibility that this campaign may also result in resumed coup plotting. We propose at phases 1 and 2 to give no encouragement to such activities, although we remain ready to listen to serious approaches.

Although past experience does not lead us to be hopeful that suasion alone, as in phase 1, will accomplish the desired results, it seems essential to make the attempt if only to establish a record and lay the groundwork for phase 2.

We believe that the combination of phases 1 and 2 has a good chance of achieving our objective if skillfully and forcefully implemented.

¹¹⁷The annexes were as follows:

(1) Evacuation as a Pressure Device, (2) Evacuation Plan, (3) DOD Checklist on Military Aid, (4) AID checklist on Economic Aid, (5) CIA Checklist on Covert Aid, (6) Consequences for the United States if Nhu Remains in Power. In the Kennedy Library file, annexes (5) and (6) are not included, presumably because they are still classified.

Phase 3 and 4 increase the pressures considerably, and they begin to enter into a stage at which it will become increasingly difficult to reverse ourselves. At this time, we would recommend approval of phases 1 and 2, leaving our decision on 3 and 4 until a later date. At that point, it would seem advisable to bring Ambassador Lodge back to Washington for consultation.

Phase 1 of the Pressures and Persuasion Track was quite similar to the Reconciliation Track. It was to consist primarily of new efforts by Lodge to persuade Diem to make the reforms that the U.S. considered essential.¹¹⁸ To help Lodge do so, there would be a new letter from Kennedy to Diem restating the U.S. position. (A copy of the suggested letter was included in the plan package.)

In phase 2 of this track the U.S. would selectively suspend aid to Vietnam, particularly to those projects and activities most closely controlled by Nhu, as well as general support funds in the commodity import program. The U.S. would also announce the evacuation of all American dependents from Vietnam. "These actions," the paper said, "have been so calculated as to bear minimal effect on the war effort and the conduct of counterinsurgency operations in VN. We are trying now and we will continue to try to avoid harming the little people in the villages and all those elements in VN which are continuing the fight against the VC."

In addition to these actions, of which Diem would be notified, certain additional actions would be taken without disclosure to Diem. "However, the fact that we are taking them will become apparent." These were "(A) Acquisition of substantial cash resources in piastres; (B) A series of covert actions;¹¹⁹ (C) At Lodge's discretion, the [CIA] Chief of Station might talk directly with Ngo Dinh Nhu to persuade him to depart."

The explanation of phases 3 and 4 of the Pressures and Persuasion Track is still so sensitive that the entire introductory, explanatory statement for each phase was deleted when documents on the plan were opened in 1981. From the general description given earlier, however, and from the pages of that section of the report which have been opened, it is possible to ascertain that phase 3 was to be the first of the two-stage direct involvement of the United States in precipitating a coup against Diem, and that the principal public actions contemplated in phase 3 were the complete suspension of financial support under the commodity import program and the agricultural commodities¹²⁰ program, from which the Government of Vietnam derived half of its revenue.

If phase 3 failed to produce the necessary reforms or "change of personnel," to use Kennedy's earlier phrase, phase 4 would begin with a private or public announcement that the U.S. was dissociating itself from the Diem regime. "Such an announcement would reassert U.S. desires to continue support of the Vietnamese people in their fight for freedom, and to indicate U.S. willingness to support an alternative regime—either in Saigon or elsewhere in Vietnam. Actions accompanying this announcement include: immedi-

¹¹⁸For a listing of these reforms see below.

¹¹⁹Here the document refers to annex 5, "CIA checklist on Covert Aid," which is not included in the file and is still classified.

¹²⁰The "P.L. [Public Law] 480 Program."

ate, preplanned evacuation of all nonessential U.S. personnel, turnaround of all shipping, and preparations to supply up-country military forces and strategic hamlets by direct pipeline. These actions now require the overthrow of the Diem regime by coup, or the establishment of a competing government outside of Saigon (and the attendant civil war chaos).¹²¹

This was the conclusion of the paper on phase 4:

If the U.S. correctly has estimated civil and military readiness to overthrow Diem, an alternate government should emerge with sufficient popular support to carry on the fight against the Viet Cong while coping with Diem, if he remains in the Saigon area. If the U.S. has not correctly assessed the readiness of the military to desert Diem and he, in fact, retains control of most major forces, the U.S. would face the final decision of U.S. military intervention or complete withdrawal from Viet-Nam. In this situation, U.S. military intervention to fight a former ally could serve no useful purpose, since there would not exist a sufficient popular base of support for U.S. objectives. Inherent in all Phase 4 activities is the element of extreme danger to U.S. essential personnel remaining in Viet-Nam. Casualties should be expected, particularly in the event that there is no popular abandonment of Diem.

On September 16, Hilsman sent Rusk the two draft cables to Lodge, one on each of the proposed two tracks, saying:¹²²

... My own judgment is that the "Reconciliation Track" will not work. I think Nhu has already decided on an adventure. I think he feels that the progress already made in the war and the U.S. materiel on hand gives him freedom to launch on a course that has a minimum and a maximum goal. The minimum goal would be sharply to reduce the American presence in those key positions which have political significance in the provinces and the strategic hamlet program and to avoid any meaningful concessions that would go against his Mandarin, "personalist" vision of the future of Viet-Nam. The maximum goal, I would think, would be a deal with North Vietnam for a truce in the war, a complete removal of the U.S. presence, and a "neutralist" or "Titoist" but still separate South Viet-Nam.

On September 17, the President met with his NSC advisers to discuss the State Department's plan. The mood was one of determination. In addition to Kennedy's own public pronouncements on the need to defend Vietnam, Senator Fulbright had stated on September 15 on the CBS program "Face the Nation" that "A withdrawal of our forces at this time would . . . be unacceptable."¹²³

It was also obvious, however, that the situation in Vietnam had improved very little, and that the U.S. was faced with having to take additional steps to enforce its demands. But while there was general agreement that the pressure plan was a good working concept, the division within the NSC was as deep as ever, and the appeal for more information on the situation struck a responsive chord with most members of the Council. Thus, after tentatively

accepting the pressure plan at the September 17 meeting, the President approved another fact-finding mission by McNamara and Taylor, and postponed final action on the plan pending their report.

After the meeting, the White House cabled Lodge that the pressure plan had been tentatively approved, and requested his comments.¹²³ "We see no good opportunity for action to remove present government in immediate future; therefore, as your most recent messages suggest, we must for the present apply such pressures as are available to secure whatever modest improvements on the scene may be possible. We think it likely that such improvements can make a difference, at least in the short run. Such a course, moreover, is consistent with more drastic effort as and when means become available, and we will be in touch on other channels on this problem."

The cable authorized Lodge to suspend U.S. aid on a selective basis when desirable. He was also urged to resume discussions with Diem: "We ourselves can see much virtue in effort to reason even with an unreasonable man when he is on a collision course."

The cable also listed the conditions which Lodge should continue to insist upon:

A. Clear the air—Diem should get everyone back to work and get them to focus on winning the war. He should be broad-minded and compassionate in his attitude toward those who have, for understandable reasons, found it difficult under recent circumstances fully to support him. A real spirit of reconciliation could work wonders on the people he leads; a punitive, harsh or autocratic attitude could only lead to further resistance.

B. Buddhists and students—Let them out and leave them unmolested. This more than anything else would demonstrate the return of a better day and the refocusing on the main job at hand, the war.

C. Press—The press should be allowed full latitude of expression. Diem will be criticized, but leniency and cooperation with the domestic and foreign press at this time would bring praise for his leadership in due course. While tendentious reporting is irritating, suppression of news leads to much more serious trouble.

D. Secret and combat police—Confine its role to operations against the VC and abandon operations against non-Communist opposition groups thereby indicating clearly that a period of reconciliation and political stability has returned.

E. Cabinet changes to inject new untainted blood, remove targets of popular discontent.

F. Elections—These should be held, should be free, and should be widely observed.

G. Assembly—Assembly should be convoked soon after the elections. The government should submit its policies to it and should receive its confidence. An assembly resolution would be most useful for external image purposes.

¹²¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

¹²²New York Times, Sept. 16, 1963.

¹²³White House to Lodge, Sept. 17, 1963, in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 743-745.

H. Party—Can Lao party [led by Nhu] should not be covert or semi-covert but a broad association of supporters engaged in a common, winning cause. This could perhaps be best accomplished by [words missing] starting afresh. . . .

J. Rehabilitation by ARVN [Vietnamese Army] of pagodas.
K. Establishment of Ministry of Religious Affairs.

L. Liberation of passport issuances and currency restrictions enabling all to leave who wish to.

M. Acceptance of Buddhist Inquiry Mission from World Federation to report true facts of situation to world.

"Specific 'reforms,'" the cable added, "are apt to have little impact without dramatic, symbolic move which convinces Vietnamese that reforms are real. As practical matter we share your view that this can best be achieved by some visible reduction in influence of Nhus, who are symbol to disaffected of all that they dislike in GVN. This we think would require Nhus departure from Saigon and preferably Vietnam at least for extended vacation. We recognize the strong possibility that these and other pressures may not produce this result, but we are convinced that it is necessary to try."

Lodge replied on September 19 that he agreed there was "no good opportunity for action to remove present government in immediate future . . . and that we should, therefore, do whatever we can as an interim measure pending such an eventuality."¹²⁴ He said that the list of reforms in Washington's cable had already been discussed with Diem and Nhu. "They think that most of them would either involve destroying the political structure on which they rest or loss of face or both. We, therefore, could not realistically hope for more than lip service. Frankly, I see no opportunity at all for substantive changes." Lodge also said that he doubted whether this kind of a "public relations package" would be effective, given the situation. He said he had talked the day before with General Minh, who said that the Communists were gaining ground and the Diem government was more corrupt and repressive than ever. He had also talked to Thuan, who said he wanted to leave the country.

With respect to using selective suspension of U.S. aid as a sanction, but without causing an economic collapse or impeding the war, Lodge said that this also was being studied by the U.S. mission, but without success. "If a way to do this were to be found," he added, "it would be one of the greatest discoveries since the enactment of the Marshall Plan in 1947 because, so far as I know, the U.S. had never yet been able to control any of the very unsatisfactory governments through which we have had to work in our many very successful attempts to make these countries strong enough to stand alone. . . . to threaten them with suppression of aid might well defeat our purposes and might make a bad situation very much worse."

Lodge said that whatever sanctions were used, they should be "directly tied to a promising coup d'état and should not be applied without such a coup being in prospect."

¹²⁴Saigon to Washington, Sept. 19, 1963, in *ibid.*, pp. 746-748.

With respect to the "dramatic symbolic moves" suggested by Washington, Lodge said he had talked to Nhu the night before about the matter, and that Diem and Nhu ". . . have scant comprehension of what it is to appeal to public opinion as they have really no interest in any other opinions than their own. I have repeatedly brought up the question of Nhu's departure and have stressed that if he would just stay away until after Christmas, it might help get the [foreign aid] Appropriation Bill through. This seems like a small thing to us but to them it seems tremendous as they are quite sure that the Army would take over if he even stepped out of the country."

In conclusion, Lodge told Washington that he had no objection to seeing Diem, but that he would "rather let him sweat for a while. . . . I would much prefer to wait until I find some part of the AID program to hold up in which he is interested and then have him ask me to come and see him."

The McNamara-Taylor Mission

On September 23, Kennedy met with McNamara and Taylor just before they left.¹²⁵ Among other things, he urged them to impress upon Diem the need for reform "as a pragmatic necessity and not as a moral judgment." He said he did not think the threats to cut off aid would be effective, and that, "Since in fact only small changes were likely to be made in the immediate future, it would be better to let such adjustments speak for themselves." Because Diem undoubtedly knew of U.S. involvement with the "opposition," he said it would be best for McNamara and Taylor to stress positive accomplishments, especially since 1961, and the strength of U.S. support for Vietnam.

Taylor suggested that it would be useful to work out ". . . a time schedule within which we expect to get this job done and to say plainly to Diem that we were not going to be able to stay beyond such and such a time with such and such forces, and that the war must be won in this time period." (The notes of the meeting do not indicate whether the President responded to this suggestion.)

When McNamara and Taylor (others on the trip were William Bundy, William Sullivan from the State Department, and William Colby from the CIA) arrived in Saigon on September 24, Lodge, who was fully aware of the politics of the situation, began lobbying hard for his position. According to Halberstam, who witnessed the incident, Lodge, who had invited McNamara to stay with him, met McNamara at the airport, where two of the Embassy's staffers had been assigned to block General Harkins so that Lodge would be the first to greet McNamara, ". . . leaving an angry Harkins pushing at the human barrier, shouting, 'Please, gentlemen, please let me through to the Secretary.'"¹²⁶

After spending about a week surveying the situation in Vietnam, McNamara and Taylor met privately with Diem. McNamara told him that he thought the war was going well, and that the Communist threat could be satisfactorily met by the end of 1965 if the po-

¹²⁵Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Memorandum for the Record, Meeting on McNamara/Taylor Mission to South Vietnam," Sept. 23, 1963.

¹²⁶*The Best and the Brightest*, p. 288.

litical situation were stabilized and reforms were carried out by the Diem government. Taylor said he agreed.¹²⁷ McNamara added that such improvements were also required for continued support from Congress and the American public. According to the official summary of the meeting, Diem spoke at length, especially about the strategic hamlets, but did not seem at all responsive to the points made by McNamara and Taylor. "His manner was one of at least outward serenity and of a man who had patiently explained a great deal and who hoped he had thus corrected a number of misapprehensions."¹²⁸

Upon their return to Washington on October 2, McNamara and Taylor immediately submitted their written report to the President, as well as reporting orally to the President that morning and to the President and the NSC that afternoon.¹²⁹ Their first conclusion was that "The military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress." They said that the timetable for final victory, ("If, by victory, we mean the reduction of the insurgency to something little more than sporadic banditry in outlying districts"), provided there was adequate political stability, was to win by the end of 1964 in all but the IV Corps (the delta), and sometime in 1965 in the IV Corps. But they also concluded that the political situation continued to be "deeply serious," and could affect the conduct of the war. U.S. pressure on Diem was required to produce change, but might make him even more uncooperative. A coup was not likely at that time, "although assassination of Diem or Nhu is always a possibility."

"The prospects that a replacement regime would be an improvement appear to be about 50-50," the report stated, adding that a new regime would probably be headed by a military officer, who would need to maintain order, and that "Such an authoritarian military regime, perhaps after an initial period of euphoria at the departure of Diem/Nhu, would be apt to entail a resumption of the repression at least of Diem, the corruption of the Vietnamese Establishment before Diem, and an emphasis on conventional military rather than social, economic and political considerations, with at least an equivalent degree of xenophobic nationalism."

Of the three alternatives—reconciliation, selective pressure, or active promotion of a coup, McNamara and Taylor said that the first would be ineffective and the third unwise. They favored the second, and recommended that the U.S. should continue to apply such selective pressures, primarily through withholding of aid funds, but that nothing should be done which would impede the war effort. "We should work with the Diem government but not support it." Although the U.S. should continue to develop relations with "an alternate leadership if and when it appears," it should not actively promote a coup at that time. ". . . whether or not it proves to be wise to promote a coup at a later time, we must be ready for the possibility of a spontaneous coup, and this too requires clandestine contacts on an intensive basis."

¹²⁷See *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 298-299.

¹²⁸PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 751.

¹²⁹The McNamara-Taylor report to the President is in *ibid.*, pp. 751-766. For comments on the report see *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 298-299, and *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 284-285.

On the military side, they recommended an increase in combat operations, but with emphasis on "clear and hold" rather than "terrain sweeps which have little permanent value." Strategic hamlets should be strengthened, and more hamlet militia armed. More Vietnamese should be trained to replace U.S. forces by the end of 1965.

They also recommended announcement of the plan to withdraw 1,000 U.S. troops by the end of 1963: "This action should be explained in low key as an initial step in a long-term program to replace U.S. personnel with trained Vietnamese without impairment of the war effort."

At the conclusion of the second meeting on October 2, Kennedy, as recommended by McNamara and Taylor in their report, issued the following press statement:¹³⁰

1. The security of South Viet-Nam is a major interest of the United States as of other free nations. We will adhere to our policy of working with the people and Government of South Viet-Nam to deny this country to communism and to suppress the externally stimulated and supported insurgency of the Viet Cong as promptly as possible. Effective performance in this undertaking is the central objective of our policy in South Viet-Nam.

2. The military program in South Vietnam has made progress and is sound in principle, though improvements are being energetically sought.

3. Major U.S. assistance in support of this military effort is needed only until the insurgency has been suppressed or until the national security forces of the Government of South Viet-Nam are capable of suppressing it.

Secretary McNamara and General Taylor reported their judgement that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965, although there may be a continuing requirement for a limited number of U.S. training personnel. They reported that by the end of this year, the U.S. program for training Vietnamese should have progressed to the point where 1,000 U.S. military personnel assigned to South Viet-Nam can be withdrawn.

4. The political situation in South Viet-Nam remains deeply serious. The United States has made clear its continuing opposition to any repressive actions in South Viet-Nam. While such actions have not yet significantly affected the military effort, they could do so in the future.

5. It remains the policy of the United States, in South Viet-Nam as in other parts of the world, to support the efforts of the people of that country to defeat aggression and to build a peaceful and free society.

¹³⁰Public Papers of the Presidents, John F. Kennedy, 1963, pp. 759-760. Several changes were made in the wording suggested by McNamara and Taylor. They recommended that the statement read: "The security of South Vietnam remains vital to the United States security." As can be noted, the word "vital" was changed to "major interest." At Taylor's suggestion, (see *Swords and Plowshares*, pp. 296-297), the report also recommended that the press statement contain this sentence: "We believe the U.S. part of the task can be completed by the end of 1965, the terminal date which we are taking as the time objective of our counterinsurgency programs." This, too, was revised, as can be seen.

The wisdom of announcing the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops, (which, it will be recalled, had been the objective of U.S. military planning since July of 1962) had been strenuously debated within the McNamara-Taylor mission, as well as among other top Presidential advisers. William Sullivan argued that it would be a mistake to include the statement:¹³¹

... we were each drafting a separate chapter of this report and then exchanging the chapters around. When I got Max's [Maxwell Taylor] chapter—we all had offices in the old MACV [U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] out there—I went to Bob McNamara and I said, "I just can't buy this. This is totally unrealistic. We're not going to get troops out in '65. We mustn't submit anything phony as this to the president." And Bob agreed and he went in and talked to Max, and Max agreed to scrub it. Then on the plane on the way we talked about it a bit. Max said, "Well, goddammit, we've got to make these people put their noses to the wheel—or the grindstone or whatever. If we don't give them some indication that we're going to get out sometime, they're just going to be leaning on us forever. So that's why I had it in there." I said, "Well, I can understand that. But if this becomes a matter of public record, it would be considered a phony and a fraud and an effort to mollify the American public and just not be considered honest."

The decision to announce the withdrawal of 1,000 troops was made by Kennedy in a meeting with Rusk, McNamara and Taylor. Both Bundys questioned whether the announcement should be made, but when pressed by Chester L. Cooper, a member of the NSC staff, and others after the meeting, they said they were "under orders."¹³² Sullivan called McNamara to ask "... why in hell is it back in public print again," and McNamara's reply, Sullivan said later, was "not all that convincing at the time."¹³³

William Bundy has since commented that in retrospect there was a "clear internal inconsistency" in the report, namely, the finding on the one hand that political reforms were unlikely to occur, and the conclusion on the other that withdrawal could begin. He attributes this to the pressures of time and the effects of exhaustion, but says, "The words of the release on the military situation were extraordinarily unwise and extraordinarily haunting for the future."¹³⁴

With respect to the results of the McNamara-Taylor trip, Bundy makes this informative observation:¹³⁵

In essence, McNamara, with the strong support of civilian members of his team, came to accept the judgment that had already been reached by Lodge, [William] Trueheart [Deputy Chief of Mission], and most (but not all) of the Embassy staff. This was that an unchanged Diem regime stood only a small chance of holding South Vietnam together and carrying the conflict with the Viet Cong and Hanoi to a successful conclu-

sion. What Diem and Nhu were doing was not merely repugnant, but seemed calculated to end in chaos.

Hence the McNamara group arrived at a series of concrete recommendations designed to dissociate the U.S. from Diem and to put substantial pressure on him.

After the meetings on October 2, Kennedy's top NSC advisers met without the President on October 3 and 4 to discuss the implementation of the McNamara-Taylor report. In the meeting on October 3, McNamara stated that "... we cannot stay in the middle much longer," and that the program proposed in the report "will push us toward a reconciliation with Diem or toward a coup to overthrow Diem."¹³⁶ Ball said, "... if we go down this road it will become known that we are using our aid as pressure on Diem. What position will we be in if we cut off aid, Diem does not do what we want him to do, and then we face a decision to resume aid because, if we do not, the effort against the Viet Cong will cease?" McNamara replied that he thought Diem would respond "by moving part way toward a position which will improve the political situation in Vietnam and therefore improve the military effort."

The group agreed that David Bell, administrator of the foreign aid program (AID), should tell Congress, which was then considering the 1963 aid bill, "that we are not suspending aid but were putting Diem on a shorter lease, which would mean that we have greater flexibility to deal with the developing situation in Vietnam."

At its meeting on October 4, the NSC group considered a draft of proposed action on the Taylor report prior to presenting the proposal to the President at a meeting the following day (October 5).¹³⁷ The draft report stated, "The recommended actions are designed to indicate to the Diem Government our displeasure at its political policies and activities and to create significant uncertainty in that government and in key Vietnamese groups as to the future intentions of the United States. At the same time, the actions are designed to have at most slight impact on the military or counter-insurgency effort against the Viet Cong, at least in the short term." "The test of the adequacy of these actions," the report added, "should be whether, in combination, they improve the effectiveness of the GVN effort to the point where we can carry on in confident expectation that the war effort will progress satisfactorily." There followed a list of specific action recommendations taken from the McNamara-Taylor report. These included the continued suspension of various aid programs, including the critically important commodity import program, as well as suspension of the extremely sensitive and important support for the Vietnamese Special Forces commanded by Colonel Le Quang Tung, and under the direct control of Nhu. These actions would not be announced, and any inquiries concerning them should be answered, the report said, "by the statement that affected programs have been suspended for technical review. . . ."

¹³¹ Kennedy Library, Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan.

¹³² Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), p. 216.

¹³³ Kennedy Library, Second Oral History Interview with William Sullivan.

¹³⁴ Bundy MS., ch. 9, p. 26.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 9, pp. 19-20.

¹³⁶ Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Meeting in the Situation Room," Oct. 3, 1963.

¹³⁷ Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security, 1963. The file copy of the "Report to the Executive Committee," Oct. 4, 1963, does not indicate its source or drafters.

The second part of the report dealt with additional actions that Lodge could take at his discretion as part of his negotiations with Diem. "Lodge's policy toward the GVN and particularly Diem," the report said, "has been one of cool correctness, keeping his distance, in order to make Diem come to him. This policy is correct, and Lodge should continue it. However, it must be realized that it may not work and that at some later time Lodge may have to go to Diem to ensure the latter understands U.S. policy." There were two issues involved: "The first is a crisis of confidence in the American Government and public. The second is a crisis of confidence among the Vietnamese people, which is eroding the popular support for the GVN that is vital to victory. Both of these crises of confidence are caused by the form of government that has been evolving in Viet-Nam. His regime has the trappings of democracy but in reality it has been evolving into an authoritarian government maintained by police terrorist methods. What the GVN must do is to reverse this process of evolution." There followed a listing of the various actions, pursuant to the McNamara-Taylor report, which Lodge could take in seeking to accomplish this result.

On October 5, 1963, the President met with his NSC advisers to consider the action report, as revised by the group on October 4. The meeting was so sensitive and important that it included only Rusk, McNamara, Harriman, Taylor, McCone, Bell, McGeorge Bundy, Forrestal, and Vice President Johnson (who had not participated in previous meetings on the pressure plan).¹³⁸ The report was approved as submitted. The President said that there would be no public statement concerning this action, and that in testifying before executive sessions of congressional committees the following week, Rusk and McNamara "should confine themselves to saying that U.S. programs were under continuing review in light of the President's previously announced policy that we supported those things which furthered the war effort and would not support those things which do not."¹³⁹ He also said that no formal announcement should be made of implementation of the decision to withdraw 1,000 troops, nor should the matter be raised formally with Diem. "Instead the action should be carried out routinely as part of our general posture of withdrawing people when they are no longer needed."

On October 11, NSAM 263 promulgated the President's decisions.¹⁴⁰

After the October 5 meeting, McGeorge Bundy sent the following cable to Lodge:¹⁴¹

... the President asked me to send you this personal message from him.

He thinks it of the greatest importance that, to the very limit of our abilities, we should not open this next stage in the press. The decisions and instructions in following telegram are being held most tightly here, and we are making every possible effort to limit public knowledge and to let the Vietnamese Gov-

¹³⁸See Kennedy Library, NSF Presidential Meetings File, "Report of National Security Council," Oct. 5, 1963.

¹³⁹"Presidential Conference on South Vietnam," Oct. 7, 1963, same location.

¹⁴⁰PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 769-770.

¹⁴¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

ernment itself learn from what we do and not what the papers say, so that your negotiations with Diem may run on your terms. Nothing could be more dangerous than an impression now that a set of major actions is being kicked off and a set of requirements imposed on GVN by U.S. This is of particular importance since some officials and reporters honorably believe in just such a public posture of disapproval and pressure. President therefore believes you should personally control knowledge of individual actions and tactics, and accept, as we will try to, necessary dissatisfaction of determined reporters with cryptic posture.

In a cable to the AID mission director in Saigon informing him of the new pressure plan, AID Director Bell said that Washington officials ". . . believe it of great importance that there should be no public impression of a package of sanctions and a package of demands. We are seeking necessary but limited improvements from a government very difficult to move, and we do not wish to encourage unjustified sense of optimism or of triumph from those who wish this situation was easier than it is. In particular, we would prefer press to consider us inactive than to trumpet a posture of 'major sanctions' and 'sweeping demands.'" He told the foreign aid mission that it should take this same line in briefing a delegation from the House Foreign Affairs Committee led by Representative Zablocki, which was on its way to Vietnam. He also told the mission not to reveal the contents of his cable to the Zablocki group.¹⁴²

When Kennedy made the decision on October 5, 1963, to reject "reconciliation," and to apply most of the pressures under the category of phase 2 of the pressure track, he was fully aware not only that these actions were calculated to induce a coup, but that they were the precise signals of U.S. support for a coup that the opposition generals had said they needed to have before proceeding. Kennedy doubtless hoped that Diem and Nhu would respond to the pressures, and that a coup could be avoided, but he also knew that there was a very slim chance that this would happen. His advisers had told him that it appeared unlikely that Diem would banish Nhu, and there was little likelihood, therefore, that U.S. demands would be met.

Thus, October 5, 1963, was the day the President of the United States decided to move against President Ngo Dinh Diem, knowing that the result probably would be the overthrow of the Vietnamese President. He did so reluctantly, having in mind, no doubt, that his own support may have been instrumental in helping Diem to gain and hold office. By the same token, he probably felt betrayed by what he considered Diem's failure to continue to provide political leadership, as well as his failure to carry out the promises he had made to the United States.

Meanwhile, coup planning was underway again in Vietnam even before news of the new U.S. commitment to support a coup had been communicated to the Vietnamese generals. On October 2, Lucien Conein met accidentally with General Don, who said that he

¹⁴²Bell to Brent, Oct. 5, 1963, same location.

had been trying for some time to establish contact. At another meeting later that day, Don told Conein that the generals had a specific plan, and that General Minh wanted to meet with Conein on October 5. Conein did so with Lodge's (and presumably Washington's) approval, even before Lodge had been told about the President's final decision at the October 5 NSC meeting.¹⁴³

At their October 5 meeting, Minh told Conein that the generals needed to know as soon as possible the position of the U.S. Government with respect to a coup. He said he did not need specific American assistance, but he did need assurances that the U.S. would not thwart the plan. He told Conein that there were three ways to accomplish the coup. The first and "easiest" was to assassinate Nhu and his brother Ngo Dinh Can, and to keep Diem in office as a figurehead. The other two involved military action by the Army against Special Forces stationed in Saigon which were loyal to Diem and Nhu. Conein, acting under specific orders, was noncommittal.

After Conein's conversation with Minh, the CIA team in Saigon recommended to Lodge that "we do not set ourselves irrevocably against the assassination plot, since the other two alternatives mean either a blood bath in Saigon or a protracted struggle."¹⁴⁴ This suggestion was rebuffed by CIA Director McCone, who cabled the CIA station in Saigon that it should withdraw the recommendation it had made to Lodge, "as we cannot be in position actively condoning such course of action and thereby engaging our responsibility therefore."¹⁴⁵ But McCone also told the station not to prevent the use of assassination:¹⁴⁶

[W]e certainly cannot be in the position of stimulating, approving, or supporting assassination, but on the other hand, we are in no way responsible for stopping every such threat of which we might receive even partial knowledge. We certainly would not favor assassination of Diem. We believe engaging ourselves by taking position on this matter opens door too easily for probes of our position re others, re support of regime, et cetera. Consequently believe best approach is hands off. However, we naturally interested in intelligence on any such plan.

Lodge immediately cabled Washington on October 5 to report Conein's conversation, and to ask for guidance.¹⁴⁷ He recommended that Conein tell Minh that the U.S. would not thwart the coup, and that Conein offer to review coup plans other than removal by assassination.

Meanwhile, before receiving Lodge's cable, Washington had sent Lodge a cable on this subject after the October 5 NSC meeting:¹⁴⁸ ". . . President today approved recommendation that no initiative should now be taken to give any covert encouragement to a coup. There should, however, be urgent covert effort with closest security

¹⁴³ "[first word or two deleted] Contacts with Vietnamese Generals, 23 August through 23 October 1963," cited above.

¹⁴⁴ Senate Report on Assassination Plots, p. 220.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 767-768.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 766.

under broad guidance of Ambassador to identify and build contacts with possible alternative leadership as and when it appears. Essential that this effort be totally secure and fully deniable. . . ."

On October 6, Washington replied to Lodge's cable of October 5:¹⁴⁹

While we do not wish to stimulate coup, we also do not wish to leave impression that U.S. would thwart a change of government or deny economic and military assistance to a new regime if it appeared capable of increasing effectiveness of military effort, ensuring popular support to win war and improving working relations with U.S. We would like to be informed on what is being contemplated but we should avoid being drawn into reviewing or advising on operational plans or any other act which might tend to identify U.S. too closely with change in government. We would, however, welcome information which would help us assess character of any alternative leadership.

On October 10, Conein accordingly assured Minh that the U.S. would not thwart the coup, would continue giving aid to Vietnam after the coup, and would be interested in further information on the plan. For the next three weeks, as plans for the coup progressed, the U.S. Government was kept fully informed through Conein's contact with the generals. There were literally hundreds of cables back and forth from Saigon to Washington on these developments, but this subject is so sensitive that almost all of these are still highly classified, and may remain classified indefinitely.

Congress Acquiesces in the Pressures on Diem

During October, as the pressures were being applied to Diem, Congress continued to approve of or acquiesce in the administration's handling of the situation. In part this can be attributed to a lack of information. Although a few Members may have been told privately what was happening, most Members were not informed. Testimony even in closed sessions of committees followed the President's instructions that Congress should be told only that the U.S. was supporting those things that would help the war, and was not supporting those things that would not.

One exception to this general pattern of approval or acquiescence was the position taken by freshman Senator George McGovern (D/S. Dak.), who on September 26, 1963, argued that the U.S. should withdraw both its forces and its aid from Vietnam. He, too, was highly critical of Diem.¹⁵⁰

Morse also continued to criticize Diem and the role of the U.S. in keeping him in power, and to assert that ". . . South Vietnam is not worth the life of a single American boy."¹⁵¹

It is important to recognize that another reason for Congress' acquiescence, which may also help to account for the noticeable sparseness of congressional comment on Vietnam during the summer and fall of 1963, as well as after the coup, may have been that key Members of Congress, especially on the Foreign Relations

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 769.

¹⁵⁰ CR, vol. 109, p. 18205.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15744-15745, 16488.

Committee, were either co-opted by the administration, or were privy to sensitive information that they refrained from discussing or acting upon. For example, in conjunction with executive sessions of the Foreign Relations Committee in early October at which U.S. activities and policy in Vietnam were discussed, President Kennedy held at least two private meetings with key members of the committee—Fulbright, Mansfield, Hickenlooper and Aiken on October 8, and Fulbright, Church, and Symington on October 10. There is apparently no record of these talks, but the composition of the group, especially for the October 10 meeting, suggests that Vietnam may have been discussed, in addition to discussion of the foreign aid bill itself. (The administration was concerned about House cuts in aid funds, which it was seeking to reverse in the Senate.)

There were probably other discussions during this pre-coup period between Rusk and McNamara and the leaders of the committees to which they reported.

The closest thing to a real examination of current U.S. plans and goals in Vietnam by Congress came in executive sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 8, 9, and 10.¹⁵² On October 8, McNamara and Taylor reported to the committee on their trip.¹⁵³ Taylor said that the war was "going well," and that victory—which he defined as the point where the insurgency in South Vietnam was under such control that it could be handled by the "normal security forces"—could be attained by the end of 1965. Although Diem was unpopular, he said, this was not seriously affecting the war effort.

Senator Church asked about U.S. "leverage" on Diem, adding ". . . it seems to me that we are in a position to go further withholding certain kinds of aid, or taking action that can help to force changes in Government policy." "Yes," McNamara said, "it is within our capacity to exert pressures, but it's not within our capacity to assure action in accordance with our recommendations. This is an independent government and I think it is quite inappropriate for us to think of it as a colony or to expect it to act as a colony." The U.S., he said, was withholding support from Colonel Tung's special forces, and was reviewing other aid commitments in an effort to support those activities that furthered the war effort. Consistent with the President's orders, however, he did not comment further on the specific actions being undertaken, and at no point did he or Taylor indicate that the President had approved a general plan of action to bring pressure on Diem.

Taylor observed that no one had suggested an alternative to Diem. Moreover, he said, "We need a strong man running this country [South Vietnam], we need a dictator in time of war and we have got one." Referring to the U.S. Civil War, where "we also had dictatorial government," he added, "This country is in the heart of a civil war and I think to try to apply what we might call normal democratic standards to this government simply is not realistic."

¹⁵²McNamara and Taylor also testified in an executive session of the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Oct. 8, 1963.

¹⁵³U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, Oct. 8, 1963.

On October 9 the Foreign Relations Committee met again in executive session with Rusk as the witness.¹⁵⁴ The subject was the foreign aid bill, then in its final stages. Church again raised the question of using U.S. aid as leverage. Rusk replied that this was being done, and mentioned specifically the suspension of payment to Colonel Tung's Special Forces. He, too, did not reveal to the committee any additional details on the pressure plan, however, or even the existence of such a general plan of action.

On October 10, there was an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with McCone and other CIA officials to discuss the role of the CIA in Vietnam.¹⁵⁵ This, as well as a discussion in the October 8 and 9 hearings, was touched off, at least in part, by a newspaper article asserting that "The story of the Central Intelligence Agency's role in South Viet Nam is a dismal chronicle of bureaucratic arrogance, obstinate disregard of orders, and unrestrained thirst for power."¹⁵⁶ A more proximate cause for the hearing with McCone, however, was the recall to Washington on October 5 of CIA Station Chief Richardson. One explanation was that he was being recalled because of "His identity having been compromised in recent press stories about internal policy struggles in the U.S. mission. . . ."¹⁵⁷ Another explanation, which is nearer the truth, is that he was close to Nhu and Diem, and was sent home by Lodge because he was not in favor of the pressure plan and the anticipated coup. The real explanation for Richardson's recall, however, was that it was undertaken as part of the plan to bring additional pressure to bear on Nhu and Diem by removing one of their allies and supporters from the U.S. mission.¹⁵⁸

In the October 10 hearing, Senator Humphrey asked why Richardson had been recalled. McCone replied that this was done primarily to give the U.S. "more freedom for carrying forward on our current policy. . . ."

Humphrey also asked what would happen if Diem were overthrown. Both McCone and William Colby replied that there was no alternative in sight, and that there would be a political vacuum if Diem were removed.

The question of a coup against Diem was discussed. McCone said, ". . . we could only advise that we would have to move very slowly into this," in part because of the lack of an alternative.

There is no indication that any Member of Congress, save one, Representative Zablocki, indicated personally to the President or his advisers a serious concern about the possible effects of a coup, or about U.S. support for a coup. On the contrary, many leading Members of Congress, especially on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, strongly supported the use of U.S. sanctions against Diem, and agreed with the position of the executive branch that Diem should be replaced if he did not make the reforms which the U.S. considered essential.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, Oct. 9, 1963.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1963.

¹⁵⁶This article, by Richard Starnes, appeared in the Scripps-Howard newspapers, including the *Washington Daily News*, on Oct. 1, 1963.

¹⁵⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 217.

¹⁵⁸See Hilsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 515.

Following the trip he and seven other members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee made to Vietnam beginning October 6, Zablocki issued a report which concluded that U.S. assistance to Vietnam was essential, that the war was being won, and that the U.S. should be very cautious in supporting any change in the Vietnamese Government.¹⁵⁹ "Some have recommended as a solution," the group said, "the ouster of the Diem family. Those who advocate such a course offer no specific alternatives. The lesson of Cuba must not be forgotten—Batista was bad but Castro is worse." The Zablocki group summed up its general position as follows:

What kind of a victory do we seek in Vietnam? A decisive military victory is not to be expected in a guerrilla operation. Nor should we expect a resounding victory for democracy as we understand it. Our sights ought to be set at more modest goals for both—a high degree of internal security and a reasonably responsible and responsive government. The problem in Vietnam today is that the military effort of the Vietnamese and ourselves is not matched by a comparable political effort which must, of necessity, be that of the Government of Vietnam. There is no reason to expect quickly in Vietnam or in any other newly established state the full range of democratic processes we know. At best we can hope only for small increments of popular participation as the level of education rises and the people identify themselves more closely with the Government.

The war in Vietnam is far from its conclusion. We can be pleased with the progress made thus far, but all indications are that the conflict will be a long one. The United States presence will be required in Vietnam until there is a successful resolution of the military conflict.

When the Zablocki group returned to Washington, Zablocki met with Kennedy to report his finding. According to Zablocki, Kennedy said, "I hope you'll write an objective report and not put President Diem in a favorable light." Zablocki said he replied, "Mr. President, we intend to write that report as we've seen it, as we believe the situation to be, and I don't think we should be basing our policy on columnists who write their stories in the Caravelle bar after a few martinis." As he was leaving the White House, Zablocki said that the President's Press Secretary, Pierre Salinger, told him, "Well, you know what the boss wants." Zablocki said he replied, "The boss will get what we think is right. . . . Somebody's giving the boss some bad information."¹⁶⁰

On October 22, 1963, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported as a part of the foreign aid bill the following substitute for the Church amendment:

It is the sense of the Congress that assistance authorized by this act should be extended to or withheld from the Government of South Vietnam, in the discretion of the President, to further the objectives of victory in the war against communism and the return to their homeland of Americans involved in that struggle.

¹⁵⁹H. Rept. 88-893.

¹⁶⁰CRS Interview with Clement J. Zablocki, Jan. 29, 1979.

This was subsequently approved by the Senate and the House after Diem's assassination, and became law.¹⁶¹ In its report the Foreign Relations Committee said:¹⁶²

This new paragraph reflects the committee's conviction that stabilization of the political situation in Vietnam is of the utmost importance for winning the war against the Communist guerrillas. The committee takes note of the fact that there is still pending before it Senate Resolution 196 [the Church resolution] calling for discontinuance of aid to South Vietnam unless the Vietnamese Government puts needed reforms into effect. If the political situation in South Vietnam deteriorates further to the detriment of the war effort, the committee will be disposed to give further consideration to the more drastic steps called for by Senate Resolution 196.

Dénouement

Toward the end of October 1963, the U.S. was informed that the coup against Diem would occur before November 2. Coup leaders were reluctant to provide Conein with detailed plans, however, because they were concerned that U.S. military officials who continued to oppose a coup might reveal the plans to Diem or Nhu. Conein was told that he would be given the plans two days in advance.

In Washington, the White House was becoming very concerned about the situation. The President and his advisers were fearful that the coup would not be successful, as well as being worried that the U.S. would be held responsible if it did succeed. On October 24, the White House cabled Lodge expressing concern about the lack of "firm intelligence" on coup plans, as well as about the possible publicity that could arise from the role of Conein. Lodge replied on October 25 that he shared Kennedy's concern about the possible publicity arising from Conein's role, and was considering using two other persons as "cut-outs" (go-betweens) for communication between Conein and the generals. As for White House jitters about the coup, Lodge said that it was important for the U.S. to support the coup. To attempt to thwart it, he said, would be a mistake:¹⁶³

First, it seems at least an even bet that the next government would not bungle and stumble as much as the present one has. Secondly, it is extremely unwise in the long range for us to pour cold water on attempts at a coup, particularly when they are just in their beginning stages. We should remember that this is the only way in which the people in Vietnam can possibly get a change in government. Whenever we thwart attempts at a coup, as we have done in the past, we are incurring very long lasting resentments, we are assuming an undue responsibility for keeping incumbents in office, and in general are setting ourselves in judgment over the affairs of Vietnam.

The White House replied immediately:¹⁶⁴ "We are particularly concerned about hazard that an unsuccessful coup, however care-

¹⁶¹Public Law 88-205, Dec. 16, 1963.

¹⁶²S. Rept. 88-588.

¹⁶³PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 780-781. The White House cable is still classified.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., p. 782.

fully we avoid direct engagement, will be laid at our door by public opinion almost everywhere. Therefore, while sharing your view that we should not be in position of thwarting coup, we would like to have option of judging and warning on any plan with poor prospects of success."

On Saturday, October 27, according to U. Alexis Johnson, then Deputy Under Secretary of State, the U.S. gave final approval to the coup, and a "green light" cable was sent to Lodge after approval by Ball. This is Johnson's account:¹⁶⁵

On Saturday, October 27, when I was playing golf with Undersecretary Ball at the Falls Road public course, Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman interrupted our game, and they gave him a telegram to sign. George was Acting Secretary in Rusk's absence from Washington. I found it somewhat curious that they did not show it to me, but there was no special reason I had to see it, so I kept out of their discussion. Ball signed the telegram, the two departed, and we continued our game. It turned out that this was the "green light" telegram authorizing Ambassador Lodge to signal that we would not oppose a coup against Diem. Looking back on it, I am relatively sure that Ball, Hilsman, and Harriman knew that I would oppose it and excluded me from their discussion on purpose.

On October 29, Lodge cabled Kennedy a summary of developments, including the latest conversations of Conein with General Don, which concluded as follows:¹⁶⁶

In summary, it would appear that a coup attempt by the Generals' group is imminent; that whether this coup fails or succeeds, the USG must be prepared to accept the fact that we will be blamed, however unjustifiably; and finally, that no positive action by the USG can prevent a coup attempt short of informing Diem and Nhu with all the opprobrium that such an action would entail.

The NSC met twice that day (October 29) to review the Vietnam situation.¹⁶⁷ The summaries of these meetings are still classified. According to Arthur Schlesinger, (who has had exclusive access to Robert Kennedy's papers containing a summary of at least the first meeting on October 29), "Robert Kennedy thought the situation no different from August, when the generals talked big and did nothing. 'To support a coup,' he told the group, 'would be putting the future of Vietnam and in fact all of southeast Asia in the hands of one man not now known to us. A failure of a coup risks too much. The reports we have are very thin.' The President observed that,

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power*, p. 412. The Kennedy Library reports that no copy of such a cable on October 27 can be found in the library's records. Judging by the "withdrawal sheets" indicating which classified items have been removed from the files, it would also appear that there is no copy of the cable in the library's records in materials covering the day or two following that date. (Many important government cables, even some highly important ones, are not in Presidential libraries, however.) Queried about Johnson's reference to a "green light" cable on October 27, Ball and Hilsman contend that Johnson's account is misdated, and that the event as he described it occurred on Saturday, August 24. See Ball's account of the August 24 cable in *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 371-372. Johnson, however, maintains that his account is correct.

¹⁶⁶ *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 260. Lodge also cabled a report (Saigon to Washington 805, Oct. 29, 1963) on his day-long talk with Diem on Oct. 27. This is in the Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

¹⁶⁷ For an outline of subjects to be discussed at the first meeting see Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, "Check List for 4 PM meeting."

since the pro-Diem and anti-Diem forces appeared about equal, any attempt to engineer a coup would be silly."¹⁶⁸

Hilsman's account of Robert Kennedy's position in the October 29 meeting (he does not mention the President's position), makes it clear, however, that the Attorney General was not taking the position that the U.S. should back away from supporting a coup. According to Hilsman, Robert Kennedy concluded, "It was difficult to see where the United States' interest lay. It was important that the decisions in such matters be Vietnamese . . . but the United States would get the blame no matter what happened. It might be wise to try to find more about what was going on."¹⁶⁹

Colby, who was also present at the October 29 White House meetings, says that in the meetings, ". . . the by-then much-hashed-over debate was repeated between the State Department view that the Diem regime had to go because it could not prosecute the war, and the Pentagon's (and McCone's and my) view that Diem was better than anyone on the horizon and that the real American interest was to avoid adversely affecting the war in the countryside by upsetting the political structure in Saigon. The President vacillated in the face of the intensity of argument among his closest advisers, and the only decision reached that day was the usual easy one to seek more information about what was really going on in Vietnam by sending out more cables."¹⁷⁰

After the October 29 meetings, McGeorge Bundy sent Lodge a cable asking for additional information, and reemphasizing the importance of a quick, successful coup.¹⁷¹ "We reiterate burden of proof must be on coup group to show a substantial possibility of quick success; otherwise, we should discourage them from proceeding since a miscalculation could result in jeopardizing U.S. position in Southeast Asia." Lodge was also told to share all of the cables on the coup with Harkins, partly because of Washington's concern about the exclusion of Harkins from the planning process. In addition, as a part of the plan, Lodge had been scheduled to return to Washington for consultation at the end of October, and in his absence Harkins' role would be even more important.

Harkins' reaction after he read the cables between Lodge and the White House was that he and Lodge had a different understanding of the guidance from Washington with respect to the U.S. role in a coup. In a cable to Taylor on October 30, Harkins said that, unlike Lodge, he assumed that the U.S. was not going to give any covert encouragement to a coup.¹⁷² He added that he was not opposed to a "change in government," but he thought it should be in "methods of governing rather than a complete change of personnel."

¹⁶⁸ Robert Kennedy and His Times, p. 721. CRS requested mandatory review of the classification of the notes which were kept on the first of these meetings, and was informed by the Kennedy Library on Apr. 13, 1983, that the State Department and the NSC will not agree at this time to declassify the material, citing Executive Order 123561, Sec. 1.3 (a) (5)—"foreign relations or foreign activities"—and Sec. 1.3 (b) ". . . disclosure, either by itself or in the context of other information, reasonably could be expected to cause damage to the national security."

¹⁶⁹ *To Move A Nation*, p. 519.

¹⁷⁰ *Honorable Men*, p. 216.

¹⁷¹ *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 788.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 784-785.

"In my contacts here," Harkins said, "I have seen no one with the strength of character of Diem, at least in fighting communists. Clearly there are no Generals qualified to take over in my opinion."

Harkins said he did not agree with Lodge that the war was not being won. On the contrary, "Nothing has happened," he told Taylor, "in October to change the assessment you and Secretary McNamara made after your visit here."

Harkins concluded:

I would suggest we not try to change horses too quickly. That we continue to take persuasive actions that will make the horses change their course and methods of action. That we win the military effort as quickly as possible, then let them make any and all of the changes they want.

After all, rightly or wrongly, we have backed Diem for eight long hard years. To me it seems incongruous now to get him down, kick him around, and get rid of him. The U.S. has been his mother superior and father confessor since he's been in office and he had leaned on us heavily.

Leaders of other under-developed countries will take a dim view of our assistance if they too were led to believe the same fate lies in store for them.

That same day (October 30), Lodge replied to Bundy's cable of that date. He agreed that it was important to "get best possible estimate of chance of coup's success and this estimate must color our thinking," but he added that he did not think "we have the power to delay or discourage a coup." He added:

Heartily agree that a miscalculation could jeopardize position in Southeast Asia. We also run tremendous risks by doing nothing.

If we were convinced that the coup was going to fail, we would, of course, do everything we could to stop it. "My general view," Lodge said, "is that the U.S. is trying to bring this medieval country into the 20th Century and that we have made considerable progress in military and economic ways but to gain victory we must also bring them into the 20th Century politically and that can only be done by either a thoroughgoing change in the behavior of the present government or by another government."

Lodge said he anticipated that after the coup there might be a need either to grant asylum in the U.S. Embassy to "key personalities" or to transport them out of Vietnam. "I believe," he said, "that there would be immediate political problems in attempting to take these personalities to another neighboring country and probably we would be best served in depositing them in Saipan where the absence of press, communication, etc., would allow us some leeway to make a further decision as to their ultimate disposition."

Lodge did not ask Washington for air transportation for this purpose. He did not need to. The Air Force had already sent a plane to Saigon for his use in returning to Washington, and commercial airlines also had planes available.

Lodge did ask Washington for money for the generals, who, he said, "may well have need of funds at the last moment with which to buy off potential opposition." (After the coup, Conein, who had

received the money on October 24, gave \$42,000 to the generals to pay troops that had participated and death benefits for those killed.)¹⁷³

Lodge's cable ended with this statement: "Gen. Harkins has read this and does not concur."

Harkins then called Taylor. He said he had not concurred because he thought the U.S. needed more information, adding, "I feel we should go along with only a sure thing. This or continue with Diem until we have exhausted all pressures. The prestige of the U.S. is really involved one way or the other and it must be upheld at all costs."¹⁷⁴

After receiving this cable from Lodge, the White House replied immediately (October 30).¹⁷⁵ In this, which may have been the final White House cable to Lodge before the coup on November 1, Bundy, speaking for Kennedy, told Lodge:

We do not accept as a basis for U.S. policy that we have no power to delay or discourage a coup. . . . You say that if you were convinced that the coup was going to fail you would of course do everything you could to stop it. We believe that on this same basis you should take action to persuade coup leaders to stop or delay any operation which, in your best judgment, does not clearly give high prospect of success. . . . Therefore, if you should conclude that there is not clearly a high prospect of success, you should communicate this doubt to generals in a way calculated to persuade them to desist at least until chances are better.

Kennedy then gave Lodge these instructions:

a. U.S. authorities will reject appeals for direct intervention from either side, and U.S.-controlled aircraft and other resources will not be committed between the battle lines or in support of either side, without authorization from Washington.

b. In event of indecisive contest, U.S. authorities agree to perform any acts agreeable to both sides, such as removal of key personalities or relay of information. In such actions, however, U.S. authorities will strenuously avoid appearance of pressure on either side. It is not in the interest of USG to be or appear to be either instrument of existing government or instrument of coup.

c. In the event of imminent or actual failure of coup, U.S. authorities may afford asylum in their discretion to those to whom there is any express or implied obligation of this sort. We believe however that in such a case it would be in our interest and probably in interest of those seeking asylum that they seek protection of other Embassies in addition to our own. This point should be made strongly if need arises.

d. But once a coup under responsible leadership has begun, and within these restrictions, it is in the interest of the U.S. Government that it should succeed.

¹⁷³Senate Report on Assassination Plots, p. 222.

¹⁷⁴Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, MAC 2084, Oct. 30, 1963.

¹⁷⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 792-793.

The Coup

On November 1, at approximately 1:30 p.m. (Saigon time), the coup began, and U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington made every effort to carry out the President's directive that it should succeed. Conein joined the generals at their headquarters and kept Lodge informed by a direct telephone line. Lodge kept Washington fully informed.

At approximately 4 p.m., Diem called Lodge to ask about the attitude of the U.S. Government toward the coup. According to a CIA summary, "Lodge took refuge in the confusion of the situation and expressed concern for Diem's physical safety. Lodge told Diem that he had heard that the coup leaders had offered Diem and Nhu safe conduct out of the country and he asked Diem about this. Diem's only comment was that he was the Chief of State, that he had tried to do his duty, and that he was trying to reestablish law and order."¹⁷⁶

This statement in the CIA summary is not entirely correct. According to the State Department's verbatim transcript of the conversation, Diem said he had not heard of the offer of safe conduct, and told Lodge, "You have my telephone number." Lodge's reply was, "Yes. If I can do anything for your physical safety, please call me."¹⁷⁷

According to Conein, when he called the U.S. Embassy on the morning of November 2 to procure an airplane in which to take Diem and Nhu out of Vietnam, the answer was that there were none available.¹⁷⁸

... on October 30, 1963, Ambassador Lodge notified Washington that there might be a request by key leaders for evacuation and suggested Saigon as a point for evacuation. (Cable, Saigon to Washington, 10/30/63.) Conein was charged with obtaining the airplane. Between 6:00 and 7:00 on the morning of November 2, [General] Minh and [General] Don asked Conein to procure an aircraft. Conein relayed the request to a Station Officer at the Embassy who replied that it would not be possible to get an aircraft for the next twenty-four hours, since it would have to be flown from Guam. Conein testified that a Station representative told him that Diem could be flown only to a country that offered him asylum and that the plane could not land in any other country. There were no aircraft immediately available that had sufficient range to reach a potential country of asylum. (Conein, 6/20/75, p. 54).¹⁷⁹

Conein has also stated, "I asked the Embassy for an aircraft and I was told I had to wait 24 hours before I could get the aircraft that was necessary to transport Diem to a nation who would accept his exile, I spoke for the United States government and I was author-

¹⁷⁶Kennedy Library, POF Country File, Vietnam Security, 1963, Central Intelligence Agency, OCI No. 9238/63, "Progress of the Coup d'Etat in Saigon (As of 0800 EST.)"

¹⁷⁷Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Saigon to Washington 860, Nov. 1, 1963. See also PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 268.

¹⁷⁸Senate Report on Assassination Plots, p. 223, fn. 2.

¹⁷⁹This citation to Conein is a reference to his testimony before an executive session of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities in connection with the committee's study of possible CIA involvement in assassination plots. All testimony on the subject of assassinations was in executive session, and remains unpublished and closed to public access.

ized and I informed the junta that I had an aircraft, but it would take me 24 hours to have that aircraft."¹⁸⁰

As a staff study for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee put it, "One wonders what became of the U.S. military aircraft that had been dispatched to stand by for Lodge's departure, scheduled for the previous day."¹⁸¹

Later that day (November 2), Diem and Nhu escaped to a residence in the suburb of Cholon. The next morning, Diem called the generals and offered to surrender in return for safe conduct out of Vietnam. It is not clear from available evidence whether this offer was accepted. The whereabouts of the brothers was soon discovered, and they took sanctuary in a nearby Catholic church. Shortly afterwards they were taken captive, and on the way to the generals' headquarters they were assassinated.¹⁸²

The NSC was meeting on November 2 when word of the assassinations was received. Taylor said that the President "leaped to his feet and rushed from the room with a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before." According to Taylor, Kennedy "... had always insisted that Diem must never suffer more than exile and had been led to believe or had persuaded himself that a change in government could be carried out without bloodshed."¹⁸³

Some CIA officials were surprised to hear of Kennedy's reaction:¹⁸⁴

The following day, at McCone's regular morning meeting with the CIA's Deputy Director and the top officials, McCone described Kennedy's reaction to the news of Diem's murder. According to Lyman Kirkpatrick, who was present at the meeting, the reaction of those in the room was not entirely sympathetic. The coup was Kennedy's idea; his administration authorized it despite repeated CIA objections. What did he expect? When a coup takes place you can't control it. Helms, too, wondered at Kennedy's dismay, and concluded later that the President had not fully understood what he had ordered. He'd okayed the August cable which first put the U.S. Embassy on the side of the dissident generals, and when a coup appeared imminent at the end of October he authorized

¹⁸⁰Quoted in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Involvement in the Overthrow of Diem, 1963*, Staff Study, 92d Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1972), p. 23.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 23, fn. 80. According to the study by *U.S. News and World Report*, cited above, "... the desire to conceal the U.S. role in the coup does not explain why, 17 hours after the coup began, there still had been no attempt to bring in a plane to fly Diem and Nhu out of the country."

¹⁸²For additional details on these events see especially the excellent Foreign Relations Committee staff study by Ann L. Hollick, *U.S. Involvement in the Overthrow of Diem*, cited above. See also the Pentagon Papers; Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*; Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*; and Mecklin, *Mission in Torment*. In addition see L. Fletcher Prouty, "The Anatomy of Assassination," in Howard Frazier (ed.), *Uncloaking the CIA* (New York: Free Press, 1975), pp. 196-209. Prouty, for nine years the officer responsible for military liaison with the clandestine operations of the CIA, who was on the staff of the JCS at the time of the Diem coup, says (p. 205), "The actual killing was a simple thing, 'for the good of the cause.' The USA and CIA could wash their hands of it. They had had nothing to do with it. Like all assassinations, it had just happened. Nobody in Washington had said, 'Shoot Diem.' You don't do an assassination that way. The way people are assassinated is by taking away the power that has been created to keep them there. The deadly passive role of the CIA had permitted the termination of another ruler."

¹⁸³*Swords and Plowshares*, p. 301.

¹⁸⁴Powers, *The Man Who Kept the Secrets*, p. 165.

McGeorge Bundy to tell Lodge to use his own judgment—a roundabout way of saying, It's okay with me. But Kennedy's dismay at the result convinced Helms that Kennedy had never quite hoisted this operation aboard: he'd said yes, without fully realizing what he was saying yes to.

After the coup, a military junta (Military Revolutionary Council) of 12 generals, headed by General Duong Van "Big" Minh, assumed power. Vice President Tho became the civilian premier with an all-civilian Cabinet. The legislature was abolished, but a Council of Notables was appointed as an advisory body. Among the various actions taken by the new government was the release of political prisoners, including Dr. Phan Quang Dan, one of Diem's leading opponents, who had been imprisoned since 1960.

Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, was later executed by the new government. His brother, Archbishop Thuc, was in Rome, and remained in Europe. His other brother, Ngo Dinh Luyen, then South Vietnam's Ambassador to London, also remained abroad. Madame Nhu was still abroad, but three of her four children were in Vietnam. She called journalist Marguerite Higgins, who called Hilsman to ask whether the U.S. Government could assist in getting the children out. Higgins told Hilsman, "Congratulations, Roger. How does it feel to have blood on your hands?" He replied, "Oh, come on now, Maggie. Revolutions are tough. People get hurt."¹⁸⁵ Hilsman said, however, that the U.S. would assist with the children. This was done, and they left Vietnam in a U.S. aircraft several days later.

Higgins' own reaction was that the U.S. ". . . allowed itself to forget that it was in Vietnam as an ally, not as a conqueror. In the fall of 1963 Washington went into the business of hiring and firing governments. We not only forgot the one overriding priority, the war effort, but also for the first time in history, conspired in the ouster of an ally in the middle of a common war against the Communist enemy, thus plunging the country and the war effort into a steep spiral of decline."¹⁸⁶

Officials in Washington reacted as might have been expected, given their attitudes and their roles. Taylor, Colby, Richardson and others from the military and the CIA, as well as U. Alexis Johnson, Nolting and some other Foreign Service officers, took the position that the overthrow of Diem was a great mistake, perhaps even a fatal mistake, in terms of U.S. involvement. In his memoirs, Taylor said:¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 225.
¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁸⁷ *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 302. A study prepared for the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College (BDM Corp.), *The Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam* [McLean Va.: 1980] (concluded in part) (vol. II, p. Ex-4):

"The overthrow of the Diem regime was one of the very few key watershed of the Second Indochina War; although Diem might have lost the war eventually, his assassination resulted in:

"—political, military and economic chaos for almost three years

"—an irreversible loss of GVN legitimacy and popularity, particularly among the rural peoples

"—massive, prolonged and eventually self-defeating U.S. military intervention

"—erosion of the U.S. moral basis for the war, and conversely a deeper commitment to support the successive governments regardless of their worth. . . ."

Diem's overthrow set in motion a sequence of crises, political and military, over the next two years which eventually forced President Johnson in 1965 to choose between accepting defeat or introducing American combat forces. The encouragement afforded the enemy of Diem's downfall found expression in a massive offensive, political and military, to exploit the removal of their mortal enemy. Taking into account all these effects, I would assess this whole episode as one of the great tragedies of the Vietnamese conflict and an important cause of the costly prolongation of the war into the next decade.

In his memoirs, Colby called the "American-sponsored overthrow of Diem," the "worst mistake of the Vietnam war. . . ."¹⁸⁸ Lansdale had this reaction:¹⁸⁹

. . . I thought it was a terrible, stupid thing. First of all, Diem was a friend of mine, so it came as a personal shock when he was killed. Secondly, the action itself didn't make military sense to me. We divided our forces in the face of the enemy—a military "no-no." South Vietnam was up against a very aggressive, smart, and imaginative enemy who was fighting the war from a political basis. And on our side, we paid too little attention to the political basis which we needed to wage a war. By killing Diem we split our political side at least in two if not more parts, and doing that in the face of the enemy who would take advantage of it right away. I felt we were too weak to play around that way, and I thought it was the worst thing that we ever did. I still can't understand anybody's thinking on that. And the enemy did take advantage of it right away. I'm sure that someplace along the line we'll find all of the ways that they did. They became much stronger, and started going on towards winning the war from that moment. I think we should never have done it. We destroyed the Vietnamese Constitution, not we, but the people we were working with, threw it in the waste basket. The governmental structure was destroyed—the province chiefs and the district chiefs and so forth, the whole structure went down. And from then on, as they kept on having more and more coups and new generals would take over, they'd destroy the whole structure of government again, all of the province chiefs and so forth. There were always people who didn't quite know their jobs throughout the country, and we were thinking all of the time that they were all solid and held together, but they weren't people to do that. And we didn't realize it. Even today I don't think any of the historians have ever figured out that it happened that way, but we destroyed the whole government side of the social structure in one fell-blow.

Among those who had advocated the coup, the reaction was that it was necessary and that it had been successful. They argued that the mistake would have been to continue to depend on the Diem government. Lodge himself cabled Kennedy on November 6 that as a result of the coup "prospects for victory are much improved." ". . . this may be a useful lesson in the use of U.S. power," he

¹⁸⁸ *Honorable Men*, p. 203.

¹⁸⁹ CRS Interview with Edward Lansdale, Nov. 19, 1982.

added. "Perhaps the USG has here evolved a way of not being everywhere saddled with responsibility for autocratic governments simply because they are anti-Communist."¹⁹⁰

On that same day, President Kennedy replied:¹⁹¹

Now that there is a new Government which we are about to recognize, we must all intensify our efforts to help it deal with its many hard problems. As you say, while this was a Vietnamese effort, our own actions made it clear that we wanted improvements, and when these were not forthcoming from the Diem Government, we necessarily faced and accepted the possibility that our position might encourage a change of government. We thus have a responsibility to help this new government to be effective in every way that we can, and in these first weeks we may have more influence and more chance to be helpful than at any time in recent years.

I am particularly concerned myself that our primary emphasis should be on effectiveness rather than upon external appearances. If the new Government can limit confusion and intrigue among its members, and concentrate its energies upon the real problems of winning the contest against the Communists and holding the confidence of its own people, it will have met and passed a severe test. This is what we must help in, just as it was ineffectiveness, loss of popular confidence, and the prospect of defeat that were decisive in shaping our relations to the Diem regime.

Lodge was also known to believe, as were others in the U.S. Government, that the coup averted an accommodation, led by Nhu, with North Vietnam, as the South Vietnamese generals themselves had feared when they began plotting. In an executive session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on June 30, 1964, Lodge declared: "Last fall, if the Diem Government hadn't come to an end and had gone on for another month, I think we might have had a Communist takeover. I think it had become that important."

George Ball has defended the decision, while criticizing the involvement of the United States in Vietnam:¹⁹²

I think it would have been disastrous to have left Diem there with the Nhus using him as though he were a puppet. They were bringing disgrace on the United States. They were creating a situation which was quite intolerable, which I think had it continued would have led to a very great continued disorder in Saigon. I don't at all accept the thesis that this was a disaster which changed the course of the war. I think it was the kind of situation which illustrated the fact that we should never have been deeply engaged with these people under any circumstances.

¹⁹⁰This cable, which is still classified, is quoted by Schlesinger, who had access to it in the Robert Kennedy papers. *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, pp. 721-722. In the same cable Lodge added that while the coup was a Vietnamese affair, "which we could neither manage nor stop after it got started and which we could only have influenced with great difficulty . . . it is equally certain that the ground in which the coup seed grew into a robust plant was prepared by us and that the coup would not have happened [as] it did without our preparation. . . ."

¹⁹¹Kennedy Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington, to Saigon 746, Nov. 6, 1963.

¹⁹²Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, p. 94. See also *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 373-374.

William Bundy, who said he believed at the time that the change of government would be an improvement,¹⁹³ feels that the decision of the U.S. to pressure Diem and to precipitate a coup in Vietnam "came to rank almost along side those of 1961, barely below those of 1954-55 in importance and those of 1964-65 in both gravity and importance."¹⁹⁴ He defends these actions, however, ". . . because the chances of South Vietnam being preserved were rightly judged to be less under Diem even than under a disorganized succession." He also finds the decisions morally and ethically acceptable: ". . . it does seem to me clear that in the face of the kind of thing that was happening in South Vietnam from mid-August onward, a nation like the U.S. must subordinate its concern to let things alone to the concern for present deprivation of liberty and life."¹⁹⁵

Bundy concludes, however, that the effect of the coup was to deepen U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and that this effect was given short shrift in the debate in the executive branch:¹⁹⁶

The political fact was that through what it did in the fall of 1963 the U.S. deepened its commitment to the preservation of South Vietnamese national independence. This was not stated at the time by Vietnamese, nor was it any significant part of the argument within the U.S. Government. So far as either written record or oral recollection can establish, no participant in the debate rested any weight, or even dwelt, on the argument that to engage U.S. prestige and judgment in the internal politics of South Vietnam was inevitably to increase the investment of both in the wider contest for the country itself. . . . In an intangible way, Americans in both public and policy circles were bound henceforth to feel more responsible for what happened in South Vietnam.

Bundy has also commented on why the decision was made, and why an action with such serious consequences was debated without full consideration of those consequences:¹⁹⁷

In part because the process was so confused, so laden with personality clashes, and so distorted and inflamed by publicity that it never got far away from the immediate issues of tactical judgment. The process of policy-making was almost at its worst from mid-August through the beginning of October, and thereafter events came so rapidly that time was not taken for reflection.

Yet this is only a part of the reason. The greater part is that all of the participants assumed that the stakes in South Vietnam were so serious as to warrant the deepened commitment, if that was what it came to.

. . . was any basic alternative considered? Might one have been? The answer to the first part of the question is, again, categorically negative. Up to the day of President Kennedy's death, no one in the policy circle suggested seriously that the U.S. start to think in terms of withdrawing with the task unfinished. . . . Out of government as within it, the general feel-

¹⁹³*Many Reasons Why*, p. 87.

¹⁹⁴Bundy MS., ch. 10, p. 1.

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.

¹⁹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

ing that things would somehow be better if Diem left—strongest in liberal circles of course—tended to drown out any serious voices asking if the whole venture was worth it.¹⁹⁸

In Congress, only a few Members commented publicly on the coup or the death of Diem. In the Senate, Mansfield said on November 1, before the news of Diem's assassination, that the reported "uprising" "appears to me to be a purely Vietnamese affair which the Vietnamese should settle among themselves." He added that the coup had come as a surprise to him and, he felt sure, to the Kennedy administration.¹⁹⁹ Zablocki made similar comments when queried by the press. "They told us [the Zablocki subcommittee]," he said, that "there was no advance information."²⁰⁰

Senator Hickenlooper, ranking Republican on the Foreign Relations Committee, said that it was a serious situation which should be watched closely. Senator Aiken said he did not know whether U.S. personnel had been involved, "But if we are at all involved we don't want another failure. I hope we don't have another Bay of Pigs on our hands."²⁰¹

The *New York Times*, along with most of the major newspapers of the country, welcomed the coup. In an editorial on November 2 it said:

The only surprising thing about the military revolt in Saigon is that it has not come sooner. The inefficiency, corruption, inflexibility and growing unpopularity of the Diem-Nhu regime has been increasingly evident for the last two years. The Buddhist revolt in May and subsequent non-Communist unrest in South Vietnam made the continuation of all-out American support impossible.

On November 5, Mansfield, referring to Diem's death, said that "recent events in Vietnam are tragic events." He went on to discuss U.S. policy in the aftermath of the coup.²⁰²

We will not serve the interests of the Nation if:

First. We regard the overthrow of the Diem government as a victory or defeat for this country. It is neither. It is more an inexorable development in the tragic postwar history of the Vietnamese people.

Second. If we reassume that the successor military-dominated regime is an automatic guarantee of a permanent improvement in the situation in Vietnam. This successor authority in Vietnam is, at this point, at best a promise of something better. But if the Korean experience is at all relevant, it is apparent that such promises can be undone in short order.

If these tragic events of the past few days are to have constructive significance for this Nation as well as for the Vietnamese people, we would be well advised to recognize that the effectiveness of our Asian policies cannot be measured by an

¹⁹⁸The commitment of U.S. policymakers to the defense of Vietnam and of Southeast Asia continued to be shared during this period by at least some of America's foremost Asian scholars, as evidenced by the papers presented in May 1963 at a conference sponsored by the Asia Society and the Association for Asian Studies, and printed in William Henderson (ed.), *Southeast Asia: Problems of United States Policy* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1963).

¹⁹⁹CR, vol. 109, p. 20868.

²⁰⁰*New York Times*, Nov. 2, 1963.

²⁰¹*Ibid.*

²⁰²CR, vol. 109, p. 21061.

overthrow of a government, by whether one government is "easier to work with" than another, by whether one government smiles at us and another frowns. In the last analysis, the effectiveness of our policies, and their administration with respect to the Vietnamese situation and, indeed, all of southeast Asia can only be weighed in the light of these basic questions:

First. Do these policies make possible a progressive reduction in the expenditures of American lives and aid in Vietnam?

Second. Do these policies hold a valid promise of encouraging in Vietnam the growth of popularly responsible and responsive government?

Third. Do these policies contribute not only to the development of internal stability in South Vietnam but to the growth of an environment of a decent peace and a popularly based stability throughout Asia—the kind of environment which will permit the replacement of the present heavy dependence upon U.S. arms and resources with an equitable and mutual relationship between the Asian peoples and our own?

This is, indeed, an appropriate time for the executive branch to reassess policies for Vietnam and southeast Asia in these terms.

In brief statements, two of the three Senators who had accompanied Mansfield on his 1962 trip to Vietnam—Pell and Boggs—concurred with his remarks.

Church, however, voiced his approval of the change of government:²⁰³

The U.S. Government—both the executive branch and the Congress—has, since the severe repression of the Vietnamese students and the Buddhists by the Diem government this summer, hoped for the creation of an atmosphere in South Vietnam which might regather popular support behind the war effort.

I think that the President has followed the correct course in relations to South Vietnam. Although we have favored reforms, we have left it entirely to the will of the Vietnamese to implement that reform. If they themselves had not so strongly desired the change, we would have seen no coup in South Vietnam. My one regret about the recent coup was the violent death of Diem and Nhu, and all others who fell in the fight.

Representative Zablocki said that curtailment of U.S. aid, especially to Colonel Tung's Special Forces, had been justified. "But there can be little doubt," he added, "that this curtailment of aid also heartened Diem's opponents and helped trigger the coup. It was a signal to the military leaders of Vietnam that the United States would support the overthrow of the Diem regime." Lamenting the death of Diem, Zablocki asked whether the U.S. had taken steps to warn Diem about the coup. "If officials of the U.S. Government knew of the coup, and failed to exert every possible pressure to gain assurances of safe conduct out of the country for President Diem, then the shadow of blame falls on our Nation."²⁰⁴

²⁰³*Ibid.*, p. 21056.

²⁰⁴*Ibid.*, p. 20940.

Three weeks after Diem's assassination, in one of the great tragedies and ironies of modern history, President Kennedy was assassinated.

CHAPTER 4

PREPARING FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF A WIDER WAR

On November 24, 1963, two days after becoming President, Lyndon Johnson met with Lodge, Rusk, McNamara, Ball, McCone, and McGeorge Bundy to discuss Vietnam. (This followed a meeting on Vietnam held in Honolulu on November 20, which was attended by all top-level U.S. officials from Washington and Saigon.) Lodge was optimistic. McCone reported that there had been a considerable increase in Communist activity, and that he "could see no basis for an optimistic forecast of the future." Johnson said he had "serious misgivings" about the situation, but that the U.S. had to persevere.¹ He said he was ". . . not going to lose Vietnam," and was "not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China did."² William Bundy has cautioned, however, against exaggerating the implications of this last statement, noting that Kennedy "said almost the same thing in September. . . ."³

On November 26, Johnson approved NSAM 273, reaffirming the U.S. commitment to Vietnam and the continuation of Vietnam programs and policies of the Kennedy administration. These were its principal provisions:⁴

- (1) That the withdrawal of forces announced on October 2 "remain as stated";
- (2) that the U.S. should support the new government;
- (3) that U.S. efforts be fully unified, and that inter-departmental criticism be avoided;
- (4) that U.S. assistance programs be maintained at previous levels, and that special attention be given to the situation in the delta;
- (5) that a plan be developed for incursions into Laos;
- (6) that steps be taken to improve U.S. relations with Cambodia;⁵

¹The *Vantage Point*, p. 43. McCone's notes of that meeting remain classified.

²Tom Wicker, *JFK and LBJ* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1972), p. 205. Bill Moyers recalls that Johnson said after the meeting, "They'll think with Kennedy dead we've lost heart. . . . The Chinese. The fellas in the Kremlin. They'll be taking the measure of us. . . . I told them to go back and tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word." Quoted by Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 726. According to Jack Valenti, who was with Johnson on the night after Kennedy's assassination, "He talked little of Vietnam that first night. I suspect he felt that Vietnam would yield to reason and informed judgment. LBJ really believed that if he applied his total intellect and concentration to a problem and if there was any alternative possible, he would find a way to an agreement. In all his career this reliance on reason and face-to-face challenge had never failed. He had no doubts it would succeed in Vietnam." Valenti, *A Very Human President* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 152.

³Bundy MS., ch. 12, p. 5.

⁴Summarized from the text of NSAM 273, which was provided by the Johnson Library.

⁵On Nov. 19, 1963, Prince Sihanouk, charging that U.S. military advisers and the CIA had been aiding opponents of his government, rejected further U.S. military and economic assistance to Cambodia. Subsequently President Johnson asked former Secretary of State Dean Acheson to talk to Sihanouk, but this offer was refused by the Prince on Dec. 17.

(7) that a strong case on the external control and provisioning of the insurgency in Vietnam be developed for public presentation.

In addition to these instructions, NSAM 273 directed that planning for "possible increased activity" should include an estimate of such factors as the damage to North Vietnam and possible retaliation from the North, other international reaction, and "the plausibility of denial." The "activity" in question was the proposed plan for covert military operations against North Vietnam, begun in May 1963 when the JCS directed CINCPAC to prepare a plan for "hit and run" operations against North Vietnam by the South Vietnamese with covert U.S. military assistance. On September 9, 1963, this new plan—CINCPAC OPLAN [operations plan] 34-63—was approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. According to the *Pentagon Papers*,⁶ the plan was not sent to the White House at that time, but it was discussed and approved at the November 20 Conference in Honolulu, and, based upon the guidance in NSAM 273, it was revised and sent to the President on December 19, 1963, as OPLAN 34A. In the form in which it was sent to the President it provided for "(1) harassment; (2) diversion; (3) political pressures; (4) capture of prisoners; (5) physical destruction; (6) acquisition of intelligence; (7) generation of intelligence; (8) diversion of DRV resources," in order to "convince the DRV leadership that they should cease to support insurgent activities in the RVN and Laos." Two thousand and sixty-two separate operations were listed. CINCPAC, however, took the position that of these 2,062 operations, only air attacks and a few other "punitive or attritional" operations would have any significant influence on the North Vietnamese.⁷

Within a few days after the issuance of NSAM 273, information coming in from the field began to create alarm in Washington. Communist pressure was rapidly increasing in Vietnam and in Laos, and this, together with the problems being experienced by the new Vietnamese Government, led to new proposals for action. Some of these contemplated greater U.S. involvement in administrative matters. According to the *Pentagon Papers*, "The tone of USG internal documents and of its dealings with GVN was that of a benevolent big brother anxious to see little brother make good on his own."⁸

Others recommended military action. According to Hilsman,⁹ "General Curtis E. LeMay, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, was particularly vigorous in advocating the bombardment of North Vietnam. 'We are swatting flies,' LeMay said, 'when we should be going after the manure pile.'" Hilsman added that "General Thomas S. Powers said that with conventional bombs alone the Strategic Air Command, which he headed, and its B-52s could 'pulverize North Vietnam,' and he made a special trip to Washington to plead the case for bombing not only North Vietnam but the Viet Cong and their bases in South Vietnam."

⁶PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 150.

⁷Ibid., pp. 150-151.

⁸Ibid., vol. II, p. 303.

⁹To Move A Nation, pp. 526-527. See also Robert F. Futrell, *The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1981), p. 201.

The CIA proposed low-level reconnaissance over Laos to gather information on infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, with the implication that this could lead to bombing the trail.¹⁰

In addition, there were proposals, probably from the military, for armed incursions from Vietnam into Laos to reduce infiltration from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This was reflected in the provision in NSAM 273 for developing a plan for such operations.

Although the evidence is fragmentary, it would appear from Hilsman's account that the Harriman-Hilsman-Forrestal group resisted proposals for incursions into Laos or the use of U.S. airpower in either North or South Vietnam or in bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and countered with a proposal that if Communist infiltration from the north increased, the U.S., in order to deter the North Vietnamese from escalating the war, should deploy a division of troops to Thailand, coupled with a warning to the North Vietnamese.¹¹ If necessary, the troops would then be moved up to the border of Laos and another division brought into Thailand. If these steps were not effective, another division could be brought into Vietnam, "and so on." This proposal, Hilsman said, was opposed by the "never again" school in the Pentagon that resisted any limitations on the use of force.¹²

It should be noted, however, that the Pentagon's Office of International Security Affairs (ISA), headed by William Bundy, also disagreed with proposed incursions into Laos, and ISA and State agreed that it would be preferable to continue CIA-sponsored covert activities in Laos in order not to threaten Laotian sovereignty or disturb the 1962 Geneva Accords.¹³

The December 1963 McNamara Report

Adding to the uncertainties of the situation were reports from Vietnam that the new junta was not performing as well as expected, and that the strategic hamlet plan was proving to be far less effective than originally anticipated. There was also evidence that the Communists had been able to take advantage of the conditions created by the coup, and were making new gains in some areas.

Although U.S. military leaders continued to express optimism, President Johnson, as he said in his memoirs, thought that the U.S. "had been misled into over-optimism," and sent McNamara (others on the trip included McCone and William Bundy) to Vietnam for a report on the situation.

After another of his whirlwind tours (he and McCone were in Vietnam for two days, December 19 and 20), McNamara returned on December 21 to give his report.

These were its major points:¹⁴

1. *Summary.* The situation is very disturbing. Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to

¹⁰To Move a Nation, p. 527.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 533-534.

¹²Ibid., p. 534.

¹³PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 117.

¹⁴Excerpted from the text in *ibid.*, pp. 494-496. On Dec. 23, 1963, McCone submitted a brief report of his own to the President, in which he said that he felt "a little less pessimistic" than McNamara. Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

neutralization at best and most likely to a Communist-controlled state.

2. *The new government* is the greatest source of concern. It is indecisive and drifting. . . .

3. *The Country Team* is the second major weakness. It lacks leadership, has been poorly informed, and is not working to a common plan. . . .

4. *Viet Cong progress* has been great during the period since the coup. . . . The Viet Cong now control very high proportions of the people in certain key provinces, particularly those directly south and west of Saigon. . . .

5. *Infiltration* of men and equipment from North Vietnam continues. . . . [“To counter this infiltration,” McNamara added, “we reviewed in Saigon various plans providing for cross-border operations into Laos. On the scale proposed, I am quite clear that these would not be politically acceptable or even militarily effective. Our first need would be immediate U-2 mapping of the whole Laos and Cambodian border, and this we are preparing on an urgent basis. One other step we should take is to expand the existing limited but remarkably effective operations on the Laos side, the so-called Operation HARDNOSE. . . .”]

6. *Plans for Covert Actions into North Vietnam* were prepared as we had requested and . . . present a wide variety of sabotage and psychological operations against North Vietnam from which I believe we should aim to select those that provide maximum pressure with minimum risk. . . .

7. *Possible neutralization* of Vietnam is strongly opposed by Minh, and our attitude is somewhat suspect because of editorials by the *New York Times* and mention by Walter Lippmann and others. We reassured them as strongly as possible on this—and in somewhat more general terms on the neutralization of Cambodia. . . .

8. *U.S. resources and personnel* cannot usefully be substantially increased. . . .

Conclusion: My appraisal may be overly pessimistic. Lodge, Harkins, and Minh would probably agree with me on specific points, but feel that January should see significant improvement. We should watch the situation very carefully, running scared, hoping for the best, but preparing for more forceful moves if the situation does not show early signs of improvement.

McNamara recommended to Johnson that more U.S. advisers, military and economic/political, be sent to the provinces, and McCone proposed improving the U.S. intelligence system in Vietnam. Both recommendations were approved by the President.

President Johnson also approved on December 21 the establishment of an interdepartmental committee, chaired by Krulak, to study the proposed OPLAN 34-A, and to designate those operations with “least risk.” The committee made its report on January 2, 1964, and on January 16 the President approved 34-A covert operations, beginning February 1. (Later in 1964, as will be seen, these operations appear to have played a key role in the incidents in the

Gulf of Tonkin which resulted in Congress’ passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.)

A few days later, Johnson ordered the establishment of an inter-departmental Vietnam Coordinating Committee under the direction of William Sullivan to deal with Vietnam. This replaced the Vietnam Task Force, headed by Kattenburg, and, because it was deliberately created outside the confines of the State Department’s Far East Bureau, it took all effective jurisdiction and control over Vietnam from Hilsman (who was relieved of his duties shortly thereafter), as well as removing Kattenburg from Vietnam responsibilities.

Before turning to the events of 1964, note should also be taken of another development in late 1963 that affected the role of the U.S. in Vietnam. This was the final implementation of Operation SWITCHBACK, under which all of the CIA’s paramilitary activities in Vietnam were transferred to the military pursuant to the conclusions of General Taylor’s study of the Bay of Pigs episode. This action, which was effective November 1, 1963, increased the control of the military in the war, and further weakened the CIA’s efforts to wage an unconventional political war. As Colby said, “it soon became clear that the military wanted to do its own thing, and neither wanted nor listened to CIA’s political ideas of how to fight the war.”¹⁵ At the November 20, 1963, Conference in Honolulu, Colby told McNamara that putting covert teams into North Vietnam would not work. “He listened to me with a cold look and then rejected my advice. The desire to put pressure onto North Vietnam prevailed, and there and then the United States military started the planning and activity that would escalate finally to full-scale air attacks.”

As 1963 ended, the United States was, as Halberstam said, caught in a quagmire. There were almost 20,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam, more than twice the number Taylor had proposed two years earlier; strategic hamlets were failing; the overthrow of Diem had not produced the expected improvements in governmental efficiency and public support; and the Communists were stronger than ever. By the middle of December 1963, it was clear to Washington policymakers that the plan for withdrawing U.S. forces was no longer workable if the U.S. was going to continue to defend South Vietnam. Although no announcement was made of the fact, the scheduled withdrawal of 1,000 troops was achieved by juggling the figures to make it look as if there were 1,000 fewer men. This was done, as the *Pentagon Papers* stated, “by concentrating rotations home in December and letting strength rebound in the subsequent two months.”¹⁶ President Johnson later stated publicly, however, that 1,000 men had been withdrawn, and Secretary McNamara made similar statements to congressional committees.¹⁷

On January 2, 1964, General Krulak submitted the report of his covert operations committee.¹⁸ The report recommended that the

¹⁵ *Honorable Men*, pp. 219-220.

¹⁶ *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 303.

¹⁷ *Public Papers of the Presidents*, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, p. 345.

¹⁸ See *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 150-158. The report itself, “Program of Operations Against North Vietnam,” from Krulak to McNamara, Jan. 2, 1964, is still classified. Also classified are the covering memo, “North Vietnam Operations Paper,” and the attachment, an undated memorandum for the President entitled “Operations Against North Vietnam.”

U.S. initiate the 34-A plan, and by "progressively escalating pressure . . . to inflict increasing punishment upon North Vietnam, and to create pressures, which may convince the North Vietnamese leadership, in its own self-interest, to desist from its aggressive policies." The 34-A plan, which was to be directed by the military, was to consist of three phases over 12 months, each phase progressively more punitive. Phase 1 ". . . called for intelligence collection through U-2 and communications intelligence missions and psychological operations involving leaflet drops, propaganda kit deliveries, and radio broadcasts. It also provided for about '20 destructive undertakings . . . designed to result in substantial destruction, economic loss, and harassment.' The second and third phases involved the same categories of action, but of increased tempo and magnitude, and with the destructive operations extending to 'targets identified with North Vietnam's economic and industrial well-being.'"

Although the Krulak committee concluded that these operations might not cause the North Vietnamese to desist, there was some hope among members of the committee and others—although this apparently did not include any of the top policymakers, who tended to view 34-A operations as relatively insignificant—that, out of concern for their economy and fear of Chinese intervention, the North Vietnamese might be inclined as a result of 34-A to cease supporting the Communists in the South. According to W. W. Rostow, one of the administration's principal proponents of the use of such gradual pressure, "Ho has an industrial complex to protect: he is no longer a guerrilla fighter with nothing to lose."¹⁹ But the Krulak committee also recognized that these operations had to be punitive enough to be effective: "Toughened, as they have been, by long years of hardship and struggle, they will not easily be persuaded by a punitive program to halt their support of the Viet Cong insurgency, unless the *damage* visited upon them is of great magnitude." (emphasis in original)

On January 16, 1964, the Krulak committee's recommendations were approved by the President.²⁰

There is no indication that the decision to launch the new program of covert operations was revealed to Congress. A few Members dealing with military matters and the CIA were probably told. Fulbright also seems to have known. In a speech on March 25, 1964, he said that one of the options for the U.S. was to equip the South Vietnamese "to attack North Vietnamese territory, possibly by means of commando-type operations from the sea or the air," adding ". . . it seems to me that we have no choice but to support the South Vietnamese Government and Army by the most effective means available," pending other decisions.²¹

New Proposals for Neutralization of Vietnam, and a New Coup

As it became apparent that the new junta was not operating effectively, a number of U.S. and other public figures began to worry

¹⁹PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 158 from a memorandum from Rostow to Rusk, "Southeast Asia," Feb. 13, 1964, still classified.

²⁰No NSAM was issued.

²¹CR, vol. 110, p. 6282.

about the possibility of greater U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the escalation of the conflict into a full-scale war. Hilsman had predicted on September 10, in the course of planning the coup, that "if we start down this path we would have to be prepared to contemplate the use of U.S. forces on the ground in Vietnam." This is what Senator Russell probably had in mind when he is said to have told Johnson late in 1963, when the President asked him what he would do about Vietnam: "I'd spend whatever it takes to bring to power a government that would ask us to go home."²²

Similar views about disengagement were being expressed privately to Johnson by Mansfield. On December 7, 1963, after talking with Johnson about the situation, Mansfield sent him a memorandum along with copies of the several memos he had sent to President Kennedy.²³ He told Johnson that it might not be possible to "win" the war in Vietnam, or to "win" it in South Vietnam. "There may be only a war which will, in time, involve U.S. forces throughout Southeast Asia, and finally throughout China itself in search of victory. What national interests in Asia would steel the American people for the massive costs of ever-deepening involvement of that kind? It may be that we are confronted with a dilemma not unlike that which faced us in Korea a decade ago."

Mansfield added that there might, however, be a "truce that could be won now in Viet Nam alone and eventually a peace which might be won throughout Southeast Asia at a price commensurate with American interests." This would involve three things: first, strengthening South Vietnam's control of its territory; second, a "diplomatic offensive," in which France would be the key participant, to bring an end to the "North-South Vietnamese conflict," which might be "on terms which reduced our influence (and costs) *provided* it also inhibited Chinese political domination"; and, third, U.S. "understanding, sympathy and sensible encouragement for the Cambodians desire to stand on its own feet without one-sided U.S. aid." "At this time," he added, "Cambodia would appear to be the principal prototype of any eventual peace for Southeast Asia. It would be an independent Southeast Asia, not dependent on a costly U.S. prop."

During Christmas week, Johnson telephoned Mansfield's assistant, Francis Valeo, and in response Mansfield sent him another memorandum on January 7, 1964.²⁴ He noted that Johnson had told Valeo, ". . . we do not want another China in Vietnam." Mansfield said:

I would respectfully add to this observation: Neither do we want another Korea. It would seem that a key (but often overlooked) factor in both situations was a tendency to bite off more than we were prepared in the end to chew. We tended to talk ourselves out on a limb with overstatements of our purpose and commitment only to discover in the end that there were not sufficient American interests to support with blood and treasure a desperate final plunge. Then, the questions fol-

²²Quoted by Tom Wicker, *New York Times*, May 1, 1966.

²³A copy is in the Johnson Library, NSF Aides File, McGeorge Bundy Memos for the President.

²⁴Same location.

lowed invariably: "Who got us into this mess?" "Who lost China?" etc.

We are close to the point of no return in Viet Nam. A way to avoid another Korea and, perhaps, another China may be found in the general policy approach suggested in the memo of December 7th. If so, there ought to be less official talk of our responsibility in Viet Nam and more emphasis on the responsibilities of the Vietnamese themselves and on a great deal of thought on the possibilities for a peaceful solution through the efforts of other nations as well as our own.

In early January 1964, at the President's request McGeorge Bundy sent him a memorandum, along with memos from Rusk and McNamara, in which all three advisers disagreed with Mansfield's position:²⁵

1. To neutralize South Viet Nam today, or even for the United States Government to *seem to* move in that direction, would mean the following:

- a. A rapid collapse of anti-Communist forces in South Vietnam, and a unification of the whole country on Communist terms.
- b. Neutrality in Thailand, and increased influence for Hanoi and Peking.
- c. Collapse of the anti-Communist position in Laos.
- d. Heavy pressure on Malaya and Malaysia.
- e. A shift toward neutrality in Japan and the Philippines.
- f. Blows to U.S. prestige in South Korea and Taiwan which would require compensating increases in American commitment there—or else further retreat.

2. We may have to move in these painful directions, but we should do so only when there is a much stronger demonstration that our present course cannot work. If we neutralize, it should not be because *we* have quit but because *others* have. Today a move in this direction would be regarded as betrayal by the new regime in Saigon and by all anti-Communist Vietnamese. There are enough of them to lose us an election.

3. The right course is to continue to strengthen our struggle against the Communist terror (which is exactly what it is). For this we need new and stronger leadership in the U.S. effort. In particular, we need a wholly rejuvenated military command and a rapidly stepped-up political effort of the sort which Lodge has at last recommended in the attached cable.

On January 9, when he gave the three memos to the President, Bundy said in a cover memo:

The political damage to Truman and Acheson from the fall of China arose because most Americans came to believe that we could and should have done more than we did to prevent it. This is exactly what would happen now if we should seem to be the first to quit in Saigon.

Mansfield's analogy with Korea neglects the fact that a very solid anti-Communist base existed in South Korea when the armistice was worked out in 1953. Moreover, the U.S. presence has continued. There is literally no comparison between this solution and proposals for "neutralization" and U.S. withdrawal in the present situation in South Vietnam. *When we are stronger, then we can face negotiation.*

Perhaps you can trade with Mike Mansfield: his support for the war effort against our support, which is real, for new and energetic political, social, and economic programs in South Vietnam.

McNamara's memorandum made these points.

1. *We should certainly stress that the war is essentially a Vietnamese responsibility*, and this we have repeatedly done, particularly in our announced policy on U.S. troop withdrawal. At the same time we cannot disengage U.S. prestige to any significant degree. . . .

2. *The security situation is serious, but we can still win*, even on present ground rules. . . .

3. . . . any deal either to divide the present territory of South Vietnam or to "neutralize" South Vietnam would inevitably mean a new government in Saigon that would in short order become Communist-dominated.

4. *The consequences of a Communist-dominated South Vietnam are extremely serious* both for the rest of Southeast Asia and for the U.S. position in the rest of Asia and indeed in other key areas of the world. . . .

5. Thus, the stakes in preserving an anti-Communist South Vietnam are so high that, in our judgment, we must go on bending every effort to win. In the final analysis, Senator Mansfield is challenging what he regards as the gross imbalance between the extent of our involvement in Southeast Asia and our narrow self-interests in the area. My assessment of our important security interests is that they unquestionably call for holding the line against further Communist gains. And, I am confident that the American people are by and large in favor of a policy of firmness and strength in such situations.

Rusk also disagreed with Mansfield's proposals. He called the proposal for neutralization "a phony," adding that "what the communists mean by 'neutralization' of South Viet-Nam is a regime which would not have support from the West and would be an easy prey to a communist takeover." In a statement submitted with his memo, Rusk said: "We do not believe that North Vietnam's terrorism can be called off by 'an astute diplomatic offensive' at this time. While diplomacy may eventually play a role, we believe this will happen only after the North Vietnamese become convinced that they cannot succeed in destroying the Republic of Vietnam by guerrilla warfare." The statement added: "We believe the fight against the Viet Cong can be won without major and direct United States involvement *provided* the new South Vietnamese Government takes the proper political, economic and social actions to win the support of the rural people *and* uses its armed forces effectively."

²⁵All of the memos are in the Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

It should also be noted that during the early months of 1964 the President was also being urged by Chester Bowles, U.S. Ambassador to India, to seek a neutralist solution, but he was ignored by Johnson as he had been by Kennedy. Kalb and Abel, *Roots of Involvement*, p. 167.

On January 13, Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's assistant who was still on the White House staff, sent President Johnson a memorandum in which he said, ". . . I am certain that Messrs. McNamara, Rusk and Bundy are right in stating that the partition or neutralization of South Vietnam today, or even our proposing such partition or neutralization, would, *under present conditions*, lead to a Communist takeover in that country, a weakening of our prestige and security throughout Asia and an increase in the possibilities of a major military involvement in that area. This would have greater political liabilities than our present course. The commitment to preserve Vietnamese independence was not made by Democrats—but we are not free to abandon it."

Sorensen suggested, however, that if the U.S. proposed some form of neutralization of all of Vietnam, or a cease-fire, rejection of these by the Communists would make the burden for continued fighting fall on them, and thus improve the position of the U.S. at home and abroad.

He also suggested that the President should make it clear that it was up to the South Vietnamese to win the war, ". . . so that if during the next four months the new government fails to take the necessary political, economic, social and military actions, it will be their choice and not our betrayal or weakness that loses the area."²⁶

On January 30, 1964, the government of General Minh was ousted by a coup led by General Nguyen Khanh, one of the Diem coup plotters. The U.S. Government was given several days notice of the Khanh coup, and Lodge was told not to become involved. The role, if any, of the U.S. Government in the coup is not known. Khanh told the U.S. in advance of the coup that some of the leading members of the junta were planning to negotiate the neutralization of Vietnam, but there is no evidence as to the possible effect of this on the attitudes and actions of U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington.²⁷

Lodge attempted to justify the change of government in a cable to Washington saying, in part:²⁸

If Khanh is able, his advent to power may give this country one-man command in place of a junta. This may be good. We have everything we need in Viet Nam. The U.S. has provided military advice, training, equipment; economic and social help; and political advice. The Government of Viet Nam has put relatively large numbers of good men into important positions and has evolved civil and military procedures which appear to be workable. Therefore, our side knows how to do it; we have the means with which to do it; we simply need to do it. This requires a tough and ruthless commander. Perhaps Khanh is it.

²⁶Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. Available records do not indicate whether President Johnson replied in writing to Senator Mansfield, or talked personally with him.

²⁷For a discussion of the factors involved in the coup see *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 306-309, and vol. III, pp. 37-39. Before and during the coup, the U.S. was kept fully informed by Col. Casper Wilson, the MAAG adviser for Khanh's I Corps, who was in Khanh's command post throughout the affair.

²⁸*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 39.

On January 31, 1964, French President Charles de Gaulle, an advocate for many years of a unified, independent Vietnam, repeated this recommendation.²⁹ In a news conference on February 1, President Johnson was asked about de Gaulle's proposal. He replied that neutralization of both South and North Vietnam "would be considered sympathetically," but that neutralization did not appear likely, and that the course the U.S. was following was "the only course for us to follow. . . . We plan to pursue it diligently and, we hope, successfully on a stepped-up basis." He was asked whether de Gaulle's proposal did not provide for neutralizing both North and South Vietnam, and how this differed from his statement that such a proposal would be considered sympathetically. He replied that the questioner would have to ask de Gaulle about his plan; as he understood it, proposals for neutralization applied only to South Vietnam.³⁰

De Gaulle's proposal was praised, however, by Mansfield. In a speech in the Senate on February 19, 1964,³¹ he said that while neutralization might be difficult to achieve, it should not be lightly dismissed. "Do we ourselves," he asked, "in terms of our national interests as seen in juxtaposition to the cost in American lives and resources, prefer what exists in South Vietnam to what exists in Laos or in Cambodia? Do we prefer another Vietnamese type of American involvement or perhaps a Korean-type involvement in these other countries and elsewhere in Southeast Asia?" "There has not been and there does not exist today," he declared, "a basis in our national interests which would justify the assumption of primary American responsibility in this situation which might well involve the sacrifice of a vast number of American lives not only in South Vietnam but, by extension, in North Vietnam, in Cambodia, in Laos, if not, indeed, in China itself."

In Saigon, according to one report, "Mansfield's statement strengthened a growing body of opinion among Vietnamese and Americans here that the United States is sick of this war and is looking for a way out. Officially there was no reaction. Privately and unofficially, reaction ran the gamut of clichés from shock to dismay to anger. 'Of course it wasn't the Senator's intention to give aid and comfort to the Communists and undermine Vietnamese and American morale,' said a top American official. 'But that's exactly what he did. And he couldn't have done a better job if his speech had been written in Hanoi.'"³²

Walter Lippmann, the noted political columnist, also urged that de Gaulle's proposal be considered, but the *New York Times*' James Reston disagreed, saying:³³

The most dangerous and likely immediate prospect is not that the Communists will win the war in South Vietnam or that the United States will carry the war to North Vietnam

²⁹De Gaulle was not suggesting neutralization per se, as Bernard Fall pointed out in an excellent analysis, "What De Gaulle Actually Said About Vietnam," *Reporter*, Oct. 24, 1963.

³⁰*Public Papers of the Presidents*, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, pp. 257, 259, 260.

³¹*CR*, vol. 110, p. 3114.

³²Keyes Beech, Chicago Daily News Service, in the *Washington Post*, Feb. 22, 1964.

³³*New York Times*, Mar. 1, 1964. A similar position against negotiations was taken by Zbigniew Brzezinski, subsequently a member of State's Policy Planning Staff under President Johnson, and national security adviser to President Carter. See *Washington Post*, Mar. 1, 1964.

but that in the atmosphere of rumor, confusion and intrigue in Saigon another coup d'état, the third in 100 days, will bring in a neutralist South Vietnamese Government that will order us out and negotiate a settlement that will leave the Communists free to take over.

This would be almost as bad for the West as a military disaster. We could not impose our presence on a South Vietnamese Government that didn't want us, and with U.S. power out of Vietnam, the situation would really, in the President's phrase, "go to pot." The Communists would be free to expand in southeast Asia almost at will.

Senator Jacob K. Javits (R/N.Y.) took issue with Mansfield. While agreeing that it was important to consider alternatives, he said, ". . . the minute we begin to talk about neutralization and neutralism, the backbone and the spirit could go out of the action which is being taken in this struggle."

There was a consensus among the American people, Javits said, that ". . . our presence there is important enough to warrant the risks we are running." Moreover, ". . . they will accept these risks—yes, even accept the casualties—if they believe there is the remotest chance in that way to keep the Communist grip from encompassing Vietnam."

There was also a consensus, he said, ". . . that if we adopted the attitude of General de Gaulle in that area, it would represent a diminution in the American effort, some lessening in our support, perhaps even a decision to pull out and let the Government of South Vietnam do whatever it pleases."

Javits added,

. . . Let us remember that even a great nation must suffer casualties currently in order to avoid even greater casualties later. The present position in south and southeast Asia—representing still a rampart against the absolutely uncontrolled expansion of Communist China, which preaches to all its people that its ultimate aim is the destruction not only of the free world, but specifically the United States of America and its people—it seems to me is only insurance against a future which seems too foreboding in terms of the intentions at the moment which Communist China declared and reiterated for so very long.

Javits concluded by saying that what the U.S. was doing was ". . . worth doing. No one in the Pentagon or in the Senate need have the 'jitters' about it. It is high time that some people understand that the American people are adults. They understand that in order to make an omelet, some eggs must be broken."³⁴

Representative Zablocki, chairman of the Far East Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, also took issue with proposals for neutralization. In a speech on February 20, which was intended to counter Mansfield's speech the previous day, Zablocki said:³⁵

Such expressions from Americans it seems to me, do a grave disservice to the brave Vietnamese people who have demon-

strated, and are continuing to demonstrate their desire to win the present guerrilla conflict against the Communist Vietcong. . . . The effect of statements, from American legislators, whether or not they have the sanction and approval of the administration, are bound to be construed by the Vietnamese as indications that the United States is growing weary of the grueling guerrilla war and want to pull out.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The people of the United States want Communist aggression defeated in Vietnam.

. . . Besides worrying our Vietnamese allies, these statements give aid and comfort to the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

Zablocki added that neutralization would "result in complete Communist dominance in the whole of the Indochina Peninsula. . . . We cannot give way—or appear to give way before the expansionist policies of Communist China. Instead, we must make our stand in Vietnam as long as the freedom-loving people of that nation ask our assistance in this joint endeavor against communism."

Zablocki was not opposed to further U.S. military involvement. "While we do not wish additional commitments of men and equipment in South Vietnam, let us not hesitate to provide them should it become necessary. While we do not wish to involve U.S. troops in direct fighting in South Vietnam, let us not shrink from such involvement should it become necessary."

In conjunction with his speech, Zablocki had reprinted in the *Congressional Record* an article on February 16, 1964, by the esteemed military correspondent for the *New York Times*, Hanson W. Baldwin, in which Baldwin reported that "South Vietnam's moment of truth appears to be at hand. . . . The Communists hold the initiative in much of the country, and the ultimate outcome is in doubt."³⁶

Baldwin concluded:

There is no doubt that the stakes are high in Vietnam. They are considerably more important than the economic, political, and strategic value of the country. For in Vietnam the United States has fielded, for the first time, its concept of counterinsurgency and has made its first all-out attempt to erect a defense against Communism's creeping aggressions and Premier Khrushchev's tactics of national wars of liberation. If the defense fails, if the dam breaks, there will be no clear-cut line drawn against Communist expansion in Southeast Asia or anywhere else in the world. A new victory for communism would have most serious international and domestic consequences.

Because the United States has been morally, militarily, and politically committed in South Vietnam, because its prestige is involved and because the consequences of failure would have worldwide repercussions, most, but not all, Washington officials believe the price of victory must be paid even if the price includes some limited commitment of U.S. combat forces.

³⁴CR, vol. 110, pp. 3277-3279.
³⁵Ibid., p. 3226.

³⁶Ibid., pp. 3228-3229.

President Johnson's reaction to Mansfield, Lippmann and others was expressed in a cable he sent to Lodge on March 20, saying in part:³⁷

I think that nothing is more important than to stop neutralist talk whenever we can by whatever means we can. I have made this point myself to Mansfield and Lippmann and I expect to use every public opportunity to restate our position firmly.

To buttress his argument, Johnson turned to his old Senate friend and ally, J. William Fulbright. On March 2, 1964, he telephoned Fulbright, and this is at least a partial transcript of their conversation:³⁸

President. If we can just get our foreign policy straightened out.

Fulbright. Get that damn Vietnam straightened out. Any hope?

President. Well, we've got about four possibilities. The only thing I know to do is more of the same and do it more efficiently and effectively and we got a problem out there that I inherited with Lodge. I wire him every day and say what else do you recommend? Here is the best summary we have. [here the President apparently read from a document] (1) In Southeast Asia the free world is facing an attempt by the Communists of North Vietnam to subvert and overthrow the non-Communist government of South Vietnam. North Vietnam has been providing direction, control, and training for 25,000 Vietcong guerrillas. (2) Our objective, our purpose in South Vietnam, is to help the Vietnamese maintain their independence. We are providing the training and logistic support that they cannot provide themselves. We will continue to provide that support as long as it is required. As soon as the mission is complete our troops can be withdrawn. There's no reason to keep our military police there when the Vietnamese are trained for that purpose. (3) In the past four months there've been three governments in South Vietnam. The Vietcong have taken advantage of this confusion. Their increased activity has had success. At least four alternatives are open to us: (1) Withdraw from South Vietnam. Without our support the government will be unable to counter the aid from the North to the Vietcong. Vietnam will collapse and the ripple effect will be felt throughout Southeast Asia, endangering independent governments in Thailand, Malaysia and extending as far as India and Indonesia and the Philippines. (2) We can seek a formula that will neutralize South Vietnam à la Mansfield and De Gaulle but any such formula will only lead in the end to the same results as withdrawing support. We all know the Communist attitude that what's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable. True neutralization would have to extend to North Vietnam and

this has been specifically rejected by North Vietnam and the Communist China government, and we believe if we attempted to neutralize, the Commies would stay in North Vietnam. We would abandon South Vietnam. The Communists would take over South Vietnam. (3) We can send Marines à la Goldwater and other U.S. forces against the sources of these aggressions but our men may well be bogged down in a long war against numerically superior North Vietnamese and Chicom forces 100,000 miles from home. (4) We continue our present policy of providing training and logistical support of South Vietnamese forces. This policy has not failed. We propose to continue it. Secretary McNamara's trip to South Vietnam will provide us with an opportunity to again appraise the prospects of the policy and the future alternatives open to us.

Fulbright. I think that's right . . . that's exactly what I'd arrive at under these circumstances at least for the foreseeable future.

President. Now when he comes back though and if we're losing with what we're doing, we've got to decide whether to send them in or whether to come out and let the dominoes fall. That's where the tough one is going to be. And you do some heavy thinking and let's decide what we do.

Fulbright. Righto.

Fulbright reacted in part by giving a speech in the Senate on March 25 in which, among other things, he criticized the French:³⁹

Recent initiatives by France, calling for the neutralization of Vietnam, have tended to confuse the situation, without altering it in any fundamental way. France could, perhaps, play a constructive mediating role if she were willing to consult and cooperate with the United States. For somewhat obscure reasons, however, France has chosen to take an independent initiative . . . the problem posed by French intervention in Southeast Asia is that while France may set off an unforeseeable chain of events, she is neither a major military force nor a major economic force in the Far East, and is therefore unlikely to be able to control or greatly influence the events which her initiative may precipitate . . . It is difficult to see how a negotiation, under present military circumstances, could lead to termination of the war under conditions that would preserve the freedom of South Vietnam. It is extremely difficult for a party to a negotiation to achieve by diplomacy objectives which it has conspicuously failed to win by warfare. The hard fact of the matter is that our bargaining position is at present a weak one; and until the equation of advantages between the two sides has been substantially altered in our favor, there can be little prospect of a negotiated settlement which could secure the independence of a non-communist South Vietnam.

Cacophony in Congress

Meanwhile, there were more discordant voices in the Senate. On March 4, Morse delivered a major speech on U.S. foreign policy in

³⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 511.

³⁸This is quoted from Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 196-197. Kearns, who helped Johnson write his memoirs, said that Johnson gave her this and several other transcripts of telephone conversations to help her learn the realities of government. All other Johnson telephone transcripts are said to be closed to the public until 50 years after his death.

³⁹CR, vol. 110, p. 6232.

which he criticized the U.S. role in Vietnam: "We should never have gone in. We should never have stayed in. We should get out."⁴⁰ He continued:

American unilateral participation in the war of South Vietnam cannot be justified, and will not be justified in American history. As I have made clear to the State Department, this administration had better be warned now that when the casualty lists of American boys in South Vietnam increase until the mothers and fathers of those boys—and, yes, the American people generally—start crying "Murder," no administration will stand.

... let us not forget that the French people finally turned out a French government because they decided that French boys—the best of French blood—were being murdered in Indochina. . . .

The effort to continue dominating the western shores of the Pacific, not to mention any part of the Indian Ocean, will be increasingly costly to us in blood and money. I am flatly and completely opposed to any expansion of our commitments there, and to increasing the scale of our participation in the Vietnamese war.

I am opposed to it because American involvement in any Asian conflict is going to be a nuclear involvement. I am satisfied that there is no other way this country could meet the manpower and geographic advantages that a Chinese-backed force would have over us.

I am permitted to say, within the bounds of secrecy and in my capacity as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee who individually has passed a judgment upon American foreign policy in Asia, that we cannot win a land war in Asia with American conventional ground forces. That is fully recognized by outstanding military experts.

I cannot think of a greater mistake that this country could make than to seek to escalate the war in South Vietnam by using conventional American forces in North Vietnam or in any other areas to the north of South Vietnam.

Therefore I say to the American people, from the floor of the Senate this afternoon, "You have the right to ask your Government now, Do you have plans for sending American boys to their deaths by the tens of thousands in escalating the South Vietnam war above South Vietnam?"

Senator Allen J. Ellender (D/La.), a conservative Southern Democrat who was a top-ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and who had visited Vietnam several times during overseas study missions in the late 1950s-early 1960s, agreed with Morse that the U.S. should not be involved in Vietnam, and that U.S. forces should be withdrawn.

On March 10, Senator Ernest Gruening (D/Alaska) also made a major speech in which he advocated U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.⁴¹ "The war in South Vietnam," he said, "is not and never

has been a U.S. war. It is and must remain a fight to be fought and won by the people of South Vietnam themselves." "Let us get out of Vietnam," he concluded, "on as good terms as possible—but let us get out."

The next day (March 11), Senator Thomas Dodd (D/Conn.), answered Gruening, in a speech entitled "South Vietnam: Last Chance for Freedom in Asia," in which he said, "We must assume that at this moment, we are losing. Only a supreme effort by the South Vietnamese and an increased effort by the United States will turn back the Communist tide." If Vietnam fell, Dodd said, the Pacific would become a "Red ocean." Neutralization, he added, would be a "dishonest substitute for unconditional surrender." Dodd, speaking unofficially for the administration, recommended guerrilla operations against the coast of North Vietnam, and possible airstrikes against the north. The solution to the problem he said, would be to carry the war "to its source: North Vietnam."⁴²

On March 11, Gruening wrote to President Johnson:⁴³

As the opposition is warming up and trying to blame you for some of the problems that you have inherited and in the creation of which you played no part, I thought it desirable to emphasize this in a speech on the Viet Nam situation, which I hope will be helpful.

I was pleased that Dick Russell, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, warmly congratulated me on this speech and said he agreed with me completely. He told me that at the time that the decision was made by the Eisenhower administration to go into Viet Nam, ten years ago, he strongly counseled against it, but his advice was not heeded.

The reactions I have gotten so far lead me to the conclusion that our getting out and the putting of an end to the killing of American boys would be highly popular.

Gruening also wrote to Fulbright suggesting that the Foreign Relations Committee question McNamara about the extent to which, during his recent trip, he had committed the U.S. to provide assistance to Vietnam. (McNamara's trip, discussed below, occurred in early March 1964.) Gruening told Fulbright that he was apprehensive about the situation in Vietnam. "My study of the situation convinces me that this is largely a civil war inside of South Viet Nam and that we should try to disengage ourselves as rapidly as possible. I find no justification for continued intervention in view of all the past sacrificing of American lives there."

Fulbright replied that he shared Gruening's apprehension about the situation in South Vietnam. He said that the Foreign Relations Committee customarily asked McNamara for briefings on his trips, but that he had not had an opportunity to arrange a meeting on the Secretary's most recent trip.

Fulbright then sent Gruening's letter to the Foreign Relations Committee's acting chief of staff with a note suggesting that a meeting be arranged.⁴⁴ (The meeting was held on March 26.)

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 4357-4359.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 4831 ff. See also his remarks on Apr. 15, p. 8071.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 4986-4992.

⁴³Johnson Library, ND 19/C0812.

⁴⁴This correspondence is in the University of Arkansas, Fulbright Papers, series 48, box 6.

Gruening's fellow Democratic Senator from Alaska, Senator E. L. "Bob" Bartlett, was also troubled by the increasing U.S. commitment in Vietnam. In a Senate speech on the same day as Mansfield's he said he did not think that the U.S. could or should withdraw at that time, but he noted, "We are attempting to find a military solution in Vietnam and if we are determined to win, the cost of this solution will have just begun." He welcomed, therefore, the diplomatic initiatives of the French, and urged that the U.S. take a more flexible, less rigid and dogmatic approach to the situation in the Far East, especially towards the Communist Chinese. French recognition of China (which had occurred in early 1964), he said, could help in bringing about a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Indochina. In the U.S., he added, China should be taken "out of domestic politics." Only by "defusing" the China issue could the U.S. begin reevaluating and reshaping its policy toward the Far East.

In another speech on March 7, Bartlett summed up his position:⁴⁵

We must at all costs avoid being cast in the role of an imperialistic, colonial power. If, through misadventure or folly, we should allow the struggle in Viet Nam to become one of Asian versus white intruders, we have lost a good deal more than South Viet Nam.

The war in South Viet Nam is a South Vietnamese war. It will be won only by the South Vietnamese themselves. It will only be won when they have something worth winning it for.

Our best hope appears, I believe, to hold and strengthen the military situation as best we can while at the same time to press hard for improvements in the central government. Unless the soldier and the peasant believe there is real hope for economic and social reform, we cannot win. If there is such hope, we shall not lose.

In the House, however, there was considerable support for a stronger U.S. role. Gerald R. Ford (R/Mich.) and Daniel J. Flood (D/Pa.), both of whom were on the House Appropriations Committee, took issue with McNamara and Taylor's reassurances about the situation in Vietnam in a closed hearing of that committee on February 17, 1964. Representative Flood said that there was division of command in Vietnam between the Vietnamese and the U.S., and that "We command and control nothing." Taylor agreed that the U.S. had no command responsibilities, but explained that the U.S. did have some control. Flood replied, "A division of command always results in the failure of national policy." He said he was not advocating the use of U.S. combat forces, but he told Taylor, "You have come to the Rubicon. Very, very soon in South Vietnam you are at the end of the line. You have to make up your mind very soon, General, that you are going to command, or you are not going to command. If you are not going to command, you are a dead duck, you cannot win." "Whether you are going to command or not," he added, "is a matter of politics vis-à-vis the people

⁴⁵This speech by Senator Bartlett was given at a conference on Mar. 7, sponsored by The Johnson Foundation (Racine, Wisconsin), the proceedings of which were published by the foundation in 1964 under the title "Viet Nam." For a subsequent Senate speech by Bartlett on June 15, 1964, see CR, vol. 110, pp. 13842-13844.

and the Government of South Vietnam. But the question whether you are going to stay in there or not is—are you going to command?"⁴⁶

Representative (later President) Ford also spoke up after one particular comment by McNamara in his testimony. McNamara said, "We hope that, with our full support, the new [Khanh] government can take hold and eventually suppress the Viet Cong insurrection. . . . However, the survival of an independent government in South Vietnam is so important to the security of all of southeast Asia and to the free world that I can conceive of no alternative other than to take all necessary measures within our capability to prevent a Communist victory. We must prove that Communist aggression cannot succeed through subversion, but will fail as surely as it has failed in direct confrontation."⁴⁷

Responding to this, Ford—who, along with other Republicans on the committee, was to some extent baiting McNamara politically—said "I don't want you [McNamara] to hesitate to say, because of a fear you might be criticized, that we would use all necessary U.S. forces to achieve what you have indicated is so vitally important." McNamara replied off-the-record, and Ford added:⁴⁸

. . . there somehow seems to be a reluctance on the part of Administration officials to commit U.S. forces to combat for a Vietnamese-United States victory, and I don't think this is a proper or prudent attitude. If we want victory or if we want to prevent a Communist victory I think we have to be prepared to make commitments. I don't like to see strong words used and then when we come to the point of implementing them, we back off. Now, I don't like the use of U.S. forces overseas any better than anybody else, but I think we have to make some hard choices every once in a while and if what you say here is what you believe, I don't see how you can back off from that viewpoint if the potential circumstances become realities.

McNamara replied, before again going off the record, "We will make whatever hard choices have to be made."

Anticipating a Crisis, the U.S. Increases Aid

The growing political and governmental problems of South Vietnam during the latter part of 1963 and early 1964 made it increasingly apparent that the "essential premise"—an effective system of self-government—was lacking, and that the U.S. would need to increase its commitment or find a way to withdraw. Harkins' quarterly MACV report from Saigon on February 2, 1964, concluded by

⁴⁶U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Department of Defense Appropriations for 1965*, Subcommittee Hearings, pt. 4, 88th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1964), p. 101. Also indicative of congressional skepticism about the progress of the war and the role of the U.S. were questions raised when McNamara testified in executive sessions of the House Armed Services Committee on Jan. 27 and 29, 1964, just before the Khanh coup. (These hearings are still closed, but there are excerpts in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 35-36.) He was asked if he continued to be as optimistic about withdrawing U.S. forces as he had been in Oct. 1963, and whether the withdrawal plan was still in effect. He replied that it was a "South Vietnamese war," that the role of the U.S. was to help them, and that "by keeping the crutch there too long we would weaken the Vietnamese rather than strengthen them." He was asked whether the U.S. was planning "to do anything to bring this war to the VC . . . to change the modus operandi of this war, so far as the bleeding of this country is concerned?" Again, he replied that it was a Vietnamese war.

⁴⁷*Department of Defense Appropriations for 1965*, p. 12.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 117.

saying, ". . . no amount of military effort or capability can compensate for poor politics. Therefore, although the prospects for an improved military posture are good, the ultimate achievement of the established military goal depends primarily upon the quality of support achieved by the political leadership of the government of Vietnam at all levels." As the *Pentagon Papers* analysis notes, "Here again was an explicit judgment that the *sine qua non* of an effective counterinsurgency operation was a stable, broadly-based, popular and effective government. It was acknowledged at this time, as it had been acknowledged before concerning other governments, that a government of these qualities did not exist. But . . . there was apparently always the hope that fate would not close in before something happened to change the situation."⁴⁹

During February 1964, the situation in Vietnam worsened rapidly as the Communists, who had accelerated their efforts in December 1963 after a decision by the North Vietnamese to provide greater assistance to the guerrillas in the south, increased their hold on the countryside. On February 12, supported by a survey in Vietnam by Lyman D. Kirkpatrick (then one of the highest ranking CIA officials), and Peer de Silva, the new station chief in Saigon (replacing Richardson), the CIA concluded in a Special National Intelligence Estimate that "the situation in South Vietnam is very serious and prospects uncertain. Even with U.S. assistance as it is now, we believe that, unless there is a marked improvement in the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government and armed forces, South Vietnam has, at best, an even chance of withstanding the insurgency menace during the next few weeks or months." Kirkpatrick said he was "shocked by the number of our people and of the military, even those whose job is always to say we are winning, who feel that the tide is against us."⁵⁰

From his post on the NSC staff, Forrestal felt the same way, and in a memorandum to McNamara on February 14, in which he made some suggestions for the trip McNamara was to make to Vietnam in the middle of March, Forrestal said, among other things, "I have the impression that since last November 1st [the date Diem was deposed] our own efforts in support of what we call the Strategic Hamlet Program have deteriorated badly . . . all of the mixed civil and military counterinsurgency programs which about a year ago seemed to be working well."⁵¹

Faced with this critical situation, the U.S. responded, first, politically, by efforts to achieve greater control over the machinery of government and the conduct of the war in South Vietnam, and, second, militarily, by stepping up pressures on the Communists, particularly by extending the war into North Vietnam.

The political response took the form primarily of increased pressure on the South Vietnamese to expand the role and influence of U.S. advisers, civilian as well as military. When this proposal (which was similar to General Lansdale's 1961 recommendation for "encadrement") was first broached with the junta after the Novem-

⁴⁹PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 41.

⁵⁰These and other excerpts from the Kirkpatrick report, and the excerpt from the SNIE, are in *ibid.*, pp. 41-42. Both reports are still classified.

⁵¹Johnson Library, NSF Aides File, McGeorge Bundy Memos to the President.

ber 1963 coup, General Minh argued that it would "play into the hands of the VC and make the Vietnamese officials look like lackeys. There would be a colonial flavor to the whole pacification effort. Minh added that even in the worst and clumsiest days of the French they never went into the villages or districts." He said that U.S. training of troops organized among political sects (he mentioned specifically the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao) "was bad because they then became American type soldiers, not Vietnamese soldiers." "We simply cannot govern this country if this kind of conduct continues."⁵² Minh and his colleagues doubtless were concerned that they would suffer the same fate as Diem, and wanted to limit U.S. influence in the internal affairs of Vietnam. It is also arguable, however, that, like Diem and Nhu, they resented the growing dominance of the United States, and genuinely believed that Americanization of the war would play into the hands of the Communists.

Unable to persuade Minh, the U.S. attempted to get Khanh to accept the idea. On February 3, 1964, only a week after the coup, and the day before Khanh formally took office, the State Department urged the U.S. mission in Saigon to reopen the question of placing more U.S. advisers in sub-units of the Government of South Vietnam. State told Lodge, "It might be useful to point out to Khanh that . . . proposed extension U.S. advisory structure would represent expansion U.S. commitment to support GVN in war against VC." Moreover, if Khanh would not agree to a general plan, State told Lodge to suggest that U.S. advisers be used in several districts "to lay basis for determining whether there is any substantial ill effect in political sense from their presence." Khanh not only agreed to this latter suggestion (he accepted U.S. advisers in 13 districts in the delta), but went so far as to ask Lodge to recommend Vietnamese for the position of Prime Minister and for the Cabinet. Lodge suggested some names, but, according to the *Pentagon Papers*, he did not recommend individuals for specific posts.⁵³

In addition to these political proposals, U.S. policymakers considered a range of new military programs. On January 22, 1964, General Taylor, Chairman of the JCS, sent a comprehensive JCS memorandum to McNamara recommending an expansion of military operations in Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, which he said was needed to achieve the victory over Communist forces that President Johnson had reaffirmed as the U.S. goal in NSAM 273 (November 26, 1963). "In order to achieve that victory," Taylor said, "the Joint Chiefs of Staff are of the opinion that the United States must be prepared to put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions which now limit our efforts, and to undertake bolder actions which may embody greater risks."

These were the principal justifications and recommendations presented in that important memorandum:⁵⁴

Currently we and the South Vietnamese are fighting the war on the enemy's terms. He has determined the locale, the

⁵²PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 307-308.

⁵³Ibid., p. 309, and Saigon to Washington 1451, Jan. 31, 1964, and 1483, Feb. 4, 1964, and Washington to Saigon 1192, Feb. 7, 1964. Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

⁵⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 496-499.

timing, and the tactics of the battle while our actions are essentially reactive. One reason for this is the fact that we have obliged ourselves to labor under self-imposed restrictions with respect to impeding external aid to the Viet Cong. These restrictions include keeping the war within the boundaries of South Vietnam, avoiding the direct use of US combat forces, and limiting US direction of the campaign to rendering advice to the Government of Vietnam. These restrictions, while they may make our international position more readily defensible, all tend to make the task in Vietnam more complex, time consuming, and in the end, more costly. In addition to complicating our own problem, these self-imposed restrictions may well now be conveying signals of irresolution to our enemies—encouraging them to higher levels of vigor and greater risks. A reversal of attitude and the adoption of a more aggressive program would enhance greatly our ability to control the degree to which escalation will occur. It appears probable that the economic and agricultural disappointments suffered by Communist China, plus the current rift with the Soviets, could cause the communists to think twice about undertaking a large-scale military adventure in Southeast Asia.

In adverting to actions outside of South Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff are aware that the focus of the counterinsurgency battle lies in South Vietnam itself, and that the war must certainly be fought and won primarily in the minds of the Vietnamese people. At the same time, the aid now coming to the Viet Cong from outside the country in men, resources, advice, and direction is sufficiently great in the aggregate to be significant—both as help and as encouragement to the Viet Cong. It is our conviction that if support of the insurgency from outside South Vietnam in terms of operational direction, personnel, and material were stopped completely, the character of the war in South Vietnam would be substantially and favorably altered. Because of this conviction, we are wholly in favor of executing the covert actions against North Vietnam which you have recently proposed to the President [34-A]. We believe, however, that it would be idle to conclude that these efforts will have a decisive effect on the communist determination to support the insurgency; and it is our view that we must therefore be prepared fully to undertake a much higher level of activity, not only for its beneficial tactical effect, but to make plain our resolution both to our friends and to our enemies.

Accordingly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that the United States must make ready to conduct increasingly bolder actions in Southeast Asia; specifically as to Vietnam to:

- a. Assign to the US military commander responsibilities for the total US program in Vietnam.
- b. Induce the Government of Vietnam to turn over to the United States military commander, temporarily, the actual tactical direction of the war.
- c. Charge the United States military commander with complete responsibility for conduct of the program against North Vietnam.

d. Overfly Laos and Cambodia to whatever extent is necessary for acquisition of operational intelligence.

e. Induce the Government of Vietnam to conduct overt ground operations in Laos of sufficient scope to impede the flow of personnel and material southward.

f. Arm, equip, advise, and support the Government of Vietnam in its conduct of aerial bombing of critical targets in North Vietnam and in mining the sea approaches to that country.

g. Advise and support the Government of Vietnam in its conduct of large-scale commando raids against critical targets in North Vietnam.

h. Conduct aerial bombing of key North Vietnam targets, using US resources under Vietnamese cover, and with the Vietnamese openly assuming responsibility for the actions.

i. Commit additional US forces, as necessary, in support of the combat action within South Vietnam.

j. Commit US forces as necessary in direct actions against North Vietnam.

W. W. Rostow, Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Council, also called for bolder action against North Vietnam. In a memorandum to Rusk on February 13, 1964, he declared:⁵⁵

South Vietnam is in danger. The internal position in South Vietnam created by the systematic operations conducted from North Vietnam is precarious. . . . although difficult tasks would still be faced in South Vietnam and Laos if North Vietnamese compliance with the 1962 agreement was enforced. We see no possibility of achieving short-run or long-run stability in the area until it is enforced.

In that same memorandum, according to the *Pentagon Papers*,⁵⁶ Rostow also said that there had been some State Department discussions "on the desirability of the President's requesting a congressional resolution, drawing a line at the borders of South Vietnam." "Even this early in the Johnson administration," Rostow said subsequently, "word had gotten back to the bureaucracy that Johnson disapproved of Truman's failure to seek a congressional resolution in the Korean War. We understood that, should the occasion arise, he intended to be governed by Eisenhower's precedent in the Formosa and Middle East resolutions, where broad congressional support was sought before policies that might lead to military confrontations were carried out."⁵⁷

On February 18, the JCS followed up its memorandum of January 22 with recommendations to McNamara for specific immediate actions:⁵⁸

a. Induce the GVN (General Khanh) military to accept U.S. advisors at all levels considered necessary by COMUSMACV [Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam]. (This is particularly applicable in the critical provinces). . . .

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 310. The memorandum—the *Pentagon Papers* refers to it as a letter—is still classified.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 153.

⁵⁷*The Diffusion of Power*, p. 505.

⁵⁸*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 44-45.

b. Intensify the use of herbicides for crop destruction against identified Viet Cong areas as recommended by the GVN.

c. Improve border control measures. . . .

d. Direct the U.S. civilian agencies involved in Vietnam to assist the GVN in producing a civilian counterpart package plan to the GVN National Pacification Plan

e. Provide U.S. civilian advisors to all necessary echelons and GVN agencies

f. Encourage early and effective action to implement a realistic land reform program.

g. Support the GVN in a policy of tax forgiveness for low income population in areas where the GVN determines that a critical state of insurgency exists

h. Assist the GVN in developing a National Psychological Operations Plan . . . to establish the GVN and Khanh's "images," create a "cause" which can serve as a rallying point for the youth/students of Vietnam, and develop the long term national objectives of a free Vietnam.

i. Intensify efforts to gain support of U.S. news media representatives in Washington

j. Arrange U.S. sponsored trips to Vietnam by groups of prominent journalists and editors.

k. Inform all GVN military and civilian officials . . . that the United States (a) considers it imperative that the present government be stabilized, (b) would oppose another coup, and (c) that the United States is prepared to offer all possible assistance in forming a stable government . . . all U.S. intelligence agencies and advisors must be alert to and report cases of dissension and plotting in order to prevent such actions.

According to the memorandum, these measures would not have a "decisive effect in the campaign against the Viet Cong," however, and the Joint Chiefs were continuing to study other, more drastic steps, including the following:

a. Intensified operations against North Vietnam to include air bombings of selected targets;

b. Removal of restrictions for air and ground cross-border operations;

c. Intelligence and reporting;

d. U.S. organizational changes;

e. Increased U.S. Navy participation in shore and river patrol activities;

f. Introduction of jet aircraft into the Vietnamese Air Force and the U.S. Air Commando unit. . . .

In mid-February, 1964 the JCS also recommended a concentrated counterinsurgency effort in the province of Long An (which had been the subject of discussion in December after reports that the situation in that key province was deteriorating, contrary to the optimistic reporting of Harkins and Krulak). Acting in Lodge's absence, Deputy Chief of Mission David G. Nes objected strongly to the proposal on the grounds that the U.S. did not have the influence to persuade the Government of Vietnam to take such action, nor was the GVN politically strong enough to launch an effective operation. Moreover, it was a mistake, Nes said, to assume that

such an "indigenous Communist insurgency with full external support could be defeated by an 'offensive' of finite duration."⁵⁹

In a memorandum to Lodge on February 17, Nes explained his position, based on his observations during two months as Lodge's deputy. He said he had decided that de Gaulle was right in believing that the U.S. faced either the possible collapse of its counterinsurgency program in South Vietnam or an escalation which could lead to direct military conflict between the U.S. and North Vietnam and China. Nes did not think the U.S. counterinsurgency program could stem the tide.⁶⁰

Nothing that I have seen or heard thus far in Saigon leads me to believe that against the background of recent Vietnamese history our counter-insurgency efforts can win through so long as the Viet Cong is backed politically and psychologically and to a lesser extent militarily by Hanoi and Peking.

The peasants who form the mass of the South Vietnamese population are exhausted and sick of 20 years of civil conflict. During this entire period they have never and are not now receiving either political leadership or orderly and just administration from the central authorities of the GVN. They have enjoyed little if any social or economic betterment.

On the other hand, the Viet Cong represents a grass roots movement which is disciplined, ideologically dedicated, easily identifiable with the desires of the peasantry and of course ruthless. The fact that the VC has the full backing of China is perhaps its most powerful asset in presenting itself as the inevitable winner.

I do not see in the present military regime or any conceivable successor much hope in providing the real political and social leadership or the just and effective country-wide administration so essential to the success of our counter-insurgency program.

I think we would be naive in the extreme to believe that any number or quality of American advisors can succeed in changing within a reasonable period of time the attitudes and patterns of thinking of senior Vietnamese military and political officialdom.

In developing a large conventional World War II Vietnamese military establishment organized into Four Corps and 9-10 divisions with other equally sizable supporting units, we may, in fact, have a Frankenstein on our hands which on the one hand serves little purpose in dealing effectively with the Viet Cong and on the other provides a perfect framework for spawning successive coups and so perpetuating the current political malaise.

On February 18, the President met with his top advisers (Rusk, McNamara, McCone and Taylor), and with the members of the newly-established interdepartmental Vietnam Coordinating Com-

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 310. For confirmation of Nes' position, see the excellent study by Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁶⁰"Where We Stand in Vietnam" Johnson Library, Nes Papers.

mittee.⁶¹ At this meeting, the President directed that "Contingency planning for pressures against North Vietnam should be speeded up. Particular attention should be given to shaping such pressures so as to produce the maximum credible deterrent effect on Hanoi."⁶²

On February 21, President Johnson used a speech in California as a vehicle for delivering a carefully prepared warning to the North Vietnamese to cease and desist or be prepared for the consequences:

In South Viet-Nam, terror and violence, directed and supplied by outside enemies, press against the lives and liberties of a people who seek only to be left in peace. For 10 years our country has been committed to the support of their freedom, and that commitment we will continue to honor. The contest in which South Viet-Nam is now engaged is first and foremost a contest to be won by the government and the people of that country for themselves. But those engaged in external direction and supply would do well to be reminded and to remember that this type of aggression is a deeply dangerous game.⁶³ There is no indication that Johnson's warning had any effect on the North Vietnamese.

On February 26, as pressure for attacking the North Vietnamese continued to grow, including actions against increased North Vietnamese activities in Laos, especially the infiltration of South Vietnam through Laos, the JCS recommended flights over Laos by Vietnamese and U.S. aircraft for both reconnaissance and the display of power. On February 25, the State Department, in a draft memorandum for the President, recommended, according to the *Pentagon Papers*, "deploying twelve F-100's to Thailand, with a view toward its potential deterrence and signalling impacts on communist activities in Laos."⁶⁴

On March 2, 1964, the JCS sent two memoranda to McNamara recommending further action. The first, "Removal of Restrictions for Air and Ground Cross Border Operations," proposed that direct action be taken against the Communists in Laos to demonstrate that the U.S. was determined to eliminate their use of Laos as a "sanctuary" for conducting or supporting operations in South Vietnam. The second proposed direct airstrikes against North Vietnam to demonstrate U.S. determination to oppose Communist aggres-

⁶¹The interdepartmental committee on Vietnam, chaired by William H. Sullivan of the State Department, was established on Feb. 14, 1964, by NSAM 280. Its members were:

John T. McNaughton, DOD
Maj. Gen. Rollen H. Anthis, JCS
Maj. Gen. Lucius Clay, Jr., USAF
William Colby, CIA
Joseph Mendenhall, State
Walter Stoneman, AID
William Jorden, State

⁶²PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 154, from a White House memorandum for the record, "South Vietnam," Feb. 20, 1964, that is still classified. This decision was not promulgated by a NSAM.

⁶³Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, p. 304.

⁶⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 156-157, from the unpublished classified paper, "Stabilizing the Situation in Southeast Asia." It is unclear as to where the State Department memorandum originated and who cleared it in the form cited by the *Pentagon Papers*, as well as whether it was ever sent to the President.

sion in Southeast Asia, and to convince the North to cease assisting the South.⁶⁵

Report of the Vietnam Committee

After the February 18 White House meeting, the Vietnam Committee, as ordered by the President, quickly drew together plans for increasing the pressure on North Vietnam. Robert Johnson, Rostow's deputy on State's Policy Planning Council, was the coordinator of the planning process, and the proposals were in the form of a memorandum which he sent to William Sullivan (head of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee) in draft on March 1, with other versions on March 13 and 19, 1964. The subject of the memo was "Alternatives for Imposition of Measured Pressure Against North Vietnam," and, according to the *Pentagon Papers*, there were the following attachments: "a 'White Paper' detailing Hanoi's role; a Presidential statement of our rationale and limited intent; a Congressional resolution; and diplomatic consultations."⁶⁶

Thus, by March 13, 1964, the draft text of a congressional resolution had been prepared by the Vietnam Committee as a key element in the series of steps leading to increased pressure on North Vietnam.

It is unfortunate that the Vietnam Committee memorandum—the first comprehensive plan for expanding the Vietnam war, and for using overt military force against North Vietnam—is still classified, but fortunately the *Pentagon Papers* contains a lengthy description of the plan and, based on that account, these appear to have been the principal points in the memorandum.⁶⁷

(1) The strategic concept on which increased pressure on North Vietnam would be based was "North Vietnamese concern that their industrialization achievements might be wiped out or could be defended (if at all) only at the price of Chicom control," and "that their more powerful Communist allies would not risk their own interests for the sake of North Vietnam."

(2) There were five objectives of increased pressure against North Vietnam—

- A. induce North Vietnam to cease support of the Communists in the South;
- B. reduce the morale of the Communists in the South;
- C. strengthen the Khanh government and discourage neutralization;
- D. demonstrate to the world U.S. determination to combat Communist aggression;
- E. strengthen morale in Asia.

In addition, it was argued that such pressure would improve the U.S. negotiating position. (Negotiation was considered "virtually inevitable.")

(3) Pressure against North Vietnam, however, was "no substitute for successful counterinsurgency in South Vietnam." "It

⁶⁵This information, taken from a chronology in *ibid.*, p. 120, is the only information available on these two memoranda, both of which are still classified.

⁶⁶PP, DOD ed., book 3, IV, C. 2, (a), fn. 27.

⁶⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 154-156. Portions in quotations are from the memorandum itself.

is not likely that North Vietnam would (if it could) call off the war in the South even though U.S. actions would in time have serious economic and political impact. Overt action against North Vietnam would be unlikely to produce reduction in Viet Cong activity sufficiently to make victory on the ground possible in South Vietnam unless accompanied by new U.S. bolstering actions in South Vietnam and considerable improvement in the government there. The most to be expected would be reduction of North Vietnamese support of the Viet Cong for a while and, thus, the gaining of some time and opportunity by the government of South Vietnam to improve itself."

(4) The U.S. should be prepared to "follow through against Communist China if necessary," but it was unlikely that the Chinese or the Russians would intervene militarily except for providing equipment and supplies.

After examining three alternative forms of pressure, (1) covert, non-attributable actions, (2) overt U.S. deployment and actions not directed toward North Vietnam, and, (3) overt U.S. actions against North Vietnam, the memorandum considered six military moves with the greatest potential, ranked, according to the *Pentagon Papers*, "in ascending order of the degree of national commitment":

(1) "deploy to Thailand, South Vietnam, Laos and elsewhere the forces, sea, air and land, required to counter a North Vietnamese or Chicom response of the largest likely order";

(2) "initiate overt air reconnaissance activities as a means of dramatizing North Vietnamese involvement," beginning with high-level flights and following with low-level missions;

(3) "take limited air or ground action in Cambodia and Laos, including hot pursuit across the Cambodian border and limited operations across the Laos border";

(4) "blockade Haiphong," which would "have dramatic political effect because it is a recognized military action that hits at the sovereignty of North Vietnam and suggests strongly that we may plan to go further";

(5) "establish a limited air defense capability around Saigon"; and

(6) conduct air strikes on key North Vietnamese LOC's, [lines of communication] infiltrator training camps, key industrial complexes, and POL [petroleum, oil, lubricants] storage.

Recognizing the desirability of rallying Congress and the public behind the position that U.S. actions against North Vietnam were in reaction to North Vietnamese aggression, as well as the importance of assuming such a position in U.S. relations with other countries, the memorandum also stated, "public justification of our action and its expressed rationale must be based primarily upon the fact of Northern support for and direction of the war in the South in violation of the independence of South Vietnam." It discussed a number of steps for accomplishing this, both in the United States and abroad.

The memorandum cautioned against undertaking any action without calculating what the U.S. could and might do depending upon the reaction from the north, including how far the U.S. would escalate militarily if the North Vietnamese did not respond to pressure or decided to escalate in response to pressure.

While new plans were being developed for responding to the situation in Vietnam, Roger Hilsman, who was preparing to leave the State Department on March 14, 1964, was summarizing his views in two final memoranda and a parting letter to Rusk. In the memoranda, he again urged that first priority should be given to establishing security in the villages, leading to the creation of a secure area which could then be extended—the "oil blot principle"—rather than having a scattering of fortified villages. He repeated his position that instead of conducting large military operations, "the way to fight a guerrilla is to adopt the tactics of a guerrilla. . . ." He favored covert operations against North Vietnam, but said that, with respect to overt operations, ". . . significant action against North Vietnam that is taken before we have demonstrated success in our counterinsurgency program will be interpreted by the Communists as an act of desperation, and will, therefore, not be effective in persuading the North Vietnamese to cease and desist. What is worse, I think that premature action will so alarm our friends and allies and a significant segment of domestic opinion that the pressures for neutralization will become formidable."⁶⁸

In his letter to Rusk on March 17, 1964, however, Hilsman advocated strengthening "our overall military posture in southeast Asia in ways which will make it clear that we are single-mindedly improving our capability to take whatever military steps may be necessary to halt Communist aggression in the area."⁶⁹ He expressed concern that "since the fall of Dienbienphu, all Asians have wondered about our determination to fight in Southeast Asia, should fighting become necessary." In Vietnam itself, he said, "De Gaulle, Lippmann and Mansfield have set the neutralist hares running with self-fulfilling prophecies that dishearten those who wish to fight and encourage coup-plotting among both the true neutralists and the simple opportunists. But what gives these lofty, unrealistic thoughts of a peaceful neutralist Asia their credibility is, again, fundamental doubts about our ultimate intentions."

To impress upon the Communists that the U.S. "might escalate hostility to a level unacceptable to them," and "that we are prepared to go as far as necessary to defeat their plans and achieve our objectives," Hilsman recommended the deployment of "substantial" U.S. ground and air forces to Thailand, where they should be maintained "quite indefinitely," together with implications that

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 43-44. See also *To Move A Nation*, pp. 535-536. The memoranda themselves are still classified. William Bundy (Bundy MS., ch. 12, p. 19) says that Hilsman's "either/or" discussion of the 'military' and 'political' approaches simply does not square with the idiom of policy debate at any time in 1963-1964. . . . Nor, I might add, does it fit with the prescriptions in Mr. Hilsman's own farewell memoranda of Mar. 1964. In parts not quoted in his book, these included the greatest possible stress on demonstrative action, specifically a major deployment of ground forces to Thailand, to show Hanoi that the US would 'take whatever measures are necessary in Southeast Asia to protect those who oppose the Communists and to maintain our power and influence in the area.' As his book does show, Mr. Hilsman also stood quite ready to see bombing of infiltration bases and other targets in the north, but said this should come only after improvement in the south had been achieved—the very conclusion the Administration reached in March and June.

⁶⁹Whether Mr. Hilsman's ideas on 'counter-guerrilla' warfare were ever practical for South Vietnam and for dealing such the infiltration routes is a question I must leave to others. For what it is worth, I (and I am sure many others at policy levels) always thought he was right in considerable degree, but asking more than a demoralized South Vietnamese force could deliver for years to come."

⁶⁸Hilsman's letter is now available at the Johnson Library, NSF Aides File, McGeorge Bundy Memos for the President.

U.S. ground forces could also be sent to Laos if necessary. This should be accompanied, he said, "by a diplomatic offensive designed (1) to reassure our friends as to our determination, and (2) to warn the Communist side that they are indeed playing a 'deeply dangerous game.'"

Report of the McNamara-Taylor-McCone Mission, and the Approval of NSAM 288

By early March 1964, President Johnson was preoccupied with getting congressional approval of legislation for his proposed "war on poverty," as well as other domestic legislation which he considered important. He was also obviously concerned about and deeply involved in Presidential election politics in preparation for the November 1964 Presidential election. The situation in Vietnam had not improved, however, and with the draft report of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee in hand he was faced with making another round of decisions about U.S. policy. His reaction was to send McNamara on another mission to Vietnam on March 8, and then to use the report of that mission as the vehicle for making a decision which he hoped would meet the needs of the situation without adversely affecting either his domestic program or his political campaign. This limited action, however, resulted in the further involvement of the U.S. in Vietnam in 1964, and laid the groundwork for U.S. military intervention in 1965.

After spending five days in Vietnam, McNamara, accompanied by Taylor and McCone, reported back to the President on March 16, and filed his report on March 17. The report did not recommend bombing North Vietnam. It did recommend, however, that plans be made for bombing the North, both through "quick reaction strikes" and in more sustained actions, as a part of the application of greater pressure on North Vietnam.

On March 17, the NSC discussed the report.⁷⁰ According to the notes of the meeting, Johnson asked McNamara "if his program would reverse the current trend in South Vietnam. Secretary McNamara replied that if we carry out energetically the proposals he has made, Khanh can stem the tide in South Vietnam, and within four to six months, improve the situation there." General Taylor added that the Joint Chiefs believed the proposed program was acceptable, but thought that to make it effective the U.S. would have to take military action against North Vietnam.

"The President summarized the alternatives to the recommended course of action, i.e., putting in more U.S. forces, pulling out of the area, or neutralizing the area. He said the course we are following is the only realistic alternative. It will have the maximum effectiveness with the minimum loss," adding that this would not foreclose other action later if the situation did not improve. He asked the group whether there were any objections to the proposals. No one objected. That day the McNamara report was issued verbatim as NSAM 288.⁷¹

These were the principal points made in the McNamara-Taylor-McCone report:

(A) The U.S. objective is to maintain an "independent, non-Communist South Vietnam." If this fails, all of Southeast Asia would be threatened. There would also be general ramifications for U.S. policy, because Vietnam was "regarded as a test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation meet a Communist 'war of liberation.'"

(B) Although the situation in South Vietnam has worsened, "it does not appear likely that major equipment replacement and additions in U.S. personnel are indicated under current policy." Replacement of Americans by Vietnamese was still sound, and would demonstrate that the war was a Vietnamese responsibility. Furthermore, "Substantial reductions in the numbers of U.S. military training personnel should be possible before the end of 1965."

(C) In terms of possible courses of action, a negotiated settlement leading to neutralization, as proposed by de Gaulle, "would simply mean a Communist take-over in South Vietnam." "Even talking about a U.S. withdrawal would undermine any chance of keeping a non-Communist government in South Vietnam, and the rug would probably be pulled before the negotiations had gone far."

(D) With respect to the other two alternatives—military action against North Vietnam, and steps to improve the situation in the South, the former would be "extremely delicate," and might not be effective. Moreover, until the Khanh government was more secure, "an overt extension of operations into the North carries the risk of being mounted from an extremely weak base which might at any moment collapse and leave the posture of political confrontation worsened rather than improved." There were, however, a number of steps that could and should be taken to help the South Vietnamese, and if the Khanh government "takes hold vigorously," the situation should improve "in the next four to six months."

(E) "If the Khanh government takes hold vigorously—inspiring confidence, whether or not noteworthy progress has been made—or if we get hard information of significantly stepped-up VC arms supply from the North, we may wish to mount new and significant pressures against North Vietnam. We should start preparations for such a capability now. . . . The reasoning behind this program of preparations for initiating action against North Vietnam is rooted in the fact that, even with progress in the pacification plan, the Vietnamese Government and the population in the South will still have to face the prospect of a very lengthy campaign based on a war-weary nation and operating against Viet Cong cadres who retained a measure of motivation and assurance."

(F) Accordingly, the President should instruct agencies of the U.S. Government:

1. To make it clear that we are prepared to furnish assistance and support to South Vietnam for as long as it takes to bring the insurgency under control.

⁷⁰Sanitized notes of the meeting are in the Johnson Library, NSF NSC Meetings File.

⁷¹The text of the report (and thus also the text of NSAM 288) is in *PP*, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 499-510.

2. To make it clear that we fully support the Khanh government and are opposed to any further coups.

3. To support a Program for National Mobilization (including a national service law) to put South Vietnam on a war footing.

4. To assist the Vietnamese to increase the armed forces (regular plus paramilitary) by at least 50,000 men.

5. To assist the Vietnamese to create a greatly enlarged Civil Administrative Corps for work at province, district and hamlet levels.

6. To assist the Vietnamese to improve and reorganize the paramilitary forces and to increase their compensation.

7. To assist the Vietnamese to create an offensive guerilla force.

8. To provide the Vietnamese Air Force 25 A-1H aircraft in exchange for the present T-28s.

9. To provide the Vietnamese Army additional M-113 armored personnel carriers (withdrawing the M-114s there), additional river boats, and approximately \$5-10 million of other additional material.

10. To announce publicly the Fertilizer Program and to expand it with a view within two years to trebling the amount of fertilizer made available.

11. To authorize continued high-level U.S. overflights of South Vietnam's borders and to authorize "hot pursuit" and South Vietnamese ground operations over the Laotian line for the purpose of border control. More ambitious operations into Laos involving units beyond battalion size should be authorized only with the approval of Souvanna Phouma. Operations across the Cambodian border should depend on the state of relations with Cambodia.

12. To prepare immediately to be in a position on 72 hours' notice to initiate the full range of Laotian and Cambodian "Border Control" actions (beyond those authorized in paragraph 11 above) and the "Retaliatory Actions" against North Vietnam, and to be in a position on 30 days' notice to initiate the program of "Graduated Overt Military Pressure" against North Vietnam.

According to the *Pentagon Papers*,⁷² NSAM 288 ". . . outlined a program that called for considerable enlargement of U.S. effort. It involved an assumption by the United States of a greater part of the task, and an increased involvement by the United States in the internal affairs of South Vietnam, and for these reasons it carried with it an enlarged commitment of U.S. prestige to the success of our effort in that area. . . ."

The *Pentagon Papers* also makes the point⁷³ that "Although VC successes in rural areas had been the prime feature of the down-swing over the past half year or more, pacification was to receive less comparative emphasis."

⁷²Ibid., p. 50.
⁷³Ibid., p. 54.

The Defense Department and the JCS immediately began planning for the implementation of items 11 and 12 on the above list of 12 actions, and on April 17 the JCS approved OPLAN 37-64, the proposed plan for exerting graduated military pressure on North Vietnam, which later served as the blueprint for the escalation of U.S. military action in 1965.

OPLAN 37 was "a three-phase plan covering operations against VC infiltration routes in Laos and Cambodia and against targets in North Vietnam. Phase I provided for air and ground strikes against targets in South Vietnam, and hot pursuit actions into Laotian and Cambodian border areas. Phase II provided for 'tit-for-tat' airstrikes, airborne/amphibious raids, and aerial mining operations against targets in North Vietnam. Phase III provided for increasingly severe airstrikes and other actions against North Vietnam, going beyond the 'tit-for-tat' concept."⁷⁴ As part of OPLAN 37, a list of North Vietnamese targets was drawn up, called the "94 Target List," which became the guide for target selection in bombing the North.

Although OPLAN 37 was developed in response to a current program of planning, Gen. William C. Westmoreland later said, "Those of us in Saigon who knew of OPLAN 37 saw little possibility that the President would implement it until after the November election. Indeed, we saw it strictly as a postelection plan."⁷⁵

Even as the basis was being established for using overt military force against the North, Johnson continued to control the U.S. commitment to Vietnam, and, more importantly at that point, he attempted to control also the level of congressional and public concern about the situation. According to Doris Kearns, "He did know that there were difficult decisions to be made. But he needed time, and in any event an election year was no time to make them. The word went out that tough decisions on Vietnam should be deferred as long as possible. . . . Opinion surveys showed that more than two-thirds of the American public said they paid little or no attention to what was going on in Vietnam. Johnson wanted to keep it that way."⁷⁶

On March 26, McNamara and Taylor met with the Foreign Relations Committee in an informal, unrecorded session.⁷⁷ McNamara reported that the situation in Vietnam had worsened. He was asked about Laos, and he replied that there, too, the situation was unstable and dangerous, and would be much worse if the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam. Cambodia would also fall quickly to the Communists, followed by Thailand.

Commenting on alternatives, McNamara said that withdrawal was not worth discussing, and that de Gaulle's proposal for a negotiated settlement and for neutrality could lead to a situation in

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 287. OPLAN 37-64 is still classified.

⁷⁵William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 109.
⁷⁶Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream, pp. 197-198. William Bundy says in response to Kearns: "If 'the word went out,' it never reached me. On the contrary I can recall at least one strong injunction from LBJ to call it as we saw it, regardless of politics or the election. Of course the election played a part, as did the fact that LBJ was in some sense a caretaker. But explicit mention of the sort described here was rare, and never came to me." William Bundy letter to CRS, Dec. 9, 1984.

⁷⁷There is no transcript of this meeting. Comments here are based on notes in the committee files in the National Archives, RG 46.

which South Vietnam would be unable to ask for outside assistance, and would be taken over by the Communists. He added that, contrary to his public statements, de Gaulle privately did not think a negotiated settlement was possible.

General Taylor outlined for the committee the alternative of applying force against North Vietnam. Three kinds of military pressure were being considered, he said: first, border control operations; second, a selective program of retaliation; third, an escalation of military pressure against the north.

Senator Fulbright said that with regard to the third category (escalation), the French once had 200,000 men in Indochina, and he wondered whether, in the event of escalation, the U.S. would put in large numbers of forces. McNamara replied that the U.S. would not use large forces, and that the major pressures would be applied by airpower.

Senator Albert Gore asked how McNamara squared his comments about increasing pressures with his statements in the fall of 1963 regarding the reduction of U.S. forces. McNamara replied that a program of new military pressures should not require additional U.S. forces in Vietnam; that the U.S. would attack by air.

Meanwhile, after their telephone conversation of March 2, Fulbright, as was mentioned earlier, publicly supported the President's position on Vietnam in a speech in the Senate on March 25, 1964, entitled "Old Myths and New Realities."⁷⁸ U.S. foreign policy, said Fulbright, suffered from the divergence "between the realities of foreign policy and our ideas about it." ". . . we are handicapped . . . by policies based on old myths, rather than current realities." Americans needed, he said, "to start thinking some 'unthinkable' thoughts about the cold war and East-West relations, about the underdeveloped countries and particularly those in Latin America, about the changing nature of the Chinese Communist threat in Asia and about the festering war in Vietnam." After dealing with the other subjects, Fulbright concluded the speech with comments on Vietnam, noting that, as compared with reevaluation of basic U.S. foreign policy in the Far East generally, "The situation in Vietnam poses a far more pressing need for a reevaluation of American policy." Other than withdrawal, which he did not think "could be realistically considered under present circumstances," there were three options: first, to continue the war in the South, second, to end the war and negotiate neutralization of South Vietnam or all of Vietnam, and, third, to expand the war, "either by the direct commitment of large numbers of American troops or by equipping the South Vietnamese Army to attack North Vietnamese territory, possibly by means of commando-type operations from the sea or the air." He said that a negotiated settlement was not an alternative as long as South Vietnam was in such a weak bargaining position. He concluded, therefore, that there were only two options: expanding the war, or assisting the South Vietnamese "to prosecute the war successfully on its present scale."

Morse responded to Fulbright⁷⁹ by repeating his proposal for taking the Vietnam problem to the U.N., after first attempting to solve it through the SEATO framework. Fulbright replied that he thought the U.N. approach was "futile," and that, "The Vietnamese situation is one in which I do not see any feasible way in which it will be possible to apply any rules of law." The U.S., he said, had "little choice but to try to stabilize conditions to see if we cannot help the present Government acquire, and I hope merit, the support of the people of that country who are free to exercise any choice." "Rightly or wrongly, we are deeply involved," he said; ". . . we are committed to the point where it would be quite disastrous for this country to withdraw." He added, however, that he was "extremely reluctant to expand the commitment."

During his speech Fulbright made the following cryptic statement, indicating that he had some knowledge of the fact that the executive branch was considering future options, and that he was not going to take a position that would foreclose his own consideration of such proposals as the President might subsequently make: "The matter [whether to expand the war] calls for thorough examination by responsible officials in the executive branch; and until they have had an opportunity to evaluate the contingencies and feasibilities of the options open to us, it seems to me that we have no choice but to support the South Vietnamese Government and Army by the most effective means available." "Whatever specific policy decisions are made," he added, "it should be clear to all concerned that the United States will continue to meet its obligations and fulfill its commitments with respect to Vietnam." What those "obligations" and "commitments" were, Fulbright did not say, but it was apparent that he was helping to lay the groundwork for the possible expansion of the war. It is also interesting to note his reference to the examination of options by officials in the executive branch, with no reference to the possible value of congressional participation in such a process.

At his news conference three days later (March 28), Johnson was asked about Fulbright's speech. He replied that he did not agree with some of Fulbright's comments, but he revealed that he had had dinner with Fulbright the Sunday before the March 25 speech, and that they had discussed Vietnam "in some detail."⁸⁰

On March 26, the day he met with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, McNamara, gave a major speech in which he used almost the same analytical framework as Fulbright had used. (The decision to make the speech had been made at a White House meeting on March 16, and the White House, as well as State, participated extensively in the writing of the speech).⁸¹ In the speech, McNamara discussed, and rejected, withdrawal or a negotiated settlement, and said that there remained only two options: expanding the war, and helping the South Vietnamese to win the war in the South. With respect to the former, McNamara said, "This course of action—its implications and ways of carrying it out—has been carefully studied." "Whatever ultimate course of action may be forced

⁷⁸CR, vol. 110, pp. 6227-6232. This was subsequently printed as the lead chapter in Fulbright's book of the same title.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 6238-6244. This was followed by a reply to Fulbright by Gruening.

⁸⁰Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963-1964, p. 429.

⁸¹See Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers, folder entitled "1964 McNamara Vietnam Speech."

upon us by the other side," he added, "it is clear that actions under this option would be only a supplement to, not a substitute for, progress within South Vietnam's own borders." As for helping the Vietnamese, he said, this was essential, and the U.S. had pledged such assistance "for as long as it takes to bring the insurgency under control."⁸²

The following day, March 27, 1964, McNamara formally (but without public notice) terminated the planning, begun in the summer of 1962, for withdrawing U.S. forces from Vietnam. The *Pentagon Papers* had this comment: "Although the Vietnamese knew that the 'withdrawal' of 1,000 men in December 1963 had been a pretense, his action now removed any remaining doubt about our intentions."⁸³

Implementing NSAM 288 While Restraining Khanh

After the issuance of NSAM 288 on March 17, the development of plans for increasing pressure on North Vietnam intensified. The central point of coordination was the Office of International Security Affairs in the Defense Department, with assistance from Bundy's Far East bureau (William Bundy had replaced Hilsman) and the Vietnam Coordinating Committee in State, as well as from the JCS. During March and April several versions of these plans were produced, each consisting of "scenarios" of increasing pressures on the North, from covert U.S. support of South Vietnamese 34-A operations, to open U.S. and South Vietnamese attacks on the North. At each stage it was planned that there would be steps to secure congressional and public support, as well as support from other countries.⁸⁴

On April 19-20, 1964, Rusk, William Bundy, General Wheeler and others met in Saigon with Lodge, Harkins and others to discuss the scenarios. "Much of the discussion," according to the *Pentagon Papers*,⁸⁵ "centered on the political context, objectives, and risks, of increasing military pressure on North Vietnam. It was understood that it would be first exerted solely by the Government of Vietnam, and would be clandestine. Gradually both wraps and restraints would be removed." There was considerable discussion as to how best to let the North Vietnamese know what the consequences would be if they did not cease supporting the Communists in the South.

During the meetings, Lodge suggested, as he had first proposed several months earlier, that a "carrot and stick approach" be tried before initiating any additional military pressures on the North. ". . . the carrot and stick concept envisioned a secret contact with Hanoi at which an ultimatum would be delivered demanding the DRV's cessation of support for the VC insurgency. Rewards for compliance would include our making available food imports to help alleviate the known food shortages affecting North Vietnam in late 1963 (and early '64). In the case of non-compliance, we

would undertake previously threatened punitive strikes to which we would not admit publicly."⁸⁶ Lodge suggested that the secret contact be made by Canadian diplomat J. Blair Seaborn, whom he knew, who was about to be sent to Vietnam to serve on the International Control Commission. It was agreed that this would be done.⁸⁷

Lodge did not object to the proposed program of increased pressure on North Vietnam, but he was unsure whether such a program would produce the desired result. He also took the position that massive intervention by the north in the south could not be met by conventional force.

During the meetings there was some discussion of the use of nuclear weapons against the north, and speculation as to whether this would cause the Russians to enter the war. Rusk apparently had reservations, both about the results of destroying North Vietnamese industrial installations, which he doubted would have much of an adverse effect on North Vietnam or on its support of the Communists in the south, and about the use of nuclear weapons. William Bundy, "for argument's sake," the *Pentagon Papers* said,⁸⁸ conjectured that the use of nuclear weapons in unpopulated areas for troop interdiction might have more of an impact on the Communists than if used otherwise.

Rusk made several suggestions for additional military pressure, including the stationing of a U.S. naval unit at Tourane or Cam Ranh Bay, to indicate to the North Vietnamese the determination of the United States to defend the south.

Although the meeting did not produce any significant new decisions or action (except for an agreement on the Seaborn mission), the "direction of thinking" in the group "was clearly away from measures internal to Vietnam, and clearly headed toward military action against the North." "In certain circles in Washington at least, there was what appears now to have been an amazing level of confidence that we could induce the North Vietnamese to abandon their support of the SVN insurgency if only we could convince them that we meant business, and that we would indeed bomb them if they did not stop their infiltration of men and supplies to the South."⁸⁹

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸³On Apr. 30, 1964, William Sullivan and Chester Cooper went to Ottawa and arranged with the Canadians to make such a diplomatic contact with North Vietnam. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66 and 163-164. On June 18 Seaborn met with North Vietnamese premier Pham Van Dong. He presented a statement of the U.S. position and offer of assistance, and warned of the consequences for North Vietnam of continued support of the Communists in the South. Then, and in another meeting on Aug. 15, Pham Van Dong is reported to have listened patiently, but indicated that the North Vietnamese, too, were confident of their cause. *Ibid.*, p. 292. In his memoirs, (*The Vantage Point*, p. 67), Johnson described the effort to communicate through Seaborn, and concluded, "Obviously, the Communist leaders believed they were winning in the South. . . . We could only conclude from his experience that the North Vietnamese had no desire to limit their actions or to negotiate. . . ." For the Seaborn mission, as well as subsequent U.S. efforts to negotiate with North Vietnam, see the four "negotiating volumes" of the *Pentagon Papers* (book 12 of the DOD edition), which were declassified and made public after the release of the earlier volumes in that series. See also the excellent study by Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁸⁴Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 65.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

⁸⁶PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 315-316. For the text, see *Department of State Bulletin*, Apr. 13, 1964. For Morse's reply to McNamara, see CR, vol. 110, pp. 6468-6470.

⁸⁷PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 316.

⁸⁸None of these documents has been made public, and there is only a brief discussion of them in the *Pentagon Papers*. See *ibid.*, vol. III, pp. 121-128, and 157-162.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 65.

On April 22, members of the NSC met to hear a report on Rusk's trip. The President joined the group toward the end of the meeting. Among the more general points that Rusk made (some of the notes have been deleted) was the problem of the "Limitation of funds—we may not be doing some of the things that we ought to be doing in Vietnam because we still think that we must limit expenditures."⁹⁰ Yet, Rusk added, "As compared to the cost of a war or our withdrawal, the amount of money we are spending in Vietnam is small." McNamara agreed. The U.S., he said, was ". . . right on the margin in Vietnam and that he could not guarantee that we would still be there in six months or twelve months from now. Therefore, we should pour in resources now even if some of them were wasted because of the terrific cost that would be involved if we had to use U.S. forces."

Somewhat more optimistic statements were made by William Bundy and General Wheeler. Bundy said ". . . we are now getting good reporting in both the political and military fields. Newspaper reporters have been misleading us. Unrest within the South Vietnam government has been exaggerated. The security situation is much better than as reported in the press." Wheeler added, "We should be encouraged by the progress which was being made."

On April 23, W. W. Rostow sent Rusk another memo—"On How Much Flesh and Blood Can Stand: Laos and Vietnam"—in which he argued that if the U.S. did not act to prevent further deterioration in the situation in Vietnam and Laos it would become much more difficult to make a credible case for possible efforts to force the North Vietnamese to adhere to the 1954 and 1962 Geneva Accords.⁹¹

On May 4, 1964, Khanh told Lodge that he wanted to move against the North. He said he wanted to declare a state of war and put South Vietnam on a war basis, including ". . . getting rid of the so-called 'politicians' and having a government of . . . technicians." He wanted to threaten the North with reprisal if there was further interference in South Vietnam's affairs, and he asked Lodge if the U.S. would consider "tit-for-tat" reprisal bombing each time there was North Vietnamese interference in South Vietnam. He also urged that the U.S. deploy 10,000 Special Forces along the frontier with Cambodia and Laos. Lodge did not make any commitments on U.S. forces (although he told Khanh he was opposed to large U.S. ground force operations on the Asian mainland), but he did tell Khanh that the war came first, and that "democratic forms" could wait.⁹² Washington's reaction was immediate and firm. After conferring with the President, the State Department sent a "flash" cable to Lodge stating that the meeting with Khanh posed extremely grave issues, and the U.S. response had to be developed with great care. On May 6, Johnson met with his advisers, and it was agreed that McNamara, who was preparing to go to Saigon, would tell Khanh that the U.S. did ". . . not intend to pro-

⁹⁰Johnson Library, NSF NSC Meetings File.

⁹¹PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 164; the memo is still classified.

⁹²Ibid., vol. II, p. 317. A copy of Lodge's cable, Saigon to Washington 2108, May 4, 1964, is in the Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

vide military support nor undertake the military objective of rolling back Communist control in North Vietnam."⁹³

On May 12-14, 1964, McNamara, General Taylor, John T. McNaughton (who had replaced Bundy as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs), General Wheeler, William Sullivan, and Michael Forrestal visited Vietnam to review implementation of the NSAM 288 decisions. Discussions were held with Khanh, at which McNamara expressed concern about Khanh's lack of progress, but also, as instructed by Johnson, told Khanh that drastic measures against the north were not necessary at that time.

Forrestal met with Vietnamese officials to review administrative and financial matters, and it was agreed that the U.S. would increase its financial assistance. (Late in April Khanh had requested that three U.S. experts in finance-economics, foreign affairs, and press be assigned to him personally. "We Vietnamese want the Americans to be responsible with us and not merely as advisors," he was reported to have said. This proposal, which was similar to the one the U.S. had made to Minh, was agreed to, and the three advisers were assigned to Khanh early in May 1964.)⁹⁴

It is of interest to note that during the Saigon meetings McNamara stated that the use of U.S. personnel in combat had not been authorized, and that efforts to use Vietnamese personnel should be intensified. Exceptions to this policy, he said, obviously echoing Johnson's concern, were to be considered undesirable and were not to be viewed as precedents for the future. Operation FARM GATE, in which, among other things, Vietnamese commando-reconnaissance teams were dropped in North Vietnam and Laos from U.S.-manned aircraft, was, he said, a specific exception—a "supplementary effort transitory in nature," that he had approved reluctantly. It should also be noted, however, that while in Saigon McNamara authorized, doubtless after approval by the President, a doubling each month of the number of such teams being dropped over North Vietnam and Laos. McNamara, according to the record of the meeting, was anxious to get more information about assistance being given by North Vietnam to the Communists in the South.⁹⁵

On May 15, McNamara reported to a meeting of the members of the NSC to which the President had invited a group of Democratic and Republican congressional leaders.⁹⁶ In his report, McNamara said that the situation was worse than at the time of his last visit in March. "The number of people under Viet Cong control and the amount of Vietnamese territory they hold is increasing. The Viet Cong holds the initiative in the military action. The Khanh government is fragmented and a religious crisis is brewing. . . . Khanh

⁹³PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 67. For a copy of the cable, Washington to Saigon 1838, May 5, 1964, see the Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam. Within the JCS, the Air Force and Marine representatives favored low-level reconnaissance and airstrikes against North Vietnam. See Furell, *The Advisory Years to 1965*, p. 204.

⁹⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 317. For the McNamara meetings in Saigon, May 12-14, see vol. III, pp. 67-72, and 164-165, as well as vol. II, p. 318. According to Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, p. 250, ". . . the brain-trust plan was never accepted by the Vietnamese, in principle or in fact, and the United States, as it had so often done before, simply backed down and didn't insist upon its implementation."

⁹⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 70.

⁹⁶Johnson Library, NSF NSC Meetings File.

controls eight out of fourteen million South Vietnamese. His major problem is not military but civilian and religious."

McNamara added that Khanh ". . . does not feel that he should strike north before his security situation in the south is improved, possibly by this fall. No strike to the north is required now, but there may be a psychological requirement to hit North Vietnam at a later time."

"The President summarized the McNamara report by saying that the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating and caused us to be extremely alarmed. The religious aspect is explosive. A great effort will be necessary to turn the tide back to our side." He said that he would soon be sending Congress a request for additional funds for Vietnam, but he added, ". . . even with increased U.S. aid the prospect in South Vietnam is not bright."

Criticism Rises

Meanwhile, congressional and public criticism of U.S. policy in Vietnam was increasing. On May 13, 1964, the *Wall Street Journal* printed an editorial entitled "Error Upon Error," commenting on McNamara's trip: ". . . no matter how many high officials visit Vietnam, or how frequently, nothing gets clarified. Except, that is, the continuing failure of U.S. policy." The editorial continued:

. . . it is almost impossible to figure out what is the U.S. strategy, if any—that is, how it thinks it can in fact drive the Communists out and keep them out. Not that anyone expects the Pentagon to reveal its war plans in detail; it is rather that the evidence indicates the lack of any plan which promises to be workable against the varied and successful tactics of the Communists.

Not even the commitment of many more American soldiers or the bombing of Communist bases in the north, which has been talked of off and on, would be guaranteed to accomplish the objective. In other circumstances perhaps, but not necessarily against this particular enemy, in this particular terrain, with this particular ally.

At the same time the French solution of neutralizing all of Vietnam sounds like a proposal in a vacuum, at least for the present. Why should Ho Chi Minh, the dictator of the north, want to neutralize when he is doing so well as it is? Or if he did want to we may be sure he would see it as a means of continuing the conquest.

We do not rule out the possibility that the United States may somehow someday turn the tide, any more than we rule out the possibility that the realities of the situation may finally dictate withdrawal. But whatever happens, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam reveals a series of classic military and political errors from which it may be hoped the Government will eventually profit. . . .

No nation should count on military success, even limited, in the most unfavorable circumstances. No piece of territory is beyond all price, worth any cost, as the French finally discovered 10 years ago after such great cost. And the United States, for all its great power, cannot forever police the world alone and unaided.

Morse and Gruening, as well as Ellender, were also stepping up their attacks, with one or the other or both speaking at almost every meeting of the Senate on what Morse had begun calling "McNamara's War."⁹⁷

McNamara's response was, "I must say, I don't object to its being called McNamara's war. I think it is a very important war and I am pleased to be identified with it and do whatever I can to win it."⁹⁸ "Well, at long last, we have smoked him out," Morse said, upon hearing of McNamara's comment. "We now have an admission from the Secretary of Defense that this Nation is engaged in war." He continued:⁹⁹

I ask the Secretary of Defense, I ask the Secretary of State, I ask the President: When are you going to ask for a declaration of war? I say from the floor of the Senate that the killing of American boys in South Vietnam cannot be justified, except on the basis of a declaration of war. I charge that McNamara's war stands today an unconstitutional war. It is now up to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense to send to Congress a declaration of war proposal. They should ask for constitutional approval of the killing of American boys in McNamara's war.

On April 24, James Thomson, William Bundy's Special Assistant in the Far East Bureau (he was formerly with Under Secretary Bowles), sent Bundy a memorandum summarizing congressional comments on the far east, especially Vietnam, during Bundy's absence from Washington during the middle of April. "Although Morse and Gruening appear to have made no admitted converts in this period," Thomson said, "they have encountered little rebuttal from their colleagues. . . . At the same time, in addition to support previously expressed by Senator Ellender, friendly questioning has revealed backing for aspects of their view from Senators Symington, John L. McClellan (D/Ark.) and Long (of Louisiana). In addition, H [the Congressional Relations Office of the State Department] reports that a growing number of Senators are privately sympathetic with the Morse-Gruening position."¹⁰⁰

On May 13, Bundy testified on Vietnam before a closed, un-recorded session of the Far East Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chaired by Senator Lausche. In advance of the meeting, Bundy's staff prepared various documents for his use, including a memorandum rebutting Morse's doubts about the legal basis for U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In a cover memo to Bundy to which these documents were attached, his assistant, Jonathan Moore cautioned him with respect to certain weaknesses in the administration's legal case. ". . . we are on pretty thin ice in certain instances," Moore said, "and accordingly must be cautious when attempting to fight on his battleground." After citing these weaknesses he advised Bundy that although it was important to make the legal case for U.S. involvement, he should "shift gears rapidly

⁹⁷Other Senate Democrats defended McNamara. See, for example, *CR*, vol. 110, p. 8411. Of Morse's many speeches during April, the most important was one he delivered on Apr. 24, *ibid.*, pp. 8996-9013.

⁹⁸*New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1964.

⁹⁹*CR*, vol. 110, p. 9070.

¹⁰⁰Kennedy Library, Thomson Papers. The "H" stands for (Capitol) Hill.

into a general (practical and political) rationale away from isolated technical details which the purely legal discussion tends to enhance." Morse was arguing that the Vietnam question should be taken to the U.N., Moore said, and "We have good answers to this question if we don't become exclusively embroiled in the legal discussion." He added, "I think that Senator Morse just might run out of gas on this one. At any rate, we should ignore him as much as possible rather than giving him more fuel for the fire."¹⁰¹

That same day (May 13), Morse returned to the attack in a speech in the Senate in which repeated many of the arguments he had been making.¹⁰² "South Vietnam," he said, "is the Achilles' heel of this administration. South Vietnam is the Achilles' heel of our whole foreign policy. . . . It is a U.S. puppet, with its government controlled by the United States, taking U.S. orders. It is a U.S. protectorate." "We are trying," he added, "to pick up the failure of Great Britain, France, the Dutch, and every other colonial power in Asia of the last 50 years, and we will end with the same failure. Asia will not be run by white men. . . . In trying to fight on ground and terms alien to the United States, we are needlessly killing Americans for an objective we eventually will have to abandon."

Morse said that "the only answer is to withdraw American military forces from South Vietnam." The U.N., he said, should play a peace-keeping role in South Vietnam, "under some arrangement which for want of a better description I would label a form of United Nations trusteeship, [and] maintain peace in the area until the people there finally develop the ability and the incentive to govern themselves on the basis of exercising their own will as to what form of government they wish."

Morse was congratulated by Senator Olin Johnston, a Southern Democrat (South Carolina) who was a liberal on economic issues but conservative on defense and foreign policy. Johnston said he agreed with Morse's criticism of the U.S. role in Vietnam, and with the suggestion that the matter should be taken to the U.N.

During this time there were also the first signs of antiwar feeling among American college students. The earliest expression of this occurred at Yale University on March 13-15, 1964, when participants in a student conference on socialism, including members of the new-left Students for a Democratic Society, SDS, (formerly the student department of the socialist League for Industrial Democracy), formed an ad hoc May Second Committee (subsequently known as the May 2nd Movement, or M2M) to organize a demonstration against the war in New York City on May 2, 1964. The march, which attracted about 1,000 people, was followed in the fall of 1964 by an M2M petition calling on draft-age college students to pledge that they would not fight in Vietnam. This also attracted only a small number of persons (about 1,000 signatures were collected), but it was, as one author has noted, "the first of the 'We Won't Go' statements and a precursor of the draft-refusal movement of later years."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹Kennedy Library, same location.

¹⁰²CR, vol. 110, pp. 10826 ff.

¹⁰³Kirkpatrick Sale, SDS (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 161.

Students on other campuses were also beginning to express their opposition to the war. On May 20, 1964, a group of students at the University of California (Berkeley), which subsequently became known for extensive antiwar activities, sent a telegram to Senator Gruening asking for the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel from Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ Faculty were also becoming involved. On July 10, 1964, a petition on Vietnam which had been circulated by the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), and signed by more than 5,000 college and university professors (several thousand others were added afterwards), was presented to the Johnson administration. It called on the President not to enlarge the war, and to seek neutralization of the area. One of the signers and presenters was Hans Morgenthau who had been an active member of the American Friends of Vietnam in the 1950s.¹⁰⁵

On the other hand, there continued to be considerable support for U.S. policy in Vietnam from Congress, the press and the public. On May 9, 1964, columnist C. L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times* (and a member of the family that owned the paper), who had numerous contacts among American and other government elites, argued that "a continued policy of neither war nor peace" would lead to the neutralization of Vietnam, which would be a "humiliating sham," a "political repetition of Dienbienphu." "The time for a showdown has come," he said. "We certainly don't want holocaust any more than we wanted holocaust in Cuba 18 months ago. But we cannot afford a self-defeating strategy. . . . So long as we permit the Communists to fight according to their own rules, to train and equip guerrillas in a northern safe-haven and then send them south, we cannot crush them. Our only hope of military triumph and positive political settlement would be to destroy their aggressive base. We should never contemplate invading North Vietnam. But it is time to announce that if aggression is not stopped, we will pulverize its bases and communications."¹⁰⁶

Laos Flares Up Again, and Planning for U.S. Action in Vietnam Intensifies

In mid-May 1964, at about the time McNamara and his party returned from Vietnam, the Communists staged an offensive in Laos, (after a dispute within the coalition government and the arrest of Souvanna Phouma by the rightists), that produced great concern in Washington.¹⁰⁷ The JCS called for more intensive covert operations in the upcoming second quarter of 34-A, and urged that these plans be worked out as quickly as possible with South Vietnam. The Chiefs also advocated airstrikes against Laos and North Vietnam, and outlined the projected timetable and results of graduated operations, ranging from those conducted by the Vietnamese alone to those in which U.S. forces in the Pacific would play a major role.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴CR, vol. 110, pp. 11754-11755.

¹⁰⁵New York Times, July 11, 1964.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., May 9, 1964.

¹⁰⁷For a description of these events see Dommen, *Conflict in Laos*, pp. 261 ff.

¹⁰⁸For the JCS proposals, see PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 165-166.

On May 21, a little noted but important decision was made to begin the first direct, overt U.S. military action in Indochina. With the consent of Souvanna Phouma, the U.S. began reconnaissance flights over enemy-occupied territory in Laos.¹⁰⁹ In addition, a U.S. troop alert was ordered in Okinawa, and the Seventh Fleet was readied for action. U.S. planes began ferrying Laotian troops, and U.S. personnel flew combat missions in planes of the Laotian air force.¹¹⁰

That same day, Mansfield endorsed a proposal made the day before by President de Gaulle to reconvene the Geneva Conference on Laos. Not only was it in the interest of the United States to avoid military involvement in Laos, Mansfield said, but there was also "little likelihood that the situation in Vietnam can be improved without an understanding in Laos along the lines which General de Gaulle is apparently hopeful of achieving. . . . we must continue our economic and military assistance to Vietnam, but we should also consider most carefully the conference proposed by President de Gaulle. It may well be the last train out for peace in southeast Asia."¹¹¹

On May 20, as a result of the events in Laos, and growing problems in Vietnam, the President directed his advisers to prepare two basic plans for action in Vietnam, one political and the other military, for his consideration. He may also have been prompted to do so by the advice of Dean Acheson, with whom he had maintained a close relationship for many years, which was reported to him on May 19 in a memorandum from one of his assistants, Douglass Cater. Cater said he had talked to Acheson the night before, and that "He is greatly concerned that situation in Viet Nam will soon enter phase when new initiatives become impossible because of convention and campaign period here at home. He urged that any assessment of stepping up involvement in Indo-China take into account that we must act quickly or be prepared to stall for a while."¹¹²

On May 21, Rusk sent Lodge an "eyes only" cable expressing his concern about the failure of the South Vietnamese to create a greater sense of solidarity against the Communists, all well as more effective actions by the government to increase public confidence and support. It is worth quoting in full:¹¹³

1. Situation in Southeast Asia is clearly moving toward basic decisions both in the Free World and in the communist world. The present activity with regard to Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam illustrates that the central issue of pressures from the communist North will have to be faced not just by us but by other allies.

2. [words deleted] The Geneva Accords of 1962 are very specific and have been grossly violated by the continued presence of Viet Minh in Laos and the persistent use of Laos for infiltration of South Viet Nam. We intend to press very hard for the

¹⁰⁹This may have been the subject of one of the two NSAMs issued on May 19, 1964, but even the titles of these are still classified.

¹¹⁰Stevenson, *The End of Nowhere*, pp. 201-202.

¹¹¹CR, vol. 110, p. 11562.

¹¹²Johnson Library, NSF Name File, Cater Memo.

¹¹³Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Washington to Saigon 2027, May 21, 1964.

full and complete implementation of those Accords on the basis of an international and legal position which is very strong indeed.

3. At a time when we and other governments are facing decisions on further military action in Southeast Asia, including the possibility of actions against North Viet Nam, the fragility of the present situation in South Viet Nam is very much on our minds. On the basis of my talks with Congressional leaders and committees and a sensing of public concern about Southeast Asia, I am convinced that the American people will do what has to be done if there is something to support. The prospect that we might strike the North, with all of the attendant risks, only to lose the south is most uninviting.

4. We need your judgment as to what more can be done to achieve both the reality and appearance of greater solidarity in South Viet Nam and to improve the actual administrative performance of the government itself in grappling with its awesome problems.

5. When I was in Saigon, we talked about whether the non-governmental community could be stimulated to demonstrate solidarity with the fight against the Viet Cong. Recent reports of new religious crises, grumblings among senior officials of government, delays in administration action to get on with the most elementary tasks of government are all disconcerting. From this end we are prepared to furnish men, material, funds on whatever scale is required to defeat the Viet Cong. But I feel the need to assure the President that everything humanly possible is being done both in Washington and by the Government of Viet Nam to provide a solid base of determination from which far-reaching decisions could proceed. I would greatly appreciate, therefore, your comments on such questions as the following, plus any others along the same lines which might occur to you.

(a) Is there any way in which we can shake the main body of leadership by the scruff of the neck and insist that they put aside all bickering and lesser differences in order to concentrate upon the defeat of the Viet Cong?

(b) Can we find some way to get the leaders of the religious communities to declare a moratorium on their differences until the anti-religious communist threat has been thrown back?

(c) How can we provide personnel experienced and trained in military government to work along side Viet Namese counterparts in order to galvanize the machinery of Government?

(d) Can we find some way by which General Khanh can convince larger segments of the people that they have a stake in the success of his leadership against the Viet Cong?

(e) Can we devise further incentives to enlist the full cooperations of ordinary people both in the cities and in the countryside to pursue the struggle as one in which they are personally involved?

6. Everyone here in Washington is deeply impressed by the magnitude and difficulty of the problems faced by General Khanh, yourself and General Harkins but, in the face of a prospect of a deepening crisis and the possible necessity for asking the American people to accept larger sacrifices and grave risks, we want to be sure that nothing is left undone which could be done to strengthen the position of South Viet Nam itself.

I find it hard to believe, for example, that General Khanh and General Minh cannot find a basis to work together as patriotic Viet Namese even though it may require General Khanh to take some chances on working with some of those he displaced when he assumed power. I do not understand why so much delay in strengthening the puny diplomatic effort of Viet Nam abroad. I can't see why we are just now able to approve a January budget. I can't see why materials in warehouses and pipelines cannot be moved promptly to the countryside to achieve the purpose from which such materials are being supplied. Surely administration can go on a war footing and French techniques of triple entry bureaucracy can be set aside in order to get prompt action. Having served in India, Burma and China during World War II I have had considerable personal experience with how deliberate all deliberate speed can be in that part of the world, but somehow we must change the pace at which these people move and I suspect that this can only be done with a pervasive intrusion of Americans into their affairs. I would deeply appreciate it if you would give me your best judgment as to how we on the American side can further stimulate Viet Namese solidarity and effort. In other words, what more can we do to make it quite clear to the American people that if a great deal more is required of them there is something solid to support and that what we may ask of them has point and the prospect of success.

On May 22, McGeorge Bundy reported to the President that four groups were working on the plans which were requested by the President on May 20.¹¹⁴ One group under McNaughton was working on the military plan, the "theory" of which was "that we should strike to hurt but not to destroy, and strike for the purpose of changing the North Vietnamese decision on intervention in the south." The second group, under William Sullivan, was working on "marrying Americans to Vietnamese at every level, both civilian and military." "The object of this exercise is to provide what Khanh has repeatedly asked for: the tall American at every point of stress and strain." The third group, under Chester Cooper, was analyzing enemy reactions to possible U.S. moves. The fourth group, under George Ball, was "drafting alternative forms of a Congressional resolution so as to give you a full range of choice with respect to the way in which you would seek Congressional validation of wider action. (emphasis added) The preliminary consensus is that such a resolution is essential before we act against North Viet-

¹¹⁴Johnson Library, NSF Aides File, McGeorge Bundy Memos for the President.

nam, but that it should be sufficiently general in form not to commit you to any particular action ahead of time."

On May 23, the McNaughton group completed a new "scenario" for pressure against North Vietnam. Unlike previous scenarios, this one did not provide for intermediate "deniable" steps involving substantial attacks that would not be acknowledged. In a cable to Lodge on May 22, Rusk explained that it had been concluded that such operations could not be successfully concealed.¹¹⁵ Lodge replied that firm action against the North by South Vietnam and the U.S. was the only way to achieve a significant improvement in South Vietnam's self-defense.¹¹⁶

The May 23 "Scenario for Strikes on North Vietnam" was based on the assumption that, as the memo stated, "additional efforts within South Vietnam by the U.S. will not prevent further deterioration there." This is the text of the proposed scenario for the 30-day period, D-30 to D-Day:¹¹⁷

1. Stall off any "conference on [Laos or] Vietnam until D-Day."
2. Intermediary (Canadian?) tell North Vietnam in general terms that U.S. does not want to destroy the North Vietnam regime (and indeed is willing "to provide a carrot"), but is determined to protect South Vietnam from North Vietnam.
3. (D-30) Presidential speech in general terms launching Joint Resolution.
4. (D-20) Obtain Joint Resolution approving past actions and authorizing whatever is necessary with respect to Vietnam.
5. (D-16) Direct CINCPAC to take all prepositioning and logistic actions that can be taken "quietly" for the D-Day forces and the forces described in Paragraph 17 below.
6. (D-15) Get Khanh's agreement to start overt South Vietnamese air attacks against targets in the North (see D-Day item 15 below), and inform him of U.S. guarantee to protect South Vietnam in the event of North Vietnamese and/or Chinese retaliation.
7. (D-14) Consult with Thailand and the Philippines to get permission for U.S. deployments; and consult with them plus U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Pakistan, asking for their open political support for the undertaking and for their participation in the re-enforcing action to be undertaken in anticipation of North Vietnamese and/or Chinese retaliation.
8. (D-13) Release an expanded "Jordan [sic] Report," including recent photography and evidence of the communications

¹¹⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, pp. 166-167. In another cable he asked Lodge to redouble his efforts to achieve greater solidarity in South Vietnam. "We need to assure the President that everything humanly possible is being done both in Washington and by the government of Vietnam to provide a solid base of determination from which far-reaching decisions could proceed."

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 166.

¹¹⁷Ibid., pp. 167-168.

nets, giving full documentation of North Vietnamese supply and direction of the Viet Cong.

9. (D-12) Direct CINCPAC to begin moving forces and making specific plans on the assumption that strikes will be made on D-Day. . . .

10. (D-10) Khanh makes speech demanding that North Vietnam stop aggression, threatening unspecified military action if he does not. (He could refer to a "carrot.")

11. (D-3) Discussions with Allies not covered in Item 7 above.

12. (D-3) President informs U.S. public (and thereby North Vietnam) that action may come, referring to Khanh speech (Item 10 above) and declaring support for South Vietnam.

13. (D-1) Khanh announces that all efforts have failed and that attacks are imminent. (Again he refers to limited goal and possibly to "carrot.")

14. (D-Day) Remove U.S. dependents.

15. (D-Day) Launch first strikes. . . . Initially, mine their ports and strike North Vietnam's transport and related ability (bridges, trains) to move South; and then against targets which have maximum psychological effect on the North's willingness to stop insurgency—POL storage, selected airfields, barracks/training areas, bridges, railroad yards, port facilities, communications, and industries. Initially, these strikes would be by South Vietnamese aircraft; they could then be expanded by adding FARMGATE, or U.S. aircraft, or any combination of them.

16. (D-Day) Call for conference on Vietnam (and go to UN). State the limited objective: Not to overthrow the North Vietnam regime nor to destroy the country, but to stop DRV-directed Viet Cong terrorism and resistance to pacification efforts in the South. Essential that it be made clear that attacks on the North will continue (*i.e.*, no cease-fire) until (a) terrorism, armed attacks, and armed resistance to pacification efforts in the South stop, and (b) communications on the networks out of the North are conducted entirely in uncoded form."

On May 24 and 25 the principal members (called the Executive Committee, or ExCom) of the NSC considered the scenario, and on May 25 a memorandum from them, "Basic Recommendations and Projected Course of Action on Southeast Asia," was signed and sent to the President by McGeorge Bundy.

These were its recommendations:¹¹⁸

1. It is recommended that you make a Presidential decision that the U.S. will use selected and carefully graduated military force against North Vietnam, under the following conditions: (after appropriate diplomatic and political warning and preparation, (2) and unless such warning and preparations—in combination with other efforts—should produce a sufficient improvement of non-Communist prospects in South Vietnam and in Laos to make military actions against North Vietnam unnecessary.

2. This basic Presidential decision is recommended on these premises:

(1) that the U.S. cannot tolerate the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism;

(2) that without a decision to resort to military action if necessary, the present prospect is not hopeful, in South Vietnam or in Laos.

(3) that a decision to use force if necessary, backed by resolute and extensive deployment, and conveyed by every possible means to our adversaries, gives the best present chance of avoiding the actual use of such force.

The memorandum added, however, "It is further recommended that our clear purpose in this decision should be to use all our influence to bring about a major reduction or elimination of North Vietnamese interference in Laos and in South Vietnam, and *not* to unroll a scenario aimed at the use of force as an end in itself."

In making these recommendations, the memorandum stated:

It is the hope and best estimate of most of your advisers that a decision of this kind can be executed without bringing a major military reply from Red China, and still less from the Soviet Union. It is also the prevailing estimate that selective and carefully prepared military action against North Vietnam will not trigger acts of terror and military operations by the Viet Cong which would engulf the Khanh regime. *Nevertheless, it is recognized that in making this decision we must accept two risks:* (1) the risk of escalation toward major land war or the use of nuclear weapons; (2) the risk of a reply in South Vietnam itself which would lose that country to neutralism and so eventually to Communism." (emphasis in original)

The memorandum recommended the following course of action, to be taken in the sequence given:

(1) A Presidential decision. . . .

(2) *The establishment of communication with Hanoi (through the Canadians) and with other adversaries of major importance (USSR, France, [sic] Red China).*

The purpose of these communications would be to make very clear both the seriousness of U.S. will and the limited character of U.S. objectives. We intend that Communism shall not take over Southeast Asia, but we do not intend or desire the destruction of the Hanoi regime. If terror and subversion end, major improvement in relations is possible. It is only if they do not end that trouble is coming.

(3) *A Honolulu conference and discussion with Thailand.*

This meeting, which might occur early next week, would be directed to the establishment of full understanding with Ambassador Lodge and MACV, and to possible intense consultations with Ambassador Unger and Ambassador Martin from Thailand. At the same time, or just after, we would communicate our basic determination and our opening strategy to the governments of Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam. This Honolulu meeting would imply major decisions also to intensify our efforts in South Vietnam (along lines to be presented in a separate paper).

¹¹⁸Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

(4) *Action at the UN.*

This would probably take a double form:

(a) *in the broadest terms*, we would present the problem of Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, together with much hitherto secret evidence proving Hanoi's responsibility;

(b) *in parliamentary terms*, we would probably ask a resolution confined to the Pathet Lao aggression in Laos. It is the current estimate of our UN experts that on a wider resolution involving South Vietnam we might not have the necessary seven votes for affirmative action. The one thing we do not want is to take our basic political case to the UN and fail to muster a majority.

The basic object of this exercise would be a double one:

(a) to give worldwide publicity to the basic problem through the voice of Stevenson, and

(b) to make it perfectly plain if we move to further action that we had done our best at the UN.

(5) *A formal announcement by us and by our friends that the requirements of the UN resolution (whether or not it was vetoed) are not being met.*

The purpose of this step is to clarify again that we have tried the UN and that it is not our fault that there has been an inadequate response.

(6) *Consultation of SEATO allies.*

We believe this should take place both by a meeting of the SEATO Council in Bangkok and by more intense consultations in the capitals of the more energetic members of SEATO, notably Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, The Philippines, and Thailand. We do not expect Pak or French support. The object would be to obtain basic agreement on the next steps toward action and commitment of forces at as high a level as possible.

(7) *The first deployments toward Southeast Asia of U.S. and, hopefully, allied forces.*

It is our recommendation that these deployments be on a very large scale, from the beginning, so as to maximize their deterrent impact and their menace. We repeat our view that a pound of threat is worth an ounce of action—as long as we are not bluffing.

(8) *A Congressional Resolution.*¹¹⁹

We agree that no such resolution should be sought until Civil Rights is off the Senate calendar, and we believe that the preceding stages can be conducted in such a way as to leave a free choice on the timing of such a resolution. Some of us recommend that we aim at presenting and passing the resolution between the passage of Civil Rights and the convening of the Republican Convention. Others believe that delay may be to our advantage and that we could as well handle the matter later in the summer, in spite of domestic politics.

¹¹⁹For the text of the draft congressional resolution proposed on May 25, see PP, DOD ed., book 4, IV. C. 2., following p. 42.

(9) *A further and expanded deployment of military force toward the theater.*

The object of this continuing deployment, after the passage of the resolution, is to give still more time for threat to do the work of action.

(10) *Initial strike against the north.*

This would be very carefully designed to have more deterrent than destructive impact, as far as possible. This action would be accompanied by the simultaneous withdrawal of U.S. dependents from south Vietnam and by active diplomatic offensives in the Security Council, or in a Geneva Conference, or both, aimed at restoring the peace throughout the area. This peace-keeping theme will have been at the center of the whole enterprise from the beginning.

There is no declassified record of the actions President Johnson took on these proposals, but he did approve the recommendation for a meeting of high-level U.S. officials to give further consideration to the situation, and this was hastily convened in Honolulu on June 1-3, 1964.

Meanwhile, Sullivan's Vietnam Coordinating Committee had completed its report on having "Americans assume de facto command of GVN's machinery." Americans, Sullivan said, should be "integrated into the Vietnamese chain of command, both military and civil," at all levels of government. "For cosmetic purposes," however, he said, "American personnel would not assume titles which would show command functions, but would rather be listed as 'assistants' to the Vietnamese principals. . . ."¹²⁰

It is not clear in what form the Sullivan proposals were presented to the President, but they were discussed—and dismissed—at the Honolulu Conference. (When the cable describing the agenda for that meeting was sent to Lodge, it stated that although U.S. personnel would be listed as "assistants" to the Vietnamese, "In practice . . . we would expect them to carry a major share of the burden of decision and action. . . .")¹²¹

On May 30, Rusk, who had attended the funeral of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India, and was en route to the Honolulu Conference, stopped by Saigon to see Khanh. He pointed out to Khanh, as stated in the cable to Washington summarizing the meeting,¹²² that, ". . . one of main problems President faces is justifying to American people whatever course of action may be necessary or indicated as matter of internal solidarity of SVN. Secretary noted that if struggle escalates, only U.S. will have the forces to cope with it. This basic reality means President has heavy responsibility of making vital decisions and leading American public opinion to accept them. Difficult to do this if SVN appears hopelessly divided and rent by internal quarrels." Khanh, in turn, stressed the need for acting against the Communists in eastern Laos and

¹¹⁹On May 27, a meeting of McGeorge Bundy, McNaughton, and General Goodpaster was held to discuss Sullivan's proposals, as slightly revised by Mendenhall in the interim. At this meeting the proposals presumably were endorsed, but there is no declassified record of that discussion. See PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 319-320. For a summary of the Mendenhall paper see *ibid.*, vol. III, p. 74.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 73.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 320-322.

North Vietnam, and wanted to know what U.S. intentions were with respect to widening the war. Rusk replied that he did not know, but that the matter would be considered in Honolulu, and that the President would have to decide.

In his discussion with Khanh, Rusk emphasized the following points:

A. Since 1945 U.S. had taken 165,000 casualties in defense of free world against Communist encroachments, and most of these casualties were in Asia.

B. U.S. would never again get involved in a land war in Asia limited to conventional forces. Our population was 190,000,000. Mainland China had at least 700,000,000. We would not allow ourselves to be bled white fighting them with conventional weapons.

C. This meant that if escalation brought about major Chinese attack, it would also involve use of nuclear arms. Many free world leaders would oppose this. Chiang Kai-Shek had told him fervently he did, and so did U Thant. Many Asians seemed to see an element of racial discrimination in use of nuclear arms; something we would do to Asians but not to Westerners. Khanh replied he certainly had no quarrel with American use of nuclear arms, noted that decisive use of Atomic bombs on Japan had in ending war saved not only American but also Japanese lives. One must use the force one had; if Chinese used masses of Humanity, we would use superior fire power.

D. Regardless what decisions were reached at Honolulu, their implementation would require positioning of our forces. This would take time. Khanh must remember we had other responsibilities in Asia and must be able react anywhere we had forces or commitments. Not by chance was this Conference being held at Honolulu; the combined headquarters of all American forces in Pacific was there.

On May 28, General LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, and its representative on the JCS, who, in Taylor's absence, was acting chairman of the JCS at the time, advised the other chiefs that the U.S. was "losing Asia fast." At the Honolulu meeting, he said, the JCS should present a plan by which the U.S. and the South Vietnamese could "start winning." The only way to prevent North Vietnam's support of Communist activity in Laos and South Vietnam, he said, was to destroy their ability to do so. He proposed air attacks on infiltration points at Dien Bien Phu and Vinh. The other Chiefs agreed, and the JCS notified McNamara of this position. When Taylor returned to Washington, he told McNamara that he agreed with the need to put additional pressure on the north, but preferred more limited action against targets that were less risky than Dien Bien Phu and Vinh.¹²³ Taylor said that there were three main alternatives:¹²⁴

a. A massive air attack on all significant military targets in North Vietnam for the purpose of destroying them and thereby making the enemy incapable of continuing to assist the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao.

¹²³Futrell, *The Advisory Years to 1965*, p. 205.

¹²⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 179.

b. A lesser attack on some significant part of the military target system in North Vietnam for the dual purpose of convincing the enemy that it is to his interest to desist from aiding the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao, and, if possible, of obtaining his cooperation in calling off the insurgents in South Vietnam and Laos.

c. Demonstrative strikes against limited military targets to show U.S. readiness and intent to pass to alternative b or a above. These demonstrative strikes would have the same dual purpose as in alternative b.

Taylor said he preferred the second alternative, but that "political considerations will incline our responsible civilian officials" to opt for the third. In a memo to Taylor on June 10, McNamara agreed.

The Honolulu Conference, June 1-3, 1964

At the Honolulu Conference, attended by all top U.S. officials from Washington and Saigon, the principal subjects of discussion were how best to apply pressure to North Vietnam, what to do in Laos if diplomatic efforts failed and the military situation worsened, how South Vietnam could be strengthened, and how to prepare the U.S. public for an expanded war. "Our point of departure," according to the State Department guidance cable, "is and must be that we cannot accept overrunning of Southeast Asia by Hanoi and Peiping."¹²⁵ In the same cable the State Department said that the President was consulting closely with congressional leaders, and that he "will wish Congress associated with him on any steps which carry with them substantial acts and risks of escalation."

At the Conference, Lodge argued for attacking the north in order to help the south. ". . . if we bombed Tchepone [on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in eastern Laos] or attacked the [North Vietnamese torpedo] boats," he said (emphasis added), this would produce greater unity in the South.¹²⁶ The general consensus of those at the Conference, however, was that attacks on the north or on Laos were not required at that time (the JCS disagreed), and that plans for such action needed to be prepared more carefully. U.S. public opinion would also have to be prepared for expansion of the war. (McNamara said it would take at least 30 days to prepare the public.) Moreover, it was felt that the Khanh government would not be strong enough to participate in such a war until the end of the year. These factors suggested that major military action against the north should be delayed until the necessary preparations could be made. Rusk took the position that the U.S. "should not be considering quick action unless the Pathet Lao lunged toward the Mekong."

The question of possible Chinese intervention was considered, and General Taylor said the assumption in Washington was that it was unlikely the Chinese would intervene in force. If they did, it would take five to seven divisions, mostly U.S., to stop them.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹²⁶This and other references to the Conference are from *ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 823-825, and vol. III, pp. 171-176.

The use of nuclear weapons was raised by McNamara. "Admiral [Harry D.] Felt [CINCPAC] responded emphatically that there was no possible way to hold off the communists on the ground without the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and that it was essential that the commanders be given the freedom to use these as had been assumed under the various plans. He said that without nuclear weapons the ground force requirement was and had always been completely out of reach." General Taylor, however, was more doubtful about the need for nuclear weapons. Rusk "said that another possibility we must consider would be the Soviets stirring up trouble elsewhere. We should do everything we could to minimize this risk, but it too must be considered. He went on to stress the nuclear question, noting that in the last ten years this had come to include the possibility of a nuclear exchange, with all that this involved." General Taylor's response was, "there was a danger of reasoning ourselves into inaction. From a military point of view . . . the U.S. could function in Southeast Asia about as well as anywhere in the world except Cuba."¹²⁷

Concerning the strengthening of South Vietnam, both Lodge and Gen. William Westmoreland (who had replaced Harkins) objected to Sullivan's plan, which Taylor said was favored by the President,¹²⁸ for *encadrement* of American personnel. They thought it would create an anticolonialist reaction, and could lead to even greater dependence on the United States.

Westmoreland proposed increasing U.S. civilian and military personnel in eight critical provinces, and this was accepted by the conferees in lieu of the Sullivan proposal. (Westmoreland also agreed with Lodge about the need for military action, such as airstrikes in eastern Laos, to galvanize the South Vietnamese.)

About 3 weeks later, on June 25, 1964, Westmoreland asked for 900 additional U.S. military advisers. By mid-July he asked for another 4,200 U.S. military personnel. McNamara's only objection was to Westmoreland's schedule; he thought that all of the additional advisers should be sent to Vietnam by the end of September. (None was sent until after the Presidential election.)¹²⁹

Considerable attention was given at the Honolulu Conference to the question of influencing U.S. public opinion, and to the desirability of a congressional resolution. According to the *Pentagon Papers*,¹³⁰ "The conference concluded that the crucial actions for the immediate future were (1) to prosecute an urgent information effort in the United States toward dispelling the basic doubts of the value of Southeast Asia which were besetting key members of Congress and the public in the budding 'great debate,' and (2) to start diplomatic efforts with the Thais, Australians, New Zealanders, Philippines, and the French on matters within their cognizance which impinged on our effort in South Vietnam."

Concerning the congressional resolution, the text of which was read to the group by Sullivan, Lodge said he did not think it would be required if the U.S. were to engage only in tit-for-tat reprisal

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 175.

¹²⁸*Swords and Plowshares*, p. 313.

¹²⁹*PP*, Gravel ed., vol. II, pp. 468-470.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 325.

bombing. Rusk, McNamara and McCone, however, argued for a resolution. Rusk said that some of the military requirements might require calling up the reserves, which was a sensitive political issue. "He also stated," according to the *Pentagon Papers*,¹³¹ "that public opinion on our Southeast Asia policy was badly divided in the United States at the moment and that, therefore, the President needed an affirmation of support." McNamara pointed out that such action by Congress would be desirable in view of the possibility that as many as seven divisions might have to be deployed to protect South Vietnam against possible action by China. McCone said that passage of a resolution should act as a deterrent to North Vietnam and China.

The Honolulu Conference ended on June 3, 1964 with agreement on three points: first, that the U.S. advisory effort would be expanded in key provinces; second, that plans for pressures on North Vietnam would be refined, and, meanwhile, that stronger military action would be delayed; third, that a campaign would be launched to influence U.S. public opinion and to secure the support of allied countries. Rusk subsequently cabled Saigon this list of expanded actions in the provinces that had been agreed upon at the Conference:¹³²

- (1) Move in additional VN troops to assure numerical superiority over VC.
- (2) Assign control of all troops in province to province chief.
- (3) Develop and execute detailed hamlet by hamlet "oil spot" and "clear and hold" operations plans for each of the approximate 40 districts.
- (4) Introduce a system of population control (curfews, ID papers, intelligence network).
- (5) Increase the province police force.
- (6) Expand the information program.
- (7) Develop a special economic aid program for each province.
- (8) Add additional U.S. personnel
 - 320 military province and district advisors
 - 40 USOF province and district advisors
 - 74 battalion advisors (2 from each of 37 battalions)

434

- (9) Transfer military personnel to fill existing and future USOM shortages.
- (10) Establish joint US/GVN teams to monitor the program at both national and provincial level.

On June 3, Rusk, McNamara, McCone and others met with the President to report on the Conference. There is no declassified document on this meeting, but the *Pentagon Papers* states¹³³ that a memo from William Bundy to Rusk may indicate what the President was told:

Citing a "somewhat less pessimistic estimate" of conditions in South Vietnam, the "somewhat shaky" but hopeful situa-

¹³¹*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 174.

¹³²*Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 325.

¹³³*Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 176.

tion in Laos, and the military timing factors reported above, Bundy counseled taking more time "to refine our plans and estimates." Criticizing CINCPAC's presentation on military planning, he stated that it "served largely to highlight some of the difficult issues we still have." These he identified as: "(1) the likely effects of force requirements for any significant operations against the [Laotian] Panhandle"; (2) the trade-off between the precautionary advantages of a major build-up of forces prior to wider action and the possible disadvantages of distorting the signal of our limited objectives; (3) the sensitivity of estimates of communist reactions to different levels and tempos of a military build-up; and (4) the need for "more refined targeting and a clearer definition of just what should be hit and how thoroughly, and above all, for what objective."

In particular, Bundy emphasized to Secretary Rusk the need for immediate efforts in the information and intelligence areas. These were needed, he said, "both for the sake of refining our plans and for preparing materials to use for eventual support of wider action if decided upon"—particularly to support the diplomatic track in Laos. He called for "an urgent U.S. information effort" to "get at the basic doubts of the value of Southeast Asia and the importance of our stake there . . ." However, noting the problem of "handling the high degree of expectations flowing from the conference itself," Bundy recommended "careful guidance and consideration of high-level statements and speeches in the next two weeks" to assure that our posture appeared firm.

According to William Bundy, the President accepted the Honolulu recommendations "without hesitation."¹³⁴

On June 4, Lodge met with Khanh to tell him about the Conference, and "the main thrust of his talk with Khanh was to hint that the USG would in the immediate future be preparing U.S. public opinion for actions against North Vietnam."¹³⁵

A few weeks later, President Johnson approved some increases in the U.S. advisory effort, and apparently gave McNamara and the military clearance to study further the question of applying pressure on North Vietnam, as well as permission to prepare logically for the introduction of U.S. ground forces into Indochina.

During this period (the end of May and the first part of June 1964) congressional Republicans, especially in the House, prompted in part by a request on May 18 for \$125 million in additional funds for the U.S. program, became more vocal in their criticism of the administration's management of the war in Vietnam. They said it was a "no-win" policy, and that the U.S. should decide to win, or get out.¹³⁶ William S. Broomfield (R/Mich.), a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, introduced a resolution¹³⁷ on May 21 calling on the President to use every means to support South Vietnam and to prevent infiltration from outside its borders, and to reassert U.S. determination to defend South Vietnam and

Southeast Asia. "There should remain," the resolution concluded, "not the slightest doubt as to the determination of the United States Government to pursue this course of action, and to fully inform the American people of what will be necessary to defend freedom in South Vietnam and in southeast Asia."¹³⁸

Republican Senator Aiken of Vermont, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, was opposed, however, both to military escalation and to precipitate withdrawal, and said that the U.S. should maintain a "stalemate with the rebels for the time being if that is the best we can do." He favored efforts to achieve a political settlement, but also said he would support the stationing of some U.S. forces in Thailand "for defensive purposes if the government of that country requests it and if the government and the people of Thailand are willing to defend their own country with full force, and if such action is not a prelude to a wide expansion of the war."¹³⁹

On May 26, Senate Republican leader Dirksen declared that the administration's "indecision" on Vietnam was "dribbling away both American lives and American prestige in Southeast Asia." President Johnson responded that same day by asking Dirksen and eight other Republican Senators to a meeting at the White House to discuss the situation in Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁰

On June 2, partisan feuding became a bit more intense when Melvin R. Laird (R/Wis.) complained in a speech in the House that the President was not being "completely forthright" in a statement in his press conference that morning about U.S. contingency plans for attacking North Vietnam.¹⁴¹ Laird said that in his work as chairman of the Republican platform committee for the 1964 Republican national convention he had been informed by Secretary of State Rusk that the U.S. was preparing contingency plans for Vietnam, including "the preparation of plans to go north into North Vietnam. . . ." He added that he had used this information, which was not classified, in a radio interview the previous Sunday. Yet, Laird said, the President had stated in his press conference, "I know of no plans being made to that effect."¹⁴² "I regret that the President of the United States used his news conference in this way," Laird continued, "because the American people deserve to be informed and have the right to know." This comment was immediately reported by one of the wire services, as follows: "Representative Melvin R. Laird, Republican, of Wisconsin, today charged that President Johnson deliberately misled the American people in stating that there were not plans to take the war in Vietnam to the Communist north."¹⁴³ This wire service story appeared on the

¹³⁴Bundy MS., ch. 13, p. 21.
¹³⁵PP, Gravel ed., vol. II, p. 325.
¹³⁶See CR, vol. 110, pp. 11116, 11397-98, 11402-03, 11451.
¹³⁷H.J. Res. 1084, 88th Cong.

¹³⁸For Broomfield's discussion of the need for Congress to express its commitment to defending Vietnam and Southeast Asia see CR, vol. 110, pp. 13249-13251. Broomfield and many other congressional Republicans also took the position that the U.S. program in Vietnam should be better funded, and they succeeded in amending the 1964 foreign aid authorization bill to earmark \$200 million in military support (supporting assistance) funds for use only in Vietnam unless the President decided otherwise and reported his decision to Congress. See Public Law 88-633, sec. 107. The President's request for an additional \$125 million for Vietnam was passed by Congress without significant opposition or debate.

¹³⁹CR, vol. 110, p. 12373.

¹⁴⁰New York Times, May 27, 1964.

¹⁴¹CR, vol. 110, p. 12460.

¹⁴²See Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1964, p. 739.

¹⁴³CR, vol. 110, p. 12476.

press ticker in the House lobby (adjacent to the Chamber), and a few minutes later senior Democrats on the Defense Appropriation Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, on which Laird served, accused Laird of misleading the public, and implied that he had used secret information on such contingency plans given to the subcommittee by McNamara a short time earlier. Laird stood his ground, repeating his statements he had been given the information from the Department of State, and that the President was not being forthright.¹⁴⁴

Republican Representative Eugene Siler, from a rural district in Kentucky, marched to a different drummer. On June 8, 1964, he said in a speech in the House:¹⁴⁵

... I rise to announce my candidacy for President of the United States.

I am running with the understanding that I will resign after 24 hours in the White House and let my Vice President take over the duties thereafter. Accordingly, I want an able and sufficient Vice President to run with me and then succeed me after that first day.

What I propose to do in my 1 day as President is to call home our 15,000 troops in South Vietnam and cancel our part of that ill fated, unnecessary, and un-American campaign in southeast Asia. . . .

Despite these few protests from Congress, general congressional opinion, as summarized on June 2, 1964, by Frederick Dutton, the head of the State Department's office of congressional relations, was "cautious or noncommittal." "Even most of those supporting the Administration's present course are often wary about it," he said, adding, "Actually the level of interest in Southeast Asia is not at all high, which suggests to me not merely political caution in an election year but low understanding or care about the problem. I suspect the overwhelming majority of Congress would support a Presidential initiative—but would also still try to keep sufficiently remote to be able to second-guess it if things went bad or were prolonged."¹⁴⁶

Preparing a Congressional Resolution

After the Honolulu Conference, planning continued for a congressional resolution, and between June 8 and 15, 1964, several interdepartmental meetings were held on the subject. For the meeting on June 10, William Bundy prepared a discussion paper, "Alternative Public Positions for U.S. on Southeast Asia for the Period July 1-November 15."¹⁴⁷ (Note the post-Presidential election date of November 15.) "It is agreed," the paper said, "that the U.S. will wish to make its position on Southeast Asia as clear and strong as possible in the next five months. The immediate watershed decision is whether or not the Administration should seek a Congressional resolution giving general authority for action which

the President may judge necessary to defend the peace and security of the area."

According to Bundy's paper, the "scenario" for a congressional resolution would entail, first, "to prepare the case in favor." There would then have to be a ". . . major public campaign by the Administration. A very important element in such a campaign would be early and outspoken support by leading members of Congress." The resolution would be preceded by a Presidential message. The resolution would not be sent to Congress, however, ". . . unless careful Congressional soundings indicate rapid passage by a very substantial majority."

In preparing the case for the resolution certain questions would arise, one of which would be, "Does this resolution imply a blank check for the President to go to war over Southeast Asia?" The proposed answer was as follows:

The resolution will indeed permit selective use of force, but hostilities on a larger scale are not envisaged, and in any case any large escalation would require a call-up of Reserves and thus a further appeal to the Congress. More broadly, there is no intent to usurp the powers of the Congress, but rather a need for confirmation of the powers of the President as Commander in Chief in an election year. The basic precedents are the Formosa Resolution, the Middle East Resolution, and, in a sense, the [Arthur H.] Vandenberg Resolution.

A decision to seek a congressional resolution, the paper stated, would not be "a small undertaking," and such a move would have "heavy implications." "A strong campaign in defense of this resolution will require a substantial increase in the commitment of U.S. prestige and power to success in Southeast Asia."

The advantages and disadvantages of seeking a resolution at that time were summarized as follows:

The great advantages of an early Congressional resolution are international. It would give additional freedom to the Administration in choosing courses of action; still more important, it would give a signal of this new freedom of action and firmness of purpose in a number of important capitals, the most important of which are in Southeast Asia, on both sides of the line.

If we do not seek a Congressional Resolution, the international disadvantages are obvious, in that we may seem to have a relative lack of freedom of action and will not have built the major new base of commitment and of authority which in the best of cases such a resolution, with its attendant debate, might provide. On the other hand, if we do not have a resolution, we do not have the risks of a contest at home, nor do we pin ourselves to a level of concern and public notice which might be embarrassing if in fact we do not find it wise to take drastic action in the months immediately ahead. Thus we need to consider how much our course of action may be limited if we do not seek a Congressional Resolution.

First, it should be recognized that there are alternative forms of bipartisan support for action: consultation with Eisenhower and the Republican candidate; discussion with bipartisan leadership of Congress; direct Presidential appeal to the

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 12475-12477.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 12889-12890.

¹⁴⁶"Loose Congressional Breakdown on Southeast Asia Situation," June 2, 1964, sent by Dutton to McGeorge Bundy on that date. Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

¹⁴⁷Johnson Library, NSC History File, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks.

people; ample, if not always encouraging, precedent for Presidential action, as in Korea.

Second, there is a wide range of actions which are plainly permissible without a resolution. These include direct military action by South Vietnamese forces, and very substantial deployments of U. S. air, sea and ground forces. Within the framework of SEATO, and in defense of the agreements of 1962, we can plausibly move troops even into Vietnam, Thailand and Laos itself if the appropriate governments request it. Short of direct U. S. military action against North Vietnam, we could almost surely maintain adequate freedom of action even without a Congressional Resolution.

Third, the only time we can get a resolution, in the absence of acute emergency, is within the next three weeks. A strong case can be made that we do not now need to commit ourselves so heavily, and that if the situation changes drastically, we could readily respond by emergency session, certainly in November, and conceivably in September too. (emphasis in original)

Bundy's paper came down on the side of waiting: "On balance, it appears that we need a Congressional Resolution if and only if we decide that a substantial increase of national attention and international tension is a necessary part of the defense of Southeast Asia in the coming summer."

At the interdepartmental meeting on June 10 where this paper was discussed it was agreed, according to a memorandum later that day from McGeorge Bundy to the President, that, ". . . we do not now recommend an attempt to get an early resolution. We think the risks outweigh the advantages, unless and until we have a firm decision to take more drastic action than we currently plan."¹⁴⁸

On June 11, the State Department prepared a draft of a congressional resolution, with alternative language for two of the resolution's three sections.¹⁴⁹ After the "Whereas" or policy statement, the proposed resolution was as follows:

Sec. 1. That the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia and the preservation of the political independence and territorial integrity of the non-Communist nations of the area, including the Republic of Viet-Nam and Laos, is required by the national interest of the United States:

Alternative Drafts of Section 2

Alternative Based on the Middle East Resolution of 1957:

Sec. 2. To this end, if the President determines the necessity thereof, the United States is prepared, upon request from any nation in Southeast Asia, to take, consistently with the Charter of the United Nations, all measures including the use of armed forces to assist that nation in the defense of its political

¹⁴⁸Johnson Library, NSF Aides File, McGeorge Bundy Memos for President.

¹⁴⁹The text is in the Johnson Library, NSC History File, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks. An earlier and similar version dated June 5 is located in NSF Aides Files, McGeorge Bundy, Meetings on SE Asia.

independence and territorial integrity against aggression or subversion supported, controlled or directed from any Communist country. Any such measures shall be reported to the Security Council of the United Nations.

* * * * * Alternative Based on the Cuba Resolution of 1962:

Sec. 2. That the United States is determined to prevent by whatever means may be necessary, including the use of arms, the Communist regime in North Viet-Nam, with the aid and support of the Communist regime in China, from extending, by force of threat of force, its aggressive or subversive activities against any non-Communist nation in Southeast Asia.

Alternative Drafts of Section 3

First Alternative:

Sec. 3. This Resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of Southeast Asia is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, and shall so report to the Congress.

Second Alternative:

Sec. 3. This Resolution shall expire on January 8 (?), [sic] 1965 [date of convening of the next Congress.]

As will be seen in the following chapter, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, while containing provisions similar to section 1 and to the first alternative for both sections 2 and 3 of this draft of June 11, was an even stronger grant of power to the President than the language in the June 11 draft.

According to William Bundy,¹⁵⁰ the June 11 resolution was prepared by the staffs of State, Defense and the White House, and was reviewed "with care" by a group consisting of McGeorge Bundy, William Bundy, Douglass Cater (a White House assistant) and James Thomson (who had moved from the State Department to the NSC staff).

On June 12, there was further discussion of a congressional resolution, based on William Bundy's June 12 "Memorandum on the Southeast Asia Situation: Probable Developments and the Case for a Congressional Resolution." The *Pentagon Papers* summarized the memorandum as follows:¹⁵¹

Even though the Administration did not expect "to move in the near future to military action against North Vietnam," it recognized that significant changes in the local situations in both Laos and South Vietnam were "beyond our control and could compel us to reconsider this position." Although our diplomatic track in Laos appeared hopeful, and our now firm escorted reconnaissance operations provided an image of U.S. re-

¹⁵⁰Bundy MS., ch. 18, p. 24.

¹⁵¹PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 180. (emphasis in original) The full text of the memorandum is now available at the Johnson Library, NSC History File, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, vol. III.

solve to complement the Polish negotiating scheme, we needed to be able to augment this posture in the event negotiations stalled. If Souvanna were to become discouraged, or if Khanh were to view our efforts to obtain a Laotian settlement as a sign of willingness to alter our objectives, we would need additional demonstrations of our firmness to keep these leaders from being demoralized. Since additional military actions in Laos and South Vietnam did not hold much promise, actions or the strong threat of actions against the North might need to be considered. For these reasons, an immediate Congressional resolution was believed required as "a continuing demonstration of U.S. firmness and for complete *flexibility in the hands of the Executive in the coming political months.*"

A congressional resolution, Bundy's memorandum stated, should be drafted in consultation with congressional leaders in such a way as to ensure its immediate and strong support and passage without extended and divisive debate. It should "support any action required but must at the same time place maximum stress on our peaceful objectives and our willingness to accept eventual negotiated solutions so that we might hope to have the full support of the school of thought headed by Senator Mansfield and Senator Aiken and leave ourselves with die-hard opposition only from Senator Morse and his very few cohorts."

With respect to timing, the memorandum stated that July would be difficult because of the Republican convention, as would August because of the possible last-minute rush of Congress to adjourn before the Democratic convention. The memorandum concluded, therefore, that the resolution should be sent to Congress during the week of June 22. It added this very interesting point: "It may be argued that a Congressional Resolution under present circumstances faces the serious difficulty that there is no drastic change in the situation to point to. The opposing argument is that we might well not have such a *drastic* change even later in the summer and yet conclude—either because of the Polish consultations [meetings then being planned for negotiating a new settlement in Laos] or because of the South Viet-Nam situation—that we had to act." (emphasis in original)

Some years later, William Bundy had this comment:¹⁵²

The case for a Resolution seemed to many, including myself, strong. The country was heading into an election campaign, in which the Congress would be away much of the time till early January of 1965. Yet there might at any time be some development in Southeast Asia that would call for quick action of a directly military character. Moreover, the strongest possible deterrent to Hanoi's pressing its local advantages in Laos and South Vietnam would surely be a Congressional expression of US steadiness and willingness to go further if need be. No longer, of course, was a Congressional Resolution being put forward in the context of a sequential plan to get Hanoi to pull back, but even without such a plan there seemed much that it could accomplish. Many of us harked back to the Middle East

Resolution the Congress had adopted in March of 1957, at a time when there was no drastic or immediate threat in the area, but when the US posture was felt to need definition.

Suspending Action on a Congressional Resolution

While his advisers were completing plans for a congressional resolution, President Johnson was trying to devise a way by which to increase pressures on the Communists while avoiding a substantial escalation of the war. He knew at least by June 1964 that the Republican Presidential nominee would be Senator Barry Goldwater, (R/Ariz.), who was critical of Johnson and the Democrats for their failure to apply sufficient force in Vietnam. Johnson also knew that there was considerable support in Congress and the public, as well as from many of his military and some of his civilian advisers, for Goldwater's point of view. Moreover, there was strong public and congressional support, shared by Johnson and most of his top advisers, for taking steps to prevent Communist domination of Vietnam and of Southeast Asia. Personally he was—and politically he needed to be—committed to helping the South Vietnamese.

On the other hand, Johnson was keenly aware of the opposition in Congress and the public to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, and he recognized the political advantage of portraying Goldwater as a saber rattler.

These factors led the President to conclude by late June 1964 that during the next six months he should demonstrate strength and firmness of purpose, while avoiding escalating U.S. involvement or substantially widening the war. He also concluded (see discussion below of June 15 memo, "Elements of a Southeast Asia Policy that does not include a Congressional Resolution") that, prior to the election, and in the absence of a congressional resolution, the U.S. could defend its interest, and could shift to a higher level of military activity if the Communists escalated the conflict.

The decision to postpone major military moves and generally to avoid any significant new actions in Vietnam, combined with the effects of the President's campaign activities, resulted, as Michael Forrestal (former NSC staff member who succeeded Sullivan as head of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee in July 1964) has described it, in a confused situation in the government, especially from the middle of August through October.¹⁵³

The President was out of Washington a great deal. He was difficult to see, and it was very hard to learn from him what he wanted to do. If I had been an older and wiser person, I would have perfectly well understood why. He didn't want to take a position during a campaign. But for somebody who was working for him, having to handle the problem from day to day, it was very frustrating. The result was that the division in the government between those who felt you've got to stay in and put in more, and those who were beginning to feel we have to somehow calm this thing down, was getting very strong, and particularly the philosophical division between those who felt that force was the only answer and those who

¹⁵²Bundy MS., ch. 13, pp. 23-24.

¹⁵³CRS Interview with Michael Forrestal, Oct. 16, 1978.

felt that the political problem was more important than the military one. It got to the point where people weren't talking to each other.

While work continued during the second week in June on the congressional resolution, Johnson received advice from others. W. W. Rostow recommended "a more aggressive approach" and a speech on Vietnam by the President.¹⁵⁴ Johnson did not make the suggested statement, however, and generally avoided the subject of Southeast Asia in public appearances during this period.

On June 9, the Board of National Estimates of the CIA submitted its conclusions, as of that time, on the question of the effect of a Communist takeover of Laos and South Vietnam.¹⁵⁵

With the possible exception of Cambodia, it is likely that no nation in the area would quickly succumb to communism as a result of the fall of Laos and South Vietnam. Furthermore, a continuation of the spread of communism in the area would not be inexorable, and any spread which did occur would take time—time in which the total situation might change in any of a number of ways unfavorable to the communist cause.

The statement went on to argue that the loss of South Vietnam and Laos "would be profoundly damaging to the U.S. position in the Far East," because of its impact on U.S. prestige and on the credibility of our other commitments to contain the spread of communism. It did not suggest that such a loss would affect the wider U.S. interest in containing overt military attacks. Our island base, it argued, would probably still enable us to employ enough military power in the area to deter Hanoi and Peking from this kind of aggression. It cautioned, however, that the leadership in Peking (as well as Hanoi) would profit directly by being able to justify its militant policies with demonstrated success and by having raised "its prestige as a leader of World Communism" at the expense of the more moderate USSR.

On June 6-7 an incident occurred that tended to highlight both the advantages and the disadvantages of the Johnson administration's approach to the situation in Southeast Asia. Two U.S. reconnaissance planes were shot down over Laos, and the U.S. announced that future flights would be escorted by U.S. fighters. Supporters of U.S. involvement applauded Johnson's firmness. Opponents of U.S. involvement, however, were displeased, and Mansfield sent a memorandum to the President warning that such flights were provocative and could lead to escalation.¹⁵⁶

For Johnson, the Laos incident had an effect similar to Kennedy's experience with Laos in the spring of 1961. Faced with a situation in which some of his advisers, notably Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis LeMay, called for strong action, Johnson's instinct, according to one account of the NSC meeting on June 7, was to probe for a better explanation and justification: "At this meeting, the decision was made to continue reconnaissance but the President pressed for more specific recommendations and plans. 'Where are

we going?' he asked with some vehemence." After the meeting, the President was reported to have said "that he was worried about LeMay and his truculent visions. 'I get anxious and look for the fire exits when a general wants to get tough. LeMay scares the hell out of me.'"¹⁵⁷

Consideration of a congressional resolution climaxed at a meeting of top NSC officials on June 15, 1964. Six papers were prepared for this meeting: first, a memo of June 15, "Elements of a Southeast Asian Policy that does not include a Congressional Resolution," second, a Sullivan memo on the general political situation in Vietnam, third, William Bundy's memo of June 12 on "Probable Developments and the Case for a Congressional Resolution," fourth, a draft congressional resolution, fifth, a paper by William Bundy on "Themes in Presenting the Resolution," and, sixth, questions and answers for an accompanying public relations campaign.¹⁵⁸

The memo on actions that could be taken in the absence of a congressional resolution was prepared by the White House staff and obviously reflected the President's views, including his assumption that, as the memorandum stated, "This outline does not preclude a shift to a higher level of action if actions of the other side should justify or require it. It does assume that in the absence of such drastic action, defense of U.S. interests is possible, within these limits, over the next six months." The outline of possible actions was as follows:

1. *Possible military actions*
 - a. Reconnaissance, reconnaissance-strike, and T-28 operations in all parts of Laos.
 - b. Small-scale reconnaissance strike operations, after appropriate provocation, in North Vietnam (initially VNAF?).
 - c. VNAF strike operations in Laotian corridors.
 - d. Limited air and sea deployments toward Southeast Asia, and still more limited ground troop movements. (Major ground force deployments seem more questionable, without a decision "to go north" in some form.)

2. *Political actions*
 - a. Internationally—a continued and increased effort to maximize support for our diplomatic track in Laos and our political effort in South Vietnam. Higher authority particularly desires a maximum effort with our allies to increase their real and visible presence in support of Saigon.
 - b. Laos—an intensive effort to sustain Souvanna and to restrain the right wing from any rash act against the French. Possible increase of direct support and assistance to Kong Le in appropriate ways.

¹⁵⁷Valenti, *A Very Human President*, p. 138.

¹⁵⁸The Sullivan memorandum remains classified, but the others are in the Johnson Library in NSC History File, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, except for the June 15 memorandum on "Elements . . ." which is in NSF Country File, Vietnam.

The Bundy draft of "Basic Themes in Presenting the Resolution," was similar to his earlier paper on June 10 cited above. The files do not contain the draft of a congressional resolution prepared and submitted for the June 15 meeting.

¹⁵⁴PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 178.

¹⁵⁵Summarized in *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

c. South Vietnam—rapid development of the critical province program and the information program, strengthening of country team, and shift of U.S. role from advice toward direction; emphatic and continued discouragement of all coup plots; energetic public support for Khanh Government.

d. In the U.S.—continued reaffirmation and expanded explanation of the above lines of action, with opposition to both aggressive adventure and withdrawal, and a clear open door to selected action of the sort included in paragraph 1.

Although the White House memo was the central point of discussion at the June 15 meeting, the *Pentagon Papers* says that the Sullivan memo "warrants special attention" because of its significance in relation to the policymaking process.¹⁵⁹ This memo described the stalemate in South Vietnam, and the feeling of Lodge and Westmoreland that a way had to be found to cause the South Vietnamese to become committed to the war. This, the memo stated, ". . . could come from the external actions of the U.S. internal leadership in Vietnam, or from an act of the [sic] irreversible commitment by the United States." Such a commitment by the U.S., the memo said, could also lead to "executive involvement into the Vietnamese structure," i.e., the *encadrement* of U.S. personnel that the Vietnam Coordinating Committee, as well as Lansdale, had been recommending.

At its June 15 meeting, the NSC officials agreed with the position taken in the White House memo that a resolution was not necessary at that time, and that there were steps that could and should be taken in the absence of such action.

This is William Bundy's comment:¹⁶⁰

... in the end the case against the resolution seemed overwhelming . . . the general consensus was that in the absence of a considered decision for a sustained course of action, the need for a resolution was impossible to explain adequately to the Congress and the public. It was also argued that the existence of a resolution would tend to determine the decision in the direction of military force.

Although the President suspended actions on a congressional resolution, he permitted the launching of the public information campaign that had been agreed upon in Honolulu, and was reaffirmed by ExCom agreement on the June 15 memo. (See "Political Actions—d." in the outline reproduced above.) This decision was promulgated by NSAM 308, June 22, 1964.

The President also sought to clarify his own authority to use the armed forces, and on June 22 he asked the State Department for advice on that subject. The reply on June 29 from the Legal Adviser at State (Leonard C. Meeker), cleared by William Bundy and by the Justice Department, was that Johnson did not need action by Congress in order to deploy troops in Southeast Asia or anywhere

¹⁵⁹ PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 78.

¹⁶⁰ Bundy MS., ch. 13, p. 22.

else in the world. This was the central point in Meeker's memorandum:¹⁶¹

The assignment of United States military personnel to duty in Viet-Nam involving participation in combat rests on the constitutional powers of the President as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, as Chief Executive, and in the field of foreign affairs. There have been numerous precedents in history for the use of these powers to send American forces abroad, including various situations involving their participation in hostilities. In the case of Viet-Nam, the President's action is additionally supported by the fact that South Viet-Nam has been designated to receive protection under Article IV of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty; both the Treaty and the Protocol covering Viet-Nam received the advice and consent of the Senate.

Persuading Congress and the Public to Support Executive Policy

The information campaign to be conducted under NSAM 308 was to be aimed at both Congress and the public. "Of special concern was a recent Gallup poll showing only 37 percent of the public to have some interest in our Southeast Asia policies. Administration officials viewed this group as consisting primarily of either those desiring our withdrawal or those urging our striking at North Viet-Nam. A general program was proposed with the avowed aim of eroding public support for these polar positions and solidifying a large 'center' behind the thrust of current Administration policies. These aims were to be accomplished by directing public comment into discussions of the precise alternatives available to the United States, greater exposure to which it was believed would alienate both 'hawk' and 'dove' supporters." Robert Manning (Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs) was named by the President to direct the campaign.¹⁶²

As part of its public information campaign the administration held two executive session briefings for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, one on June 15 with Rusk and William Sullivan as the witnesses, and the other on June 30 with Lodge as the witness.¹⁶³ In the June 15 session, Senator Church again argued that only the South Vietnamese could win the war, and that U.S. military intervention would not be a decisive factor in that struggle and might involve the United States in a war with North Vietnam or China. Fulbright expressed an interest in Church's views, but did not express his own opinion.

In the June 30 meeting, Lodge, who had resigned as U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam in order to participate in the Presidential campaign, and had been replaced by General Taylor, said that the situation was improving, but it would take time for the necessary political strength to be developed in South Vietnam.¹⁶⁴ His point of

¹⁶¹ Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam 7B Legality.

¹⁶² PP, DOD ed., book 4, IV, C. 2. (b), p. 2

¹⁶³ The unpublished transcript of the June 15 hearing has been declassified and opened, and is in the papers of the Foreign Relations Committee in the National Archives, RG 46.

¹⁶⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, unpublished executive session transcript, June 30, 1964. During the process of choosing Lodge's successor, several of the Presi-

Continued

view seemed to have the support of the committee, except for Morse, who again urged a negotiated settlement.

Several days after the meeting with Rusk, Church, who was chairman of the U.N. Subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee, made a major Senate speech on June 26 on the accomplishments and changing role of the United Nations, in which he suggested that the U.N. might help to bring peace to Indochina:¹⁶⁵

If experience proves anything at all it is that upheaval among the black, brown, and yellow peoples, now emerging in their own right throughout Africa and Asia, is not likely to be assuaged for long through the unilateral intervention of any white nation. The empires which Western power could not hold, that power cannot now pacify. But because the United Nations has proved itself to be theirs, as well as ours, it can often play the role of "honest broker," and even that of the welcome policeman on the beat, when violence breaks out within, or between, the newly independent countries which were so recently the restive possessions of the Western World.

For this reason, it seems to me that we would be well advised to probe all the possibilities for using the peacekeeping machinery of the United Nations, not only in the matter of the smoldering border dispute between Cambodia and South Vietnam, but also in the broader effort to end the fighting in Laos and South Vietnam itself, under some form of negotiated settlement. Administered by the U.N. such an accord might succeed in preserving the independence of these countries, guaranteeing their neutrality, and permitting them to peaceably proceed to fashion their own destinies through self-determination.

Fulbright welcomed Church's suggestion, but said he doubted whether the U.N. could play such a role until there was greater stability in South Vietnam. ". . . under the circumstances that now exist," he said, "if it became current, if the people, particularly the people of South Vietnam, thought we were about to withdraw and turn the matter over to the U.N., it could well cause a crisis in the affairs of the Government of South Vietnam. In other words, I think our determined support at this time is indispensable to the survival of that regime. . . . If we could establish a firm position in which things were going better for the South Vietnamese and they had greater confidence in their capacity to survive, a consideration of some substitute, by way of the U.N., not only would be tenable, but I would be favorable toward it." Church agreed that

dent's prominent advisers had volunteered to take the assignment, including Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, McGeorge Bundy, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who sent Johnson this handwritten note on June 11, (from Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, p. 728):

"Dear Mr. President:

"I just wanted to make sure you understood that if you wished me to go to Viet Nam in any capacity I would be glad to go. It is obviously the most important problem facing the United States and if you felt I could help I am at your service.

"I have talked to both Bob and Mac about this and I believe they know my feelings. I realize some of the other complications but I am sure that if you reached the conclusion that this was the right thing to do then between us both or us all we could work it out satisfactorily.

"In any case I wished you to know my feeling on this matter."

Johnson declined Kennedy's offer: "I feared, as did Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, that the potential danger to the late President's brother was too great." *The Vantage Point*, p. 99. See also Jack Valenti, *A Very Human President*, pp. 138-143.

¹⁶⁵CR, vol. 110, pp. 14790-14796.

the U.S. had to continue its efforts in South Vietnam, but he was "concerned lest we eliminate other alternatives to military action alone":

Now it is said that perhaps we must go further and extend the war to North Vietnam, Laos, or northward. What troubles me is that if this war—which is essentially a political war, that can be won only by the people of South Vietnam—is being waged on terms so advantageous, with the enemy restricted to 25,000 hard core Vietcong, how on earth will the situation be improved by extending the war to the north? Will it help to take on the army of North Vietnam? Do we think that the bombing of North Vietnam will break the spirit of the Government, and cause it to discontinue to aid and abet the insurrection in the south? Why should we? The bombing of North Korea never broke the spirit there. And we bombed every house, bridge, and road until there was nothing left but rubble. Expanding the war is not getting out, Mr. President. It is getting further in.

"If we become involved in that region," Church added, ". . . we could waste our troops endlessly in the interminable jungle." What for? he asked:

Do we think it will be a war in which world opinion will be on our side? Do we think that the history of the last 20 years means that a white nation is going to be upheld in fashioning the destiny of Asia? Do we think that if we occupy this region with our naked power, we would then have solved the problem? Do we think that the Asians concerned would then say, "We are saved. We are liberated by the Western power, the United States, and her occupation will be our shield"? Why, the tides of history will wash over us in time. For Asia does belong to the Asians now, and will forevermore.

These comments were indicative of a position which Church had been developing for several months, and according to Bryce Nelson, who was assisting him, Church's speech was an important one:¹⁶⁶

In my mind, it was one of the first forceful expressions of some senatorial discontent on Vietnam. During this period, Morse and Gruening had been the most outspoken senators against American involvement in Vietnam. And I think that one of the feelings of the younger and more cautious senators was that they did not want to identify too much with opposition to involvement in Vietnam because they thought that the comments of people like Morse and Gruening were so strident. They did not want to be lumped in with people like Morse and Gruening, at least initially.

Hubert Humphrey, who was about to be chosen by President Johnson as his Vice Presidential running mate also commented on Church's speech. He agreed that the U.N. could play a role, and he said he was opposed to escalating the war. "What is needed in Vietnam," he added, is a cause for which to fight, some sort of inspiration for the people of South Vietnam to live for and die for."

¹⁶⁶CRS Interview with Bryce Nelson, Dec. 12, 1978.

Humphrey obviously was being very cautious. The President had asked him for his views on Vietnam, and Humphrey had been advised by John Rielly, his foreign policy assistant, to avoid discussing Vietnam with the President or becoming one of the his spokesmen on Vietnam. Rielly told Humphrey: "(1) Do not make any speech on the subject of Vietnam. (2) Do not present to the President any memoranda on Vietnam. (3) Do not permit yourself, if at all possible, to be maneuvered into the position by the President where you become the principal defender of the Administration's policy in the Senate against critics like Mansfield, Church, Morse, Gruening and others."¹⁶⁷

Humphrey replied to Johnson's request in a memorandum prepared by General Lansdale and Rufus Phillips, in which he argued for U.S. restraint. "The Vietnamese," he said, must be skillfully and firmly guided, but it is they (not we) who must win their war. . . . A political base is needed to support all other actions. . . . No amount of additional military involvement can be successful without accomplishing this task. . . . Direct U.S. military action against North Vietnam, U.S. assumption of command roles, or the participation in combat of U.S. troop units is unnecessary and undesirable."¹⁶⁸

The memorandum also criticized the over-reliance on a conventional military response, and the excessive use of heavy artillery, napalm, and airstrikes. The war was primarily a guerrilla war, it said, and should be fought as such.

In conclusion, Humphrey suggested to the President that a new team of U.S. experts, headed or selected by Lansdale and Phillips, should be sent to Vietnam to take charge of implementing the counterinsurgency program. Maj. Gen. Chester V. Clifton, Jr., President Johnson's military aide, in a memorandum to the President on June 25, 1964 commenting on Humphrey's memorandum, said, ". . . fine as these men are, they have a reputation for using the 'lone wolf' approach rather than being men who can participate as part of a team effort." "I do not recommend that you inject Lansdale-Phillips into the action at this time."¹⁶⁹

Toward the end of June 1964, while the administration's public information campaign was getting underway, congressional Republicans continued pressing Johnson and the Democrats to take a stronger stand on Vietnam. In a public hearing of the Foreign Relations Committee on June 23, on the 1964 foreign aid authorization bill, Senator Hickenlooper, the ranking Republican on the committee, told McNamara, the witness at that point, that he was concerned about what U.S. objectives were in Vietnam, and about how serious the situation was and how committed the United States was in its policies and programs. He thought the time had come for a congressional resolution: "We have had lots of speeches on the vital necessity of some of these things. But in the past we have had resolutions concurred in by Congress establishing policy. It seems to me the time had come when we had better have the

¹⁶⁷ CRS Interview with John Rielly, Mar. 29, 1979.

¹⁶⁸ Hubert H. Humphrey, Norman Sherman (ed.) *The Education of a Public Man, My Life and Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) pp. 482-488.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam.

administration and the Congress get together on some understood policy and some definite directional trends here so that we know what potentials we may have to face."

Hickenlooper added that, in the absence of such a consensus, it was becoming more difficult to explain U.S. policy on Vietnam to the public, as well as more difficult for Congress to approve funds. "I can vote lots of money when I think I understand the objectives and I am willing to support the objectives when they are reliable. But to vote money on a rather indefinite and still undefined purpose is a rather difficult thing." McNamara replied that the President and his advisers had defined U.S. objectives. Hickenlooper said that he still did not know whether it was U.S. policy "to win." "Is victory in South Vietnam the essential objective? I think we had better get down to the point where we determine whether we do that. Then if the American people or the Congress want to say, 'All right, we will accept the thesis and the objective that victory in South Vietnam is absolutely essential to the well-being of the country and to the free world; therefore, if it is, we will support all necessary action from here on out to guarantee that victory.'"¹⁷⁰

A few days later (June 29), the House Republican Conference issued a statement generally criticizing Johnson and the Democrats for "letting down our guard" against the Communists, and specifically criticized the administration for not taking steps to win the war in Vietnam. It said the administration was following a "why win?" policy in Vietnam, and that "A victory in South Vietnam over the military and subversive threats of communism is urgently required. We must repeal today's complacent commitment to prevent a Communist victory and substitute a commitment to insure a victory for freedom." In making public the report of the group, Representative Gerald Ford said that the U.S. should immediately ". . . take command of the forces in Vietnam and not simply remain advisers," and that more U.S. Special Forces should be sent to Vietnam in order to seal the borders against infiltration from the north.¹⁷¹

Senator Mansfield was very critical of the statement, calling it a "tirade." "I am not surprised that the partisan political knives should be drawn on this issue," he said. "What amazes me is that they have come out of the sheaths so early. I can only conclude that they are intended to be used in a preliminary rumble in San Francisco [site of the July 1964 Republican National Convention] as a warmup for the political war later on."¹⁷² Senator John Sherman Cooper (R/Ky.) however, defended the action of the House Republicans, as did Senator Javits, who said he believed "regardless of party, that we must stick it out in Vietnam. I do not believe that we ought to pull out. I believe there is too much at stake for us to pull out. Also, I do not believe we should overtly extend the war to North Vietnam which has been recommended by some."¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Foreign Assistance 1964*, Hearings, 88th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1964), pp. 542-552.

¹⁷¹ *New York Times*, June 30, 1964.

¹⁷² CR, vol. 110, p. 15666.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 15672-15673.

CHAPTER 5

STRIKING BACK: THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENTS

During the latter part of June and continuing through July 1964, the U.S. proceeded to carry out various of the military measures outlined in the June 15 White House memo which had been approved by the top members of the NSC and by the President. The *Pentagon Papers* provides a good summary of these actions:¹

Among the more important *military-political* actions, carried out with considerable publicity, were the accelerated military construction effort in Thailand and South Vietnam, the prepositioning of contingency stockpiles in Thailand and the Philippines, the forward deployment of a carrier task force and land-based tactical aircraft within close striking distance of relevant enemy targets, and the assignment of an unprecedentedly high-level "first team" to man the U.S. Diplomatic Mission in Saigon. These measures were intended both to convince Hanoi and to reassure the GVN of the seriousness and durability of the U.S. commitment.

In addition, the U.S. undertook a number of unpublicized and more provocative actions, primarily as low-key indications to the enemy of the U.S. willingness and capability to employ increased force if necessary. Chief among these were the occasional DE SOTO Patrols (U.S. destroyer patrols conducted deep into the Gulf of Tonkin along the coast [sic] of North Vietnam), both as a "show of strength" and as an intelligence gathering device; Laotian air strikes and limited GVN cross-border operations against VC infiltration routes in Laos; GVN maritime raids and other harassing actions against North Vietnam; YANKEE TEAM, low-level photo reconnaissance missions over Laos, conducted by U.S. jet aircraft with fighter escorts for suppressive or retaliatory action against enemy ground fire. . . .

Many U.S. officials, however, continued to feel that a stronger, more dramatic commitment by the United States was required in order to rally the South Vietnamese. On July 13, William Sullivan, head of the Vietnam Coordinating Committee, who was about to leave for Vietnam as Taylor's deputy, drafted a memorandum on the situation in Vietnam again calling for such a commitment.² Sullivan referred to the "great doubt and confusion in Vietnam about U.S. determination." He added, "The daily speeches of Senator Morse, the columns of Walter Lippmann, the *New York Times*

¹PP, Gravel ed., vol. III, p. 291.

²Sullivan's July 13 memorandum, Johnson Library, NSF Country File, Vietnam, would appear to be quite similar to his memo of about June 18, cited above, which is apparently still classified. Either he used much of the same material, or the July 13 memorandum is misdated, or the *Pentagon Papers* incorrectly attributed it to a date in June.

editorials, AFP [American and foreign press?] distortions of George Ball's meeting with General de Gaulle [early June], the diplomatic negotiations with respect to Laos, and the absence of any clear signal concerning US intentions in Southeast Asia have worried the Vietnamese."

Given this sort of atmosphere in South Viet Nam, it is very difficult to persuade the Vietnamese to commit themselves to sharp military confrontations with the communists if they suspect that something in the way of a negotiated deal is being concocted behind their backs.

Both Ambassador Lodge and General Westmoreland, at the Honolulu Conference, expressed the opinion that the situation in South Viet Nam would "jog along" at the current stalemate pace unless some dramatic "victory" could be introduced to put new steel and confidence into Vietnamese leadership. General Westmoreland defined "victory" as a determination to take some new vigorous military commitment, such as air strikes against Viet Cong installations in the Laos corridor. Ambassador Lodge defined "victory" as a willingness to make punitive air strikes against North Viet Nam. The significant fact about both the Ambassador's and the General's suggestions was that they looked toward some American decision to undertake a commitment which the Vietnamese would interpret as a willingness to raise the military ante and eschew negotiations begun from a position of weakness. . . .

The general conclusion from this analysis is that we can anticipate no sharp upturns in the Vietnamese willingness or ability to press for the extermination of the insurgency if the current situation continues. Indeed, if they continue to worry about American will and determination, we could expect further political fragmentation and increasing disabilities. On the other hand, we cannot guarantee that a dramatic "victory" or active commitment by the U.S. would produce the sharp infusion of spirit which both the Ambassador and General Westmoreland predict.

It is clear, however, that unless some improvement in spirit and leadership can be introduced, we will have great difficulty in introducing more effective American assistance or in obtaining more effective Vietnamese utilization of that assistance. . . .

During July 19-23, there was new agitation by South Vietnamese leaders for "marching North," and Ambassador Taylor, fearing that Khanh might resign, and that the Vietnamese might even move toward negotiating with the Communists if they were unable to get more action out of the U.S., recommended to Washington on July 25 that the U.S. propose joint contingency planning for bombing North Vietnam.³ Such planning, he said, would have several advantages, including forcing the Vietnamese "to look at the hard facts of life which lie behind the neon lights of the 'March North' slogans."