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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
WASHINGTON

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21 Nov 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Defoliant Operations in Viet Nam

1. President Diem has appealed for United States support of a defoliation program in Viet Nam. The Country Team has recommended urgent approval of a program, including the following general types of operations which would be carried out as required to complement military plans. Each of the operations would be carefully planned and controlled to ensure discriminative target selection and execution.

a. Food denial. The subsistence available to Viet Cong insurgents would be attacked by spraying their manioc, corn, sweet potato, rice and other crops with commercially produced agricultural weedkiller-type products (cacodylic acid and butyl 2, 4, 5-T). Vietnamese pilots flying Vietnamese helicopters fitted with spray rigs provided by the United States would perform the actual spraying. These operations could begin as soon as required materials arrive in Viet Nam.

b. Tactical.

(1) Principal communication routes between Saigon and other key cities to include roads peripheral to Zone D (a Viet Cong jungle base area northeast of Saigon) would be sprayed to defoliate and kill forest mantle and underbrush. This program, by eliminating roadside concealment to a distance of approximately 200 feet on each side of the road, will improve defense against ambushes.

(2) Selected sections of Viet Cong base areas, such as Zone D will be defoliated to improve access and observation and permit coordinated military actions in the area.

Use of Vietnamese aircraft is not feasible for these operations. Their helicopters do not have adequate capacity. The Vietnamese have C-47's but this type of aircraft produces unsatisfactory distribution of the chemicals. For these operations the United States would provide temporarily six U.S. C-123 aircraft with U.S. pilots. The chemicals employed will be 2, 4-D and 2, 4, 5-T.

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c. Border Control. As the overall plan for control of insurgency is developed, selected border areas along infiltration routes will be defoliated. Care would be exercised to ensure that all spraying is confined to areas sufficiently far from the Cambodian border to avoid justified Cambodian protests. Selected segments along the Cambodian and Laotian borders will be sprayed as required to facilitate infiltration control by border patrol forces. The same U.S. aircraft and types of chemicals as for the above tactical operations would be required.

2. The spray agents to be employed are commercially produced in this country and have been used for years in industrial and agricultural plant growth clearing operations. The agents have no harmful effects on humans, livestock or soil. Their only effect is to kill the plant growth upon which sprayed.

3. The field has urged speed, especially for the food denial phase. The Air Force is making all necessary preparations pending final approval of the program. The status of preparations is as follows:

a. Tactical Air Command was advised 9 November 1961 to employ six C-123's for the operation. They will be attached to the Jungle Jim unit on arrival. Modification of two will be completed 20 November 1961, and the remaining four by 25 November 1961. They will be flown to Clark Air Force Base and held there pending approval of their participation in these operations.

b. The USAF has procured and is airlifting to Viet Nam the chemicals required for food denial operations. Chemicals for subsequent operations will be sealifted insofar as continuity of supply permits.

c. CINCPAC has been assigned operational control of the operations. He has assigned Chief, MAAG planning and coordinating responsibility for the defoliant operations in Viet Nam. Chief, MAAG is developing with Vietnamese officials detailed plans to ensure that defoliant operations are consistent with a geographically phased overall counterinsurgency plan.

d. It is estimated that the entire program will cost \$8-10 million.

4. Advantages and disadvantages. The basic problem is to weigh the political/military effects of the program within Vietnam, along with the possibility of adverse reactions by nations outside Vietnam. It is already clear that any such program will be subject to charges of chemical/biological warfare. Ambassador Nolting reported on November 6 that Radio Hanoi announced that the GVN has used "poison gas" on the rice crop in the

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Tay Ninh vicinity and that people had been made ill. The Ambassador also reported 12 November 1961 that, according to a Vietnamese army staff officer, a captured Viet Cong document shows that the Viet Cong are aware of the defoliant plan and are planning propaganda exploitation.

The pros and cons can best be weighed case by case:

a. Food denial. This is the aspect stressed by President Diem. It would be a continuing program, carried out concurrently with defoliation of jungle areas for tactical purposes. Viet Cong food crops throughout Vietnam would be the target, and requirements have already been placed on Vietnam corps commanders to provide specific intelligence on crop locations to ensure discriminate spraying. An important part of the effort would be aimed at the food supplies of the plateau area, occupied by the Montagnard peoples. Militarily, it may make a lot of sense, since it appears clear that the Viet Cong do infiltrate in substantial numbers in this area and do live off the land. However, the effect of killing crops on the Montagnard attitudes may be a serious problem, and the use of chemicals to destroy food supplies is perhaps the worst application in the eyes of the world. There is, however, a precedent in that the British used helicopters for crop spraying in Malaya during 1953 (Operation CYCLONE I). If done in an area where friendly Montagnards may be affected, it should begin only after development of a careful program of resettling the innocent populations of the areas and assurance that they have adequate replacement food supplies. So far as we can tell, Diem has no such plans now developed, although he could well do so, and has in fact been trying for years to get the Montagnards into agrovilles. If this were done, and if adequate rice supplies were furnished, then we believe the adverse effects would be mitigated, both locally and worldwide, and that such an operation would have a net favorable effect.

b. Clearing of key routes. This is urged by Chief, MAAG, and would have substantial military advantages in forestalling ambushes and enabling freer movement. What would be involved is not basically different from the standard clearing of rights of way in this country, and it could be so represented. For major areas, there would apparently be little effect on any crops, since the main problem parts of these routes are in tough and uninhabited jungle. Thus, this may well be the desirable first use, on a modest basis, to test reaction.

c. Zone D. This hotbed of Viet Cong strength, 25 miles north-east of Saigon, has resisted all efforts at control going clear back to 1939. Its population is totally Viet-Cong controlled, and the major area is tough jungle forest. The field plan is to cut trails by means of the chemicals, that would permit an organized attack. However, although some plans for such an attack are said to exist, it seems clear that it would be a stern test of Vietnamese capabilities, and probably beyond what they

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could attempt in the present state of morale and organization. In any case, defoliation should be done only just before, and as a part of, a concerted and realistic field plan. We recommend that the field be told of these conditions, and that this operation be put on ice pending a much clearer picture of readiness to follow up and get a real military result.

d. Border Control. This, too, would have to be tied into realistic military plans to take advantage of the areas cleared. Mere clearing will not accomplish a great deal, unless we are ready with helicopters and/or border patrol forces to patrol the areas and do a job. Thus, this is a long term angle, and should not be pressed at present.

5. The markings of the aircraft and nationality of the pilots are significant factors. You will note that Vietnamese aircraft and crews can perform the food denial operations, but that U.S. aircraft and crews will be required for the tactical and border defoliation operations. There is the possibility of changing the plane markings to Vietnamese and employing covert air crews. However, in view of the nature of the aircraft, it is not believed that these measures would effectively disguise U.S. participation, and their use is not recommended.

6. In view of probable charges of chemical or biological warfare by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Government of South Vietnam has been requested and has agreed to Department of State proposals for handling public relations aspects of the program. The defensive nature of the operation will be stressed. Immediately before the operation begins, the Vietnamese Government would announce publicly through press releases, a public statement, and a leaflet drop in areas to be sprayed that the program is under GVN direction and control. The defensive purpose of the program will be explained and inhabitants of affected areas will be advised that the spray will have no harmful effects on humans, livestock, or the soil.

7. It is understood that the views of the Department of State are being forwarded by a separate paper.

8. In our judgment, there are two basic possible alternative decisions possible:

a. To avoid the use of this material wholly on grounds of net adverse local reaction, and particularly of worldwide disapproval. On this, we have no clear judgment, since it depends on factors that can best be assessed by the Department of State.

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b. To go ahead with a selective and carefully controlled program starting with the clearance of key routes, proceeding thereafter to food denial only if the most careful basis of resettlement and alternative food supply has been created, and holding Zone D and the border areas until we have realistic possibilities of immediate military exploitation.

The Department of Defense is inclined toward the latter decision. In no circumstances, in our judgment, should the use of this material be authorized in the discretion solely of the field. There should be careful prior consideration and authorization from the Washington end of the plans developed by CINCPAC and the Country Team.

*Rowell G. G. G. G.*

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