

USAF PLANS AND POLICIES
IN
SOUTH VIETNAM AND LAOS
1964

USAF HISTORICAL DIVISION
LIAISON OFFICE

LAO: 

Reprinted by Dalley Book Service,
90 Kimball Lane, Christiansburg,
Virginia 24073


FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

FOREWORD

This study emphasizes Headquarters USAF's plans and policies with respect to South Vietnam and Laos in 1964. In the first four chapters the author describes the progressive military and political decline of the Saigon regime, after two government coups, and the efforts by U.S. authorities to cope with this problem. He notes especially the view of the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, frequently stated, that only air strikes on North Vietnam could end the insurgencies in South Vietnam and in Laos and bring stability to the Vietnamese government. This contrasted with administration efforts to devise an effective pacification program and, pending emergence of a stable government, its decision to adopt a "low risk" policy to avoid military escalation.

In the remaining chapters of the study, the author discusses briefly the major USAF augmentations, the expansion of the Vietnamese Air Force, the problem of service representation in Headquarters, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and the rules of engagement as they affected particularly air combat training. The study concludes with a brief review of the beginning of USAF special air warfare training for the Royal Laotian Air Force and the inauguration of limited USAF and Navy air operations over Laos to contain Communist expansion in that country.

USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam and Laos in 1964 is a sequel to three earlier studies prepared by the USAF Historical Division Liaison Office on counterinsurgency and Air Force activities in Southeast Asia. The earlier studies are: USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam, 1961-1963; USAF Counterinsurgency Doctrines and Capabilities, 1961-1962; and USAF Special Air Warfare Doctrine and Capabilities, 1963.


MAX ROSENBERG
Chief
USAF Historical Division
Liaison Office

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

C O N T E N T S

FOREWORD

| | | |
|------|---|----|
| I. | REVISED U.S.-SOUTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY PLANNING | 1 |
| | General Khanh's Coup | 3 |
| | Plans to Revitalize Counterinsurgency Operations | 4 |
| | Plans to Increase Pressure on North Vietnam. | 7 |
| | New U.S. Policy Guidance | 9 |
| II. | CONTINUED MILITARY AND POLITICAL DECLINE | 13 |
| | The Search for New Courses of Action | 13 |
| | More U.S. Aid and Reorganization of MAC/V | 15 |
| | More Planning for Operations in Laos and North Vietnam | 17 |
| | New U.S. Leadership and More Military Aid | 21 |
| III. | THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT AND AFTERMATH | 24 |
| | U.S. Response in the Gulf of Tonkin | 24 |
| | A New Round of Planning | 27 |
| | New U.S. Guidance | 31 |
| | The "Low Risk" Policy | 32 |
| IV. | THE BIEN HOA AIR BASE ATTACK AND AFTERMATH | 36 |
| | The Bien Hoa Incident | 36 |
| | The Problem of Base Security | 39 |
| | Review of Future Courses of Action | 41 |
| | Continuing Crisis and a New Incident | 45 |
| V. | BUILDUP OF USAF FORCES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA | 48 |
| | New Aircraft for the 1st Air Commando Squadron | 50 |
| | Deployment of B-57's to the Philippines. | 52 |
| | Other USAF Augmentations Early in 1964 | 53 |
| | Buildup After the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. | 54 |
| | More Transport and Reconnaissance Aircraft | 55 |
| | Establishment of a Search and Rescue Unit | 56 |
| | Retention of the 19th TASS | 56 |
| | Airfield Expansion | 58 |
| VI. | OTHER USAF ACTIVITIES AND PROBLEMS | 59 |
| | USAF Support of the Vietnamese Air Force | 59 |
| | Expansion of the VNAF | 59 |
| | The Problem of the 5th and 6th A-1H Squadrons. | 61 |
| | The Problem of Jet Aircraft | 62 |

| | |
|---|------------------------|
| Completion of Helicopter Training | 64 |
| VNAF Strength | 64 |
| Air Force Representation in MAC/V | 65 |
| Rules of Engagement | 68 |
| VII. BEGINNING OF AIR OPERATIONS IN LAOS | 72 |
| Initial Lao and U.S. Air Activity | 72 |
| Plans Against Infiltration | 77 |
| NOTES | 81 |
| APPENDICES | 95 |
| Appendix 1 - U.S. Military Personnel in Southeast Asia . . | 95 |
| Appendix 2 - U.S. Aircraft in Southeast Asia | 95 |
| Appendix 3 - U.S. and Allied Aircraft in Southeast Asia . | 96 |
| Appendix 4 - USAF Flying Hours and Sorties in South Vietnam | 96 |
| Appendix 5 - USAF Aircraft Losses in Southeast Asia . . . | 97 |
| Appendix 6 - U.S. Casualties from Hostile Action in Vietnam | 98 |
| Appendix 7 - VNAF Aircraft Losses | 99 |
| Appendix 8 - VNAF Sorties Flown | 99 |
| Appendix 9 - South Vietnam and Viet Cong Military Strength | 100 |
| Appendix 10 - South Vietnam and Viet Cong Deaths and Weapon Losses | 100 |
| GLOSSARY | 101 |
| MAPS AND CHARTS | <u>Facing Page</u> |
| 1. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam | 16 |
| 2. Airfields in South Vietnam | 58 |

~~TOP SECRET~~

I. REVISED U.S.-SOUTH VIETNAMESE MILITARY PLANNING

(TS) At the beginning of 1964 the South Vietnamese government, now headed by Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh, had not recovered from the overthrow of former President Ngo Dien Diem on 1 November 1963. The breakdown in authority enabled the Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) to overrun many strategic hamlets and military outposts and achieve other successes. Buoyed by victories, improved organization, and increasing North Vietnamese and other Communist bloc aid, their momentum continued into the new year. U.S. estimates placed hard-core Viet Cong strength at 22,000 to 25,000, and irregular forces at 60,000 to 80,000. Compared with January 1963 estimates, hard-core cadres had increased modestly and irregular forces had declined slightly despite losses of about 1,000 monthly from deaths, wounds, capture, and defec-¹tions.

(S) Despite setbacks, South Vietnamese forces engaged the Viet Cong in scores of actions, mostly in the southern part of the country. In the first five weeks of 1964 they averaged 56 battalion-size or larger operations per week, but smaller actions, while less frequent, were more effective, accounting for one half of reported enemy killed. Ground action was accompanied by a rising level of air support by USAF's 1st Air Commando Squadron (previously Farmgate) and the

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). Summarizing the military situation for the JCS, Adm. Harry D. Felt, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) and Gen. Paul D. Harkins, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMAC/V) said that the most suitable Vietnamese tactics required good intelligence, communication security, and large and small actions to "clear and hold" former enemy territory.²

(TS) After the fall of Diem, top U.S. military and diplomatic officials reviewed their Vietnam planning. Headquarters MAC/V prepared a new pacification plan to replace the poorly executed and moribund national campaign plan of 1963. The U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge, advocated a broader civic action program as he perceived a Viet Cong shift from military to political tactics. Lodge stressed the need for trained political teams to acquaint the rural populace with the Saigon government's objectives in education, land reform, health, and other areas. He urged a beginning in Long An Province where Viet Cong control was virtually complete.³

(TS) The JCS pressed for stronger measures. On 22 January it recommended to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara that the United States should deploy more forces, assume temporary tactical control of the war, and make MAC/V responsible for the entire U.S. effort in South Vietnam. It favored air and ground actions to halt the flow of personnel and supplies from Laos and Cambodia, and air and sea strikes against North Vietnam.⁴

~~TOP SECRET~~

(TS) McNamara expressed special interest in employing more reconnaissance to detect Communist infiltration. In response to a query, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, USAF Chief of Staff, prepared a list of Air Force and VNAF aircraft in the theater available for this purpose and said that more were scheduled to arrive. One decision reached was to begin high altitude U-2 flights in February over North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.⁵

General Khanh's Coup

(U) Meanwhile, a power struggle within the Minh government led, on 6 January 1964, to the establishment of a military triumvirate. Twenty-four days later Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, Commander of the Vietnamese Army's I Corps, organized a bloodless coup d'etat against the triumvirate. Khanh emerged as Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council and, on 8 February, took over as Premier of the country with General Minh elected to the ceremonial post of head of state. In justifying his actions, Khanh charged that the three-month old Minh regime had failed to make progress in effecting political, social, and economic reforms and was susceptible to the influence of a neutralist officer faction. He also accused President Charles De Gaulle, of France, of attempting to interfere in Vietnamese affairs.⁶

(S) In his coup, Khanh enjoyed the strong support of Col. Nguyen Cao Ky,* Commander of the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) since 16 December 1963. U.S. officials subsequently expressed hope that the new government

* On 5 March 1964 Colonel Ky was promoted to Brigadier General.

would, as it promised, step up operations against the Viet Cong. On 17 February McNamara told a House committee that the Khanh government appeared to have considerably more popular support than its predecessor and was pursuing more effective strategic hamlet and "clear and hold" programs. The Defense Secretary reaffirmed plans to withdraw most U.S. troops by the end of 1965.⁷

(TS) To improve U.S. assistance to the new government, President Johnson established an interdepartmental committee* to manage U.S. policy and operations in South Vietnam, ordered the prompt fulfillment of all aid requests from Ambassador Lodge, asked that U.S. dependents be encouraged to return voluntarily, and directed a speed-up in shaping a "credible deterrent" against North Vietnam. The President also announced that McNamara would again visit Saigon to review the military situation there.⁸

Plans to Revitalize Counterinsurgency Operations

(S) As a result of Premier Khanh's promising leadership, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, asked the JCS for a new plan to revitalize counterinsurgency and recommendations to stabilize the government and prevent new coups.⁹

(TS) The JCS quickly recommended stepped up intelligence and operations in border areas, financial relief for areas taxed by both the government and the Viet Cong, more U.S. military and civilian

* Known as the Sullivan Committee, it was headed by William H. Sullivan, Assistant to Undersecretary for Political Affairs, W. Averill Harriman.

advisors at all government levels, better civilian programs to gain popular support, more effective crop destruction in Viet Cong areas, and increased effort to win the support of U.S. news media. It studied the possibility of combining the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG/V) with MAC/V,* endorsed the latest Vietnamese national pacification plan, and urged the preparation of a civilian plan wherein new "Life Hamlets" would replace strategic hamlets. The JCS cautioned that only Vietnamese civilian administrators, in the long run, could stabilize an area cleared by military forces.¹⁰

(S) The new national pacification plan was scheduled to begin on 3 February but the Khanh coup caused a delay. After he approved it on the 17th, government ministers changed the name to the Chien Thang or "victory" national pacification plan. Based on a "spreading oil drop" concept, it consisted of two phases. First, military operations would destroy or expel the Viet Cong. Secondly, the Viet Cong "infrastructure" or cells would be liquidated and replaced by new and "friendly" organizations. There would be expanded civic action programs designed to improve police, education, health, welfare, economic, and other activities to win the confidence of the people. A national pacification council, headed by Premier Khanh, was created to oversee the plan.¹¹

(S) An air plan subsequently prepared by the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) to aid pacification called for enlarged and better coordinated close support and interdiction programs with more aircraft placed on continuous alert to provide faster reaction. As the "oil drop" spread and liberated areas widened, pockets of Viet Cong would be rooted out by heavier day and night

* See p 16.

~~TOP SECRET~~

air attacks. Because of VNAF limitations, more USAF aircraft and personnel would be needed for combat training strikes and to provide reconnaissance for aiding border control. PACAF believed that the expanded use of airpower was essential to weaken enemy morale, increase his casualties and defections, win support of fence-sitting Vietnamese, and demonstrate Vietnamese and U.S. determination.¹²

(TS) The JCS endorsed Ambassador Lodge's proposal (supported by the State Department) to recapture Long An Province from the Viet Cong. The Air Force especially believed that air support would be vital to the operation. Secretary of the Air Force Eugene M. Zuckert informed McNamara that USAF and VNAF units could transport medical and other supplies, and provide aerial loudspeakers for broadcasting to the Vietnamese. Political teams, if attacked, could quickly radio for air support and airborne troops.¹³

(S) Some U.S. officials considered the Lodge plan impractical. The U.S. Minister-Counselor in Saigon (and sometimes Acting Ambassador), David G. Nes, thought that the JCS directive to implement the plan revealed "an almost total lack of comprehension" of the Vietnam problem. General Harkins and Admiral Felt agreed that an immediate offensive in Long An Province was not possible. Harkins pointed to inadequate Vietnamese civic action planning, conflicting provincial military priorities, and a "bizarre" command structure that permitted pacification troops to be transferred. As a consequence, Ambassador Lodge's proposal was soon abandoned.¹⁴

~~TOP SECRET~~

(TS) Although the Air Force Chief of Staff concurred with JCS proposals to revitalize the counterinsurgency program, he urged still bolder U.S. measures. A 12 February intelligence report, General LeMay observed, warned that without a marked improvement in efficiency, the Vietnamese government and armed forces "at best had an even chance" of withstanding the Viet Cong in the coming weeks and months. Regardless of the threat of escalation, LeMay thought that the time for a military showdown had arrived, and that the U.S. government should explain to the American people the extent of Communist subversion in South Vietnam and announce its determination to defeat it.¹⁵

Plans to Increase Pressure on North Vietnam

(S) With its hopes raised by the seemingly strong Khanh government, the administration was not ready to follow LeMay's counsel. However, on 21 February, McNamara asked the JCS to assess ways to apply more pressure on North Vietnam to persuade it to end support of the insurgents in the South and in Laos. They were to include actions such as special air and sea nonnuclear attacks which would be least likely to escalate the conflict and cause adverse third country reaction. In addition, he asked them to suggest how best to deter Hanoi and Peking from dispatching troops throughout Southeast Asia.¹⁶

(TS) In a partial reply on 2 March the JCS recommended selected air attacks immediately on North Vietnam for "shock" effect as part of a coordinated diplomatic, psychological, and military program. These attacks could be followed by additional air and amphibious attacks,

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

sabotage, and harrassment of the North's fishing and shipping in ascending severity.* For the air and sea assault program, VNAF's effort could be augmented by 1st Air Commando Squadron and B-57 aircraft. Additionally, there should be preparations for armed reconnaissance of military supply lines between North Vietnam and Laos and China, air strikes of industrial targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area, mining of waters, and a maritime blockade of the North. The Joint Chiefs also foresaw the need for limited Vietnamese incursions, with U.S. support, into Laos and Cambodia to reduce Viet Cong infiltration from and escape into these sanctuaries. They prepared a special memorandum for McNamara on this subject.¹⁷

(TS) The JCS considered it unlikely that the proposed graduated attacks would result in any large-scale Chinese intervention. In the dry season, it thought, the Chinese could support logistically 13 infantry divisions, less artillery and armor, and North Vietnam 9 divisions. Estimated air strength in South China, Hainan Island, and North Vietnam was placed at 400 jet fighters and 125 light bombers. Chinese sea power was limited. Although China could order land, sea, and air attacks simultaneously against South Korea, Taiwan, and other areas, it could not sustain a major assault in more than one region at a time.¹⁸

(TS) McNamara's 21 February request also prompted the JCS to ask ✓ CINCPCAC to prepare an air and naval plan against North Vietnam and China.

* Some of these activities would be under the aegis of special Plan 34 that provided for limited operations such as mining of waters, bombardment of selected installations, sabotage, radio broadcasts, and leaflet drops.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Previously, the Air Force excepted, the services had opposed the concept behind such a plan: the Army and Marine Corps because it was "unthinkable" not to provide for sizeable ground forces; the Navy because of concern lest an Air Force commander exercise control over Navy air. In response, CINCPAC on 1 June issued Operational Plan 38-64. The JCS approved it in July. While basically concerned with air and naval actions, Plan 38-64 also required the use of sizeable ground forces.¹⁹

New U.S. Policy Guidance

(U) Meanwhile, Washington's review of the U.S. role in South Vietnam and the possibility of air strikes on the North received much publicity. Apparently, the administration hoped that hints of more forceful action would have a deterrent effect on Hanoi. As part of the reassessment, McNamara departed for Saigon.²⁰

(TS) Accompanied by General Taylor and other officials, the Defense Secretary reached South Vietnam early in March. He toured the countryside with Khanh to build up the Premier's image and dramatize U.S. support. However, he found the situation had deteriorated. There was virtually no "clear and hold" program and few directives were flowing from the new government. Nevertheless, McNamara and Taylor remained "guardedly optimistic," if Khanh stayed alive and in power. They still believed most U.S. personnel could be withdrawn by the end of 1965. For example, McNamara thought that the aircraft of the USAF O-1 squadron could soon be transferred to the expanding VNAF,* and that its personnel, as well as a U.S. Marine helicopter squadron, could depart by mid-1964.²¹

*See pp 56-57.

~~TOP SECRET~~

(TS) For the immediate future more U.S. assistance was needed. McNamara authorized additional manpower for MAC/V, continuation of special operations under Plan 34A the integration of the Vietnamese civilian irregular defense group (CIDG) into the regular armed forces, and aerial mining training for the VNAF. He refused, however, to approve any relaxation in the rules of engagement for the 1st Air Commando Squadron,^{*} and held in abeyance a decision on the recent JCS proposal to replace B-26's with jet B-57's.⁺ He said restrictions on defoliation activities would remain in effect and believed that the United States should "stay out of this business."²²

(TS) McNamara's report to President Johnson contained 12 major recommendations. Although the JCS considered them insufficient and again urged air attacks on North Vietnam, the President approved them on 17 March after conferring with the National Security Council. Generally they expanded or accelerated programs already in effect: support for the government's mobilization plans, a 50,000-man increase in Vietnamese regular and paramilitary strength, more compensation for the military, improved organization, establishment of a truly Vietnamese offensive guerrilla force, more equipment for the Vietnamese Army and Navy, addition of a third VNAF fighter squadron and the replacement of all T-28's with A-1H's, continued high-level reconnaissance flights over South Vietnamese borders, and support for more rural reform and a civil

* See p 68.

+ See pp 50 and 52.

administration corps to work at the province, district, and hamlet level. The President also restated U.S. support for the Khanh government and opposition to more coups.

(TS) Most importantly, the President approved--for the first time--planning to permit on 72-hour notice retaliatory air strikes and on 30-day notice graduated strikes against North Vietnam and Vietnamese "hot pursuit" of Viet Cong units crossing into Laos. (Pursuit approval followed a South Vietnamese-Laotian agreement on resuming diplomatic relations and military planning. Vietnamese units over battalion size would require the approval of Laotian Premier Souvanna Phouma.) But any U.S. support of pursuit into Cambodia would be contingent on U.S.-Cambodian relations.* In separate decisions in March, the administration approved the transfer of three B-57 squadrons from Japan to the Philippines and the beginning of USAF special air warfare (SAW) training of Lao and Thai pilots in Thailand because of the Communist danger in Laos.²³

(TS) Meanwhile, at JCS request Felt and Harkins quickly developed plans in accordance with Presidential decisions. On 30 March, Felt sent Operational Plan 37-64 to the JCS. A three-part plan, it provided

* In 1963 Cambodia rejected further U.S. aid and broke diplomatic relations with South Vietnam. Throughout 1964 U.S.-Cambodian relations grew worse. A poorly defined border resulted in several erroneous bombings of villages by the Vietnamese and, on 24 October, in the downing of a USAF C-123 by Cambodian gunners, killing eight U.S. personnel. During the year Cambodia strengthened its ties with Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow. At year's end diplomatic talks in New Delhi, India, to resolve differences proved fruitless.

for limited U.S. air and ground support for Vietnamese operations for border control and retaliatory and graduated strikes, using VNAF, USAF, and Navy aircraft, against North Vietnam. The JCS approved it, with amendments, in July. Thereafter it evolved into one of CINCPAC's most comprehensive plans for stabilizing the military situation in South Vietnam and Laos, and three other CINCPAC plans eventually were incorporated into it. In June Harkins completed MAC/V Operational Plans 98-64 and 98A-64 for limited U.S. support of cross-border operations into Laos.²⁴

~~SECRET~~

II. CONTINUED MILITARY AND POLITICAL DECLINE

(U) Although the President's 17 March decisions showed U.S. readiness to bring military pressure against the Communists in Laos and North Vietnam as well as in the South, the military and political situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. The Army's low morale and irresolute leadership was increasingly manifest and not easily overcome by the infusion of more U.S. advice and military and economic aid. Some advisors on the scene credited many Viet Cong victories to Vietnamese apathy rather than to Viet Cong skill.¹

The Search for New Courses of Action

(TS) Alarmed over Communist gains, the JCS launched into another review of the military situation and in mid-April completed a new study for McNamara. The chiefs split in their recommendations. General LeMay and the Commandant of the Marine Corps strongly advocated immediate Vietnamese expansion of operations against North Vietnam backed by U.S. low-level reconnaissance and other forms of assistance. But the Army and Navy chiefs demurred, apparently feeling that momentarily the Saigon government was in no position to shoulder more military responsibility and risks. In subsequent months the Air Force and the Marine Corps again would be aligned on the side of more forceful action while the other two services recommended a more cautious approach.^{* 2}

* See pp 30, 35 and 37.

~~SECRET~~

[REDACTED]

(TS) In April Secretary of State Dean Rusk flew to Europe and Southeast Asia seeking "more flags" in South Vietnam from America's NATO and SEATO allies. After his return to Washington, Rusk proposed additional political and financial measures to strengthen internally the Saigon regime. To "signal" Hanoi, he recommended establishing a U.S. naval presence at Touraine or Cam Ranh Bay, more visible air training flights over Vietnam, and a diplomatic effort to impress upon Hanoi's leaders the benefits from "leaving its neighbors alone." He opposed another Geneva conference until the military situation improved.³

(TS) The JCS agreed that Rusk's proposals would improve the situation in the South but were insufficient to "turn the tide" to victory. Only greatly intensified counterinsurgency operations and a "positive" program of military pressure against the North could do this.⁴

(TS) Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff, after visiting South Vietnam, recommended that USAF air commando strength be increased to three squadrons, all equipped with A-1E's. He also recommended a "Hardnose" operation in Laos to disrupt Communist infiltration, and continuance of Plan 34A activities to help siphon off North Vietnam's resources.⁵

(TS) More Viet Cong successes and a lagging Vietnamese pacification program prompted President Johnson, in May, again to send McNamara

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

~~SECRET~~

and General Taylor to Saigon. Premier Khanh confessed he was unable to cope with the political problems. About 8,000,000 Vietnamese, he thought, were under Saigon's control but 6,000,000 were not, although all of the latter were not necessarily under the Viet Cong. But the Communists had the initiative as demonstrated by the loss of 200 of 2,500 villages since September 1963, the rise of "incidents" to 1,800 per month, and fewer casualties. Vietnamese forces, in turn, were suffering greater losses in casualties, weapons, and from desertions. Their morale was low and recruiting was difficult.⁶

More U.S. Aid and Reorganization of MAC/V

(TS) After his conferences, McNamara announced plans to enlarge the Vietnamese regular and paramilitary forces and provide other aid. The VNAF would receive more aircraft and a 100-percent increase in pilots. Observing the frequent changes in Vietnamese government and military leaders, the Defense Secretary conceded it would be a "long war," thus finally abandoning hope for withdrawing most U.S. forces by the end of 1965. On 19 May, President Johnson asked for and Congress shortly approved \$125 million to finance the additional military and economic aid.⁷

(S) In implementing actions, Harkins and Felt recommended and the JCS in late May approved the dispatch of more howitzers, grenade launchers, radar, and other equipment. To support the Chien Thang pacification plan, it agreed not only to retain all U.S. Army helicopters but to add one more Army helicopter unit. It also agreed on

~~SECRET~~

the need to retain indefinitely the U.S. Marine helicopter squadron, scheduled to depart in June, and re-equip it. McNamara quickly approved most of these recommendations.⁸

(S) In conjunction with these decisions, the administration streamlined its activities in Saigon by combining the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG/V) with MAC/V. Initially studied in February as a possible way to help revitalize counter-insurgency operations, the consolidation was opposed vigorously by General LeMay and the Navy and Marine Corps chiefs. They feared it might lead to the establishment of an Army specified command and would produce insignificant personnel and financial savings. Generals Taylor and Wheeler thought otherwise, however, and McNamara on 8 April concurred. The consolidation became effective on 15 May.⁹

(S) As a result of the change, the Air Force Section MAAG/V was redesignated the Air Force Advisory Group, MAC/V and placed under the operational control of the 2d Air Division. But military assistance program (MAP) responsibilities remained with the enlarged MAC/V.¹⁰

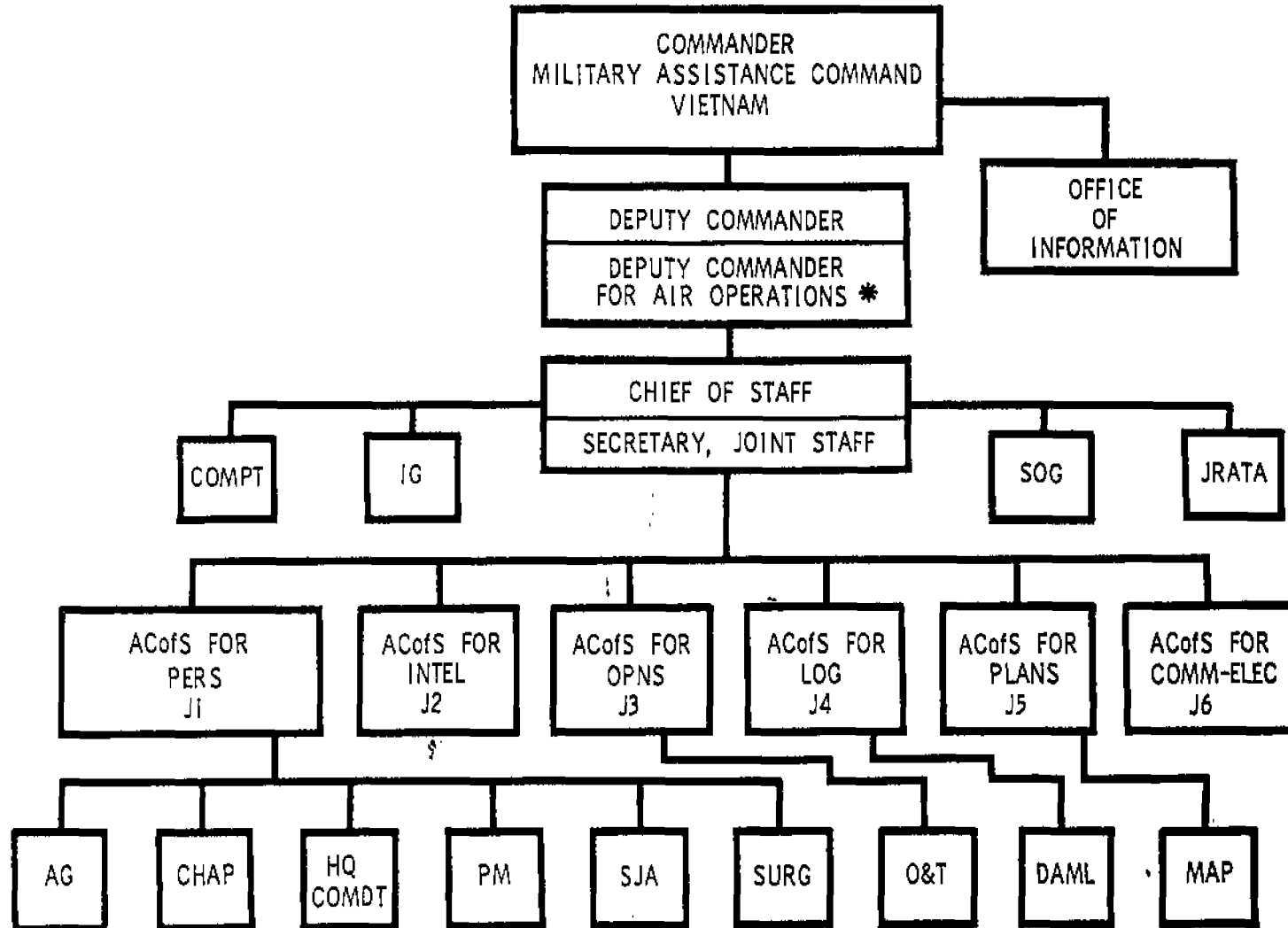
(S) Still under JCS and Defense Department consideration were Sullivan Committee proposals to increase drastically the number of U.S. advisors in South Vietnam to improve government efficiency, pacification, and paramilitary training.¹¹

~~TOP SECRET~~

(THIS PAGE IS ~~SECRET~~)

US MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM

31 DECEMBER 1964



* PROPOSED IN LATE 1964 BUT NOT FULLY APPROVED BY JCS AND SOD UNTIL 10 MAY 1965

[REDACTED]

17

More Planning for Operations in Laos and North Vietnam

(U) In addition to devising measures to strengthen South Vietnam, administration planning addressed itself increasingly to neighboring Laos and North Vietnam.

(TS) In Laos, the Communists had long enjoyed a sanctuary for infiltrating men and arms to the Viet Cong. In April, Communist-led Pathet Lao forces attacked Laotian neutralist and right-wing forces, jeopardizing the 14-nation agreement of 23 July 1962 on the neutrality of Laos. Cautiously responding to both threats, U.S. authorities on 5 May instructed General Harkins to begin limited U.S.-Vietnamese planning for small ground patrols, aided by unmarked aircraft and helicopters. And on 19 May, USAF and Navy aircraft began "Yankee Team" reconnaissance* over Laos to aid friendly Laotian air and ground forces and observe infiltration routes. The administration desired to obtain a cease-fire and restore the military status quo ante.¹²

(TS) The administration also reviewed more plans—and the risks involved—in striking North Vietnam. At McNamara's request, the JCS studied additional "telegraphing" actions along with specific military pressure against Hanoi. It warned that certain types of actions, like deploying more U.S. forces to Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific, could lead to international demands for another Geneva-type conference before Hanoi altered its policy. Telegraphing actions in themselves, the JCS thought, would have little effect: only "positive" offensive

*See pp 73-80.

[REDACTED]

measures could convince Hanoi that its support of the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao no longer would be tolerated.¹³

(TS) LeMay believed that the war was being lost. Administration authorities had directed the JCS on 20 May to tighten its rules of engagement for U.S. air support within South Vietnam to lessen U.S. involvement. With respect to strategy against the North, LeMay pointed to two years of unsuccessful efforts to compel Hanoi to decide to end its subversion by examples of U.S. determination. The objective, he said, should be to destroy the North's capability, and to achieve this he proposed conveying the "message" by attacking sharply two important targets supporting the Viet Cong and Pathet Lao: Vinh and Dien Bien Phu.¹⁴

(TS) In this instance the Army and Navy chiefs agreed with LeMay but General Taylor considered the risk too great as both were huge targets. Air strikes would require hundreds of sorties for several days, be unnecessarily destructive, retard eventual "cooperation" with Hanoi, challenge the Communist bloc, and escalate the war. Of three JCS proposals considered--a massive air attack on all significant targets, a series of lesser attacks, and limited attacks to show U.S. will--Taylor favored the last although he asked Felt to prepare for all three. McNamara agreed with Taylor's conclusion. PACOM's commander submitted the plans to the JCS early in July.¹⁵

(TS) JCS advocacy of air strikes against North Vietnam had strong support in the State Department. The chairman of its Policy Planning Council, Walt W. Rostow, although opposed to a large-scale U.S. ground

commitment in Southeast Asia, agreed that the United States should demonstrate its willingness to use air and naval power to stop the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos. Warning of possible defeat, he said this would mean preparing for war to gain a political objective as in Cuba in 1962.¹⁶

(TS) Early in June, Rusk, McNamara, Taylor, and top field officials met in Honolulu to review the political and military situation. Rusk indicated that Premier Khanh's position was shaky and McNamara was pessimistic about the success of internal reform measures. In the war there was danger that the Viet Cong might push from Laos to the sea through Quang Ngai Province, cutting South Vietnam in half, and this was forcing Khanh to concentrate military forces in the north rather than in the south.

(TS) The conferees agreed that air strikes against North Vietnam should be authorized by Congress and preceded by an augmentation and redistribution of U.S. forces in the western Pacific and Thailand. Taylor postulated three levels of strikes against the North: using only the VNAF to demonstrate U.S. will; using USAF's 1st Air Commando Squadron and the VNAF to destroy Hanoi's will; and using the 1st Air Commando Squadron, the VNAF, and other U.S. air units to destroy Hanoi's ability to support the Viet Cong.

(TS) In the event the Chinese Communists intervened, McNamara thought air attacks could reduce the Chinese effort by 50 percent if enough conventional bombs were available, but this would not resolve

~~TOP SECRET~~

the problem of coping with 5 to 18 Chinese divisions. Felt believed that the United States would run out of aircraft before enough conventional bombs were dropped to defeat the Chinese. On the other hand, to resort to nuclear weapons, said Rusk, was "a most serious" matter and he foresaw the possibility of Soviet counteraction elsewhere to U.S. strikes on the North.¹⁷

(TS) The conferees further agreed to provide more U.S. military and economic aid for the Khanh government. Another decision required the services to review their available shipping, manpower, reconnaissance, airlift, ordnance, and command post resources, and future requirements to sustain the "escalation" phases of CINCPAC's Operational Plans 32-64 and 37-64. McNamara directed the Army to prepare for the dispatch of an infantry brigade and asked the JCS to submit a joint U.S.-Thai military plan for defense of the Mekong delta and for punitive action against Communist forces in northern Laos.¹⁸

(TS) There was more planning against the threat in Laos. Limited U.S.-Vietnamese planning was authorized on 5 May and in late June the JCS sent McNamara MAC/V's plans for Vietnamese cross-border operations. Fuller consultation with Saigon was now required but the State Department would not allow this until political objections raised by the U.S. Ambassador in Laos were resolved. The delay greatly troubled the Air Staff.¹⁹

(TS) Laotian planning also figured in a JCS reply to the National Security Council (NSC) request for guidance. Deeply concerned over the

~~TOP SECRET~~

growing U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia, the NSC in July asked for a restrictive program that would aid the counterinsurgency effort in South Vietnam and reduce the defeatism of South Vietnam and its leaders, but minimize U.S. participation and the risk of military escalation. The Joint Chiefs offered three courses of action: ground cross-border operations into Laos against infiltration targets, air strikes on Laotian infiltration routes, and selected air attacks on North Vietnam with unmarked aircraft. The JCS warned, however, that while its proposals would have some military and psychological value—provided the effort did not absorb counterinsurgency resources—they would not significantly affect Communist support for the Viet Cong. And they might aggravate the political situation in Laos.²⁰

(TS) Overall planning trends were now strongly weighted toward expanded use of airpower. In late July, the JCS directed CINCPAC to plot 94 key North Vietnam targets, a list subsequently included in CINCPAC's 37-64 plan.²¹

New U.S. Leadership and More Military Aid

(U) Coincident with planning operations against Laos and North Vietnam were changes in U.S. military and diplomatic leadership in Saigon. On 20 June Gen. William C. Westmoreland, deputy to General Harkins, became the commander of MAC/V. On the 23d President Johnson announced that General Taylor would succeed Ambassador Lodge* and that

*Gen. Taylor officially succeeded Lodge on 2 July.

U. Alexis Johnson would become Deputy Ambassador, a newly created post. General Wheeler, the Army's Chief of Staff, succeeded Taylor as JCS chairman. On 30 June Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp succeeded Admiral Felt as CINCPAC. The changes were accompanied by a new warning to the Communists on the 28th by President Johnson. He said that the United States was prepared to "risk war" to preserve peace in Southeast Asia and would continue to stand firm to help South Vietnam maintain its freedom.²²

(TS) Almost simultaneously MAC/V asked for more U.S. military advisors, units, and equipment. For expanded air operations the Army would provide 27 more CH-1B helicopters and 16 CV-2B Caribou transports (and a few supporting aircraft), while the Air Force would deploy a fourth C-123 squadron (16 aircraft), 25 A-1E's (for the second combat training squadron approved on 5 May),* and six HH-43B helicopters for a search-and-rescue (SAR) unit. There would be more air liaison officer and forward air controller (ALO/FAC) teams for stepped up combat training and close air support operations.²³

(TS) MAC/V's request was followed by more South Vietnamese setbacks in July. The Viet Cong stepped up its attacks in the Mekong delta, Vietnamese forces suffered a major defeat in Chuang Province, and on the 20th there was another coup attempt in Saigon. U.S. officials now estimated Viet Cong strength at 34,000 with about 30 percent of the infiltrators coming from the North, and irregular forces at 68,000.

* See p 51.

~~SECRET~~

Concluding that counterinsurgency activities were insufficient and that only direct pressure on the North could defeat the Viet Cong, Premier Khanh's government agreed to U.S.-Vietnamese planning for such action without a firm U.S. commitment.²⁴

(TS) Meeting with McNamara on 20 July, the JCS generally supported MAC/V's proposals except for additional Army helicopters and Caribous. LeMay and the Commandant, Marine Corps, strongly believed that the Army aviation units required more justification in view of available USAF and VNAF aircraft for close support and airlift. They were subsequently overruled by the Defense Secretary.²⁵

(TS) After assessing MAC/V's ability to absorb quickly the additional personnel, aircraft, and equipment, the administration announced on 27 July that about 5,000* more U.S. military personnel would go to South Vietnam, raising the total there to 21,950. Most of the manpower and equipment would arrive by 30 September as MAC/V wished, but some units could not be absorbed or sent until November and December. These were the fourth C-123 squadron, the SAR unit, five A-1E's, 20 (of 40 requested) ALO/FAC teams, and 336 jeeps. More civilian technical advisors also would be sent. For certain units, final approval to deploy was still pending.²⁶

* After adjustments, the figure was reduced to 4,800 personnel.

~~SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

III. THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT AND AFTERMATH

(U) In March, May, and July the administration was forced to provide more aid for South Vietnam. Counterinsurgency operations were proving ineffectual in the face of demoralized Vietnamese leadership and rising Viet Cong strength and aggressive tactics. As a consequence, planning focused increasingly on airpower as a means to reverse defeats. Early in August, the Communists supplied the provocation needed to launch an air attack on North Vietnam.

U.S. Response in the Gulf of Tonkin

(TS) On 2 August the U.S. Navy destroyer Maddox, part of a patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin, detected three hostile patrol boats closing in at high speed. After three warning shots failed to halt them, the destroyer opened fire with its 5-inch batteries. One boat was disabled but succeeded in firing two torpedoes that missed the Maddox by 200 yards; a second boat lost power and retired, and a third, also struck, passed 1,700 yards astern the Maddox, firing a machine gun. In response the United States reinforced the patrol by adding a destroyer (the C. Turner Joy) and an aircraft carrier (Ticonderoga). On the night of 3 August enemy boats again attacked the patrol. In return fire, one was presumed sunk.

~~TOP SECRET~~

(TS) On 4 August, immediately after the second attack, Admiral Sharp proposed and the JCS and the President agreed to conduct punitive air strikes against North Vietnam. These were launched on 5 August when Navy A-1 Skyraiders, A-4 Skyhawks, and F-8 Crusaders from the Ticonderoga and the Constellation flew 64 sorties, attacking four torpedo bases at Hon Gay, Loc Chao, Phuc Loi, and Quang Khe and an oil storage facility at Vinh.* Eight boats were destroyed and 21 damaged and the Vinh oil facility, representing about 10 percent of North Vietnam's oil storage capacity, was 90 percent destroyed. Two aircraft, an A-1 and an A-4, were shot down by antiaircraft fire over Hon Gay killing one pilot. The other was taken prisoner. Two other aircraft were hit but returned safely. No USAF aircraft participated in these strikes.¹

(TS) Simultaneously, the President publicly warned the Communist world not to support or widen aggression in Southeast Asia, and McNamara, with the President's approval, announced the dispatch of more U.S. reinforcements to the area.⁺ Pacific theater shifts brought 50 additional USAF aircraft (B-57's, F-102's, RF-101's) to South Vietnam and 26 (F-105's, F-100's, KB-50's) to Thailand. Other aircraft (F-105's, C-130's) from the United States went to U.S. bases in Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines. From its First Fleet on the Pacific Coast the U.S. Navy sent the supercarrier Ranger, 12 destroyers, an antisubmarine

*The code name for the air strike was "Pierce Arrow."

⁺The initial deployment of air units was called "One Buck," and subsequent deployments were "Two Buck," "Three Buck," etc.

