

# 177. Draft Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson<sup>1</sup>

Washington, May 19, 1967.

## SUBJECT

Future Actions in Vietnam

General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp have requested 200,000 additional men (100,000 as soon as possible with the remainder probably required in FY 1969) and 13 additional tactical air squadrons for South Vietnam. The program they propose would require Congressional action authorizing a call-up of the Reserves, the addition of approximately 500,000 men to our military forces, and an increase of approximately \$10 billion in the FY 68 Defense budget. It would involve the virtual certainty of irresistible pressures for ground actions against “sanctuaries” in Cambodia and Laos; for intensification of the air campaign against North Vietnam; for the blockage of rail, road, and sea imports into North Vietnam; and ultimately for invasion of North Vietnam to control infiltration routes. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recognize that these operations may cause the Soviet Union and/or Red China to apply military pressure against us in other places of the world, such as in Korea or Western Europe. They therefore believe it essential that we also take steps to prepare to face such hostile military pressures. The purpose of this paper is to examine the recommendations of our military commanders and to consider alternative courses of action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, 2EE Primarily McNamara Recommendations. Top Secret. Prepared by McNaughton. A notation indicates that the President saw the memorandum. A typed disclaimer at the top of the first page reads: “first rough draft; data and ‘estimates’ here have *not* been checked.” The Draft Presidential Memorandum (DPM) was a bureaucratic mechanism for circulating ideas and eliciting views and opinions from senior policymakers. Omitted portions of this DPM are printed in *The Pentagon Papers*, The Senator Gravel Edition, Vol. IV, pp. 477–489.

<sup>2</sup> In a memorandum the next day, McNamara requested that the Director of Central Intelligence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretaries of the Navy and Air Force analyze the alternatives he had presented (concentrating bombing in the panhandle of North Vietnam or expanding strikes against lines of communication while restricting attacks against unassociated fixed targets and possibly limiting importation capabilities through the ports) especially in terms of their respective impacts upon interdiction, aircraft and pilot loss, and the risk of furthering Soviet or Chinese involvement. (National Archives and Records Administration, RG 200, Reading File, May 13–18, 1967) In a May 20 memorandum to the President, Rostow described the DPM as “a reaction against the JCS position as he understands it and projects it—a reaction that goes a bit too far.” He lauded the emphasis on the internal security situation in South Vietnam but believed that additional manpower would be necessary; he also favored continued bombing in the Hanoi–Haiphong area. (Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, 2EE Primarily McNamara Recommendations) In a May 22 mem-

This memorandum is written at a time when there appears to be no attractive course of action. The probabilities are that Hanoi has decided not to negotiate until the American electorate has been heard in November 1968. Continuation of our present moderate policy, while avoiding a larger war, will not change Hanoi's mind, so is not enough to satisfy the American people; increased force levels and actions against the North are likewise unlikely to change Hanoi's mind, and are likely to get us in even deeper in Southeast Asia and into a serious confrontation, if not war, with China and Russia; and we are not willing to yield. So we must choose among imperfect alternatives.

This memorandum will first assess the current situation; second, analyze the military alternatives that seem to be open to us in connection with General Westmoreland's request for more troops and in connection with military action against North Vietnam; third, consider the diplomatic and political options available to us; and, finally, make recommendations.

[Here follows a brief table of contents.]

## CHAPTER ONE. APPRAISAL OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

### A. United States

The Vietnam war is unpopular in this country. It is becoming increasingly unpopular as it escalates—causing more American casualties, more fear of its growing into a wider war, more privation of the domestic sector, and more distress at the amount of suffering being visited on the non-combatants in Vietnam, South and North. Most Americans do not know how we got where we are, and most, without knowing why, but taking advantage of hindsight, are convinced that somehow we should not have gotten this deeply in. All want the war ended and expect their President to end it. Successfully. Or else.

This state of mind in the US generates impatience in the political structure of the United States. It unfortunately also generates patience in Hanoi. (It is commonly supposed that Hanoi will not give anything away pending the trial of the US elections in November 1968.)

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orandum to Helms, Vance, and Bundy, Rostow described an "intermediate strategy" between the positions of the JCS and that put forth in the DPM. He recommended more troops specifically to secure the demilitarized zone and to assist pacification by operating against Communist forces at the provincial level. His program would include a bolstered anti-infiltration effort and greater selectivity in the bombing of the North, as well as the creation of a contingency reserve force. (Ibid., Vol. LXXI, Memos (A))



## B. South Vietnam

The “big war” in the South between the US and the North Vietnamese military units (NVA) is going well. We staved off military defeat in 1965; we gained the military initiative in 1966; and since then we have been hurting the enemy badly, spoiling some of his ability to strike. “In the final analysis,” General Westmoreland said, “we are fighting a war of attrition.” In that connection, the enemy has been losing between 1500 and 2000 killed-in-action a week, while we and the South Vietnamese have been losing 175 and 250 respectively. The VC/NVA 287,000-man order of battle is leveling off, and General Westmoreland believes that, as of March, we “reached the cross-over point”—we began attriting more men than Hanoi can recruit or infiltrate each month. The concentration of NVA forces across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the enemy use of long-range artillery are matters of concern. There are now four NVA divisions in the DMZ area. The men infiltrate directly across the western part of the DMZ, and supplies swing around through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The NVA apparently plans to nibble at our forces, seeking to inflict heavy casualties, perhaps to stage a “spectacular” (perhaps against Quang Tri City or Hue), and/or to try a major thrust into the Western Highlands. They are forcing us to transfer some forces from elsewhere in Vietnam to the I Corps area.

Throughout South Vietnam, supplies continue to flow in ample quantities, with Cambodia becoming more and more important as a supply base—now of food and medicines, perhaps ammunition later. The enemy retains the ability to initiate both large- and small-scale attacks. Small-scale attacks in the first quarter of 1967 are running at double the 1966 average; larger-scale attacks are again on the increase after falling off substantially in 1966. Acts of terrorism and harassment have continued at about the same rate.

The over-all troop strengths of friendly and VC/NVA forces by Corps Area are shown in Attachments I and II.<sup>3</sup>

All things considered, there is consensus that we are no longer in danger of losing this war militarily.

Regrettably, the “other war” against the VC is still not going well. Corruption is widespread. Real government control is confined to enclaves. There is rot in the fabric. Our efforts to enliven the moribund political infrastructure have been matched by VC efforts—more now through coercion than was formerly the case. So the VC are hurting badly too. In the Delta, because of the redeployment of some VC/NVA

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<sup>3</sup> Not printed are attachments comprised of charts of enemy and friendly strength, combat battalions of both sides, and projected troop deployments.

troops to the area north of Saigon, the VC have lost their momentum and appear to be conducting essentially a holding operation. On the government side there, the tempo of operations has been correspondingly low. The population remains apathetic, and many local government officials seem to have working arrangements with the VC which they are reluctant to disturb.

The National Liberation Front (NLF) continues to control large parts of South Vietnam, and there is little evidence that the revolutionary development program is gaining any momentum. The Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) is tired, passive and accommodation-prone, and is moving too slowly if at all into pacification work.

The enemy no doubt continues to believe that we will not be able to translate our military success in the "big war" into the desired "end products"—namely, broken enemy morale and political achievements by the Government of Vietnam (GVN). At the same time, the VC must be concerned about decline in morale among their ranks. Defections, which averaged 400 per week last year, have, until a slump near the end of April, been running at more than 1000 a week; very few defectors, however, are important people.

[Here follows discussion of Vietnamese politics and rice imports.]

### C. North Vietnam

Hanoi's attitude towards negotiations has never been soft nor open-minded. Any concession on their part would involve an enormous loss of face. Whether or not the Polish and Burchett-Kosygin initiatives had much substance to them, it is clear that Hanoi's attitude currently is hard and rigid. They seem uninterested in a political settlement and determined to match US military expansion of the conflict. This change probably reflects these factors: (1) increased assurances of help from the Soviets received during Pham Van Dong's April trip to Moscow; (2) arrangements providing for the unhindered passage of matériel from the Soviet Union through China; and (3) a decision to wait for the results of the US elections in 1968. Hanoi appears to have concluded that she cannot secure her objectives at the conference table and has reaffirmed her strategy of seeking to erode our ability to remain in the South. The Hanoi leadership has apparently decided that it has no choice but to submit to the increased bombing. There continues to be no sign that the bombing has reduced Hanoi's will to resist or her ability to ship the necessary supplies south. Hanoi shows no signs of ending the large war and advising the VC to melt into the jungles. The North Vietnamese believe they are right; they consider the Ky regime to be puppets; they believe the world is with them and that the American public will not have staying power against them.



Thus, although they may have factions in the regime favoring different approaches, they believe that, in the long run, they are stronger than we are for the purpose. They probably do not want to make significant concessions, and could not do so without serious loss of face.

#### D. International

Most interested governments and individuals appear to assume that the possibility of initiating negotiations has declined over the last several months. Following the failure of Kosygin's efforts while in London, the Soviets apparently have been unwilling to use whatever influence they may have in Hanoi to persuade North Vietnam to come to the conference table while the bombing continues.

The dominant Soviet objectives seem to continue to be to avoid direct involvement in the military conflict and to prevent Vietnam from interfering with other aspects of Soviet-American relations, while supporting Hanoi to an extent sufficient to maintain Soviet prestige in International Communism.

China remains largely preoccupied with its own Cultural Revolution. The Peking Government continues to advise Hanoi not to negotiate and continues to resist Soviet efforts to forge a united front in defense of North Vietnam. There is no reason to doubt that China would honor its commitment to intervene at Hanoi's request, and it remains likely that Peking would intervene on her own initiative if she believed that the existence of the Hanoi regime was at stake.

Whether, apart from Vietnam, China is or soon will be a military threat in the Far East is an interesting question. The current chaos in China certainly bears on the point, as does an analysis of China's history, interests and capabilities. This point is addressed below at page 17.<sup>4</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO. ALTERNATIVE MILITARY COURSES OF ACTION

*Against North Vietnam*, an expansion of the bombing program (Rolling Thunder 56) was approved mid-April. Before it was approved, General Wheeler said, "The bombing campaign is reaching the point where we will have struck all worthwhile fixed targets except the ports. At this time we will have to address the requirement to deny the DRV

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<sup>4</sup> On page 17, not printed, McNamara contended that the Chinese threat to the region and Asia in general had been met. As a result, he foresaw little difficulty in containing Chinese expansionism in the future.

the use of the ports." With its approval, excluding the port areas, no major military targets remain to be struck in the North. All that remains are minor targets, restrikes of certain major targets, and armed reconnaissance of the lines of communication (LOCs)—and, under new principles, mining the harbors, bombing dikes and locks, and invading North Vietnam with land armies. These new military moves against North Vietnam, together with land movements into Laos and Cambodia, are now under consideration by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

*For South Vietnam*, General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp have requested 200,000 additional men (4-2/3 divisions, or 42 additional maneuver battalions; one-half as soon as possible with the remainder required probably in FY 1969) and 13 additional tactical air squadrons. The previously approved program—Program 4—called for General Westmoreland to have 87 maneuver battalions (460,000 men) by December of this year, with late arrivals bringing the number of troops to 470,000 by June 1968. (The "approved" and requested forces are shown in detail in Attachment III.)

The new request would increase the total of US forces in Vietnam to 670,000 and the total in the area to 770,000. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have acted on one-half of this request, recommending that it be approved immediately; they are now addressing the second half and the possibility of additional deployments and force increases beyond the 200,000 requested by General Westmoreland. It is the opinion of the JCS that fulfillment of half or all the request would require calling up Reserves, probably in August of this year. Taking account of the fact that Reserves must be returned to civilian life in a short period of time and that Reserves or their equivalent are needed as insurance against trouble elsewhere in the world, we would at the time of the Reserve call-up have to start immediately to add approximately 200,000 to the active forces to serve as replacements for the Reserves, and approximately 100,000 to the forces needed to train and support the additional forces. The impact of deploying the 200,000 additional troops to Vietnam, therefore, would mean a Reserve call-up, an eventual increase of approximately 500,000 in military strength (from 3,600,000 to 4,100,000), and an increase in the Defense budget for FY 1968 of approximately \$10 billion.

In this setting, we have two alternative military courses of action:

Course A. *Grant the request and intensify military actions outside the South—especially against the North.* Add a minimum of 200,000 men—100,000 (2-1/3 divisions plus 5 tactical air squadrons) would be deployed in FY 1968, another 100,000 (another 2-1/3 divisions and 8 tactical air squadrons) in FY 1969, and possibly more later to fulfill the JCS ultimate requirement for Vietnam and associated world-wide contingencies. Accompanying these force increases (as spelled out below)



would be greatly intensified military actions outside South Vietnam—including in Laos and Cambodia but especially against the North.

Course B. *Limit force increases to no more than 30,000; avoid extending the ground conflict beyond the borders of South Vietnam; and concentrate the bombing on the infiltration routes south of 20°.* Unless the military situation worsens dramatically, add no more than 9 battalions to the approved program of 87 battalions. This course would result in a level of no more than 500,000 men (instead of the currently planned 470,000) on December 31, 1968. (See Attachment IV for details.) A part of this course would be a termination of bombing in the Red River basin unless military necessity required it, and a concentration of all sorties in North Vietnam on the infiltration routes in the neck of North Vietnam, between 17° and 20°.

#### A. Analysis of Course A

Course A would be chosen with a view to bringing additional military pressure to bear on the enemy in the South while continuing to carry out our present missions not directly related to combating enemy main-force units. It would involve accepting the risk—the virtual certainty—that the action, especially the Reserve call-up, would stimulate irresistible pressures in the United States for further escalation against North Vietnam, and for ground actions against “sanctuaries” in Cambodia and Laos.

#### *Rationale*

Proponents of the added deployments in the South believe that such deployments will hasten the end of the war. None of them believes that the added forces are needed to avoid defeat; few of them believe that the added forces are required to do the military job in due course; all of the proponents believe that they are needed if that job is to be done faster. The argument is that we avoided military defeat in 1965; that we gained the military initiative in 1966, since then hurting the enemy badly, spoiling much of his ability to strike, and thus diminishing the power he could project over the population; and that even more-vigorous military initiative against his main forces and base areas will hurt him more, spoil his efforts more, and diminish his projected power more than would be the case under presently approved force-deployment levels. This, the argument goes, will more readily create an environment in South Vietnam in which our pacification efforts can take root and thrive; at the same time—because of our progress in the South and because of the large enemy losses—it will more rapidly produce a state of mind in Hanoi conducive to ending the war on reasonable terms.

Estimates by the proponents vary as to how long the job will take without, and with, the additional forces. General Westmoreland has said that without the additions the war could go on five years. He has said that with 100,000 more men, the war could go on for three years and that with 200,000 more men it could go on for two. These estimates are after taking account of his view that the introduction of a non-professional force, such as that which would result from fulfilling the requirement by calling Reserves, would cause some degradation of morale, leadership and effectiveness.

[Here follows discussion of five issues in the form of questions and answers. McNamara did not expect the enlargement of the military through an expanded draft and reserve call-up in order to obtain the 200,000 reinforcements for Vietnam, and the attendant casualties, to lead to "massive civil disobedience." A more efficient use of troops already in country would not provide sufficient numbers to make unnecessary the additional deployment. The new troops would not be able to make a significant difference in the military situation since the enemy controlled the pace of battle. In addition, the North Vietnamese could match any U.S. build-up. Last, a large deployment would generate "irresistible domestic pressures" for an expansion of the war.]

### *Bombing Purposes and Payoffs*

Our bombing of North Vietnam was designed to serve three purposes:

- (1) To retaliate and to lift the morale of the people in the South who were being attacked by agents of the North.
- (2) To add to the pressure on Hanoi to end the war.
- (3) To reduce the flow and/or to increase the cost of infiltrating men and matériel from North to South.

We cannot ignore that a limitation on bombing will cause serious psychological problems among the men, officers and commanders, who will not be able to understand why we should withhold punishment from the enemy. General Westmoreland said that he is "frankly dismayed at even the thought of stopping the bombing program." But this reason for attacking North Vietnam must be scrutinized carefully. We should not bomb for punitive reasons if it serves no other purpose—especially if analysis shows that the actions may be counterproductive. It costs American lives; it creates a backfire of revulsion and opposition by killing civilians; it creates serious risks; it may harden the enemy.

[Here follows McNamara's argument that the current program of bombing had failed to break the will of North Vietnam to carry out its struggle or to reduce the flow of men and supplies into South Vietnam. An escalation of the air attacks, mining North Vietnamese harbors, or invading the North would only bring more American pilot losses and create a devastating public image of the U.S. Government. This ex-



pansion of the war would likely bring a reaction from the Communist bloc, not only in Southeast Asia but in other trouble spots of the world.]

Those are the likely costs and risks of Course A. They are, we believe, both unacceptable and unnecessary. Ground action in North Vietnam, because of its escalatory potential, is clearly unwise despite the open invitation and temptation posed by enemy troops operating freely back and forth across the DMZ. Yet we believe that, short of threatening and perhaps toppling the Hanoi regime itself, pressure against the North will, if anything, harden Hanoi's unwillingness to talk and her settlement terms if she does. China, we believe, will oppose settlement throughout. We believe that there is a chance that the Soviets, at the brink, will exert efforts to bring about peace; but we believe also that intensified bombing and harbor-mining, even if coupled with political pressure from Moscow, will neither bring Hanoi to negotiate nor affect North Vietnam's terms.

#### B. Analysis of Course B

As of March 18, 1967, the approved US Force Structure (Program 4) for Southeast Asia provided for 87 maneuver battalions, 42 air squadrons, and a total strength of 468,000 men. Based on current forecasts of enemy strength, under Course B it should not be necessary to approve now for deployment more than 9 of the 24 available maneuver battalions and none of the air squadrons—a total of approximately 30,000 men including appropriate land and sea support forces (see Attachment III).

This approach would be based, first, on General Westmoreland's statement that "without [his requested]<sup>5</sup> forces, we will not be in danger of being defeated, . . . but progress will be slowed down," and General Wheeler's support of that view. General Wheeler added, "We won't lose the war, but it will be a longer one." It would be based, second, on the fact that no one argues that the added forces will probably cause the war to end in less than two years. Course B implies a conviction that neither military defeat nor military victory is in the cards, with or without the large added deployments, and that the price of the large added deployments and the strategy of Course A will be to expand the war dangerously. Course B is designed to improve the negotiating environment within a limited deployment of US forces by combining continuous attacks against VC/NVA main force units with slow improvements in pacification (which may follow the new constitution, the national reconciliation proclamation, our added efforts and the Viet-

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<sup>5</sup> Brackets in the source text.

namese elections this fall) and a restrained program of actions against the North.

This alternative would give General Westmoreland 96 maneuver battalions—an 85 per cent increase in combat force over the 52 battalions that he had in Vietnam in June of last year, and 22 per cent more than the 79 we had there at the beginning of this year. According to this report, we have already passed the “cross-over point,” where the enemy’s losses exceed his additions; we will soon have in Vietnam 200,000 more US troops than there are in enemy main force units. We should therefore, without added deployments, be able to maintain the military initiative, especially if US troops in less-essential missions (such as in the Delta and in pacification duty)<sup>6</sup> are considered strategic reserves.

The strategy of proponents of Course B is based on their belief that we are in a military situation that cannot be changed materially by expanding our military effort, that the politico-pacification situation in South Vietnam will improve but not fast, and that (in view of all this) Hanoi will not capitulate soon. An aspect of the strategy is a “cool” drive to settle the war—a deliberate process on three fronts: Large unit, politico-pacification, and diplomatic. Its approach on the large-unit front is to maintain the initiative that “Program 4-plus” forces will permit, to move on with pacification efforts and with the national election in September, and to lay the groundwork by periodic peace probes, perhaps suggesting secret talks associated with limitation of bombing and with a view to *finding a compromise involving, inter alia, a role in the South for members of the VC*.

This alternative would not involve US or Vietnamese forces in any numbers in Laos or Cambodia, and definitely not in North Vietnam. Since the US Reserves would still be untapped, they would still be available for use later in Asia, or elsewhere, if it became necessary.

### *Bombing Program*

The bombing program that would be a part of this strategy is, basically, a program of concentration of effort on the infiltration routes near the south of North Vietnam. The major infiltration-related targets

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<sup>6</sup> [Omitted here is a footnote in the source text in which McNamara pointed out that the bulk of the first 100,000 troops would be assigned to the pacification effort in the Mekong Delta region. He questioned the necessity for employing American troops in an area where there was no external threat to the GVN’s security since almost all of the enemy force there consisted of indigenous insurgents.]



in the Red River basin having been destroyed, such interdiction is now best served by concentration of all effort in the southern neck of North Vietnam. All of the sorties would be flown in the area between 17° and 20°. This shift, despite possible increases in anti-aircraft capability in the area, should reduce the pilot and aircraft loss rates by more than 50 per cent. The shift will, if anything, be of positive military value to General Westmoreland while taking some steam out of the popular effort in the North.

The above shift of bombing strategy, now that almost all major targets have been struck in the Red River basin, can to [*enables*] military advantage [to] be made at any time. It should not be done for the sole purpose of getting Hanoi to negotiate, although that might be a bonus effect. To maximize the chances of getting that bonus effect, the optimum scenario would probably be (1) to inform the Soviets quietly that within a few days the shift would take place, stating no time limits but making no promises not to return to the Red River basin to attack targets which later acquire military importance (any deal with Hanoi is likely to be midwived by Moscow); (2) to make the shift as predicted, without fanfare; and (3) to explain publicly, when the shift had become obvious, that the northern targets had been destroyed, that that had been militarily important, and that there would be no need to return to the northern areas unless military necessity dictated it. The shift should not be huckstered. Moscow would almost certainly pass its information on to Hanoi, and might urge Hanoi to seize the opportunity to de-escalate the war by talks or otherwise. Hanoi, not having been asked a question by us and having no ultimatum-like time limit, would be in a better posture to answer favorably than has been the case in the past. The military side of the shift is sound, however, whether or not the diplomatic spill-over is successful.

### CHAPTER THREE. DIPLOMATIC AND POLITICAL ACTIONS

[Here follows McNamara's discussion of the fact that both sides believed in their cause while the rest of the world lined up in a variety of ways. The current decision had to place the war in the larger context of U.S. interests in the Far East. McNamara suggested that the original goal for intervention, the "perceived need to draw the line against Chinese expansionism in Asia," had already been met and could be consolidated by following Course B. The only objective the United States had in Vietnam was a limited one, in his view: The U.S. Government was committed to allowing the South Vietnamese people the freedom to determine their own future. The U.S. commitment would cease at the point when the South Vietnamese themselves no longer strived toward this goal.]

## D. Suggested Strategy

The strategy that is suggested by the present situation has seven parts;<sup>7</sup>

(1) *Now*: Not to panic because of a belief that Hanoi must be made to capitulate before the 1968 elections. No one's proposal achieves that end.

(2) *Now*: Press on energetically with the military, pacification and political programs in the South, including groundwork for successful elections in September. Drive hard to increase the productivity of Vietnamese military forces.

(3) *Now*: Issue a NSAM nailing down US policy as described herein. Thereafter, publicly, (a) emphasize consistently that the sole US objective in Vietnam has been and is to permit the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future, and (b) declare that we have already either denied or offset the North Vietnamese intervention and that after the September elections in Vietnam we will have achieved success. The necessary steps having been taken to deny the North the ability to take over South Vietnam and an elected government sitting in Saigon, *the South will be in position, albeit imperfect, to start the business of producing a full-spectrum government in South Vietnam.*

(4) *End-May*: Concentrate the bombing of North Vietnam on physical interdiction of men and matériel. This would mean terminating, except where the interdiction objective clearly dictates otherwise, all bombing north of 20° and improving interdiction as much as possible in the infiltration "funnel" south of 20° by concentration of sorties and by an all-out effort to improve detection devices, denial weapons, and interdiction tactics. (The shift might be tied to the May 23 Buddha's birthday standdown. We might talk to the Russians on May 20, make the shift to the funnel on May 21, and go even further by offering to continue the May 23 total stoppage of bombing if North Vietnamese military movements between 17° and 20° are stopped or significantly reduced.)

(5) *July*: Avoid the explosive Congressional debate and US Reserve call-up implicit in the Westmoreland troop request. Decide that, unless the military situation worsens dramatically, US deployments will be limited to Program 4-plus (which, according to General Westmoreland, will not put us in danger of being defeated, but will mean slow progress in the South). Associated with this decision are decisions not to use

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<sup>7</sup> We should not even rule out, as part of the strategy, changing key subordinates in the US Government to meet the charge that "Washington is tired and Washington is stale." [Footnote in the source text.]



large numbers of US troops in the Delta and not to use large numbers of them in grass-roots pacification work.

(6) *September*: Move (force, if necessary) the newly elected Saigon government well beyond its National Reconciliation program to a political settlement with the non-Communist members of the NLF—to try to arrange a ceasefire and to reach an accommodation with the large number of South Vietnamese who are under the VC banner; to accept the non-Communist members of the NLF as members of an opposition political party and, if necessary, to accept their individual participation in the national government—in sum, a settlement to transform the members of the VC from military opponents to political opponents.

(7) *September*: Explain the situation to the Canadians, Indians, British, UN and others, as well as nations now contributing forces, requesting them to contribute border forces to help make the inside-South Vietnam accommodation possible, and—consistent with our desire neither to occupy nor to have bases in Vietnam—offering to remove later an equivalent number of US forces. (This initiative is worth taking despite its slim chance of success.)

### E. Analysis of the Strategy

The difficulties with this approach are neither few nor small: There will be those who disagree with the circumscription of the US commitment (indeed, at one time or another, one US voice or another has told the Vietnamese, third countries, the US Congress, and the public of “goals” or “objectives” that go beyond the above bare-bones statement of our “commitment”); some will insist that pressure, enough pressure, on the North can pay off or that we will have yielded a blue chip without exacting a price in exchange for our concentrating on interdiction; many will argue that denial of the larger number of troops will prolong the war, risk losing it and increase the casualties of the American boys who are there; some will insist that this course reveals weakness to which Moscow will react with relief, contempt and reduced willingness to help, and to which Hanoi will react by increased demands and truculence; others will point to the difficulty of carrying the Koreans, Filipinos, Australians and New Zealanders with us; and there will be those who point out the possibility that the changed US tone may cause a “rush for the exits” in Thailand, in Laos and especially inside South Vietnam, perhaps threatening cohesion of the government, morale of the army, and loss of support among the people. Not least will be the alleged impact on the reputation of the United States and of its President. Nevertheless, the difficulties of this strategy are fewer and smaller than the difficulties of any other approach.

Operationally, it may not be easy to get the Saigon government to talk with the VC. Just as we have had great difficulty in getting them to treat prisoners well, to deal with Chieu Hoi ralliers properly, and to make the Reconciliation Proclamation, we will have difficulty getting them to take steps to permit the VC to play a role in the election process or in the government. Of course, Saigon may surprise us in this regard, depending on the kind of government that is chosen in September. But in the past, the problem has been that Saigon clearly was unwilling to talk from weakness. It is possible, but doubtful, that the post-September government will feel strong enough to fly from the nest. We will probably have to push them. Furthermore, the VC may refuse to talk with the Saigon government. So, the fruits of our effort will necessarily be slow in coming. The chances exist, though, of an accommodation government's being agreed to; and, if our efforts in that direction are total, we can probably make it happen.

Here are contingencies for which we must be prepared in pursuing the recommended strategy:

1. *Hanoi will continue efforts to take over South Vietnam by force.* This is to be expected. Indeed, even if we have a negotiated arrangement with Hanoi, we should expect them to struggle on, as Communists are wont to do.

2. *The Saigon government might collapse under the strain.* We would then have to decide whether to snip a piece of stem, plant it, nurture it, and start over again with the VC excluded, or to follow the example of the Dominican Republic and, to the extent that we could, to force a compromise under our own auspices. The situation would be messy, but, in the eyes of the world, our course would have been honorable and our commitment upheld. We have certainly done enough in fulfilling our commitment to give us the right to knock a few heads together! (We need a contingency plan covering the case of the GVN and perhaps the ARVN falling apart.)

3. *No progress might be made toward the accommodation government.* This would put us in no worse, and probably in a better, position than we now are. If the scenario is faithfully carried out, the "rules of the game" will have been changed by then; the definition of "success" will have been changed. Attention will more and more be focused on Saigon's attempt to produce a working consensus of South Vietnamese people, with the US (and hopefully other countries) role more and more that of fending off or canceling out interference from outside, letting the chips inside fall where they may.

4. *An accommodation government might be formed, but it might choose to go neutral or otherwise to ask us to leave.* We should leave, maintaining the guarantee if the government wished it. This might mean we had a "Finland" or a "Cambodia" in South Vietnam.



5. *The accommodation government might go Communist.* This could happen, but would almost certainly take some time—perhaps 3 to 5 years. This is a bad outcome because it is unlikely the result would be a “Yugoslavia.” “Yugoslavia” are created by countervailing force, e.g., NATO, of which there is “none” in Southeast Asia. Instead, a Communist-dominated SVN would probably join with North Vietnam to carry on subversive attacks on Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. (There is less likelihood that North Vietnam would be a puppet of China under this scenario than under one in which we try to press North Vietnam to capitulation. For Hanoi has made clear that, while it dislikes the Chinese, it prefers a Chinese invasion to an American invasion.) How much this case would appear to be a “defeat” for the US in, say, 1970 would depend on many factors not now foreseeable.

The question arises as to how long the Course B strategy can be continued if progress in South Vietnam is slow and there is no movement by Hanoi toward settlement. Could the President stick at less than 550,000 men in South Vietnam and to a bombing program limited to south of 20°? It would not be easy. But, if Course B is chosen, it must be made clear to political and military leaders alike that the troop limit is firm and, short of an imminent military defeat, will not be breached—the objective will be to make progress, even though it be slow, without the risks of Course A.

#### CHAPTER FOUR. RECOMMENDATIONS

The war in Vietnam is acquiring a momentum of its own that must be stopped. Dramatic increases in US troop deployments, in attacks on the North, or in ground actions in Laos or Cambodia are not necessary and are not the answer. The enemy can absorb them or counter them, bogging us down further and risking even more serious escalation of the war.

Course A could lead to a major national disaster; it would not win the Vietnam war, but only submerge it in a larger one. Course B likewise will not win the Vietnam war in a military sense in a short time; it does avoid the larger war, however, and it is part of a sound military-political/pacification-diplomatic package that gets things moving toward a successful outcome in a few years. More than that cannot be expected. No plan can be fashioned that will give a better chance of success by 1968 or later. Attempts to do so not only produce dangerous plans but also are counterproductive in that they make us look overeager to Hanoi.

We recommend Course B because it has the combined advantages of being a lever toward negotiations and toward ending the war on satisfactory terms, of helping our general position with the Soviets, of

improving our image in the eyes of international opinion, of reducing the danger of confrontation with China and with the Soviet Union, and of reducing US losses.

Robert S. McNamara

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178. Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State<sup>1</sup>

Saigon, May 20, 1967, 1220Z.

26231. Subject: Thieu-Ky. Ref: Saigon 26200.<sup>2</sup>

1. Since dispatch reftel we have been sorting out various reports of what has and has not transpired regarding Thieu's candidacy. It is clear that he has made statements to his colleagues and to two or more journalists that he has decided to run, but he has not made a formal announcement of his candidacy. It is not clear when he may make such a declaration or perhaps even that he will make it, although most indications suggest that he will do so at some stage. It remains possible, however, that his present maneuvers are designed in the first instance to block Ky's path and perhaps secondarily to lay groundwork for an alliance between himself and a civilian candidate.

2. Since Thieu's actual intentions and Ky's possible reactions are not now known, we are planning to take a number of soundings with persons close to both of them, making evident our grave concern at these most recent developments and the effect they may have on our position here and support back home for our effort in Viet-Nam.

3. I had made an appointment with Ky for Saturday morning<sup>3</sup> to present Senator Case,<sup>4</sup> but this was cancelled the same morning, and my office was informed that he would be out of town for the day. Following these initial soundings, I am planning to see both Thieu and Ky, either separately or together depending on what seems best at the time, to state our views very plainly regarding the unacceptability of

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<sup>1</sup> Source: National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1967–69, POL 14 VIET S. Secret; Immediate; Exdis. Received at 9:03 a.m. and passed to the White House, DOD, and CIA at 9:15 a.m. Rostow sent a copy of the telegram to the President, who saw it. On a covering memorandum for that copy, Rostow described the Thieu-Ky rift as "serious." (Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, Vol. LXXI, Memos (A))

<sup>2</sup> In telegram 26200 from Saigon, May 19, Bunker reported that Do told Calhoun that Thieu had definitely decided to become a Presidential candidate. (National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1967–69, POL 14 VIET S)

<sup>3</sup> May 20.

<sup>4</sup> Senator Clifford P. Case (R-NJ).