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J. Ponturo
13 May 1966

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THE SOUTH VIETNAM CRISIS OF 1961: PART II
GENESIS OF THE SECOND PRESIDENTIAL PROGRAM

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FOREWORD

This working paper was written several years ago in the course of working on Critical Incident No. 3, the South Vietnam crisis of late 1961. The study was not completed and this portion of it is itself incomplete. It is published at this time as an internal paper because it may have some intrinsic interest to members of the Critical Incident Project and because of its possible value as background information for anyone concerned with command and control relating to subsequent Vietnam affairs.

The paper covers politico-military decision making during the latter 1961 period, up to the point at which major Presidential decisions were made to introduce the first US operational forces into South Vietnam. A previous working paper, No. 3 in the series, covered the earlier 1961 period.

The reader may wish to know the names of some of the officials mentioned, particularly the following:

DepSecDef	Gilpatric
CJCS	Lemnitzer
CINCPAC	Felt
Ambassador	Nolting
ChMAAG	McGarr
MilRep	Taylor
Dep Special Asst to Pres	Rostow
Director, Task Force on Vietnam	Cottrell
Dep UndSecState	
Pol-Mil Affairs	Johnson
Dep AsstSec/ISA	(Wm) Bundy
Dep AsstSec, Regional Affairs, ISA	Williams

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SUMMARY OF THE SITUATION

THE INSURGENCY

Communist insurgency in South Vietnam grew steadily worse during 1961, continuing the threat which began in late 1959 when the Vietnamese Communists (Viet Cong or VC) switched from predominantly clandestine political/terrorist tactics to more open and aggressive guerrilla warfare.

By the fall of 1961, armed VC strength in South Vietnam was estimated at 15,000 men or more, not counting auxiliary units, agents and supporters.¹ This represented about a five-fold increase in two years and a one-third increase in 1961 alone. Since VC losses during 1961 were running at the rate of about 1000 a month (according to South Vietnamese claims), the increase indicated a substantial capability to recruit additional guerrilla forces, both locally and by infiltration from North Vietnam.

Together with the increase in overall VC strength, there was a significant increase in the size of operating units and their equipment, aggressiveness and freedom of action. Actions involving VC units of 200-500 became frequent and there were even instances of actions involving as many as 1000 VC. The VC appeared to be adequately equipped with small arms, frequently used light machine guns and mortars, and occasionally even rocket launchers, recoilless rifles, night flares, land vehicles, motorboats and radios. Violent incidents rose to a level of 1000 a month, including not only isolated acts of terrorism (such as assassinating or kidnapping village officials) and attacks on the small outposts of the poorly armed and trained village

¹NIE 14.3/53-61, 15 August 1961, SECRET; Dept. of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, RM RFE-1, 29 September 1961, SECRET

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defense forces, but also attacks on sizable regular army units and raids on large towns. In one instance, in early September, a force of about 1000 unusually well-armed and equipped VC attacked an ARVN (Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam) battalion near Kontum in the north-central highlands. The battalion repulsed a number of heavy VC assaults, and called for reinforcements; but by the time it was ready to counterattack, on the third day of the fighting, the VC dispersed in typical guerrilla fashion and contact was lost.¹ In another instance, in mid-September, the VC attacked and overran a province capital 20 miles north of Saigon. Although they held the town only a few hours, they burned down government buildings, liberated several hundred VC prisoners, confiscated over 150 weapons and beheaded the Province Chief (PC) and several members of his staff in front of the assembled townspeople.² Incidents of this kind were not at all typical, but they were impressive demonstrations of VC capabilities.

VC control and influence in the countryside, based primarily on organized coercion and terrorism against the virtually helpless peasant population, continued to spread. In large areas, notably the rural region south and southwest of Saigon and the area just to the north, GVN (Government of (South) Vietnam) authority was effective only by day and only when backed up by military reinforcements. There were also a few areas, such as the Ca Mau peninsula at the southern tip of the country and the swampy Plaine des Joncs area to the west of Saigon near the Cambodian border, which the VC appeared to control both night and day. In the latter areas the prolonged absence of ARVN forces in adequate strength had permitted the VC to establish overt party organizations and provisional local government units, virtually supplanting GVN authority.³

¹PACOM Weekly Intelligence Digest, 20 October 1961, SECRET (summarizing September incidents).

²Ibid.

³Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, RM RFE-1, 29 September 1961, SECRET.

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VC activities made travel throughout much of South Vietnam hazardous. Moreover, VC interdiction of roads and waterways, together with direct pressure on the peasants to hoard their crops or turn them over to the VC, was beginning to cut deeply into the flow of rice and other foodstuffs to the cities. Saigon, for example, which normally consumed 1200 tons of rice a day, was receiving only 900 tons a day, and stocks were insufficient to last until the next harvest. Prices rose, as a consequence, further adding to popular discontent and undermining confidence in the GVN.¹

The Communists had also stepped up their propaganda and other non-violent subversive activities. Their so-called National Liberation Front organization, with its own "news agency" and mobile radio transmitter (or transmitters), was conducting a major campaign to exploit and intensify dissatisfaction with the government, attempting to discredit it, calling for its overthrow, and proposing its replacement by a coalition government acceptable to the North Vietnamese Communists. The Front claimed to represent and speak for non-Communist opponents of the regime in South Vietnam, as well as the Communists, and its major target groups included labor, intellectual and youth groups in the urban areas as well as the peasants. The evident intent was to establish the Front as a rallying point for the discontented; and, further, to promote it as the basis of a possible rival "government" in a "liberated area," or as one which might manage to take over in any confusion resulting from the possible assassination or overthrow of President Diem.

There appeared to be considerable dissatisfaction with the Diem regime throughout the country, although the nature and extent of it were difficult to measure. In the judgment of the US intelligence community, as reflected in a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in

¹USARPAC Intelligence Bulletin, 1 September 1961, SECRET; Dept. of State, Current Foreign Relations, 13 September 1961, SECRET; CIA, Current Intelligence Weekly Summary, 21 September 1961, SECRET.

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August 1961,¹ Diem still had great personal prestige as a resolute leader and was widely respected for his integrity and courage; but he had remained an aloof and uninspiring figure to most Vietnamese and had never generated much active public support. His achievements in bringing a high degree of order to the chaotic situation he inherited at the end of the French Indochina War in 1954 were considered remarkable by most onlookers; but his paternalistic, authoritarian approach, his reliance on a small circle of relatives and private confidants, and his roughshod treatment of critics, had alienated many of the politically conscious elements in the country, especially in the critical Saigon area. The Saigon opposition was badly divided and disorganized, lacked outstanding leaders, and seemed to have little popular appeal outside the city, so that in general it was not considered a significant threat to the regime, but it contributed an undercurrent of criticism and political gossip that accentuated the basic unpopularity of the regime, especially in the eyes of the outside world.

Dissatisfaction among the peasants, over and above a certain amount of traditional antagonism toward any government, was attributed (in the August NIE) mainly to the GVN's inability to assure their protection against Communist violence and intimidation. Some peasant dissatisfaction was believed to derive from excessively harsh and arbitrary methods sometimes employed by local administrators and security forces, but GVN efforts to discipline or remove the more corrupt, harsh, and unpopular officials appeared to be alleviating this source of discontent. The August NIE assessment was that the peasants fundamentally were indifferent to politics at the national level; the GVN did not seem capable of building a groundswell of positive support among them, but neither, in the short run, did the Communists; and whatever peasant unrest existed could be substantially reduced by an improvement in the security situation and a further improvement in official practices in dealing with the populace.

¹NIE 14.3/53-61, Propsects for North and South Vietnam, 15 August 1961, SECRET.

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Dissatisfaction within the GVN itself, and particularly within the armed forces, appeared to be much more serious and a much greater immediate threat to the regime. At virtually all levels, from cabinet members and top military leaders on down, US observers noted serious anxiety and pessimism about the critical internal security situation, and they found considerable disillusionment with Diem's leadership. Officials resented Diem's system of family rule, his personal and often erratic direction of the bureaucracy, his distrust of all but members of his family and a few other intimate advisers in the largely behind-the-scenes inner circle, and his use of the secret Can Lao party machine as a surveillance and control mechanism. Senior military commanders resented Diem's reluctance to permit them a greater role in planning and executing counterinsurgency operations, his frequent disregard of regular channels of command, and his use of the Can Lao to maintain tight control over the military establishment. Throughout the armed forces there was growing concern about the course of the fighting and morale among troops in the field was low.

This dissatisfaction within the GVN and the armed forces was associated with reports of coup plotting. Conspiratorial activity and coup rumors were endemic features of the South Vietnam scene, but they tended to be suppressed during periods when the war effort appeared to be well in hand, or when, as in the spring of 1961, there were convincing shows of US support of the Diem regime. By fall, however, reports of anti-regime activity among the military were on the increase. No new coup group had yet taken shape, according to the August NIE, but the situation was considered "fluid" and "potentially explosive," especially if the internal security situation were to deteriorate further. If that should occur, the chances of a military coup against the Diem regime were expected to increase considerably.

The connection between the chances of a coup and a worsening of the security situation was a significant point in the US estimate,

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since the outlook in September was for an intensification of the VC campaign during the next several months. The expansion of areas under VC control, together with the increased pace and scope of VC paramilitary activities (as illustrated by the series of unusually large engagements in September), indicated that the VC might be preparing for a showdown, and that a decisive phase of the insurgency might be imminent. The immediate danger was not necessarily that the VC could intensify the insurgency to a point that would enable them to seize control of the government and the country directly -- at least, not without aid from North Vietnam that would be tantamount to overt military aggression. The more likely possibilities were that, by stepping up their campaign, the VC would be able to establish a fully "liberated" area or areas strong enough to defend against GVN forces, or to so weaken the GVN as to precipitate its collapse or overthrow; or some combination of both.

If either or both of these contingencies occurred, even short of the actual military conquest of South Vietnam, the war would probably enter a new and much more dangerous stage, with added political complications. If the VC could establish a firmly controlled area of substantial size, they might more plausibly claim world-wide Communist (and possibly neutralist) recognition of the National Liberation Front as a legitimate popular movement, entitled to participate in any genuinely free and representative government, or even to form the basis for such a government; they could make a bid for more substantial and open Bloc assistance, as they had in Laos, counting on the US to find effective counteraction politically difficult; they could put themselves in an improved position to escalate hostilities to the level of conventional civil war, on a larger scale, or, if it seemed more prudent and expedient, to seek an advantageous political settlement at the conference table.

These possibilities were also open to the VC if they could cause an overthrow of the regime, even indirectly, and if they could exploit

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any subsequent confusion or instability in the successor government. As a propaganda target, the VC might have preferred the Diem regime to one that was more liberal and democratic, but it was not likely that any successor government would be any less authoritarian; and the continuation of the Diem regime did appear to foreclose an important option which the VC would undoubtedly like to have, that of seeking a negotiated solution to the war, should it become too costly or risky to continue, or should the Communists believe it expedient to seek another pause in the military campaign, in order to assimilate their gains. A successor government, even though non-Communist, might not be as uncompromisingly opposed to negotiations as was the Diem regime, and might re-open this option for the VC.

Thus, should the Communists succeed in intensifying the insurgency in South Vietnam, they might be able to bring about a situation that was not only extremely serious in its military aspects but also very awkward and difficult to deal with for political reasons. A new government willing to negotiate an end to hostilities would undermine the basis and justification for US military assistance to South Vietnam. Overt Bloc assistance to the VC, on the pretext of supporting a legitimate South Vietnamese movement or government, would make it difficult to avoid the risks of direct great power confrontation in the area, a confrontation in which, because of additional ambiguities in the situation, the US might not necessarily have the preponderant weight of world opinion on its side. Such changes in the political circumstances surrounding the war were potentially more dangerous and troublesome for the US than a further deterioration of the military situation, in and of itself, and might drastically alter the nature of the conflict.

Events in Laos compounded the problem, and added to US apprehensions in the early fall of 1961 concerning an intensified VC campaign in South Vietnam. The Geneva Conference on "neutralizing" Laos, which had dragged on since the previous May, appeared to be

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deadlocked, with the Communists insisting on a veto over inspection arrangements. In Laos itself, the Communists had proceeded to consolidate their positions in the eastern half of the country, to strengthen their forces, and to improve their logistic capabilities. The mountain trails in southern Laos, which the Communists had used for years in moving men and supplies into South Vietnam, were now under solid Communist control, and the Communists were busy improving connecting road links. With the aid of the Soviet airlift from Hanoi, the Communists had also managed to stockpile some 6000 tons of military supplies in the area, a substantial amount for a small force accustomed mainly to "living off the land," and one which could greatly facilitate support of an intensified military effort, whether in Laos or South Vietnam.

The gravity of the Laos situation was pointed up in September, when a series of intelligence reports indicated large-scale infiltration and a substantial buildup of North Vietnamese troops, in battalion-size concentrations, particularly in southern Laos.¹ Like other reports out of Laos, these were not necessarily accurate or reliable, and were difficult to verify. In the context of the situation there and in South Vietnam at the time, however, they seemed quite credible, and appeared to confirm the worst fears of US authorities: namely, that whether or not the Communists intended to launch a full takeover attempt in Laos in the near future, they intended to use controlled areas in Laos as a base for intensified VC operations in South Vietnam.²

GVN leaders were as much alarmed about the situation in Laos as they were about the situation in their own country and saw a direct

¹ ChMAAG Vietnam, for example, passed along reports of a dozen or so enemy battalions in southern Laos, some of them proceeding toward or concentrated along the Laos/South Vietnam border, where, due to the rugged terrain, GVN forces had little capability to prevent (or even detect) infiltration. He warned of a possible widespread increase of subversive activity in South Vietnam during the fall and a VC attempt to move into the final phase of their program to overthrow the GVN. ChMAAG to CINCPAC 100909Z September 1961, SECRET.

² SNIE 53-2-61, "Bloc Support of the Communist Effort Against the Government of Vietnam," 5 October 1961, SECRET.

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connection between the two. In their opinion, Communist operations in Laos were part of a coordinated North Vietnamese offensive aimed at outflanking and eventually conquering South Vietnam. They believed that the "neutralization" of Laos would inevitably result in a Communist dominated government, and they had repeatedly advocated strong action, including military intervention by the US and other SEATO powers, to support pro-West Laotian forces. The evidence that the US was unwilling to intervene in Laos and that it was willing to accept an unsatisfactory political compromise with the Communists worried them, since they saw it as an indicator of the US resolve to stand against Communist advances in Southeast Asia and one which led them to question the dependability of US intentions with respect to their own country. US political overtures and concrete measures of assistance to South Vietnam earlier in 1961 had partly allayed the fears of Diem and other GVN leaders, but had apparently not eliminated them entirely; and, if Diem really understood the distinctions involved in the US policy of reaching a political compromise in Laos but holding fast in South Vietnam, he appeared to have little confidence in its ultimate feasibility.

In general, then, as the US viewed the situation in South Vietnam in the early fall of 1961, there was considerable cause for alarm. The situation was worse, and the signs pointed to a further downturn in the next few months. Communist military capabilities had increased markedly during the year and the pattern of Communist operations, in Laos as well as South Vietnam, appeared to be setting the stage for a new, more aggressive phase of the war. On the political level the Communists appeared to be preparing for the establishment of a rival "liberation" government, which the outside Communist powers could then openly recognize and support, presenting the US with a much more serious political as well as military challenge. In addition, the deterioration of the internal security situation had caused, or brought to the surface, widespread dissatisfaction with the GVN among Vietnamese officials and military leaders and considerable demoralization within

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the armed forces. Conditions seemed to be ripening for a coup and there was a new flurry of coup rumors. Even though it might be instigated by non-Communists, a coup attempt might well benefit the Communists; indeed, precipitating a coup might even be an intermediate objective in Communist strategy, as an important step on the road to takeover. Altogether, the situation seemed more critical than at any time since 1954.

GVN COUNTERMEASURES

GVN resources for countering the VC insurgency included a 150,000-man army (the ARVN), a 5500-man navy (the VNN), and a 5000-man air force (the VNAF). In addition to the regular forces, the GVN had also established the Civil Guard (CG), an armed rural militia of about 60,000 men; and the Self Defense Corps (SDC), a village constabulary force of about 45,000 men.¹

The ARVN was very largely trained under fire and had acquired extensive combat experience in counter-guerrilla warfare. Its leadership was considered among the best in Southeast Asia and although officers who were really qualified above battalion level were in short supply, a high proportion had respectable combat records. The ARVN was deficient in communications and transport and lightly equipped by US standards, but troops generally knew their terrain and had learned to move and fight under adverse conditions. In terms of the kind of war and the internal enemy it faced, the major structural weaknesses of the ARVN appeared to be ineffective logistics, poor intelligence and inexperience in combined arms operations.

The VNN was equipped with patrol boats and minesweepers which gave it some capability for river and coastal patrol operations. Even in terms of this limited mission, however, it was handicapped by lack of technical skills and experience and by weaknesses in logistic support.

¹NIE 14.3/53-61, 14 August 1961, SECRET

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The VNAF had about 200 pilots and 150 aircraft. Most of the aircraft were transport (C-47) and liaison (L-19) types, but there was one fighter squadron of 25 propeller-driven AD-6s.¹ The fighter squadron had performed reasonably well in support of ground operations and the transport units had conducted successful supply and paratroop missions, on a limited scale, but these capabilities were still not very well developed.

The CG and the SDC had not been supported under the US military assistance program for South Vietnam, prior to 1961, and had been organized, trained and equipped by the GVN mainly from its own limited resources.² As a consequence, they were very poorly trained and equipped, even in such basic items as weapons. Scattered about the countryside in small units, unable to coordinate well with the regular forces because of command problems and poor communications, they were extremely vulnerable to VC raids and ambushes, were a prime source of GVN weapon and ammunition losses to the VC, and suffered most of the GVN casualties.

As a result of US decisions in the spring of 1961 to provide increased assistance to the GVN counterinsurgency effort, in the early fall of 1961 GVN forces were in process of being reorganized and expanded. The ARVN was being increased by 20,000 men to 170,000 and planning was under way for a possible further increase to 200,000. ARVN units had been redeployed throughout the country, in territorially organized corps and division "tactical zone" commands, to take on counterinsurgency (rather than the external threat) as their primary immediate mission. Over half of the ARVN was continuously engaged in security operations, making it difficult to relieve combat units for retraining, but efforts were being made to recycle them through training programs reflecting greater emphasis on counter guerrilla

¹ Douglas Skyraiders. This aircraft has since been redesignated the A-1.

² USOM, however, had furnished advisers and some aid to the CG under one of its police assistance programs.

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tactics and techniques. Within the ARVN, greater stress was also being placed on leadership training and on organizing, training and equipping ranger units and special forces for unconventional warfare missions.

In addition, the VNN was developing a Junk Force, a force of native junk vessels, to assist in patrolling coastal and inland waterways; the VNAF was developing a radar surveillance capability, to enable it to cope with enemy aircraft if they should be employed;¹ and both the CG and the SDC, now brought under the US military assistance program, were receiving accelerated training and improved equipment.

Although it was felt in the early fall of 1961 that these measures were beginning to show favorable results, it was acknowledged in the US intelligence community that they could not be expected to produce a conclusive improvement in the internal security situation for 12 to 18 months -- even if there was no substantial increase in enemy capabilities and even if the GVN made a strenuous all-out effort.² As already noted, however, enemy capabilities had continued to increase during 1961 and further increases were likely, especially with the outside support that could easily be provided through Laos. Worse still, the GVN was hardly making an all-out effort, at least of the kind that US officials, both in Washington and in Saigon, believed to be required.

Despite considerable prodding by US representatives throughout 1961, the GVN had not mounted a systematic counterinsurgency campaign,

¹At the time it was doubtful that North Vietnam had a significant air force, but an air force headquarters had been organized in its Defense Ministry, some personnel had received pilot training (and may have participated in the Soviet airlift from Hanoi to Laos), and a few propeller-driven fighters had been observed in North Vietnam. However, North Vietnam had a number of good airfields and it would have been easy for Communist China or the USSR to provide aircraft, or to operate them on behalf of the North Vietnamese, at short notice. See NIE 14.3/53-61, 15 August 1961, SECRET.

²NIE 14.3/53-61, 15 August 1961, SECRET

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embracing political and economic as well as military measures and providing for maximum utilization of its resources (including the rather substantial aid it was getting from the US). It had failed to enact the political reforms that would have promoted a more "liberal and representative image of the regime, perhaps enabling it to muster greater popular support and more active public participation in the counterinsurgency effort. It had also failed to put into effect the organizational reforms necessary to improve the coordination and direction of counterinsurgency operations. Diem had gone through the motions of establishing an Internal Security Council to provide for central direction and coordination of a national counterinsurgency campaign, but this appeared to be a token gesture. He still insisted on making most decisions himself, delegated little real authority and permitted little initiative to the Council or his cabinet ministers and continued to rely heavily on personally trusted agents operating largely outside the formal structure of government. As early as the spring of 1961 he had formally agreed to most of the concepts and proposals in the US Counterinsurgency Plan (CIP), which called for the GVN to develop an overall plan, consisting of mutually supporting political, economic and military measures, but thus far no such plan had been developed. Even on the military side, to which Diem characteristically accorded greatest priority, progress in developing a campaign plan for defeating the VC was extremely slow. A "concept for pacification operations" upon which to base "pacification plans" for each corps area was not issued by the GVN until late in July 1961; the corps plans, which together were supposed to constitute the military portion of the overall national counterinsurgency plan were not submitted for approval until early October and had not yet been finalized.¹ Meanwhile, military operations continued to be conducted in a fragmented, uncoordinated manner; with poor civil-military teamwork, even in intelligence matters; with inadequate planning of fire

¹ChMAAG to CINCPAC 180109Z August 1961, SECRET; ChMAAG to CINCPAC 130259Z October 1961, SECRET

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support, communications, logistics and the like; with overemphasis on terrain objectives and on defensive rather than offensive operations; and with insufficient orientation toward unconventional, guerrilla-type warfare.¹

A major obstacle in planning and conducting effective military operations was the lack of coherent and clearcut military command channels. Diem claimed to have given his military commanders full authority over military operations, as called for by the CIP, but his top commanders insisted to US representatives that they had little actual authority and that Diem still frequently by-passed them and meddled unnecessarily in tactical operations. In this respect, the principal source of military complaints was the dual role of the Province Chief (PC), who was involved in both the civil and military chains of command.

Although generally a professional military officer, of field grade rank, the PC was the principal civil authority in his province, appointed by and reporting directly to Diem. However, he also wore a second hat, as the commander of a military "sector" within a Division Tactical Zone, in which capacity he was ostensibly in the military chain of command (each province was designated a military sector; there might be from two-to-eight such province/sectors in a Division Tactical Zone). In his civil capacity the PC was responsible for local security as well as other matters, and usually had CG and SDC units at his disposal, over which higher military headquarters had no direct control; planning of any regular military operations which required the assistance of CG and SDC units were therefore subject to coordination and negotiation with the PC. In addition, in his military capacity, the PC might be assigned ranger companies and other ARVN units, ostensibly under Division Tactical Zone control. Such

¹These were the views of ChMAAG, as expressed to President Diem. See JCS 2343/18, 23 August 1961, enclosing a letter from ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 9 August 1961, SECRET; and JCS 2343/10, 7 August 1961, enclosing an Aide Memoire from ChMAAG to Diem, 3 July 1961, SECRET

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assignments might be made directly by Diem, at the request of the PC, without necessarily clearing with intervening military commands as to their operational plans or commitments. When such assignments were made, even for specific, temporary tasks, efforts of Division commanders to see to the proper employment of the forces involved or to re-assume command over them for other operations could be thwarted if the PC, in his civil hat, successfully protested to Diem. Military orders and directives to the PC could similarly be countermanded by direct appeal to Diem, virtually nullifying whatever advantages might have accrued by bringing the PC within the military chain of command.

The PC arrangement was workable only if and when, in military matters, Diem operated through the military chain of command and supported military commanders in conflicts with PCs; that is, if he enforced the military role of the PC as a sector commander subordinate to division and higher military headquarters. As it was, Diem often sided with the PCs and overruled his military commanders, even in tactical details. He allowed sufficient ambiguity and uncertainty in the system to make effective military planning and the execution of well-coordinated military operations extremely difficult, if not impossible. And he perpetuated methods of administration that, because of the PC's primary stake in protecting the assets in his particular province, promoted a piecemeal, cautious, and unduly defensive approach to fighting the VC.

In sum, as reviewed by US authorities throughout most of 1961, the principal defects of the GVN counterinsurgency effort were not attributable to a lack of adequate military and other resources so much as to poor utilization of the resources that were available. Deficiencies in the strength and capabilities of GVN military and paramilitary forces had been noted, of course, and, with increased US help, were being remedied. But the most glaring deficiency of all was the failure of the GVN to organize and conduct a systematic, all-out counterinsurgency campaign. The GVN did not have a national

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counterinsurgency plan to coordinate the efforts of all agencies, military and civil, national and local; it had resisted US suggestions and proposals with respect to such a plan; and its progress in developing one of its own was very slow. The GVN did not even have a military plan to govern military operations. Moreover, because of the reluctance of the GVN to delegate operational responsibilities to military commanders and to direct military operations through a clearly delineated military chain of command, such operations as were conducted were poorly planned and poorly executed, overly fragmented and unduly defensive, with the initiative usually on the enemy side. Here the basic fault rested with President Diem and his management methods, which were designed more to preserve his power than to prosecute an effective campaign. Unless Diem could be persuaded to change his ways, US representatives were not hopeful that the insurgency could really be defeated.

US PLANS AND PROGRAMS

The basic framework of US policy and action with respect to South Vietnam in the fall of 1961 was embodied in a comprehensive Program of Action, a 44-point program of political, economic and military assistance measures designed "to prevent the Communist domination of South Vietnam."¹ The Program had been formulated during the spring of 1961 by a high-level interagency task force in Washington led by the DepSecDef, and had been approved by the President in a series of National Security Council (NSC) decisions. Implementation of the Program was being monitored by a continuing Presidential Task Force organized at the staff officer level, chaired by an official from State, with representatives from ISA, the JCS, Treasury, Bureau of the Budget, ICA,² USIA, and the Office of the Presidential Assistant for National Security Affairs. The existence of the Program and the Task Force testified to the urgency with which

¹Task Force on Vietnam, "Presidential Program for Vietnam," 23 May 1961; and "Supplement to Presidential Program for Vietnam," 11 September 1965; both SECRET

²International Cooperation Administration, predecessor of the Agency for International Development (AID)

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the President regarded the South Vietnam situation, and to the priority he accorded to US actions to counter the Communist threat there. It was clear that the President desired a unified and accelerated US effort and that he hoped to obtain an extraordinary degree of inter-agency consultation and cooperation, in both Washington and the field, to support it.

Unification of the US effort was only one aspect of the Program, however, because in substance it was not a program of direct US action to counter the insurgency in South Vietnam but a program to provide greater US support of GVN actions to counter the insurgency. In these terms the chief aim of the Program was to induce the GVN to organize and conduct a broader and more effective counterinsurgency campaign, consisting of political, economic and military measures to win over the populace as well as to destroy VC forces; and providing for more efficient utilization of all resources. The measures in the Program were intended to assist in developing such a GVN campaign and to provide greater resources for prosecuting it.

Previous attempts to persuade Diem to mount such a campaign had met with little success, primarily because the political and organizational measures that were proposed called for fundamental changes in the highly centralized and personal system of rule to which Diem seemed dedicated. These attempts had created major difficulties in US-GVN relations, not only because Diem disagreed with US views on the need for changes, but also because US views of this nature were implicitly critical of his regime, and even of his abilities. In the spring of 1961, however, the US had a new Democratic administration in Washington and a new Ambassador in Saigon, both of whom could perhaps disassociate themselves from past irritants and put themselves in position to be more persuasive than US representatives had managed to be in the past. Accordingly, the Ambassador was instructed to make a fresh and basically sympathetic approach to Diem, offering the inducement of the substantially increased US aid in the Presidential

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Program and eliciting from him a commitment to take positive steps to organize and conduct an effective campaign.

Along these lines, the political measures contained in the Program were intended to restore Diem's confidence in the US, by making strong pronouncements and providing other manifestations of US support; to improve the GVN's relations with other countries and its status in world opinion, primarily by diplomatic activity in friendly capitals; and to strengthen Diem's popular support within South Vietnam, by helping to improve government-to-people communications and by continuing to nudge Diem in the direction of altering some of the regime's more unpopular practices. With respect to the latter, US views on the need for genuine political and administrative reforms had not changed, but had been put aside as probably unacceptable to the GVN. The Ambassador was to negotiate whatever political modifications he could and still remain on good terms with Diem; but the details were left to his discretion.

The economic measures in the Program, which provided for greatly increased economic aid to South Vietnam, were selected largely for psychological effect. The Program was to support short-term "impact" projects in rural welfare and development, and increased "civic action" activities by both civil and military agencies. In addition, in order to demonstrate US confidence in the future of South Vietnam, the US was to help plan and finance a 5-year economic development plan for the country.

The military measures were to provide additional military assistance for a 20,000-man increase (to 170,000) in GVN regular forces, as well as to support the CG, the SDC, and the Junk Force; to install a radar surveillance system; to provide special forces training to GVN special forces, and to provide US military specialists to work with GVN forces in health, welfare, and public works activities in the villages; to study with the GVN the problem of border control and the possibility of establishing a joint facility to develop and test

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new counterinsurgency technology and techniques; and to increase the MAAG as necessary to support these measures.

Although the Presidential Program had been developed in an atmosphere of great urgency and although the GVN had readily agreed to its provisions (particularly since no specific commitments on the political side were exacted), its actual implementation got off to a delayed start and moved rather slowly. In the first place, it was only an outline program, developed in considerable haste and acted upon by the President before much of the necessary staff work could be accomplished. Almost every important measure required further study, further negotiations with the GVN, and further decisions on substantive detail, before it could be put into effect. In the second place, obtaining the necessary resources and getting them to South Vietnam, besides involving additional planning and programming, did not prove to be an easy matter.

For example on 29 April,¹ the President approved the establishment of a radar surveillance capability in South Vietnam, to provide warning of possible Communist overflights. On 2 May the JCS asked for CINCPAC's recommendations on what was required.² CINCPAC dispatched a team of AC&W specialists from PACAF to South Vietnam for an on-the-spot survey, which was completed on 29 June.³ The team found that even with severe compression of normal lead times for planning, funding, procurement and construction, establishment of a suitable permanent heavy radar site would require 18 months. In the interim, the only solution seemed to be to deploy a US mobile air control unit, from CONUS resources since PACOM units were fully committed to current contingency plans; specifically, the team recommended a USAF Control and Reporting Center.⁴ CINCPAC queried the USAF about this. The

¹JCS 1992/973, 2 May 1961, TOP SECRET

²JCS 995205 to CINCPAC, 021840Z May 1961, SECRET

³ChMAAG to CINCPAC 200915Z July 1961, SECRET

⁴CINCPAC Command History, 1961 (CINCPAC Ser. 000128, 27 April 1962, TOP SECRET

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reply, on 23 July, was that USAF mobile AC&W assets worldwide were so committed that none were available and CINCPAC should approach the JCS for a solution.¹ CINCPAC then recommended to the JCS that either the USAF or the Marine Corps be tasked to provide a suitable unit, either a Control and Reporting Center or, in the case of the Marines, an Air Control Squadron.² This was on 8 August.

J-3 looked into the question and advised that either a USAF Control and Reporting Center or a Marine Air Control Squadron could be made available from the US, but that these units had a greater capability than was required. The USAF had a smaller unit, a 45-man Reporting Post, which did not have an air control capability but which could accomplish the surveillance mission; it was a relatively self-sufficient unit except for perimeter security and logistical support and was air transportable; and it would be more economical of men and equipment than either of the units suggested. However, no effort had been made to investigate the foreign policy implications of deploying such a unit to South Vietnam, in terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords on Indochina, which in effect placed a ceiling on US military personnel in South Vietnam and prohibited the introduction of military equipment except on a replacement basis.³ In order to get the Geneva Accords question resolved, J-3 suggested that the SecState be requested to obtain GVN clearance for introducing the unit, a request which should trigger a resolution of the issue.⁴

The JCS approved the J-3 recommendations on 5 September and on 9 September a memorandum was sent to the SecDef, recommending the deployment of a Reporting Post and suggesting coordination with State on political clearance of the unit.⁵ A DepSecDef memorandum was

¹Hq. USAF to CINCPAC and PACAF, 89658, 23 July 1961, SECRET

²CINCPAC to JCS 080005Z August 1961, SECRET

³The general problem of the 1954 Geneva Accords and US policy with respect to them is discussed below.

⁴JCS 2343/19, 11 September 1961, TOP SECRET

⁵JCS 2343/19, 11 September 1961, TOP SECRET

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forwarded to State on 18 September, describing the unit and asking State to obtain GVN clearance (without, however, indicating that the Geneva Accords might be an obstacle to its introduction into South Vietnam).¹ State apparently did not make an issue of the question, provided the unit did not engage in ground-to-air communications that might give its presence away and invite propaganda exploitation by the Communists,² and the unit was thereupon deployed. It was in place in South Vietnam on 5 October and by the end of the month was fully operational on a 24-hour a day basis.³

Thus, in this case it had taken six months from the basic Presidential decision to get the specific details resolved and the action implemented. Parenthetically, it may be noted that the situation in South Vietnam had changed in the meanwhile and the tempo of military activity, including VNAF tactical air operations, had greatly increased. As a result, a few weeks after the surveillance unit became operational, ChMAAG was impelled to ask for additional men and equipment to provide a tactical air control capability as well.⁴

Similar delays and difficulties beset other measures in the Program. Funding problems associated with supporting the additional 20,000 troops were not solved, on the US side and with the GVN, until mid-July.⁵ Equipment requisitioned by ChMAAG for these troops did not begin to arrive in South Vietnam until August and only a tenth of it had arrived by October.⁶ Moreover, GVN induction machinery and

¹N/H of JCS 2343/19, 21 September 1961, TOP SECRET

²This is inferred from Saigon to State 652, 14 November 1961, CONFIDENTIAL, which requested State's authorization for the unit to engage in ground-to-air communications in spite of the (Embassy's) assumption that the "Reds" would read such communications and might "distort" them for their own purposes.

³ChMAAG to CINCPAC 050732Z October 1961, SECRET; and ChMAAG to CINCPAC 310605Z October 1961, SECRET

⁴CINCPAC Command History, 1961 (Ser. 000128, 27 April 1962) TOP SECRET

⁵Ibid

⁶ChMAAG to CINCPAC 050345Z August 1961, SECRET; and 130259Z October 1961 SECRET

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training facilities severely limited the troop call-up rate, so that by the fall of 1961, while most of the additional units had been activated (at least on paper), actual operational capabilities of the armed forces had not really changed very much.¹

The situation was even worse with respect to the CG and SDC programs, which were essentially new elements in the Military Assistance Program. Here MAAG personnel had to prepare operational concepts, unit TO&Es and training plans; coordinate with the rest of the Country Team on funds and other matters; and, finally, negotiate the relevant agreements with the GVN (which would typically accept MAAG proposals only after thorough study, often returning with counter-proposals which then had to be re-staffed on the US side). Both the CG and SDC programs were also hampered by a shortage of indigenous trainers and facilities and by a shortage of personnel with acceptable leadership qualities, and both were slow to get underway. By the end of September only 10 CG companies had completed the 24-week basic training course, and the SDC program had not progressed much beyond the training of selected cadre personnel. In the latter program, the GVN had still not accepted ChMAAG's master training plan.²

The Junk Force program, which envisaged a force of nearly 500 sailing and motor junks to help control infiltration along the coast, also moved slowly. The GVN was to provide the junks and crews, while the US was to provide weapons and radios. The first junks and crews were obtained from the South Vietnamese fishing fleet and were found unsatisfactory, whereupon it was decided that new junk construction, more selective recruitment, and additional crew training would be necessary. By the fall of 1961, less than 80 sailing junks had been acquired; a GVN-designed prototype motor junk had been tested (sea

¹ChMAAG to CINCPAC 130903Z July 1961, SECRET; and 120259Z October 1961, SECRET

²ChMAAG to CINCPAC 150725Z September 1961, SECRET; and 280925Z September 1961, SECRET

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trials) and had proved unsatisfactory; and only about 170 personnel had been recruited.¹

The planned expansion of GVN special forces, from some 300 to 800 men, also encountered difficulties. Although the numbers involved were relatively small, the GVN was reluctant either to release special forces personnel for retraining or to detach regular troops for the additional training required to qualify as special forces, because of operational commitments. The GVN also seemed to have difficulty finding suitable recruits outside of the armed forces and insisted on a careful political screening of candidates, which took time. By the fall of 1961, only about 150 special forces recruits were on hand undergoing training.²

In the civic action area, the Presidential Program called for providing US military specialists to assist GVN forces in local health, welfare, and public works activities. The GVN had neither an organization nor a real program for civic action, however, and a special civic action mobile training team was sent from the Department of the Army to help develop them. The team arrived in South Vietnam in July, began to train two South Vietnamese civic action companies and conducted extensive field surveys to look into possibilities for civic action projects. The field surveys were completed in September, but it was another month before the team developed a program that could be recommended to the GVN.³

Border surveillance and control, although a critical problem and one designated in the Presidential Program as warranting priority attention, had also made little progress by the fall of 1961. A MAAG-GVN study group was formed to investigate the problem and

¹ChMAAG to CINCPAC 310929Z August 1961, SECRET; and 280925Z September 1961, SECRET; CINCPAC Command History, 1961 (Ser. 000128, 27 April 1962) TOP SECRET

²CINCPAC Command History, 1961 (Ser. 000128, 27 April 1962) TOP SECRET; ChMAAG to CINCPAC 310929Z August 1961, SECRET

³ChMAAG to CINCPAC 200915Z July 1961, SECRET; 280925Z September 1961, SECRET; and 310605Z October 1961, SECRET

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considered several ideas, including helicopter patrols (rejected because maintenance facilities were completely inadequate for the large numbers of helicopters that would be involved), chemical defoliation to clear fire-breaks along the border (held in abeyance pending field tests of chemical defoliants), a road construction program to improve border access (still in the planning stage), and other measures. The GVN did have a system of border outposts, but these were small and vulnerable, confined largely to static defense, and difficult to support logistically. Some of the more remote outposts, for example, had to be resupplied by porters, which could involve as much as a 30-day round trip. During the spring and summer of 1961, one of the GVN corps zones began to experiment with the outposts in its area, regrouping them into larger and more defensible bases, each to have a C-47 airstrip and ultimately access roads, and from which GVN forces were to engage in aggressive patrolling to intercept VC infiltrators. Reorganization of outposts along these lines was approved by the GVN for this corps zone in late August, but approval was still pending on other corps plans and there was still no overall plan for border control in October.¹

The joint US-Vietnamese Combat Development and Test Center (CDTS) to study counterinsurgency equipment and techniques was established in Saigon in June but administrative details were not fully worked out for several months. By fall it had four projects underway: a chemical to kill the tapioca plant on which the guerrillas depended for food, a chemical to destroy jungle foliage around potential ambush areas, a terminal guidance beacon for use in air-drop operations and the use of scout dogs to aid in patrolling. The techniques and materials for the tests had to be brought in from the US, however, and the tests had to be coordinated with the South Vietnamese. Despite attempts to expedite the necessary actions, these projects, like the other measures, had made little headway by October.

¹ChMAAG to CINCPAC 061051Z July 1961, SECRET; 050245Z August 1961, SECRET; 310929Z August 1961, SECRET; 280925Z September 1961, SECRET; 130259Z October 1961, SECRET; and CINCPAC to ChMAAG 202040Z October 1961, SECRET

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The military portion of the Presidential Program also included an expansion of the MAAG, "as necessary," to handle the heavier workload of training, advising and administering military assistance. This, too, moved slowly and with difficulty, illustrating some of the political as well as other complications in attempting to accelerate military assistance in South Vietnam.

ChMAAG's initial request was for augmentation of the MAAG by 100 men. This was not approved until July. Only about half the personnel had arrived by the end of August and only about 75 by October.¹ Meanwhile the MAAG was short of advisers to cover newly activated South Vietnamese units. As late as mid-October ChMAAG reported that unless the personnel actions were further expedited some activated units would be without US advisers for five or six months.²

What made the situation even worse was that the MAAG was already understaffed and had been forced to operate under a rather tight and arbitrary personnel ceiling as a result of the 1954 Geneva Accords on Indochina. The Accords, which the US had not signed but declared it would respect, prohibited the introduction of "additional" foreign military personnel into South Vietnam. At the time, there were 342 US and 546 French military advisers in the country, a total of 888. Although the French personnel were withdrawn during the next two years, and the US assumed the entire burden of aiding and advising GVN forces, it was not clear that the US could overtly fill the former French spaces without incurring problems with the Canadian-Indian-Polish International Control Commission (ICC), established in 1954 to ensure compliance with the Accords. Consequently, rather than expand the MAAG, the US in 1956 introduced a 350-man military Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM), whose overt mission was to

¹ ChMAAG to CINCPAC 200915Z July 1961, SECRET; 310929Z August 1961, SECRET; 280925Z September 1961, SECRET

² ChMAAG to CINCPAC 161107Z October 1961, SECRET

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recover the US military equipment provided for French use during the Indochina War, a mission which the ICC reluctantly accepted as legitimate, but whose covert mission was to aid in logistical and technical training of GVN forces, which the ICC might not have accepted. Personnel in the MAAG plus those in the TERM totalled 692.

Most of the US equipment was recovered by 1959, threatening to deprive TERM of its cover, and the GVN finally informed the ICC that TERM would be withdrawn by the end of 1960. TERM was in fact phased out in December 1960.

In the interim, however, the insurgency in South Vietnam had intensified, and in February 1960 the GVN notified the ICC that it was asking the US to increase the size of the MAAG, due to North Vietnam's subversive activities in violation of the Accords. The proposal was to increase MAAG strength to 685, a figure selected in order to facilitate ICC concurrence, by showing a reduction (from 692) of the US military presence, while avoiding the number (692) associated with the MAAG-TERM arrangement, which might have made the US vulnerable to charges that TERM had been a device for circumventing the Accords. In April 1960 the ICC voted by 2-1, with the Polish representative in the negative, to "note" the GVN declaration -- a vote which did not constitute approval but which did not specifically enjoin the GVN against having the MAAG expanded, either -- and authorized MAAG strength was established at 685.¹ (An Administrative Support Unit of 55 military communications, medical, and administrative personnel under the control of ChMAAG was not counted against this ceiling because it could be listed as part of the Embassy (Diplomatic Mission) rather than the MAAG.²)

Although the US was thus able to expand overt MAAG strength from 342 to 685, the issue of whether the US was entitled as a matter of

¹ Memo for the Record, "MAAG Vietnam," (ISA/FER Files), 31 October 1961, SECRET

² Ibid

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principle to the former French spaces (which with the US spaces would have set the ceiling at 888) had still not been tested. After the US decision in 1961 to increase the 685-man MAAG by another 100 men, the opportunity arose again. The Ambassador approached the Canadian ICC member in Saigon, the most friendly of the three to US interests, and revealed the US intention to overtly increase the MAAG on the basis of a US claim to all 888 spaces. (Curiously enough, he did not take this step until early October, months after the augmentation had actually begun.¹) The Canadian responded with "shock" and "alarm"; he said that the Canadian government had even been dubious about the legality of the 1960 increase to 685, and certainly could not justify a still greater increase; and he argued that it was not necessary to exceed the 685 ceiling overtly in view of the possibilities for doing so covertly, i.e., without officially informing the ICC. The Ambassador recommended to State that, in view of the Canadian reaction (the Indian and Polish reactions would undoubtedly have been much worse), the US should continue to retain the overt ceiling of 685 and handle any expansion above the ceiling covertly.² State concurred.³

This did not dispose of the problem, however. Even before the decision on handling the 100 augmentation covertly, ChMAAG had submitted additional requirements for 318 more men by the end of 1961 and 406 others during the first half of 1962, rather large numbers to conceal even if one or more members of the ICC chose to look the other way.⁴ The Geneva Accords issue had to be faced anew.

Thus, some six months after major Presidential decisions to mount an accelerated Program of Action to reverse the Communist tide in South Vietnam, not much success had been registered. Implementation of the Program had encountered a series of unforeseen difficulties

¹Saigon to State 435, 4 October 1961, SECRET

²Ibid

³State to Saigon 389, 5 October 1961, SECRET

⁴Memo for the Record, "MAAG Vietnam," (ISA/FER Files), 31 October 1961, SECRET

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and delays, and moved very slowly. The main US objective in committing itself to a program of substantially increased aid, which was to induce the GVN to organize a systematic and vigorous counterinsurgency campaign, had still to be realized. Meanwhile, the situation had continued to deteriorate and appeared to be more critical than ever, with Communist insurgency on the rise and continuing to make serious inroads on the GVN's hold on the country, and with a number of indicators pointing strongly toward a more intensified and politically complicated phase of the war. It appeared that only prompt and effective counter-measures, more far-reaching than any thus far undertaken, could prevent a Communist victory.

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THE MILREP MISSION

ORIGINS

At a news conference on 11 October 1961, the President announced that he was sending his Military Representative (MilRep) to Southeast Asia to "discuss" ways in which the U.S. could better "assist in meeting the threat to South Vietnam." The MilRep was to provide the President -- and the JCS, he said -- with "an educated military guess" about the situation. Asked whether he was considering sending U.S. troops to South Vietnam, Laos, or Thailand, the President said, "We're going to wait until [the MilRep] comes back" and "then we can come to conclusions."¹

The office of MilRep, the full title of which was Military Representative of the President, was new and unusual, insofar as the limited public knowledge of it was concerned.² A few days after the Bay of Pigs affair in April 1961, the President had called the former Chief of Staff of the Army out of retirement for what were announced as special and presumably temporary White House assignments in the areas of intelligence, unconventional warfare, and counterinsurgency.³ Then, in June, after the President's meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna, which sparked the Berlin crisis of 1961, the President announced his appointment as MilRep, as a staff officer in the White House to advise and assist him in the military matters reaching him in his role as Commander-in-Chief, and to represent him when he desired senior military representation at home or abroad. Although there was some

¹New York Times (NYT), 12 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

²The information available for this study provides no details on the duties and functions of this office, beyond what has been available in the open press. The office was perhaps uniquely individual; when the MilRep was made CJCS in July 1962 it was permitted to lapse.

³NYT, 23 April 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

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ambiguity in the position as far as the public was concerned, and considerable press speculation as to the meaning and significance of the appointment, the President stated clearly that the MilRep would not be "interposed" between himself and his statutory advisers or advisory bodies in defense matters, such as the SecDef, the JCS, or the NSC.¹

From the little information that is available; the coincidence in time between the MilRep's appointment and the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev seems rather significant, and possibly related to the sharp increase in U.S.-Soviet tensions that followed the meeting. In an address to the nation, the President described the Khrushchev talks as "somber", especially on the subject of Germany and Berlin; on the latter, Khrushchev had delivered a note calling for the "normalization" of the situation, and threatening to sign a separate treaty with East Germany turning over to the East Germans control over access to West Berlin, if no solution were reached in six months' time.² The President attempted to impress the nation with the seriousness of the situation and with the risk that it could lead to war; and there followed a series of decisions and moves on both the U.S. and Soviet sides that quickly put the Berlin problem in the forefront as a major potential crisis area, dominating newspaper headlines throughout the summer and fall of 1961. On 25 July, for example, the President made a major public address, highlighting the Berlin situation, and calling for a \$3.25 billion increase in the Defense budget, a 200,000-man expansion of the armed forces, and a major civil defense shelter program.³ On 13 August the East Germans sealed the East Berlin border

¹NYT, 27 June 1961, UNCLASSIFIED. The appointment was perhaps in keeping with the President's apparent preference for what one academic expert on the Presidency called "multiple conduits" carrying ideas up and down from the White House. He added that there were so many sources of opinion converging on the President that it was virtually impossible to learn who was saying what, when, and with what effect. See Sydney Hyman, "The Testing of Kennedy", New Republic, 2 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

²NYT, 7 July 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

³NYT, 26 July 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

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and erected the wall.¹ On 20 August the U.S. reinforced the Berlin garrison.² On 1 September the USSR resumed nuclear tests, breaking the unofficial 34-month moratorium.³ On 5 September the U.S. announced it would resume nuclear tests in the laboratory and underground.⁴ On 9 September Defense announced the deployment of an additional 40,000 troops to Europe.⁵ On 19 September the SecDef ordered two National Guard divisions and other reserve units to active duty.⁶ On 6 October the President and Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko held a two-hour talk, with what the press reported as "zero" results.⁷ On 11 October the SecDef announced that an additional 10,000 troops would be sent to Europe.⁸ On 23 October the USSR exploded a 30-50 megaton weapon.⁹ On 27 October U.S. and Soviet tanks had a tense 16-hour confrontation at the Friedrichstrasse crossing point in Berlin.¹⁰ On 30 October the USSR exploded a 50 megaton weapon.¹¹

The atmosphere of crisis generated by these events was reflected in a public opinion poll which showed that a majority of Americans were more worried about war breaking out then than they had been in years. When asked about this at his 11 October press conference, (the conference in which the President announced the MilRep mission to Southeast Asia), the President said that the public was naturally and quite correctly concerned. "We happen to live in the most dangerous time in the history of the human race."¹² It was clear in the

¹ NYT, 14 August 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

² NYT, 21 August 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

³ NYT, 2 September 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁴ NYT, 5 September 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁵ NYT, 10 September 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁶ NYT, 20 September 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁷ NYT, 7 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁸ NYT, 12 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁹ NYT, 24 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

¹⁰ NYT, 28 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

¹¹ NYT, 31 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

¹² NYT, 12 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

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context, however, that be considered the principal trouble spot to be Berlin, not South Vietnam, and that while the situation in South Vietnam seemed critical it was far from being the main focus of attention.

Although this preoccupation with the Berlin situation overshadowed other foreign problems at the time, the Vienna talks had also dealt with Communist subversion in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world. The President reported to the nation that Khrushchev "predicted the triumph of Communism in the new and less developed countries":

"He [Khrushchev] was certain that the tide there was moving his way, that the revolution of rising peoples would eventually be a Communist revolution, and that the so-called wars of liberation, supported by the Kremlin, would replace the old methods of direct aggression and invasion. . . .

"Their missiles, they believe, will hold off our missiles, and their troops can match our troops should we intervene in these so-called wars of liberation. Thus, the local conflict they support can turn in their favor through guerrillas or insurgents or subversion. A small group of disciplined Communists could exploit discontent and misery...and seize control...of an entire country without Communist troops ever crossing any international frontier...¹

Referring to this challenge, the President was subsequently quoted as saying, "I kept insisting that there could be no agreement between us as long as he supported Communist subversion all over the world, but he never gave way, never gave an inch."²

This facet of the talks did not make as deep a public impression as the Berlin problem, but it apparently added to the urgency of efforts within the Administration to formulate new policy and doctrine, new organization and procedures, and greater overall effort, in the field of counterinsurgency. During the summer and fall of 1961, the MilRep was a key figure in these activities, as a member of the Special Group of the NSC for counterinsurgency, the Special Group (CI). Later,

¹NYT, 7 June 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

²Steward Alsop, "Kennedy's Grand Strategy", Saturday Evening Post, 31 March 1962, UNCLASSIFIED.

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in January 1962, when the Special Group (CI) was made permanent -- "to insure recognition that subversive insurgency is a major form of politico-military conflict equal in importance to conventional warfare" -- the MilRep was made its chairman.¹

South Vietnam was the outstanding illustration on the international scene of an active, large-scale Communist insurgency, and was a living reminder of the seriousness of the problem and the difficulties of coping with it. It would be natural for those officials who were deeply involved in finding solutions to the counterinsurgency problem worldwide to pay special attention to and become actively involved in South Vietnam affairs; and it would be natural for the President to view the MilRep's role in the development of a U.S. counterinsurgency program as a particularly good reason (in addition to those which led to the creation of the office and the appointment in the first place) for sending him on a mission to Southeast Asia when he wished a special survey by a personal emissary.

There are several possible explanations of the timing of the President's decision on the MilRep mission, and several events, or a combination of them, may have provided the specific trigger. The background, as previously noted, was that the situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated and there was every indication it might deteriorate further, that GVN countermeasures still seemed completely inadequate, and that the U.S. Program of Action seemed to have made little headway. Several of the serious September incidents cited above, together with reports of large-scale infiltration through Laos, may have brought home to the President the gravity of the situation. On 4 October the President, with the SecDef and the CJCS, met with the Thai Foreign Minister to discuss SEATO problems, and it is not unlikely that the Thai official voiced concern about the effectiveness of the SEATO umbrella in protecting Laos and South Vietnam and that he

¹NSAM 124, 18 January 1962, SECRET.

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in turn received reassurances of the U.S. commitment to the area.¹ On 6 October the President had a two-hour session with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, in which, according to the press, the President informed Gromyko "bluntly" that the U.S. would not permit the Communists to use Laos as a base against South Vietnam, a statement which the President may have wished to reinforce by some action.² In addition, however, and perhaps of greater influence in the timing of the decision, two important events had occurred: Diem in South Vietnam had asked for increased assistance and a bilateral defense treaty, and the White House Staff had developed a proposal for introducing SEATO forces into South Vietnam.

Diem's request for a treaty came as something of a surprise, at the end of a long meeting on 29 September with CINCPAC, the PACOM Political Adviser (POLAD), and the Vice DJS, who were on their way to a meeting of SEATO military advisers in Bangkok; plus the Ambassador and ChMAAG. During the discussion Diem expressed concern about the prospective establishment of a neutralist government in Laos (which he said would be a "military disaster"), about the increased VC infiltration through Laos, and about the intensification of VC military operations in South Vietnam. He said he needed increased aid, in particular more attack aircraft and helicopters, and a large increase in advisers of all types. When informed by CINCPAC that one of the major topics of the forthcoming SEATO meeting was the SEATO plan to be implemented if conditions in South Vietnam deteriorated further, Diem expressed doubts that SEATO action could be effected; it would be inhibited by the UK and France, just as it had been in Laos. He said that plans were not enough, there must be the will to support the plans, and this required advance psychological preparation worldwide, including in the U.S.

¹NYT, 5 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

²NYT, 7 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

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Diem then asked CINCPAC what the U.S. commitments were in his area in the event the situation worsened. CINCPAC replied that from the military viewpoint he was prepared for a limited or a large-scale war; in the event of war he was prepared to support South Vietnam with troops, land-based aviation, the Seventh Fleet, "the works"; but that the question of commitments was political. The Ambassador interjected that from the political standpoint he wished to remind Diem of past assurances, including those conveyed by the Vice President to Diem in his May 1961 visit, that the President of the U.S. took U.S.-SEATO obligations seriously. The Ambassador also reminded Diem that Diem had often assured him that with continued U.S. help he could contain the insurgency in South Vietnam. Diem said this had been true, but that the situation had changed, both in its military and political aspects. It was at this point that he asked for a U.S.-GVN bilateral defense treaty, as an expression of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.¹

This, as the Ambassador stated in a message to Washington, was a "large and unexpected" request, and created several problems.² In the first place, the 1954 Geneva Accords (which neither the U.S. nor the GVN had signed but which both had declared they would respect) prohibited the GVN from entering into military alliances, and a defense treaty would obviously be such an alliance. In the second place, resort to a bilateral defense treaty would be an open admission of the inadequacy of SEATO, which, though it could not accept the GVN as a member without contravening the Accords, had included South Vietnam within the "Treaty area" which it was pledged to protect. Moreover, a bilateral treaty with the U.S. would make it even more difficult for Diem to counter Communist allegations that he was a U.S. puppet, a matter on which both he and the U.S. were extremely sensitive. If this was a serious request, and the Ambassador thought it was, it

¹Saigon to State 158, 10 October 1961, SECRET.

²Saigon to State 421, 1 October 1961, SECRET.

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indicated the depth of Diem's fears about the outcome in Laos, his disillusionment with SEATO, and his worries about actual U.S. intentions in the area.

The Ambassador suggested to Diem that the two of them meet further to discuss the treaty question, "from all angles", but assured him that the U.S. would give it careful and serious consideration. As to increased military assistance, both the Ambassador and CINCPAC told Diem that the limitation on U.S. aid was not imposed by lack of funds and equipment but by the ability of the GVN to absorb and use it gainfully. The Ambassador emphasized the need for improved "synchronization" of the GVN effort; CINCPAC emphasized the need to "let the military off the leash", and to stop the PC's from "free wheeling" and ignoring military directives.¹

Rather full reports of the meeting were sent to Washington. CINCPAC reported to the JCS on 2 October.² The Ambassador sent a short message on 1 October asking for a quick reaction to the treaty request (State replied that Diem could be informed that the request would be studied promptly and sympathetically),³ and followed up on 10 October with a long memo of record of the entire meeting.⁴ The latter was available in Washington just prior to the President's decision on the MilRep mission.

The second major event which probably helped to precipitate the President's decision on the MilRep mission was a proposal for military intervention in South Vietnam. On 5 October the Deputy Special Assistant to the President for national security matters proposed the introduction into South Vietnam of a SEATO "border patrol" force, under a "first-rate imaginative commander", with helicopters and light aircraft,

¹CINCPAC to JCS 020711Z October 1961, SECRET.

²Ibid.

³Saigon to State 421, 1 October 1961, SECRET; State to Saigon 368, 2 October 1961, SECRET.

⁴Saigon to State 158, 10 October 1961, SECRET.

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light naval forces (for coastal and canal operations), modern communications, good intelligence, and a staff able to develop and apply new and more effective border control techniques. The military objective of the force would be to secure South-Vietnamese borders against infiltration, "to the maximum possible degree", and to free GVN forces for more effective offensive operations against the VC. Two possibilities were suggested:

- a. Deployment of the force at the "greatest possible number" of entry points along the entire border, excluding the short strip along the 17th parallel line of demarcation between North and South Vietnam, which was held in force by the RVNAF; or
- b. Deployment of the force to cover only the 17th parallel, in order to free the RVNAF there for operations against the VC. The force would be authorized to take all necessary action for its own security, but would not otherwise engage in offensive actions against the VC.¹

The DepSecDef passed the concept along to the JCS, with the statement that it urgently required refinement from the military standpoint, and a military judgment as to its feasibility and desirability. He asked the JCS to analyze the proposal in the total context of the defense of Southeast Asia, assuming the political objective of defending Thailand and South Vietnam and holding those areas of Laos required for the defense of Thailand and South Vietnam; and to include existing or modified plans for intervention in Laos and/or deployment of forces to Thailand. He asked for comments on:

- a. The desirable force structure and command arrangements.
- b. The participating and supporting forces required, together with their source and the effect of their deployment on the U.S. military posture.
- c. More precise rules of engagement, and

¹JCS 2343/24, 6 October 1961, SECRET. See also JCS 1885 to CINCPAC, 141913Z October 1961, TOP SECRET, which identifies the author of the Deputy Special Assistant to the President for national security affairs.

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d. The forces required in the event of "overt response" by the DRV and Communist China.¹

The JCS reply was based on a DJS memo (staffed by J-5) approved on 7 October.² The JCS stated that the use of SEATO forces along the entire border was not feasible: the forces would be deployed along a border several hundred miles long, and could be attacked piecemeal or bypassed as the VC wished; they might be able to reduce but could not stop infiltration; they would be deployed in the weakest defensive positions should DRV or Chinese Communist forces intervene; and such a deployment would compound the problems of communications and logistical support. The alternative of deploying the forces to cover only the 17th parallel border was feasible, but militarily unsound: the border along the parallel was not a main avenue of VC infiltration, and the DRV might interpret the move as preparation for aggression and decide to pre-empt.

Moreover, the JCS added, any concept dealing with the defense of Southeast Asia that did not include all or a substantial portion of Laos was unsound, from the military standpoint. To concede most of north and central Laos would leave three-fourths of the Thailand border exposed and invite the expansion of Communist military action; to concede southern Laos would expose the flanks of Thailand and South Vietnam, and the northern border of Cambodia as well. On the other hand, any attempt to combat insurgency in South Vietnam while holding areas of Laos essential to the defense of Thailand and South Vietnam, and at the same time deploying forces to Thailand, would require a U.S. effort on the order of three divisions and supporting units; two of the divisions would have to come from CONUS.

In the JCS view, what was needed was not the spreading out of forces but a concentrated effort in Laos, where a firm stand could be

¹JCS 2343/24, 6 October 1961, SECRET.

²JCS 2343/25, 9 October 1961, TOP SECRET.

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taken to save all or substantially all of Laos. This would at the same time protect Thailand and the borders of South Vietnam, and provide concrete evidence of the U.S. determination to stand firm against further Communist advances worldwide.

The JCS stated that these objectives could best be served by implementation "now" of the SEATO plan (5/61) for countering Communist insurgency in Laos. If this was politically unacceptable, they proposed a possible "limited interim" course of action to help the GVN regain control of its own territory. This would involve deploying SEATO forces of one infantry division, plus air, communications, and logistic units -- essentially the forces called for by the SEATO plan for Laos -- to the high plateau area of north-central South Vietnam, initially, with further deployments at the discretion of the field commander in the light of the tactical situation. The forces were to aid in securing the South Vietnamese border, free GVN forces for action against the VC, and hold Laos or such areas of Laos as were essential to the defense of Thailand and South Vietnam. U.S. forces, which would comprise three-fourths of the total 22,800 troops, would come from PACOM, and would not adversely affect the U.S. capability to conduct planned operations in Europe related to Berlin. The forces should be permitted to take whatever action the commander deemed necessary to insure their security, with action against the VC normally limited to that necessary to destroy VC forces posing a threat to the borders of South Vietnam or to themselves, but envisaging the possibility of "reasonably limited" projections of air and/or ground forces into Laos. The forces should also be permitted to retaliate immediately against overt DRV intervention by launching air strikes against military targets in North Vietnam.

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The JCS warned that this "limited interim" course of action in South Vietnam would not provide for the defense of Thailand or Laos and would not contribute substantially or permanently to the defense of Southeast Asia; but it was preferable to either of the two alternatives proposed for a SEATO "border patrol" force.¹

The JCS-outlined "limited interim" course of action, envisaging the deployment of SEATO forces to north-central South Vietnam to defend the border while avoiding direct engagement in the conflict within South Vietnam, became the subject of daily interagency conferences in Washington. On 10 October a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) on the plan was issued.² The SNIE agreed in general with the JCS belief that overt military intervention by the DRV or Communist China in response to the move was unlikely, both because of the risks to them of broadened hostilities involving the U.S. and because of the success they were achieving with lower-risk tactics. The SNIE predicted, however, that the DRV and Communist China would seek to frustrate the move by political means, and by military actions short of major overt attack, such as committing additional guerrilla forces to the border area and subjecting the SEATO forces to harassment, ambush, and guerrilla attack. The SNIE also warned that the Communists might declare the 1954 Geneva Accords abrogated and openly increase their outside assistance, including the build-up of a jet

¹JCS 2343/25, 9 October 1961, TOP SECRET.

²SNIE 10-3-61, 10 October 1961, "Probable Communist Reactions to Certain SEATO Undertakings in South Vietnam", TOP SECRET.

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equipped air force in North Vietnam; and that they would probably drop the effort to reach a political settlement in Laos and renew their offensive action in order to hasten its takeover.

CINCPAC was also consulted on the plan, and was specifically asked his views on the augmentation he would need to "win" a war in Southeast Asia if the DRV and Communist China intervened.¹ He replied that OPLAN 32-59, his plan for the defense of mainland Southeast Asia, which provided for contingencies ranging from localized guerrilla conflict to full-scale war with the Communists, was a "plan to win". He listed the forces earmarked in the plan for dealing with overt aggression by the DRV, and by the DRV and Communist China combined, and added that any additional forces required would depend on Presidential decisions []

As indicated by the query to CINCPAC, even the remote prospect of DRV and/or Chinese intervention apparently troubled Washington. An ISA memo summarizing the pros and cons of the plan probably hit on a key factor when it stated that the U.S. could not take this limited action without accepting as "the real and ultimate objective" the defeat of the VC and the restoration of security in South Vietnam; so that if the Communists intensified their efforts the ultimate force requirements of supplementary military action would have to be considered.³ Moreover, the Administration feared the breakdown of the Laos talks and the resumption of large-scale hostilities there, whether independently or as a consequence of U.S. intervention in South Vietnam. The proposed plan for South Vietnam was not a net substitute for actions which might be required in Laos, and possibly also in Thailand, in the event the Communists stepped up their campaign, and extra forces

¹JCS 1853 to CINCPAC, 121559Z October 1961, TOP SECRET. The request conveyed in this message was originally made by Telecon on 10 October, PACOM time. See CINCPAC Command History, 1961 (CINCPAC Ser. 000128), 27 April 1962, pp. 168 ff., TOP SECRET.

²CINCPAC to JCS 101121Z October 1961, TOP SECRET.

³Undated memo, "Concept for Intervention in Vietnam", ISA/FER files, TOP SECRET.

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might be demanded. At a time when urgent efforts were being made to mobilize additional forces and deploy additional troops to Europe to deal with the Berlin situation, new demands would be difficult to meet. CINCPAC's hint that, even if at worst the Chinese intervened, the situation could be handled if a favorable decision were made on the use of nuclear weapons, was not likely to ease Administration anxieties, either, about all of the potential force requirements.

The Administration was apparently also concerned about a satisfactory political basis for the action.¹ Intervention would constitute a clear break with the Geneva Accords, would put the onus on the U.S. for justifying such a break, and would expose the U.S. to Communist charges of "colonialist aggression". The idea of somehow intervening under a UN umbrella was considered preferable, but did not seem promising. At best, the U.S. could go ahead and intervene, and simultaneously go before the UN with charges of DRV aggression and an appeal for UN observers to investigate or deter infiltration. If this were done, a Soviet veto in the Security Council was virtually certain, and the case would have to be carried to the General Assembly. There seemed to be a feeling, however, that the public case against the DRV had not been well-documented, and that even in the General Assembly the weight of sentiment might well be against UN action in favor of ICC action, or perhaps another international conference on the Laos pattern. On the other hand, even if there were a failure or deadlock in the UN, the attempt itself might help to rationalize intervention, as an action taken in view of the inability of the UN to prevent infiltration or subversion, and as one which would be continued only until the UN could protect South Vietnam. Since the U.S. was likely to face charges of "aggression" in the UN anyway, it seemed advisable to take the initiative in some manner, but there appeared to be little hope of obtaining express UN cover.²

¹Ibid.

²Ibid.

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While Washington decision-makers were examining these many political and military problems associated with implementing the JCS-proposed "limited interim" course of action, there was apparently hope in some quarters that enemy knowledge that intervention in South Vietnam was being considered and that preliminary moves were getting underway would expedite a settlement in Laos and help shut off large-scale Communist infiltration through Laos into South Vietnam.¹ In any case, on 8 October, three days after the initial SEATO "border patrol" force was proposed, and for the first time since the previous spring, the press carried reports that the U.S. was considering sending troops to South Vietnam, to cope with the worsening situation there and in Laos. Troops, to consist of mobile regimental combat teams equipped with helicopters and other support aircraft, would be sent to "key points". Officials were reported as declaring that the U.S. "would not tolerate another Laos" in South Vietnam.²

These rumors that the U.S. was considering some form of intervention in South Vietnam were given dramatic impetus by the President's announcement of the MilRep mission on 11 October. The President's handling of the question at the news conference and subsequent press reporting created the impression that the principal aim of the MilRep mission was to help determine whether it would be necessary or desirable to send U.S. combat forces to South Vietnam; and this is apparently how the Communists interpreted it. On 12 October Moscow Radio charged that the U.S. had "openly aggressive plans" to send troops to South Vietnam, and cited the MilRep mission as proof.³ A few days later Peking and Hanoi chimed in, charging that the mission's purpose was to prepare the way for "intensifying U.S. intervention" in South Vietnam, in violation of the Geneva Accords.⁴ Over the next weeks,

¹This point is admittedly speculative. However, the ISA memo cited above, "Concept for Intervention in Vietnam", mentions this possibility as one of the "plus" factors in the proposal.

²NYT, 8 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

³NYT, 13 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

⁴NYT, 15 October 1961, UNCLASSIFIED.

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the question of possible US intervention in South Vietnam was prominently in the news, where, it seems, the MilRep mission had largely put it; so that if part of the President's purpose was to communicate a forecful message to the Communists he had apparently selected an effective means to do so.

To summarize, then, the MilRep mission of October 1961 originated in an atmosphere of considerable US-Soviet tension, dominated by the threat to Berlin but also influenced by the challenge of subversive insurgency, especially as typified in Southeast Asia. There, the Communists seemed to be winning. They already controlled much of Laos, and, under cover of the prolonged negotiations on the "neutralization" of Laos, they had actively stepped up infiltration of guerrillas into South Vietnam. In South Vietnam itself the internal security situation seemed worse than ever and was possibly on the verge of collapse; thus far neither GVN countermeasures nor the comprehensive program of US support had shown signs of slowing down the Communist drive, much less halting it. President Diem, worried about the future, disillusioned with SEATO, and doubtful about US intentions, had asked for increased assistance and a bilateral defense treaty, as an earnest of the US commitment to his country. Within the Administration, attention turned to thoughts of military intervention.

It has been seen that the first proposal, which emanated from the White House, was for the introduction of a SEATO "border patrol" force, to help protect South Vietnam against infiltration from Laos. The JCS believed this proposal to be impracticable and unsound; they believed that the infiltration problem should be attacked closer to the source, in Laos, and that SEATO forces should intervene there. Failing that, the JCS suggested deploying a 22,800-man SEATO force to north-central South Vietnam, as a "limited interim" course of action which would not solve the central problem but which was preferable to the "border patrol" idea. The forces were to aid in securing the border, free GVN forces for counterinsurgency operations in the interior, and hold

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unspecified parts of Laos deemed essential to the defense of Thailand and South Vietnam.

This JCS alternative became the subject of daily interagency discussions, and, although documentary evidence is lacking, almost certainly went before the President. A number of political and military issues were raised, including making a clear break with the 1954 Geneva Accords, upsetting whatever chances existed for a Laos settlement, mustering international political support, and meeting the force requirements of the action without adversely affecting other commitments. The question of force requirements was posed, not in terms of the forces proposed for the action itself, but in terms of the forces which might ultimately be required if the Communists should counter by escalating hostilities, or if the US should be drawn into a deeper commitment, to fully restore security in the area. Since at the time the US was taking priority action to mobilize additional forces and to deploy large numbers of them to Europe, whether the requisite forces could be spared for Southeast Asia was bound to be a thorny problem.

The President's decision on the MilRep mission had the effect of postponing the resolution of these issues. Whether by coincidence or design, the press published reports that the US was considering sending combat troops to South Vietnam, reports which were given more publicity and greater credence when the President announced that he was sending the MilRep to Southeast Asia. The public impression was created that the mission would help decide whether US combat troops would be sent to South Vietnam, and the message was apparently not lost on the Communists.

THE MILREP MISSION

The President's decision on the MilRep mission was handed down as an NSC action at a meeting on 11 October, the day it was announced at his press conference. It was actually one of a set decisions: to prepare to publish a white paper on DRV aggression, to develop plans for action in the ICC based on the white paper, to develop plans to

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present the case in the UN, to initiate guerrilla ground action ("including the use of US advisers if necessary") against Communist air resupply operations in Laos, to deploy a USAF "Jungle Jim" unit¹ to South Vietnam for the "initial purpose" of training South Vietnamese airmen, and to send the MilRep mission "to explore ways in which aid of all types might be made more effective."²

The President's official instructions to the MilRep were to proceed to South Vietnam, and to other countries in Southeast Asia if necessary; to appraise the situation in South Vietnam, especially as it concerned the threat to internal security, but also in terms of the defense of South Vietnam and adjacent areas; to consider what US actions could be taken to avoid further deterioration and eventually to contain or eliminate the threat; to evaluate what might be accomplished by introducing various levels of US or SEATO forces, including the role they would play, their composition and their probable dispositions; and concurrently to examine possibilities of improving the effectiveness of the RVNAF, including additional equipment and training and a further increase in size. The President said he would like to be assured that all US aid was being applied to the internal security problem, including its "social dimensions," that unconventional forms of aid were not being overlooked (he suspected there were many such measures which might be applied if initiative and ingenuity were brought to bear), and that once aid was approved it could flow into South Vietnam "with minimum procedural delays." On the latter point,

¹This was an element of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, equipped with C-47, B-26 and T-28 aircraft, and organized and trained specifically for counterinsurgency operations, in either a combat or a training role. On 19 September the Sec AF recommended to the SecDef that the unit be sent to South Vietnam and attached to the CDTC, to assist the VNAF in developing and testing new techniques and equipment. The SecDef found the proposal attractive and apparently recommended it to the President. Sec AF memo to SecDef, I-19015/61, 19 September 1961, TOP SECRET; SecDef memo to CJCS, 3 October 1961, TOP SECRET.

²NSAM 104, 13 October 1961, TOP SECRET; SecDef memo for Sec. A, Sec N, Sec AF, CJCS, ISA, "Southeast Asia," 21 October 1961, TOP SECRET.

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the President said he had noted the "complicated chain of economic and military responsibilities between Washington and Saigon," and asked for comments on whether "greater simplicity and directness" might not be possible. He added that the MilRep would have to discuss with Diem and other GVN officials some of the courses of action the US was considering, in order to obtain their views and assure their cooperation if the US made certain decisions; but that it was important for the MilRep to emphasize to them that his talks were "exploratory" and did not commit the US Government.¹

Before the departure of the MilRep mission, which took place on 15 October, a staff-level document listing 20 "lesser courses of action" -- "lesser" probably by contrast with the deployment of the 22,800-man SEATO force -- was prepared by action officers in ISA, the Joint Staff, and the Services, for the "information and convenience" of the party. The document listed a variety of possible military actions which could be taken short of large-scale intervention. About half of them had apparently been mentioned in the 11 October NSC meeting; the remainder had been added by ISA. Available records do not show what the members of the Joint Staff may have contributed; but the JCS as such was not asked to review the list until after the mission's departure. (By the time JCS comments were prepared, several weeks later, the issue was overtaken by events and the subject was withdrawn from JCS consideration).²

The list of 20 "lesser courses of action" was probably indicative of the main thrust of Washington thinking on the eve of the MilRep's departure. A number of the actions were merely extensions of actions already underway; many of them had been discussed before, some as early as the previous spring; but some, at least, appeared to be new suggestions. The actions were as follows: deploy a US combat unit to

¹Undated memo, "Direct Instructions from the President to the MilRep," ISA/PER files, CONFIDENTIAL

²JCS 2343/27, 19 October 1961; JCS 2343/28, 23 October 1961; and JCS 2343/29, 25 October 1961; all TOP SECRET

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South Vietnam to train the RVNAF; deploy a US combat unit to South Vietnam to train the RVNAF; deploy a US combat unit, battalion or larger, to northern South Vietnam, essentially to bolster morale by its presence; deploy a US combat engineer battalion, to assist in road, port, and airfield construction; deploy other US logistical units; provide US military aircraft for logistical support of the RVNAF; provide US helicopter support; aid the VNN in interdicting junk traffic, by participating in coastal patrol operations; increase the MAAG to place US advisers at company level; expedite CG and SDC training; expedite the Junk Force and shallow draft boat programs; expedite airfield, port and road construction; step up the construction of small airstrips along the border; provide the ARVN with its own organic army aviation; provide more light aircraft; provide T-33 jet aircraft; provide additional small ships; expand the CDTC; institute a chemical defoliation program; increase RVNAF pay; and increase bounties for information leading to the capture or surrender of VC personnel.

Armed with the President's instructions and this list of staff-level suggestions, the MilRep mission departed Washington the morning of the 15th. Eleven persons were in the party, including the Director of the Task Force on Vietnam (a former CINCPAC POLAD), the Deputy Special Assistant to the President for national security affairs, the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Politico-Military Affairs, the Deputy Assistant Secretary ISA, and the Deputy Assistant Secretary (Regional Affairs) ISA.

The mission made a stopover in Hawaii, and on the 16th spent the day in briefings and discussions at CINCPAC headquarters. The mission was briefed on OPLAN 32-59 for the defense of mainland Southeast Asia, and on the parallel family of SEATO plans, including the plan for deploying the 22,800-man SEATO force to South Vietnam. CINCPAC reported that the discussion of these plans was "spirited," reflecting the intense interest of the party in getting a complete explanation of

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what the plans were, how they were tied together, and how the transition from one to another was to be effected.¹ The Deputy Special Assistant to the President asked if North Vietnam would be considered a Communist "sanctuary" in the event of overt aggression by the DRV or China; the response was an emphatic "no", that the understanding in SEATO was that overt aggression would be met by immediate air attacks in North Vietnam, on LOCs, troop concentrations, airfields and the like. [

] On the question of the possible magnitude of a Communist invasion, CINCPAC said his plans were based on estimates of the maximum enemy capabilities, but that he did not accept the view in some circles that Southeast Asia could be invaded by "hordes of Red Chinese"; that many things could be done militarily to "throttle" a maximum enemy effort. The Deputy Special Assistant to the President questioned the ability to interdict Communist forces effectively; CINCPAC replied that such interdiction was included in his plans and that he had a "massive capability" in the 7th Fleet and other forces to carry out the necessary tasks. (CINCPAC may have been annoyed by the question; subsequently, on 2 November, he sent the Deputy Special Assistant a special memo, detailing a large number of air, sea, and land actions he was prepared to undertake to interdict Communist forces).²

In private discussions with CINCPAC, the MilRep asked for a personal estimate of the political/military situation in South Vietnam; the military effectiveness and political reliability of the RVNAF; the pros and cons of introducing SEATO or US combat forces; the political, military and economic measures that might be taken short of introducing US combat forces, assuming no limitation on funds; and the

¹CINCPAC to JCS, 180250Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

²CINCPAC memo, Ser. 000262, 2 November 1961, "Intelligence Appreciation, North Vietnam," TOP SECRET

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changes or reforms that the US was justified in urging on Diem. CINCPAC reviewed impressions of his recent visit, and passed along "unevaluated" CAS reports concerning coup possibilities. He stated that the ARVN was good but over-extended; that it was mismanaged because Diem was unwilling to delegate authority to military commanders; that the VNN was improving but still needed "jacking up"; and that the VNAF was becoming proficient but was still inadequate to perform the job required. He also reported that morale in enlisted and junior officer ranks was poor, and higher military commanders were frustrated, but that the armed forces would probably be loyal to Diem if he actually delegated authority to military commanders and embarked on a systematic campaign to defeat the VC. This he regarded as the "number one problem."¹

CINCPAC also gave his opinion of the pros and cons of intervention with US combat forces "with a token SEATO flavor," apparently a reference to the 22,800-man force proposal.² The points in favor of intervention were that overt aggression would then immediately involve US forces, eliminating the possibility of a sudden enemy victory before the US could react; that the deployment of US forces would "settle" the question for South Vietnam and other countries in Southeast Asia of whether the US would come to their defense; that it would strengthen the prestige of SEATO; that it would free GVN forces for offensive operations; that it would help compensate for RVNAF deficiencies in communications, logistics and air support and would provide training dividends; and that it would strengthen Diem against a coup "without necessarily precluding non-Communist coup attempts."³

The points against intervention were that it could lead to intensification of hostilities, perhaps not by overt aggression but by the introduction of "full-blown" enemy combat units into Laos; that it

¹CINCPAC to JCS, 180250Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

²CINCPAC to JCS, 200401Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

³This was a strange proviso, but it is possible that it was added because a non-Communist coup to overthrow Diem was known by CINCPAC to be favored in some US quarters.

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might induce the Communists to accelerate the modernization of DRV forces, possibly by adding air elements; that it might lead the Communists to hasten the establishment of a "so-called" representative government in South Vietnam; that it would present the VC with a provocative military target, and that VC harassment might ultimately force the US into an active military campaign; that it would probably lead to the garrisoning of a US division in Southeast Asia for an extended period of time, as in Korea; and that it would probably bring on a "fuss" about white colonialism. CINCPAC reported to the JCS that he and the MilRep did not "thrash out" the pros and cons of intervention to any conclusion, but that in his own view they added up to not introducing combat forces until other means were exhausted.¹

CINCPAC also gave the MilRep his suggestions on military actions, short of introducing combat forces, which he said should be taken "at once" in view of the deteriorating situation. Some of the actions were in direct support of the GVN; others were actions in preparation for the possible introduction of US combat forces, if that became necessary. In the first category, he proposed deploying two US Army helicopter transportation companies, under MAAG operational control, to provide airlift for the ARVN; accelerating the delivery of T-28 aircraft for close support; deploying the "Jungle Jim" unit quickly; conducting photo reconnaissance for the South Vietnamese; and augmenting the MAAG. In the second category, he proposed deploying an Army engineer construction battalion and a Navy construction battalion, to expedite construction of POL facilities and pipelines, airfields and roads; and he proposed prepositioning war consumables, ammunition and POL for possible PACAF use. CINCPAC added that he had not been able to preposition ammunition and other equipment in South Vietnam because of political obstacles, but that the time had now come to push these aside; that it should be possible to "work a political gimmick" for the introduction of the US construction battalions; and that a decision should be made quickly on whether to [] the

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personnel of the helicopter companies and to "sanitize" their equipment or whether to introduce them overtly.¹

In forwarding his suggestions to the JCS, CINCPAC made no reference to the 20 "lesser courses of action," although several of his ideas -- the provision of helicopter lift and construction units, in particular -- coincided with items on the list. CINCPAC did report, however, that the MilRep seemed to be favorably impressed with his suggestions.²

After the briefings and discussions at CINCPAC headquarters, the MilRep mission proceeded to Saigon. Before it arrived there, however, two events transpired in South Vietnam: the GVN, apparently interpreting the announcement of the MilRep mission and the rumors about possible US military intervention as indications of greater US interest and concern, lost no time in enlarging its request for assistance; and a severe flood inundated the better part of three provinces in South Vietnam. Both events had their impact on the MilRep mission.

The GVN's request for greater assistance was made in a meeting on 13 October between the Ambassador and Diem's deputy in the Defense Ministry, Nguyen Dinh Thuan (the meeting was apparently a follow-on to the 29 September meeting between Diem and CINCPAC). At this 13 October meeting Thuan specifically asked for: (a) an extra squadron of AD-6 aircraft; (b) US "civilian contract" pilots for helicopters and C-47 aircraft, for "non-combat" operations; and (c) US combat units, to be introduced into the country as "combat-trainer" units and stationed near the 17th parallel. In addition, in what was apparently a trial balloon, Thuan asked what the US reaction would be to a proposal to ask the Chinese Nationalists for a division of combat troops, to conduct counterinsurgency operations in the southwestern part of South Vietnam.³

¹CINCPAC to JCS, 180444Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

²CINCPAC to JCS, 180250Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

³Saigon to State 488, 13 October 1961, SECRET

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The Ambassador told Thuan that the request for US combat units was a large request, coming on the heels of the request for a bilateral defense treaty; he asked whether it reflected Diem's considered views, in the light of Diem's previous reluctance to take such a step,¹ and whether the request for troops was in lieu of a treaty. Thuan affirmed that the request did indeed represent Diem's views, which had changed as a result of the worsened situation, and said that even token forces would be better than a treaty, and quicker. The Ambassador, who was not sure that Thuan had thought the question through or discussed it in detail with Diem, brought up the Geneva Accords; Thuan said he thought a case could be made for introducing US units for "guard duty", not to engage in combat unless attacked.

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The Ambassador informed State of the Thuan conversations on 13 October, before the departure of the MilRep mission from Washington,

¹The idea of introducing US combat forces into South Vietnam for various purposes, including the "combat-trainer" idea, had been discussed at length in the spring of 1961; ChMAAG, the Ambassador, and some Washington officials had favored the idea and it was discussed with Thuan when he visited the US in June. Diem finally decided against it, on the grounds that the presence of US troops would mar his image as an independent nationalist who was fighting his own war.

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SECRET (Memo for Record, Acting Assistant Secretary, ISA).] I-17264/61, 24 October 1961,

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and followed up on the 16th with an analysis of the GVN position as he saw it.¹ He stated that in the requests for a bilateral defense treaty and "perhaps alternatively" for US combat forces for "guard duty" there was no evidence of panic,² but that Diem was "temporarily" giving up his basic conviction that victory must be achieved by the Vietnamese themselves. He cited the situation in Laos as the main reason for the change, and Diem's view that the approaching "neutralist" solution in Laos was going to transfer Communist pressure to South Vietnam. He said that the GVN could not be brought to believe, "at least by me," in paper guarantees that Laos would remain neutral and that its territory would not be used for aggressive purposes. Nor could Diem and other GVN leaders be persuaded that US policy in Laos was "not inconsistent" with a determination to protect South Vietnam; they had made up their minds, the Ambassador said, that the envisaged settlement in Laos was going to make things harder for them and they were trying to build hedges against it.

The Ambassador went on to say that if the major cause of the deterioration in South Vietnam could not be attacked in Laos, or if the solution in Laos could not be convincingly sold to the GVN, the alternative was to "go all out" to reinforce South Vietnam internally, with even faster, more far-reaching, and more expensive measures than those either in train or in prospect. He advocated the following for further consideration: (a) means to seal South Vietnamese borders, including a defoliated strip, barbed wire "(electrified?)", mines, patrols, outposts, etc., with the employment of US combat engineers to help with the necessary construction; (b) US combat forces to be stationed near the 17th parallel, as requested by the GVN; (c) additional fighter-bomber and transport aircraft, with US "civilian contract" personnel, both flying and maintenance, for non-combat

¹ Saigon to State 488, 13 October 1961; and 495, 16 October 1961; both
SECRET

² The first version of the 16 October Saigon message read, "In recent requests for US commitments evidence of panic." A correction changing this to "no evidence of panic" was issued on the 17th. Saigon to State 495, 16 October 1961 (Part 2 or 2, Correction issued 17 October 1961,
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operations;¹ and (d) forces from other SEATO nations, perhaps the Philippines and Thailand.

With such far-reaching measures, the Ambassador stated, the US would have the right and obligation to assume that Diem would take extensive steps on his side to strengthen the GVN politically, to carry out needed reforms, and to rally mass support. He said that he was in the process of refining his suggestions along these lines -- on government reorganization at both national and local levels, on gaining popular support in the border areas, on unifying the educated class behind the GVN, and on tax and financial reforms. He warned, however, that a balance had to be struck between the ideal and the possible, assuming the continuation of Diem, and given Diem's "extraordinary blend" of fortitude, deep conviction, determination, lack of political instinct and lack of organizational and administrative ability.

It is noteworthy that these more far-reaching measures advocated by the Ambassador went considerably beyond the Thuan requests; and that in tying the increased measures to the condition that the GVN undertake certain changes and reforms the Ambassador was once more repeating the pattern that had characterized US efforts to deal with the South Vietnam situation throughout 1961, with very little success.

¹It is curious that the Ambassador should specify that the air personnel should be "civilian contract." If the Geneva Accords were to be by-passed by the introduction of US ground combat forces, why not use overt military pilots and maintenance personnel for the aircraft? But then, although the Ambassador was aware of the 11 October decision to send the USAF Jungle Jim unit to South Vietnam, and supported it, he apparently assumed that this would have to be accomplished by resorting to the familiar ruses: by bringing in the aircraft with VNAF markings and claiming them as replacements for some of the aircraft shipped out by the French which had not been controlled by the ICC; by covering the personnel within the 685 MAAG ceiling through manipulation of the manifests of outgoing personnel; and by basing the unit in an area where ICC teams were not present and were therefore unlikely to notice either the size of the unit or the fact that US personnel were operating its aircraft. See Saigon to State 489, 13 October 1961, SECRET

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It is also noteworthy that the Ambassador had the 16 October message containing his proposals sent "info CINCPAC" for the MilRep. The message probably recorded his considered views, therefore, not only in reaction to the GVN requests but also in anticipation of the arrival of the MilRep mission, and probably represented the position he expected to advocate before the mission.¹

The second development which occurred just before the MilRep mission arrived in Saigon was a disastrous flood in the Mekong River delta. Virtually all of the three southwestern provinces adjoining Cambodia were inundated. Over half a million people were affected. Most roads and bridges in the area were damaged, tens of thousands of homes were destroyed, and several hundred thousand tons of rice was lost. The problem of rehabilitation and reconstruction in the wake of the flood was very much on the minds of both GVN and US officials in South Vietnam when the MilRep mission arrived.²

The MilRep mission arrived in Saigon on the morning of 18 October. It spent seven days in South Vietnam, from the 18th through the 24th. It left Saigon for Bangkok on the 25th and spent five days there. It then proceeded to Manila, where it apparently spent two or three

¹If the 16 October message triggered a Washington response, the evidence has not turned up. However, Washington did respond to the message of 13 October which reported the Thuan requests. Washington strongly urged T-28 aircraft in lieu of AD-6s; although the T-28 did not have the firepower of the AD-6 it had other desirable ground support features, and the delivery of AD aircraft could only be made at the cost of seriously reducing US fleet capabilities. It approved "in principle" the request for US civilian pilots for non-combat operations, and asked for a field estimate of the specific requirements. It expressed a negative reaction to the introduction of Chinese Nationalist forces "at this time," but said the matter would be kept under consideration, in the light of overall force requirements. And it deferred comment on the introduction of US combat forces, pending the conclusion of the MilRep mission. See JCS 1932 to CINCPAC, 192320Z October 1961, SECRET, reproducing State-Defense 449 to Saigon.

²The US press first reported the flood in Saigon dispatches dated 15 October. The New York Times (16 October 1961) called it one of the worst natural catastrophes in South Vietnam's history.

Damage estimates are taken from subsequent US reports: Saigon to State 581, 1 November 1961, SECRET; and USARPAC Intelligence Bulletin, 1 November 1961, SECRET

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more days. It was back in Washington on 3 November, after a total absence of close to three weeks.¹

During the week in South Vietnam, the MilRep had at least two long meetings with Diem, one on the 18th and one on the 24th. In between he conferred with other GVN officials and with a number of high-ranking RVNAF commanders, as well as with US MAAG and Embassy officials; made an air/ground tour of fighting zones and flooded areas; and inspected a number of troop training and other installations.

The MilRep spoke fluent French, which doubtless greatly facilitated his communications with Diem and the other Vietnamese, most of whom were much more at home in French than in English.

The first meeting with Diem lasted two and a half hours,² and produced, as the MilRep said, "a number of surprises."³ Shortly before the meeting, Diem declared a state of emergency, citing both the increasing gravity of the military situation and the devastating flood. At the meeting itself, he outlined what appeared to be a "brand new plan" for guerrilla suppression, which the MilRep reported US representatives had not seen before. And he appeared to reverse Thuan by not asking for US ground combat troops.

It is not clear what the "brand new plan" was. It may have been based on recommendations made to Diem by the UK Advisory Mission.

¹These were the movements of the MilRep himself. After the mission arrived in Saigon, it apparently split up; not all members accompanied the MilRep in his various conferences and field trips and it is possible that not all members remained the entire period.

The information available on the mission's activities is rather fragmentary. Many of the messages concerning the mission, including those of the MilRep himself, were marked "personal" or "eyes only" for a few individuals and not all of them have been uncovered. The account given here is pieced together from a relatively few messages, with the help of reports in the New York Times.

²The length of the meeting was not unusual. Most of Diem's meetings with US officials were quite long and typically one-sided, with Diem discoursing at great length about his philosophical ideas. He was also given to conducting his own map and grease-pencil briefings on the operational situation.

³Saigon to State 510, 19 October 1961, SECRET (Dept. personal from the MilRep for the DepUndSecState; White House personal for Special Assistant to the President for national security affairs).

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This was a team of some half-dozen veterans of the Malaya counterinsurgency campaign, headed by R.G.K. Thompson, who had been Permanent Defense Secretary of Malaya during the campaign. As early as the spring of 1961, State had urged third country participation in South Vietnam, so that the US would not appear to be the sole active supporter of the GVN.¹ The Country Team, CINCPAC, and the JCS had objected strongly to the idea, for fear that it would lead to confusion and divided responsibilities and would impede the US advisory effort.² State proceeded to explore the matter with the British, however, the UK proved willing to get into the act, and Diem went ahead and issued the necessary invitation, making it, as ChMAAG said, a "fait accompli."³ The UK Ambassador in Saigon assured the US Ambassador that the mission would not concern itself with military advice but would confine its activities to the civil side, in intelligence, police, propaganda, and similar operations.⁴ ChMAAG felt that this limitation would not preclude the UK mission from advising on such matters as overall countrywide organization for counterinsurgency, preliminary softening of areas targeted for military operations, or consolidation operations in the aftermath of military actions -- all closely interrelated with military operations -- and he foresaw complications as a result. He proposed the establishment of a tripartite GVN-US-UK committee to provide for the necessary liaison and coordination.⁵ CINCPAC and the JCS felt that a formal arrangement was unnecessary and that informal liaison should suffice.⁶ After its arrival in South Vietnam on 17 September, however, the UK mission made its own survey of the situation

¹State to Saigon 1115, 24 February 1961; and 1218, 23 March 1961; both SECRET

²Saigon to State 1444, 8 March 1961; ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 040525Z March 1961; CINCPAC to JCS 070245Z March 1961 and 050105Z April 1961; and JCS 2343/14, 18 August 1961; all SECRET

³"First Twelve Months' Report of Chief MAAG Vietnam," 1 September 1961, SECRET; State to Saigon 1260, 8 April 1961, SECRET

⁴JCS 2343/14, 18 August 1961, SECRET

⁵ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 190745Z August 1961, SECRET

⁶JCS 2343/14, 18 August 1961, SECRET

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and submitted its conclusions to Diem without prior consultation with US officials. The mission recommended shifting priority efforts from the provinces around Saigon to those in the Mekong Delta, and it proposed the establishment of a security framework based on defended hamlets and villages (an idea which formed the basis of what later came to be known as the Strategic Hamlet Program).¹ Both proposals were contrary to US advice at the time, though the latter idea, especially, was appealing to Diem. It may well have been the "plan" he unexpectedly put before the MilRep mission.

As for the GVN, it was not unusual for it to withhold information on its plans and intentions from US representatives. On 22 October, for example, CINCPAC learned (from a message sent by a member of the MilRep mission to OSD) of a GVN plan for a major assault in a certain zone, and he asked ChMAAG about it.² ChMAAG's reply was quite illuminating as to the nature of the MAAG's problems at the time. He said that the GVN had such a plan, but that it was very closely held. The MAAG had not been officially notified of its existence, and, in spite of the fact that he had persistently offered the services of the MAAG staff in operational planning, the MAAG had not been asked to help in its preparation. Knowledge of the plan had been acquired accidentally in the CDTC, in the course of developing US-GVN plans for defoliation operations. ChMAAG said he was trying to get copies, but that he had pushed as hard as he possibly could without "command authority."³

Whatever the "brand new plan" was, Diem agreed to give it to the MilRep in writing so that the mission could study it while it continued its conferences and field trips.⁴ ChMAAG informed CINCPAC the next day that he had officially requested a copy and would forward it when "(and if)" it was received.⁵

¹OCMH, DA, "History of the US Army Buildup and Operations in the Republic of Vietnam, 1961-1963," (draft), TOP SECRET

²CINCPAC to ChMAAG, 230617Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

³ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 250725Z October 1961, TOP SECRET

⁴Saigon to State 510, 19 October 1961, SECRET

⁵ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 200713Z October 1961, SECRET

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On the second of the major surprises at the first meeting, it is not clear that Diem completely withdrew Thuan's request for US ground combat troops. The Ambassador, as noted above, was not sure that Diem had actually authorized the request in the first place. The MilRep in his very private message reported that Diem had "reversed" Thuan by not asking for the "immediate" introduction of the forces.¹ ChMAAG reported that Diem had retreated "at least for the moment" on the request for troops, to "contingency planning for same."² Whatever the facts were, however, they did not foreclose further consideration of the issue by the MilRep mission.

Available information on what else transpired at the meeting is scanty. The MilRep apparently formed the impression that Diem was well prepared to press for more aid, based on the economic losses from the flood, the anticipated upsurge in infiltration following the Laos settlement, and the "new atmosphere of concern" Diem detected in Washington.³ On his side, the MilRep strongly urged the need for an overall national counterinsurgency plan, and stressed the importance of more offensive spirit and action in the armed forces.⁴

On the next day, the MilRep conferred with other Vietnamese, first with the GVN Vice-President, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, and then with top RVNAF commanders. Tho was outspoken in criticizing GVN handling of the war. He stressed the need for better trained and armed CG and SDC forces, in order to protect the peasants at the village hamlet level, and expressed the opinion that these forces should have been increased rather than the regular RVNAF. He said the RVNAF was "over-developed" for regular warfare, and that more emphasis should be placed on rangers. He said that the various intelligence services were divided, and that the Central Intelligence Organization, which was supposed to coordinate intelligence activities, was not really working. He said that the US

¹ Saigon to State 510, 19 October 1961, SECRET

² ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 200713Z October 1961, SECRET

³ Saigon to State 510, 19 October 1961, SECRET

⁴ ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 200713Z October 1961, SECRET

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should intervene "quickly and intelligently," that six months from then would be too late and that the US should insist that US aid be used more efficiently. As summed up by the Ambassador, it was clear that Tho was pointing the finger at Diem's methods of government and administration; and that while he was not necessarily anti-Diem, he was pleading for the US to adopt a firm approach with Diem on improving GVN effectiveness.¹

Another meeting on the 19th was held with the Chief of the GVN Joint General Staff (Lt. General Le Van Ty) and the Chief of Staff of the ARVN (Brig. General Nguyen Khanh). They asked for additional equipment, including French armored vehicles, which they felt more suitable to South Vietnam than US M-24s because of local bridge capacities; organic ARVN aviation; and three more airborne battalions. The MilRep questioned the requirement for these items. Ty attempted to justify them in terms of the "dual mission" of the RVNAF, and said that if hostilities broke out in Europe the DRV would overtly attack South Vietnam. The MilRep emphasized that the counter-guerrilla war was primary and that up to a certain point training was the same and good trained soldiers could be used in either role. He also stressed the need for greater mobility and the "absolute necessity" for improved intelligence.²

The MilRep also met on the 19th with the commanders of the RVNAF Field Command (Maj. General Duong Van "Big" Minh and Brig. General Le Van Kim). Minh was pessimistic. He said that the VC forces were growing alarmingly and that the GVN was losing the support of the people. He said that he had been unable to get cooperation from other GVN agencies in developing overall plans. He complained about the lack of clearly delineated responsibilities and he was especially critical of the PCs and their role in the military chain of command.³

¹ Saigon to State 516, 20 October 1961, Secret

² ChMAAG to CINCPAC, 200713Z October 1961, SECRET

³ Ibid

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After several more days of discussions, field trips and inspections, the MilRep returned to Saigon on 24 October for his final talk with Diem. At the meeting, which again lasted for several hours, the MilRep was accompanied by the Deputy Special Assistant to the President for national security affairs, the Ambassador, the head of USOM, and ChMAAG; on the GVN side, Diem's deputy in the Defense Ministry, Thuan, was also present.

At this point in time, the MilRep had had two weeks of briefings, consultations and direct observations on the South Vietnam problem and he had arrived at some general conclusions and tentative recommendations. He felt that the critical political-military situation in South Vietnam had been brought on by Western policy in Laos as well as by the continued buildup of the VC; and that these factors, together with the major flood disaster in the southwestern provinces, had combined to create a deep and pervasive "crisis of confidence" in South Vietnam and a near-collapse of national morale. While this made the political situation "volatile," however, and complaints against the GVN were rife, the MilRep saw no hard evidence of a likely coup against Diem and he felt that there still was no visible rival or replacement for him.

On the military side, the MilRep felt that operations were ineffective because of the absence of reliable intelligence, unclear and unresponsive channels of command and responsibility, and tactical immobility of the ground forces. Defense against the VC was "passive" and "fragmented," with the VC exercising the initiative in selecting the targets for attack. The harrassed population looked to the government for better protection; the GVN responded by assigning more static defense missions to the armed forces; and the consequence was that the RVNAF was not allowed either to train or to fight but passively awaited VC attacks in relative inaction.¹

¹ Saigon to State 536, 25 October 1961, TOP SECRET (From the MilRep; pass White House, Defense, JCS, CIA; State for DepUndSec, White House for Special Assistant to the President for national security affairs, Defense for SecDef, JCS for CJCS, CIA for Director)

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Based on this assessment of the situation, the MilRep had concluded that additional steps should be taken to reverse the military trend, stimulate a more offensive spirit in the armed forces and re-establish morale. He outlined these steps to Diem in the final meeting as personal ideas to which he was seeking an informal reaction. The steps were as follows: (a) organize a joint GVN-US intelligence effort, to improve intelligence organization and techniques and to produce intelligence which was adequate both for tactical requirements and for the assessment of the internal security situation at government levels; (b) conduct joint US-GVN surveys of the security situation at the province level, where basic intelligence was to be found, incidents occurred, and defenses were tested, in order to provide a better basis for decisions as to the remedial measures which needed to be taken; (c) improve ARVN effectiveness by increasing its mobility rather than its size (which could not be increased much before the end of 1962); the ARVN should be released from static missions and it should be provided additional transport, notably helicopters and light aircraft; and (d) take advantage of the flood devastation in the southwestern provinces to initiate relief/rehabilitation actions with the ultimate purpose of reducing infiltration; perhaps by providing US military helicopters for reconnaissance of flood conditions and for emergency delivery of medical supplies; or perhaps by providing a US "flood relief task force," largely military, composed of engineer, medical, signal, and transport elements, as well as combat troops to protect them, and incidentally to provide a US military presence in South Vietnam and constitute a reserve in the event of heightened military crisis.¹

Diem's reactions were reported as generally favorable. He "expressed satisfaction" at the idea of introducing US forces for "flood relief" activities. He also stressed the importance of additional aviation, especially helicopters. The MilRep made it clear that he

¹ Saigon to State 536, 25 October 1961, TOP SECRET

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envisaged helicopters piloted by Americans and constituting US units under US commanders; he felt there was no other immediate solution. Thuan reiterated his 13 October request to the Ambassador for additional attack aircraft, so that there would be enough to disperse about the country in position to respond quickly to requests for close support; the MilRep replied that existing attack aircraft were not being fully utilized, and that the remedy for the slow response problem was to improve the system of bases, communications, and air/ground liaison. Thuan also reiterated his previous request for Chinese Nationalist troops, this time in the form of "cadres:" he admitted that the presence of large Nationalist units could not be kept secret, but said that cadres might, even if they numbered in the thousands. The MilRep commented that it would be "difficult" to bring in Nationalist troops for political reasons.

Diem also brought up the question of the chemical spraying equipment he had requested some months before for crop destruction in VC-held areas and of armored boats for the Delta "rice struggle," the perennial battle between the GVN and the VC over the rice crop; he stressed the urgency of these measures in view of the impending harvest which was due to begin in November.

The Deputy Special Assistant to the President stated that the key to turning the tide against the VC was offensive action. Diem referred to his efforts to "collaborate" more closely with the US in military planning and complained that he had run up against a "wall of secrecy" concerning US and SEATO military plans.¹ (It is not known whether ChMAAG or any other US representative brought up the matter of the "plan" Diem had unexpectedly revealed at the 18 October meeting, or of the special zone plan CINCPAC had inquired about on 22 October, both of which were indicative of ample secrecy on the GVN side.)

¹ Saigon to State 541, 25 October 1961, TOP SECRET

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After the meeting with Diem, before proceeding to Bangkok, the MilRep and the Ambassador reached an understanding with respect to the coordination of follow-up actions "to reduce the reaction time" for the approval of recommendations growing out of the MilRep mission. The understanding covered the recommendations which the MilRep mission expected to make in its reports, on the one hand, and the actions which the Embassy would take to spell them out in detail and to obtain GVN acceptance.

The MilRep and the Ambassador agreed to the following:

1. The mission would recommend the establishment of a joint US-GVN intelligence effort, predicated on assigning a US intelligence representative to each province and US intelligence "advisers" throughout the GVN intelligence apparatus. The Embassy would develop this into a specific proposal for discussion with the GVN and would calculate the personnel requirements for submission to Washington.
2. The mission would recommend joint US-GVN province surveys in order to improve US knowledge of the security situation at the grass roots level and to enhance the ability of the US to influence the GVN with respect to appropriate remedial measures. The Embassy would work out the composition of the survey parties and their operating procedures and propose them to the GVN.
3. The mission would recommend the prompt provision of US military helicopters, up to about three companies, plus light fixed-wing aircraft. The Embassy would develop plans for their location, command and control and administrative support.
4. The mission would recommend US support of a "carefully tailored" force of Vietnamese rangers to control the border, especially to reduce infiltration into the high plateau area in the north-central part of the country. The Embassy would press the GVN to organize such a force, utilizing existing ranger companies and would report the US support requirements to Washington.

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5. The mission would recommend the prompt introduction of a US "flood relief task force," to arrive in a package, or, if that would delay it, piecemeal. The Embassy would forward recommendations to Washington as to its composition, schedule, location and administration.

6. The mission would recommend actions to dramatize the urgency of the situation arising from both the VC insurgency and the flood, such as an exchange of letters between the US President and Diem on increasing US aid in view of the national emergency and the "new phase" of the war. The Embassy would take action to initiate the letter from Diem.

The Ambassador also agreed to keep the MilRep informed during his return to Washington on any new developments arising from these follow-up actions.¹

¹Bangkok to State 625 (Action Saigon 145), 27 October 1961, SECRET (From the MilRep; Saigon eyes only for the Ambassador, State for DepUndSecState).

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POSTSCRIPT

The MilRep returned to Washington and there ensued a series of high-level briefings and discussions which eventuated in a major set of Presidential decisions. These decisions established the basic pattern of US military actions in Vietnam for the next three years, i.e., until the 1964-5 decisions to more actively involve US military power in prosecuting the war, in both North and South Vietnam.

The President decided against introducing US combat troops into South Vietnam on grounds that it must essentially be a GVN task to handle the insurgent threat and that the introduction of US or SEATO forces into South Vietnam might wreck the chances for a Laotian settlement.¹

The President decided instead to offer Diem increased assistance provided he undertake to implement real administrative, political and social reforms: to put his nation on a wartime footing and mobilize its entire resources by broadening his government to include all non-Communist elements willing to contribute to the struggle; to give wartime agencies adequate authority to perform their functions effectively; and to overhaul the military establishment and command structure. In return, the US would provide the following:

1. Increased airlift, including helicopters, light aircraft and transports, manned to the extent necessary by uniformed US personnel and under US operational control.
2. Additional US equipment and personnel for air reconnaissance, photography, instruction in air-ground support techniques and special intelligence.

¹State to Saigon 618, Eyes Only for Nolting; and 619, info Bangkok and CINCPAC for POLAD; both 14 November 1961, both TOP SECRET

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3. Small craft and uniformed advisers and operating personnel for surveillance and control of coastal and inland waters.
4. Additional training and equipment for the CG and SDC.
5. Personnel and equipment to improve the military-political intelligence system from the Central Intelligence Organization down to province level.
6. New terms of reference, organization and personnel for US forces, more suited to operational collaboration with GVN forces and to the operational direction of US units.
7. Increased economic aid for the flood relief and rehabilitation program and to conduct an expanded counterinsurgency program.
8. Assistance in obtaining help from other countries.
9. Individual advisers and administrators for the government as required.
10. Personnel for joint surveys of the social, political, intelligence and military factors pertinent to the counterinsurgency program.

The Presidential decisions were formalized in a NSAM issued on 22 November and the Ambassador was instructed to negotiate the requisite agreement with Diem.¹ On 4 December the Ambassador reported Diem's promise to take a number of measures to improve the efficiency of the GVN and to increase its public support and on 15 December the President sent Diem a letter sealing the US side of the bargain.² The first US operational forces called for by the agreement began arriving in South Vietnam in early January, marking the start of a new phase in the US involvement in Vietnam.

¹NSAM 111, 22 November 1961, TOP SECRET, published in JCS 2343/50, 27 November 1961

²Saigon to State 756, 4 December 1961, TOP SECRET; Public Papers of the President, 1961, p. 801, "Exchange of messages with the President of the Republic of Vietnam," UNCLASSIFIED

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