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Subject: AP Story on Vietnam Document Release This Morning

Copyright 1997 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. The information contained in this news report may not be published, broadcast or otherwise distributed without the prior written authority of the Associated Press. By MIKE FEINSILBER Associated Press Writer WASHINGTON (AP) -- Seven weeks before President Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963, American military leaders were anticipating a withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam by the end of 1965, newly declassified documents suggest. The documents are likely to add to the historical controversy over whether Kennedy planned to end American military involvement in Vietnam after the 1964 presidential election. At the time a key Oct. 4, 1963 memo was written, the United States had only 16,300 advisers in South Vietnam, a force that would swell to more than 536,000 within five years. "All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN (Republic of Vietnam) forces for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965," said the memo. Signed by Army Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the memo was directed to the uniformed leaders of the four military services. The memo also ordered the service chiefs to "execute the plan to withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963." In all, 800 pages of Joint Chiefs papers were made public today by the government's Assassination Records Review Board. The board was created by Congress to amass for public inspection any records that might shed light on Kennedy's murder. Some historians believe that Kennedy intended to get out of Vietnam and that his successor, Lyndon Johnson -- eager not to be seen as the first American president to lose a war -- reversed Kennedy's strategy. But historian Ronald Spector of George Washington University said the execution of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem on Nov. 1, 1963 may have been more decisive in keeping the United States in Vietnam than the change at the top of the U.S. government. American leaders discovered that Diem had been bottling up reports from the field that showed the war was going badly for the South Vietnamese, said Spector, who teaches a course on the U.S. role in Indochina. The documents show that less than a month after Kennedy's assassination, Johnson told his commanders to press the South Vietnamese toward "increased activity" against North Vietnam while considering "the plausibility of denial; possible North Vietnamese retaliation; (and) other international reaction." America would remain in Vietnam until August 1973, when U.S. military action in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos ended. By the end of that year, the United States had only 50 military people in Vietnam and had suffered 46,163 battle deaths. The war ended April 30, 1975 with North Vietnam's capture of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital.

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