

Meetings on Vietnam

This is a memorandum for the record summarizing three meetings about the deployment of U.S. troops to Vietnam.

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Scroll to July 1965: Troops Increase in Vietnam

ATTENDANCE AT VIETNAM MEETINGS

Wednesday, July 21, 1965

The President

State Department

Secretary Rusk
Under Secretary Ball
Mr. William Bundy
Ambassador Lodge
Ambassador Unger

Defense Department

Secretary McNamara
Deputy Secretary Vance
Mr. McNaughton

JCS

General Wheeler

USIA

Director Rowan
Mr. Marks

White House

Mr. McGeorge Bundy
Mr. Valenti
Mr. Busby
Mr. Cooper
Mr. Clifford (afternoon)

July 22, 1965

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TOP SECRET EYES ONLY

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Meetings on Vietnam, July 21, 1965

This is a summary of the discussion of Secretary McNamara's report and recommendations held in the Cabinet Room on Wednesday, July 21. There were three sessions: a preparatory meeting without the President at 10:30, a meeting with the President from 11:30 until 1:00, another meeting with the President from 2:30 until 5:30. A list of those present is attached at annex.

Preparatory Meeting - 10:30

Secretary McNamara noted that the only Section of his report which contained specific action recommendations and the only one fully coordinated with the principals (Ambassador Taylor, Ambassador Johnson, General Westmoreland, General Wheeler, and Ambassador Lodge) was paragraph 5. The four key recommendations follow:

1. The deployment of US ground troops in Vietnam be increased by October to 34 maneuver battalions (or, if the Koreans fail to provide the expected 9 battalions promptly, to 43 battalions). The battalions -- together with increases in other units, would bring the total US personnel in Vietnam to approximately 175,000 (200,000 if we must make up for the Korean failure).
2. Congress be requested to authorize the call-up of approximately 235,000 men in the Reserve and National Guard. This number would provide approximately 36 maneuver battalions by the end of this year.
3. The regular armed forces be increased by approximately 375,000 men (approximately 250,000 Army, 75,000 Marines, 25,000 Air Force and 25,000 Navy). This would provide approximately 27 additional maneuver battalions by the middle of 1966.
4. A supplemental appropriation of approximately \$X for FY 1966 be sought from the Congress to cover the first part of the added costs attributable to the buildup in and for the war in Vietnam. A further supplemental appropriation might be required later in the Fiscal Year.

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| By DCH | NARS, Date 8-11-82 |

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Although no attempt was made to coordinate the remainder of the paper, the comments of other members of the group were solicited. No attempt was made to resolve certain shades of difference, but Ambassador Lodge's concerns about early political moves to obtain a negotiated settlement (paragraphs 4c and 9) were recorded in footnotes.

Ambassador Lodge emphasized that his concern with respect to political moves was basically on the matter of timing. He also felt that channels of communication with the VC and DRV already exist.

McGeorge Bundy noted that such questions of the "liberation" of North Vietnam could be handled in our public utterances. As far as "negotiations" were concerned, third countries could be relied on to keep initiatives going. Secretary McNamara observed that the contemplated size of our forces and bases in South Vietnam could well give Hanoi the impression that we had the intention of "marching North." Hanoi, Peiping, and Moscow should be made aware that this was not our intent.

In a response to a series of questions from Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara doubted that the GVN could raise the necessary forces to counter increasing VC capabilities (the country team was more optimistic, but we would be prudent to take a pessimistic and skeptical view of the abilities of the GVN - "a non-government" - to push forward with any major program); morale of US forces was excellent. (General Wheeler heartily agreed); the monsoon offensive was under way and "there was more to come;" the VC lacked the capability to seize any of the major US bases, or Saigon.

In connection with VC logistics, Secretary McNamara indicated that, although there was little information available, VC supplies appeared to be adequate. Both he and General Wheeler felt that much of the VC supplies were coming in by sea. Our capability to interdict sea supply was inadequate. This, and the lack of tactical intelligence ("POW interrogations must be tightened up") were the two most important operational problems we faced.

The seeking out of VC main force units was generally regarded as a high priority matter. To a considerable extent this reflected the gaps in intelligence. General Wheeler pointed out that small US-ARVN "foraging teams" operating primarily in the Delta, attempt to locate VC units.

Secretary Rusk stated that, if the McNamara report was accepted, a scenario for Congressional and public actions would be desirable. There was a general feeling that the President would have to move ahead on statements to Congress and the public early in the week of July 26. Although there was already a widespread expectation that we would be expanding our forces in Vietnam, the key question involved calling up reserves.

Secretary Rusk felt that it was important that the new military proposals have civilian (i. e. , State Department) endorsement. He thought he should participate in the Congressional testimony. Mr. Bundy suggested that the Congressional presentation should be a DOD responsibility and that Mr. Rusk should participate in the follow-up presentation to the public. Mr. Ball pointed out the need to paint "a sombre picture" and to dispel any idea that the post-monsoon period would see us over the hump. Secretary McNamara felt that we should make it clear to the public that American troops were already in combat.

Meeting with the President - 11:30

Mr. Bundy suggested an agenda for the discussion to follow:

1. The Action Recommendations (para. 5 of McNamara report)
2. The political situation and prospects in Vietnam
3. The basic diplomatic position
4. A scenario of action

The President stressed the need for utmost care to avoid any leaks or speculation on the subjects under discussion.

Secretary McNamara summarized his recommendations.

The President indicated that, when the time came to call up the reserves, he wanted a full statement of the situation in Vietnam which required additional US troops. What consequences are likely to flow from a call-up? (The McNamara paper gives no sense of victory, but rather of continuing stalemate.) Why can't we get more third country troops? What are the alternatives available to us? We could tell the GVN that we are leaving, but is this an option we wish to pursue at this time? If we pull out of Vietnam now, will we have to call up more troops and suffer more casualties

at some later date? We have explored all initiatives for a peaceful settlement, to an extent, perhaps, that we might already look weak. In short, what are our present options, why do we select the recommended number of troops rather than more or fewer? What will this increased force accomplish?

Mr. McNamara discussed the deterioration in the situation: the VC has greatly expanded its control of the country, populous areas are now isolated, both the VC and ARVN have been suffering heavy casualties. Unless the US steps in with additional forces, the VC will push the GVN into small enclaves and become increasingly ineffective. The VC now controls about 25 percent of the population (CIA Director Raborn estimated that the VC controlled about 25 percent of the population during the day and about 50 percent at night). A year ago, the VC controlled less than 20 percent.

The President felt that our mission should be as limited as we dare make it.

General Wheeler agreed, but felt that we should engage in offensive operations to seek out and fight VC main force units. Although this is difficult because of the lack of tactical intelligence, we know where these base areas are.

Director Raborn reported the CIA's estimate that the VC will avoid major confrontations with US forces and concentrate on destroying our LOCs and on guerrilla warfare, generally.

General Wheeler felt that the VC will have to "come out and fight" and that this will probably take place in the highlands where they will probably attempt to establish a government seat. Mr. Ball thought, however, that the VC might not "accommodate" us by moving in "Phase III" operations. Mr. McNamara felt that if the VC did not choose to fight in large units, the ARVN could proceed with pacification activities and consolidate its oil spots. We don't know what the VC will do when confronted with 175,000 US forces, but they probably will contrive to use their main force units in large concentrations until they get badly mauled (probably by the first part of 1966). At the moment, terrorism is low in terms of VC capabilities. US forces can engage guerrillas as well as the main force units.

Admiral Raborn believed that the VC/PAVN will attempt to achieve a decisive victory in the next six months. In response to the President's query as to the likelihood of this, Mr. McNamara stated that this was highly improbable.

The President asked if there were any dissents from the McNamara recommendations. Mr. Ball felt that we were engaged on "a very perilous voyage." He had grave apprehensions about our ability to beat the VC because of the nature of the terrain, the softness of the political situation and other factors. However, he would go along with the McNamara report. The President indicated that he was aware of the dangers, but wondered about other courses open to us.

Mr. Ball stated that he could not offer a course that would permit us to "cut our losses" easily. But we should weigh the costs of cutting our losses now as opposed to later. The pressures to move toward a larger war would be "almost irresistible." He based his views not on a "moral" position but on a "cold-blooded calculation." We will have to take the risk of Southeast Asia becoming Communist. However, he believed that the losses would be of a short-term nature.

The President felt that Mr. Ball clearly identified the dangers before us, but did not get the impression that Mr. Ball opposes the McNamara course. The President wanted to minimize the dangers of this enterprise but felt that he had no other choice. He would seriously like to explore other alternatives, now or as we proceed.

Mr. Rusk agreed that alternative options should be explored. He felt, however, that if we had met the challenge posed in 1961 by sending "50,000 men" to South Vietnam, Hanoi may have hesitated to proceed with its actions against the South.

Mr. Rowen indicated he would go along with the McNamara proposal, but was worried about the prospects for GVN stability (page 3 of the report). Unless we can achieve stability, our forces will be severely handicapped.

Mr. Lodge pointed out that we cannot count on stability in South Vietnam. Saigon has no roots in the countryside and needs peace to rule the country. In any case, if there were a strong stable government there wouldn't be a war. "We shouldn't take the Government too seriously." If the area is important to us, we must do what is necessary regardless of the Government.

The President asked Mr. Ball to present his alternative proposal in detail at a meeting in the afternoon.

Mr. McNamara proceeded to develop his option. In essence the VC now had the capability to push ARVN out of positions they now control with a consequent inevitable takeover of the Government. He would not recommend that we hold our forces at the present level. We should increase our forces or get out. General Wheeler pointed out that the ARVN strength had sharply declined because of casualties and desertions. With increased US forces we will have proportionately less casualties. He could not assure the President, however, that an additional 100,000 men would be sufficient.

In response to the President's query why Hanoi couldn't match US man for man, General Wheeler indicated that large-scale PAVN forces would be a favorable development for us. He felt that the PAVN would be unlikely to put more than 25 percent of its own forces into South Vietnam (Note: the PAVN consists of approximately 250,000 troops). Admiral Raborn stated that CIA's estimate was that Hanoi would send 20-25,000 PAVN troops into South Vietnam by the end of the year.

The President urged the DCI to increase CIA's capabilities for intelligence collection in the North. Anything that was needed to accomplish this would be made available. Mr. McNamara stressed the need to increase combat intelligence as well (CIA and MACV-J-2 were working on this problem).

The President indicated his deep concern about press stories from Saigon that US forces were bombing innocent civilians. These followed a general discussion on the overall press situation with the President urging State Department officials to work on the matter.

The President closed this session with a request to Messrs. Ball and McGeorge Bundy constantly to explore alternatives to proposed policies. The session adjourned at 1:00 p.m.

Afternoon Session - 2:30

Mr. Ball developed the details of his policy alternative. He was basically skeptical of the ability of Westerners successfully to wage war on the terrain and in the political atmosphere of Vietnam. If the war

could be won in a year with reasonable casualties, he would not be so concerned. But he feels that it will take at least two years and the fact that we will have put in so much US manpower with no early definitive results, would be a sign of US weakness in the eyes of the world. The fact that our tactical intelligence is so poor indicates the unfavorable political atmosphere in Vietnam. We have underestimated the seriousness of the problem since we started there. And we are still underestimating the seriousness of the situation. "It is like giving cobalt treatment to a terminal cancer case." The least harmful way to cut our losses is to let the GVN decide it doesn't want us. He has no illusions about the consequences of this in Vietnam or in Southeast Asia. He reviewed these consequences in detail, but felt that in the long run they would be less serious than they might appear at first.

The President agreed that the situation is serious. He regretted that we were embroiled in Vietnam. But we are there. He believes the Vietnamese people want us there, despite the frequent changes of government. In response to the President's query, Mr. McNamara indicated his poor impression of General Ky, and his belief that the present GVN would be removed by the end of the year. General Wheeler stated that he had a good impression of General Thieu. He felt that the stability of the present government would depend on our support.

The President stressed his concern about the GVN's instability. He noted two basic problems:

1. Can Westerners engage in a war in Vietnam?
2. How can we fight a war under a government that changes so frequently?

Mr. Bundy agreed with the McNamara proposals. He felt that no government which could hold power is likely to be one that will invite us to leave. The basic lesson of Mr. Ball's view is that:

1. The post-monsoon season will not see us in the clear.
2. No single speech will be sufficient to reassure the American people.

We will have to face up to the serious, ominous implications of our new policy. This is not a continuation of our present approach. "We are

asking Americans to bet more to achieve less." We will have to engage in a much more massive political and economic effort. New organizational changes may be necessary in our mission in Saigon and in our governmental structure in Washington. There are no early victories in store, although early casualties are likely to be heavy.

Mr. Bundy did not believe that Mr. Ball's "cancer analogy" was a good one. Immaturity and weakness, yes. A non-Communist society is struggling to be born. Before we take our decision to the American people, Ambassador Taylor should go back to the GVN and get greater, more positive assurances. There will be time to decide our policy won't work after we have given it a good try. (Mr. Ball disagreed here, feeling that the larger our commitment, the more difficult would be the decision to get out. "We won't get out; we'll double our bet and get lost in the rice paddies.")

Mr. Bundy felt that the kind of shift in US policy suggested by Mr. Ball would be "disastrous". He would rather maintain our present commitment and "waffle through" than withdraw. The country is in the mood to accept grim news.

Secretary Rusk emphasized that the nature and integrity of the US commitment was fundamental. It makes the US stance with the USSR creditable. It would be dangerous if the Communist leadership became convinced that we will not see this through. It is more important to convince the Communist leadership of this than to worry about the opinion of non-Communist countries. He is more optimistic about the outcome of the war than some. The effects of our force increment will be to force the VC into guerrilla activity, to remove the capability of the other side to use major forces against the GVN. The VC must now be faced with difficult decisions. An increased US commitment does not change the nature of the war -- we have already gone a long way in the air and on the ground without escalating. Consequently, he wondered whether we should be too dramatic about the increase in US forces. (Mr. Bundy pointed out here that calling up the reserves will require a certain amount of "drama").

Mr. McNamara felt that Mr. Ball understated the cost of cutting our losses. He agreed with Mr. Rusk on the international effect of such an action at this time. Mr. Ball also overstates the cost of his (McNamara's) proposal. He agreed that it would take at least two years to pacify the country and we must be prepared to increase our forces by another 100,000.

General Wheeler said that it was unreasonable to expect to "win" in a year regardless of the number of US troops involved. We might start to reverse the unfavorable trend in a year and make definite progress in three years.

The President wondered whether we could win without using nuclear weapons if China entered the war.

General Wheeler felt we could in "Southeast Asia." He believes US forces can operate in the terrain of Southeast Asia. This is the first "war of National Liberation"; if we walk out of this one, we will just have to face others.

The President asked why, when we have been undertaking military efforts for 20 months, this new effort will be successful. General Wheeler felt that our additional forces will stave off a deteriorating situation.

Ambassador Lodge disagreed with Mr. Ball's approach. He felt, however, that it was essential to get a political/civil program going.

Ambassador Unger agreed with McNamara proposal. He found no unfavorable reactions in South Vietnam to an increase in US forces.

The President raised again the problem of getting more economic/political information into the press. State Department representatives promised to give this increased attention.

The President stressed his desire to get more third country troops into South Vietnam. He also raised the possibility of a Vietnam Task Force which would meet daily.

The meeting adjourned at 5:30.

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