

Chairmen in Crisis

Planning the Air War against North Vietnam, 1964

**Walter S. Poole
and
Dale Andrade**



Special Historical Study 3

**Joint History Office
Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**

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Foreword

If one can learn more from failure than from success, the Vietnam War offers one of the best, if most painful, learning experiences in American military history. The men who held the position of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, during those years were tested in ways that none of their predecessors had been.

At that time the Chairman was the corporate spokesman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or first among equals when providing military advice to civilian leaders. Failure to provide military recommendations that won approval and proved effective had to be, in good part, the Chairman's failure. It is useful to look at how Chairmen performed during the initial planning of the air campaign against North Vietnam in 1964 in order to assess what helped or hampered them. In other words, were the shortcomings of successive Chairmen personal or institutional?

Walter Poole of the Joint History Office initially researched and wrote this study in 1996, and the Joint History Office's Dale Andrade updated it in 2013. They relied on the files of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council and the presidential papers at the Johnson Library to write this narrative. Penny Norman, Staff Editor, prepared the manuscript for publication.

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Planning the Air War against North Vietnam 1964

If one can learn more from failure than from success, the Vietnam War offers one of the best learning experiences in American military history. History regards that conflict largely as a mistake, from the policy and strategic level down to the battlefield tactics, and both civilian and military leaders have struggled to take lessons from Vietnam ever since. From the military senior leadership perspective, much has been made of its inability to grasp the realities of the war in Southeast Asia and of their deep disagreements with the civilian administration. The men who held the position of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, during the years 1963-1973 were tested in ways that none of their predecessors had been. The Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War have been depicted as “five silent men” who failed to develop “forthright communication” and effective influence with Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson and with Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who served in both administrations. While relationships changed somewhat under President Richard M. Nixon and his Secretary of Defense, Melvin R. Laird, the overall climate during that time span consisted of sharp disagreements between the Chiefs and the administration, with the former believing that White House plans to win the war could not possibly succeed.¹

The Chairman served as the link between the Chiefs and their civilian superiors. Failure to provide military advice that won approval and proved effective had to be, in part, the Chairman’s failure. Were the shortcomings of successive Chairmen personal or institutional? The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 changed the Chairman from a corporate spokesman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or first among equals into “the principal military adviser to the

¹ H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), pp. 325-326, 333.

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President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.” A man replaced a committee. Many observers considered the Goldwater-Nichols Act a necessary and overdue reform; others worried that elevating the Chairman in this manner might combine too much influence with too little expertise. It is useful to look at how the Chairman performed during the Vietnam War, without the benefit of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, and find out what helped or hampered them.

The three Chairmen during the Vietnam War—General Maxwell D. Taylor, USA; General Earle G. Wheeler, USA; and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, USN—each held very different ideas of how he should carry out his duties. Broadly speaking, General Taylor was personally close to the President and saw himself as the agent of his civilian superiors, supporting their policies and working to garner the Joint Chiefs’ support for them. Consequently, his relations with the President and Secretary of Defense were more comfortable than those with his own Service Chiefs. General Wheeler, in contrast, put a premium on JCS collegiality and held the Service Chiefs’ confidence by keeping them fully informed about what transpired at high-level meetings. Wheeler regarded himself as a corporate spokesman charged with persuading civilians to accept military advice. The result was that President Johnson respected Wheeler but kept him at arm’s length. Admiral Moorer was prepared, when he felt the occasion demanded, to bypass the Service Chiefs and act by himself in cooperation with the White House. He exercised a degree of authority and latitude that the Chairman would not actually obtain until the passage of Goldwater-Nichols.

In the earliest days of America’s expanding role in Vietnam, the role of the Joint Chiefs was changing. In 1961, through National Security Action Memorandum No. 55, President Kennedy directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to act as “more than military men” and help fit military requirements “into the overall context of any situation” He was calling upon them to recognize the political reality that underlay their statutory responsibilities. However, that reality also meant that the Chairman was much better positioned than the Service Chiefs to be “more than a military man.” Constant dealing with senior officials in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department, and the White House gave the Chairman insights that a Service Chief could not acquire. As Army Chief of Staff during 1955-1959, General Taylor was a disaffected outsider; as Chairman, he appeared the consummate insider. General Wheeler as Army Chief of Staff followed Taylor’s lead, but as Chairman he led the Service Chiefs to adopt consensus recommendations. Admiral Moorer, as Chief of Naval Operations in

1968, did not figure prominently in JCS discussions about Vietnam, but as Chairman in the last years of the war, he acted as captain of the ship.²

How well did each Chairman's approach to his job translate into influence with the Secretary of Defense and the President? The degree of harmony between a Chairman and the Service Chiefs seemed to have no effect upon his standing with the President and the Secretary of Defense. Some Service Chiefs did not trust General Taylor, but his civilian superiors saw him as the epitome of what a Chairman ought to be. To take examples from earlier years, Taylor served President Kennedy's purposes by controlling the Chiefs during the Cuban missile crisis after the White House had rejected their recommendation to attack, and by lining them up to support the Limited Test Ban Treaty with the Soviet Union, which they consistently opposed. In mid-1964, President Johnson sent Taylor to Saigon as ambassador in the belief that his reputation would prevent South Vietnam from becoming a partisan issue during the election. In 1965, with the election won, the administration rejected Taylor's advice not to commit major ground troops to combat. In hindsight, President Johnson valued Taylor less for his advice than for the credibility that his presence gave to administration policies.

General Wheeler always received a polite hearing as corporate spokesman, but very often nothing more. The Chiefs' unanimity, Wheeler soon found, did not make the Secretary or the President more ready to accept their advice. As he wryly told the Service Chiefs after a crucial White House meeting on 1 December 1964, "I got no disagreement in this paper at all except to the course of action recommended." By 1968, Wheeler felt that he was fighting a rearguard action against Defense Department civilians who wanted to withdraw from Vietnam quickly, whatever the consequences. He repeatedly scaled back JCS recommendations, hoping that such steps would encourage the administration to stay the course, though to no avail. In the end, personality and circumstances mattered a good deal more than provisions of law in making a Chairman effective.

Decisionmaking Challenges

During the Vietnam War there arose several crucial events that resulted in disagreements between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White

² *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1961-1963*, vol. VIII, National Security Policy (US Dept. of State, 1966), pp. 109-110, hereafter *FRUS*. This directive remained in force until it was reissued in somewhat different form by President Jimmy Carter.

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House, from how to deal with South Vietnam's troublesome first President Ngo Dinh Diem, to the shape of intervention in 1965, and finally how to disengage from the conflict in the early 1970s. All were divisive, but one disagreement stood out: the long-running debate over how to convince the North Vietnamese to cease its war effort in the South. One of the most dramatic and long-running disagreements over strategy occurred in 1964, before the decision was made to send US ground forces to fight in South Vietnam. Since taking office after the assassination of President Kennedy in October 1963, President Johnson had made little headway in Vietnam. By mid-1964 Viet Cong main forces were routinely defeating South Vietnamese Army units, and Hanoi had begun sending North Vietnamese regulars to the Southern battlefield, further skewing the balance of forces. In the face of this worsening situation, the White House groped around for a coherent plan.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff advised quick and decisive action to stave off what was increasingly looking like defeat in Southeast Asia. On 22 January 1964, the Chiefs had advised Secretary McNamara that, since South Vietnam currently held "the pivotal position" in a worldwide confrontation with Sino-Soviet communism, "we must prepare for whatever level of activity may be required [to save it] and, being prepared, must then proceed to take actions as necessary to achieve our purposes surely and promptly." The Chiefs believed that the United States "must be prepared to put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions" placed on US actions in Vietnam because "we and the South Vietnamese are fighting the war on the enemy's terms." The Chiefs believed that these voluntary limitations conveyed "signals of irresolution" to Hanoi, and they called for "increasingly bolder actions," including the bombing of North Vietnam and the possible introduction of American troops. While the focus of the counterinsurgency battle lay in South Vietnam, they argued that the war's character could be "substantially and favorably" altered if North Vietnam stopped supporting the Viet Cong. Among the bolder actions favored by the JCS were bombing targets in North Vietnam, committing US forces in support of combat actions within South Vietnam, and taking direct action—mostly covert—against North Vietnam itself.³

McNamara sent the JCS memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk on the twenty-eighth, and two days later the South Vietnamese government—only three months old following the coup against

³ JCSM 46-64 to SecDef, 22 Jan 64, JCS 2339/117-2, 9155.3/3100 (3 Jan 64) (A); Memo, JCS for SecDef, JCSM-46-64, 22 Jan 64, in *Pentagon Papers*, (Gravel ed.), vol. III, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 496-99.

President Diem—was itself overthrown, this time by General Nguyen Khanh, the leader of another dissatisfied military junta. Over the next twelve months there would be five different governments in Saigon, setting off a dizzying spiral of chaos and paralysis that only exacerbated the sense of defeat in South Vietnam. Given the circumstances, Secretary of State Rusk finessed his reply, agreeing in general with the JCS but implicitly rejecting their recommendations. Rusk closed with the bland evasion that the State Department would “always be prepared to consider promptly ... any courses of action” proposed by the Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs.⁴

On 2 March, the Joint Chiefs advised Secretary McNamara that the best way to make Hanoi stop supporting the insurgents was to prepare military actions against North Vietnam, “one in the form of a sudden blow for shock effect, the other in the form of ascending order of severity with increasing US participation.” Taylor told McNamara that the Chiefs had not “matured” their views about which mode of attack to recommend. Two days later, the Chiefs conferred with President Johnson. Basic decisions must wait until the November election was over, Johnson said. In the meantime, he wanted to take steps that would keep the North Vietnamese “off balance” without risking US involvement on the scale of the Korean War. Taylor did not believe the Vietnam commitment would expand into another Korea. But General Wallace M. Greene, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and General Curtis E. LeMay, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, foresaw a “Korean-type operation.” The other two Service Chiefs, Admiral David L. McDonald, Chief of Naval Operations, and General Wheeler, the Chief of Staff of the Army, were uncertain.⁵

The JCS position on the war in Vietnam was far removed from that of the White House—and it would remain that way. President Johnson, in office for only a few months and already facing an election in November, regarded the war as a troublesome obstacle, and he was unwilling to make bold, sweeping moves in a faraway conflict that most Americans knew little about and cared less. From the beginning of his administration Johnson prized consensus, and he played a personal role in the policymaking process in order to see it through to an

⁴ Ltr, Rusk to McNamara, 5 Feb 64, in *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, p. 63; Lawrence S. Kaplan, et al., *The McNamara Ascendancy, 1961-1965*, History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, (Washington, DC: Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2006), p. 505.

⁵ Joint History Office (JHO), *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam: 1960–1968, Pt. I*, pp. 9-1 to 9-8. Michael R. Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 267.

agreement. Beginning in February 1964, the President began holding Tuesday luncheons, informal brainstorming sessions to shape national security policy that included the Secretary of Defense as well as the Secretary of State and the National Security Adviser. These intimate meetings were opportunities to speak frankly and directly to the President, and came to be regarded by Secretary Rusk, for one, as the real National Security Council (NSC). None of the Joint Chiefs were invited, however, not even the Chairman, a snub that rankled until General Wheeler was finally invited to become a regular at the luncheons in late 1967.⁶

On 8 March Secretary McNamara and General Taylor traveled to Saigon for a fact-finding mission. The consensus of their findings was that the South Vietnamese were in a weakened state, made worse by the coup and increasing politicization of the military, but they were also more receptive to American advice than had been the Diem regime. McNamara concluded that lessening US support would lead to a major communist victory, but he continued to reject overt attacks against North Vietnam. The Secretary circulated a draft report to the President that defined US objectives as including “an independent non-Communist South Vietnam.” He recommended a series of measures to bolster the Saigon government and its armed forces but opposed overt military actions against North Vietnam for the time being.⁷ A written response by General Greene summed up the Service Chiefs’ view that McNamara’s report amounted to simply continuing along the current, clearly inadequate course: “Half-measures won’t win in South Vietnam.”⁸

Admiral McDonald also disagreed with the “half measures,” saying in a staff meeting that “We have been pussyfooting around and need to decide whether to fight” and advocated putting the US forces on a war footing while withdrawing American dependents from South Vietnam. Secretary McNamara pointed out that officials in Saigon felt such a move would be bad for morale.⁹ More discussions ensued and the following day the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent a memorandum to Secretary McNamara stating that they did “not believe that the recommended program in itself will be sufficient to turn the tide against

⁶ Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam*, Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, vol. VI (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), p. 17.

⁷ JHO, *The JCS and the War in Vietnam: 1960–1968, Pt. I*, pp. 9-11 to 9-18.

⁸ JCS 2343/346-1, 17 March 1964, JMF 9155.3/3100 (13 Mar 64).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 509-10.

the Viet Cong in South Vietnam without positive action being taken against the Hanoi Government at an early date.”¹⁰

The Secretary of Defense’s report went up to President Johnson with a notation from General Taylor saying that the Joint Chiefs “believed the proposed program was acceptable, but it may not be sufficient to save the situation in South Vietnam” without action against the North. The President accepted the report, and his policy as outlined in the forthcoming NSSM 288 on 17 March was that “It will remain the policy of the United States to furnish assistance and support to South Viet Nam for as long as it is required to bring Communist aggression and terrorism under control.”¹¹

While the Joint Chiefs were in agreement that the current focus and pace of action would not solve South Vietnam’s woes, they were not of a single mind on the way forward or its timing. Air Force Chief of Staff General LeMay and Marine Corps Commandant General Greene wanted operations against the communists “extended and expanded immediately,” but General Taylor, Admiral McDonald, and Army Chief of Staff General Earle G. Wheeler saw nothing to justify a radical change in the President’s recent policy statements. Given that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were split in their views, with a majority against immediate military action, Secretary McNamara let the matter lie.¹²

At a JCS meeting on 20 March, General Taylor asked the Service Chiefs whether they wanted to send the Secretary more recommendations, bearing in mind the President’s decision to solidify the situation within South Vietnam first. They proposed no immediate steps but did initiate a study to help determine the optimum course of action. Meantime, the Chiefs had ordered the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), to prepare operational plans for air attacks to carry out border control, retaliatory actions, and graduated overt military pressures against North Vietnam. CINCPAC submitted a detailed OPLAN 37-64 on 30 March.¹³

Still the downward slide in South Vietnam continued. By April 1964 the Saigon government was clearly not able to stem either the worsening domestic situation or the increasingly bold and successful Viet Cong attacks, prompting the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to report that “sustained Viet Cong pressure continues to erode [South

¹⁰ JCSM-224-64 to Secretary McNamara, “Draft Memorandum for the President, Subject: ‘South Vietnam,’” 13 March 1964, in *FRUS 1964–1968, Vol. I* (1992), pp. 149-150.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 512.

¹³ JHO, *The JCS and the War in Vietnam: 1960–1968, Part I*, pp. 9-33 to 9-35.

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Vietnamese government] authority ... undercut US/programs and depress South Vietnamese morale In any case, if the tide of deterioration has not been arrested by the end of the year, the anti-Communist position in South Vietnam is likely to become untenable.”¹⁴

The instability in Saigon coincided with North Vietnam’s decision to send main force units to the South, escalating the conflict and placing additional pressure on the South Vietnamese Army. Battles with enemy main force units became more commonplace, and the South Vietnamese barely held their own. As the situation deteriorated, the Johnson administration revisited the possibility of taking the war to North Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, who were out-of-sync with White House thinking on the course of the war in general up to that point, would have another opportunity to influence the course of events.

On 14 April, they completed a paper for Secretary McNamara entitled “Alternate Courses of Action, Vietnam” which outlined all the Service Chiefs’ concerns and recommendations. Two of the Chiefs, General LeMay and General Greene, were “convinced that operations in Vietnam should be extended and expanded immediately.” They also advocated a program for “applying the necessary pressure against the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam, i.e., North Vietnam].” Such pressure, they argued, “could cause the communists to stop supporting activities in South Vietnam, thereby speeding up the time table for suppressing the insurgency.”¹⁵

The Chairman did not support this position: “Pursuant to the President’s approval [of Secretary McNamara’s recommendations through NSAM 288] implementing action is now in progress and, in my opinion, nothing has occurred in the meantime to justify the substitution of a new plan as recommended by the Chief of Staff, US Air Force, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Such a proposal would be difficult to defend and, if adopted, would disrupt the continuity of actions presently underway.”

The remaining Chiefs agreed with the Chairman. Army Chief of Staff General Wheeler argued that “All US programs for action against the DRV must complement and support each other.” The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral McDonald, also recommended that the outline plan not be approved. Instead he proposed that, subsequent to the review of a plan which has just been submitted by the Commander in Chief, Pacific, relating to the same program (Border Control Actions, Retaliatory Actions, Graduated Overt Military Pressures), the Joint

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 514.

¹⁵ JCSM-298-64 to Secretary McNamara, “Alternate Courses of Action, Vietnam,” 14 April 1964, JCS 2343/3454-3, 9155.3/3100 (13 Mar 64) (1).

Chiefs of Staff make recommendations as appropriate regarding any additional military actions which should be approved for early implementation.¹⁶

On 21 April, the Joint Chiefs approved the plan, called CINCPAC OPLAN 37-64. During 11-13 May, Secretary McNamara and General Taylor made another trip to Saigon and found the outlook even bleaker. McNamara concluded that the Viet Cong had “shifted into high gear” and ordered development of a new scenario for strikes against North Vietnam. The Office of the Secretary of Defense drafted a document, with technical assistance from the Joint Staff.¹⁷

Pondering Escalation

In preparation for a major planning session of the National Security Council on 24 May, the Secretary of Defense—with major input from the Joint Chiefs of Staff—submitted a paper setting out new proposals with an oddly worded summary: “to try to improve the situation in the South without strikes on the North, or to try to improve the situation in the South *with* strikes on the North.” If the communist leadership could not be convinced to cease its intervention in the South, the plan suggested—with Congressional approval—mining North Vietnamese ports, striking road systems and bridges that helped move war materiel southward, followed by attacks “against targets which have maximum psychological effect on the North’s willingness to stop insurgency. These latter targets would comprise those related to North Vietnam’s military power (e.g., POL [petroleum, oil, lubricants] storage, selected airfields, barracks/training areas, bridges, railroad yards, port facilities, and communications) and those comprising their industrial assets.” At the onset, the strikes would be launched by the South Vietnamese aircraft, “but they could be expanded to include US aircraft.” The objective was “not to overthrow the North Vietnam regime nor to destroy the country, but to stop DRV-directed Viet Cong terrorism and resistance to pacification efforts in the South.”¹⁸

During a meeting with General Taylor, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the Director of Central Intelligence, John A. McCone, McNamara pointed out that the first issue which should be presented to

¹⁶ Secretary McNamara decided that he did not need to take action to resolve the split in JCSM-298-64 because “the currently approved program reflects the views of the majority of the Chiefs.”

¹⁷ JHO, *The JCS and the War in Vietnam: 1960–1968*, Part I, pp. 9-35, 10-3 to 10.9.

¹⁸ Draft Memorandum for the President prepared by the Dept. of Defense, “Scenarios for Strikes on North Vietnam,” 25 May 64, in *FRUS 1964–1969*, vol. I, pp. 363-368.

the President is “whether we believe that additional US efforts within South Vietnam will or will not prevent further deterioration within South Vietnam.” Secretary Rusk reiterated his long-held belief that “we should straighten out the Laotian situation,¹⁹ possibly by moving against North Vietnam, and if we succeed in this, we would then straighten out South Vietnam.” He also expressed his view that “we should hit light at first so that North Vietnamese prestige was not involved. Ho Chi Minh could back out of the situation if his prestige was not deeply engaged.” Director McCone disagreed, taking the military’s line that “if we go into North Vietnam we should go in hard and not limit our action to pinpricks.” General Taylor commented that a surprise attack from the air could be very effective, but, thereafter, attacks would be less effective and losses would go up.”²⁰

Opinions ranged along the same lines during the National Security Council later that day. Secretary of State Rusk was wary of “start[ing] something big, such as seeking a Congressional resolution of support, and then have the whole situation in South Vietnam collapse,” while General Taylor made the long-standing JCS point that “air attacks should be initiated on a substantial scale from the outset, with full US participation.” Secretary McNamara stressed that “the US must be prepared from the outset to put in ground troops, possibly in very substantial numbers”—perhaps to include “calling up two National Guard divisions, both to signal the seriousness of our intentions and to make sure that we have enough.” This suggestion “met with no favor or enthusiasm whatever” and was later “rejected definitely” by the White House. This was not to say that the President did not foresee a time when the Joint Chiefs’ preference for striking North Vietnam would be appropriate. According to notes of a meeting at the White House later that day, President Johnson was by this time “convinced that extension of the conflict northward into North Vietnam is inevitable unless the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the formal name for North Vietnam] desists in what they are doing.”²¹

The administration was no closer to approving a policy for Vietnam, and the prospect of either losing South Vietnam or being

¹⁹ The 1962 Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos forbade signatories, which included the United States and both Vietnams, to introduce foreign troops or other military personnel. Almost immediately, however, Hanoi violated that prohibition.

²⁰ Summary Record by Bromley Smith of the National Security Council Executive Committee Meeting, 1100 hours, 24 May 64, in *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, p. 369 ff.

²¹ Notes of Debriefing about White House Meetings Held on 24 May 1964 given to the Joint Chiefs of Staff at 1400 hours, 25 May 1964, by LTG Andrew J. Goodpaster, USA, Assistant to the Chairman, JCS, Chairman’s File, 091 Vietnam.

dragged into a ground war before the November election loomed large. Because of the persistent disagreement between civilian and military advisers, President Johnson all but excluded the Joint Chiefs of Staff from policymaking. Their recommendations went through McNamara, who effectively kept the Chiefs in check, to the White House where they were largely ignored. According to one official history, “The exclusion may have helped muffle internal dissent and foster the illusion of administration unity and consensus but at the price of exacerbating the underlying tensions.” Not until after the election did the President relent, announcing at a 19 November White House meeting that no future decisions on Vietnam “would be made without participation by the military.”²²

Military planning went on, however. Throughout the spring, the Pentagon pored over potential targets, and on 30 May the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted their findings, entitled “Air Campaign Against North Vietnam,” to the Secretary of Defense. Targets were divided into three groupings: Category A included armed reconnaissance along highways leading to Laos, airfields identified with supporting enemy supply and ammunition depots, petroleum storage, as well as military headquarters and barracks. Category B targets consisted of smaller airfields, important railroad and highway bridges, supply and ordnance depots in northern North Vietnam, aerial mining, and petroleum storage in Hanoi and Haiphong. In Category C were “significant industrial targets, the destruction of which would effectively destroy the NVN industrial base.” There were ninety-one targets in these three groups, and “The intensity of execution can range from selective strikes in an ascending order of gradually increasing military pressure to a concentration of effort designed to attain the effect of a sudden blow.” Planners believed that “the most effective application of military power will result from a sudden sharp blow in order to bring home the penalties for violating international agreements and the intent of the United States is to bring a cessation of DRV support of the insurgency in Laos and Vietnam.”²³

This reflected the opinion of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that, from a military viewpoint alone, “a sudden sharp blow” was best. But General Taylor felt obliged to see things as more than a military man, and his understanding of that requirement quickly separated him from some of the Service Chiefs. During a JCS meeting on Saturday, 30 May, General LeMay—who was the acting Chairman while General Taylor was attending the high-level Honolulu Conference—circulated a strongly

²² Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam*, p. 13.

²³ JCSM-460 to the Secretary of Defense, “Air Campaign Against North Vietnam,” JCS 2343/383, 30 May 1964.

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worded draft memorandum delineating objectives and courses of action. The original text stated that the United States “should seek through military actions to render North Vietnam incapable of rendering further support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos,” but those words were changed to read “seek through military actions to accomplish destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities necessary to compel the DRV to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos.”²⁴

The disagreement between Taylor and LeMay was more than just semantic. During the regular meeting of the Chiefs on Monday, 1 June at 1400, the Director of the Joint Staff, Lieutenant General David A. Burchinal, USAF, recorded that he had been directed by the Chairman to “withhold forwarding of [JCSM-471-64, 31 May] because Taylor was not sure that the wording therein reflected was just what the Joint Chiefs had decided upon during their Saturday, 30 May, meeting. LeMay, who was Acting Chairman during this Monday meeting, did not like this turn of events at all. Later, when I talked with him privately, we both agreed that this action on the part of the Chairman had every appearance of a deliberate move to put the subject paper and the views of the Joint Chiefs on ice until after the Honolulu meeting. This would enable the Chairman to avoid presenting the views of the Joint Chiefs at this very important conference.” Some minor changes in the wording were made and all agreed that “the paper represented the understanding reached at the Saturday meeting.”²⁵ General LeMay proposed forwarding the paper the Secretary of Defense, but Burchinal suggested they phone the Chairman in Honolulu for his approval because “these views were of such critical importance” that they should be vetted both by the Chairman as well as the other officials in Honolulu.²⁶

The result was the revised JCSM-471-64 of 2 June, “Objectives and Courses of Action-Southeast Asia,” submitted to the Secretary of Defense. In the strongly worded document, the Joint Chiefs—minus the

²⁴ JCSM-471-64, 31 May 64. CSAFM 459-64 to JCS, 28 May 64, JCS 2343/394; Decision on JCS 2343/394, written by the Assistant Secretary, JCS, 30 May 64; 9155.3 (26 May 64).

²⁵ Revised Decision on JCS 2343/394, the Secretary of the Joint Staff (SJS), 1 Jun 64, 9155.3 (28 May 64) lists the very small editorial changes they agreed upon: “... seek through military actions to accomplish destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities necessary to compel ...” became “will and capabilities as necessary to compel”

²⁶ Memorandum by Gen. Greene, “Chairman’s Action on JCS Paper, ‘Objectives and Courses of Action—Southeast Asia,’” 1 Jun 64, Greene Papers, Marine Corps History and Museums Division.

Chairman—defined their primary obligation as identifying “a militarily valid objective for Southeast Asia and then advocate a desirable military course of action to achieve that objective.” Based on these “military considerations,” the Service Chiefs once again suggested that the United States “should seek through military actions to accomplish destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities as necessary to compel the ... DRV to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos.” They pointedly objected to “current thinking [that] appears to dismiss this objective in favor of ... military action which, hopefully, would cause the North Vietnamese to decide to terminate their subversive support of activity in Laos and South Vietnam. This lesser objective is thus not geared to destruction of capability but to an enforced changing of [DRV] policy and its implementation which, if achieved, may well be temporary in nature. The Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that this lesser objective just described is militarily an inadequate objective for the present situation, but would agree as an initial measure to pursue a course of action to achieve this lesser objective.” Reluctance by the President “to take positive action will almost inevitably increase the price and gravity of such action when it is finally taken,” argued the Chiefs. “This situation exists because, in spite of more than two years of effort to convince a determined enemy of our determination that he will not prevail, he has clearly increased his effort and achieved improvement in his relative situation If we mean to send a ‘message’ [that] we really intend to prevail in this situation, we must recognize the requirement to convey directly, sharply, even abruptly, that the situation has indeed changed insofar as the United States is concerned.”²⁷

Approving a bombing campaign against North Vietnam was not high on the agenda at the Honolulu Conference. According to the JCS official notes of the ongoing proceedings, General Taylor “sensed that it was definitely the intention, particularly on the part of State, to hold back discussions on possible actions against North Vietnam [and] they were never fully discussed.”²⁸

At the same time, however, the Chairman disagreed with his Chiefs’ call for heavy attacks on the North. In a memo to Secretary McNamara, Taylor wrote that he did not believe the alternative actions set forth by his Chiefs “are an accurate or complete expression of our

²⁷ JCSM-471-64 to the Secretary of Defense, “Objectives and Courses of Action-Southeast Asia,” JCS 2343/394-1, 2 Jun 64.

²⁸ Memorandum for Record by MajGen H. W. Buse, Jr., USMC, “JCS Meeting at 1400 on Wednesday, 3 June 1964,” Greene Papers, Marine Corps History and Museums Division.

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choices.” The Service Chiefs’ preferred approach was “A massive air attack on all significant military targets in North Vietnam for the purpose of destroying them and thereby making the enemy incapable of continuing to assist the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao [communist guerrillas in Laos]—but General Taylor felt that such heavy attacks were “probably unnecessarily destructive for the purpose of changing the will of the adversary; it limits any possibility of cooperation from Hanoi in calling off the insurgents; and represents such a challenge to the Communist Bloc as to raise considerably the risks of escalation.” Instead, the Chairman recommended going along with civilian policymakers, who seemed to embrace a plan “Demonstrative strikes against limited military targets to show US readiness,” though he fully expected that the time would come for a more robust plan of attack against the North.²⁹

The basic distinction between General Taylor and the Service Chiefs was that they wanted to change North Vietnam’s will by destroying its capability while he wanted to change Hanoi’s will by demonstrating that its capability could be destroyed—which was the essence of graduated response theory. The Service Chiefs thought that the key lay in demonstrating Washington’s determination that “we really intend to prevail in this situation,” while he framed the problem in terms of convincing Hanoi to desist and cooperate. Taylor was trying to bridge the gap between the Service Chiefs’ position and McGeorge Bundy’s recommendation that an initial strike be “more deterrent than destructive.” But the Chairman underestimated the difficulty of his task. Bundy had advised President Johnson that “[t]he main object is to kill as few people as possible while creating an environment in which the [communists’] incentive to react is as low as possible.”³⁰

As these discussions continued, the ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, submitted his resignation. Secretary McNamara and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy suggested Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric as successor, but President Johnson preferred General Taylor. On 15 June, Bundy telephoned the President to press the case for Gilpatric rather than Taylor, arguing that the general “is a tired man with an uncertain health problem and I myself do not believe that in fact he’s ever understood that war.” But the President insisted that Taylor “can give us cover that we need with the country and with the Republicans and with the Congress ... I believe anything in his name, signed to, would

²⁹ Chairman’s Memorandum 1451-64 to the Secretary of Defense, “Comments of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, on JCSM-471-64, 5 Jun 64.

³⁰ Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, p. 371.

carry some weight with nearly anyone.”³¹ In other words, Taylor’s reputation would stifle criticism and prevent the administration’s Vietnam policy from becoming a campaign issue.

On 1 July, General Taylor prematurely ended his tour as Chairman in order to accept the ambassadorial appointment. Two weeks earlier, General William C. Westmoreland had replaced General Harkins as Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. By the President’s direction, Ambassador Taylor bore “overall responsibility” that included “the whole military effort in South Vietnam” and authorized him to exercise “the degree of command and control that you consider appropriate.”³² General Wheeler became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and General Harold K. Johnson succeeded him as Army Chief of Staff.

One month later, the Tonkin Gulf episode occurred. American naval vessels were conducting “DeSoto Patrols,” which involved collecting intelligence to support South Vietnamese covert maritime operations against North Vietnam. On 2 August and allegedly again on 4 August, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked US destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf. After reports of a second attack, President Johnson ordered retaliatory attacks on 5 August by carrier-based aircraft, mainly against North Vietnamese port facilities. Two days later, at the administration’s urging, the House of Representatives passed unanimously and the Senate approved by 88-2 a resolution declaring that the United States was prepared “as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.” The Gulf of Tonkin resolution served as the legal basis for steadily escalating US involvement.³³

On 16 August, a military coup brought back to power General Nguyen Khanh (the same general who had come to power in January 1964. He was overthrown on 8 February by General Duong Van Minh, and was now returning to power in the same manner). In the face of the burgeoning communist threat and the North Vietnamese attacks in the Tonkin Gulf, Khanh and his generals declared a state of emergency and took on dictatorial powers. Violent public protests soon broke out in Saigon, again plunging to country into chaos.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 407-411, 415-416.

³² The President’s letter to Taylor is printed in *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, p. 538.

³³ JHO, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam: 1960-1968*, Pt. I, pp. 11-20 to 11-27. There remains little doubt now that the second attack never occurred.

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Against this backdrop of political instability, Ambassador Taylor sent a message on 18 August suggesting two responses to the Tonkin Gulf incident. Course of Action A would stress strengthening the Khanh government while deferring air attacks against the North. Course of Action B would open the air campaign against North Vietnam without delay. Taylor recommended adopting Course A while maintaining readiness to shift to Course B.³⁴

With General Wheeler on leave and General LeMay acting as Chairman in his stead, the Joint Chiefs pressed for a forceful presentation of their views—which did not match Ambassador Taylor's proposal. "I do not believe that we can afford to risk the possible collapse of our position in Asia," LeMay wrote in a memo for General Wheeler. "There is too much at stake. I am convinced that direct US offensive operations are necessary, that they entail far less risk to the US than continuing on our present course, and that they have every prospect of success."³⁵

Instead, the Joint Chiefs of Staff endorsed Taylor's Course of Action B as being "more in accord with the current situation" and proposed "an accelerated program of actions" against North Vietnam was the best way to stave off "a collapse" of the US position in the South. In addition, the Chiefs did not agree that "we should be slow to get deeply involved until we have a better feel for the quality of our ally. The United States is already deeply involved." Rather, in their opinion, "only significantly stronger military pressures" on North Vietnam were likely to give the South Vietnamese the breathing room needed "for attainment of the requisite governmental stability and viability."³⁶

On 31 August, Secretary McNamara asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop their recommendations in more detail. The process of writing a reply clarified the major differences of opinion among the Chiefs. General Johnson believed that "the war against the insurgency will be won in South Vietnam and along its frontiers." If moderate pressure did not make Hanoi stop supporting the Viet Cong, he deemed

³⁴ *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, pp. 689–693.

³⁵ CSAFM-732-64 to JCS, 26 Aug 64, 9150 (18 Aug 64) sec. 1.

³⁶ JCSM-746-64 to the Secretary of Defense, "Recommended Course of Action—Southeast Asia," JCS 2343/441-1, 26 Aug 64, in *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, pp. 713–717, which wrongly gives the date as 27 Aug; JCSM-729-64 to the Secretary of Defense, "Target Study—North Vietnam," 24 Aug 64, JCS 2343/383-2, 9155.3/3100 (21 May 64) sec. 2, expanded the list of targets to 94, grouped into five basic categories: A, airfields; B, lines of communications (bridges, railroad yards, and shops); C, military installations (military barracks/headquarters, ammunition depots, POL storage, supply depots, communications facilities, and port facilities); D, industrial installations; E, route armed reconnaissance.

it “illogical to conclude that ... more severe pressures would have any other effect but to increase and intensify the support of the VC insurgency.” General LeMay, on the other hand, again pressed for immediate destruction of the targets that had already been identified as being most critical to support of the Viet Cong and to North Vietnam’s military capabilities and industrial output. Taking both views into account, the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally agreed upon a Talking Paper, dated 7 September, that did not significantly depart from their position already on record.³⁷

During a meeting on 7 and 8 September, Ambassador Taylor, Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, and General Wheeler discussed current trends and options. They believed that South Vietnam would in the short term be “too weak for us to take any major deliberate risks of escalation that would involve a major role for, or threat to, South Vietnam.”³⁸ Therefore, US forces “should be prepared to respond on a tit-for-tat basis against the DRV in the event of any attack” on American interests, but otherwise “deliberately provocative elements” should be avoided while South Vietnam was struggling to get back on its feet. They predicted that by early October, however, “we may recommend such action.”³⁹

During a meeting at the White House on 9 September, Secretary McNamara and General Wheeler discussed the difference of opinion within the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the National Security Council. Wheeler downplayed its significance, pointing out that his “two colleagues were persuaded by the argument of Ambassador Taylor—the man on the spot—that it was important not to overstrain the currently weakened GVN by drastic action in the immediate future.” Secretary of State Rusk reiterated that he “did not recommend such decision now,” but “a major decision to go North could be taken at any time.”⁴⁰

President Johnson was more concerned with the situation on the ground in South Vietnam, which would drive his decisions either way.

³⁷ CSAM-472-64 to JCS, 4 Sep 64; CSAFM-759-64 to JCS, 4 Sep 64; J-3 TP 159-64 for JCS, 7 Sep 64, 9155.3 (3 Sep 64).

³⁸ Special National Intelligence Estimate 53-64, 8 Sep 64, reached a similar conclusion: “At present the odds are against the emergence of a stable government capable of effectively prosecuting the war in South Vietnam. Yet the situation is not hopeless; if a viable regime evolves from the present confusion it may even gain strength from the release of long pent-up pressures and the sobering effect of the current crisis.” *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, pp. 742-746.

³⁹ Memorandum by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, “Courses of Action for South Vietnam,” 8 Sep 64, in *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, p. 747.

⁴⁰ Memorandum by McGeorge Bundy of a White House Meeting, 1100 hours, 9 Sep 64, in *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, pp. 749-755.

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Ambassador Taylor replied that “it was somewhat worse,” but South Vietnam’s weakened state was more political than military. Even so, he believed that “sooner or later we would indeed have to act more forcefully against the North.” Well aware that this was the case, President Johnson asked if anyone doubted South Vietnam “was all worth this effort.” Ambassador Taylor replied that the United States “could not afford to let Hanoi win, in terms of our overall position in the area and in the world.” General Wheeler agreed and pointed out that it was the unanimous view of the Joint Chiefs that “if we lose in South Vietnam, we would lose Southeast Asia. Country after country on the periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area.” CIA Director McCone and Secretary of State Rusk concurred. In the end, concluded the President, the reason postponing attacks on North Vietnam “must be simply that with a weak and wobbly situation [in the South] it would be unwise to attack until we could stabilize our base.” McNamara added that “the price of waiting was low, and the promise of gain substantial.”⁴¹

At the meeting’s end, President Johnson asked General Wheeler to explain “to his colleagues in the JCS” that it would be wrong to “enter the patient [South Vietnam] in a 10-round bout, when he was in no shape to hold out for one round.”

Continuing Crisis

The political upheaval in South Vietnam worsened. After weathering two coup attempts in as many months, General Khanh was anxious to shed his responsibilities as prime minister. The former mayor of Saigon, Tran Van Huong, accepted the position in late October, but his new government seemed to have only critics and opponents, with no important faction rallying to its support. Over the next six months three other men would rotate in and out of the position. The continuing instability, reported Ambassador Taylor, had resulted in a marked increase in infiltration by North Vietnamese troops, and the Viet Cong were moving out of their mountain bases to encroach on the populated coastal plains.⁴²

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, meantime, continued examining what actions they should propose beyond those described on 26 August.

⁴¹ Through NSAM No. 314, dated 10 September, the President approved resumption of DeSoto patrols and planning for South Vietnamese cross-border air and ground operations into Laos. *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, p. 758-760.

⁴² Messages, Saigon 1129 and 1167 to the State Department, 14 and 17 October 1964, in *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I.

General Johnson wanted the JCS to go beyond military recommendations and address such issues as governmental instability, low leadership morale, and an inadequate civil service. But General LeMay felt that waiting for the political base to firm up was “a lost cause,” and advocated positive military action” as the best way to establish such a base. On 12 October, LeMay called the latest Strategic National Intelligence Estimate “as clear a forecast of impending disaster as we can expect to receive from the intelligence community.”⁴³

In light of the worsening situation, on 23 October, the Chiefs forwarded a memorandum to Secretary McNamara which set out the opinions of each Service Chief and slightly altered their recommendations to the President. Generals LeMay and Greene continued to argue that delaying a major strike against North Vietnam would only make matters worse—and time was of the essence. “Unless we move now to alter the present evolution of events, there is great likelihood of a VC victory,” read the two generals’ portion of the memo, and in their opinion there was “no useful alternative to initiating action against the DRV now through a planned and selective program of air strikes” against lines of communication in North Vietnam and Laos, infiltration points along the border with South Vietnam and inside the North, and the aerial mining of North Vietnamese ports. The most severe suggested options—which no one expected would be approved—included “amphibious/airborne operations” along North Vietnam’s coast and a decision to “Commit US and allied ground forces into Southeast Asia as required.”⁴⁴

The Secretary of Defense forwarded the memorandum to the President on 27 October. He also forwarded it to Ambassador Taylor in Saigon, who replied that “it is well to remind ourselves that ‘too much’ in this matter of coercing Hanoi may be as bad as ‘too little.’ At some point, we will need a relatively cooperative leadership in Hanoi willing to wind up the VC insurgency on terms satisfactory to us.”⁴⁵

⁴³ JCS 2343/470, 30 Sep 64; CSAFM J-19-64 to JCS, 9 Oct 64, 9155.3 (25 Sep 64) (1). SNIE 53-2-64, 1 Oct 64, concluded that “the situation in South Vietnam has continued to deteriorate. A coup by South Vietnam military figures could occur at any time. In any case, we believe that the conditions favor a further decay of GVN will and effectiveness. The likely pattern of this decay will be increasing defeatism, paralysis of leadership, friction with Americans, exploration of possible lines of political accommodation with the other side, and a general petering out of the war effort.” Printed in *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, pp. 806-811.

⁴⁴ JCSM-902-64 to the Secretary of Defense, Courses of Action, Southeast Asia,” JCS 2339/149, 27 Oct 64, in *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, pp. 847-857.

⁴⁵ *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, pp. 882-884.

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That seemed unlikely, considering that the enemy was stepping up its attacks in South Vietnam. Just after midnight on 31 October, the Viet Cong launched a mortar attack against Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon that killed four US servicemen, wounded 30, and destroyed or damaged 27 aircraft. Ambassador Taylor urged prompt reprisal, preferably against a North Vietnamese airfield, within 24 to 48 hours. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, meeting at 1000 hours on 1 November, decided to recommend bombing all 94 targets on the previously proposed list—but as a progressive campaign, not a single act of retaliation. The first step should consist of attacking, within 24-36 hours, five military targets in Laos, followed within 72 hours by a B-52 strike against Phuc Yen airfield in North Vietnam and attacks against other airfields and fuel storage facilities. The whole campaign would take about one month, allowing for bad weather. When General Wheeler presented these views during a White House meeting at noon, concern was voiced about North Vietnamese or Chinese retaliation and the need to prepare for that contingency. Both President Johnson and Secretary of State Rusk were anxious about the potential for Chinese intervention and, although the JCS took that concern into account in their deliberations, they seriously underestimated the power it held over the White House.

In a JCS meeting at 1030 hours on 2 November, General Greene raised the alternative of withdrawal, in light of his assessment that the US public was not prepared for war. During a White House meeting early that same afternoon, at which General Wheeler presented the Joint Chiefs' recommendations in detail, the decision was taken not to make an "immediate" response. Debriefing the Service Chiefs at 1520 hours, Wheeler said that President Johnson believed that a US response must be made, but "we had to be prepared for North Vietnamese and Chinese reaction." The President, Wheeler told them, was also concerned about US dependents in South Vietnam.

After the White House meeting, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy was directed to chair an interdepartmental NSC working Group that would review Vietnam policy. The JCS representative on this group was the Director of Operations, Joint Staff, Vice Admiral Lloyd M. Mustin.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The above paragraphs are based on *Foreign Relations: 1964-1968*, Vol. I, pp. 873-882; JHO, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam: 1960-1968*, vol. I, pp. 13-10 to 13-20; and notes of JCS Meetings by Dr. Robert J. Watson, currently held in the Joint History Office. Election Day in the US was 3 November. President Johnson won an overwhelming victory.

The working group completed its findings on 17 November. There were three broad options: Option A would “continue the present policies indefinitely.” Option B was intended to bear “a systematic program of military pressures” against North Vietnam with pressure applied “at a fairly rapid pace and without interruption until we achieve our present objective of getting Hanoi completely out of South Vietnam and an independent and secure South Vietnam reestablished.” This option can be labeled a “fast/full squeeze.” Option C was envisioned as a “progressive squeeze-and-talk” consisting of talks with China and the Soviet Union as well as Hanoi, along with military strikes against infiltration targets, first in Laos and then North Vietnam. “The military scenario should give the impression of a steady deliberate approach,” reasoned the planners, “and should be designed to give the US the option at any time to proceed or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not. The negotiating part of this course of action would have to be played largely by ear.” This last option would certainly play well with those in the White House who were reluctant to commit to the use of force, but the working group warned that “we would have to accept the possibility that, as the whole situation developed, we might not achieve these full objectives unless we were prepared to take the greater risks” envisaged in the previous options—in other words, an escalation of force would certainly be necessary.⁴⁷

On 23 November, Admiral U.S.G. Sharp, the Commander in Chief, Pacific, sent General Wheeler a recommendation that paralleled the working group’s Option C: “What is needed is a campaign of systematically and gradually increased military measures conducted in conjunction with a coordinated diplomatic and psychological program.” It would offer the least risk of Chinese intervention and avoid committing the United States to “pursue escalation to any particular level.” Several days later, General Westmoreland, US military commander in South Vietnam, proposed delaying strikes against the North until March or April 1965, and then launching a “modified Option C.” He acknowledged that Option A would not suffice but argued that a firmer base in the South and better prospects for victory were needed to justify Option B. Once B was launched, he cautioned, the United States “will be committed to follow through, regardless.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Draft Report by NSC Working Group, “Courses of Action in Southeast Asia,” 17 Nov 64, Part III, “The Broad Options,” 9150 (17 Nov 64) sec. 1A, currently held by the Information Management Division, Joint Staff.

⁴⁸ Message, CINCPAC to JCS, 230515Z Nov 64, in *Foreign Relations: 1964–1968*, Vol. I, pp. 930-932. Admiral Sharp does not mention this message in his memoir, *Strategy*

General Wheeler gave a debriefing of his meeting with Secretary McNamara at which they discussed the plan. McNamara opposed JCS Option B—the “fast/full squeeze”—believing it would demand reprisal by North Vietnam. Wheeler felt just the opposite, arguing that there would be “a lesser chance of escalation because the signal you gave was absolutely clear and ... indicated a strong determination to see the thing through.” He compared the situation to a poker game. If the White House reacted to North Vietnam’s provocations with the robust Option B, Hanoi would have to “put a stack of blue chips in the middle of the table”—a move that the Chairman believed the communists would not risk—or fold. Wheeler did, however, think that if the White House relied only on Option C, the North Vietnamese would remain on the offensive and be able to respond with several options, the equivalent of throwing in only “a couple of white chips”⁴⁹

On 24 November, the NSC Working Group circulated a revised report on “Courses of Action in Southeast Asia” that assessed Option B as probably standing “a greater chance than either of the other two of attaining our objectives vis-à-vis Hanoi and a settlement in South Vietnam.” However, Option B did run “considerably higher risks of major military conflict with Hanoi and possibly Communist China.” As it had in earlier drafts, the Working Group described Option C as “more controllable and less risky of major military action than Option B.”⁵⁰ But most members of the National Security Council still clung to the idea, as Ambassador Taylor would point out, that “stable government in the south must precede military action in the north escalation despite the improbability of ever getting a stable government without the lift to the national spirit which military action against the homeland of the enemy could provide.”⁵¹

That evening General Wheeler briefed the Chiefs on the White House meeting, pointing out that “virtually all” of the President’s staff were opposed to the “hard knock” Option B proposed by the JCS. At the same time, however, everyone agreed that “the loss of South Vietnam would be a catastrophe.” Secretary McNamara supported a new draft of the options that Wheeler believed would beef up Option C, using the JCS version of the previous week as a basis. “The result will likely be between Options C and a ‘determined C,’” said the Chairman. Although

for Defeat (1978). Msg, Gen. Westmoreland, MAC 6164 to Gen. Wheeler, 27 Nov 64, 9150 (17 Nov 64) sec. 3.

⁴⁹ Notes of a Meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 24 Nov 64, (Notes by Dr. Robert J. Watson), currently held in the Joint History Office.

⁵⁰ *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, pp. 916-929.

⁵¹ *The Pentagon Papers*, (Gravel Ed.), vol III, pp. 258-60.

the Service Chiefs “were not entirely willing to say that Option C was better than nothing,” General Wheeler assured them that he would “allow no doubt in higher councils that Option B was the course recommended by the JCS.”⁵²

Over the next three days, the Joint Chiefs of Staff continued to debate the nuances of the options being pondered by the White House. At 1130 on the twenty-seventh, General Wheeler briefed the Service Chiefs on an Executive Committee’s meeting with Ambassador Taylor, who had recently arrived in Washington. The overlying issue on the table was “if the GVN folds how can we wage a useful war?” Taylor repeated his idea that “what it really comes down to is, you merely punish the DRV for their actions.” South Vietnam could probably “go and operate as long as the United States supports it. However, if they ever once got the idea we were going to walk out on them, they probably would accommodate themselves and go neutralist.” Secretary of State Rusk said, “A nonaligned government in South Vietnam would be perfectly congenial to the United States,” to which other members argued that there could never really be a “neutralist government”; it would likely lean toward the “other side ... that is, one which will accommodate with the VC and with the DRV.” The consensus was that a truly nonaligned government in South Vietnam “requires the defeat of the Viet Cong,” a sentiment that General Wheeler considered was “the bedrock upon which our programs are going to have to be designed.” The Chairman also cited as important Ambassador Taylor’s statement that the plans currently being considered did not give sufficient stress to the fact that the war “should continue to be a South Vietnamese/Laotian war. He said if we start a war [against North Vietnam] without South Vietnamese participation we will be in trouble.”

As for the state of the long-running skirmish over the way ahead, General Wheeler characterized the positions held as follows: General Westmoreland favored Option A; the Commander in Chief, Pacific favored Option C; Ambassador Taylor called for Option A “plus a bit of C”; the McNamara version was “a determined C”; the State Department “is not firm but is not stronger than Taylor”; and the JCS alone were for Option B. This led General Wheeler to conclude that “the JCS are going contrary to the advice of the three senior American military and political representatives in the field. My question is: Do we adhere to our present position? Do we modify our present position or do we adopt a new position which is not any of these three? The first item you can consider

⁵² Notes of a Meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 24 Nov 64, Notes by Dr. Robert J. Watson, currently held in the Joint History Office.

for what it may be worth is that ... our recommendation has no chance at all of being accepted by the administration—absolutely none.”

To reinforce that point, General Wheeler related a conversation with Secretary McNamara: “[He] told me the other day he didn’t agree with the JCS at all. I spent forty-five minutes with him on the subject of Option B versus Option C” According to the Chairman, McNamara said, “Okay, you brass hat militarists, I will go over and convey your views to the Great White Father.” Wheeler’s point was that “They may disagree with our positions but they can’t say they are not clear.”

General Greene added another caveat. “I think there is something even more important than that and I don’t think anyone has got to it yet,” he said. “That is, to take another look at what our stakes are in Southeast Asia from the point of view of the United States and make up our minds whether this is the place to take a stand against the Communists If it is the place then Course of Action B is the logical course.” Greene called it “a very distasteful action, and it seems to me we have to go back and look at our national objectives to determine whether this is what we want to do.” The reason the Chiefs wrote their objectives in the first place “was to focus everyone’s attention on what our declared public objectives are and to flush out of the bushes any changes in public objectives that are in other people’s minds. This is one reason I think this statement by Mr. Rusk was most important: ‘A nonaligned South Vietnam is perfectly congenial to the United States.’ Is, in fact, a nonaligned South Vietnam compatible with the presently expressed us objectives in Southeast Asia?” If so, the Marine Commandant reasoned, there needed to be a serious reexamination of US policy goals. “If our stakes in Southeast Asia are what we think they are, the logical deduction is [that] the United States should make a stand in Southeast Asia against the Communists. The only way to do it is to make it a US war. A US war won’t be popular with the United States public If the US public is not conditioned for this thing, it may be necessary to pull out of Southeast Asia and face them somewhere else. This is the thing I would think they would be studying in the White House and in the Executive Branch rather than kidding themselves about some course of action. The course of action will be determined by the objectives and I think they have lost sight of this.”⁵³

There was no follow-up discussion of these remarks, probably because the other Chiefs were preoccupied with the B versus C debate and did not think it proper to venture into an issue of domestic politics that the President, in the wake of his landslide election victory only

⁵³ Notes of a Meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1400 hours, 27 Nov 64, notes by Dr. Robert J. Watson, currently held in the Joint History Office.

three weeks earlier, seemed well equipped to handle. Possibly, also, General Wheeler worried that injecting a political issue into the discussion would destroy JCS unanimity. A major opportunity was lost here, since hindsight shows that General Greene had pinpointed the fatal flaw. Strategic incrementalism left the American public unprepared for a large, protracted conflict, while dramatic escalation could well have crystallized public feeling for or against such a war.

The Joint Chiefs were now the only holdouts against Option C, graduated pressure. Just before the President was due to make his decision, Ambassador Taylor again tried his hand at bridging the gap between the Chiefs and the civilians. On 30 November, Taylor briefed the JCS on his conversation at the White House. "Course B, the sharp blow, certainly has advantages," he said. "It may well be the shock treatment which will produce quick submission from Hanoi and the accomplishment of our objective." On the other hand, according to the President's civilian advisers, "we are not trying to destroy North Vietnam. We are not trying to kill Communists as an end in itself. We are trying to get the Hanoi government to do two things: First, to desist and stop aiding the Vietcong in the South; second, if possible ... to get their cooperation at some point to tell the Viet Cong that we have reached an adjustment, so lay off." This was the gist of the debate for weeks now.

As for the advantages of Course B, Taylor said "It would show the seriousness of the purpose of the United States. This would have the military advantage of taking out the MiGs [enemy aircraft] at the very outset and thereby allow a great deal more flexibility on what we could do throughout the country. Finally, it would give very little time for international intervention, for pressure to be brought on us to negotiate, or little time for the Communists to adjust their forces. These are pretty strong arguments."

On the other hand, Taylor argued, "I would say, by its very magnitude it becomes the riskiest course of action in terms of bringing in the Chinese Communists and also the course of action most likely to coalesce the communist world. It would be most subject to international condemnation as being a surprise attack of a magnitude not justified by the events that have taken place There is no escape hatch for Hanoi." Course C, on the other hand, "has limited risk of inducing Chinese or Soviet intervention. It has limited risk of coalescing the communist world. It preserves the image of South Vietnam acting in self-defense. It leaves an escape hatch open to Hanoi and offers the hope that through that escape hatch can come a relatively cooperative enemy who sees that the future is very unpromising if they continue on

the course of action they are now following. Course C requires rather limited preparatory action in comparison to Course B and certainly preserves an important initial role for the Vietnamese Air Force. It gives you maximum control of the situation and flexibility. You could shift into the B channel any time you want to; you can't shift from B back to C.

On the "con" side of the argument were at least two serious objections to Course C. "One is that it does give time for international pressures to build up," and second, "in its initial phases it could be viewed as comparative timidity on our part, especially if the initial blows are very light and the escalations follow very slowly."

General Wheeler responded that the JCS continued to believe that Course C, "particularly a low-level C," does not send a clear enough signal. "In effect, you might lead these people on [so that] instead of cooperating, they may undertake a game of successive escalatory measures back and forth, so you end up with a B in the final analysis without having the advantages of B, such as the early strikes on the air, POL, and so on."

Ambassador Taylor replied, "It might turn out that way, but it seems to me you can always shift to B. First, I concede that C is ambiguous until you define what you are going to do and at what rate. You can be a fast C operator and go almost as fast as a slow B operator. On the other hand, if you are talking about six months to do this, then I would concede C is no good."⁵⁴

By 1 December, it seemed clear that President Johnson had made up his mind about the way forward in South Vietnam. After a meeting at the White House that morning, General Wheeler told the Service Chiefs that the President, Vice President-elect Hubert Humphrey, Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy had conferred before the meeting, and he "was convinced that the decision was actually made there."⁵⁵

The atmosphere at the White House meeting, Wheeler told the Service Chiefs afterward, was "extremely sober and serious." Ambassador Taylor spoke first about governmental instability in Saigon, saying that "we are playing a losing game," though he did not foresee a "sudden collapse but rather a continuing debilitation of the governmental process" made worse by North Vietnamese actions that

⁵⁴ Notes by Dr. Robert J. Watson, currently held in the Joint History Office.

⁵⁵ Notes of a Meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1400 hours, 1 Dec 64, notes by Dr. Robert J. Watson, currently held in the Joint History Office. A version of this meeting consisting of brief, often cryptic notes by Asst. Sec. of Def. John McNaughton is printed in *FRUS 1964-1968*, vol. I, pp. 965-969.

“continue to weaken the government.” President Johnson reiterated his long-held position that “If the situation is deteriorating, and you all tell me it is, I think we have to shore up the position of the South Vietnamese leadership before we can do anything.”

General Wheeler reported that he had then presented the full JCS views to the meeting, using a Talking Paper based on the key JCS memorandums prepared since 1 November. Nothing had changed. “The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend the initiation of sharp military pressures against the DRV ... designed to destroy in the first three days Phuc Yen airfield near Hanoi, other airfields, and major POL facilities, clearly to establish the fact that the US intends to use military force, if necessary, to the full limits of what military force can contribute to achieving US objectives in Southeast Asia.” Attacks against the North “could be suspended short of full destruction of the DRV if our objectives were earlier achieved. The military program would be conducted rather swiftly, but the tempo could be adjusted as needed to contribute to achieving our objectives In sum, the Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that, if military action against the DRV is not taken at an early date, a Communist victory in SVN must be foreseen.” General Wheeler concluded that “[I]f we must fight a war in Southeast Asia, let us do so under conditions favorable to us from the outset and with maximum volition resting with the United States.”⁵⁶

Wheeler said the President listened carefully to his presentation, asked questions, and did not hurry the matter despite Wheeler’s own certainty that a decision had already been made. “In fact, I got no disagreement in this paper at all except to the course of action recommended,” said the Chairman. “He said, ‘I agree with you absolutely. That is exactly what I am trying to get ... a situation where we can undertake the military action under terms favorable to us from the outset.’”⁵⁷

Wheeler continued: “First, there is no question in my mind but that the President is deeply concerned about the situation there, but is anxious to do something about it. Second, he is worried, sincerely worried, about the weakness of the [South Vietnamese] government and the position we would be in if it disappeared while we were in the midst of taking unilateral military action Third, he is deeply concerned

⁵⁶ Ibid., *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960–1968*, vol. II, p. 181.

⁵⁷ McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*, p. 193, concludes that Wheeler “did not present the Chiefs’ position forcefully” and “did not highlight the Chiefs’ disagreement with the consensus policy.” It is worth remembering, however, that Wheeler went into the meeting convinced that the JCS recommendation would be rejected.

Chairman in Crisis

with American congressional and public opinion as to whether it would support a stronger action in Vietnam at the present time.”

Ambassador Taylor’s idea of strong action against North Vietnam—he called “laying waste”—should the United States be forced to withdraw because of a sudden South Vietnamese collapse was also discussed. The President asked, “For what purpose?” Taylor replied, that it was to “punish the people who had done this and to retain a measure of credit among the rest of our allies, etc.” Wheeler agreed with this: “Don’t let them get away with a big plum for nothing,” though the Chairman “had no feeling that anyone really wants to do anything like this.”

Presidential Decision

On 7 December, President Johnson announced his decision on the way forward in South Vietnam, in his “Position Paper on Southeast Asia.” Its relevant parts are quoted⁵⁸ below:

We will join at once with the South Vietnamese and Lao Governments in a determined action program aimed at DRV activities in both countries and designed to help GVN morale and to increase the cost and strain on Hanoi, foreshadowing still greater pressures to come. Under this program the *first phase* actions within the next thirty days will be intensified forms of action already under way, plus possibly ... air Strikes against the DRV as reprisal against any major or spectacular Viet Cong action in the south, whether against US personnel and installations or not

Thereafter, if the GVN improves its effectiveness to an acceptable degree and Hanoi does not yield on acceptable terms, the US is prepared—at a time to be determined—to enter into a second phase program ... of graduated military pressures directed systematically against the DRV. Such a program would consist principally of progressively more serious air strikes, of a weight and tempo adjusted to the situation as it develops (possibly running from two to six months) and of appropriate US deployments to handle any contingency. Targets in the DRV would start with infiltration targets south of the 19th parallel and work up to targets north of that point. This could eventually lead to

⁵⁸ Memorandum from President Johnson to Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, and Director McCone, 7 Dec 64, in *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. I, pp. 984, 969-974.

such measures as air strikes on all major military related targets, aerial mining of DRV ports, and a US naval blockade of the DRV. The whole sequence of military actions would be designed to give the impression of a steady, deliberate approach, and to give the US the option at any time (subject to enemy reaction) to proceed or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not. Concurrently, the US would be alert to any sign of yielding by Hanoi, and would be prepared to explore negotiated solutions that attain US objectives in an acceptable manner.

The presidential decision set the United States on a course of gradual escalation that ultimately did little to dissuade the North Vietnamese from continuing the war against the South. This is not to say that if the Johnson administration had accepted the course of action proposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff Hanoi would have backed off or, as the President and many of his advisers feared, North Vietnam's communist allies might not have intervened in some way. But the fact of the matter was that by the beginning of 1965, the Viet Cong were coming close to outright military victory. In February, attacks against US installations at Pleiku and Qui Nhon triggered reprisal air strikes against the North, which were followed by the initiation of Operation ROLLING THUNDER in March—a graduated, slowly unfolding campaign punctuated by pauses that the administration hoped would coax Hanoi into negotiations.⁵⁹

The debate that had unfolded over the past nine months really had revolved around which goal mattered more: minimizing the risk of Chinese and Soviet intervention, or attaining what General Wheeler called the “bedrock” objective of an independent noncommunist South Vietnam. Option C (graduated pressure) was crafted to ensure the former, Option B (fast/full squeeze) to achieve the latter, virtually to the point where B and C became mutually exclusive. The objective was what mattered, not the feasibility of negotiating pauses. The President's Working Group had been right to say, in its draft of 17 November, that “a clear decision would in fact have to be made at the outset whether we were pursuing Option B or Option C.” The Joint Chiefs evidently grasped this point, which would explain why they were not entirely willing to say that Option C was better than nothing (as they did on 24 November). Ambassador Taylor tried to minimize the difference, telling

⁵⁹ *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam: 1960–1968*, vol. II, pp. 17-17 to 17-25.

the Chiefs that “you can always shift to B” and that “you can be a fast C operator and go almost as fast as a slow B operator.” He acknowledged, however, that “if you are talking about six months to do [C] then I would concede C is no good.” Yet, to take an example, major oil refineries were not attacked until June 1966, fifteen months after the bombing campaign began. ROLLING THUNDER, conducted as what Wheeler called on 30 November “a low-level C,” failed to deter or discourage Hanoi. Thus Taylor and Wheeler both found their views rejected. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, graduated pressure worked because the Soviets knew they were outmatched at every potential level of conflict. In Vietnam, the North Vietnamese and their communist allies believed they held many of the advantages, a belief that ROLLING THUNDER only reinforced. So a policy with disastrous consequences was set in motion.

What could the Joint Chiefs of Staff have done differently? Probably very little. Secretary McNamara was so deeply committed to the graduated response and possessed the President’s confidence to such a degree that nothing within General Wheeler’s power could have changed the decision of 1 December 1964. But it was General Greene, and not Wheeler, who pinpointed the fatal flaw: The administration’s objective could be achieved only by turning Vietnam into a US war, which the American public apparently was not prepared or “conditioned” to support.

Nor was there much support in Congress, despite the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August. On 1 December, General Wheeler told the Service Chiefs that the President had spoken with three prominent Senators, and all strongly opposed deeper US involvement. A Chairman who repeatedly and forcefully brought this political problem before the President between July 1964 and July 1965 might have changed the course of events.⁶⁰ Graduated escalation allowed Johnson to avoid, for a critical time, the domestic challenges that a fast “full/squeeze” would have forced him promptly to confront.

What of the charge made by some historians that the Chiefs collaborated in a conspiracy of silence that concealed from the American public both their misgivings and the magnitude of the task ahead? Simply put, it was not their job to directly address the public

⁶⁰ However, late in July 1965, when the President was about to approve the first sizable deployment of combat troops, Gen. Greene advised him as follows: “How long will it take? 5 years—plus 500,000 troops. I think the US people will back you The place where they will stick by you is the national security stake.” *FRUS 1964–1968*, vol. III, pp. 214–215. The record does not show General Wheeler raising this political issue with the President.

with their opinions—then or now—and the record seems to clearly indicate that the Service Chiefs were never loathe to share their disagreements with civilian superiors. Two of them, Generals LeMay and Greene, consistently aired their contrary views on the need for greater military action against North Vietnam in what must have seemed an endless loop to administration officials. Finally, the military culture from which the Vietnam War-era general officers emerged virtually precluded them from behaving like mavericks. Like his fellow Chiefs, General Wheeler was convinced this was a war that had to be fought—as did most within the Johnson administration—and he hoped the civilian decisionmakers would come to accept JCS advice about how to wage it. As McNamara wrote much later, Wheeler offered advice “in private meetings and public testimony in a direct but non-inflammatory and non-confrontational way.”⁶¹ Ultimately, though, the conflict between loyalty and conviction wore Wheeler down. In 1970, his first words to Admiral Thomas Moorer, his newly nominated successor were, “You’ll never survive.”⁶²

⁶¹ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 291.

⁶² TelCon, W. S. Poole with ADM Thomas H. Moorer, USN (Ret.), 9 Apr 98, JHO.