

3

The Road to Escalation



The day I started working on Vietnam ended with the president's televised assurance "We still seek no wider war." Soon that became a major theme of his electoral campaign. But every official I dealt with in Washington that summer and fall expected a wider war under President Johnson no later than the start of the new year.

To a man, administration insiders had agreed since the spring of 1964 that the present course of U.S. policy in Vietnam, which limited our overt involvement to funding, equipment, and advisers in the South, was failing, rapidly. Unless the United States broadened its role to include direct participation in combat, either by air and naval attacks on the North or by ground units in the South, or both, Communist-led forces would take over South Vietnam within months. This would come about by some combination of Communist military victory, collapse of the anti-Communist regime or army, or negotiations among the Vietnamese. On this point no one in internal government discussions disagreed with Senator Goldwater or his Republican colleagues. Nor was there anyone, so far as I could tell, who departed from the internal consensus that defeat could be averted, even in the relatively short run, *only* by a direct U.S. combat role. The sole internal controversy throughout 1964 involved when and on what initial scale it must begin and exactly what form it should take.

Except for their chairman, Maxwell Taylor, the Joint Chiefs of Staff favored starting a large-scale bombing program up to the border of China immediately, along with mining North Vietnamese ports and waterways.

General Taylor, who became ambassador to Saigon in midyear, disagreed tactically on this. Like a number of civilians, he preferred a more gradual approach, to begin later, in hopes that the government of Vietnam (GVN) would achieve some stability beforehand. (The generals who had overthrown President Ngo Dinh Diem in November had themselves been displaced in a coup by General Nguyen Khanh early in 1964.)

Johnson had not yet decided these issues of timing and tactics. For that matter, he had not made a definite decision on the basic question of escalation versus extrication. But there was little doubt in the Pentagon, or any other place I visited in Washington, what his decision would be between those last alternatives. He had made clear within the government two days after he had taken office that he was determined not to accept failure or defeat in Vietnam, not to be "the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." His secretaries of state and defense, along with the JCS, shared that commitment. Moreover, since both the Joint Chiefs and Secretary of Defense McNamara were strongly convinced that some form of bombing campaign against the North was essential to avoid defeat, it was taken for granted in the Pentagon that the president would come to accept that conclusion.

However, the president was clearly very anxious not to make this decision or act on it before the election in November. He wanted not just to beat Goldwater—all polls showed that was virtually a foregone conclusion—but to win by the largest possible margin, preferably by the largest landslide in history. That would erase the notion that he was an "accidental president." He wanted a strong mandate for his Great Society programs. Along with many of his fellow Democrats, he also hoped to smash the Republican right wing supporting the Goldwater candidacy. He intended to run as the reasonable, moderate "peace" candidate, emphasizing domestic issues, while painting his opponent as a dangerous, unbalanced extremist, eager to escalate to full-scale war in Vietnam. At the same time, he needed to answer Goldwater's charge that he was indecisive and weak in foreign policy.

The one-shot "restrained reprisal" on August 5 fitted his campaign needs incredibly well. He shot up in the polls, and bipartisan support for his action and the resolution took the issue of Vietnam out of the campaign, except as a negative for Goldwater. But after the Tonkin Gulf reprisals Johnson strongly hoped to avoid any further major military moves before the election and to conceal the pressures for escalation within his own administration. He was campaigning in large part against Goldwater's pro-

posals for Vietnam, which ironically were identical to those of Johnson's own Joint Chiefs of Staff. That last fact was a well-kept secret during the campaign.

On September 25 the president criticized "those that say you ought to go north and drop bombs, to try to wipe out the supply lines." Three days later he was more specific: "Some of our people—Mr. Nixon, Mr. Rockefeller, Mr. Scranton and Mr. Goldwater—have all, at some time or other, suggested the possible wisdom of going north in Vietnam." Neither then nor at any other time did he mention that the people who said this included all of his own principal military advisers, the JCS and his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara. It's true that the president was not committed before the election to following their specific advice, and certainly he had not yet made an official determination to do so, but they, and those of us working for them, knew that he disagreed as sharply as any of the Republicans mentioned with "some who say we ought to go south and get out and come home." Given the views of his top advisers in the Pentagon, insiders understood that to mean that bombing lay ahead for North Vietnam no later than early 1965, whichever candidate was elected.

It didn't mean that there was no difference at all on this issue between the two candidates. Johnson was not likely to begin bombing in the precise way that Goldwater almost surely would. That was the way of the four service chiefs, starting out very big with a "hard knock," hitting targets close to Hanoi and to China at the outset, and pursuing the destruction of North Vietnam to full victory. But it was even less likely that Johnson would not be bombing the North at all in the spring of 1965. There was scarcely any chance that the U.S. role by then would still be within the limits observed from 1945 to 1964.

Yet that was what most voters thought Johnson was projecting with his campaign slogan "We seek no wider war." It was what an overwhelming majority of them believed they were voting for on election day, November 3. No one I knew within the administration voted under that particular illusion. I don't remember having time to vote that day myself, and I doubt if McNaughton did. We both were attending the first meeting at the State Department of an interagency working group addressing the best way to widen the war.

The group had been set up by the president under Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy the day before. It hadn't started a week earlier because its focus might have leaked to the voters. That could have considerably lessened the landslide victory for Johnson, which reflected an ex-

aggerated view of the difference on the war between the two candidates. Moreover, we didn't start the work a day or week later, after the votes had been cast, because there was no time to waste. It seemed urgent to arrive at an internal consensus on how to avert a Communist victory in South Vietnam by expanding the war. Except for a status quo option, a straw man, all the alternatives we considered called for escalation. On the day the electorate, as expected in polls, was voting in unprecedented numbers against bombing North Vietnam or otherwise escalating the war, we were working to set such a policy in motion.

How could we possibly have justified doing this? We served the president and our immediate bosses. It was our understanding that it was the president's job to make foreign policy, with the advice of our bosses, not, in any serious sense, with the advice of Congress. It didn't matter that much to us what the public thought.

After all, it didn't make much difference what we ourselves thought. I soon learned from John McNaughton that Lyndon Johnson was skeptical about the value of a systematic bombing campaign against the North. I myself was more than skeptical, and so was McNaughton. But our boss, McNamara, was not, and we worked for him. In the fall of 1964 McNaughton began to accompany McNamara to regular White House meetings on Vietnam with the president. Some of these were cabinet-level meetings at which John was the only assistant secretary in the room. If he had time to debrief me when he came back from the White House, he did, and at those moments I heard things about the personal perspectives of the players I could never have read in cables or memos. This was a running course for me on bureaucratic behavior, a subject of endless fascination for McNaughton.

John would mention what someone had said, and then he would give his interpretation about why he had said that at that moment and in just that way: how it related to his agency's interests and the relationships he was trying to protect and serve. Or he would comment on what some had not said, what they had been silent about and why. That applied to John himself. He told me he said very little at these meetings, never volunteering anything, commenting only when McNamara asked him something. One reason for that was his junior position. McNamara was the only one who could get away with bringing an assistant with him. John felt very privileged to hear what the big boys and especially the president were thinking—it was precious to us in our work; it was bureaucratic gold—and he knew his position there was precarious. He didn't want to jeopardize it by being intrusive and perhaps stepping on anyone's toes.

Another reason was that at this time he often privately disagreed with what he was hearing McNamara say to the president. The secretary of defense was pressing for the necessity of a bombing campaign against the North, which McNaughton didn't believe in, any more than I did. These meetings gave him the chance to learn that the president was dubious about it too. That was vital information of a sort that McNaughton would get only by being in the room with them. McNamara wouldn't have been likely to tell him about the president's doubts and questions, at least with any concreteness and vividness.

Those reports gave me a good impression of Johnson. For once McNamara seemed off base to me; I couldn't figure out why. The president sounded like the only sensible adult in the room. That gave me some hope that fall that things would turn out all right. (What I didn't know at the time—and I don't think John knew either—was that LBJ's own preference was to put troops in South Vietnam rather than bomb the North.) To hear from John that the president, in speaking to McNamara, regularly referred to "your bombing bullshit" made me think that Johnson was reluctant to undertake escalation of any kind and perhaps therefore open-minded about extricating us altogether.

McNaughton told me that McNamara would say of bombing, "It's something you can stop. It's a bargaining chip." When someone criticized it, as not being likely to get good results or to be all that easy to stop, he challenged him: "Well, what's your alternative?" Answering McNamara's question by saying, "Getting out, withdrawing, negotiating out," would have amounted to saying, "My alternative is quitting. Losing." Given the president's views, that was an answer no one in these meetings, which were in effect preparatory to discussions in front of the president, was willing to advance. It was a nonoption. As a result, McNamara's challenge and his proposed policy (which was far from his alone) looked less crazy than they really were.

McNaughton's fear, he told me one afternoon when he had just come back from the White House, was that one day the president would turn to him and ask him what he thought about bombing. In a memoir written years later, NSC aide Chester Cooper describes having had a comparable fantasy more than once. The president would be going around the table, asking if everyone agreed with his decision, and he imagined himself saying when it came to his turn, "No, Mr. President, I do not agree!" As he was contemplating this thought, he would notice the president's eyes turning to him and he would hear himself saying, as he nodded yes, "I agree, Mr. President."

McNaughton told me, "I've asked myself what I would do." Then he paused and looked at me. "I would have to follow McNamara's lead. I'd have to say something along the same lines as McNamara. I couldn't contradict McNamara or undercut him in front of the president." I didn't say anything. He went on: "You know, my family owns a newspaper in Illinois. We don't have much to do with running it; that's for the editor. The main thing we have to do is pick the editor. And when we pick an editor, well, there're a number of things you look for, but my father taught me that the number one thing you look for is loyalty."

He continued to look at me, and I continued to listen. I knew why he was telling me this. He didn't define what he meant by loyalty, but it was clear enough from his story: Do what's good for your boss, the man who hired you; put that above what you think is best for the country, above giving the president or the secretary of defense your best advice if that would embarrass your boss. I heard it, but I didn't accept it. Actually I was shocked. Lie to the president? Deprive him of your own best judgment, when he was asking you for it, on a matter of war and peace? Or lie to McNamara, the secretary of defense, if I was in the room with him and McNaughton and he asked me for my own thoughts? That was the real point of this story. Never, I thought. I didn't say anything to John, and the situation never arose.

I did have a chance earlier in the fall to argue outside our offices against initiating air strikes against the North at all. Walt Rostow, the chairman of the policy planning staff at State, circulated a paper proposing that we seek to change, by both declaration and action, the prevailing "common law" rules of the game in international relations. These limited our military responses to what he called "covert aggression" such as what we all believed to be North Vietnam's covert direction and support of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam. Rostow had argued since 1961 for the legitimacy and necessity of American bombing of North Vietnam. McNaughton asked various parts of his staff to contribute to a detailed critique of "the Rostow thesis that covert aggression justifies and must be fought by attacks on the source of the aggression." I wrote a section of our very critical response, which was circulated to all the relevant agencies, on the costs and risks of applying the thesis:

Given present attitudes, application of the Rostow approach risks domestic and international opposition ranging from anxiety and protest to condemnation, efforts to disassociate from U.S. policies or alliances, or even strong

countermeasures. . . . Currently, then, it is the Rostow approach, rather than the measures it counters, that would be seen generally as an "unstabilizing" change in the rules of the game, an escalation of conflict, an increasing of shared international risks, and quite possibly, as an open aggression demanding condemnation. . . .

This is one of the very few passages in the surviving drafts or official documents of that period in which I can recognize my own words. On rereading it now, I'm struck by two things. First, so far as I know, it is the *only* use of the word "aggression" applied to a possible action of the United States in the entire official documentation of that era. Second, I note that I took care to tender that word not as a compelling, objective judgment or as my own. It expressed how our bombing a country that had made no overt armed attack against us or anyone else would possibly be "seen" and condemned by *others*. There was no other way to get such a thought into official discussion internally even once and remain employed. I'm sure that's still true. The same holds for the words "criminal" and "immoral" applied to a policy that one's agency or the president might favor or has adopted.

These three taboo words would have been widely used by others, including our allies, if the Joint Chiefs' preferred program had ever been implemented. Yet the same words, only a little less obviously, could apply to the plan for "graduated pressure on the DRV [Hanoi regime]" that McNaughton had fashioned for McNamara. He drafted this on September 3, three weeks after he had drafted instructions for Seaborn's threat to Hanoi and about the same time I was criticizing Rostow's proposal. In his "Plan for Action for South Vietnam," John listed several classes of actions that "should cause apprehension, ideally increasing apprehension, in the DRV," and "should be likely at some point to provoke a military DRV response" that would

provide good grounds for us to escalate if we wished . . . to commence a crescendo of GVN-U.S. military actions against the DRV. The escalating actions might be . . . mining of harbors . . . air strikes against North Vietnam moving from southern to northern targets, from targets associated with infiltration . . . to targets of military then industrial importance. . . . The possibility that such actions would escalate further, perhaps bringing China into the war, would have to be faced.

Aside from the issue of aggression involved in planning for provocation, I believed, as McNaughton did privately, that this graduated approach to

bombing was not a whole lot better than the JCS plan for an initial full-scale attack. I thought it was likely to come to the same thing eventually. Still, given that some form of bombing seemed inevitable, McNaughton's proposal slowed the progression toward the most destructive and dangerous forms. Its other supposed advantage was flexibility and control. "The timing and crescendo should be under our control, with the scenario capable of being turned off at any time." In a later formulation for the Bundy group, McNaughton wrote that the scenario "would be designed to give the U.S. the option at any point to proceed or not, to escalate or not and to quicken the pace or not."

But was such controllability real? Did John himself believe in it? In *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) journalist David Halberstam answers the latter question. He describes McNaughton as having shared with Michael Forrestal, then at the White House, as early as the spring of 1964 all his doubts about the GVN, bombing, and the war that I heard from him when I joined him months later. Evidently quoting Forrestal as his source, Halberstam says Michael "was not yet as pessimistic as McNaughton." He didn't think entrapment was inevitable.

He was sure that it could be avoided somehow, that there were options, that good intelligent men in Washington could control decisions and avoid the great entanglement. McNaughton was not sure. "The trouble with you, Forrestal," he once said, "is that you always think we can turn this thing off, and that we can get off of it whenever we want. But I wonder. I think it gets harder every day, each day we lose a little control, each decision that we make wrong, or don't make at all, makes the next decision a little harder because if we haven't stopped it today, then the reasons for not stopping it will still exist tomorrow, and we'll be in even deeper."

That was the John McNaughton I knew in private. It was how he spoke to me, and he told me it was what he said to McNamara when they were alone together. But it was not what he drafted for McNamara's use as talking papers or memos to others or what he said in meetings, speaking for his boss. None of that seems so wise. Whether McNamara himself really felt differently or not, I don't know. He worked directly for the president. That means his written memos to the president or others, often drafted by McNaughton, might misrepresent his most private thinking as much as John's did his own. It's more than possible that his positions in meetings or in writing, like McNaughton's, often represented his boss's beliefs and priorities, with which he didn't agree. But the written record can't answer that. Unless

McNamara chooses to clarify more than he has how his perspective differed from those of his two presidents, I don't think his own behavior, or the history of that era, can be adequately understood.

Meanwhile John was giving him what he wanted. Subsequent accounts based on documents from the Pentagon tend to credit, or blame, McNaughton as a driving force in the promotion of bombing, particularly as it was actually conducted (against the instincts of the JCS). In those memos, my boss appeared constantly to be making recommendations to bomb, as well as how to do it, when and what and why to bomb, in what sequence and to what effect. He didn't believe any of it. That is, he didn't believe any of it was necessary or to the advantage of the United States or the Vietnamese, except that it was preferable to—less disastrous than—what the JCS wanted to do. His attitude, like mine, was that bombing the North was absurd and dangerous, that it would not achieve anything positive but would only bring us into the war in a heavier way.

Even more than I, considerably more, McNaughton was committed to the view that we should stop what we were already doing in Vietnam and get out on almost any basis. He was not impressed with the arguments that our efforts up till then had created a serious national interest, that we were being tested in some significant way, that withdrawal would lose us prestige, or that important alliances would suffer along with our influence in world affairs. On the contrary, he believed that we would suffer more in every one of these dimensions by our prolonged involvement than by our withdrawal. Moreover, even if by means of massive military intervention we could in some sense be successful, he didn't believe the benefits in terms of our national interest could measure up to the costs or to the harm we would inflict on the Vietnamese. There is scarcely a hint of any of these attitudes in any piece of paper he drafted or signed in the last years of his life, from 1964 to 1967. Yet that is what he did believe. Where we disagreed on these assessments, he was right; I was wrong.

Personally I thought he underrated the cost to our influence and our ability to confront communism elsewhere that would result from a U.S. failure in Vietnam. Sometimes I wondered if he might be less of a cold warrior than I was. I thought our retreat from Vietnam would cause us more trouble in our worldwide conflict with communism than John seemed to believe. It would, I believed, embolden the Soviets and Chinese and insurgents worldwide and discourage our clients and allies. On that point I could agree, contrary to John, with Secretary of State Rusk and the JCS. But whereas the true Vietnam hawks believed that was a sufficient reason for

expanding our involvement and generally thought they knew a way to succeed at it, I did not. I agreed with John's private opinion that we would be even worse off, on balance, if we tried to keep a doomed effort going, and still worse if we escalated. Vietnam was not the place to plant our flag. So we would just have to deal as best we could with the problems that would arise if we left. Far more than I knew at the time, that attitude was shared by a number of officials, cold warriors all, just below the top levels.

But not by any of their bosses. It was not what the president had in mind or Secretary of State Rusk, or the secretary of defense. Given my admiration for Robert McNamara, I could never understand why he wanted to set out on this path of provocation and escalation at all, however "gradually." It was steadily more perplexing and disturbing for me to know that he was among the strong proponents of bombing the North.

That was especially paradoxical for me because of my strong confidence that McNamara shared some of my deepest values, particularly my abhorrence of nuclear war. This feeling had its roots in my earlier work as a Rand consultant to the Office of the Secretary of Defense on nuclear war plans and command and control of nuclear weapons. Like a number of my Rand colleagues, including Harry Rowen and Morton H. Halperin, a young consultant on arms control, I believed that to initiate limited or general nuclear war under any circumstances would be catastrophic. We felt strongly about this, though it was a position that contradicted U.S. defense policy and strategy in NATO. That rested openly on U.S. readiness to carry out its threat and preparations for a nuclear first-use strike against a Soviet conventional attack. Our personal opinions also contradicted the doctrine of the air force, for which we worked at Rand. Nevertheless, I believed that McNamara agreed with us.

I had inferred his position from the way he talked with me in a private lunch at his desk in 1961. I had written papers that had gone to him but had never met him before. He impressed me strongly and positively that day with his conviction that under no circumstances must there be a first use of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe. It would be totally disastrous even if it did not lead to an all-out war between the United States and the USSR, as he believed it surely would. Even before that, "It would be total war, total annihilation, for the Europeans!" He said this with great passion, belying his reputation as a cold, computerlike efficiency expert. Moreover, he thought it was absurd to suppose that a "limited use" would remain confined to Europe, that it would not immediately trigger general nuclear war.

I had recently drafted, and he had approved, the top secret secretary-of-

defense guidance to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a new version of the operational plans for general nuclear war. It was in that context that he had invited me to lunch. At the request of his deputy secretary of defense, Roswell Gilpatric, I had drafted a number of questions on the Eisenhower-era war plans, which were still current. Gilpatric had sent these to the JCS for their response. When I showed the draft list to Robert Komer of the NSC staff, he picked out one of the questions and sent it to the chiefs as a presidential query. The question was: "If existing general war plans were carried out as planned, how many people would be killed in the Soviet Union and China alone?"

During our discussion over lunch, I told McNamara that the JCS supplied the White House with an answer almost immediately, within a day or two. It was classified top secret—for the president's eyes only—but since I had drafted the question, Komer called me over to the NSC offices to look at it. The answer was in the form of a straight-line graph, a rising line that related fatalities on the vertical axis, in millions of deaths, against time on the horizontal axis, in months from the time of attack. The number rose to reflect delayed radiation deaths from fallout after the attacks. (I had asked only for fatalities, not for casualties, which would have included wounded and sick.) The lowest point of the graph, starting at the left-hand side of the chart, gave the number that would die in the first few days of our attacks. The highest number, at the right-hand side of the chart, showed the cumulative number killed by our attacks within six months of the execution of the plans.

The lower number was 275 million dead. The higher number was 325 million.

This was for the Soviet Union and China alone, all that I had asked for. I drafted a follow-up question for Komer covering areas contiguous to the Sino-Soviet bloc, and the staff provided comprehensive estimates with equal dispatch. Another hundred million or so would die from our attacks on targets in the Eastern European satellite countries. Moreover, fallout from our surface explosions on the Soviet Union, the satellites, and China would decimate the populations of the neutral nations bordering these countries—such as Finland, Sweden, Austria, and Afghanistan—as well as Japan and Pakistan. The Finns, for example, would be virtually exterminated by the fallout from surface bursts on Soviet submarine pens near their borders. These fatalities from U.S. attacks, up to another hundred million depending on wind conditions, would occur without a single American warhead landing on the territories of these neutral countries.

Fallout fatalities inside our NATO allies from U.S. attacks against the

Warsaw Pact could be up to a hundred million allied deaths from our attacks, "depending on which way the wind blows," as a general testifying before Congress had recently put it. All this was without considering the effects of Soviet nuclear attacks on the United States, Western Europe, and U.S. bases elsewhere, retaliating for the U.S. first strike that these JCS calculations presumed. Nor did it include the effects of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, the point that McNamara had just made to me passionately.

The total death toll from our own attacks, in the estimates supplied by the JCS, was in the neighborhood of five to six hundred million. These would be almost entirely civilians. A hundred Holocausts. The greater part would be inflicted in a day or two, the rest over six months, about a third in allied or neutral countries.

This was not a hypothetical calculation of what was needed to deter a Soviet nuclear attack on the United States or its allies (as such it would still have been obscenely absurd). It was the JCS's best estimate of the actual results, in terms of human fatalities, of our setting into motion the existing machinery for implementing the current operational plans of the JCS for general war. Current U.S. plans for "any armed conflict" with conventional forces of the Soviet Union, anywhere, arising under any circumstances—Berlin, uprisings in East Germany, Soviet attacks on Iran or Yugoslavia—presumed that the president would initiate general nuclear war, with these consequences outside the United States.

I still remember holding that graph in my hand and looking at it in an office of the White House annex in the Executive Office Building on a spring day in 1961. I was thinking: This piece of paper, what this piece of paper represents, should not exist. It should never in the course of human history have come into existence.

I didn't say that to the secretary. From the tone of our conversation I didn't think I had to. I've never had a stronger sense in another person of a kindred awareness of this situation and of the intensity of his concern to change it. Thirty years later McNamara revealed in his memoir *In Retrospect* that he had secretly advised President Kennedy, and after him President Johnson, that under no circumstances should they ever initiate nuclear war. He didn't tell me that, but it was implicit in everything he had said. There is no doubt in my mind that he did give that advice and that it was the right advice. Yet it directly contradicted the U.S. "assurances" on U.S. readiness for first use he felt compelled to give repeatedly to NATO officials throughout his years in office. (NATO retains a first-use policy to this day, as does the United States outside the NATO area—perhaps now with a new

degree of sincerity, indicated by the first-use premises of the Bush administration's nuclear policy review leaked in March 2002.) McNamara's private advice also contradicted the long-term assumptions in U.S. limited-war planning for necessary first use of nuclear weapons in a conflict with large Chinese forces in Asia.

McNamara's assistant Adam Yarmolinsky had joined us for the last part of the lunch. After we left McNamara's office, Adam took me into his small adjoining room and said, "You must tell no one outside this room what Secretary McNamara has told you."

I asked if he was referring to fears of the reaction from Congress and the JCS (I could have added "NATO"), and he said, "Exactly. This could lead to his impeachment." I told him I understood. He went on to emphasize the seriousness of not telling anyone. "By no one," he said, "I mean, not Harry Rowen, not anybody." Evidently he knew that Harry was my closest friend and confidant, the colleague with whom I normally would have shared even such highly sensitive information. I got the message and respected his way of putting it. I never did tell anyone what McNamara had said, even Rowen, though Harry would have found it as heartening as I did. But I did ask Adam, "As far as you know, is the president's thinking on these subjects different from the secretary's?" He said, "Not an iota."

I left the secretary's suite thinking that Robert McNamara was someone worthy of my greatest loyalty and trust. He had, as I saw it, the right perspective on the greatest dangers in the world and the power and determination to reduce them. Also, he and his assistant had the street savvy to know that if he wanted to achieve that, he had to keep his cards very close to his chest. I felt that extreme loyalty over the next three years, and I brought it with me when I came to work full-time in the Pentagon. It was a sense that McNamara and his trusted lieutenants were men with my values and concerns trying to tame powerful and irrational institutional forces—largely, though not all, within the same building—that threatened to steer us toward nuclear disaster. I felt privileged to try to help them.



Thus I gave McNamara great benefit of the doubt even when, as now, I couldn't understand his choices. Uneasy as I was about the policy of escalation he had us working on, there was no question in my mind that it was, at least in the short run, far less likely to trigger nuclear war with China than the Goldwater approach that the JCS was urging. If anything, Johnson seemed even more concerned about that risk. So my loyalty attached itself

to Johnson as well. I wanted to see him reelected with as big a mandate as possible, and I don't recall that the dissimulation to that end bothered me very much. It was important not only to keep men like Johnson, McNamara, and McNaughton in office but to enhance their power relative to the Joint Chiefs. We were staving off pressure for a course that appeared considerably more dangerous.

The same objective justified the efforts of my boss and me in the NSC working group starting on election day. Our job, as McNaughton framed it, was not to keep alive the withdrawal option, which either of us would personally have regarded at that time as the least bad of a bad lot. It was to work to achieve a consensus for McNamara's preferred bombing strategy, "gradual pressure," and a rejection of the Joint Chiefs' "hard knock." The latter called for hitting all the targets on the chiefs' ninety-four-target list as nearly simultaneously as possible, for maximum surprise and shock. First to be hit were the MiG base at Phuc Yen on the outskirts of Hanoi and oil storage sites in the same populated area.

Nearly every policy recommendation from the Joint Chiefs reiterated: "... the United States should seek through military actions to accomplish the destruction of the North Vietnamese will and capabilities as necessary to compel the [Hanoi regime] to cease providing support to the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos." The key words in this objective, as the chiefs emphasized in distinguishing it from alternative aims of influencing, coercing, or persuading, were "destruction," "compel," and "capabilities." To this end they recommended a list of specific proposals, recited so regularly from early 1964 through 1968 that it was almost a litany. These included mining Haiphong Harbor and waterways within North Vietnam, blockading the seacoast of Vietnam up to China, bombing land, water, and rail communications between China and North Vietnam, and eliminating any air support from China, along with unrestricted air attacks against military and industrial targets throughout North Vietnam up to the Chinese border. The idea was to cut off the flow of supplies from the Sino-Soviet bloc that came through China and by sea, thus isolating North Vietnam and the NLF in the South from their Communist suppliers, and, by the unrestricted air campaign, to pound the leaders and people of North Vietnam into submission.

Moreover, the army and marines believed it was essential to cut off the infiltration of both troops and supplies from the North to the NLF by divisions of U.S. ground troops across the infiltration routes in Laos and Cambodia and/or U.S. divisions within or on the coast of South Vietnam. This part of their victory strategy surfaced only occasionally in interagency

discussions in 1964. It was submerged not only because of the election campaign but because Maxwell Taylor and Robert McNamara both opposed it until April 1965. Nevertheless, planning for ground deployments within army and marine staffs was going on throughout that period. From the logic of the situation it was no surprise to me when pressure for it became explicit and urgent in early 1965.

From my study of bombing in World War II and Korea, I agreed with the civilian intelligence analysts of the CIA and the State Department that conventional bombing would simply fail either to cut off the relatively small flow of infiltration needed to sustain the guerrilla war in the South or to induce the Hanoi leadership or its people to give up the armed struggle. Nor did these intelligence analysts expect ground operations in the highlands or border areas to "isolate the battlefield" in the South, as the army hoped. Even if they did, they wouldn't have a decisive effect in the largely indigenous conflict in the South. But once the United States had so committed itself and taken heavy casualties, I foresaw very strong tendencies to try to recoup early failures and break out of a stalemate by expanding the war still further. This would likely take two forms. First, although the chiefs and the air force disclaimed any intention to target cities or population *per se*, as in World War II and Korea, I doubted that restraint would long survive a failure to destroy the "capability" of the North to persist in the war. Going after their "will" decisively would mean both city bombing, whether admitted or not, and destroying the Red River dikes in the North, threatening a million deaths from famine.

The other response to a failure to end the North's support to the war in the South would be our army's extending the efforts to block infiltration in Laos and Cambodia to an invasion of the southern part of North Vietnam. That in turn, in failing to end the war, would encourage full invasion of the North, meaning a far bloodier replay of the French war, up to the border of China. This was very likely to bring in Chinese troops, if earlier moves had not. Our war planners had long presumed that we would initiate nuclear war against China in that case.

It was popularly understood that the legacy of the Korean stalemate was a "never again" club in the U.S. Army, meaning "Never again a land war in Asia." I knew from my earlier work on war planning that the real meaning of that motto was "Never again a land war with China *without nuclear weapons*." The files I read in McNaughton's office made it clear that lesson was still doctrine. And not only (though mainly) among the military. Secretary of State Dean Rusk (who had been assistant secretary for the Far East

during the first two years of the Korean War) could not have agreed more. In a conference with Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon in mid-April 1964, he had recited the formula in so many words: "[W]e are not going to take on the masses of Red China with our limited manpower in a conventional war."

In a Honolulu conference on June 2, 1964, General Taylor spoke of the real possibility that air attacks on the North—which all present favored—would bring in Chinese Communist ground forces. Secretary McNamara said we had to be prepared for this eventuality, even if it was not probable; this led to

a serious question of having to use nuclear weapons at some point. Admiral [Harry D.] Felt (CINCPAC) responded emphatically that there was no possible way to hold off the communists on the ground without the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and that it was essential that the commanders be given the freedom to use these as had been assumed [in] the various plans.

Talk of commanders' "freedom to use" tactical nuclear weapons bore on the most dramatic issue of the electoral campaign in its preliminary stages that month: Senator Goldwater's advocacy of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam, and even of delegating authority to use tactical nuclear weapons to field commanders. This position was Goldwater's greatest vulnerability in the campaign. (President Johnson's secret delegation of authority under some circumstances, such as failure of communications with Washington, was carefully concealed from the public and Congress, and it was considerably more limited than the delegation Goldwater proposed with the secret support of General Curtis LeMay, Admiral Felt, and many others among Johnson's top military men.) Goldwater's supposedly extreme stand lay behind the most devastating TV political ad ever: a little girl plucking petals off a daisy while a voice in the background counted down "Ten, nine, eight . . ." Nevertheless, though from my knowledge of him McNamara could not have agreed with either Felt or Rusk, the record of the Honolulu conference shows no argument with their position from any of the civilian officials of the Johnson administration present.

Nor was this official discussion—which would have gotten a good deal of attention if leaked to Congress or the public that campaign summer—confined to private talks among American officials. In talking with South Vietnamese General Nguyen Khanh (who was then premier) in Saigon on May 30, 1964, just before the Honolulu conference, Rusk brought up the subject, along with a reference to somewhat earlier discussions with

other Asian leaders. He informed the department in a cable that he had told Khanh:

U.S. would never again get involved in a land war in Asia limited to conventional forces. Our population was 190,000,000. Mainland China had at least 700,000,000. We would not allow ourselves to be bled white fighting them with conventional weapons.

... This meant that if escalation brought about major Chinese attack, it would also involve use of nuclear arms. Many free world leaders would oppose this. Chiang Kai-Shek had told him fervently he did, and so did [UN Secretary-General] U Thant. Many Asians seemed to see an element of racial discrimination in use of nuclear arms; something we would do to Asians but not to Westerners. Khanh replied he certainly had no quarrel with American use of nuclear arms, noted that decisive use of atomic bombs on Japan had in ending war saved not only American but also Japanese lives. One must use the force one had; if Chinese used masses of humanity, we would use superior fire power.

From January 1964 through 1968, the JCS continuously favored the immediate implementation of certain military measures—air, land, and sea—each of which, it acknowledged, posed tangible risks of war with China. No civilian quarreled explicitly with its assertion that such a war, if it resulted, must be nuclear. The differences between the civilians (with whom Maxwell Taylor tended to side) and the JCS on the scale of these risks, and on the importance of averting nuclear war with China, were large and significant. To a very great extent these differences shaped the strategy President Johnson chose and how he chose to describe it and conceal it, because he urgently desired to prevent these differences from being made public and debated. Yet although it was the favored proposals of the JCS that raised the prospect of nuclear war with China most immediately and acutely, all the proposals that the civilian leaders took seriously also involved clear risks of such a war eventually. The JCS was inviting the administration to play with nuclear fire. And whatever their reasons and reservations, the top civilian officials were not refusing to play.

4

Planning Provocation



From early September 1964 U.S. “retaliatory” capability against North Vietnam was a cocked pistol. Officials just below the president were waiting for something to retaliate to and increasingly ready to provoke an excuse for attack if necessary. Six days after John McNaughton’s September 3 plan “to provoke a military DRV response and to be in a good position to seize on that response . . . to commence a crescendo of GVN-U.S. military actions against the DRV,” the highest officials forwarded the proposal to the president for his decision. After recommending the immediate resumption of DeSoto patrols off the coast of North Vietnam and the resumption of 34A actions, both suspended since August 5, they added: “The main further question is the extent to which we should add elements to the above actions that would tend deliberately to provoke a DRV reaction, and consequent retaliation by us. Examples of actions to be considered would be running U.S. naval patrols increasingly close to the North Vietnamese coast and/or associating them with 34A operations.”

I recall that these proposals excited a flurry of concrete suggestions by the JCS on how best to provoke an attack on U.S. forces by the North Vietnamese if it proved hard to get a rise out of them. Along with running a U.S. destroyer increasingly close to beaching on their coast, U-2 reconnaissance planes over North Vietnam could be supplemented by low-level reconnaissance jets flying progressively lower over populated areas. This could culminate, if necessary, in a supersonic flight that would break every window in Hanoi with a sonic boom.