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THE AIR FORCE IN VIETNAM  
The Administration Emphasizes Air Power

1969

by

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OFFICE OF AIR FORCE HISTORY

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## FOREWORD

This study is the thirteenth in a series of historical reports on the war in Southeast Asia prepared by the Office of Air Force History since 1965. The previous works include: USAF Plans and Operations: The Air Campaign Against North Vietnam, 1966; The Air Force in Vietnam: The Search for Military Alternatives; and The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Toward a Bombing Halt, 1968.

In this report the author has focused on policy changes introduced by the Nixon administration during 1969 in regard to the Vietnamese war, particularly as they affected the role of air power. Repeatedly expressing determination to end the war as early as possible on the basis of self-determination of the South Vietnamese people, President Nixon decided--after negotiations with the Communists in Paris proved fruitless--to unilaterally withdraw U.S. forces while simultaneously strengthening Saigon's forces to take up the slack.

The first reduction in U.S. military strength in South Vietnam took place during the summer of 1969 when 25,000 troops were withdrawn. However, a particular phenomenon of the year was that air power was not materially reduced. The main theme of this history is that, in his effort to "wind down" the war via Vietnamization while maintaining pressure on North Vietnam to negotiate, the President made new and greater use of the U.S. air arm.



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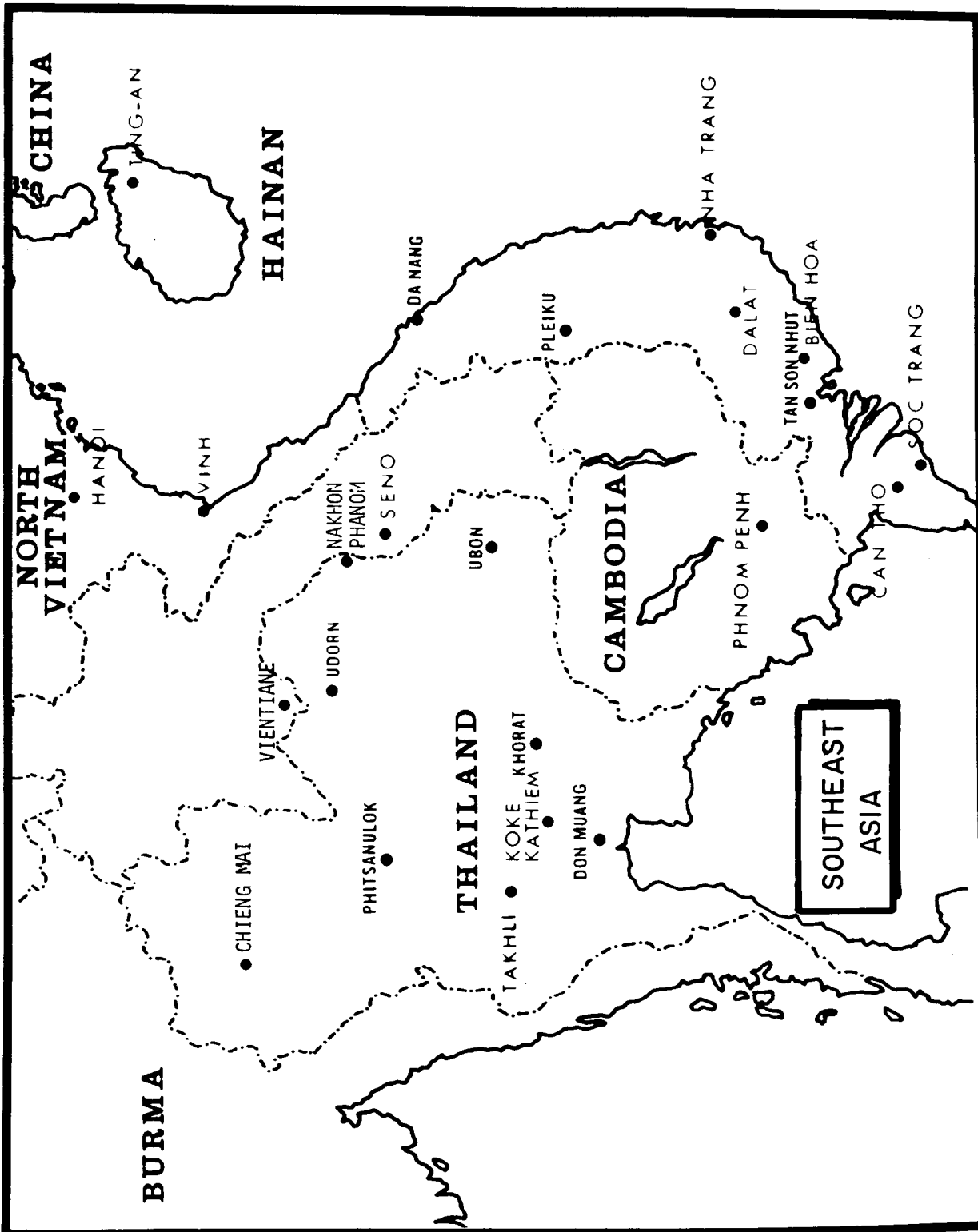
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## I. THE WAR IN VIETNAM UNDER A NEW ADMINISTRATION

(U) Pending firming up of the views of President Richard M. Nixon and his new administration, U.S. operations in South-east Asia (SEA) in early 1969 continued under the influence of strong pressures for withdrawal generated during the last months of the Johnson administration and the presidential campaign. Thus, the 1 November 1968 cessation of bombing of North Vietnam (NVN) remained in effect, while plans for withdrawing U.S. forces (termed T-Day plans), initiated in 1968, were further debated and refined. Actions to improve and modernize the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), also begun in 1968, were continued and accelerated. Meanwhile, the fighting in South Vietnam went on but at a reduced tempo.

(~~TOP SECRET~~) Faced with strong economic and political pressures to end the war, cut government spending, and "reorder the nation's priorities," President Nixon established as a major goal of his administration the reduction of federal expenditures. Directly related to the money problem was a second major objective, the achievement of a lower profile in U.S. operations overseas, particularly in Asia--i. e., a reduction in the American role of world policeman. This aim, under study early in the new administration,<sup>1</sup> was publicly announced by the President on 25 July during a stop on Guam,\* becoming most commonly known as the "Nixon doctrine."

(~~TOP SECRET~~) These two overall objectives were embodied in what was to become the basic Nixon policy on the Vietnam war, "Vietnamization,"<sup>+</sup> whereby U.S. forces were to be gradually withdrawn and their tasks assumed by strengthened and improved South Vietnamese forces. This policy, which required preparation of timetables for withdrawing U.S. troops and training the South,

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\*Mr. Nixon was on the first leg of a round-the-world diplomatic visit which took him to eight countries--the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Romania, and Great Britain.

+See Chapters IV and V.

Vietnamese, was announced on 10 April. Some two months later, following a conference on Midway Island with President Nguyen Van Thieu of the Republic of Vietnam, President Nixon on 8 June announced the withdrawal of the first 25,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam. Although President Johnson had endorsed a similar Vietnamization program and the Nixon plan was hence one of "continuity," the latter would soon reach such dimensions as to constitute a basic change in U.S. policy.

President Nixon Reviews Policy

(~~TOP SECRET~~) The new administration had not arrived at these new objectives precipitately. Even before taking office, it had begun a sweeping review of the situation in Vietnam. This was evident in the fact that on 21 January, the day after inauguration, three major policy papers were presented to the National Security Council (NSC), two of them directly related to Vietnam, the other indirectly so. The first of these was an NSC paper,<sup>1</sup> "Vietnam Policy Alternatives," prepared by the President's national security adviser, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger.<sup>2</sup> It initiated a discussion of the strategy alternatives on Vietnam, requesting analysis of the two basic approaches: continued pressure on Hanoi, with threats of escalation or actual escalation; reduced U.S. presence which, by being more sustainable, could be another form of pressure. The second policy paper on Vietnam, NSSM\*1, consisted of 29 detailed questions on tactics and problems of the war, covering such critical topics as the effectiveness of air operations in Southeast Asia, the success of the pacification program, and the ability of North Vietnam to continue the war.<sup>3</sup> These questions were addressed to the government agencies primarily concerned in the war, including those in the Department of Defense and State, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

(~~TOP SECRET~~) In the third major policy paper issued on 21 January,<sup>4</sup> President Nixon initiated a far-reaching review of the entire U.S. military posture, taking into account various budget levels and strategies, their security, and foreign policy implications. During the next several months this review would engender strenuous debate. It was to end in perhaps the most significant

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\*National Security Study Memorandum



Presidential decision of 1969, which adopted a new U.S. overall military strategy.<sup>5</sup> Instead of being prepared, as in the past, to cope simultaneously with two major and one minor war, the Department of Defense (DOD) was now required to address one major and two minor wars at the same time. This decision was related to domestic concern over U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but was primarily dictated by budget considerations and the resulting Nixon doctrine of a "lower profile" in U.S. commitments overseas.

#### A Divergence of Views

(TS-C-1) A major feature of the early 1969 policy reassessments was the clear dichotomy of views as to future developments in Vietnam. One group of officials assumed that the 1968 trend of winding down the war would continue towards some form of termination. A second group felt that the war was far from over and might even intensify, that it was going favorably and that the United States should pursue its advantage rather than throw it away by lowering its sights. The former often cited budget constraints and saw this as a compelling reason for cutting back. The second group, which included the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and most military leaders, felt it was essential to keep up the pressure on North Vietnam in order to achieve the U.S. objective of an independent South Vietnam.

(TS-C-1) This difference in views was reflected in the debates on major policy matters throughout 1969, notably those aired in Dr. Kissinger's "29 questions" on Vietnam and later in NSSM 36 on "Vietnamization." The NSC summary of responses to the 29 questions noted that the reportees fell into two groups, with "generally consistent views and membership." The first usually included the JCS, the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), and the U.S. Embassy, Saigon. In general they took a hopeful view of current and future prospects in Vietnam. The second group usually included the CIA, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD)--particularly the Assistant Secretary for Systems Analysis (SA)--and to a lesser extent the State Department, and was decidedly more skeptical about the current situation in Vietnam and pessimistic about the future.<sup>6</sup> At one point the report described the divergencies of the two groups as a gap in views between "the policy makers, the analysts, and the intelligence

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community on the one hand, and the civilian and military operators on the other."<sup>7</sup>

(~~TS-C-1~~) One illustration of this gap appeared in the widely differing reactions to the first major policy paper of the Nixon administration, the 21 January National Security Council paper on "Vietnam Policy Alternatives," also prepared by Dr. Kissinger. The Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs (OSD/ISA) and the Director of the Joint Staff, assenting to the contents of a talking paper for the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman, JCS,<sup>8</sup> described the Security Council view as too "tactical." In their view, it dealt with the Vietnam problem without regard for larger U.S. national interests and worldwide objectives, and failed to give adequate attention to the impact of Vietnam policies on future American policies regarding East-West relations, protection of other nations and the problem of China. They criticized the insufficient attention paid to establishing a politically viable government in South Vietnam and to determining which military strategy would be most likely to encourage this. By contrast, the Plans and Policy Directorate of the Joint Chiefs and the Air Force<sup>9</sup> seemed to find the alternatives not "tactical" enough. The JCS objected that the Security Council did not take into account currently accepted goals in Southeast Asia and the fact that U.S. casualties would increase if American forces were reduced without enemy deescalation. They would have the United States adhere firmly to the objective of assured Government of South Vietnam (GVN) control over all South Vietnam (SVN).

(~~TS-C-1~~) The Air Force was very concerned because Dr. Kissinger seemed to accept the current situation in Vietnam as "normal." It argued strongly against the logic of fighting North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam, while subjecting North Vietnam to no pressure. Suspension of the bombing attacks was to have been a quid pro quo for prompt, productive talks. Failing this response, the pressure on Hanoi imposed by bombing should remain an essential part of U.S. strategy. As the Air Force saw it, the Kissinger analysis assumed any renewal of bombing of the North constituted escalation and that current operations (without bombing) could destroy or force withdrawal of enemy forces in 1 to 2 years--something the JCS had never said could be done. It took strong issue with the second Kissinger alternative, which would change the U.S. objective of assuring GVN control of all South Vietnam to a mutual U.S./NVA withdrawal instead--the President's advisor suggesting that Saigon's defeat by the Viet Cong would be acceptable

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since the main goal of repelling external aggression would have been achieved. The Air Force strongly questioned how Washington could justify the tremendous investment of 30,000 lives and \$100 billion by merely fulfilling the letter of a formal commitment. It also doubted that Dr. Kissinger's proposed alternative strategy--reducing U.S. pressure--would be more effective against Hanoi because it would be more sustainable. Instead, it insisted there was no proof--despite the great opposition to the war--that the U.S. public would not sustain existing force levels. Further, it cited President Nixon's inaugural address statement, "We will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need."

(~~TOP SECRET~~) This divergence in views came out in more specific terms in the NSC 14 March summary of replies to Dr. Kissinger's 29 questions on Vietnam. There were strong differences of opinion on all the questions dealing with air effectiveness in SEA.\* In addition, there was emphatic disagreement on the extent and type of RVNAF improvements. All agreed that, while Saigon's armed forces were getting larger, the South Vietnamese could not in the foreseeable future handle both North Vietnam and the Viet Cong (VC) without U.S. combat support. The military community gave much greater weight to RVNAF statistical improvements--which CIA thought an unreliable indicator--while OSD and CIA highlighted the remaining obstacles: severe motivation, leadership, and desertion problems. OSD doubted that expansion and equipment programs were enough to make an effective force.<sup>10</sup>

(~~TOP SECRET~~) The two groups also differed profoundly on the degree of Saigon's control of the population. According to MACV, the GVN controlled 75 percent of the population and JCS said it would control 90 percent in 1969. OSD and CIA argued, however, that at least 50 percent of the rural population was subject to significant VC presence and influence, and the State Department went even further, estimating that two-thirds of the people were subject to VC influence. Further, OSD argued that urban migration rather than pacification had brought more people under South Vietnam's control--a finding not noted by MACV or Embassy Saigon. Finally, CIA and State assigned much higher figures to the enemy Order of Battle than MACV.<sup>11</sup>

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\*See Chapter II.

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(TS [redacted]) If the various agencies were of two minds about the war, the administration itself continued to address the imperatives facing it on arrival: cutting the budget and allaying domestic concern about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Despite the internal wrangling, it continued to pursue the alternative of a reduced, more sustainable, U.S. presence in Vietnam, specifically with its 10 April request for a detailed plan for Vietnamizing the war,\* asking for timetables for transferring combat responsibility to SVN.

(TS [redacted]) At the same time, however, the administration also kept the negotiations option open. It circulated study memos on negotiating strategy<sup>12</sup> as well as on Vietnamization, and continued to solicit JCS suggestions for "keeping the pressure on" North Vietnam as a means of leverage at the negotiating table. Concerning the latter, the JCS in early 1969 requested permission to attack enemy forces operating in the demilitarized zone; suggested a temporary resumption of bombing North Vietnam; renewed previous requests for authority to use artillery and air strikes against the enemy in Cambodia; and recommended certain deceptive military moves in a psychological warfare campaign. Cautioning against a defensive strategy that would turn U.S. forces into targets and demoralize the RVNAF, the JCS urged retaining the offensive-- by destroying the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia for example-- as a way to reduce U.S. casualties and facilitate withdrawals.<sup>13</sup> At that time, however, the new administration would act on none of these requests; instead, it asked that the violence level be kept down or that offensive operations "be held in abeyance."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, when asked if he would resume bombing North Vietnam in reply to enemy rocket attacks in South Vietnam, in late February, President Nixon said:

I believe that it is far more effective in international policy to use deeds rather than words threatening deeds... the United States has a number of options that we could exercise to respond... I will not indicate in advance... that we are going to start bombing the North or anything else...<sup>15</sup> It will be my policy as President to issue a warning only once... Anything in the future that is done will be done. There will be no additional warning.<sup>16</sup>

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\*NSSM 36. See Chapters IV and V.

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(~~TOP SECRET~~) In pursuing both options simultaneously, the administration sought to maintain the credibility of both--emphasizing negotiations as far as North Vietnam was concerned, and Vietnamization as far as the U.S. public was concerned. This was evident in a 2 April conversation between Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, and the South Vietnamese Ambassador in Washington at the time of former President Eisenhower's funeral.<sup>17</sup> Secretary Laird, asking how the South Vietnamese liked the term Vietnamization, was told they enthusiastically endorsed it and wanted to take over the burden of the war. Mr. Laird cautioned them against overstressing this point in view of objectives in Paris, where the administration wanted to emphasize mutual withdrawal, even while preparing for the eventual complete takeover by Saigon of its own defenses.

(~~TOP SECRET~~) A Presidential directive of 1 April<sup>18</sup> also reflected the above policy. President Nixon stipulated there would be no U.S. deescalation, except as an outgrowth of mutual troop withdrawals, and stressed the importance of getting Hanoi to comply with that condition. In a subsequent section of the paper, he directed further studies on phased withdrawal under conditions of (a) mutual withdrawal, or (b) Vietnamization of the war. This dual policy led to many charges in the press that the President was giving up his peace aims, and led one of the VC negotiators in Paris to compare Nixon's policy to "chasing two rabbits." It was in fact not a question of either/or, but of both.

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## II. THE DEBATE OVER AIR POWER

(~~TOP SECRET~~) Air power was to play a central role in the pursuit of both Presidential options for ending the war. Thus, in support of the negotiating option, air would be one of the most important coercive tools in applying pressure on North Vietnam. Under the Vietnamization option, while U.S. ground forces were to be increasingly replaced by the South Vietnamese, the U.S. air role was not only to be maintained but enhanced.\* This continued strong air role, however, was not immediately apparent at the beginning of 1969. The election year impulses for completely winding down the war were still strong in some quarters, and cuts in air strength were rather widely anticipated. Other military and civilian officials, not foreseeing an early termination of the war, wanted air power undiminished as one of the most important weapons against the enemy. It was not surprising then that arguments over the continuing role of air should be one of the central issues in the internal debates just noted.

### Views of the Lame Duck Administration

(~~TOP SECRET~~) Soon after President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam, a difference of opinion arose between military leaders and certain civilian defense planners, notably those in Systems Analysis, OSD. The former, concerned that North Vietnam would use the bombing halt to improve its position, urged compensatory bombing elsewhere in order to offset this lessening of pressure on Hanoi. They recommended and were authorized a great step-up in bombing of enemy supply lines in Laos and within South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> They also renewed their earlier requests to quarantine Cambodia. Systems Analysis officials, however, were mainly concerned with budget cut requirements and how the bombing halt could service that end. In their view, stopping all bombing sorties over North Vietnam was a golden opportunity to cut expenses by reducing the requirement for aircraft and munitions.

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\*See Chapters IV and V.

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(TS Op 1) In a 7 November 1968 memo, Alain C. Enthoven, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, suggested three Southeast Asia air reduction options to Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford in connection with submission of the fiscal year 1970 DOD budget. The first, merely reallocating the NVN sorties, half to Laos and half to SVN, was expected to save \$170 million and about 60 fighter aircraft. The second, withdrawing 54 USAF Thai-based F-105's and 40 U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) A-4's and closing one SEA air base would save about \$400 million and about 83 fighters annually. The third option, redeploying most of the aircraft previously involved in bombing North Vietnam\* and closing three SEA air bases would save \$1,200 million and 166 fighter aircraft annually.<sup>2</sup>

(TS Op 1) Mr. Enthoven argued that jet aircraft were inefficient truck killers,<sup>+</sup> unable to fly slowly or carry heavy payloads. They lacked high maneuverability and long loiter time, and since special truck killing munitions were in short supply, they would have to use highly inefficient iron bombs. During the monsoon season most jet sorties would necessarily have to be Sky Spot strikes,<sup>‡</sup> relatively useless against moving targets. Mr. Enthoven further believed the jets would be even less effective in South Vietnam than in Laos because interdiction was more difficult due to the nature of the enemy's logistic system there, with his supplies broken up into small packets and almost delivered by hand.

(TS Op 1) The Air Staff disagreed with these Systems Analysis views,<sup>3</sup> as did the JCS, who thought budget constraints should not be allowed to stand in the way of responding to an increased threat. The Joint Chiefs stated that all currently available air resources were required to support SVN requirements and to interdict enemy infiltration, particularly in Laos where there was an increasingly

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\*108 Thai-based F-105's and 72 Thai-and 36 SVN-based Air Force F-4's, 15 Marine F-4's, and 20 Marine A-4's.

<sup>+</sup>He estimated the cost per truck kill at \$250,000.

<sup>‡</sup>Ground directed bombing system in SEA, using mobile special purpose ground based radar guidance for greater bombing accuracy.

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hostile air environment.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting CINCPAC and CINCPACAF views, the JCS emphasized that an in-place capability to resume offensive bombing operations in NVN rapidly was an essential element of U.S. strategy, and diversion of such assets could be interpreted as a lack of American resolve and a change in U. S. objectives. It could also mislead the nation about progress in the Paris talks. The interdiction role for jets, moreover, was not confined to truck killing, but included the destruction of many other point and perishable area targets. Hence, the JCS stated, it was inaccurate to associate every sortie flown with truck kills or to utilize truck kill statistics to derive a cost-per-truck kill factor. Finally, the recent substantial increase noted in the enemy's anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) capability meant U.S. air forces would increasingly face a "high threat area" where survivability counted. In this connection, CINCPAC had suggested that, in the face of increased AAA activity, the effectiveness of all slow-moving, prop-driven aircraft, including Gunship II and A-1's, might be so degraded that they would eventually be forced out of Laos.

#### The Air Debate Under the New Administration

(~~TS-C-1~~) The debate over air effectiveness continued throughout 1969, and was sharpened by the Nixon administration's efforts to cut costs, reduce U.S. involvement, and "Vietnamize" the war. In the widespread policy review undertaken by the new Administration, (Dr. Kissinger's "29 Questions"), the effectiveness of air operations in SEA was a major topic. Specifically, the National Security Council requested data on the overall effectiveness of the B-52 attacks, the Laotian interdiction campaign, and the actual strains the bombing put on the enemy in terms of economic disruption and logistic "throughput" to the south.

(~~TS-C-1~~) In their response to the "29 Questions," the JCS, CINCPAC, MACV, and the Embassy in Saigon assigned much greater effectiveness to the bombing operations than did OSD, CIA, and some elements of the State Department.<sup>5</sup> The latter group was not convinced that the bombing campaign, either before or after the November halt, had reduced the enemy's transport of supplies to the point that he could not continue his operations. They agreed that enemy traffic on the roads had been disrupted, but pointed out that he used less than 15 percent of available road capacity; that he was constantly expanding that capacity through new roads and passes;

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